Mystical Solidarities: Ali Shariati and the Act of Translation

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ABSTRACT: This introduction frames the special issue titled "Mystical Solidarities: Ali Shariati and the Act of Translation." Drawing from insights across the collection's essays, it foregrounds a notion of translation as a transformative act, anchored in Shariati's mystical ontology, that fosters and sustains anticolonial solidarities. To illustrate, we explore differences and affinities between Shariati and Frantz Fanon with regard to truth-telling, translation, alienation, and subjectivity. The comparison reveals a generative distinction in Shariati's thought between cultural and existential alienation, "translated intellectuals" and the act of translation. The distinction creates grounds for a vision of anticolonial solidarity responsive to circumstances in postrevolutionary Iran, a vision that reaches beyond the postcolonial state.

KEYWORDS: Ali Shariati, Frantz Fanon, solidarity, mysticism, translation, alienation

What is the salience of the ineffable for a politics of solidarity? This special forum offers six engagements with Ali Shariati's speeches and writings, which together address the question. Intervening in a range of fields, from political theory to religious studies, continental philosophy, art, comparative literature, and intellectual history, the essays collected here foreground the parts of Shariati's voluminous collected works that discuss mysticism alongside his efforts to forge a vision for Third World solidarity. Shariati's reflections

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on mysticism, it is to be shown, venture an aspiration for political solidarity beyond Iran and Islam.

The activity that brings these threads together is translation. Fittingly, the idea for the special section arose from a collective experience of translating Shariati. Each contributor produced a translation of one text, hitherto untranslated in English, for a separate forthcoming volume that we co-edited. For this special section, we invited the contributors to address the substance of the text they translated in light of *the act of translation*, a phrase we use to describe, first, the literal experience of translating from one language to another and, second, a mode of communication at odds with literalism. The act of translation so defined signals the transmission of an experience. It differs from a pretense to convey words or information passively from one register to another, and it bears a striking resemblance to what Shariati, in a different context, describes as mysticism. As we see it, the act of translation summarizes Shariati's distinct social and political notion of mysticism, his comparative approach to aesthetics and poesis, and, further still, his theory of anti- and decolonial solidarity.

This introductory essay offers a conceptual map for reading the special section as a whole. Our contribution to the collection recasts Shariati's biography through the perspective of his work as a translator, which, in turn, begets a reassessment of Shariati's status in debates about the current dismal trajectory of post-revolutionary politics in Iran. It also suggests an approach to decolonization rooted in the circumstances of post-revolutionary Iran, one that may be critical of state-sponsored claims to bear the mantle of anti-imperialism globally and yet still invested in decolonization as a horizon. The following explores the suggested global dimensions of these debates in conversation with and as an introduction to the other five contributors' remarkably novel readings of Shariati's *oeuvre*.

On Account of Alienation

Translation can seem anathema to anticolonial thought and its aspirations for decolonization. To the extent that colonization works through language, it would appear that translation, an invariably linguistic practice, cannot forge a viable path to liberation. The earliest writings by Frantz Fanon, the most prominent theorist of anti- and decolonial theory and a key interlocutor for Shariati, propose dodging language altogether: with poetry and theater, the body and open-ended questions (Fanon 2008, 198–205). Faced with the vicissitudes of the Algerian war for liberation and postcolonial governance on the African continent, Fanon's later works pursue a different set of possibilities, locating cultural production in the ongoing struggle for liberation (Fanon 1965,

82–6; Fanon 2004, 172–7).[1] Truth be told, the two tendencies and two projected Fanons share more in common than this schematic divide suggests (Gordon 1995, 9).[2] Shariati, who rarely appears in conversations about postcolonial theory without some mention of Fanon, artfully brings the tendencies together, making a compelling case for cultural production en route to decolonization—translation included.

Shariati situated his thought in an anticolonial trajectory shared with the likes of Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Jomo Kenyatta, and Julius Nyerere. When it comes to Shariati and Fanon, however, much has been lost in translation. Cynical readers dismiss Shariati as derivative. He is summarily described as Iran's Fanon, a compelling orator who parroted someone else's ideas in a manner palatable to local audiences.[3] Others credit Shariati for translating Fanon's 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* from French into Persian. This false impression, oft repeated as lore, was fostered by the placement of Shariati's name in the text's by-line to hide the actual translator's identity and eventually made its way into tracts of scholarly repute (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2020).

Yet another prevalent and similarly dubious legend claims Shariati and Fanon exchanged letters—this despite no extant evidence of a correspondence apart from two passing remarks made by Shariati himself (Shariati 1362/1983, 169–71; Shariati 1363/1984–1985, 6–7). An anthology of Fanon's unpublished papers titled *Écrits sur l'aliénation et la liberté* has reproduced one such statement word-for-word and credited Ehsan Shariati, Ali Shariati's son, with translating the statement from Persian into French (Fanon 2015, 542). The anthology's English language translation notably omits the translator credit (Fanon 2018, 667–9). Less careful readers who have reviewed and referenced *Alienation and Freedom* have simply taken for granted that the letter exchange took place.[4]

The assumption and how easily it circulates reveal a broader misunderstanding of the interpretive approach shared between Shariati and Fanon. Consider the reputed terms of debate: Shariati says he sent Fanon a letter that argued for religion as a platform to organize and develop national unity. Fanon's reported disagreement with Shariati's proposal resembles a trope Fanon articulated in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The chapters on national consciousness and national culture argue that intellectual appeals to a distant past do not correspond with the ever-changing lived experiences and visionary insights of a colonized people actively engaged in a struggle to end the conditions of their domination (Fanon 2004, 144, 159–63, 168). One of Fanon's alleged letters similarly rejects Islamic traditions as a basis for revolutionary action. Shariati makes use of this alleged letter to deliver a modernist corrective: true Islam, he maintains, is an active and lived reality opposed to petrified custom (Shariati

1362/1983, 169–71). Shariati's representation of Islam thus satisfies the principle of movement that animates Fanon's description of the people, the rural masses, the peasantry—in short, the process of anticolonial revolution.

More often than not, depictions of Shariati in terms legible for contemporary intellectual historians lose sight of this principle. (The point arguably holds true for representations of Fanon as well.) The assumption that Shariati's claims of a letter exchange are empirically true overlooks his penchant to deliberately play the part of an unreliable narrator. As we discuss at length in our essay, Shariati regularly invented characters and fictional moments of exchange to prove a point. These performances enact what Fanon, in *L'An V de la révolution Algérienne*, called a "true lie" (Fanon 1965, 87). Fanon famously describes Algerian peasants listening to jammed radio broadcasts for news of guerrilla resistance to French settler colonial rule. Unable to receive a clear signal, peasants took to telling fantastical stories about the guerrillas' feats, a lie. Telling that lie conscripted peasants in a growing uprising against the French settlers. It put to practice a deeply held, previously constrained set of beliefs that aligned the peasant with a changing state of affairs, one marked by the inevitable demise of the French settler presence, a truth. Fanon's dialectical writing style captures the spirit of these "true lies," their malleability. As his narratives unfold, circumstances change, and positions and protagonists change significance in turn.[5] Shariati, too, adopts an ethos of becoming, mimicking the Algerian peasant in his performances, his "true lies." (Shariati, it is to be noted, claims to have worked on a translation of *L'An V* (Shariati 1362/1983, 169).) Given these affinities, it is nothing short of ironic to claim one such performance as indicative of Shariati's differences with Fanon.

Further, related affinities with Fanon revolve around a shared critique of cultural alienation. Fanon excoriates the national bourgeoisie in postcolonial contexts: "It has learned by heart what it has read in the manuals of the West and subtly transforms itself not into a replica of Europe but rather its caricature" (Fanon 2004, 119). Shariati delivers a similar critique of "translated intellectuals," who blindly adopt ideas from Europe without regard to the specific situation or socio-political circumstances pertaining in Pahlavi Iran. Just as Fanon offered a personal account of his own trials and tribulations while battling an inherited colonial mindset in *Black Skin, White Masks*, so too does Shariati in his *Kavir* [*The Desert*]. Naveed Mansoori's contribution to this special issue reconstructs Shariati's autobiographical account in *Kavir* of a childhood robbed by ethno-nationalist schooling. The story, which Shariati locates at the heart of his identity, portrays the long, institutionalized reach of cultural alienation in Pahlavi Iran.[6]

Unsurprisingly, Shariati and Fanon both argued for "a return to self" as a way to remedy cultural alienation. The status of that "return" has been the subject of considerable debate in Iranian Studies, the disciplinary locus where Shariati's works have (thus far) been examined. Critics denounce references to a "return" as "nativism" and hence a troubling ideological precursor to the Islamic Republic.[7] Others, by contrast, point to the influence that fellow Third Worldist intellectuals exerted on Shariati, most notably Césaire and Fanon, who imagined the self of a prospective "return" living and acting in the present (Davari 2014; Saffari 2017, 21–6, 140–42). Along with Mansoori, Atefeh Akbari Shahmirzadi and Seema Golestaneh's interventions elaborate this insight. Each addresses debates about a "return to self" and does so in conversation with Shariati's mysticism.

These are new avenues for research, previously unconsidered, that shed light on Shariati's thought and, more generally, on conceptions of decolonization. They notably add to Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's discussion of Shariati's thought in terms of a "mystical modernity" shared with European critical theorists writing in the aftermath of the First World War. Ghamari-Tabrizi identifies, in particular, a conceptual symmetry between Shariati and Walter Benjamin, on account of which Shariati's notion of "return to self" looks to the past to locate an "emergency break" that could momentarily halt the linear, teleological course of historical progress. Human emancipation thus acquires a mystical dimension, not in the sense of a "separation from materialism" but "in the sense proposed by Michel Foucault in his discussion of the Iranian revolution: transformation into a person who, prior to the process of transformation, did not appear within us" (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2021, our translation).[8] The emphasis here, as in Fanon, is on the process and activity of change itself.

To wit, unlike Fanon, Shariati considered a broader experience of alienation characteristic of the human condition as defined from an Islamic perspective. We refer to this experience, with considerable qualification, as existential alienation. As is well known, Fanon's framework for interpreting colonization stretches the core notion in Sartrean existentialism that existence precedes essence and joins it with phenomenology to account for the "lived experience" of Blackness. More accurately, Fanon epitomized an Africana existentialist tradition that preceded Sartre and posed questions of existence in response to situated realities conditioned by the question of Blackness (Gordon 1995, 14; 2000, 4, 9–12, 31–6). Speaking in response to anti-Black racism, Fanon grounded his analysis in an understanding of colonization as a total project. Alienation, here, follows from cultural production such that language itself determines membership in and exclusion from humanity, reproducing

the terms of order by relegating Black people to a "zone of non-being." Shariati engaged Sartrean existentialism with careful and sustained consideration, translating Sartre and his ideas into Persian. Echoing Fanon and the broader Africana existential tradition, however, Shariati developed a philosophy of existence rooted in his own situated reality. He thus adopted a distinct approach to colonization, and so he described the challenge facing Iranian Muslims as disfiguration and hence *non*-totalizing.[9] Right or wrong (and it certainly leaves much to be desired, considering the many overlaps between Islamic history and experiences of Blackness), Shariati's approach seems to pursue a distinct concept of the existential.

Leili Adibfar's contribution reconstructs the conceptual parameters and psychic dimensions of *this* existential alienation. For Shariati, pain, angst, anxiety, and alienation arise from a condition of dual existence reserved for human beings. What he proposes extends a foundational principle in Islam—the notion that human beings, unlike angels or the natural world, are not just manifestations of God's command (*amr*) but also the spirit of God's command (*ruh min al-amr*) (Rahman 2002, 34). The human is both materialist and idealist, "a combination of clay [*gel*] and spirit [*ruh*]." Adibfar demonstrates continuities shared between Shariati's premises, based as they were on religion and Islam, and similar formulations in modern European romanticism and existentialism. Important differences notwithstanding, the remedy in either case proves to be artistic production—recourse to a higher order ideal to address a fundamentally fraught but potentially transformative material condition of duality.

The distinction between "translated intellectuals" and the act of translation in Shariati's thought parallels the one between cultural and existential alienation. While Shariati disparages "translated intellectuals" who perpetuate cultural alienation, the act of translation plays a necessary, remedial role in his broader proposals for a dis-alienated self. This act does not register in most taxonomies as translation at all, and yet it recalls the rhetoricity needed for Third World solidarity in cultural translation. "Language," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, "is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. . . . Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much" (Spivak 2012, 313–14). The act of translation lives in that silence. It is not a replica, much less a caricature, but rather an activity that operates on the order of a "true lie." A kind of translation, it is to embody the spirit of a message more than capture its literal words or a literalist passage of information.

Our contribution to this collection recounts Shariati's various (and varied) activities with translation over the course of his intellectual career. If Fanon writes a *bildungsroman* about the anticolonial intellectual alongside the trials and tribulations of national consciousness, we chart the development of Shariati's self-consciousness through translation, showing how his activities as a translator played a constitutive role at each stage of his thought. The remaining contributions bring this dynamic to life. They explore the spirit of Shariati's intellectual biography, from Mansoori's reconstruction of Shariati's changing autobiographical accounts to Akbari Shahmirzadi and Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's in-depth analyses of Shariati's method and, finally, Adibfar and Golestaneh's formulations of existential alienation.

The Act of Translation and a "Return to Self"

While Shariati did not in fact translate *The Wretched of the Earth*, his engagements with Fanon nevertheless performed translation, according to Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, who argues that Shariati's statements on Third World solidarity should be read both for their perlocutionary content and their illocutionary effects. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi illustrates this point with reference to a late 1960s lecture titled "Some of the Pioneers of the Return to Self in the Third World," where Shariati pronounced the value of intercontinental solidarity and introduced "a pantheon and emerging canon of anticolonial resistance and postcolonial experiments in state-building." Through its "explicitly performative dimension," the lecture worked to "expand the imaginations of [Shariati's] audience," projecting a shared community beyond the ethno-nationalist one that, as Mansoori notes, marred Shariati's formative experiences in Pahlavi Iran. This "exercise in translation" hinges on a lack of specificity, which, on the one hand, makes possible an imagined community greater than the nation-state but, on the other, contains a "virtual clue" to the "eventual unraveling" of Third World solidarity. In the final analysis, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi argues, Shariati draws a simplistic picture of a Third World bloc uniformly facing a shared condition of exploitation vis-a-vis the capitalist colonial world. On account of this picture, he was able to craft a far-reaching vision of Third World solidarity. The same picture overlooks significant economic disparities that, as later history shows, would render sustained intercontinental solidarity impossible.

Golestaneh interprets these less-than-specific "exercises in translation" through Shariati's mystical tendencies. Responding to a thread in our contribution, Golestaneh asks after practices meant to capture and relay "the 'spirit' [*ruh*] of a piece over a translation that favors a more technically obvious reproduction." Spirit, here, refers to the hidden, formless, and indescribable expe-

riential dimensions of a text, the impressions it leaves "beyond the language that comprises it." Difficult enough to convey in its original idiom, the task appears insurmountable across linguistic registers, each of which are "empty shells" that must be shed. The challenge of translation accordingly resembles the impossible union with God aspired to by Sufis, who persist in their pursuit notwithstanding insurmountable odds. For Golestaneh, the path itself—the process, the exercise, the performance—creates proximity to divinity and, in Shariati's case, to conveying shared meaning, to fostering anticolonial solidarity, to liberation.

We might paraphrase this insight in terms of a "return to self," a theme that recurs across the special section. The act of translation does not pretend to create a perfect union with the other, be it the existential other signified by divinity or the cultural other conventionally associated with translation, rather attempts to forge these essentially unstable unions serve to reconstitute the self. A return to self is, in other words, a transformation of self (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2021). The lack of specificity in Shariati's iteration of the concept affords the slippage we attribute to his performative acts of translation. On account of its imprecision, it creates grounds for solidarity across difference. That same lack of specificity opens a window onto the specific, and specifically mystical, dimensions of his thought. Here, the reader would be right to suspect a contradictory impulse. We view that impulse to be a generative tension, characteristic of Shariati's theory of action and encapsulated by his discussion of "return." We call it mystical solidarities.

In this vein, Akbari Shahmirzadi's essay paints a compelling portrait of the act of translation as "return" through Shariati's discussion of Dante. Shariati adopted and adapted Dante's *Divine Comedy* for a short essay titled "Divine Tragedy," which, unlike Dante's narrative, is marked by the impossibility of a sustained union with God. Akbari Shahmirzadi reads Shariati's essay from a worldly perspective, peering beyond the words on the page to both authors' respective situations and the interpretive traditions that inspired them. Shariati recited Dante's story in a manner suited for a Muslim Iranian audience. While responsive to Shariati's contemporary circumstances, this refiguration of *Divine Comedy* was not an arbitrary or whimsical exercise unrelated to the original but rather entailed a recovery of a past systematically denied in canonical interpretations. Shariati thus departs from prevalent readings of Dante as narrowly European, demonstrating the Italian's sustained conversations with Muslim traditions and influences. Shariati engages instead in a "comparative literary praxis" that poses "an alternative to the Eurocentric formation of Comparative Literature." His refiguration of *Divine Comedy* as "Divine Tragedy" is

a recovery of Dante's contemporary circumstances and *his* situated position. Phrased differently, Shariati's literary praxis takes a trope in Dante's work—the virtues of harboring distance and cultivating intimacy at once—and reiterates it as an approach to reading Dante. This is neither a simple act of poesis, the postulation of something new, nor, for that matter, a simple repetition. By virtue of its performance and activity, it constitutes instead a "return." Akbari Shahmirzadi's essay thus names Shariati's method.

The special section similarly sketches a portrait of the "self" to which a "return" aspires. For Golestaneh, speaking of mysticism, the attempt to create a union with the other is valuable insofar as the act itself creates proximity to the other. Whether the other is a foreigner or God, whether the attempt is an act of linguistic translation or a Sufi ritual, or whether the act is meant to remedy cultural or existential alienation—in any case, union with the other is not a station at which one arrives. Shades of divinity appear in action, through movement, and as becoming. The self appears unmoored as a result, a site of unceasing change. In this manner, acts of translation mirror ethical practices of mysticism. Encounters with parts of a text that remain untranslatable, where the delivery of meaning falls out of reach, mimic practices that aspire to unification with God.

The kind of mysticism on offer, however, defies conventional expectations. "For Shariati," Golestaneh writes, "the transformation of the self is a political project as much as it is a personal one." Distinct from other (notably, clerical) figures in modern Iran, who combined mystical and political thought to project models of ideal leadership, Shariati "saw the revolutionary potential when *all* people master esoteric knowledge and an ethos of becoming." Mansoori's contribution links this ethos to the variable quality of popular sovereignty, turning to a second iteration of Shariati's autobiography, written on the occasion of Ashura in 1971, where Shariati recasts his personal history in conjunction with the history of "the people." His attendant theory of popular sovereignty does not dissolve an individual into a collective but pursues instead a third position, of what Mansoori calls "a collaborator in a people's coming-of-age."

Once more, we are privy to a discussion of Shariati's activity, of his performance and his method, in this case of the "counter-pedagogy" he developed to reconstitute himself. If conventional ethical accounts presume an individual removed from society or, at most, an individual striving to achieve such separation, Shariati's "counter-pedagogy" proposes an "autodidactic method" premised on "collective subjectivity," "collapsing the distinction between solitary learning and learning in the company of others." The mourning rituals around

Ashura, Mansoori concludes, are "a public school orchestrated by a collective instructor where no single individual had mastery over the curriculum."

The Situation

That Shariati grounds mysticism in popular sovereignty contravenes the charge, levied against him by dissident intellectuals in post-revolutionary Iran, that he fails to appreciate the concrete, ever-changing socio-historical circumstances shaping political life. Our essay stages a conversation between Shariati and one of the most sophisticated purveyors of this charge in Morad Farhadpour. A decorated translator, critical theorist, and essayist, Farhad-pour's theory of "thought/translation" arises from a critique of cultural politics in the Islamic Republic. For Farhadpour, all translation depends on the translator's situation. Reflecting on the situation of translators in Iran specifically, he argues that all thought in Iran is translated thought. Shariati's notion of a return to self is said to prefigure post-revolutionary state discourse about anti-imperialism, projecting an authentic self at odds with the general situation in modern Iran, not to mention the "post-reformist" terrain characteristic of politics in recent years. Contra Farhadpour's characterization of Shariati, we show how Shariati's practices of translation and his related notion of a "return to self," rooted as it is in mysticism, in fact prefigure Farhadpour's concept of "thought/translation."

In other words, we recover Farhadpour's theory of "thought/translation" from the situated prejudices that cloud readings of Shariati in post-revolutionary Iran. Similar prejudices appear among Iranian critics who take for granted the Islamic Republic's version of decolonization and, acting on the basis of their own localized challenge to state power, proceed to dismiss global aspirations for decolonization elsewhere. This claim to specificity poses an obstacle to solidarity. Ironically, the claim perpetuates the self-other divisions that a critic like Farhadpour rejects when he describes translation as a process that undoes the self. A similar insistence on the specificity of the situation in Iran leads cynics to reject appeals for Third Worldist solidarity because they are trumpeted by the state. Where attempts to project discreet divisions between pre- and post-revolutionary situations ignore significant continuities, we read for continuities between Shariati and Farhadpour and thus call for a reappraisal.

Well and good in the abstract, an emphasis on situated thought should entail situated analysis of thought itself. From this perspective, the special section raises unresolved, enduring questions about Shariati and the prospects for anti- and decolonial solidarity today. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi rightly locates Shariati's idea of "a return to self" in its immediate historical context. Shariati

posits an unmoored image of the self, one linked to Third Worldism in direct response to the Pahlavi state and its ethno-nationalist cultural politics, which imagined Iranians as Aryans and, further, as never having been subjects of colonization because they were never formally colonized. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's further identification of an overly simplified political economy in Shariati's proposals for Third World solidarity recalls Fanon, who depicts the "dead ends" that haunt *Négritude*, the *nahda* ("Arab renaissance"), and similar cultural approaches among colonized intellectuals. Detached from the objective problems of *les damnés*, the colonized intellectual cuts culture off from reality (Fanon 2004, 151–5). "To fight for national culture," Fanon concludes, "first of all means fighting for the liberation of the nation, the tangible matrix from which culture can grow" (Fanon 2004, 168).

Fanon's emphasis on the institution of a "tangible matrix" as a necessary precondition for cultural production raises questions about the framework adopted here. Are we misguided to search for Third World solidarity among cultural remedies to alienation? Doesn't the act of translation demand situated analysis, recalling the fight for a "tangible matrix from which culture can grow" as its precondition? Or is it the case that reflections situated in Iran, a place where all thought is translated thought, demand revisions to theories of decolonization? Can we translate anticolonial, Third World, and decolonial solidarities as mystical solidarities? Should we?

To venture a response, we build on Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's insight that different economic and political circumstances in the colonial periphery require nuanced and contingent approaches to decolonization. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi demonstrates the challenges that face projections of a united anti-imperialist front, especially, we might add, crude ones. Through a reconstruction of the problem in the 1960s and 1970s, the era when such projections seemed commonplace, his essay speaks indirectly to contemporary anxieties. Our contribution suggests that Shariati's mystical and ever evasive concept of the self parts from visions of decolonization practiced in post-revolutionary Iran—the kinds of visions against which critics like Farhadpour emphasize specificity and ultimately relinquish aspirations for Global South solidarity. Shortly after the 1979 revolution, the Iranian state pursued a Cultural Revolution designed to implement a "tangible matrix" from which indigenized knowledge production could grow. It conscripted Shariati's references to a "return to self" to justify its actions. When read exclusively in conversation with Fanon, Shariati's lack of specificity—his mystical tendencies—appears to be a shortcoming. When read in light of the situation in Iran, the somewhat intangible matrix implied by Shariati's mystical tendencies serves to challenge reductive associ-

ations between Shariati and post-revolutionary state violence. Does that same somewhat intangible matrix afford a new concept of decolonization, one that responds to situated realities in Iran and in today's similarly burdened postcolonial states?

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ENDNOTES

1. For a discussion of Fanon on cultural self-affirmation as resistance, see Glen Sean Coulthard (2014, 31–42, 146–8). See also Lewis R. Gordon (1995, 63–5).

2. See also Lewis R. Gordon (2000, 29).

3. See, e.g., Boroujerdi (1996, 112). See also Abrahamian (1989, 115–16).

4. See, e.g., Christopher J. Lee (2018); Tricontinental (2020, 6); David Marriott (2021, 194). Adam Shatz is one reader who cites the French edition and still takes the letter's existence for granted. See Shatz (2017).

5. This method is most clearly on display in Fanon's description of the transformations necessary for the development of national consciousness in *Wretched*. See Jane Anna Gordon (2014, 129–61). For a further articulation of Fanon's method, vis-a-vis Hegel, see also Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996, 10–46).

6. A recent crop of writings has similarly focused attention on translation and cultural alienation among Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, Shariati included. Our intention is to build on this literature. See, e.g., Hamed Ghessimi (2019, 51–60). See also the abstract for Mina Khanlarzadeh (2020).

7. See, e.g., Boroujerdi (1996). See also Ali Mirsepassi (2011).

8. For similar readings of Shariati's spiritual recasting of modernity, see Faramarz Motamed-Dezfooli (2008/2009); Masoumeh Aliakbari (2007/2008).

9. For further elaboration of this point, see Davari (2014).

10 For an insightful but distinct discussion of translation and pedagogy in Shi'ism, see Milad Odabaei (2022, 281).

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Thought/Translation and the Situations of Decolonization

Arash Davari and Siavash Saffari

ABSTRACT: Known as a revolutionary ideologue and a religious reformer, Ali Shariati's activities as a translator have not garnered substantial scholarly attention. We reconstruct a history of Shariati's translations, situating these endeavors at the center of his intellectual project. Shariati's thought itself, we show, is a form of translation in the service of decolonization. This history reveals a nascent theory of decolonization as open-ended and indeterminate. We advance this claim by staging a conversation between Shariati's reflections on decolonization and Morad Farhadpour's evolving concept of thought/translation, a dissident theory of translation influential in contemporary Iran that bears resemblance to Shariati's performative works. More than an abstruse debate in Iranian intellectual history, these continuities raise questions of pressing concern for postcolonial states, in particular the specificity of local situations as they relate to ongoing global hierarchies.

KEYWORDS: decolonization, Morad Farhadpour, mysticism, Ali Shariati, translation, Third Worldism

The Situations of Decolonization

The brand of anticolonial and anti-imperialist discourse espoused by the Islamic Republic of Iran for the more than four decades of its existence has proven a source of confusion and contentious debate among the left. Some imagine the Islamic Republic at the forefront of a global struggle against

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neo-colonial domination and Eurocentric epistemic violence. For others, the Islamic Republic's rhetoric is a ruse meant to divert attention away from the state's repressive domestic practices and its ambitions for regional hegemony. Iran's anticolonial posturing and antidemocratic policies thus reflect the pitfalls of postcolonial politics described by Frantz Fanon and Edward Said.

While Iran was never formally colonized, anticolonial and anti-imperialist sentiments animated the revolutionary movement of the late 1970s against the Pahlavi monarchy. Experiences of semicolonial subordination to Britain and Russia during the nineteenth century and of patron-client relations with the United States after the Second World War convinced many dissident Iranians that the ruling class in their country was an appendage of Western powers. That skepticism gave rise to intellectual affinities with mid-twentieth century anticolonial and national liberation movements in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Translations of Fanon and Aimé Césaire appeared in Persian as early as the 1960s, and translations of Patrice Lumumba, Albert Memmi, Agostinho Neto, and Léopold Sédar Senghor soon followed, stacking the shelves of (predominantly) leftist activists in the years leading up to the revolution. These were read and discussed along with books and pamphlets on revolutionary guerrilla movements in Latin America, Viet Cong resistance, the Palestinian national liberation struggle, the Algerian war of independence, the Négritude movement, Pan-Africanism, Third Worldism, the Bandung Conference, and dependency and world-system theories.

The establishment of an Islamic Republic in 1979 signaled the triumph of Islamist forces united under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini. Soon after coming to power, the new Islamist rulers began to position themselves not only as the sole defenders of disenfranchised revolutionary masses, but also as the only truly anti-imperialist force in Iran. The occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 by a group of Islamist university students sympathetic to the Islamic Republic helped the burgeoning state consolidate its image as a vanguard force. The Cultural Revolution of 1980 to 1983 was another critical episode in its quest to channel anticolonial and anti-imperialist sentiments into a state-building project. That episode involved the forced closure of all universities and colleges in the country, the expulsion of students and professors deemed to be at odds with Islamic and revolutionary values, and the creation of the Bureau of the Cultural Revolution to Islamize university education and purge its curricula of Western influence.

State projects to indigenize and Islamize university education have endured with varying degrees of intensity over the past four decades, in the humanities and social sciences especially. One iteration from the 1990s saw

the state promote postcolonial theory as part of its attempt to counter Western influence and foster non-Western knowledge production in its place. A state-sponsored press published the Persian translation of Said's *Orientalism* in 1992. Government agencies—including, most notably, the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology—translated and published other major works in postcolonial theory in the years that followed, among them books by Homi Bhabha, Leela Gandhi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Robert J. C. Young. The state also sponsored lectures and conferences on postcolonial studies, handing out scholarships for Iranian academics to pursue doctoral degrees in postcolonial studies in Australia, Malaysia, India, the UK, and the United States (Ghaderi 2018, 460–61).

These initiatives reveal an ambivalent relationship with translation. On the one hand, efforts to produce an indigenous program in the social sciences and humanities fuel skepticism about translation (Sheikholeslami 2017, 13–15). On the other hand, state officials and institutions have considered certain varieties of translation desirable when they accord with the Islamic Republic's officially designated ideological goals. None other than the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has translated several books from Arabic, including three by Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb.

The same ambivalence, which appears to be an innate feature of decolonial discourse in Iran, has clouded the reception of Ali Shariati. A leading proponent of anticolonialism during the pre-revolutionary period, Shariati harshly criticized "translated intellectuals," whom he charged with a failure to think beyond Eurocentric frames of reference. Shariati registered this critique despite the fact that he himself translated numerous works from French into Persian. Versions of Shariati's pronouncements (not to mention his image and his name) appear generously in post-revolutionary state literature, the Islamic Republic having adopted Shariati's critique of Eurocentrism and intellectual dependency as a mantra. When pitched as government policy and ideological design, however, the quest to decolonize knowledge production in post-revolutionary Iran came imbued with authoritarian exclusions and violence, exemplified by the Cultural Revolution. To this day, the state continues to deploy similar practices against intellectuals deemed *gharbzadeh* (Westoxified), a term Shariati also helped popularize in the 1970s.

A number of dissident intellectuals in post-revolutionary Iran have sought to rethink translation and knowledge production in response, often dismissing Shariati along the way. The most sophisticated of this lot is perhaps Morad Farhadpour, a leftist translator, critical theorist, and essayist who holds an esteemed position among contemporary Iranian intellectual celebrities. Far-

hadpour's concept of "thought/translation" questions the very possibility of knowledge production in Iran without modern Western thought. Since the early twentieth-century encounter with European modernity, a series of factors have given rise in Iran to what Farhadpour names a "crisis of thought" (*bohrān-e tafakor*): the combined effects of pseudo-modernization and uneven development, a historical rupture between past and present, and the dominance of repressive political structures. These circumstances render translation the only possible form of thought and hence also the only way out of the crisis. To the extent that Iran has been integrated in the capitalist world economy as a dependent periphery, experiencing modernization through the acquisition of Western technology (however inadequate and uneven), Farhadpour claims that translations of Western social and philosophical thought can cultivate needed awareness of the contemporary condition and its crises.[1] At the same time, translation can be a strategy for resisting an authoritarian state that utilizes the rhetoric of "indigenous social sciences" to surveil its population (Farhadpour 2015, 15–16).

Seen from this perspective, the post-revolutionary quest for indigenous knowledge holds common ground with the pre-revolutionary discourse of a return to self (*bāzgasht beh khish*) advocated by figures like Shariati. The Islamic Republic has infamously drawn distinctions between self and other (*khodi va ghayr-e khodi*) to sequester proverbially foreign and *gharbzadeh* elements in its polity. Post-revolutionary rhetoric that posits an irreconcilable distinction between the native self and the non-native other appears to echo a pre-revolutionary discourse of "return to self," which had assumed an ideal, authentic self in an antagonistic relationship to the other. For Farhadpour, Shariati's syncretization of existentialism and religion as an antidote to the distorted modernism of the Pahlavi state served to hinder the emergence of a self-conscious modern subject and set the stage for the Islamic Republic's project of Islamizing a Heideggerian rejection of modernity (Farhadpour 2013, 2015). Against this paradigm, Farhadpour dismisses the suggestion that translation is a form of imitation and that translation of Western thought equals Eurocentrism or *gharbzadegi* (Westoxification). The objective of translation is not to mimic and reproduce Western modernity, but to reexamine the self in a dialectical relationship with the other. "Translation," he writes, "is a manner of interpretation and an exemplary attempt to understand the other. And understanding the other is a necessary condition for any type of self-awareness and self-reflection" (Farhadpour 1999). Farhadpour would go on to revise even this notion and take a more radical position vis-à-vis translation and the self. Translation, he would finally conclude, is the medium through which the self comes to rec-

ognize its invariably unsettled and inessential condition—a far cry from paeans to an authentic, essentially Islamic self and pretensions to return to it.

Matters are not as settled as Farhadpour makes them seem. According to Hosna Sheikholeslami much of the Iranian engagement with Western social sciences and theory in translation after the 1979 revolution is indebted to Shariati (Sheikholeslami 2017, 55–6). Farhadpour, we claim, is no exception to this pattern and shares more in common with Shariati than the discussion of "thought/translation" lets on. To lift the fog, this article reconstructs Shariati's many formative encounters with translation. We offer a corrective to accounts that associate Shariati's views of translation and the self with the post-1979 state project in Iran, showing instead affinities between his translational practices and Farhadpour's concept of "thought/translation." Shariati did not simply prefigure the vision of decolonization championed by the Islamic Republic; he anticipated critiques of that vision, like the one levied by Farhadpour.

The first section of the essay writes an alternate intellectual history, reconstructing the central pillars of Shariati's thought alongside his various encounters with translation. We show how each of his core ideas corresponded with one of his major translations, broadly defined. Shariati's translated thought not only converted concepts from existentialism, Marxism, and Third Worldism into Shia idioms familiar among Muslim audiences, but also dallied with practices common in more experimental corners of translation studies today.

The second section locates translation in Shariati's understanding of decolonization. This link requires revisions to both concepts, pending circumstances specific to mid-twentieth-century Iran, where formal and direct colonial rule were absent. We offer, here, a close reading of an essay titled "Existentialism" where Shariati performs a loose translation of Jean-Paul Sartre. Shariati's essay does to Sartre's theory what Sartre notoriously did to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), transposing his ideas onto a historical subject identical with the translator. As a result, Sartre speaks to a situation (Iran) where his ideas are better understood and presumably rendered universal. Unlike Sartre's preface to Fanon, however, Shariati's recapitulation of Sartre challenges extant global hierarchies produced by colonial power. Shariati's practice—as distinct from the literal words he utters about "translated intellectuals"—dispels the myth that his vision for a "return to self" involves a crude, atavistic disengagement from modern European thought. Along the way, translation as disfiguration becomes translation as an instrument of decolonization. This vision of decolonization differs markedly from the one advanced in certain official corners of the Islamic Republic.

Our last two sections stage a conversation between Shariati and Farhadpour. The sections are organized according to the evolution of Farhadpour's theory from "thought/translation" to "~~thought/translation~~." "Thought/translation" describes a dialectical confrontation that results in a return to a unified, authentic self while "~~thought/translation~~" indicates an encounter with the other that perpetually fosters irresolute subjectivity. Shariati initially appears to repeat the closed dialectic of "thought/translation," covering up its gaps with what Farhadpour calls a "delusional and demagogic" ideological narrative. Shariati's "translations" of an invented figure named Chandel cast doubt on this assessment. These references prove key to Shariati's formulation of an open-ended dialectic between self and other, one that fosters irresolute subjectivity as part of the search for decolonization.

It is no secret that Farhadpour finds existentialism sophomoric and dangerously misleading when combined with religion. Existentialism of a theistic variety, he argues, precludes the rise of a self-conscious modern subject because it obstructs an internalization of the rupture that constitutes modernity. He duly rejects Shariati, who, for Farhadpour, flirted with this rupture but ultimately could not and did not affirm an unsettled subject (Farhadpour 2013). Rather, Shariati's technique tamed, undermined, and redirected the radical possibilities implied by thought/translation into expressions of reactionary populism (ibid.).

Shariati's mystical writings, however, posit an unsettled self nearly identical to the one sought by Farhadpour.[2] Shariati's translational practices illustrate the point. A less scientific, more spiritual approach to translation considers an original source ineffable due to its transcendent qualities. This practice informed Shariati's thinking in general, most easily identifiable in his understanding of Islam. He was an heir to Sufi traditions that favored a negative theology in pursuit of a founding spirit distinct from the letter of Islamic law. Biographer Ali Rahnema accordingly describes Shariati's thought in terms of "becoming" (Ranhema 2014, xcii–xxiv). Muhammad Iqbal, a noted influence on Shariati who championed "the intellectual revolt of Islam against Greek philosophy" and its "static view of the universe," similarly describes the Quranic "conception of Nature as a process of becoming" (Iqbal 1930/2013, 106, 113). In her contribution to this collection, Seema Golestaneh further clarifies Iqbal's impact on Shariati to describe the conjoined "mystical and political becomings" that characterize his thought. This "ethos of becoming," we show, bears a striking resemblance to Farhadpour's later concept of "~~thought/translation~~."

More than an abstruse debate in Iranian intellectual history, Farhadpour's aversion to Shariati reflects a broader tension between anticolonial discourse and the specificities of postcolonial politics. Continuities between Shariati and Farhadpour raise pressing questions about the project of decolonization as it relates to situated thought in Iran. Do Iran's circumstances challenge grand narratives about a united front against Western imperialism? Should these challenges compel a repudiation of decolonization altogether, as many contemporary pundits claim? Or should Iran's situation call for a revised concept of decolonization?

Shariati, the Translator

A prolific writer and orator, Shariati produced a massive body of work, the bulk of which was collected and published posthumously in thirty-six volumes numbering many thousands of pages. He has been recognized as an original thinker who aimed to develop "indigenous social theory" to analyze conditions and initiate change in his local Iranian context in the latter half of the twentieth century (Amin Ghaneirad 2002, 275). Shariati is also remembered for—and in some cases falsely credited with—several translated works. The range of these translations presents a picture of Shariati's multifaceted religious, literary, and sociopolitical interests. Though he articulated his revolutionary Islamic discourse from a position of particular attachments, when his translations are pieced together and read in dialogue, a different picture emerges—of an intellectual actively engaged with the world at large and in search of new perspectives to rethink contentious issues in his local setting. He found inspiration in the works of Muslim reformers, socially-minded literary critics, and revolutionary intellectuals who were themselves engaged in producing discourses of resistance against colonial and capitalist hegemony. A firm believer in the emancipatory potential of religious faith, Shariati was also drawn to the ideas of those who sought to offer, in the words of one of his interlocutors, Iqbal, "a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis" (Iqbal [1930] 2013, 142).

Shariati's first published work was a 1954 translation from Arabic to Persian of a booklet by the Iraqi Shia jurist Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita'. The booklet had appeared earlier that year under the Arabic title *Al-mathal al-'ulya fi al-Islam la fi Bhamdun*. It was a response to the Muslim-Christian Convocation, an initiative of the American Friends of the Middle East, held in Bhamdoun, Lebanon between April 22–27, 1954, with the express goal of uniting Muslims and Christians against the ostensible threat of communism.[3] Although Kashif

al-Ghita' himself opposed communism, he nevertheless condemned the gathering as a front for imperialism, which he saw as the most urgent threat facing the Muslim world. Shariati's translation was published under the title *Nemunehāy-e 'āli-e akhlāghi dar Islam ast na dar Bhamdoun* (*Excellent Ethical Ideals are to be Found in Islam not in Bhamdoun*). It appears in volume 31 of Shariati's collected works.

His second translation is also from Arabic, this one of a work by the Egyptian author Abdel Hamid Gouda al-Sahhar. Titled *Abu Dharr al-Ghifari: Al-ishtiraki az-zahid* (1943), the book chronicles the life of Abu Dharr (Abu Zar), an early convert to Islam known for his strict piety and opposition to corruption in the post-Muhammad institution of the Caliphate. According to Rahnema, Shariati had begun work on this translation as early as 1951, taking full liberty to articulate "his own reflections, independent research, and commentary" on al-Sahhar's book. The translation was finally published in 1955 as *Abu Zar Ghifari: Avalin khodāparast-e sosiālist* (*Abu Zar Ghifari: The First God Worshiping Socialist)* (Ranhema 2014, 57). The subtitle, a slight modification from the original Arabic, is an homage to *Nehzat-e Khodāparastān-e Sosiālist* (The Movement of God-Worshiping Socialists), an Iranian political organization that Shariati affiliated with in the early 1950s. This translation appears in volume 3 of his collected works. Shariati's third translation, again from Arabic, is of a book by the leftist Egyptian literary critic Muhammad Mandur titled *Fi al-adab wa al-naqd* (1949). Shariati translated the book into Persian in 1958 as a requirement for his bachelor's degree in literature at the University of Mashhad. The translation was published in 1970, under the title *Naqd va adab* (*Criticism and Literature*). It appears in volume 32 of Shariati's collected works.

Shortly after obtaining his bachelor's degree, Shariati moved to France in 1959 to pursue graduate studies at the University of Paris. Here, too, he was asked to complete a translation as a requirement for his degree. At the suggestion of his doctoral supervisor, Gilbert Lazard, Shariati corrected, commented on, and translated from Persian to French a thirteenth-century manuscript on the history of the central Asian city of Balkh, known as *Fada'il-i Balkh*. The manuscript was originally written in 1214 in Arabic by Safi al-Din al-Waiz al-Balkhi and subsequently translated into Persian in 1278 by 'Abd Allah Muhammad Husayni Balkhi. Whereas most of his translated works were passion projects informed by a sense of social and political commitment, this work hardly interested Shariati, as subsequently reported by Lazard (ibid., 118).

While sullenly working on his doctoral requirement, Shariati immersed himself in several projects closer to his true passions, including the translation into Persian of a work by Alexis Carrel, the French surgeon and biologist who received the 1912 Nobel Prize in medicine. Shariati's interest in Carrel dated

back to at least 1955, when, in an article in *Khorāsān* newspaper, he praised Carrel for taking a critical position on Western scientific positivism and philosophical materialism. For Shariati, Carrel's turn to metaphysics clearly indicated compatibility between faith and science (ibid., 65). In Paris, he translated an article by Carrel titled "*Un médecin parle de la prière*" (1944). The translation was published in Iran in 1960 under the title *Niyāyesh* (*Prayer*). It can be found in volume 8 of Shariati's collected works.

Carrel's influence on Shariati went beyond reinforcing his belief in the congruence between science and spirituality. In a posthumously published book titled *Le Voyage de Lourdes* (1948), Carrel recounts his experience accompanying a group of pilgrims to Lourdes in southwestern France, the site of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, where he purportedly witnessed the miraculous cure of a woman diagnosed with tuberculous peritonitis named Marie Bailly. Carrel wrote his account of the voyage in a third-person narrative by Dr. Louis Lerrac, a fictional character whose last name is Carrel in reverse.[4] Rahnema suggests that Carrel's choice to transpose his name with that of a fictional character may have inspired Shariati to invent his own fictional identity, a character by the name of Chandel (شاندل.) to whom Shariati made frequent references in his writings and lectures (Ranhema 2014, 163).[5] The fictionalized name is a play on the French word for candle, *chandelle*. The Persian word for candle, شمع (*sham'*), was a pen name under which Shariati published a number of his early writings, including several poems. The pen name is an anagram of Shariati's initials: ش stands for Shariati, م for Mazinani, and ع for Ali (Ranhema 2014, 163).[6] Shariati attributes some of his mystical writings, referred to as the *Kaviriyāt* (*Desert Writings*), to Chandel. For instance, volume 13 of his collected works includes a poem titled "*Sorood-e āfarinesh*" ("Creation Hymn"), which Shariati claims to be the translation of the introduction to a book by Chandel titled *Safar-e takvin* (*The Genesis Journey*). Shariati similarly claims that "*Goftegoohāy-e tanhāyee*" (*Dialogues of Solitude*), which appears in volume 33 of the collected works, is a translation originally authored by Chandel.

The above-noted works, which ascribe a mystical disposition to Chandel, recall the teachings of Louis Massignon. A leading French scholar of Islam and a Catholic priest of the Melkite Order, Massignon exercised an influence on Shariati that Rahnema likens to the relationship between the thirteenth-century mystics Shams Tabrizi and Jalal al-Din Rumi (ibid., 121). Shariati worked as Massignon's assistant between 1960 and 1962 while the famed French orientalist conducted research on the life of Fatima al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet of Islam. Shariati reportedly collected and translated Persian manuscripts on Fatima into French (ibid., 120). While Massignon, who died in Oc-

tober 1962, never completed his planned book, several of his short essays on the subject appeared posthumously in a three-volume collection titled *Opera Minora* (Massignon 1963).

Massignon's work finds parallels between the status of Fatima in Islam and that of the Virgin Mary in Christianity. In a letter to his student Henry Corbin, Massignon insisted the planned book "could make an important contribution to unification between Shi'ism and Sunnism and between Islam and Christianity," urging Corbin to take responsibility for completing the volume. As Jean Moncelon notes, however, Massignon's wish was fulfilled not by Corbin, but by Shariati, who drew on his mentor's research materials and paid homage to him in a famous 1971 lecture titled *Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast* (*Fatima is Fatima*) (Moncelon 1997, 209). Shariati also translated Massignon's *Salman Pak et les prémices spirituelles de l'Islam iranien (Salman Pak and the Spiritual Beginnings of Iranian Islam)* (1934), a biographical account of the life of Salman al-Farsi, who was an early convert to Islam and a companion of Muhammad. The book's Persian translation, titled *Salmān-e Pāk* was published in 1967. It appears in volume 28 of Shariati's collected works. Many Persian-language sources have claimed that Shariati also translated a book by Massignon on the life of the tenth-century Persian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj. This claim has been questioned by Rahnema (2014, 135) and no such work appears in Shariati's collected works.

During his five-year sojourn in Paris, Shariati also developed a deep interest in the ideas of Frantz Fanon. Much mythology surrounds the nature of Shariati's relationship with the Martinican revolutionary. It has been claimed, without adequate evidence, that Shariati was "a student of Fanon's" (Varzi 2011, 62), that he met Fanon in France (Abu Zayd 2006, 49), that the two men exchanged a number of letters and discussed "the role of Islam in the broad anti-colonial war," and that Shariati translated Fanon's 1959 book *L'an V de la révolution Algérienne* (known in English as *A Dying Colonialism*) (Ranhema 2014, 127).

The question of Shariati's role in translating Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, published in 1961 with a preface by Sartre, has especially given rise to a contentious and ongoing debate. Many sources have credited Shariati with translating the book, while others have maintained that he only translated Sartre's preface. According to Rahnema, Shariati and his Iranian friends in Paris were so impressed by Fanon's book that they decided to divide its chapters among themselves and translate it collectively. In Rahnema's assessment, the fact that the translation of the book in Iran only bore Shariati's name was likely a ploy by the publisher to increase sales (ibid.). Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi identifies Abolhasan Banisadr, who was among Shariati's friends in Paris and who went on to become Iran's first President after the 1979 revolution, as the sole transla-

tor of Fanon's book, including Sartre's preface (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2020). In a previous study, acknowledging the existence of early print copies of the Persian translation bearing Banisadr's name, Farzaneh Farahzad speculated that either "Shariati and Banisadr collaborated on the translation," or "Banisadr lent his name to Shariati's project in order to aid the book's distribution" (Farahzad 2017, 134). Adding to the speculations still, some sources have named Shariati as the translator of Fanon's will (Ghaderi 2018, 459; Salem 2020, 57). However, as Farahzad has noted, the text that appears in volume 4 of Shariati's collected works under the title of *Vasiat nāme-ye Fanon (Fanon's Will)* is in fact a truncated translation of the concluding chapter of *Les Damnés de la terre* (Farahzad 2017, 133). The myth and reality of Shariati's translation of Fanon notwithstanding, there is no doubt that Shariati played a key part in introducing and popularizing Fanon in pre-revolutionary Iran (Zahiri 2021, 507).

Sartre is yet another thinker whose intellectual influence was formative for Shariati during his Paris years and whose writing Shariati translated into Persian. It is plausible that Shariati would have known about the famous French existentialist philosopher even before moving to Paris, as some of Sartre's writings had already been translated into Persian in the 1940s. It may also have been through Sartre that Shariati first learned about Fanon's work. According to Rahnema, Shariati attended a lecture by Sartre on Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1962 at Restaurant Musulman located in Paris's Boulevard Saint-Michel.[7] Reports about Shariati's ties with Sartre are no less ridden with mythology than those about his links to Fanon. Some sources, for instance, have quoted Sartre as having said: "I have no religion, but if I were to choose one, it would be that of Shariati."[8] Shariati is also falsely credited with having translated Sartre's 1943 book *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*) (Newell 2016, 206). What is known for certain is that Shariati translated into Persian an excerpt of Sartre's 1948 book *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (*What Is Literature?*). The translation, titled "*Adabiyāt chist?*," was published in 1967 in a literary magazine in Mashhad called *Hirmand*. It also appears under the title of "*She'r chist?*" ("What is Poetry?") in volume 32 of Shariati's collected works. The publication of "*Adabiyāt chist?*" marked his final work as a translator.

Translation and Decolonization

Shariati's translations from French corresponded with similar efforts by contemporaries in his intellectual milieu. Following the Second World War, Iran saw a dramatic rise in translations from European languages into Persian. The establishment of the Franklin Book Program (FBP) in 1953, the same year

the British and Americans colluded with Iranian royalists and military officers to orchestrate a coup deposing Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh from power, and the institution of an FBP office in Tehran the following year preceded a marked increase in the publication of U.S. titles. An "exercise in cultural and commercial imperialism" as well as "cultural diplomacy," FBP translations in Persian supported Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's modernization objectives in addition to U.S. Cold War aims (Rahimi-Moghaddam and Laugesen 2020).[9]

Still, in the post-war era translation was more than just a device for buttressing the Pahlavi state's modernization agenda or supporting U.S. Cold War designs. During the 1940s, translations of Soviet literature began to pour into Iran courtesy of the Tudeh Party as well as the Society for Cultural Relations between Iran and the Soviet Union. The former, whose members included many prominent intellectuals and literati, fostered the translation of canonical Marxist works, including the writings of Vladimir Lenin and other Bolshevik thinkers. The latter, in addition to offering Russian-language classes and publishing Persian translations of Russian classics, printed a Persian language periodical titled *Payām-e no* (later changed to *Payām-e novin*) that featured articles about the economic and scientific achievements of the Soviet Union as well as short stories and literary essays from Soviet writers (Mossaki and Ravandi-Fadai 2018, 429–430). In 1946, the Society hosted the First Congress of Iranian Writers. The attendees included some of the "luminaries of Iran's literary scene," and discussions on Russian and Soviet literature featured prominently (ibid., 430).

The translation and dissemination of U.S. and Soviet works reflected the clashing metanarratives of the Cold War era. Some oppositional intellectuals viewed both sets of translation as a perpetuation of colonial power in Iran. For Jalal Al-e Ahmad, a Tudeh Party defector, the Soviet Union was as much a part of a colonially-facilitated structure of global domination as the United States and Western Europe (Al-e Ahmad 1962/2006, 13). Following his split with the Tudeh, Al-e Ahmad translated a batch of French existentialist texts, most notably André Gide's *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* (Dabashi 2021, 265–266). French existentialism's critical departure from Soviet politics and its critique of essences offered rich source material for figures like Al-e Ahmad who were eager to embark on an independent path and critique conditions specific to Iran. While Shariati never joined the Tudeh Party and remained a steadfast nationalist in his early years (albeit of a religious hue), he too used French existentialism as a canvas for intervention in Iranian politics. His translation of Sartre and his engage-

ments with Fanon, in particular, pursue decolonization as a matter of disalienation (Robcis 2021).

The term "decolonization," as distinct from anticolonialism, challenges colonial power absent direct colonial rule, a condition pertinent to Iran which, despite various forms of foreign influence, remained formally autonomous. The pursuit of decolonization can focus on sites adjacent to politics: enduring economic disparities and, especially, pernicious ideas in individual psyches (Daifallah 2019, 810).[10] With respect to the latter, decolonization may promise a full and purportedly authentic self, absent the corrupting influence of foreign elements.

Contemporaries of Al-e Ahmad and Shariati in neighboring Arab states similarly embraced Sartre's ideas in pursuit of decolonization following the declaration of formal independence. *Wujudiyah*, or Arab existentialism, focused on the enduring legacy of colonial ontology. If existence precedes essence, as Sartre claims, then disalienation resides in actions beyond the prison house of language. These efforts dispel the charge that colonized subjects searching for authenticity acted in a derivative fashion by merely citing a European in Sartre (Di-Capua 2018, 8–13). The question remained as to how critical linguistic practices, like literal translations, complemented efforts to navigate the concrete situations required for decolonization.

Circumstances specific to Iran invite further reflection on this question. It is impossible to discuss decolonization in Iran without also addressing literal translations.[11] Following the Perso-Russian wars of the nineteenth century and as part of a program in defensive development, the Qajar court supported translation initiatives designed to access European military advances in science and technology (Karimi-Hakkak 2008, 493–501). These initiatives involved translations of Western political culture, especially the British and French, and gave rise to what Milad Odabaei aptly calls "epistemic confusion"—a disconnection between the literal words on a page and the worlds to which they made reference. Epistemic confusion proved "productive" in that it revealed "the emergence of a historical rupture in the Iranian order of things and the formation of nascent historical discourses," a process epitomized by the innovations of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution (Odabaei 2016, 104–110; esp. 108). Translations generated even further unintended effects as Iranians came to sense their "backwardness" relative to Europeans through translations of European orientalists writing about Iran. Iranian experiences of psychic alienation vis-a-vis Europe occurred, at least in significant part, through the translations that drove modernization programs. Mirza Habib Esfahani's translation of James Morier's 1824 book *The Adventures Of Hajji Baba Of Ispahan* in the late nineteenth

century takes pride of place in the story of orientalist representations that lent themselves to anticolonial reinterpretation (Karimi-Hakkak 2008, 499; Hadaddian-Moghaddam 2014, 59–68).

Shariati addressed these dynamics in his characterization of alienation as *maskh shudan*. The term *maskh*, most famously used to render the title of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* in Persian, also appears in Shariati's purported translation of the conclusion to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* where it replaces the French verb *détraquer* (meaning to put something out of order or have its regular functioning disturbed). In its most technical guise, *maskh shudan* refers to the passing of a soul at death into another body. More colloquially, it describes a change in appearance according to which a thing no longer appears as it was or truly is (Davari 2014, 94 n38). Unlike translation, which also involves transmutation and may appear neutral, common uses of the term *maskh* carry a negative connotation. Shariati would claim that colonial alienation in Iran and Islamicate contexts involved the misrepresentation of an authentic self, as distinct from anti-Black racism, which involved the outright denial of any culture or civilization (ibid., 94–95). He would derisively use the phrase "'translated' intellectuals" (*rowshanfekrān-e 'tarjome-i'*) to describe contemporaries who adopted an alienated worldview and took on postures "according to foreign models."[12] (The phrase is itself a translation of Fanon's concept of *assimilé* intellectuals.) Shariati championed "authentic intellectuals" in their stead, figures characterized by an acute awareness of their situation as it relates to the ideas they pronounce (Saffari 2019, 288).

Shariati's choice to translate Europeans, orientalists like Massignon especially, seems odd given his polemical distinction between "authentic" and "translated" intellectuals. Shariati makes it clear, however, that not all translations are disfigurations, which implies that not all acts of translation are disfiguring. When discussing Sartre's work in Persian, for instance, Shariati identifies poor renditions that result in a distorted (*naqis*) and disfigured (*maskh*) understanding of the French philosopher's ideas. A corrective model demands specialized training in relevant subject matter, not just mastery of a foreign language (Shariati [1388] 2009, 340). Tellingly, he refuses to offer a literal reproduction of Sartre's words and instead writes a critical article meant to capture the "spirit" (*rūh*) of Sartre's discourse (ibid., 342).

This, too, is a kind of translation, characteristic of Shariati's enduring influence on twentieth-century intellectual life in Iran. Through his own translations, writings, and lectures, Shariati helped introduce Iranians to new theoretical perspectives, including existentialism and postcolonialism. He brought bodies of literature from different contexts into conversation, creating

reading publics primed for further exchange to great effect. Sheikholeslami thus shows how, years after the 1979 revolution, translators of Western social sciences and theory continued to credit Shariati's work as a source of inspiration even as they discarded the substance of his arguments (Sheikholeslami 2017, 55–56).

Shariati's figurative translation of Sartre professes a commitment to truth, precision, and exactitude but changes the original source to address conditions salient in its target language, broadly understood as the social and political context in which that language is spoken. To this end, Shariati revises Sartre's famous example of abandonment, the story of a student caught between conscription in the Second World War to avenge his brother's death and staying home to care for his ailing and abandoned mother (Sartre 2007, 30–31). In Shariati's rendition, the student faces a choice between caring for his mother or traveling to England on account of his beliefs, where he might work in collaboration with others who share similar beliefs and, in turn, make a larger sacrifice on behalf of those beliefs (Shariati [1388] 2009, 357). The revised account bears an uncanny resemblance to the choice facing prospective urban guerrillas in Iran, whose decision to commit to armed struggle entailed a complete break from family and friends.[13] It should be mentioned that one of the principal guerrilla groups in 1970s Iran was named the People's Sacrificers (or *Fedai*). Sartre's apparent authorship, meanwhile, provides cover for this address. On the one hand, then, Shariati's approach presumes pure originals beyond disfiguration, and yet, on the other, the refiguration of Sartre's content in response to the exigencies of Shariati's situation indicates that originals are subject to transmutation as well.

Equally significant, the essay ends with a critique. Sartre's words, Shariati claims, cannot guide a contemporary insurrectionary generation unless supplemented with models that inspire the youth to take responsibility for difficult choices (Shariati [1388] 2009, 362). This critique arrives in response to a provocative question posed at the outset of the text:

> Can a doctrine misunderstood by Europeans, despite Sartre's numerous efforts to clarify it, a doctrine the youth have not been able to feel, a doctrine that society considers detrimental as a result, exercise a positive impact in Eastern countries and societies like ours? Do our [Eastern, Iranian] intellectuals better understand that existentialism is a formative doctrine [*maktab-e sāzandeh*], that everyone should think about Sartre? (Ibid., our translation)

Shariati's conclusion suggests that Sartre's European ideas are fully realized in a situation like Iran's where Islamic culture offers adequate ethical models for insurrectionary action.

These revisions and addenda ironically mirror Sartre's controversial preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, an unwanted posthumous translation that revealed the limits of left solidarity and universalism. Sartre's preface to *Les Damnés* notes that Fanon's text is not written for white European readers, that it displaces them as the subjects of history. Sartre then proceeds to make the text legible for these very readers, reinscribing them as subjects charged with carrying "the dialectic [of history] through to its conclusion." The European not privy to Fanon's discourse (as Sartre would have it) and hence in need of translation (despite the fact that Fanon wrote in French) completes the process of decolonization set in motion by the colonized, "finishing the job." A series of reversals put the colonizer in the position of the "native" (the very position previously occupied by the colonized), where they enact violence on their own people. The colonizer must be decolonized and thereby complete their transformative process of their own doing. "The history of man" depends for its dialectical completion on this final act (Fanon 2004, lvii–lxii).

Sartre's argument is nothing short of an infelicitous translation, distorting and disfiguring Fanon's texts while pretending to represent it transparently. It creates a separate subject of address for the colonizer, relegating Fanon's words to an internal conversation with his "brothers," proverbial "strangers gathered around a fire," when, in fact, Fanon's subject of address is a prospective humanity beyond gendered, ethnic, or national identity (Butler 2006, 19–23). Fanon invites readers to complete the dialectic without needing Sartre's intervention, and that invitation does not assume rigid binaries between self and other of the sort that Sartre imposes. The conclusion to *Les Damnés de la terre* argues that a universal dialectic as pronounced by Europe remains partial. Its completion depends on wrestling dialectics away from Hegel, the author of "the prodigious adventure of the European Spirit." Fanon writes, "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man" (Fanon 2004, 237, 239). Decolonization thus aspires to universalism by positioning the colonized as the proper subject of history.

Shariati's essay on Sartre reads as a preface of sorts as well, doing to Sartre, the European, what Sartre does to Fanon, only now before the attention of an Iranian audience. Shariati, like Sartre, speaks for the text. At the same time, Shariati, like Fanon, claims to complete the dialectic on behalf of an original author (in this case, Sartre), leveraging his unique situation in Iran and as a

Shia Muslim to fill lingering gaps in the author's reasoning. Insofar as orientalist representations in translation made Iranians appear "backward," as followers on a path in history first charted by Europeans, decolonization demands a reversal of roles. As Fanon would have it: "We can do anything today provided we do not ape Europe, provided we are not obsessed with catching up to Europe" (ibid., 236). When they rewrite European texts to position the colonized as history's protagonist, Fanon and Shariati counter these misrepresentations. Shariati's translation of Sartre thus corrects not only the disfigurations of Sartre's ideas by existing literature in Persian, but also the disfigurations of Islam, Iran, and the colonized by Europe. Along the way, translation as disfiguration (*maskh*) becomes translation as transmutation, even metamorphosis (*maskh*), and ultimately an instrument of decolonization.

Shariati and Thought/Translation

Conventionally, a good translation hews to its original source, revered for its authority. Translators are tasked with rendering the text's substance in a legible format for the target language. Against British and French traditions that sought to assimilate foreign materials to local understandings, modern German theorists emphasized the translator's situation. For early-twentieth-century critics like Walter Benjamin, fidelity to form through literal rendition held possibilities for unexpected transformations in the target language (Benjamin 2002, 253–263). Jorge Luis Borges balanced these concerns by returning to the "glorious heterogeneity" produced by the Romantic tradition, where a similar foreignizing impulse produced unexpected results (Venuti 2012, 73–74). The difference, for Borges, lies in a transparent departure from any claim to strict mimesis. A good translation came to demand creativity, and reception mattered as much as authorship. These ideas shaped questions of social and political concern beyond translation, most pertinently the prospects for dissident subject formation. French theorist Jacques Rancière, for example, envisioned an "emancipated spectator" in defiance of the label "ignoramus" ascribed to the destitute by ideologues. No matter how passive an audience or spectator seems, Rancière claimed, they always engage in narrative and translation. "An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators" (Rancière 2011, 22).

Similar ideas have taken on new life in post-revolutionary Iran where translation comprises an important site of dissident activism. One prominent figure, Farhadpour, has articulated a theory of *all* Iranian thought as translation, or "thought/translation" (Farhadpour 2009, 231, 264). For Farhadpour, the current "post-reformist" situation in Iran calls for translations of European

philosophy. These translations, viewed as metaphor [*este'āreh*] (ibid., 233), promise to advance a leftist project opposed to authoritarian postcolonial rule. And so, turning away from Shariati and other ideologues who fashioned the 1979 revolution, Farhadpour encourages infinitely irresolute and hence indeterminate encounters with the other.

True to form, Farhadpour's concept of translation changed over time in accordance with changes in Iranian domestic politics. His initial notion of "thought/translation" functioned within the parameters of the reigning order. Where the Islamic Republic conditioned its existence on its capacity to preserve an authentic self, Farhadpour, following Hans-Georg Gadamer, insisted that the self can only be realized through the other. This approach demanded translations of the other most hostile to projections of an authentic self, which, in post-revolutionary Iran, amounted to translations of European modern philosophy. The self would arrive at completion, perfection, and even homogeneity through dialectical confrontation (Gould and Tahmasebian 2020, 60).[14] Farhadpour flags Iran's cultural situation as uniquely conducive for this activity: "For us Iranians, more than for any other culture, translation is the performative dimension of understanding" (ibid., 61–62).

By his own account, the defeat of reformist ambitions and the onset of a "post-reformist" period compelled Farhadpour to revise his concept and abandon any pretense of arriving at a complete self, even one mediated by the other. Rather, invoking the critical reception of Gadamer's ideas in Europe (which he acknowledges not having adequately situated before), Farhadpour adjusts "thought/translation" to signal the void invariably marking understanding. The persistence of a Lacanian Other, he claims, engenders "~~thought/translation~~" (ibid., 64, 68). The formulation indicates universalism predicated on absence, the emptying of the self as opposed to its assertion through various constituent parts (ibid., 63).

All along, Farhadpour is careful not to reinscribe the notion of a homogenous self who wills intellectual adventures. The translator is "chosen" as subject, rather than choosing. So, too, is thought (ibid., 64, 66). Ideas that repeat European philosophy, moreover, are not derivative colonial postures so long as the performance of translation speaks to the situation in its target language, in this case opposition to the Islamic Republic. This approach conflicts with metropolitan intellectuals who would reduce all political questions to anti-hegemonic stances against the West and who would subsequently ignore situated strategies in a country like Iran, enacting imperial hierarchies as they champion anti-imperialism.[15] Self-determination may instead require thinking

with, through, and about European philosophy, depending on specific circumstances.

As the "architect" of the 1979 revolution (Abedi 1986, 229–34) and "the Islamic ideologue *par excellence*" (Dabashi 1993, 103), Shariati falls squarely in the sights of Farhadpour's critique. "Ideological thought or thought/translation," he writes, "does not reveal its inner misunderstanding or gap. It does not preserve this gap as a productive tension at the heart of theory or [a] theoretical act. Rather, it covers up this gap with an ideological narrative that is both delusional and demagogic" (Gould and Tahmasebian 2020, 66). Shariati's effort to craft an Islamic ideology seems to preclude the gap Farhadpour believes to be constitutive of the modern condition. The dialectic of decolonization that arises from Shariati's translation of Sartre's ideas into an Iranian context resembles Gadamer's concept of a "perfect and homogenous" self mediated through encounters with the other. In this sense, Sartre helps Shariati arrive at a predetermined and assured notion of the self, and the process of translation does not seem to impart any changes on who or what that self is. At worst, Shariati, like Gadamer, relies on an ontological presumption about the self, a reading affirmed by the essentialist typologies of Iranian and Islamic identity that appear in parts of Shariati's work.[16]

In an interview with Sheikholeslami, Farhadpour reflects on his group of Trotskyists, whom, following the 1979 revolution, became fellow editors of the influential journal *Arghanoon:* "We were reading Kant and Hegel, Adorno and Benjamin so the ideas of Shariati, Mottahari, all seemed ridiculous to us" (Sheikholeslami 2017, 72–3 n42). The essay "Thought/Translation" critiques Gadamer's "deliberative translation" on similar terms:

> We have previously encountered this perfect authentic subject or self in Iran under the rubric of return to "the self of the self [*khishtan-e khish*]," pseudo-religious, mystic and spiritual readings of Heidegger and theories of Weststruckness (*gharb-zadegi*). As indicated earlier, the fundamental point about these theories is the thesis of the Weststruckness of the West itself. From this point of view, both West and East are homogeneous, self-sufficient, and mutually exclusive totalities. (Gould and Tahmasebian 2020, 62)

These sentiments, while mostly directed at Ahmad Fardid and Al-e Ahmad, include Shariati as well, who Farhadpour reads as denying "the necessary mediation of Iran's past and of Islamic learning by European philosophy" (Gould and Tahmasebian 2020, 50).[17] The description of self-other dynamics in passages

like the following, where Shariati clearly imputes an ontological self beyond any and all interactions with the other, support Farhadpour's charge:

> There is nothing more tragic than when our intellectuals see themselves through the eyes of the Other, and to gain knowledge of their own thoughts, culture, history and religion—which constitute their own identity—knowingly, or even worse unknowingly emulate the points of reference and the analytical and interpretive tools of the Other. (Shariati 1978; cf Saffari 2019, 288)

And yet, simple characterizations of Shariati as an ideologue who manipulated encounters with the other to arrive at a preconceived, static sense of self resemble "deliberative translation" in their own right, missing subtle aspects of Shariati's thought as a result. Here is Hamid Dabashi:

> [Shariati] could only bring the totality of his *emotional* moments and the immediacy of his political agenda to bear on whatever he presently uttered. Shariati entered the Iranian ideological scene more like an unexpected thunder than a forecasted rain, thus giving his writings a certain *emotional* immediacy, a certain urgency of purpose. To look into Shariati's collective writings for a systematized political theory or a thorough definition of what is to be done is a futile task. At best, one has to try to catch those vibrant moments of ideological drive that made this revolutionary thunderbolt roar. (Dabashi 1993, 104; emphasis ours)

The passage employs an opposition between reason and emotion in which "systematized political theory," with its prostrations at the altar of reason, fails to capture the "emotional immediacy" driving Shariati's ideas. Dabashi proceeds to reject the opposition, opting for a third term, ideology, that promises to channel the force of emotion for the sake of persuasion. Is this not a kind of assimilation, a dialectic reconciliation of two opposing poles, reason and emotion, under the guise of a third, ideology? The relationship between reason and emotion here resembles the one between a source text and its translation. Just as emotion appears secondary to reason, translation is conventionally seen as derivative of an original authorial creation. Both are presumably subordinate, dependent on the affirmation provided by an original for authority (Collins 2016, 19–20).

Farhadpour's revision of thought/translation as ~~thought/translation~~ usefully troubles these hierarchies. His depiction of "Iranians" in a distinct situation that requires translations of European philosophy, however, threatens to

reinscribe global hierarchies in its own right. Can some version of Farhadpour's thought/translation trouble *these* hierarchies as well? We believe Shariati's mystical writings, when read together with his pursuit of decolonization, offer a response. As other contributions to this special section also demonstrate, Shariati casts self-other dynamics in a spiritual register. That is, the self embarks on a journey toward the other, God, who remains beyond any pretense to (dialectical) completion in this world. Shariati's "cosmopolitan localism" thus suggests a restless "oscillation" between self and other (Saffari 2019, 283, 292). Shariati's variegated references to Chandel, which anticipate Farhadpour's revision of thought/translation as ~~thought/translation~~, prove central to this story. These aspects of Shariati's work supplement Farhadpour's theory and project a vision of Iran's situation in its specificity beyond Iran's territorial borders.

Chandel as ~~Thought/Translation~~

Shariati notably categorized his writings in accordance with distinctions between self and other. "My writings," he wrote, "are in three genres: *Ijtimāiyāt* (social writings), *Islamiyāt* (Islamic writings), and *Kaviriyāt* (desert writings). That which only the people like is *Ijtimāiyāt*. What I and the people both like is *Islamiyāt*. And that which satisfies me and gives a sense of purpose to my work, my writing, nay, to my life, is *Kaviriyāt*" (Shariati 1362/1983, 235). Shariati's socio-political criticism and his Islamic writings were addressed, in various capacities, to others, while his mystical, spiritually-inclined desert writings (*Kaviriyāt*) were addressed to the self. Chandel's reappearance across these works—in both Shariati's spiritual reflections as well as his social and political writings and lectures—reveals important continuities between Shariati's spiritual and socio-political conceptions of the self.

Shariati's socio-political criticism and religious reinterpretations depict Chandel as an authority figure, a polymath scholar who lends validity and legitimacy to Shariati's ideas (Davari 2021). He goes to great lengths to provide detailed, albeit fictionalized, references to Chandel's publications and to impress his audiences with tales of Chandel's groundbreaking research or his commanding knowledge of various scholarly fields. The trope was not aberrant. The use of pseudonyms and the invention of fictional personas as authority figures was fairly commonplace in socio-political tracts written by dissident intellectuals of Shariati's generation in Iran. Invented fictional characters gave dissidents across ideological divides an especially layered, and often playful, cover. One of the leading theorists of the Marxist-Leninist People's Fedai Guerrillas, Amir-Parviz Pouyan, for instance, used it in *Bāzgasht beh nākojā-ābād* (*Return to Utopia*) to critique what he saw as the retrograde and reactionary dis-

course of *bāzgasht* (return) articulated by Al-e Ahmad (Ranhema 2021, 25–28). Originally published in 1969 in a literary review titled *Faslhā-ye Sabz* (Mohajer 2017, 215), Pouyan's critique was staged as the translation of a dialogue between two fictional Mexican thinkers named Simon La Marte and Emmanuel Arterey.[18] During the 1960s and 1970s, works by Latin American revolutionaries were among the key theoretical resources of the People's Fedai Guerrillas, setting the stage for Pouyan's fictionalized depiction.[19]

Characters like Chandel, La Marte, and Arterey gave critics like Shariati and Pouyan an air of authority. To the extent that translations in Iran had convinced many educated citizens of their country's historical backwardness and intellectual stagnation, they readily viewed non-native sources superior and preferable to statements made by fellow Iranians. It follows that when he invoked real as well as fictionalized non-native figures of authority—Fanon, Massignon, Sartre, and Chandel—Shariati responded to Iran's "translated" history of intellectual dependence. To be more precise, his engagements with non-canonical intellectual resources and non-European thinkers, from Césaire and Fanon to Rabindranath Tagore and Iqbal, indicate a deliberate and persistent effort to unsettle a Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy through the very use of Iran's "translated" history. He would especially invoke non-Iranian thinkers when he pathologized a condition of Eurocentrism and cultural alienation among his educated and modernized countrymen.

When invoked as an intellectual authority, Chandel took on two distinct postures. His persona occasionally appeared as a translation of Fanon's person—that is, a Francophone intellectual of non-European origin who engaged in revolutionary struggle against French colonialism in North Africa. A 1971 lecture titled "*Cheh bāyad kard?*" ("What is to be done?") cites Chandel's critique of self-alienated elites in the colonial periphery. Chandel claims these elites "act as a guide for those thieves who have stopped killing people so as to have a free hand to rob them" (Shariati 1986, 33). Elsewhere, Chandel appears as a transmutation of Sartre's person, a Frenchman who pronounces abstract formulations that anchor Shariati's reasoning. One memorable case introduces Chandel as the author of *The Principle of Indetermination*, a rough translation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (Ranhema 2014, 162). On these occasions, Shariati develops a reader-centric approach to decolonization, prevalent among his contemporaries in neighboring Arab states (see, e.g., Daifallah, 2019). Chandel represented a figure of disfiguration meant to be deciphered. Citations to Chandel are designed to foster distrust in Shariati's authority as a narrator and, as a result, to cultivate an individual ethic of self-determination.

Audiences practice the ability to think for themselves, adopting a modern Enlightenment sensibility of constant critique and doubt (Davari 2021).

Shariati arguably invites readers of these Chandel references to experience what Farhadpour, in his first account of "thought/translation," calls "deliberative translation." Encounters with Chandel—the abstract embodiment of a European other who was, in his thinking, prone to abstract universalism—facilitate a dialectical return to a situated authentic self capable of discerning disfigurations brought on by "translated" intellectual activity. The story of Chandel, however, does not end here. Whereas references to Chandel in the *Ijtimāiyāt* and *Islamiyāt* cultivate an ethic of self-determination, in *Kaviriyāt* they unsettle the very construct of a stable and complete authentic self. There, in a piece titled "*Ma'budhā-ye man*" ("My Idols"), Shariati writes of Chandel:

> I could never contain him in a single frame. In Jalal Al-e Ahmad's words: "He became a new person wherever he went, and yet everywhere he was the same person." His appearance changed in each context, but in all of these colorful and exuberant manifestations a single spirit was evident. He was constantly in vacillation, restlessly traversing between Buddha and Descartes, East and West, past and future, heaven and earth. (Shariati [1362] 1983, 371)

Other scattered biographical sketches of Chandel in *Kaviriyāt* paint an equally elusive portrait. He is an African poet, a music teacher living in Rome, a French writer of Algerian origin, a French orientalist born in Tunisia, a sociologist, a composer, a linguist, a geographer, a historian of religion, a scholar of Islam, and a revolutionary. In one instance, we are told that Chandel drowned in the course of studying two great oceans, and, in another, that he was martyred in Tunisia. His religious affiliation is variably described as Muslim, Christian, and Jewish (Ranhema 2014, 164).

On this accord, Chandel is Shariati's alter ego and his idealized self. Most scholarly assessments, in fact, read Chandel as a pseudonym disguising what Shariati actually intended to say but could not due to political and cultural restrictions. These assessments mistakenly ascribe a single, self-same, and intentional identity to Shariati. More accurately, Chandel's pluri-identity persona conveys Shariati's perception of his own self. As Soussan Shariati notes, by "multiplying himself" through the evasive figure of Chandel, Shariati seeks to "escape the pigeonholes of fixed identities" (Shariati 2013).

To be sure, the invention of a fictional persona grants Shariati the liberty to share ideas that may not otherwise be said. For Yann Richard, writings authored by Chandel reveal Shariati's deep and hidden "fascination with

Christianity." Shariati thus attributes to Chandel "*Goftegoohāy-e tanhāyee*" and "*Sorood-e āfarinesh,*" with their recurring Christian themes, to evade accusations of heresy (Richard 2020). Although Richard seems to overstate Shariati's attraction to Christianity and downplay his engagements with other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Mithraism, his observation about Shariati's anxieties over heresy is certainly plausible. That "*Goftegoohāy-e tanhāyee*," which was written between 1967 and 1969, was not published during Shariati's lifetime may be attributed to these anxieties.

Still, the suggestion that Shariati only introduced Chandel to deflect accusations of heresy fails to adequately capture the complex dynamics at play in the *way* Shariati used this particular fictional character. Both before and after inventing Chandel, Shariati published many works using a variety of pseudonyms, among them Ali Sabzevari, 'Ayn Mazinani, Hamun, Nam, Rowshan, and Sham' (Ranhema 2014, 99, 105, 112). Although some are also plays on Shariati's real name, these pseudonyms are clearly meant to veil the author's identity and protect him from political persecution, public harassment, and even embarrassment (as may have been the case when the young Shariati published a number of poems under the pen name Sham'). None of these works mention Shariati's name alongside the pseudonym, but Chandel only ever appears as a citation or a translation in speeches and writings authored by Shariati. When he purports to translate Chandel, Shariati makes apparent his association with the text while at the same time keeping a measure of distance between his own person and the text's potentially contentious themes. Much like writing under a pseudonym, translation allows an author to express critical ideas that are difficult to say outright or publicly. Translated works that appeared to be removed from the immediate situation in Iran were less likely to raise the ire of authorities than works written by local authors about local conditions (Rahimi-Moghaddan and Laugesen 2020). Translating a pseudonym adds a further layer of complexity. By feigning to translate Chandel, Shariati questions the relation between public and private self, placing an only thinly veiled private self on open public display.

At times in the *Kaviriyāt*, Shariati uses Chandel to propose a spiritual ontology that describes an irresolute dialectical relationship between self and other. Chandel is the author of a poetic narrative "*Sorood-e āfarinesh*" in which God, the ultimate self-contained subject, embarks on the act of Creation to escape the emptiness of perfect subjectivity. Speaking through Chandel, while invoking the Gospel of John, Shariati muses: "In the beginning . . . there was the word, and the word was God. . . . But what is a word without a tongue to speak it, and without a consciousness to perceive it?" He answers, "The word comes

into being only when it is understood. Only upon recognition by the other, the self becomes self-conscious."[20]

The formulation marks a departure from Iqbal, Shariati's philosophical and spiritual mentor. For Iqbal, the human individual is perpetually incomplete while the Divine is resolute, never in need of an encounter with the other (Bachir Diagne 2018, 93). Shariati takes the prospect of an unsettled self one radical step further, framing the Divine, the One, itself as incomplete. "*Sorood-e āfarinesh*" shows God walking through the steps of Hegel's dialectic of mutual recognition on a path to self-consciousness. The nominal author of this account, Chandel, enacts in his very "person" the narrative's core principle—that all selfhood, even the Divine, is unsettled.

Lest we misconstrue the fictional Chandel for the resurrection of a sovereign author, Shariati's spiritual ontology puts his invention in dialectical relation with a fictive interlocutor. We learn about Chandel's trials and tribulations through his dialogues with an imagined counterpart named Madame Rosas de la Chapelle. Much like Chandel himself, Madame de la Chapelle is an elusive character who holds multiple identities. In one report, she is "a beautiful Swedish Iranologue, who has dedicated her life to the comprehension of the true spirit of Islam." In another, she is "an outstanding [Jewish] artist of the new wave" (Ranhema 2014, 166). These stories recount "a passionate tale of love" between Chandel and Madame de la Chapelle, conjuring themes regularly found in Sufi ghazals. The intense attraction Chandel and Chapelle feel for one another is "that of two separated and incomplete halves, seeking reunion" (ibid., 167). Although the reunion never materializes, their intoxicating love transforms Chandel and sets him on a path of both spiritual enlightenment and social commitment (Latif Abbaspanah 2015).

A synecdoche for self-other dynamics in a spiritual key, Chandel indicates mystical themes overlooked in hasty judgments of Shariati's work as nativist ideology. Is the Lacanian Other in Farhadpour's theory a secular translation of the Divine? Is Farhadpour, like so many of the translators in post-revolutionary Iran, indebted to Shariati? Are denials of these continuities a mark of repression in response to the trauma caused by four decades of authoritarian rule? And what does that repression produce? According to Farhadpour, the Iranian "situation" implies temporal and spatial discontinuities: a break with the era of decolonization and a methodological nationalism that seems to separate Iran from global hierarchies of an imperial nature. Shariati's affinities with Farhadpour suggest a revised theory of thought/translation and perhaps a map to navigate "situations" in their specificity and the global as an ongoing project of decolonization.

Acknowledgements

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ENDNOTES

1. See Farhadpour (1999) and (2004).
2. For a discussion of the self and mysticism in Shariati, see Ghamari-Tabrizi (2021).
3. For an account of the Muslim-Christian Convocation at Bhamdoun, see Anderson (1954, 106–108).
4. See Carrel (1950).
5. The first English language source to identify Chandel as a fictive creation of Shariati's imagination appears to be Abdollah Vakili's 1991 MA thesis at McGill University. Vakili's preface credits his friend Amir Mansour Maasoumi with helping him solve the mystery of Chandel's identity. It was Maasoumi, Vakili explains, who reported that "Dr. [Abdolkarim] Surush, a prominent contemporary Iranian thinker and a committed supporter of Shariati, declared in a private conversation in Tehran in mid-1981 that there is no real person by the name of Chandel and that he is Shariati's invention." Vakili adds that, upon reviewing the various references to Chandel in Shariati's writings, he observed a striking similarity between Chandel's biography and Shariati's own life, as well as a revealing connection between Chandel's

name and Shariati's pen name, Sham': "[I] observed that not only is there an amazing similarity between Chandel's background and that of Shariati, in terms of their heritage, the year of their birth, 1933, is the same as well. In addition, Shariati's pen name was Sham' (meaning candle) which, in French, is written as Chandelle. Yet when written in Persian Chandel and Chandelle sound the same. Thus taking account of all these factors, it seems most probable to conclude that Chandel is Shariati's self-projection" (Vakili 1991, vi–iii).

6. In some of Shariati's writings, شاندل is Latinized as Chandel, while in other instances it is spelled as Shandel or Schandel. Moreover, Chandel is sometimes given the initials M. E., which, according to Rahnema, is yet "another game of association" as "Shariati is informing his readers that Chandel is I (me)."

7. Rahnema (2014, 119).

8. Bakhtiar (1996, viii).

9. For a succinct history of FBP, see Sheikholeslami (2017, 49–50n21, 51–2n26). According to Sheikholeslami, some dissident translators managed to work within FBP parameters, capitalizing on a lack of familiarity about dynamics on the ground to publish pro-Marxist material. For a lengthier study focused on FBP, see Haddadian-Moghaddam (2014, 102–115).

10. See also Wa Thiong'o (2011). On Al-e Ahmad's critique of postcolonial political economy, see Sadeghi-Boroujerd (2021, 173–194).

11. The Persian tradition of translation is over a millennium long, reliably dating back to the Sasanian period. During the medieval period, translation played host to robust intellectual debates on account of scholarly fluidity between Arabic and Persian. These activities petered out in the nineteenth century as language reforms and divisions between Persian speakers, fostered by British colonial rule in South Asia, confined Persian to Iran's territorial borders and its immediate environs. The threat posed by rising European powers, however, sparked renewed interest.

12. See, e.g., Shariati ([1361] 1982, 469–70). See also Shariati ([1363] 1984–1985, 5).

13. On the experience of urban guerrilla warfare in 1970s Iran and the choice to break from family, see Sohrabi (2021).

14. We have cited from the translation to facilitate exchange with readers who cannot access the text in Persian.

15. For a related discussion regarding Syria, see Bardawil (2019, 174–192). See also Bardawil (2020).

16. Shariati's Islamic discourse is often advanced within a civilizational framework in which the categories of East and West occupy a central place. For a critical discussion on Shariati's civilizational discourse see Saffari (2017, 142–150, 160–164).

17. For another direct critique of Shariati, see Farhadpour (2013).

18. La Marte and Arterey are fictional characters. According to Rahnema (2021, 26), Artery is Pouyan and La Marte is Al-e Ahmad. The name of the translator, Hamshahri, is one of Pouyan's pseudonyms. In a subsequent print, the name of the translator is said to be Ali Kabiri, which is another one of Pouyan's pseudonyms. Over the

course of the dialogue, and through a series of Socratic inquiries and expositions, Arterey exhibits the errors of the romantic vision of a return to the past, which La Marte defends.

19. Massoud Ahmadzadeh, another prominent theorist of the People's Fedai Guerrillas, drew extensively on the experiences of guerrilla warfare in Latin America and the ideas of Fidel Castro and Régis Debray in *Mobarezeh-e Moslahaneh: Ham Estrātezhi Ham Takteek* (*Armed Struggle: Both a Strategy and a Tactic*) (1970). Pouyan himself is said to have translated a number of works on Latin American literature and politics. See Mohajer (2017). For a detailed discussion on the contributions of Pouyan and Ahmadzadeh, see Rahnema (2021).

20. For a discussion of the self-other dynamics in Shariati's *Kaviriyāt*, including an abbreviated English translation of "*Sorood-e āfarinesh*," see Saffari (2019, 285–287). For a discussion of Shariati's spiritual mediation of subjectivity see Saffari (2017, 120–126).

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"To be Transformed into Thought Itself": Mystical and Political Becomings within Ali Shariati

Seema Golestaneh

ABSTRACT: Ali Shariati is typically understood as a theorist of "political Islam." Yet his theological innovations within what is called "mystical thought" are also worthy of attention. Shariati does not consider mystical thought as an escapist, transcendent paradigm, but as a means to interpret and navigate the socio-political world. Of particular relevance to Shariati is an idea ubiquitous across Islamic mysticism: the transformation of the self. Within Islamic mysticism, there are various iterations of the idea that to become closer to God, one must enact a radical transfiguration of the self, one that occurs simultaneously at the divine and existential registers. For Shariati, this transformation of the self is tied not only to one's relationship with God, but also to the desire to alter the social realm. This is an ethos that, for Shariati, should infiltrate all aspects of life, material and immaterial, cerebral and social. If one wishes to overturn the status quo, one must cultivate not only a revolutionary subjectivity but a mystically-oriented subjectivity as well, or one that is characterized by constant change and growth.

KEYWORDS: mysticism, Sufism, becoming, Shariati, Iran, political theology

On November 24, 2017, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled: "Who Are Sufi Muslims and Why Do Extremists Hate Them?" In the article Sufism is posited as "synonymous with peace-loving Islam," and a form of the religion that emphasizes "the inward search for God," "tolerance," and "renunciation

of worldly things." As such, Sufis are not-so-subtly positioned as the antithesis of extremists who carry out violence in the name of Islam. More significantly, at the heart of this assertion is the idea that Islamic mysticism supports the type of religious practice viewed most favorably in the neoliberal imagination: that of an "interiorized" religion that has no investment in, interaction with, or opinion regarding the social sphere. Indeed, Sufism is often viewed by the West as the form of Islam most disengaged from the socio-material realm.

And yet such a characterization of Sufism is false on several levels, not the least of which is the underlying assumption in the article that the myriad other forms of Islam are not as "peace-loving." It also ignores the incredibly complex social and political histories of Sufi Orders, their involvement with state apparatuses in nearly every corner of the globe, including but not limited to those with Sufi roots, such as the Safavids, who wielded large armies and assumed state power.[1] And finally, and most significantly for our purposes, it assumes that one who embraces a mystical orientation is fundamentally disinterested in the role of religion as a force for societal change, as if an investment in the esoteric necessitates a particular political (non)-consciousness.

To counter these claims, we need only look toward the *oeuvre* of one thinker: Ali Shariati. Shariati is typically, and for good reason, understood primarily as a theorist of "political Islam," and yet his theological innovations within the realm of what we might call "mystical thought," especially the ways in which mystical thought and political thought cross-pollinate, are also worthy of attention. I define "mystical thought" here broadly as the conceptual matrices arising out of and engaging with the esoteric dimensions of Islam, and in the present context, of Shi'i Islam specifically. In Iran, these works arise especially, but not exclusively, out of the traditions of *erfan*, *tasavvuf*, and even *sufigari*.[2]

This essay demonstrates Shariati's investment in an idea ubiquitous across Islamic mysticism, and one which he uses as part of his political philosophy: the transformation of the self. Within the vast literature categorized under Islamic mysticism, there are various iterations of the idea that, in order to achieve the mystical goal of becoming closer to God (*tauhid*), one must enact a radical transfiguration of the self, one that occurs simultaneously at the divine and existential registers.[3] For thinkers like Junaid (d. 910), Mansour al-Hallaj (d. 922), and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), among many others, the end goal of this transfiguration is the entire annihilation of the self (*fanaa*) where, in light of the union with God, only a radically distinctive form of subjectivity remains. In these instances of *fanaa*, the self has become so subsumed in its intimacy with the divine, that autonomous subjectivity becomes lost, as it is unclear where the self ends and the divine begins. For others, like Abu al-Hussan al-Nuri (d.

908) and Najm al-Din Kobra (d. 1221), the self becomes fashioned in the ideal attributes of the divine, where undesirable aspects like the ego or the lower soul (*nafs-e amarra*) have been eliminated. It should also be noted that this process of self-transformation is constant and without end, as to become one with God is a goal attainable only for saints and prophets. In a sense it is a teleology where the actual telos is inherently impossible. And yet, even if the end goal is ever out of reach, one can still make progress, one can still become closer.

What sets Shariati apart from these and other, similar mystical thinkers is that his transformation of the self is tied not only to one's relationship with God, but also to the desire to alter the social realm. For Shariati, the transformation of the self is a political project as much as it is a personal one. Throughout his *oeuvre* there is a constant, near obsessive, emphasis on "evolution," "change," "transformation," "growth," "perfection." Even his frequent invocations to "return" could be seen as an imperative to alter the trajectory of one's current path (perhaps complicating notions of progress and directionality along the way). Significantly, Shariati makes these paeans to change when discussing both the state of society and the state of the individual.

For Shariati, when one strives to elevate oneself to a higher stage (*marhale*) of consciousness, as the Sufis do, it is not a form of escapism but the spiritual component of what he calls "human evolution," or, to echo Ali Rahnema, *an ethos of becoming* (Rahnema 2014, xvii–xxv).

This is an ethos that, for Shariati, should infiltrate all aspects of life, material and immaterial, cerebral and social. In other words, if one wishes to overturn the status quo, one must cultivate not only a revolutionary subjectivity but a mystically-oriented subjectivity as well, or one that is characterized by constant change and growth. As Shariati writes in his essay "Love and Tauhid":

> human responsibility—which calls for the individual to sacrifice themselves for others, and considers the sacrifice of one's liberty, comfort, pleasures and even one's life itself for the sake of humanity or the nation or the subjugated class, liberty, comfort, and life or for the fate of the future generations as a virtue . . . is constructed neither by social interests nor by the relations between individuals in the society, but is derived from the essence of the depths of existence and finds its meaning in the relationship between the conscious will of humanity and the conscious will of the world. (Shariati 1388/2009, my translation)[4]

Here, it is the "conscious will of humanity," not social relation or interests, which must drive "responsibility," suggesting something more ineffable and interior than material conditions.

In this essay, I trace the relationship between mystical and political becomings in the thought of Shariati. To provide a bit more context, I first briefly explore the writings of other Iranian intellectuals known more for their "political Islam," who also show a deep commitment to esoteric epistemologies, namely Ayatollah Khomeini, Mohammad Motahari, and Ayatollah Javad Amoli. From there, I touch upon several works where Shariati contends with mystical and political transfigurations of the self, and where love for the Beloved is understood not only as an intimate act, but a political one as well. I conclude the essay with some thoughts on the relationship among mysticism, politics, and the (im)possibilities of translation. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate not only that Shariati's revolutionary subjectivity contains and requires an engagement with esoteric knowledge, but that Islam's mystical epistemologies contain a revolutionary potential, if only one knows where to look.

Mystical and Political Thought in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

As previously mentioned, Shariati is not the only mystically-inclined proponent of "political Islam." There are other thinkers whose work grapples with mystical epistemologies *within* their political theologies; in other words, their interest in mysticism does not run counter to or contradict their political philosophies. No less than the Ayatollah Khomeini himself demonstrated a deep interest in esotericism throughout his long life. Ruhollah Khomeini first came to mysticism as a seminary student. His writings from that time demonstrate a preference for esoteric thinkers like Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) and the Twelver Shi'i Mulla Sadra (d. 1640). He demonstrated particular interest in Mulla Sadra's *Kitab al-asfar* (*Book of Journeys*), an account of the four stages of mystical wayfaring that tracks the movements and oscillations among self, God, and world. What is noteworthy about this is that the final stage marks the enlightened self traveling from "man to man, bestowing on his community a new dispensation of spiritual and moral order" (Knysh 1992, 634), therein suggesting the impact that a single individual who is on a higher plane of consciousness can have on the profane world. In other words, this is not an individual who ends up alone atop a mountain, isolated and withdrawn.

Khomeini also composed his own mystical treatises, including the 1930 text *The Lamp Lighting the Way to Viceregents and Sainthood* (*Misbah al-hidaya ila al-khilafa wa al-wilaya*). Here, Khomeini draws heavily from Ibn Arabi's idea of the

perfect man (*al-insan al-kamil* or *ensan-e kamil* in Persian), one who has achieved a level of spiritual ascendancy so high that he is able to act as the intermediary between the sacred and profane world. As Ibn-Arabi writes: "In relation to the cosmos he [the perfect man] is like the spirit in relation to the body" (Ibn-Arabi 1911, 2:67.28). In his *Misbah*, Khomeini takes this idea of the perfect man and portrays him as a religious leader of a community of believers, sometimes tying them to the ideal of the Shi'i Imams and other times to the idea of viceregents (*khilafa*) more generally. Here, the spiritual advancement of these individuals has a direct impact on the social-material realm, such that a sort of collective phenomenological experience occurs where the spirito-existential status of the perfect man will result in a new world order. As Alexander Knysh writes: "Summing up Khomeini's cosmological theory [in the *Misbah*] . . . he envisioned the material universe as a projection of divine self-image and self-knowledge into a primordial void, which is followed by their gradual objectification in the entities and phenomena perceived by human beings in the surrounding" (ibid., 643). Said slightly differently, one's "divine self-image," far from being a phenomenon that only affects the individuals themselves, has a profound effect on the shaping of the world, at least for the ideal man.

While Khomeini's interest in mysticism was eventually overshadowed by his political activism, it should be noted that he never disavowed his early teachings and writings, nor did he dismiss them as the misguided interests of a young man. Indeed, he continued to write mystical poetry until the last days of life and personally granted explicit permission for his supercommentaries and treatises on mysticism to be published in the 1980s after his rise to power (Knysh 1992, 651).

Khomeini was not the only prominent member of the *ulama* to embrace both political activism and esotericism. Morteza Motahari, a key ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, confidant of Khomeini, and student of Allamah Tabatabai, arguably the most famous of the esoterically inclined Twelver Shi'i *ulama* of the twentieth century, also spilled much ink on the importance of mystical epistemologies, defending *erfan* against its detractors who deemed it anti-Islamic. Ahoo Najafian has written eloquently on Motahari's commentaries on the medieval Sunni poet Hafez, namely his intention to establish Hafez as an esoterically oriented Shi'i above all else by highlighting how ideas found within Hafez and *erfan*—ambiguity, paradox, the unseen—are also key components within Shi'ism and political Shi'ism in particular.[5] In doing so, Motahari not only renders Hafez as mystically inclined but posits Shi'ism *itself* to be contingent upon esoteric ideas. Lastly, Najafian draws attention to the stakes of this claim: Motahari's interpretation of Hafez was inspired, at least in part, as an at-

tempt to reclaim Hafez from nationalist and Marxist readings occurring at the time, understanding him instead as a crypto/proto-Shi'i. For Motahari as well as Khomeini, esotericism does not just figure in their minds as a religio-philosophical stance. It exists as a phenomenon with deep political repercussions—a fact perhaps unsurprising given their broader political theologies.

Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli (b. 1933), a former member of the Assembly of Experts, is also a compelling figure among the contemporary seminarians with more than just a passing interest in mystical thought. He has not only held a prominent role in the Qom Seminary (*howzeh*) for many years, but is also a public figure, commenting on issues related to Iran's nuclear programs and elections, and acting as a long-standing critic of Iran's banking sector and policies.[6] Alongside this, he has published extensively on *erfan*, with a particular interest in the role of *velayat* as it pertains to mysticism. Javadi Amoli has also spoken in talks such as "The Mystical Characteristics of Khomeini," about what he views to be the mystical dimension of Khomeini's thinking, which he always refers to as the *erfani* dimension.[7] At a meeting with the Society for the Ahlul-Bayt in 1398/2019, the Ayatollah stated that: "The epistemology of true mysticism (*erfan*) is the intuition of essence. There stands no veil between God and creation except for creation itself" (*Ma'arifat shinasi-ye irfan-e haqiqi shohud zaat ast. Bayn-e khoda va khalq hich hijabi nist magar khud-e khalq*).[8] Such a statement, situated within a conversation on how the true meaning (*mozoo*) of mysticism (*erfan*) is the presence of infinite truth, would not appear out of place coming from a Sufi sheik. For Ayatollah Amoli, the leader of the nation must have a strong grasp of the unseen (*al-ghayb*), suggesting that the political framework of the nation should be shaped by one with a vested interest in more abstract registers.

I offer this brief overview of these three mystically inclined and politically influential clerics to emphasize that there are those within the clergy for whom mysticism was not only an intellectual exercise confined to the seminary circle and to the page, but a form of epistemology with a place in shaping the socio-political world. While this merging of the political and mystical resonates with Shariati's tendency to do the same, there are key differences between them. Most importantly, the three thinkers outlined above emphasized the role of the exemplary individual who has mastered esoteric knowledge, be it the perfect man (*ensan-e kamel*) or the guardian of the jurist (*velayat-e faqi*), who might then lead a community to a better world. Shariati, on the other hand, saw the revolutionary potential that emerges when *all* people master esoteric knowledge and an ethos of becoming. This understanding of mystically inspired transformation as accessible to all is not only more egalitarian, but also

more radical, as it suggests how mysticism may operate as a vehicle for change of both self and society on the grandest of scales.

Transfiguration of Subjectivity

> *The true human being is in a state of becoming.*
> —Shariati, "Art Awaiting the One that was Promised"

In this section, let us look more closely at Shariati's deep investment in an evolving, changing self, beginning with his "Return to Self" pieces (*Bazgasht*, *Bazgasht be Khish* and *Bazghast be Khistan*) (Shariati 1978). Here, Shariati advocates for a form of subjectivity similar to the Sufi dissolution of the self (*fanaa*).[9] Arash Davari has thoughtfully explored Shariati's idea of the self becoming a martyr, the *shahid* (Davari 2014, 86–105). Davari quotes a passage from "Husayn, Va'res-i Adam" where Shariati expounds upon what it means to become a martyr: "A particular (relative, *nesbi*) man becomes a universal [absolute, *motlagh*] man. Because he is no longer a human, a person, an individual. He is thought. He was an individual who sacrificed himself in the pursuit of his thought and as a result has been transformed into thought itself" (ibid., 100).

To be "transformed into thought itself." Where one has become so subsumed with an idea or experience that one's entire subjectivity has fallen by the wayside ("no longer . . . an individual"), their selfhood completely replaced by the epistemologies to which they have been devoted. This formulation is remarkably similar to mystical ideas of the self being consumed, and subsequently fundamentally altered, by love, passion, and an all-encompassing remembrance and commitment to the divine. Here, both Shariati and the mystics view the self as something to be *transformed*. Whether it be martyrdom, or becoming fully one with God, subjectivity emerges as a site of contestation and transfiguration for both.

Moreover, devotion itself is nothing less than fulfilling the self. Shariati defines worship in the following terms in his essay "Love and Tauhid" ("*Esgh va Tauhid*"):

> Worship (*Ebaada*): means the commitment of a devout person to these values. It is an exercise in self-development, so that the life of the human being, so weak, uneven, full of doubt, indecisive, and brimming with contradictions becomes an easy and stable path following in the steps of God, a path without holes, ups and downs, or obstacles, a path upon which one can easily travel. (Shariati 1399/2009a, my translation)

Notice too his use of the word "path" (*tariqa*) here, a concept employed liberally by many Sufi thinkers. In addition to the ideas of journeying and traversal, Shariati's piece emphasizes the idea of change and progress for both self and society. I would argue that a belief in the possibility of transformation or, to go even further, a belief in the absolute *necessity* for transformation, is central to Shariati's thinking. In other words, like the Sufis who believe that as one becomes closer to God, one assumes a distinctive ontological and existential stance, so too does Shariati believe that human beings can change themselves on an existential level:

> In Islam, obedience . . . is the most important factor in the existential development of an earth-bound humanity, a development on the path to perfect one's nature, moving towards power, awareness, creativity, and absolute dominance over one's nature, over one's character and to fulfill one's destiny. . . . In other words, becoming divine. (Shariati 1388/2009a, my translation)

Here we see Shariati's commitment to the perfection of the self that is necessary to "becom[e] divine," a sentiment more likely to be found among esoterically-minded Shi'is than among more "mainstream" Twelver Shi'ites, for whom "becoming divine" may be suspect. Compare Shariati's statement here with the words of Sayyad Haidar Amuli, the fourteenth-century Sufi Shi'ite philosopher and a favorite of contemporary Sufis in Iran:[10]

> when the soul or self devotes its energy to true spiritual exercises which are based on real knowledge, then the person loses all of the viler features of his self . . . and takes on all of the finer qualities . . . in this way the self attains the rank of harmony and evenness of temperament which marks for man the highest station of perfection on the path to Allah. (Amuli 1982, 109)

Both passages express the idea of baser attributes falling away in favor of a higher form of self, the idea of the path, and a general sense that there is a progressive and continual form of "existential development," as Shariati calls it.[11]

The idea of transformation of the self is similarly a key theme in the philosophies of Mawlana Rumi, a non-Shi'i whose influence among Shi'i and Sunni Sufis is beyond compare. Rumi writes:

> When the manure has been annihilated in the heart of the vegetable patch, then it will be freed from its dungness and add savor to food. As long as you are excrement, how will you know the joy of sancti-

fication? Pass beyond your dung nature and go to the Blessed and
Transcendent! . . . You guard the treasury of God's Light—so come,
return to the root of the root of your own self! Once you have tied
yourself to selflessness, you will be delivered from selfhood. (Chit-
tick 1984, 335–337)

The scatological nature of the example aside, Rumi's commands for the indi-
vidual to change their currently base nature—to "go to the blessed" and, in so
doing, "return to the root of the root of your own self"—bear a striking similarity
to both Shariati's sometimes admonishing tone in "Love and Tauhid," as well as
his cry to "return to the self" in his *bazgasht* pieces. Within the writings of Shah
Nimatullah Vali, whom nearly all contemporary, ethnically Persian, Shi'i Sufis
claim as a member of their chain of succession (*silsile*), there are many detailed
discussions of the different stages (*marhale*) of development of the self along
the path to achieving union with God, with each self being fundamentally and
existentially distinct from the previous one. While Shariati seems less invested
in a hierarchy of stages (*marhale*), he is very invested the idea that the self can
be transformed into a higher form. As one reaches for God, one changes in the
process. Indeed, according to Shariati: "the aspiration towards transcendence,
the sublime . . . is the driving force of human evolution" (Shariati 1388/2009a,
my translation).

There are many differences between the objectives of mystics and the ob-
jectives of Shariati.[12] Shariati views the transformation of self and society as
both equally necessary and working in tandem: you cannot (and probably
should not) attempt one without the other. In the next section, I trace how
Shariati's mystical becomings are reflective of and tied to his ideas of political
becoming.

Transformation of Self, Transformation of World

> Above all, the human is located between mud and providence, one is free to choose
> either as their will dictates. . . . And so, from the Islamic point of view, man is the
> only creature who is responsible not only for his own fate but also has a mission to
> fulfill the Divine Purpose in the world.
>
> —Shariati, "The Free Human and Freedom of the Humanity"

Perhaps the figure that best embodies Shariati's commitment to becoming in
in regard to both self and society is Muhammad Iqbal, the early-twentieth-
century South Asian philosopher. In the essay, "Muhammad Iqbal: Manifesting

Self-Construction and Reformation," Shariati praises Iqbal for being "not only a mystic (*aref*)" but a "reformer." He states:

> he is a man we regard as being a reformer of Islamic society, who thinks about the conditions of human and Islamic society . . . and the liberation of Muslim people . . . He strives and endeavors and, at the same time, he is also a lover of Rumi. He journeys with him in his spiritual ascensions and burns from the lover's flames, anguishes, and spiritual anxieties . . . He is a complete Muslim. Even though he loves Rumi, he is not obliterated in him. (Shariati 1361/1982, 12)[13]

With this last sentence, Shariati makes a gentle critique of those mystics who leave the world behind entirely, praising instead how Iqbal's "striving" to liberate oppressed people goes hand-in-hand with his burning from "the lover's flame" of Rumi. This is what makes Iqbal a "complete Muslim," and one committed to journeying and becoming within both the social and spiritual registers. Moreover, Shariati highlights what he sees as Iqbal's belief in the individual's capacity for becoming and transformation, tying that directly to an imperative to change the world. As he writes:

> But Iqbal, *the mystic*, says: If the world does not agree with you, Arise against it! The world means the destiny and the life of humanity. The human is a wave, not a still shore. One's being and becoming is in movement. What do I mean? It is to be in movement. In the mysticism of Iqbal, which is neither Hindu mysticism nor religious fanaticism, but Quranic mysticism, the human being must change the world. Quranic Islam has substituted "heavenly fate," in which the human being is nothing, with "human fate" in which the human being plays an important role. In addition to being progressive and constructive, this is the greatest revolutionary principle which Islam has created in its world view, philosophy of life, and ethics. (Ibid., 20; emphasis mine)

Here, Shariati unequivocally makes the case that, in this form of mysticism, the human being is responsible for "chang[ing] the world." The ability to do so is based on the fact that the human is a "wave" in "movement," one caught in change and flux. Here, that spirit of transformation—or that ethos of becoming—which characterizes mystical human nature, spills out into the socio-material world, working to effect change and, in turn, drawing a clear connection for Shariati between the supposedly abstract world of esotericism and the ma-

terialism of sociopolitical advocacy. This tendency of the human to be invested in evolution and movement applies to all registers of life, the spiritual *and* the material. Despite the differences in ideologies and epistemologies, all schools of thought are united in their abilities to dream. As he writes in *Islamology:*

> Essentially, the existence of imaginary [ideal] society proves that the human being is always moving from the "present situation" to a more "desirable situation," whether it be imaginary, scientific, the utopia of Plato or the classless society of Marx. . . . There, all schools of thought, whether materialistic or mystic, have a mental conceptual of an "ideal type." (Shariati 1387/2008)

In this way, there seems to be more affinity than difference between ideas and schools of thought typically considered incongruous or even antagonistic to one another. If all these disparate intellectual traditions are guided by a dream for a more "desirable situation," as long as they contain within them an ethos of becoming, their specific differences pale in comparison to their potential for collaboration.

Lastly, Shariati's consideration of the idea of messianism is also important for our purposes in understanding the relationship between the transformation of the self and the world. Mina Khanlarzadeh delves into the significance of what she calls "active messianism" for Shariati where laypersons must work alongside a messianic figure to join past generations in their fight to bring about a long-desired change (Khanlarzadeh 2020). Khanlarzadeh describes how, for Shariati "the future resides, rather, at the heart of the present in the form of a messianic longing for a more egalitarian future that is not far from the present" (ibid., 4). The idea of longing is central to Islamic mysticism, as poets and writers have been describing their experiences of longing for the Beloved and their attempts to overcome the separation between themselves and the divine for centuries. Longing is thus a powerful motivating force for both Shariati and the mystics, even if the object of desire for the two is different: for Shariati, the longing is for a classless and just society; for the mystics, they long for a (re) union with God (although for Shariati they are, perhaps, one and the same).

In his 1971 essay, "*Entezar: Mazhab-e Eteraz*" (Shariati 1971), Shariati further explores this theme by suggesting two forms of longing: positive and negative. "Negative longing" is a desire for change in the status quo and the material conditions of society, while "positive longing" is when one *acts* upon such feelings by carrying out a rebellion to enact the change they wish to see. While both are seen as beneficial, the active nature of "positive longing" renders it the superior form. As such, we see how Shariati transforms even an idea like

longing—typically understood to belong to the domain of the apolitical and the lovelorn, the romantic and the starry-eyed—into a force for political change. Moreover, the fact that he does not reject the more passive "negative longing," seeing it as merely less potent than "positive longing," demonstrates his belief in the importance of affect and emotion; it is clearly better to desire change, even if one does not act on it, than not to desire it at all.

Conclusion: Translating the Ineffable

As the first article in this symposium by Davari and Saffari describes, Shariati's commitment to translation is well-documented, having transposed into Persian a diverse range of materials, including works of medieval history, Islamic jurisprudence, and literary criticism. Moreover, Davari and Saffari write of Shariati's advocacy for capturing the "spirit" (*rūh*) of a piece over a translation that favors a more technically obvious reproduction. Shariati has made reference to the importance of understanding "spirit" over technical expertise in other pieces as well. For example, in *Islamology*, he states that: "Understanding a school of thought (*maktab*) is not the same as having technical and detailed information about it . . . It is to feel deeply towards a religion or an ideology, to find the spirit and meaning which is hidden in an idea" (Shariati 1387/2008). Here, "understanding" means uncovering "what is hidden," or that which exceeds immediate comprehension of an idea. And so we might ask: what does it mean to attempt to convey the "spirit" of a piece when undertaking translation, especially given Shariati's mystical tendencies?

In Islamic mysticism, *rūh,* closely associated with the word *nafs*, is alternately translated as the spirit, soul, or ego of human or divine beings like angels (Picken 2005, 101–27). The *rūh* is the animating force that gives life, the immaterial entity or energy that enlivens the material being. It is essentially an essence without form, existing in both mortal and immortal beings. When considering rendering this elusive spirit (*rūh*) in translation then, what is the place of language? Is language the form? The empty shell in which the spirit is contained, the linguistic analog to the corporeal body? Unlike the body, which is so often said to house the spirit, with the heart especially acting as a holding place for this animating life force, it is language itself that ultimately creates the ineffable essence to which Shariati is committed.[14]

To relay the spirit of a piece then means to conjure the indescribable, those qualities or sentiments of a piece that are at once felt most acutely and at the same time are the most difficult to describe. In other words, that which is *experienced* in reading a piece rather than what might be known; that particular understanding or impression of a text that is a result of and yet extends beyond

the language that comprises it. This is the task that Shariati has set for himself: to translate into another language those more opaque and experiential elements of a text that are difficult enough to convey in the original. Given this, it makes one consider the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of the task at hand, which brings to mind the common refrain of things being "lost" in translation, as if something went missing and could not be recovered. The impossibility of translation, per Shariati's aspiration to convey the spirit of a piece, thus parallels notions of impossibility in mysticism.

In the introduction to this essay, I briefly discussed how the goal of so many strains of Sufism, *tauhid*, or union with God, is considered ultimately unattainable for most of humanity, only ever fully achieved by saints and imams. Despite the fundamentally insurmountable odds, Sufis commit themselves to this path, whole-heartedly and without reservation for, even if full union does not occur, they are able to become *closer* to divinity. As Shariati writes in "Love and Tauhid," it is the proximity that is significant: "In fact, adoration of God is a means of educating humanity with these divine values, and human evolution is dependent upon achieving proximity to the values" (Shariati 1388/2009a, my translation). I would argue there is a similar sentiment toward translation, and especially the anti-colonial politics surrounding it. Even if full translation is impossible, attempting the best translation possible still brings us closer to liberation. With these translated words, disparate worlds are traversed and brought together, just as the separation between the divine and profane worlds falls away for the mystics in their endeavors. When striving occurs within all these different registers—spiritual, political, linguistic—when the ethos of becoming infiltrates all aspects of life, only then can humanity fulfill its full potential. For Shariati, this is the potential he believes in so sincerely and advocates for so fiercely. It is one that can transform self and society, the word and the world.

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ENDNOTES

1. See, for example , Rula Abisaab (2004) and Roger Savory (1980). For modern examples, see Katherine Ewing (2020) and Mamadou Diouf (2013).

2. For more on the differences between these terms, see Ata Anzali (2017).

3. *Tauhid* is a key theological concept within Islam that has been translated variously as monotheism, oneness of God, unicity, the uniqueness of God, and union with God. Although the word itself does not appear in the Quran, it is a concept explored in depth by nearly every school of Islamic jurisprudence, from Ismailis to Salafis, from East Asian to North American Muslims, and has grown particularly popular in the modern era. Shariati discusses the term in depth in *Islamshenasi.* Shariati writes: "My world-view consists of *tauhid. Tauhid* in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists. But *tauhid* as a world-view in the sense I intend in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the hereafter . . . . *Tauhid* represents a particular view of the world that demonstrates a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate hypostases—God, nature, and man—because the origin of all three is the same . . . *Tauhid* . . . regards all the particles, processes and phenomena of existence as being engaged in harmonious movement toward a single goal" (Shariati 1979, 84–89). We see here how Shariati's understanding of *tauhid* extends far beyond a confirmation of monotheism, and more closely resembles a theory—or to use his word, a "world-view"—of the unity of existence. To accept *tauhid* is to accept, value, and emphasize oneness over division, so much so that even the divine realm should not be distinct from the profane, as doing so lessens the power of both.

4. All translations of "Love and Tauhid" are my own. The translation will appear in full in Davari, Rabiee, and Saffari (forthcoming).

5. Ahoo Najafian (2018) provided the first close reading and analysis of Khomeini's mystical poetry as well as its publication in her dissertation "Poetic Nation: Iranian Soul and Historical Continuity." (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2018). Najafian describes some controversy in the posthumous publication of Khomeini's mystical poetry. Initially made public by his daughter-in-law, this was not well-received by certain high-ranking government officials. Ultimately, the detractors did not stop the publication of the poetry and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute continues to keep publishing them in print and online.

6. For more on Amoli's views on everything from jurisprudence to the role of Mahdism in the contemporary, see the website of his foundation, the Esra International Foundation of Revelatory Sciences. http://javadi.esra.ir/home.

7. "Vijegi-haye Erfani-e Imam Khomeini Az Manzar-e Ayatollah Javadi Amoli," accessed at: http://javadi.esra.ir/-/ یاه-ینافرع-یگژیو-ماما-ینیمخ-سدقم-هرس-ز ا-رظنم-هللا-یداوج-آملی.

8. http://javadi.esra.ir/-/ معرفت-عرفانی-حقیقی،شهود-ذاتی-است-بین-خدا-و- خلق-چیه-حجابی-نیست-مگر-خود-خلق.

9. Within Sufi thought, the loss of self is often, but not exclusively, approached through the concept of *fanaa,* alternately translated as "the annihilation of the self,"

"destruction of the ego," or "falling away of the lower soul." Regardless of the particular translation choice, it is ultimately some form of transformation of subjectivity on an existential level.

10. Haidar Amuli's *Secrets of the Inner Path* is read among contemporary Sufis, found in *khaniqa* libraries, and is available for download in Farsi, Arabic, and English on the Soltanalishahi website sufism.ir. See Seema Golestaneh (2023).

11. As Ali Rahnema and the first essay by Davari and Saffari in this edition note, Shariati was quite familiar with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, a major proponent of existentialism. As such, it is very possible that Shariati's use of the term was influenced by Sartre's rendering of existentialism, where meaning does not exist in any *a priori* form, but must be determined through the act of existing. The tracing of such a direct correlation would require more space than is allowed here. I should also clarify that my own use of the term "existential" does not refer to Sartrean existentialism, but the more neutral use of the term that pre-dates the existentialist movement of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

12. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi has examined Shariati's relationship with Sufism's organizational logic, tracing what attracted him to mysticism as well as what repelled him from it. Ghamari-Tabrizi notes how, as a young man, Shariati engaged in solitary isolation, composed "desert contemplations" (*khaviriyyat*), and identified with Sufi saints like Rumi and Hallaj. Later in his life, however, Shariati would grow disdainful and impatient with what he saw as the tendency of Sufi groups (if not Sufism itself) to ignore the larger world, burying their proverbial heads in the sands while injustice raged around them. Even then, however, Shariati never dismissed mystical *thought*, as Ghamari-Tabrizi explains: "he rejected an organizational logic in Sufism, not its embrace in the plurality of mystical experiences" (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016, 91). See also Ghamari-Tabrizi (2021).

13. See also the English translation by Bakhtiar (1991).

14. For more on Sufis and the body, see Bashir (2011).

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Students of Revolution: An Essay on Ali Shariati's Counter-Pedagogy

Naveed Mansoori

ABSTRACT: Though Ali Shariati is well-known as the "ideologue" of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, this essay considers Shariati conversely as a student of revolution. It begins by posing a distinction between the apprentice and the autodidact through reference to Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and introduces a third term, the collaborator, that is crucial to Shariati's account of counter-pedagogy. The essay then reconstructs Shariati's critique of the pedagogical state. There, he recalls resisting interpellation by learning from other pasts, refusing instruction, and learning from others. Finally, I show changes in how Shariati conceptualized self-transformation, from an autodidactic process of soul-searching to a collaborative process that gives soul to a collective. On becoming immersed in the sounds of his compatriots grieving the martyrs of struggle, Shariati attests to being a student of history: the curriculum of a people becoming, the history of struggle, and its instructors, those who modeled it, pivoted around a refusal to be instructed. Overall, this essay develops an account of media environments as informal pedagogical spaces.

KEYWORDS: pedagogy, interpellation, ideology, collaboration, revolution, Ali Shariati

> *A couple people seem to be reticent about the term "study," but is there a way to be in the undercommons that isn't intellectual? Is there a way of being intellectual that isn't social? When I think about the way we were using the term "study," I think we were committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice.*
>
> —Harney and Moten (2013)

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When Ali Shariati returned to Iran after studying at the University of Paris, he produced a body of work his biographer Ali Rahnema describes as his "mystical murmurs" (Rahnema 2014, 144–160). "*Hubut*" [*The Fall*] is a longform reflection on the solitude of philosophers on the quest for knowledge. "*Kavir*" [*The Desert*] is a coming-of-age story that narrates how formal schooling changed him into a subject of nationhood. Where "The Fall" is a testament to philosophy's power to question knowledge, "The Desert" is a reflection upon the hostility of formal education toward the pursuit of knowledge. A key theme in his "mystical murmurs" is "the desert." The desert is resonant with the concept of the *tabula rasa* or blank slate, meaning the unmarked canvases of the mind inhabited prior to formal instruction. In learning history and geography, Shariati no longer inhabited "the desert," experiencing it rather as "Iran," a historical and geographical mental construct. Iran was built upon a *tabula rasa*. It was potential made actual. In later writings, Shariati attests to becoming transformed by informal pedagogical spaces that modified how he perceived time and space independent of national history and geography. By focusing on the theme of pedagogy in his writings, I develop an account of counter-pedagogy. In so doing, I consider a media environment that served as a public school guided by collective instruction.

While Shariati was summoned from official channels as a subject of Iranian nationhood, he attests to informal pedagogical spaces that interpellated or summoned him otherwise. In his "mystical murmurs," Shariati was experiencing a crisis of faith in the voices that summoned him. He lamented how, as a child, he was summoned by nationalists and mindlessly responded in turn. During his politically active years, Shariati was summoned otherwise by fellow travelers. By examining Shariati's shifting perception of the "desert," this essay develops an account of media environments as informal pedagogical spaces. At the same time, it provides an account of what it means to be summoned otherwise—as a mode of communication that such informal pedagogical spaces enact for political ends. It also offers an account of changes in how Shariati conceptualized self-transformation, from an autodidactic process of soul-searching to a collaborative process that gives soul to a collective. The informal pedagogical space that transformed Shariati, I argue, was a sonic landscape generated by the sound of mourners grieving the death of the Imam Hussein, whose martyrdom at the hands of the forces of the Caliph Yazid marks the beginning of the history of Shi'ism. Shariati entered a public school orchestrated by a collective instructor where no single individual had mastery over the curriculum.

I begin this article by drawing out a contrast between the autodidact and the apprentice in the history of Islamic political thought through reference to

the twelfth-century philosopher Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. This contrast anticipates a third term that plays a crucial role in Shariati's works: the collaborator. I then suggest that the metaphor of the blank slate in *Hayy* anticipates the significance of "the desert" for Shariati, which signaled the omnipresent potential for new political orders. Second, I turn to Shariati's critique of the pedagogical state. Where his formal instructors fashioned him as a subject of nationhood, Shariati resisted apprenticeship by learning from other pasts, by refusing to learn, and by learning from others, all while longing for a return to desert beginnings to redeem his potential. Finally, I turn to a later autobiographical text Shariati wrote on Ashura after he was banned by the administrators of the Husseynieh Ershad, the religious-cultural institute where he regularly delivered lectures on Islamic history and philosophy. He set his nostalgia for the desert aside. Shariati attested to the emergence of an alternative political order. That political order materialized when a collectivity mourned the victims of the history of the struggle for freedom. He is instructed otherwise: neither apprentice nor autodidact, but now a collaborator in a people's coming-of-age. Shariati joined others as pupils of history.

The Solitude of the Philosophers

> Oh you who are me as me my other, oh you for whom I am your other you, oh my compatriot, my fellow city dweller, my neighbor, my cohabitant! My familiar, my family! Do you not know yourself as a fellow traveler? Do you not know you are a traveler? Do you not know that you have fellow travelers? Oh my fellow traveler! Oh my fellow traveler! (Shariati [2007] 2008, 213)

Shariati penned these words when the Pahlavi state's domestic and foreign intelligence agency SAVAK (Organization of National Security and Information) banned him from speaking in public. He declares that solitude was his source of pain. Shariati laments that his "fellow travelers" were now alone, summoning them to join him in travel. What Rahnema calls Shariati's "mystical murmurs" are filled with cries of grief for his solitude and a longing for relief from the pain it brings him. In the sections that follow, I will explain Shariati's despair at the fact that the pedagogical state in Pahlavi Iran addressed the pain of solitude by incorporating its pupils into the ideological formation of the nation-state; and follow by turning to his experience in an informal "public school" that instructed him otherwise. But first, I revisit a classic of Islamic political thought, the twelfth-century philosopher Ibn Tufayl's allegory *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* [*Alive son*

of Awake], which, I suggest, offers a reflection on pedagogy that better illumi-
nates Shariati's thinking. I frame his reflections on pedagogy as reflections on
two registers of Ibn Tufayl's allegory: *first*, the contrast between the autodidact
and the apprentice; *second*, a diagnosis of "society," the inhabited island, as an
obstacle for freedom. I conclude this section by relating Shariati's invocations
of "the desert" [*kavir*] to Sufism, where he envisions the "inhabited island" as
the actuality of a potential political order.[1]

Ibn Tufayl presents his allegory in response to a debate in philosophy over
whether philosophers could "[commune] with the divine, that is, enjoy revela-
tion, by exercising reason" (Tufayl 2003, 96).

He suggests a third way: "When I speak of the rationalists' method . . . I
do not confine myself to their knowledge, any more than I confine myself to
the metaphysical when I speak of intuition" (ibid., 98). *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* portrays
acquired and received wisdom as two aspects of learning, establishing terms
of debate over the relationship between truth and method in Islamic political
thought. The allegory begins with the child Hayy on an uninhabited island who
attains knowledge through rational self-inquiry. Hayy was born out of "spon-
taneous generation" and was "joined with 'the spirit which is God's'" (Tufayl
2007, 106). Hayy is visited by Absal, who journeys from an inhabited island.
Absal teaches Hayy language to teach him religion. In so doing, he learns that
Hayy is as knowledgeable as he is, if not more so. When Hayy and Absal return
to Absal's island to educate the people, they are resisted by its ruler and inhab-
itants. They then return to Hayy's uninhabited island to enjoy the solitude of
contemplation together.

The allegory distinguishes between the autodidact and the apprentice, the
pupil of "rational wisdom" and the pupil of "received wisdom." Ibn Tufayl sets
out to demonstrate "how [Hayy] grew up and progressed until he reached his
remarkable goal" (Tufayl 2007, 106). With speculation alone, Hayy reached the
highest plane of existence, the world of the divine. He was disappointed by the
necessity of "leaving his vantage point to tend to his body" (ibid., 158). On the
inhabited island, where a particular religion had already gained a foothold,
Absal and a peer, Salman, "had taken instruction in this religion and accepted
it enthusiastically," though Absal "was the more deeply concerned with getting
down to the heart of things, the more eager to discover spiritual values, and
the more ready to attempt a more or less allegorical interpretation" (ibid., 158).
In contrast, Salman was committed to literalism, unwilling to give "free reign
to his thought" (ibid.). Once an apprentice, Absal left the inhabited island for
Hayy's island to learn by himself. There, both Hayy and Absal face solitude.

Hayy and Absal leave the pain of solitude through meeting each other. They experience the fulfillment of their own method of finding truth in learning each other's method. When Absal heard Hayy describe "Truth Himself," he "had no doubt that all the traditions of his religion about God, His angels, bibles, and prophets, Judgment Day, Heaven and Hell were symbolic representations of these things that Hayy ibn Yaqzan had seen for himself" (ibid., 160). The "old religious puzzlings" that perplexed Absal were resolved, "all obscurities, clear" (ibid.). On hearing Absal describe the people of the inhabited island, Hayy "understood all this and found none in contradiction with what he had seen for himself from his supernal vantage point" (ibid., 161). They both acquired knowledge in different ways and acknowledged that how the other acquired knowledge also resulted in certainty. That acknowledgement gestured toward a higher synthesis of rational and traditional wisdom, of the autodidact (Hayy's way) and the apprentice (Absal's way). They enjoy that higher synthesis when they decide to collaborate with one another by imparting wisdom. Though Ibn Tufayl's allegory concludes with Hayy and Absal failing, they end up alone together.

The second register concerns society and freedom. There is a geography in the allegory: an inhabited and an uninhabited island. The literalist Salman, now the "ruler of the island," "believed in living within society and held it unlawful to withdraw" (Tufayl 2007, 163). Hayy "began to teach this group and explain some of his profound wisdom to them. But the moment he rose the slightest bit above the literary or began to portray things against which they were prejudiced, they recoiled in horror from his ideas and closed their minds" (ibid.). Hayy gave up. He lied to the people of the inhabited island, "[telling] them that he had seen the light and realized that they were right" (ibid., 164). The institutions of formal schooling on the inhabited island educated inhabitants to be orderly, to not question the "literal," that is, the surface of things, and thereby take things as they appear. When Hayy and Absal began to teach the inhabitants, authorities saw that they were inciting disorder. In a variation on a theme, Ibn Tufayl was suggesting that philosophical endeavor was impossible in society, not because the conditions for philosophy were absent, but because of a moralization of order.

The inhabited island was fundamentally different than the uninhabited island. Hayy and Absal were free to live the philosophical life because they were independent of any social order. Hayy and Absal "[said] goodbye to them, the two left their company and discretely sought passage back to their own island" where "they served God on the island" until they died (Tufayl 2007, 165).

In Shariati's "mystical murmurs," the ideal of the "uninhabited island," the utopian abode of the philosopher, appears as the desert.

Shariati may have been thinking of Mawlana (or Rumi), who speaks to the longstanding conversation Ibn Tufayl was entering with his allegory. In the final poem of Rumi's *Masnavi*, some pilgrims marvel at an ascetic who can withstand extreme heat and deprivation (Rumi 2007, 223–4). They ask him how he survives. The ascetic asks the sky to answer their prayers. A cloud arrives and inundates the arid land. In his prayer, the ascetic professes, "From Placelessness You've made this place appear" (ibid., 224). The desert is a pure and empty terrain. It is the potential for new political orders. Stated directly, the ascetic voiced his intention for a world to appear that nourished him. His prayer was answered by God. Shariati affirms the idea that another world is possible, and that nature does not set a limit on what the world can be. He flips Rumi on his head, however, by reimagining the relation between stated intentions and how those intentions become actualized. He does not look to heaven for a creator to actualize his intentions, but to his fellow travelers. Likewise, he will begin with the premise that the uninhabited island, or the desert, is a lost utopia.

In "The Fall," in which he wrote the epigraph to this section, Shariati is grieving that he was made in the image of God, yet in working to see God in himself, he became alone. He portrays his birth as "spontaneous generation": "Nobody built me, but God built me . . . I was dirt that lacked an owner. He breathed his spirit in me to free me on earth and below the sun in solitude" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 16).

In autodidactic mode, he works through ignorance, expressed with a refrain: "What do I know?" Echoing Socrates, he concludes that "[knowing] is to know I know nothing. Only this" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 38).

Insisting that to understand the truth is to know nothing, Shariati attests to feeling alone: "Being fortunate alone is a pained fortune, it is incomplete since solitary being is incomplete" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 61). But Shariati cannot see a way out of his solitude without losing himself to an ignorant world. Hayy attained self-consciousness on the uninhabited island; Shariati was thrown into the inhabited island. This results in a cynicism he will draw on to narrate the effect formal schooling had upon his way of being. Unlike Absal, Shariati did not have an uninhabited island on which to find refuge.

Another Brick in the Wall

Before Shariati developed his account of collaborative world-building where he turns his attention to fellow travelers as a pupil of the struggle for freedom, he first reflects upon his own apprenticeship as a student of the pedagogical

state in the inhabited island, the Pahlavi state. The *tabula rasa* is not emptiness, as is commonly presumed. It is a foundation built by others. Students are not born with that foundation. They are taught it. Shariati begins with that premise. The uninhabited island that Hayy and Absal fled for does not exist. Civilization has been built upon it, and the state teaches its subjects to see it as a natural order. So too, Shariati attests to his interpellation as a protagonist in the drama of officially sanctioned Iranian history. This section turns to his autobiographical coming-of-age story, entitled "The Desert." Shariati identifies his formal education as the instrument of his formation as a national subject. This process coincides with his formation as a rational actor disenchanted with flights of the imagination. He looks to his past as a resource to derive three ways of working against schooling: by remembering unofficial pasts, refusing official ones, and learning from unofficial sources.

Shariati describes his autobiography as a "history presented in the form of geography" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 238). It tracks Shariati's movement from his ancestral village Mazinan to the urban center Mashhad, and the way that his formal education in the city changed his perception and understanding of the village. The autobiography begins by locating Mazinan "at the edge of the desert" (ibid., 261). The desert is not merely a biome. It is Hayy's island or Rumi's desert, a "place" that appeared out of "placelessness." The desert is "the end of the earth; the foundation of the territory of life" (ibid., 379).

As a blank slate, the desert is anything it can be imagined as. In the desert "it is as if we are near another world and it is from there that we can see and feel the supernatural" (ibid.). There is a philosophy of the mind that foregrounds how Shariati tells the story of his life. The inner landscape of the soul, the mind, is reflected by and reflects its outer landscape, or context. The one does not determine the other, rather they determine each other in dialogue. The interplay of mind and context unfolds upon "the desert," the foundation of the territory of life.

The key difference between city and village is how far from the desert each has fallen. Due to its proximity to the desert, the village is still desert while the city is alienated from it. There is good reason to retain critical distance from the teleology of Shariati's autobiography. It naturalizes the notion that the villager is a noble savage and is legible in a framework that sees history as a narrative of progress. In Aristotle's *Politics*, the village results from families coming together, a movement that is spurred into motion by the necessity of individuals to associate to make ends meet. I do not wish to delve into the thickets of debate about Aristotle. What is worth thinking through in Shariati's autobiography is that the *tabula rasa*, the speculative foundation of the ethno-nation, is the be-

ginning of politics rather than the family. Shariati remembers the beginning of politics to denaturalize the official, ethno-national narrative.

Shariati shows how education naturalized the state's official narrative of Iranian history. Education changes mind and soul. It changes how the educated experience life. The Pahlavi state enlisted schools to teach children Iran's history, composed to depict the Shah's efforts to change Iran into a modern nation-state as a renaissance of its golden age (see Marashi 2008, 100). In schools, children would learn to imagine what Iran is and should be as the state made the fantasy real. Shariati attended a school where he was taught the official narrative of Iran's past. Concerning his schooling in Mashhad, Shariati speaks of his resulting "grudge" against history: "Some time ago one of my classmates showed me his journal in which I had written: I despise two 't's: history [*tarikh*] and the other, Taqizadeh!" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 274 n1) Hassan Taqizadeh was one of Iran's early noted ideologues of Westernization. Shariati looks inward: "Perhaps the root of my resentment towards Taqizadeh is that he is but one part of history incarnate and yet the soul of our history is incarnated in this character?" (Ibid., 275 n1) Iran was a castle built on sand, represented by apparently great men. Schools were enlisted to persuade children that the castle was a natural formation, rather than a particular work of art.

Shariati's formal education changed how he perceived and understood the village. He became increasingly disenchanted by ways of seeing that he did not question in his childhood. His teachers in the city would mockingly correct him by providing astronomical explanations for his astrological prejudices. Where he once saw "the way of Ali" or "the way of Mecca" as he ran his eyes across the night sky, his teacher would laugh and say, "No, my dear, 'galaxies'" (Shariati [2007] 2008, 284). He experienced the same when he was taught that shooting stars were meteors plummeting to earth. Shariati is by no means suggesting that how he once saw the sky was a realistic representation. It was more that he could no longer experience the sky unaware of or unmediated by the scientific image. He is in grief that the night sky was once a canvass, that his imagination once had artistic freedom. His memory of the night sky when he was a child reminded him of the power of the imagination. Once transformed by the city, he was neither here nor there, suspended between two worlds—as if Hayy, after visiting Absal's island, could no longer experience his island as he had before. It is that awareness that Shariati brings to his critique of the school as a site of ideological interpellation.

How does Shariati work against his schooling? In three ways. First, by remembering against the lineage that begins with the ethno-nation and ends with Iran. He writes his autobiography against history to remember the des-

ert, history's origin. The source of "rational wisdom" for Hayy, an island that provides its inhabitants access to knowledge of the divine, is here the desert, the reminder that truths are opinions in rational garb. Second, by refusing learning, captured by a story he recalls when he and his peers pranked their instructor and deceived him into thinking that they had done their readings (Shariati [2007] 2008, 263–264). The source of "traditional wisdom" for Absal is now an ideological state apparatus. Shariati narrates that prank as refusal. Third, by seeking out alternative sources of knowledge. Shariati attests to learning a "lesson" when the village's chief slit the throat of a rooster that had awakened the village at night. This "lesson" is worth sitting with because the "homeless rooster" is idiomatically used to refer to someone who speaks out of turn. The chief "taught" Shariati what fate awaits the truth-teller, as Hayy and Absal nearly learned the hard way when speaking the truth on Absal's island. He speaks in his autobiography to these three ways of working against schooling, namely, being instructed by other pasts, refusing instruction, and learning from other instructors. Together these are key registers of what I describe as his counter-pedagogy or pedagogy against official lines.

The Public School

> I told myself I should go to a mosque for rawzeh, a rawzeh whose sound tonight bellows from every alley and every house. I saw, my faith and fervor for the greatness of Hussein and his work surpassed all the humiliation I could listen to and endure. I became discouraged. Yet, the night was Ashura, the city was a seamless blanket of mourning and the home a seamless blanket of silence and pain, what could I do? I could withdraw from Ashura, but how could I withdraw myself from Ashura? (Shariati [2011] 2012, 29)

I now turn to Shariati's testimony of entering a collaborative pedagogical space, of exiting solitude and learning from the past together. Shariati penned the above words on the night of March 14, 1971, the night of Ashura, the anniversary of the Imam Hussein's martyrdom at the hands of the forces of the Caliph Yazid. For the past few years, Shariati had delivered lectures at the Husseynie Ershad, a religious and cultural center that featured popular religious intellectuals critical of the Pahlavi state. The Husseynie Ershad was an informal pedagogical space. By lecturing there, he publicly recalled the Islamic past, refused official narratives in turn, and assumed responsibility for serving as an alternative instructor to the pedagogical state. Though in part aimed at

the pedagogical state, his lectures also took aim at religious intellectuals, who he accused of teaching their students an Islam that worked as an opiate of the masses. The administrators of the Husseynie Ershad would ultimately ban him from speaking. Again, he was censored. Shariati describes "It was the Night of Ashura, the Ashura of 1349" as a sequel to his autobiography: "Just as in 'The Desert' I said, 'A history depicted in the form of geography,' here I tell our history and my life" (Shariati [2011] 2012, 45).

The nature of the coming-of-age story differs here since the self in question is not an "I" but a "we." In this story, Shariati attests to being educated by a collectivity giving voice to the struggle for freedom.

On Ashura, Shariati's relation to the people changed from instructor to instructed. The "seamless blanket of mourning," brought about by the sound of Shia's mourning Hussein's death, turned him into a pupil with his peers, eliciting a transformation that endured even when he retreated to the solitude of home. In "The Desert," he lamented how his schooling in Mashhad stole his childhood from him. Because school disciplined his imagination, he could no longer see the night sky of "the desert" as he once had. Though he physically withdrew from the city, he could not withdraw from it spiritually. He now attests to hearing a city within the city. While a history as geography, his reflection on his education *on* Ashura is meaningfully different from his reflection on his schooling *in* Mashhad. The individual pursuit of discovering utopia, the desert covered by the city, is here a collective project of building a city in the city, a heterotopia. By entering that space, "the seamless blanket of silence and pain" became Ashura too, reminding him that, despite his solitude, he was not alone. His ear also changed: the night sky of the auditory realm, of silence and pain, was a void he had been taught to hear as the refusal of the people.[2]

Just as horizons changed, so too did the ground: "the desert" was now "covered in blood" (Shariati 2007, 27). Were Shariati to say his peers were building a city in the city from nothing, he would be suggesting that people were free to become who they are, independent of worldly restrictions. The slate upon which the mind inscribes its designs, however, is not blank. It is stained by the marks of a war. The ideal of the unmarked desert is lost to the reality of Karbala where Husssein lost his life. Shariati no longer despairs that the pedagogical state has occupied the potential to be otherwise since the "blood" that stains "the desert" recalls a history of sacrifice to harness that potential, even if he and his peers were thrown into a world that demanded they forget themselves. The melancholy expressed in "The Desert" is here as well yet in different terms, now informed by the rituals of mourning that are also a celebration of the hard work of struggle. We are left with an image: a people longing for bluer skies

plodding through the crimson soil of history. Between earth and sky, there is the possibility of an intangible space, the collective imagination that Shariati attests drew him in, instructed, and transformed him. The mediated geography of Ashura, made real by the sound of people mourning, was a public school.

Shariati was instructed on Ashura alongside the collective mourning for Hussein. His relationship to the ideal of solitary contemplation of the divine is altered, as depicted by Ibn Tufayl's Hayy and Rumi's ascetic. "In the freedom of solitude and the intimacy of faith," he writes, he was "an ascetic who is in an empty void a 'monad' making waves, and that bird, my imagination . . . suddenly took off from a corner of the Euphrates and from Ashura . . . cascaded" (Shariati 2007, 35–6). He adds, "I don't want to say in Sufi fashion: 'and withdrew into himself,' where emancipation is cutting oneself from others and from the self, and is sole attachment to 'Him. . . .'" Shariati has not cut himself off from others, he cannot, even with the freedom of solitude, nor is he contemplating "Him," the divine. The object of contemplation is now a people becoming through a struggle for freedom. "I have 'been living' for twenty years. Before then, I was 'only alive' and these twenty years, comprising the entirety of my true life, have taken place on upon one 'word . . . :' the people!" (Shariati 2007, 20–1) Two decades prior was 1951, the beginning of then-Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadeq's campaign to break Iran free of foreign powers. 1951 marked the beginning of a national coming-of-age, of a people learning how to be a people.

The three ways of working against the ideological training of the pedagogical state— learning from other pasts, refusing instruction, learning from others—were operative on Ashura. The other pasts: the struggles for self-determination that Shariati draws into the fold of the history of Islam and Shi'ism. The other instructors: exemplars of that struggle across space and time. Shariati had held a grudge against history lessons wherein a national pantheon represented him. He now turns to "inheritance [*verasat*]," weaving a genealogy not of blood, but of struggle, stretching from the origin of humanity, represented by the first man Adam, to its crux, Hussein; just as well, the Adams and Husseins are pitted in a Manichean struggle against oppressors:

> In these two lines, everywhere and always in the duration of history, they battle each other face to face—right and wrong, justice and injustice, monotheism and polytheism, faith and heresy, the people and the mullahs and the wretched and the proud—two houses also bear the responsibility of inheriting the leadership of two factions: Abel and Cain, Abraham and Nimrod, Moses and the Pharaoh, Joseph and Herod, Jesus and Caesar, Muhammad and the Quraysh or

> . . . Caesar (Khosrow and Kaiser), Ali and Muawiya and. . . . Now . . .
> Hussein and Yazid! (Shariati 2007, 33)

His imagination, which he likens to a bird, soars across history, engaged in counter-memory.

The curriculum of a people becoming, the history of struggle, and its instructors, those who modeled it, pivoted around a refusal to be instructed. Where prior, Shariati performed an autodidactic method of learning and unlearning his true being, he now attests to being an apprentice to other pasts and other instructors. Though autodidactic in its method, the terms have changed since the "self" becoming is not an "I" but a "we." He does not relinquish Hayy's method in favor of Absal's but sees Hayy and Absal in and through each other. The autodidactic method that begins upon the premise of collective subjectivity is collaborative, collapsing the distinction between solitary learning and learning in the company of others. The Adams and Husseins of history were solitary, and yet, they were collaborators across time. Just as well, Shariati testifies to being called away from home by the sounds of Ashura: "Who is this? This solitary and wandering and broken and hopeless and pained figure, in a desert covered in blood, who emerged from the red sea of martyrdom and is standing alone and silent! I am no longer him!" (Shariati 2007, 27–28) In being called, he is not made by the world but summoned to collaborate in changing it.

Conclusion

I have presented an account of media environments as informal pedagogical spaces and of summoning otherwise as the mode of communication that such spaces enact for political ends. The media environment here, the soundscape, called Shariati to join in receiving a political education through collective reflection upon the history of freedom struggles and its exemplars across time. It is crucial to not take the account provided above as the exclusive province of "fellow travelers"—by which I mean to not simply assume that to learn otherwise is to learn well—but rather, as framing mediascapes as sites of contestation for a people becoming. Mediascapes are where the pupils of unofficial pedagogical spaces unlearn allegiances they did not ask to learn. The Pahlavi State, an ideological state apparatus, was the primary mechanism of ideological training. In its capacity as a social engineer, it designed formal education only to witness cities within cities appear, heterotopic spaces where Iran was imagined otherwise. Other histories and geographies featured in the myriad curricula of unofficial public schools, where the attendees learned from other

pasts, refused instruction, and learned from each other. This essay has examined one such public school and the miseducation of one such pupil.

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ENDNOTES

1. Samar Attar (2007) claims that Daniel Defoe and John Locke, among others, derived the concept of the *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, from a Latin translation of Ibn Tufayl's allegory. Notwithstanding whether Attar's historical claim holds water, the "uninhabited island" in *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* more or less functions as a blank slate, providing its solitary inhabitants a place from which they can understand the world in solitude.

2. I have argued elsewhere (Mansoori 2021) that Shariati attempted to modify the perceptual habits of his audiences to hear the silence of the people as a sign of tacit disagreement with sovereign order.

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Aesthetics, Alienation, and Idealism: An Inquiry into Ali Shariati's Account of Art

Leili Adibfar

ABSTRACT: Critical investigations of Ali Shariati (1933–1977) reveal a body of work formed upon a contradictory synthesis of Islamic and modern Western thought. This combination reflects the historical milieu to which Shariati belonged, interpretation of which requires mapping his work onto iterations of global thought that respond to the conditions of modernity. The present inquiry examines Shariati's understanding of art as an idealistic effort to appease human alienation vis-à-vis the question of human existence, which, I argue, elucidates his interpretations of Islamic and Western terrains of modern thought.

KEYWORDS: Shariati, art, alienation, Islam, romanticism, existentialism

Art (*Honar*), the thirty-second volume of Ali Shariati's collected and published works (Shariati 1999a and 1999b), includes a conference talk, course lectures, a translated publication, a play, and selected poems, which, taken together, illustrate his enthusiasm for art and his endeavor to theorize its significance in relation to broader intellectual pursuits. The texts, specifically his lectures on art, invite inquiries by scholars of art history and Iranian history as well as students of existentialist philosophy, religious studies, and critical theory. Two such questions preoccupy my remarks in this article. How does Shariati's account of art exemplify and inform understandings of idealism, above all its role in building the distinct value systems that underlie aesthetic, religious, and political aspirations? And how does Shariati's focus on anxiety, pain, and

alienation as fundamental human experiences cohere with his interpretation of religion in conjunction with other bodies of modern thought?

In this inquiry, I focus on two of Shariati's lectures in *Art*, "Religion Is a 'Door' and Art a 'Window'" ("*Mazhab 'Dar'ist va Honar 'Panjereh'i*") and "Art, a Liberation from 'What Is'" ("*Honar, Gorizi as 'Āncheh Hast'*"). The former lecture includes parts of Shariati's course lectures in the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad during the 1967–68 academic year, taken by the publisher of the volume from the book *Islamic Knowledge* (*Ma'āref-e Islāmi*). The latter includes students' notes taken during a course taught at the same location in fall 1969, selected by the publisher of the volume.[1] Together, they provide interpretive possibilities for understanding the idealistic significance of art and religion in Shariati's thought, which in turn map onto both Islamic and modern traditions of contemplating human existence.

I begin this inquiry with a review of Shariati's account of art. Shariati understands art as an idealistic effort to appease human angst, which arises from a condition of dual existence between ideal and material dimensions. I then examine the significance of the notions of anxiety, pain, and alienation in Shariati's account of art in conversation with Eric L. Santner's reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy* as part of his discussion of *creaturely life* (Santner 2006). My aim in this comparative reading is to situate Shariati's discussion of aesthetics within the global scope of modern thought, specifically a romantic understanding of the human power for reflection through consciousness and the alienating effects it provokes. For Shariati, consciousness not only is the origin of human separation from the world, but also characterizes human existence as a process of becoming. I therefore continue this inquiry with an examination of Shariati's account of art vis-à-vis the question of human existence as I highlight his incorporation of aspects of existentialist thought into his Islamic interpretation of the human truth in "Four Prisons of Man" ("*Chahār Zendān-e Insān*") or (Shariati 1977).[2] I conclude my investigation with a critical remark on Shariati's account of art to recount both the possibilities this conceptual framework engenders and consequences it fails to recognize. I structure this inquiry around a critical reading of the texts of the two previously mentioned lectures, which grows out of an intimate working with these texts in the process of translating them from Persian to English.[3] The primary source for this examination, therefore, is the content of the transcribed lectures which I put in conversation with the other mentioned texts.

"Religion Is a 'Door' and Art a 'Window'" and "Art, a Liberation from 'What Is'" pivot on a single conceptual thread—that is, Shariati's theorization of art as an indispensable aspect of human existence vis-à-vis his notion of the hu-

man being as the dual combination of the material and the ideal. While Shariati demonstrates his account of the human with references to the Quranic interpretation of human existence as a combination of spirit (*rūh*) and clay (*gel*) (Shariati 1999a, 55–56), he ultimately locates the roots of this dualism in the first human conceptions of the earth (*khāk*) and heaven (*behesht*), the lower world (*donyā-ye zirin*) and the upper world (*donyā-ye zebarin*) (ibid., 58). The belief in dual worlds, Shariati argues, was an outward reflection of an inner sentiment of dualism in the human being between the material and the ideal (ibid., 59). According to this account, the material dimension, an extension of the mortal world, is in perpetual conflict with the ideal dimension, an extension of immortal transcendence that yearns for absolute ideals.[4] There is a constant incongruity between human yearnings, such as immortality, and crude realities, such as mortality.

> Absolute beauty, absolute righteousness, absolute perfection, the greatest of the great, the purest of the pure, the grandest of the grand, and the best of the good: these are all the ever-existing idols and deities of the human spirit. The human has always been yearning for them and desiring to possess them, thinking about them and searching for them and never finding them, knowing that they are unattainable. Whatever we see is relative, mortal, and perishable. The absolute, therefore, is unattainable. (Ibid., 50; my translation)

The world thus appears mute (*gong*) and unresponsive to the human self, who, by contrast, has the capacity to reflect and to doubt. The realization of this everlasting strife between the self, an interior phenomenon, and nature, which the human experiences as exterior, brings forth feelings of angst (*izterāb*) and alienation (*bigānegi*) and, in turn, necessitates art. Art is thus a response to the moment of self-realization against the mute world.

Art, Shariati argues, along with religion, is an idealistic human effort to appease angst and alienation while the human endeavors to come to terms with their dual existence and their incongruity with nature.

> The study of history illustrates the various ways through which the human has realized how to respond to the angst caused by the [sensation] of incongruity with nature. All works of art, religions, schools of mysticism, . . . have been created in the world to alleviate such [angst].
>
> One of these endeavors is the human effort to forge ideals and absolutes. . . . Absolute [ideals] are . . . [transcendent] ideals that are

exclusively human yearnings. The human admires and worships absolute ideals because they are not attainable in nature. (Ibid., 64–65; my translation)

Emerging from a sense of estrangement in the world, art recreates the abstract realm of absolute transcendent ideals within the boundaries of the material. It appeases the pain of standing against the world and its oblivious phenomena by adorning (*ārāstan*)[5] the world with attributes and ideals known to the human:

> There are two ways to adorn the world. The first one is to create phenomena, colors, and forms that are not in accord with nature, and art accomplishes such an aspiration. The second is to give sentiment and meaning to nature and all its mute and oblivious phenomena, which is to use metaphors, symbols, allusions, and [other] tropes to grant natural phenomena the intended meaning we would like them to have, to consider phenomena in nature as rather what we would like them to be seen and felt as and not as what they are . . . Why do we do this? Because if [we envision] phenomena [as if they] could feel and comprehend and bond with us on emotional and spiritual levels, we would feel the estrangement in the world less. (Ibid., 64; my translation)

Art, therefore, is not the representation of what the world is but a liberation from it. If the urge to move toward what there is in the world propels industry (*san'at*), the urge to move away from what is and toward what is not and should be propels art. In this account, which goes against the Aristotelian notion of art as mimesis, art is mimetic only in so far as it imitates what is yearned for and yet cannot be attained in this world (Shariati 1999b, 79, 84). It is through this conception of imitation that art reveals its idealizing potential, that is, to alleviate the sense of angst through the (abstract) endeavor of adorning the world with ideals. The human who has the power to create is thus rendered as an idealist. The human, Shariati explains,

> is "an animal who forges absolutes." Human nature has originated from the realism of nature, yet the deepest yearning in its foundation is idealism. The human is the only idealist creature in nature, and this is the very contradiction that propels all exigencies. (Shariati 1999a, 65; my translation)

As is well known, Shariati explicitly sought to formulate Shi'ism as a revolutionary ideology in pursuit of social change and justice. His lectures on art demonstrate the vital significance of religion in his intellectual *oeuvre* as well, where his account of art as a window onto the world of ideals goes hand in hand with his account of religion as an entry, or "door," to that world. Shariati's theorization of art, however, departs from a strict focus on the specificities of a Shi'i discourse and discusses religion as a worldly phenomenon. Within this conceptual framework, which is still built on the Quranic interpretation of human existence as the combination of clay and spirit, he views all human beings from any time and place in their dual existence between the sacred and the profane, and he considers art, along with religion and mythology, as an idealistic remedy for this existential double bind and the anxiety it propels. In his account, art, religion, and mythology collapse into each other as different practices in response to the same urge—the yearning to come to terms with an irresponsive nature. Shariati therefore does not consider art as a means to practice religion but rather as a phenomenon that transcends to a rank of its own. He does not discuss religion, moreover, as an end in itself but as a means to alleviate human alienation.

Shariati's account of art is rooted in an acknowledgment of the painful conditions the human encounters in their antagonizing affair with the world. These conditions appear as a timeless phenomenon in the absence of any specific local contextualization, and yet the notion of pain in Shariati's account of art may be understood in relation to his intellectual engagement with local currents. In Shariati's society at the time, Ali Rahnema claims,

> chivalry, honour and sacrifice were virtues. Sacrifice in the pursuit of honour incurs pain. The pleasure of pain and longing becomes the motor of life . . . Shari'ati's poetry, romantic, political, or self-destructive, recounted the story of a pain. His sentimental romantic stories and his visionary Sufi words of ecstasy, were all narratives of longing and the heart-warming feeling of unfulfilled metaphysical love. Revolutionaries of all kinds; practitioners, intellectuals or preachers, are lovers of utopias and display all symptoms of an earthly lover at a metaphysical level. This is why Shari'ati always thought that even Marxist revolutionaries willing to die for a cause, were metaphysical idealists who were willing to sacrifice their most precious material belonging for an ideal cause. (Rahnema 1998, x)

For Shariati, this culturally-rooted romantic view of pain extends on a universal level as the outcome of human consciousness (*khodāgāhi-e insāni*) and its

capability to reflect. In a footnote in "Religion Is a 'Door' and Art a 'Window,'" Shariati elaborates his interpretation of the human being:

> I consider [the word] human not a name that indicates a type of animal but a quality, a characteristic. I do not call "human" every creature that walks on two feet and may be classified as such in the natural sciences. The one I call human is the one who has, to some degree, realized their truth, who has human consciousness. The human I talk about is the same human Darwin talks about, but we do not share the same interpretation. Darwin says that evolution in organisms started from aquatic unicellular organisms and expanded to reptiles and later . . . to the human. From the human onward, evolution took another form, and the first phenomenon that emerged in the evolved organism who is [known as] the human and made it a greater kind is the spiritual sentiment [*ihsās-e irfāni*] (What Darwin calls the spiritual sentiment is undoubtedly different from what we call the spiritual sentiment. The spiritual sentiment in Darwin's language is what I call human consciousness.). Just as wings grew in reptiles and enabled them to fly—and that led to the emergence of a new category known as birds—the spiritual sentiment (as Darwin calls and human consciousness as I call, which is the realization that the human is a creature originating from nature but growing toward the supernatural) appeared in the human as a phase in evolution and turned the human into a new kind. The evolutionary chain up to the human is studied physiologically in the body but from the evolved human onward it should be studied in the spirit. In other words, just as unicellular organisms initiated an evolutionary chain of physiological life on earth, the human is the beginning of an evolutionary chain of spiritual life. Therefore, the more elaborate consciousness becomes in the human (*bashar*), the more evolved the human (*insān*) would become. (Shariati 1999a, 62; my translation)[6]

For Shariati, therefore, the evolution of a spiritual dimension in the human, which he recognizes as a byproduct of human consciousness, undergirds the break between the human and nature and propels the progression from the reflective process of self-realization to the melancholic experience of alienation that necessitates art.

This interpretation of the human and their condition echoes a romantic tradition that underscores the alienating consequences of human reflection as

it stands against the world to contemplate it. To further explore this connection, I turn to Santner's reading of Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy* in his discussion of *creaturely life*, which sheds light on the reflective essence of the human as a disruptive force. This comparison is not an attempt to understand Shariati's account of art as a reincarnation of a Western discourse, as I am aware of the different intellectual terrains they each occupy. My aim is to highlight a dimension in Shariati's body of work that is compatible with the romantic tradition of thought on human life under conditions of modernity.[7]

Santner explains that in his eighth *Duino Elegy*, Rilke

> famously sets off human life from the way of being of what he calls, simply, *die Kreatur*. In the elegy, written in 1922, Rilke praises the capacity of plant and animal life to inhabit a seemingly borderless surround that he names, as the environmental correlate or sphere of the creature, *das Offene*—the Open:

> With all its eyes the natural world [*die Kreatur*] looks out
> into the Open. (Santner 2006, 1)[8]

Because, Santner continues, "human life is essentially reflective, mediated through consciousness and self-consciousness, man's relation to things is crossed with borders, articulated within a matrix of representations that position him, qua *subject*, over against the world, qua *object* of desire and mystery" (ibid., 1–2). He then highlights Rilke's suggestion at the end of the first strophe, that is,

> it is ultimately death anxiety that disrupts the free movement in the Open for humankind:

> we, only, can see death; the free animal
> has its decline in back of it, forever,
> and God in front, and when it moves, it moves
> already in eternity, like a fountain. (Ibid., 2)

The human, Rilke suggests, is bound by the capacity of reflection that realizes death. Therefore, Santner writes,

> Man is forever caught up in the labor of the negative—the (essentially defensive) mapping and codification of object domains that allow for certain sorts of desire and possession but never what Rilke posits as the unimaginable enjoyment of self-being in otherness manifest by the creature:

Never, not for a single day, do *we* have
before us that pure space into which flowers
endlessly open. Always there is World
and never Nowhere without the No: that pure
unseparated element which one breathes
without desire and endlessly *knows*.

Man, instead, is condemned to the ceaseless production of mediating representations (in German the word for representation, *Vorstellen*, literally means to place before, in front of, over against the agent of representation). (Ibid., 2–3)

Santner continues reading the second strophe, where Rilke names the only few occasions, childhood, death, and love, in which the human might make unmediated contact with the Open and be immersed in it. He then unfolds the third strophe, where Rilke suggests that "only those creatures that never experience a radical break between the sphere of gestation and the sphere of motility, creatures never distracted by memories of the more tender and intimate communion of the womb, as Rilke puts it, are fully at home in the Open" (ibid., 4).

Moving toward the end of the elegy, Santner concludes that

the crucial distinction for Rilke remains that between man and the "world" of the creature taken as a whole. The word Rilke uses to summarize his claim about man's alienation from the Open, his claustral enclosure within an inner theater of representations and mediations, comes, not surprisingly, from the stage. The poet suggests, that is, that only man lives his separation from the maternal sphere as a kind of permanent homesickness experienced in the modality of a compulsive stance of *spectatorship* over against the world:

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
turned toward the world of objects, never outward.
It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down.
We rearrange it, then break down ourselves. (Ibid., 5)

Unlike Rilke, Shariati's account of art does not praise the capacity of plant and animal life to be boundlessly immersed in the Open. In fact, he calls nature and all its phenomena mute and oblivious as they are irresponsive to human yearnings. Yet the two share an understanding of the human as an existence over against the world, on the verge of a break with it, that is constantly dis-

rupted and alienated by the capacity of reflection and the stance of spectatorship.

Santner recognizes the human posture of reflection and spectatorship suggested in Rilke as a continuation of

> what Robert Pippin has characterized as a romantic tradition of seeing alienation "wherever one can detect the presence of self-consciousness and reflection . . . as if such reflection, a cardinal aspect of modern mindedness, is inherently doubling," that is to say, as if the human mind not only perceived objects but also, by reflection, had a "second-order self-consciousness *of* one's perceptual state as a new, dual object." (Ibid.)

Rising from the Quranic interpretation of the duality of human existence as the combination of the sacred and the profane, the alienation foundational to Shariati's account of art appears in line with this romantic tradition. However, where Rilke recounts childhood, death, and love as narrow possibilities to make a captivating contact fleetingly and momentarily with the Open, Shariati sees art, religion, mysticism, and mythology as constant idealistic efforts to render the mute world bearable. For Shariati, therefore, human consciousness is both the origin of the separation from the world and what, along with the human freedom to choose (*intekhāb kardan*) and the human ability to create (*āfarinandegi*), defines the truth of the human as an authentic self in the process of becoming (Shariati 1977).

What the human is and the urge to know the human truth lie at the core of Shariati's theorization of art and his broader intellectual pursuit. More than once he asserts in his lectures that the fundamental question for the human today is the human and what the human is (ibid.), and that any endeavor to define art, religion, and mysticism, which he recognizes as the greatest emanations of the human, should be contingent on knowing the human truth (Shariati 1999a, 61).

To undertake this task, Shariati juxtaposes the Quranic interpretation of human dual existence with the existentialist principle that existence precedes essence. In "Four Prisons of Man," without providing references to a specific work, Shariati discusses Jean-Paul Sartre's basic existentialist principle in an attempt to define what the human is.[9] While he recognizes that Sartre's existentialism, like that of Martin Heidegger, lacks a theological dimension, he appreciates its interpretation of the human as an entity different from all the other beings in nature. This aspect of existentialism, Shariati believes, allows one to contemplate human existence free from the limitations of materialism

and naturalism (Shariati 1977). Relying on this aspect, he synthesizes the existentialist notions of human will (*irādeh*) and freedom to choose, which originate from human consciousness, with the Islamic interpretation of the sacred dimension of human existence, which mirrors the same features as the manifestation of God's divine attributes.[10] With this configuration, Shariati conceives human truth as the ability to grow from a being (*bashar*) into a becoming (*insān*) and views art, which is the emanation of the ability to create, as an idealistic effort to continue the undone work of nature.

Shariati's account of art, in sum, reflects his intellectual engagement with art vis-à-vis the question of human existence. It also elucidates the affinities between Islamic and modern bodies of thought in his *oeuvre*. The conceptual framework of Shariati's account, which is structured around the dualism of existence, enables him to discuss art and other idealistic human efforts like religion beyond cultural specificities and as timeless practices toward a ubiquitous aspiration, which is becoming a human (*insān*). It simultaneously, however, motivates a pattern of binarism that, combined with his emphasis on the significance of absolute ideals, may confine the understanding of art and other human practices within already defined opposing forces, characteristics, and categories. Shariati's interpretation of the human as an idealist who shapes their existence recognizes the human as an entity in the process of becoming. Yet his reliance on dualism—which has the capacity to turn into a system of value-making—as the foundation of human existence may prevent possibilities of applying his account to understand instances of art informed and inspired by interpretations of the human beyond binary oppositions.

Further inconsistencies appear in Shariati's account. Corresponding to a romantic view, Shariati's view of art reveals that he sees the liberation of the self from the world in reaching for the realm of absolute ideals. At the same time, he believes ideals are capable of inspiring and mobilizing revolutions. They propel the human in the process of becoming to revolt (*osyān*) and achieve freedom from nature, history, society, and the self, which he recognizes as prisons of the human when they threaten to determine human existence. Art, as an idealistic effort, is one human endeavor that can transform both inner human nature and the outside world (Shariati 1977). While the revolution Shariati envisions involves indeterminate ethical transformations of the self on a collective scale and for a collective cause, his emphasis on human liberation through the pursuit of absolute ideals threatens to undermine the possibility of liberation as a human-to-human interaction beyond an individual encounter with the realm of ideals.

Further, Shariati's reliance on the self to transform from being (*bashar*) into becoming (*insān*)—against the determinations of preexisting settings and structures in the world such as nature, history, and society—dismisses the significance of collective engagements with preexisting settings and structures needed to transform them. Phrased differently and in more concrete terms, ideals can facilitate the transcendence of existing individual and sociopolitical life, in particular valueless projections of bourgeois liberalism, yet their detachment from the masses, whose daily life Shariati dismisses as crude and base (*past*), and from the preexisting settings and structures in which the masses live and form their daily lives, contravenes his claim to build a mass movement. In the instance of art, such a configuration may fail to recognize the social significance, function, and relevance of art, even as it praises art as an indispensable component of human existence.

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ENDNOTES

1. This information is taken from the "Publisher's Note" to the volume.

2. My investigation of aspects of romanticism in conjunction with aspects of existentialism in Shariati's thought is not a jump from one tradition to the other but is an organic outcome of inquiring into Shariati's account of art vis-à-vis the question of human existence. Notwithstanding differences, romanticism and existentialism share a focus on human individuality and alienation that has guided my inquiry, which in turn may elucidate the continuation of aspects of one tradition into the other.

3. Shariati's methods of argumentation in his lectures on art, which are better understood with an inquiry into his style of delivering speeches, illustrate the kind of a thinker he was and the sort of intellectual intentions he pursued. The Persian texts, which are notably transcriptions of lectures, reflect the spontaneity of their original speech format in structure and content. The speaker's long uninterrupted sentences move to-and-fro between repeated statements. These repetitions, not to mention Shariati's sweeping generalizations, arguably reveal the zeal with which he made his points. Often, he elaborates on assertions by rewording them in different ways, incorporating loose references that do not provide accurate, much less sufficient, supporting evidence. Rather, his delivery recalls the craft of storytelling as a means to elucidate an intended, even projected claim.

4. Often, Shariati appropriates terms for argumentative purposes from known intellectual traditions, highlighting a specific interpretive dimension in them according to his desired intention. His use of the term "idealism" in his account of art is one such example. In "Religion Is a 'Door' and Art a 'Window,'" for example, Shariati applies "idealism" as a general term to discuss the foundational yearning within the human for absolute ideals such as beauty, greatness, and righteousness. In his elaboration of "idealism," Shariati does not contextualize the term within a specific intellectual tradition of idealism. Rather, he considers it as an opposing force to realism. Yet his conception of idealism departs from the convenient understanding of ideals as passive and inert. Absolute ideals, Shariati describes, are innate concepts in the human that correspond not to the concrete world of existence but to the unseen world of transcendence. These ideals, which are the origins of human yearnings, propel the human to rise against and move beyond nature. Idealism, therefore, is an effort of becoming a human as the human reaches for absolute ideals.

5. I have chosen "to adorn" over "to decorate" as an equivalent for the Persian *ārāstan* to go beyond an association with decorative arts. Shariati views art as a means to adorn the mute world. For Shariati, this process entails an act of envisioning ideals that are unattainable in the world and assigning them to the world. This engagement with the world is viewed by him as a transformative idealistic effort in the process of becoming a human.

6. The phrase *khodāgāhi-e insāni* literally translates as "human self-consciousness." I have translated the phrase as "human consciousness," which better captures Shariati's romantic affinities. The Persian term Shariati uses makes explicit a reflexive pattern of thought, outlined by the romantic tradition in general, on the basis of which the human stands separate and distinct from the world of the creature. What Shariati describes here can be summarized as the process of self-making through consciousness in which the human as a being transforms into the human as a becoming. To illustrate the distinction between a being and a becoming, Shariati uses two different Persian words in the last sentence of this segment of the text that both translate as "human," that is, *bashar* for "being" and *insān* for "becoming." In "Four Prisons of Man," Shariati—referencing a friend who was doing research on Quran—explains that *bashar* and *insān* are two different words to talk about the human in Quran. *Bashar* is used when the intention is to address the human as an animal at the end of the revolutionary chain which walks on its two feet, while *insān* is used when the intention is to address the human as that transcendent and sacred truth that is distinct from all the other phenomena in nature. The former is the subject of biology, while the latter is the subject of poetry, philosophy, and religion. This word choice enables Shariati to explicate his interpretation of the human as a becoming self. It also poses translation challenges to finding relevant equivalents for *bashar* and *insān* in Shariati's work while the choice for both words seems to be "human" in English.

7. In the lectures in question, Shariati largely applies art as a general term without specifying it in terms of different practices, traditions, and movements it entails and discusses it as a ubiquitous response to the ever-existing pain of human alienation from nature beyond any specific time and place. In "Religion Is a 'Door' and

Art a 'Window,'" however, he appreciates and advocates the angst-driven romantic "art of the time" in its break from imitation across different practices including music, painting, literature, architecture, and design. See Shariati (1999a, 55). Also, Shariati does not explicitly address or recount the conditions of modernity but in "Art, a Liberation from 'What Is'" he specifically mentions the life of the bourgeoisie and discusses the bourgeoisie as a class privileged enough to feel melancholic while it does not have to worry about making ends meet. In this specific occasion, Shariati contextualizes his account of art in the life of the bourgeoisie and its melancholic estrangement from the world. See Shariati (1999b, 80).

8. Rilke's poem that Santner mentions (2006, 1) is quoted from Stephen Mitchell's translation in Rilke (1984).

9. Here, he also mentions Sartre's application of the term "délaissement" to describe the human as an abandoned entity in nature who—beyond all the other animals that are driven by their instincts—is driven by the responsibility for one's own life and freedom to choose.

10. Shariati's incorporation of existentialist thought into Islamic thought to reach a definition of the human is not free from contradiction. His distinction between the human (*bashar*), which is a being, and the human (*insān*), which is a becoming, echoes the existentialist view of the human as an entity in the process of self-making who cannot be reduced to an essence. Yet his reliance on the Quranic interpretation of human dual existence to define the human truth appears as a reduction of the human to a dual essence. This contradiction reflects Shariati's peculiar style of synthesis in the form of appropriation and adoption of conflicting principles to craft his arguments.

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Returning Comparative Literature to Itself: Shariati Reads Dante

Atefeh Akbari

ABSTRACT: At the time of his premature death at the age of forty-three, the written output of Ali Shariati was remarkable. He wrote in a variety of styles and forms and read extensively from vastly distinct literary traditions. While in recent years, Anglophone scholarship on his work has situated him rightfully among critical anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, his contribution to a worldly reimagining of comparative literature has not received the same attention. This essay offers a framing of his work within the field of comparative literature, with a particular focus on his adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. By studying his mode of engagement with this canonical text, this essay provides an introductory analysis to the comparative literary practice of a towering Iranian intellectual. It can also serve as a model for a comparative literature practicum that privileges the work of a writer from the Global South.

KEYWORDS: Shariati, comparative literature, Dante, translation, literary humanism, Eurocentrism

Unpremeditated Storytelling as Literary Humanism

After an introduction, the first section in Ali Shariati's *Kavir* [*The Desert*] is titled "*Naqd va taqriz*" ["Critique and Commentary"]. Above the title, there is an epigraph in Arabic: "*Hāzeh shiqshiqaton, hadarat . . .*" (Shariati 1970, 13). In a footnote that carries on for two and a half pages, Shariati first translates "*shiqshiqat*": "[it] is something resembling a balloon that comes out of a camel's mouth at the

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height of its outburst, when it's impassioned and ecstatic, or angry and clamoring, and subsides an hour later."[1] He then proceeds to explain the source of his epigraph, which is a quotation by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and narrates the story that led the first Shi'a Imam to utter these words. In one of his sermons [*khutba*] to his followers, Imam Ali, whom Shariati describes as "having an arm of steel and a heart of fire" and from whose "tongue poetry flowed," suddenly bursts into an uncharacteristic, passionate, and frenzied narrative of all the hardships he'd experienced over the preceding twenty-five years (ibid.).[2] This account of personal afflictions and betrayals by trusted confidants was unexpected and atypical of a man known for his magnanimity and grace. He speaks "with words that had become painful and fiery," moving his audience to tears (ibid., 13–4). In the midst of this ardent narrative, an apathetic audience member (in whose description Shariati minces no words) asks a completely uninspired question about Islamic jurisprudence. ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, unexpectedly subdued by this man's question, answers him calmly and patiently. The other attendees, furious with this man and his idiotic question, plead with their Imam to continue his personal account. In a sentence that, Shariati writes, captures the "intimacy, simplicity, beauty, and eloquence of his pain," the Imam explains his outburst of emotions: "It was a *shiqshiqa* that jumped out and then subsided." And this is the sermon, Shariati explains, that is referred to as *Shaqshaqiya* (ibid, 15).

In this essay, Shariati addresses the criticisms and attacks he expects to receive vis-à-vis his writings in *Kavir* and explains what he views to be the form and genre of its constituent essays—which he decidedly claims are *not* essays (Shariati 1970, 21) but rather the kind of writing that Jean-Paul Sartre defines as "poetry" (ibid., 30).[3] Before Shariati even starts the essay, however, he deems it central to provide an in-depth explanation for and clarification of his epigraph. He therefore proceeds to recount and reflect on a lengthy narrative about unpremeditated storytelling in a footnote and, in the process, he underlines Imam Ali's poetic language and capabilities. A few pages later, the reason for this prolonged explanatory note becomes clear: Shariati compares the genre of his writings in this collection to the genre of Imam Ali's improvised and impassioned personal narrative in the midst of a sermon (ibid., 21). Thus, the critical nature of this expansive footnote becomes clear: understanding this intertextual reference is paramount for understanding Shariati's own literary and rhetorical strategies within this text. In the guise of textual annotations, Shariati presents what is, in my view, the most methodical example of his comparatist practices. Through this footnote and the subsequent role its explication plays in outlining the form and content of his writing, he is offering a roadmap for his work in this text; a text that is the result of—and results

in—a worldly literary view and encompasses his comparative literary practice, demonstrating what he reads, how he reads, and how he implements his inter-disciplinary, inter-, intra-, and cross-cultural readings.

One of the essays from *Kavir* that readily encapsulates this comparative literary practice is "Divine Tragedy" (an adaptation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*). I read this essay along with two of Shariati's letters to his son, which, in my estimation, are extensions of his writing style in his essay about Dante. This reading allows me to demonstrate the parameters of Shariati's comparative practice, which remains intimate even while requiring distance. To explain these parameters, in what follows, I introduce and situate the works of Dante and Shariati in the discipline of comparative literature and discuss the implications of this co-placement for the disciplinary formation. I demonstrate how Shariati interprets Dante's work from his planetary[4] position and adapts it for his twentieth-century Iranian readership in a manner that exemplifies the inclusivity that an ethical comparative practice is capable of.

But first, an explication of annotation as (comparative) method: the epigraph to "Critique and Commentary" acts as a framing device, signaling to the attentive reader what kind of discursive framework she can expect in the text. The first thing one notices is that it's in another language, immediately communicating the multilingual world of the text and Shariati's code-switching and translational methods. Sometimes he expects his reader to know the meaning of a non-Persian utterance, leaving it untranslated, or, alternatively, signaling the private nature of the utterance, a demonstration of intimacy with a particular readership or with a text that puts distance between himself and the reader-cum-outsider; at other times, he makes a point to translate the foreign phrase, to render the foreign familiar. Not everyone will read the expansive footnote pertaining to this Arabic utterance, but a reader that engages with the text deeply and continually revisits it will notice that the annotation is central to understanding the text's discursive framework. In other words, from the outset, the text encourages re-reading, an essential component of a comparative practice. Further, Shariati underlines its unscripted orality as a central element of his work. It references an oral and theological tradition, thus signaling an interdisciplinary interest and practice. The first Shi'a Imam's experience of an impromptu moment of intimacy with his listeners in the midst of a formal sermon, in Shariati's reading, is transformed into a *literary* form that he emulates. This is yet another example of his easy movement between different genres and the manner in which he reads a religious sermon as a literary text.

Later in his essay, it becomes clear that he has incorporated in this form the literary theorizations of one of the most important French intellectuals of

the twentieth century—Sartre. At the same time, as he writes about the "the essence of 'speaking' and how speaking is itself 'a form of 'living,'" he explains that he's not providing testimony by Sartre. Rather, he is thinking of

> the simple and pained hearts of the desert's inhabitants. . . . That which Sartre recognizes as "poetic word" and has comprehended through philosophical ingenuity and the worthy art of logic, [the villagers] have found through "the power of pain" and "the miracle of heart" and "the guidance of necessity." (Shariati 1970, 23)

There is no need, then, to *apply* Sartre's theories, as it were, to the conversations among villagers in Iran, and subsequently, to Shariati's literary project in this collection. The lived experience and poetics of the desert-dweller is in fact already an *a priori* embodiment of what Sartre arrives at. While Shariati does not demonstrate nativist sentiments in his literary readings and practice, in this case, he privileges local knowledge and interdisciplinary readings over a blind application of a so-called Western logic. In "Why Not Compare?" Susan Stanford Friedman writes in favor of comparison, for "Politically speaking, the refusal to compare can potentially turn into a romance of the local, a retreat into the particular and identity based, a resistance to the cosmopolitan" (Friedman 2013, 38). Shariati's project follows the kind of scholarly research that Stanford Friedman calls for in comparative work:

> Scholars who develop narrative theory out of a purely Western literary archive—without global comparisons of different narrative traditions—are caught, politically speaking, in a hermeneutic circle that confirms Western narrative forms as dominant, universal. A more inclusive comparison of narratives from different sites on the globe can dismantle the false universalism of Western forms. (Ibid.)

In closing this essay, Shariati makes it clear that he is not arguing in favor of the local over the "Western," as it were; he is not creating a hierarchy of knowledge: "This book, in Sartre's interpretation, contains the 'poetry,' and in Persian, the 'lyrics' . . . of a wounded heart, a 'desert soul'" (Shariati 1970, 30). Shariati's work in this book thus exemplifies what Arash Davari posits as, "akin to Fanon, [Shariati's argument] for a new humanism—a position that rejected the rigidities of a predetermined universal handed down by colonial powers while also eschewing the celebration of the particular as an inverted and similarly static cultural form" (Davari 2013, 92). Davari reads Shariati's seminal notion of *bazgasht* or "return" as an "ethical transformation" (ibid., 88) of the self that, in later stages of his thought, "promised to create its own "new univer-

sal"—one where religious and nonreligious intellectuals might find common grounding" (ibid., 96). I read Shariati's comparative literary practice as a corollary to this articulation of *bazgasht*. Catherine Brown's "What Is 'Comparative' Literature?" offers a view of comparison in literature that parallels Davari's view of Shariati's humanism. "At a political level," Brown writes, "the willingness to compare one thing or oneself with an other or others undermines absolutism. And it is an ethically sound aim of human interaction for individuals to respect their own and each other's quiddity, whilst reaching to find maximum common ground" (Brown 2013, 85). Shariati thus adopts Dante's text, yet adapts its Christian worldview into a universal one (albeit, with specifically Islamic elements), and within this adaptation we see the literary actualization of *bazgasht,* of reaching for "maximum common ground" by returning to a canonical text of Western civilization with a fresh perspective.

Dante's Divine Comedy in/as Comparative Literature

In the opening lines of her seminal text, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction,* Susan Bassnett writes,

> Sooner or later, anyone who claims to be working in comparative literature has to answer the inevitable question: What is it? The simplest answer is that comparative literature involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across time and space. (Bassnett 1993, 1)

What Bassnett is outlining here is the practice of comparative literature in its most fundamental articulation. When capitalized, Comparative Literature includes not only the practice, but also the contours of its disciplinary formation(s). And within these disciplinary formations, not all comparisons or comparative practices are equal. At its outset, the development of comparative literature in Europe and North America was Eurocentric, and in the United States in particular, the studies of non-Western languages and literary traditions were relegated to area studies departments.[5] Therefore, the sites from and in which comparisons are taking place matter. For example, when Dante is read comparatively in the Arabic-speaking world in the context of medieval Islam, Europe is decentralized.

Dante (1265–1321) started writing his *Commedia* (now known as *Divine Comedy)* while living in exile from Florence. It consists of three parts: *Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso.* The ancient Roman poet, Virgil, serves as a guide who takes

Dante the pilgrim through their descent into the circles of Hell, at the innermost layers of Earth, and through their climb atop the mountain of Purgatory. Yet, as they approach the mountaintop, ready to ascend to Heaven, Virgil leaves Dante—after all, Virgil was not a Christian, and therefore cannot gain access to a Christian Heaven. A short while later, Dante comes across his new guide, Beatrice. While Beatrice was a historical figure whom Dante knew, idolized, and loved from the age of nine until her death when Dante was twenty-five, in his text she both epitomizes and transcends her earthly being and represents the divine love and guidance that Dante the pilgrim needs to reach God. Dante labels his work a comedy because, despite the tragedy that Dante the pilgrim witnesses in this path, it ends well. He meets God.

Studies abound on the literary and philosophical influence of Dante's Roman predecessors (including Ovid, Saint Augustine, and Virgil, among others) and of Latin literature on his writing, and traces of his readings of the Bible are ever-present in his text. Simultaneously, Dante advocated for the use of vernacular language (that is, Italian) for writing serious works of literature and philosophy (traditionally, such works were only written in Latin), and he does so exquisitely in his own canonical poetic creation. Yet, as Bassnett reminds us,

> Dante, hailed as the father of the Italian language, did, after all, praise the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel as his master, granting him the supreme honour of allowing him to speak in his native language in Canto XXIV of *Purgatorio*, and thereby demonstrating that poetry as he conceived it was not tied to native language or culture. (Bassnett 1993, 23)

Bassnett provides this example to support the work of early French practitioners of comparative literature, who saw the Middle Ages as a period rife with possibility for comparative scholarship, "when linguistic boundaries were only loosely drawn and national boundaries were not defined at all, when there was free traffic between scholars and poets" (ibid.). Dante thus captures the spirit of comparative thinking and creation: in the span of his creation, he deftly combines multiple linguistic and literary traditions, such as epic and lyric, and in effect establishes a new genre that combined fiction, poetry, and religious philosophy. The combination would prove essential to succeeding generations of Italian, Christian, and Western European thinkers and writers. Akash Kumar, a Dante scholar, provides an illustrative example of how Dante links literary and linguistic traditions and creates something new. About the first utterance by Dante the pilgrim in the text, "*Miserere di me*," Kumar writes,

> "Miserere" replicates the first word of Psalm 50 in its Latin form, while the vernacular "di me" translates the next word of the Latin ("mei"). As we consider that Dante is addressing Virgil with these words, our response is a measure of the distance—spatiotemporal, linguistic, and cultural—that is folded together in this poem. Dante speaks Latin to a Latin poet, but it is not Virgil's Latin; rather, it is the Latin translation of Hebrew poetry. And it is not pure Latin, but a Latin that gives way to the vernacular that is the pride of this poem. There is a layering of difference in this act of translation, from the temporal divide between Dante and Virgil that is bridged by forging of a new language to the poetic translation of already-translated poetry. (Kumar 2019, 2)

Dante's manner of reading, adapting, and (re)translating the poetry of Psalms makes explicit his "acknowledgement of the multicultural nature of even 'canonical' texts" (Kumar 2019, 3). What is more, it points to "how Dante could make personal use of this complex Word to empower his own speech, how he could speak Scripture as his own tongue" (Peter Hawkins,[6] cf Kumar 2019, 3). There is a comparable argument to be made here in relation to Shariati's citation of Quranic text in his writings, which I will expand upon in the next section. For now, through creating this "hybrid" linguistic form (Kumar 2019, 3), Dante underlines the multicultural nature of the Western canon at the same time that he makes it his own and domesticates it for an Italian audience in the process.

Those who engage with *Divine Comedy* strictly on nationalist terms are prone to overlooking—or completely disregarding—its worldliness and capacity for comparativism. The reasons for this approach, more often than not, are political—and it is precisely in response to such politically motivated, singularly nationalist readings and the subsequent danger of "absolutism" that Brown, as mentioned earlier, speaks of the imperative to compare. According to Allen Mandelbaum, a well-known translator of Dante's work, "lettered and unlettered Italians knew that Dante's exile in a fragmented Italy had given birth to a work that made Italy one" (1980, 339). This conception of the *Comedy* unifying Italy at a time of domestic conflict is not limited to Dante's time. As Elisabetta Benigni points out, during Italy's unification at the turn of the nineteenth century,

> the significance of Dante was itself undergoing a process of systematization and interpretation as the icon of a national poet . . . Despite Dante's harsh criticism against the institution of the Church of his

time, the [*Divine Comedy*] was integrated into the canon of Italian na-
tional literature as the symbol of Medieval Western Christianity and
Italian identity. (Benigni 2017, 119)

It is around this time when a so-called period of controversy surrounding Dan-
te's *Comedy* reached its height. Miguel Asín Palacios (1871–1944), the Spanish
scholar of Islamic and Arabic studies, published *Muslim Eschatology in the Di-
vine Comedy* in 1919,[7] in which he claimed that "Dante was beholden to Muslim
sources" (Ziolkowski 2015, 8).[8] An essentialist severance of the *Divine Comedy*
from an Islamic tradition was thus conducted most aggressively by some Dante
scholars situated in Europe, for even though, according to Benigni, "*Commedia*
was interpreted as an agent of cultural negotiation between the various spheres
that constituted the Mediterranean epistemic unity[,] . . . this idealized Med-
iterranean unity was imbued with nationalistic rhetoric [and] eurocentrism"
on the European shores of the Mediterranean (Benigni 2017, 135). For it was
not only an Italian nationalist unity that was at stake in these conversations;
in his introduction to *Dante and Islam*, Ziolkowski rightfully portends the text's
centrality in the world beyond Italy "as a centerpiece in Western culture" and
"an archetype of Catholic literature" (Ziolkowski 2015, 1).

It was the scholars of comparative literature and Italian literature in the
Arabic-speaking world, studying Dante and translating his text respectively,
who were able to offer "a conception of literature that is inclusive, which has
helped to understand Dante as part of a shared cultural space" (Benigni 2017,
134). The work of the translators reflects the arguments about translation as
decolonization put forth by Davari and Siavash Saffari in their introduction to
this issue. Benigni provides the example of an Egyptian translation of *Divine
Comedy* in the 1950s, at the height of revolutionary movements in the country
and subsequent removal of all British forces, with Cairo university professor
Hasan 'Uthmān's prose translation of the text "appropriating the discourse of
the struggle toward liberation and progress . . . presenting Dante as a cantor of
political engagement, exile and suffering" (ibid., 133). She characterizes this as
a "form of domestication of the text" (ibid.). However, this does not preclude
Uthmān and his contemporary Arabic translators and comparative literary
scholars of the text from offering the aforementioned inclusive conception of
literature—this is precisely what they have accomplished in their introductions
to their translations and framing of the discourse around Dante and Islam in
the Arab-Islamic world (ibid., 134).

Similarly, one way of reading Shariati's adaptation of Dante's poem is as a
translation-cum-domestication of the text. Contrary to what one might expect,
though, Shariati's engagement with the text does not include any reference to

the so-called controversy, and so, while Shariati's Purgatory and Heaven are Islamic, ultimately, his adaptation contains no traces of a nationalist politicization of the text during Iran's pre-revolutionary period. This, I would argue, is due to his site of comparison, or more to the point, his distance.

Dante's (enforced) distance from his native Florence allowed him to create a text that would come to represent a unified language and people, at the same time that it drew from and consisted of multiple languages and literary traditions from different historical periods. That distance, as Kumar contends, "is folded together in [Dante's] poem" (Kumar 2019, 2). The following section demonstrates what I mean by distance in Shariati's case and how that distance allowed him to create a vision of spiritual and literary unity free from sectarianism. The opening pages of his lyric essay, "Divine Tragedy," provide us with a literary model for this unifying transcendence—albeit, an imperfect one, which is perhaps why Shariati's essay, in contrast to Dante's vision, ends with a tragedy.

Shariati's "Divine Tragedy"

In the first line of his essay, Shariati's poetic speaker tells us that he has reached the end of Purgatory, and he thanks Virgil for bringing him that far. Given the essay's title and this description, one might think that it is Dante himself speaking (or at least, Dante the pilgrim in *Divine Comedy*). The content of the speech, however, makes it clear that the pilgrim in this essay is Muslim. References are made to crossing over a bridge that is thinner than a strand of hair (Shariati 1970, 110), or rivers of milk and honey in paradise (ibid., 114), as well as the trumpet of Israfil to resurrect the dead from their purgatory state (ibid., 117). Shariati thus maps Dante's journey onto an Islamic architecture of the afterlife. And it *is* Dante's journey specifically, for the poetic speaker in this essay tells us that he is retracing Dante's footsteps and that he had in fact seen Dante in that same location years ago with Beatrice. He also writes about hearing Dante's story from his own mouth, thus placing himself (or his poetic persona) directly in conversation with Dante. Yet, while Dante's Purgatory was an island with a mountain, Shariati's is a desert, and the poetic speaker's interiority is the focus of the text. After the text's first paragraph, this interiority includes a well-known line of poetry by Iqbal, incorporated seamlessly (without attribution) into Shariati's own prose, after which he composes a composite poem that draws from his readings of Stéphane Mallarmé and André Gide; he writes the poem in French and writes the Persian translation across from these lines on the right side of the page.[9]

Granted, Shariati attributes a poem to Rimbeau that is in fact by Stéphane Mallarmé. Shariati would not claim that his comparative poetics is perfect—far from it. The process of an ethical transformation of the self is rarely perfect, and thus the new humanisms, literary and otherwise, that Shariati reaches for reflect the imperfections and errancies inherent within these humanisms. In his essay, he demonstrates a moment in which the ultimate mystical self-transformation has been achieved—a union with God—only to be tragically interrupted moments later. Virgil, whom he calls his "prophet" and "imam" (ibid., 114), is central in this union, as is Beatrice, whom, similar to Dante's version, Shariati's pilgrim meets shortly after Virgil tells him he cannot accompany him further. What is more, as opposed to a heaven strictly reserved for baptized Christians, the Paradise in "Divine Tragedy" houses Moses and Jesus and Muhammad, Zarathustra and Plato and Abraham, Beatrice and Khadijah and Zeinab, thus rescuing Dante's text from the ideological claims on it by a Catholic West. Mere moments after Shariati's pilgrim meets God, however, he falls into an abyss and ends up back in the desert.

Shariati's *Kavir* was published in 1969, five years after he had left Paris, following the completion of his PhD; the purview of his doctoral education was Islamic philology, and he later explains to a friend that his "doctoral thesis was in the field of 'comparative literature'" (Rahnema 1998, 109). By this time, he has also already established himself as a prolific translator.[10] Shariati's doctoral dissertation was completed under the supervision of Gilbert Lazard, but during this time, he also worked closely with the renowned scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon. Immediately before "Divine Tragedy," *Kavir* includes another essay penned by Shariati titled "My Idols," which mentions several writers, artists, and thinkers whom he admires and has learned from (including Jean Cocteau, George Gurvitch, Fanon, and Sartre, among others). Yet the leitmotif is an elegy for Massignon. In "My Idols," while Shariati refers to Massignon as a "zealous Catholic," almost in the same breath he adds, "He [Massignon] noted that 'up there' is a place where two souls, even if they've taken flight from two foreign religions—once they arrive there and meet each other at that point—the two religions will also reconcile and become one" (Rahnema 1998, 95). I would argue that Shariati's adaptation of Dante's work is a manifestation of this meeting point and reconciliation, between the two texts—between Dante and Shariati—and thus signal a move toward the aforementioned "new universal."

During his time in Paris, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Shariati also undertook a vigorous reading of Mowlana's *Masnavi* (Rahnema 1998, 93). Rahnema writes that the universalism of Mowlana's worldview may have contributed to the development of a universal worldview in Shariati at the time,

one that moved away from his previous binary view of East and West and his adherence to Islamist and nationalistic beliefs. I would add to Rahnema's conjecture that it was necessary for Shariati to read Mowlana *while in Paris* (having gained some distance from his hometown of Mashhad, his undergraduate experience and political activities, and subsequent arrest and imprisonment) for him to develop a way of thinking that was less myopic and more inclusive. It is only after he has gained some distance (yet again) both temporal and geographical, from his consequential experiences in Paris that he is able to write and publish his "Divine Tragedy." It is conceivable that Shariati wouldn't have been able to adopt this democratic vision had it not also been for the teachings of his staunchly Catholic mentor.

In June 1973, a private letter that Shariati had written from Tehran in November 1972 to his thirteen-year-old son, Ehsan, in Mashhad—the first letter he had ever written to his son—became public; Ehsan "had confided in someone who showed interest in the works of his father. Having obtained the letter, this person had xeroxed and sold 'Shari'ati's latest work'. . . . Similar to all Shari'ati's writings at the time, the letter was widely distributed" (Rahnema 1998, 326), including in Tehran, its point of origin. The epistolary can thus be read as an emblem of (the possibility of) intimacy and distance enveloping one another. The letter traverses to its destination, to its intended private and intimate audience, but that same letter, multiplied, returns to its point of departure, this time having been made public, with its final line an inadvertent, revolutionary call to all readers, in Iran and elsewhere: "And you my son, if you don't want to be captive to any dictator, just do one thing: read and read and read!" ("*Naameh be Ehsan*" ["Letter to Ehsan"])

Unaware of the fate that awaited his father's first letter, the son responds, prompting Shariati to write a second letter to his son in 1973 (though the exact date of this letter is unknown, there is no indication that Shariati is aware of the publicization of his first letter). This second letter seamlessly incorporates Quranic citations into his Persian letter in their original Arabic.[11] Shariati does not provide their Persian translations, nor does he offer information about the surah or verse number. He simply adds quotation marks around the citation. In a manner similar to Dante speaking "Scripture as his own tongue," Shariati's citing of Quranic text indicates his own intimacy with this text, insofar as its words become his own words and require neither translation nor explication. He expects his reader (in this case, his son) to be, or better yet become, equally intimate with the text. Thus, any distance between the reader and this untranslated, unattributed textual material must be covered by the reader himself. The same letter includes excerpts and phraseologies from *Kavir* in a

similarly seamless manner, with quotation marks but without attribution. It is altogether feasible (and perhaps quite common) that indigenous readers of Shariati's correspondence with his son will miss these references and, in this case, the distance and loss can be remedied by the (unintended) public audience of this letter reading his public work, *Kavir*. There is, therefore, a difference between the distance he places between his text and his most intimate readers, on the one hand, and the distance he places between his work and its public readers. A flashing moment of intimacy between Imam Ali and his audience leads to unpremeditated storytelling. Perhaps, the measure of premeditation in the distance that he creates in his text is in inverse relation to his intimacy with the reader; the further they are, the more likely it is that he will create more distance that they will have to work hard to traverse. Ultimately, then, not only does the intimate language and history between father and son preclude the reader from a perfect understanding of the letter's content, but also the manner in which Shariati closely embeds Quranic text and his own public writings within private narrative renders straightforward comprehension impossible. Intertextuality within comparativist writing abnegates easy comprehension. In this letter, he also writes that he read his son's letter multiple times in the first few minutes that he received it. One could argue, then, that he's teaching his son (and by extension, other readers of his letter) how to read. One must constantly return to and revisit an intertextual, multicultural, multilingual text to make up for—as much as possible—losses in meaning. To quote Brown once again, "No text reads the same twice. A 're-reader' always compares the text as read with their memory of that text read in the past" (2013, 68). The process of re-reading itself, then, becomes comparative, and every reading opens new avenues for comprehension.

A few months before he passed away in England in 1977, Shariati wrote another letter, this time in conditions of near-exile, from London to his son in Seattle.[12] Shariati formulates the letter as a "cultural exchange" (*Ba mokhatab-ha-ye ashna*; 2020, 91), and when one considers the contents of the letter as well as the contours of this exchange (a private correspondence between an Iranian father and son, sent from London to Seattle), this formulation becomes critical, for it lays bare the exigencies of Shariati's thinking and the possibilities it entails as an alternative to the Eurocentric formation of Comparative Literature. In a letter wherein he encourages his son to fully enmesh himself in all facets of this new place's language (formal and informal speaking, reading, and writing), he also encourages him to read Bertolt Brecht and Iqbal, as well as texts from his own cultural background. If the site of comparison matters to save comparative literature from its Eurocentrism, in this case, one might

think that Ehsan's geographical location—Seattle—would not help this cause. But here *Ehsan himself* becomes the site of comparison. In "Beyond Compare," Micol Siegel explains, "defining a self in contrast to (an) other(s) is essentially an act of comparison. Comparison is the process of relational self-definition" (Siegel 2005, 64). In this case, Shariati acknowledges the potential that comparative literature, if practiced ethically, can have for its practitioner, and how it will allow the practitioner to "return to [their] self" through a "process of "relational self-definition." Later, Siegel adds, "Comparisons pull together the bodies compared, rhetorically; they pluck individuals from originating locations and set them down in foreign fields; they force scholars to absorb foreign languages and histories; they ask readers to join in their transnational gazing" (ibid., 66). Comparisons require distance, but by pulling in the reader and encouraging them to participate in this transnational gazing, they create an intimacy that the reader can arrive at, provided they continuously revisit and reimagine the reading at hand.

The ending of "Divine Tragedy," though, is a reminder that some distances cannot be easily traversed. That is also the nature of literary comparison, as well as the translational practices embedded within it. There is always a loss in meaning that accompanies the transference of literary and cultural meaning from one context to another. So, perhaps some phrases are better left untranslated. To borrow a phrase from Davari and Saffari's introduction to this issue, perhaps this loss in meaning can be characterized as the "ineffable" quality of a source text that cannot be conveyed when it is transferred to another cultural, literary, or linguistic context. Shariati's adaptation demonstrates a desire to transfer the ineffable to the extent possible. When it comes to comparative literature, an ethical implementation of that desire can be enough.

Acknowledgment

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ENDNOTES

1. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

2. In the Shi'a tradition, the belief is that Imam Ali was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and that after the Prophet's death, Ali should have been the first Caliph, instead of the fourth. It was only twenty-five years after the Prophet's death that he became the official leader of the Islamic community, and accounts of those twenty-five years speak of the intense suffering that the Imam experienced both personally and at the hands of friends and foes alike.

3. In *What is Literature?* (Sartre [1948] 1988), Jean-Paul Sartre expanded upon his concept of *littérature engage* [committed literature] that he first outlined in 1945 in his introduction to the first issue of *Les tempes modernes*, a French literary magazine he co-founded. In the 1948 essay, he wrote "Prose is, in essence, utilitarian" ("*La prose est utilitaire par essence*") (ibid., 25/34). Accordingly, language has inherent resources that can be mobilized in action, as long as the writer knows how to use them. This genre of literature, therefore, does not require a call to action, for it is a form of socio-political activism in and of itself. He distinguishes it from poetry as an aesthetic form in which its practitioners "refuse to *utilize* language" (ibid., 29). See Sartre (1988) and (1964).

4. My use of this term is informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's third chapter "Planetarity" (2003, 71–102) in her *Death of a Discipline*.

5. Spivak offers an in-depth analysis of the development of these two fields in the United States in the first chapter of *Death of a Discipline* titled "Crossing Borders" (1–23). More than a decade later, in a contribution to the American Comparative Literature Association's decennial State of the Discipline Report in 2014 titled "Comparative Literature, World Literature, and Asia," Karen Thornber makes the case that not much has changed and that "scholars working on non-Western-language literatures . . . remain a disproportionate minority in most comparative literature departments" (paragraph 1).

6. The work of Hawkins, another prominent Dante scholar, that Kumar is referring to is *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (1999).

7. The original Spanish title of the book was *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*; *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, an abridged English translation by Harold Sunderland was published in London in 1926.

8. Ziolkowski (2015) cites Vicente Cantarino who explains that Asín Palacios had "called attention to the resemblance between the ascent of Dante and Beatrice into Paradise and the ascent of Ibn al-'Arabī, the Murcian mystic. Taking this as a starting point, Asín Palacios asserted that Ibn al-'Arabī's ascension was a mystical-allegorical adaptation of Muḥammad's ascension, the *mi'rāj*. In Muslim lore, the *mi'rāj* was preceded by an *isrā'*, a nocturnal journey of the Prophet, during which he visited the infernal regions of the otherworld. The tradition, widely spread in Muslim writings, was, according to Asín Palacios, the prototype of Dante's journey in the *Commedia*" (Cantarino 2015, 34).

9. Persian is written from right to left.

10. See Davari and Saffari's introduction to this forum for a complete history and analysis of his work as a translator.

11. For my translation of this letter, see Davari, Rabiee, and Saffari (forthcoming).

12. For my translation of this letter, see Davari, Rabiee, and Saffari (forthcoming).

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Shariati, Anti-Capitalism, and the Promise of the "Third World"

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi

ABSTRACT: This essay engages with Ali Shariati's lecture "Some of the Vanguard of the Return to Self in the Third World" to explore his conception of the "Third World" as a cultural, psychic, and politico-economic project of which Iran would be an integral part, and his relationship to the intellectual contributions of Frantz Fanon, whose translation and critical reception proved to be of considerable importance to the ideological development of a popular-nationalist and avowedly religious section of Iran's anti-Pahlavi opposition during the 1960s and 1970s. The essay explores several elements of Shariati's anti-capitalism in the context of his advocacy of a Third World politico-economic bloc and some of the potential difficulties, tensions, and contradictions this vision would, and ultimately did, encounter. Finally, the essay concludes by examining how Shariati's prescriptions for breaking the chains of "dependency" might have been further developed and complicated, given the immense obstacles the promise of Third World solidarity has historically faced.

KEYWORDS: Shariati, Iran, Third World, Fanon, anti-capitalism

In "Some of the Vanguard of the Return to Self in the Third World" (henceforth *Vanguard*), a speech Ali Shariati delivered in Mashhad in 1969–1970 (1348), the activist-orator outlines his thoughts and engagement with several Third World anticolonial activists, statesmen, and intellectuals, whom he regards as pioneers of what he famously called "the return to self." These include the Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere (1922–1999), the Kenyan anti-colonial activist

and President, Jomo Kenyatta (1897–1978), the Martinican poet and stateman, Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), the Algerian novelist and playwright, Kateb Yacine (1929–1989), the Iranian intellectual and dissident Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), and the Martinican-Algerian revolutionary, Frantz Fanon (1925–1961). In this lecture Shariati boldly proclaims that "we must come to know the intellectuals of Asia and Africa and have contact with their thought, not like Sartre or others who don't at all understand what we have to say . . . because the condition of their society is not like the condition of our society" (Shariati forthcoming). *Vanguard* provides a fascinating window into Shariati's evolving and highly variegated political and intellectual lifeworld, which has for the most part tended to focus on either European existentialist and phenomenological influences or the formative impact of Shiʿi traditions, archetypes, and mythologies upon his thought. For Shariati, the likes of Nyerere, Kenyatta, and Fanon, constitute a veritable vanguard, stewarding into existence an Afro-Asian intercontinental consciousness set against the colonial condition and ever real threat of re-colonization. He brings to life for his audience the emerging forms of transnational solidarity within what is known today as the Global South and engages with the challenges of postcolonial state-building. These aspects have often been understated or neglected in the analysis of Shariati's intellectual influences, even as they play a notable role in understanding how he envisioned the "Third World" as a global cultural, social, and politico-economic project.

In this short intervention, I will argue not only for the considerable thematic symmetry between Shariati's vision of post-colonial self-determination and that of fellow anti-colonial nationalists, but that his proposed solution, an intercontinental Third World populism and corresponding anti-capitalist industrialization and economic union, face many of the same challenges and pitfalls as those of his African, Asian and Latin American counterparts (Getachew 2019). In other words, even as Shariati's diagnosis remains powerful, his program for breaking the chains of dependency remain woefully underdeveloped or even liable to create new forms of domination and exploitation in their wake. According to his reading, anti-colonial revolutions emerged from a "return to self," which would in dialectical fashion form the basis of an intercontinental antagonistic frontier against the imperial center, but how an intercontinental solidarity predicated upon the negation of the colonial would sustain its vibrancy and continue to inoculate itself from the ever-present risk of reincorporation into relations of dependency is left undeveloped. This lack of specificity and analytical rigor, as well as the subsumption of class struggle under the category of the "people," are enabling conditions of solidarity, positive and negative,

but also provide vital clues relating to the project's eventual unravelling in the aftermath of political decolonization and formal independence.

Vanguard begins with an analysis of the post-colonial emergence of Tanzania and Shariati's unabashed admiration for President Julius Nyerere and his achievements following independence. Despite occasionally playing fast and loose with names, facts, and the historical sequence of events, Shariati draws on Nyerere's promotion of Swahili to stress the importance of language, not only to the end of knowing and preserving one's own cultural identity, but one's political independence. Shariati clearly holds there to be a powerful relationship between cultural, linguistic, and political self-determination, a conclusion echoed in the writings of Césaire (Césaire 2010), Fanon (Fanon 1965, 1967, 2004), Amílcar Cabral (Cabral 1973), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Āl-e Ahmad 1385/2006; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2020).

Shariati's analysis of what transpired in Tanzania tends to oversimplify an intricate nexus of socio-economic and political formations and processes, but nevertheless clarifies for his audience the issues which he held to be of essential importance. Though Swahili was widely understood and historically used for purposes of trade, it was not the "indigenous" or "native" language of Tanzania, and represented a second language for many, including Nyerere himself, alongside dozens of other local and regional tongues. It was, however, consciously enshrined by Nyerere as an official language of the country alongside English, to foster national unity and consciousness, an overarching sense of belonging, and feeling that the new country was indeed a fully-fledged post-colonial nation. It would thus palpably demonstrate that it was more than just a continuation of an administration that had come about as the result of sheer colonial imposition. In this respect, it sought to institute a discontinuity with what had come before and thereby disrupt the dominant relations of coloniality that had prevailed hitherto. The thrust of Shariati's insight is, however, primarily concerned with the importance of a living relationship to one's language and cultural practices and how the erasure of such plays a pivotal role, if not *the* pivotal role, in processes of alienation, colonization, and the perpetuation of colonial domination. In *Vanguard* he goes so far as to contend, "First, we must strike at the cultural side of colonialism so that later we can destroy the other aspects, namely, the economic and even the political. If we can preserve the cultural aspects of our society, we can achieve anything" (Shariati forthcoming). This relationship is further reiterated by Shariati when he paraphrases Kenyatta, who famously struck upon the intimate relationship of Christian missionaries, colonization, and the material and territorial dispossession of indigenous peoples on the African continent (Rodney [1972] 2018; Loc 4982).[1]

Shariati is introducing his audience, which varied in age and educational attainment, to a genre of anti-colonial thought and the ways in which colonialism had been understood and fought in recent decades on the African continent. He was conveying to his audience not only a flurry of names they probably had not encountered, but also glimpses of what they had said and how they had both analyzed and striven to overturn their colonial condition. He patiently explains terms such as "psychiatry" with which his audience might not have been familiar. In looking to Algeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and elsewhere, he insists, Iranians can attain a better understanding of their own circumstances and the obstacles to cultural, economic, political, and psychic liberation they face. This perspective is one that would directly fly in the face of the Persian chauvinism of the Pahlavi state, which sought to cast Iran as an "Asian Aryan power" whose real kin lay in Europe. In this sense, the lecture should not be read as a studious and precise piece of exegesis, breaking down and weighing up the pros and cons of each anti-colonial revolutionary's thought and praxis, but a homily broadly reflecting upon how anti-colonial struggles have been waged and realized.

Like so much of Shariati's *oeuvre*, *Vanguard* possesses an overtly performative dimension, both illocutionary and perlocutionary, harboring the will to engender and encourage the formation of an intercontinental Afro-Asian consciousness, as well as a desire to see it taken up in the world, re-enacted, and lived by his audience. It also sought to close the apparent distance separating Iranians from struggles on another continent, by gathering them together with their Algerian, Kenyan, and Tanzanian counterparts, on a shared and synchronous imaginative plane. Shariati was countering the refrain commonly repeated by Iranian nationalists of various stripes that "Iran had never been colonized," as a misplaced false pride that sought to distinguish them from those implicitly "lesser" peoples who had been "really colonized." It also belied the myriad ways Iranians continued to be dominated in their neo-colonial capitalist present. Shariati saw colonialism's denial as little more than ideological obfuscation and a convenient ruse to overlook its continued hold on cultural self-understanding and political and economic life in Pahlavi Iran. His interjection is therefore not only a matter of description and analysis, but an endeavor to illustrate vividly that another world was possible and achievable. He thus sought to expand the imaginations of his audience and denaturalize both the inevitability and unquestioned hegemony of Cold War bipolarity. The Third World was not a mere abstraction. For millions it was becoming both a real and an imagined community. Elsewhere, in *Bāzgasht* (*Return*), he declares in the course of his analysis of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution that "the

new nationalism is not an abstract self-existent reality, it is a rational reaction, it is a protest (*eʿterāz*)" (Shariati 1384/2005, 161).

In *Vanguard*, Shariati reflected upon several themes scholars preoccupied with the prospects and possibilities of decolonial knowledge and decolonizing knowledge production continue to grapple with today. His most elaborate engagement in this instance is with the political thought of Fanon. As I have argued elsewhere, Shariati's engagement with Fanon was extensive, even if, as it turned out, he was not the much-vaunted translator of the latter's *The Wretched of the Earth* into Persian (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2020). *Vanguard* itself can and should be read as an exercise in translation not only of Fanon, but of a pantheon and emerging canon of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial experiments in state-building with an explicitly performative dimension.

Revolution as "Social Miracle"

The lion's share of Shariati's attention in *Vanguard* is not spent dwelling, as one might expect, on the *locus classicus* of anti-colonial thought, *The Wretched of the Earth*, but rather on Fanon's observations pertaining to the changing nature and structure of kinship and gender relations in the Algerian family. Shariati takes up Fanon's 1959 essay published in *Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution* (*L'An V de la révolution Algérienne*) to show how the struggle for national liberation accelerates the process whereby traditions, customs, and entrenched social hierarchies are overturned as they are fundamentally transformed. In his exposition and analysis of Fanon's essay, Shariati calls this revolutionary process a "social miracle" which is neither intelligible nor foreseeable beforehand. In "The Algerian Family," Fanon poignantly argues that "[t]he old stultifying attachment to the father melts in the sun of the Revolution," adding that "the colonized society perceived that in order to succeed in the gigantic undertaking into which it had flung itself, in order to defeat colonialism and in order to build the Algerian nation, it would have to make a vast effort of self-preparation, strain all its joints, renew its blood and its soul" (Fanon 1965, 101).

The proverbial father, who once prevailed unquestioned, had lost authority. He finds himself not merely subordinated to, but irrevocably diminished by the revolution. The revolutionary agency of women stood at the forefront of Fanon's analysis of the radical unmooring of gender and power relations within the Algerian family. Thus, Fanon pronounced, "all these restrictions were to be knocked over and challenged by the national liberation struggle . . . The freedom of the Algerian people from then on became identified with woman's liberation, with her entry into history" (Fanon 1965, 107). In the process of translating and rearticulating Fanon for his Iranian audience, Shariati de-

scribed how this process unfolds "when everyone strives to reach a shared goal and has faith in that goal." Shariati speaks of the role of "faith" (*īmān*) and the way faith is structured by the "goal" of liberation and its role in the formation of a general will. Shariati's insights here profoundly resonate with those of Jane Anna Gordon in chapter four of *Creolizing Political Theory*, where she reads Jean-Jacques Rousseau through Fanon and vice versa (Gordon 2014).

Shariati similarly places gender and women's revolutionary capacities and agency front and center: "the same girls become warriors, who lose everything for the sake of the homeland, and her family not only do not oppose her, but they exude pride for what they have done and the sufferings they have endured" (Shariati forthcoming). In conversation with Fanon, Shariati saw women's revolutionary subjectivity as essential to collective will formation and the prospects for self-determination in anti-colonial mobilization and struggle. Anti-colonial struggle hastened leaps, bounds, and transfigurations which might not otherwise have taken place for generations. Even though it is beyond the scope of this essay, extant scholarship on Shariati's depiction of revolutionary women, most notably the figures of Fatemeh al-Zahra and Zainab, the daughter and granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, respectively (Shariati 1356/1377), could be enriched through further engagement with Shariati's Fanonian reflections on the obsolescence of the father in the process of anti-colonial resistance and upheaval. What is important to make explicit for our purposes, however, is how *Vanguard* moved between the liberatory and enabling conditions of revolutionary mobilization, and the ongoing challenges which inexorably arise in the aftermath of formal decolonization. His haphazard insights reflected the examples upon which he draws, including movements fighting settler-colonial and direct colonial rule, as well as the often more evasive mechanisms of informal empire with which the newly independent former colonies and their national-popular elites had to contend. Shariati invokes their example just as he strives to make the case for their relevance to Iran's neocolonial condition and developmental trajectory.

Third World Solidarity and Breaking the Chains of Dependency

As should already be clear, in *Vanguard* Shariati energetically makes the case for the importance of the Third World, and specifically the African continent, as a constitutive part of an encompassing anti-colonial imaginative geography. "The problems which Sartre and his society face are not the same as the problems that we face, while our pain and the pain of the Easterners (*sharghī'hā*) are the same," Shariati proclaims (Shariati forthcoming). Again, loosely drawing on Fanon, Shariati advocates for the formation of a new kind of "people" and

socio-economic order comprised of Third World nations and brought together by their common condition of "suffering" and confrontation with imperialism and neo-colonialism. He forthrightly states that "the commonality of nations, is not religion, not language . . . but is a shared condition and suffering . . . because it is a shared condition and ailment and the countries of the Third World face a single danger (the assault of capital and industry), they must join together" (Shariati forthcoming). He posits that "industrializing is not the same as becoming capitalist, and it is a dangerous lie that for industrialization we must undoubtedly be capitalist. Becoming capitalist is dangerous" (Shariati forthcoming). The diagnosis and political vision mobilized here by Shariati align closely with what Anuja Bose has called Fanon's "intercontinental populism" (Bose 2019). For Shariati, in a comparable fashion to Fanon, "the return to self," namely, the immersion and embrace of a pan-religious, cultural, or ethnic identity, was part of a multi-pronged "political struggle to develop an intercontinental consciousness of colonial oppression" (Bose 2019, 677). Even when political decolonization had been achieved at the price of inordinate sacrifice and an irreparably transformed society, without a positively articulated intercontinental solidarity and concomitant institutional form, states would find their development subordinated in the global division of labor and subject to control and domination in a manner which negated their hard-won self-determination in everything but name. In many cases, as Samir Amin and others subsequently averred, such an eventuality is basically what transpired in much of Global South (Amin 1982, 432; Getachew 2019; Kohli 2020).

The details of Shariati's own vision, which he often presented as that of Fanon himself, as one might expect from a short speech aimed at a public audience, were delivered with rhetorical flair, oftentimes sketchy, and short on details. Indeed, it is likely that his prescription, at times approximating a combination of import substitution industrialization (ISI) and the development of a Third World trading bloc, if improperly handled, could hinder, and, in the final analysis, undermine the kind of solidarity he sought to forge. A policy of ISI was pursued by the Pahlavi state in the mid-1960s to early 1970s and, on its own limited terms, met with some degree of success. The latter represented a common strategy adopted by developing countries of varying ideological hues throughout the 1950s and 1960s seeking to address declining terms of trade while weaning their economies off a stilted overdependence on the export of a single cash crop, often itself the legacy of colonial rule, or the export of a price volatile commodity such as oil (Prashad 2007, 68). The shortcomings of this strategy, however, quickly became apparent (ibid., 73). According to its critics, ISI policies, despite delivering economic growth, gave rise to an increase in the

production of consumer durables for a small class of affluent elites and middle classes at home and export market abroad, while exacerbating the decline of the agricultural sector and further impoverishing the mass of the urban and rural population alike (Hoogland 1982, 100–1; Larrain 1989, 142). Shariati's intercontinental view of Afro-Asian solidarity, unlike contemporaneous Pahlavi-era initiatives, would in important ways mark a radical rupture with the latter, namely, a break from the U.S.-led capitalist camp, monopoly capital, and go some way to countering the "dependency" he sought to overturn and neutralize. It nevertheless remained unclear how it would guard against reconstituting widespread exploitation of recently proletarianized labor at home or address asymmetries of power and socio-economic competition and revanchist authoritarian nationalism within the Third World bloc itself.

Shariati does not express anything like Fanon's reservations vis-à-vis the nationalist elites who had led the charge against the vestiges of the old European colonial order (Fanon 2014, 175). In later years, sympathetic critics like Amin, while acknowledging the decisive role of anti-colonial liberation movements, were often less sanguine about their capacity to avoid reincorporation into subordinate relations vis-à-vis the center and the sway of powerful multinationals, barring a break with the capitalist law of value. Indeed, it would be both an instructive and generative exercise to speculate on how Shariati might have viewed Amin's theorization of "delinking" with its advocacy of "auto-centric" development. Delinking did not entail a "total renunciation of any relations with the exterior, but subjecting external relations to the logic of an internal development that is independent of them" (Amin 1985/2020, Loc 2004). For Amin, given that capitalist expansion was predicated upon "unequal exchange" with the periphery, "Development of the countries on the periphery of the world capitalist system must . . . come through an essential 'rupture' with that system, a 'delinking' or refusal to subject the national development strategy to the imperatives of 'worldwide expansion'" (Amin 1985/2020; Loc 2004). Even though Shariati does not use the term "unequal exchange," he does, albeit in somewhat more demotic terms, attempt to capture a similar dynamic at work in North-South relations. He writes:

> The industrialized and capitalist world now pursues its own path apace and possesses so rapid a momentum that however much the Third World struggles to advance, the gap separating it increases every day. Therefore, the countries of the Third World fall under their influence and their fate is in [the capitalist world's] hands. (Shariati forthcoming)

Crucially, in *Vanguard* we observe Shariati combine an anti-capitalist politics, where he regards capitalism as one of, if not the primary driving force of economic inequality and voracious exploitation raging across the Third World, with an insistence on a form of coordinated and collaborative industrialization among formerly colonized and neo-colonized nations. The basis of their unity resides in their shared condition of oppression and exploitation and their commitment to the negation of prevailing colonial social relations. In this respect, Shariati shares much in common with other anti-colonial politicians and statesmen during this period who were deeply invested in ideologies extolling the virtues of industrialization, regional trading blocs, extractive technologies, and "heavy" industries, seeing them as the best way to decisively break the chains of economic dependency; a form of dependency which, as they saw it, continued unabated after formal independence.

Ventriloquizing Fanon, Shariati contends, "we must not build another America out of Africa, the ominous experience of America suffices. We must industrialize these countries by means of a path other than becoming capitalist" (Shariati forthcoming). Industrialization, it appears, would not take place out of a competitive drive for profit and for the purposes of capital's valorization, but presumably, for the satisfaction of human needs and the production of use-values. It would be successful to the extent that it allowed the "damned" to extricate themselves from their onerous exploitative conditions and provided for their basic individual and social needs. Thus, while he does not provide a critique of the neo-colonial incarnation of the national bourgeoisie in the style of Fanon, the intercontinental socio-economic formation he outlines, however schematically, would appear to be antithetical to a panoply of national elites exploiting their respective peasantries and proletariats for the sake of their own self-enrichment, all the while ensuring the uninterrupted drain of value from South to North. It is hard to imagine Shariati disagreeing with Amin that "industry must be made to serve the poor urban masses and no longer be guided by the 'profitability' criteria which favor the privileged local market and exports to the developed centers" (Amin 1977, 17). Nevertheless, the fact that the class character of the national bourgeoisie is never explicitly addressed or theorized by Shariati should cause pause for thought.

Other queries and caveats remain. For example, in typical high modernist fashion, Shariati gives negligible thought to heavy industries' detrimental environmental impact and the devastation which they have wrought on non-human nature, including those individuals and peoples most vulnerable in the Third World itself (Foster and Holleman 2014; Furtado 2020) nor how they themselves might be embedded in capitalist social relations and their corre-

sponding abstract social forms of domination (Foster, Clark, and York 2010; Malm 2020; Scott 1998, 4). Moreover, the peasantry—as both a social class and historical actor—are absent in Shariati's vision, a feature which distinguishes him from Fanon and Amin in crucial respects (Worsley 1972, 202).

Unlike Cabral or the Tunisian agronomist, Slaheddine el-Amami, he does not consider how "traditional" agricultural farming and agronomy might be integrated with more novel developments in agro-ecology (Ajl 2019, 2021) or how revisiting the conditions of the peasantry might arrest many of the detrimental repercussions of proletarianization. These lacunae are hardly surprising given that Shariati was in crucial respects a quintessentially urban intellectual with a different educational background than the figures mentioned above. But he arguably missed an important opportunity for thinking through alternative perspectives on questions of development. The Pahlavi state's own "White Revolution," where land reform was the central component, had been inaugurated only several years prior and its consequences were just beginning to be understood. The profoundly deleterious impact of the reforms on the agricultural sector and a considerable stratum of the peasantry has not only been demonstrated in numerous studies in the years that have followed (Hoogland 1982), but it was also, throughout the course of the 1960s and early 1970s, subject to strident criticism by Marxist-Leninist intellectuals and organizations (Jazanī, Tīr 1358/1979, 13–20; OIPFG, Mordād 1352/1973; Randjbar-Daemi 2021).

At times Shariati appears to come close to arguing for a theory of comparative advantage between Third World nations, which could potentially provoke tensions in the absence of mutually beneficial terms of trade. His conjured scheme does not entertain the possibility that some nations in the Third World bloc might imperceptibly find themselves emerging as the periphery of the periphery, nor does it consider how conflicts would be adjudicated and resolved equitably and to the satisfaction of all parties, whether federally or by means of an intra-Third World arbitration body. For example, how might Shariati envision the economic relations between oil-producing states such as Iran and Venezuela and non-oil-producing states in the Third World, which faced spiraling "sovereign debt" in the aftermath of the oil crisis of 1973? In *Vanguard* it is for the most part assumed that the shared condition of exploitation at the hands of the capitalist colonial world would be enough to build enduring solidarity and thereby overcome inevitable disagreements. But as the rise of OPEC and the shortcomings of the New International Economic Order testify, the conditions of Third World nations were complex and varied and moralizing on the premise of a "shared condition" alone would prove seriously inadequate to the task (Dietrich 2017, 19).

The question of how the intercontinental populism of the "damned" and, at the domestic level, the intractable conflicts among national elites, local capitalists, the working class, and peasantry, might relate to one another, or how their potential and real antagonisms could be productively channeled is left unaddressed, or they are simply assumed to disappear of their own accord. Shariati, as was his wont, assigns an outsized role and responsibility to his own social group, namely the urban intelligentsia, for overcoming discord:

> all societies in the Third World must form one system and industrial unity (*vahdat-e san ʿatī*), a unified form of life (*shekl-e zendegī-ye vāhed*) and their intellectuals must strive to build one people (*nezhād*) (the role of intellectuals is more in these societies and the duty of the intellectual is this). (Shariati forthcoming)

While his valorization of anti-colonial nationalism is understandable and could be said to echo aspects of V. I. Lenin's and M. N. Roy's famous remarks on the status of "oppressed nations" at the Second Congress of the Communist International, when taken in conjunction with his amorphous conception of "the people," it arguably ends up obscuring the perils of postcolonial class exploitation and oppression (Lenin and Roy 1920; Shariati 1384/2005, 161). Moreover, there is no correlate to Lenin and Roy's advocacy of peasant and workers councils, including under those circumstances where pre-capitalist relations prevail, or an indication that national liberation was a necessary precondition of proletarian revolution (Lenin and Roy 1920).

Shariati was no political economist, nor does he claim to be one, but at the risk of falling foul of the "condescension of posterity," it is not unreasonable to submit that he had had adequate time to appreciate not only the strengths, but also many of the shortcomings of the developmental strategies of numerous Third World anti-colonial states. In this regard, Shariati's Egyptian (and similarly French-educated) contemporary, Anouar Abdel Malek (1924-2012), had proven more clearsighted and discerning of the project's historic gains and achievements, as well as its many contradictions (Abdel-Malek 1964; 1981). It would be unfair to claim that Shariati was oblivious of the decisive role of class struggle in the various projects of national liberation of which he was well-apprised, even as he accused Marxists in the same breath of abiding by a "new scholasticism" (Shariati 1384/2005, 158).

Shariati's conception of "the people," at both the national and international levels, lacked a proper sociological grounding or analytical differentiation. He was inclined to lump "the class of common people" (*tabaqeh-e ʿavām-e mardom*) or "mass of people" (*tūdeh-e mardom*) into a single amorphous category. This

problem recurs even in Shariati's more explicit discussions of class and class consciousness, where in the final analysis, the bestowal of class consciousness and the mobilization of the "masses" can only be brought about through recourse to intellectuals adopting "religion as a language and as a culture so that they might speak with the masses (*tūdeh*)" (Shariati 1394/2015, 396). Moreover, Shariati could often be highly condescending when speaking about the masses and their capacity for self-rule. Shariati's analysis was frequently devoid of a material-economic basis and was, at times, articulated in terms of a mental or psychological state: "the class of common people from an intellectual (*fekrī*), not an economic perspective (beggar or billionaire): it encompasses the major part of society. This class (*tabaqeh*) doesn't think but acts on the basis of money or its body . . . they are followers and follow the paths laid down by others (intellectuals)" (Shariati 1390/2011, 113). But it is important to acknowledge that Shariati's writings were also often contradictory on this score and that elsewhere he was clear that "the struggle against hunger in a hungry society and ignorance in a decadent (*monhat*) society is our definite and immediate obligation" (Shariati 1394/2015, 396).

Conclusion

What one can and should take away from *Vanguard* is the vision that he shared with myriad other anti-colonialists across the Third World, namely, "the creation of a geographical region for distribution, production and consumption in Third World countries" in order to guarantee a more humane future; a future which by definition must be anti-capitalist, for "capitalism brought about exploitation, which was there from the start . . . but is now boundlessly violent and savage" (Shariati forthcoming). Shariati thus espouses his clear and unambiguous moral condemnation of the ills of capitalist society and imperialism, but his answers as to how the Third World might overcome these ills, even by contemporary standards, are found wanting. If he had lived to see the Iranian Revolution of 1979, he would have perhaps announced that not one revolution, but myriad revolutions would be necessary for liberation, a perspective for which there is ample evidence and resources within his own life and thought (Davari 2014; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2019, chapter 2; Shariati 1388/2009). If only intimated in *Vanguard*, Shariati appears convinced that his fellow intellectuals as well as his popular audience should not content themselves with "general welfare" since such ameliorative measures would do little to change capitalism's inherently destructive, exploitative, and crisis-ridden character. Moreover, so long as the Pahlavi dictatorship prevailed with the approbation of the U.S.'s informal empire (Nirumand 1969; Rahnema 2021), the prospect of pop-

ular control over "development," and economic life more generally, would be well-nigh inconceivable.

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ENDNOTES

1. Shariati paraphrases the following famous quote attributed to Kenyatta, "When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible."

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