Evaluation of Iranian Contemporary Nationalist Historiography Characteristics

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Abstract

Novel Iranian historiography is strongly influenced by the nationalist dialogue. It has had a great impact on redefining the new Iranian identity in the contemporary era. The Pahlavi regime (emerged in 1925) produced and used that way of thinking in a modern way and differently from previous traditional governments. This study will take a look at the emerging of the modern Iranian identity from a historical-analytical perspective and attempt to determine why the common nationalist thinking in most recent Iranian historic literature is dominant. It mentions the most significant characteristics of that party's historiography. New Iranian historic literature, influenced by the nationalist dialogue, has characteristics such as modernization, racism, Islamophobia, westernization, and egotism.

Keywords: nationalist movement, nationalist historiography, modernization, national identity.
1. Introduction

According to most current researchers, no doctrine has played a role as significant as that of nationalism in forming the modern world. In the modern era, the existence of government and nation has become an essential framework for all social and cultural and economic activities. Nationalism consists of beliefs and indicators which create a feeling of belonging to a unified political community that makes the majority of people loyal to one government and nation. One of the most significant actions of the nationalist party is to trigger a group identity called national identity which invites people to take part in that special identity that is beyond other identities such as class, sexual, family, tribal, and local identities. That type of identity is the basis of correlation in the modern era. One of the other actions by nationalism is legalizing modern governments. That can be discussed in people’s participation in political affairs and creation of a national regime, because in modern governments, unlike in traditional ones, the governance is clearly based on the society’s people.

That wave resulted in the forming of a new concept of group identity called national identity. The most significant tool of nationalism in that type of identity creation is historiography. Historians in the recent era have played a significant role in creating and changing the national identity by narrating the national history. They have helped form the national identity by uncovering and reconstructing nations’ history.

Since mid-19th century, the modern European historiography affected the traditional Iranian historiography in different ways. Factors such as Iranians’ defeats in wars with Russia and Iranian intellectuals’ attempts to uncover the causes of political, military and social lag in the Iranian society of that era, translation of new European history books, discoveries in archaeology, foundation of novel schools similar to European ones such as “Darolfonoon” are of the reasons why Iranians took a new method of historiography.

2. Emerging procedure of Iranian nationalism

As Iranians became familiar with the novel European thinking, the European nationalist doctrine became popular among the first group of Iranian intellectuals in the 19th century based on the existing cultural and historic identity indicators. Nationalism became a significant doctrine among other cultural and political parties. While European nationalism emerged inside Europe as an internal phenomenon, it was imported to Iran as a result of Iranians getting familiar with the western way of thinking. The most significant promoters of nationalism in Iran were a small group of intellectuals who were familiar with the western thinking. Diplomats such as Mirza Hasan Khan Shirazi, and students like Mirza Saleh Shirazi, along with intellectuals such as Mirza Fathali Akhondzadeh, Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, Mirza Malkam Khan among others were the first ones who promoted it. Of course, Iran’s special social and political conditions in that era were influential in promoting that doctrine. At the time of Qajar, some scattered identities such as local, regional, tribal, religious, group,
lingual and racial identities threatened the national identity [2]. On the other hand, during the Qajar era, great political and military events such as Iran’s defeats from the Russian armies and their harmful political and economic consequences and seeking the causes of Russians’ rapid victories and Iran’s defeats gave A completely new perspective of the new world to some Iranian statesmen and intellectuals. This familiarity with the realities of the modern world led Iranians to national awakening. They witnessed issues such as dictatorship, domination of columniation, exploitation, and historical and social backwardness in the Iranian society which had to be fixed. In their view, nationalism was an important weapon to overcome these problems. Thus, nationalism became the most important element forming the discourse of modernity in Iran and Iran's first modern intellectuals were also the first nationalists [24]. According to those early nationalists, Iran could be transformed into a modern country only if the National sovereignty and the rule of law provided the groundwork for social and economic development in the country so that it could resist the policies of colonial countries of that era. During the modern social and political movements in Iran since the revolution such as the tobacco movement and particularly the constitutional revolution, the idea of nationalism was significantly expanded in the political scene. The constitutional discourse sought to redefine the nation and finally build a nation-government. In the new definition, the nation was not of particular faiths or religions, but they were all the citizens who wanted a unified and lawful sovereignty [22]. In this new version of nationalism, Shi’ism was the focus of nationalism and patriotism and religion were intertwined together along with elements of the history of pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran [2].

In the next period, we encounter another variant of nationalism, shortly after the establishment of the constitutional government, chaos swept across the country and the risk of division cast a shadow on it. Any attempt to reform and modernize vanished. The weakness of the central government, the First World War and the occupation of the country by foreigners put the country into poor conditions. In such circumstances, the reformist and nationalist parties were in favor of the creation of a strong central government [24]. A new discourse of nationalism was formed by the concept of "Romantic Nationalism" and provided the groundwork for ancient-oriented and romantic radicalism; that doctrine attempted to reconstruct the Iranian identity based on an unreal and emotional attitude. The intellectuals having that attitude, affected by the Orientalist discourse, racial theories and new archaeological achievements in the Iranian ancient history, were strongly attracted to archaeological ideas and began to rebuild new concepts of national identity from that perspective [9]. Books by the pioneers of this movement such as Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar and Mirza Aqha Khan Kermani were full of nostalgia towards the ancient homeland and celebration of the Persian mythology, Zoroastrianism, superiority of nationality over religion, hatred towards Arabs and Turks as foreign elements in the Iranian identity and tracing the decline of the ancient civilization.

This trend created centers such as "Kaveh" in Berlin and "future" in Tehran and was developed by the presence of Romantic poets such as Mirzadeh Eshghi. The Pahlavi
government as a modern state used military forces, centralized and widespread bureaucracy, and the ideas of archeological nationalism as an ideology and its official policy in order to legitimize its efforts to modernize the country. Nationalism was formally made the dominant discourse at the same time in countries such as Iran by Reza Shah Pahlavi and his allies, in Turkey by the Young Turkish, in Egypt by the Wafd party, in India by the Congress Party and in Germany by the Nationalist Socialist Party [11].

3. Nationalism and historiography

In the context of building history, the historical past of a nation and its national identity are closely connected, because having an identity with historical continuity would be one of the characteristics of the new nation. So in order to understand nations, their past and historical events have to be evaluated; and the most significant tool to make this new identity is historiography. Historians, as part of their community, are influenced by the values, ideologies and discourses of the dominant society in which they live [13].

As archeological nationalism was the dominant discourse among intellectuals and the educated class since the Qajar era, the Iranian modern historiography was heavily influenced by that discourse. Thus, the archeological view of the great historians of that era is thought to be a reflection of Iran’s social and political conditions at that time [32]. On the other hand, historiography was dedicated to nationalism and legitimization of the resulting governments. Historians who narrated the national history contributed a lot to change the mindset of traditional political communities into that of a nation. Therefore, government leaders, in order to strengthen their governance and legitimize their claims, would always support their own historiography and promote their narrations of the history formally. Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani reminds of history’s identity-creating function for nations and considers history to be every nation’s savior, document of the greatness, honor and the cause of their feelings [22]. Kasrawī particularly emphasizes on history’s social-political and identity functions and writes, “It would not be an exaggeration to say the history of a people is like the root of a tree. History makes a people more stable and reliable.” [19].

This attitude on history is clear in the writings of academic historians such as Abbas Iqbal. He wrote on the occasion of the publication of Pirmia’s Ancient Iran’s history, “Hopefully national pride will ignite in our contemporary fellow Iranians so that it will burn their slothfulness and frailty away and make them follow their great ancestors” [18].

4. Iranian nationalist historiography features

4.1. Influence of European modernization

Modernization of the traditional laggard Iranian society was the aspiration of Iranian intellectuals. Modernization became the dominant paradigm of development and social change in Iran in the Pahlavi era, especially in the 60’s and 70’s. This social change was based on the Western model of development and its historical process. As a result, any country that
would go in the direction of further development would look more like European countries. Most history books written especially at the Pahlavi era contained the concept that implied making progress for the society based on the western model is the goal for the whole society. That goal was recognized by Reza Shah and put in action by Mohammadreza Shah. Kasrawi, as a great historian of that era, was heavily influenced by that idea. He writes about the significance of history, "History gives us beneficial knowledge that implies people began on the way of progress in poverty, ignorance and misery ... We know from the knowledge history gives us that the future of this world will be far more glorious than its past." [19]

4.2. Positivism (scientism)

The 19th century in Europe was the era of proof as much as well as experiment. In the field of human sciences, scientists hoped to acquire the strength required to overcome barbarism, superstition and political and economic issues and problems using the scientific mind the same way it had happened with natural science. The positivism idea was based on the claim that historians and sociologists could find a relationship between the past, present and future using experimental information. Modern historiography with the positivist perspective disapproves the impact of any metaphysic force in the fate of humanity and attempts to find natural causes for all events and legalize everything and use a unified principle in all societies that can predict future events [30].

Leopold van Ranke (1785-1886) believed than in writing history, what really happened must be recognized and no signs of personal beliefs must be present in historians’ books. That tradition went on to be taken as a scientific method by some European and American historians. Also in Iran, the academia would have no doubt about the fact that history must be treated scientifically. Abbas Iqbal would always emphasize on the fact that history is a major in science and has extendable principles and regulations and the truth can be uncovered impartially in historic studies. The positivist view on history is a significant feature of the Iranian nationalist historiography.

4.3. Self-centeredness

Self-centeredness as a fundamental feature in the Iranian nationalist historiography was affected by two issues. Firstly, the traditional Iranian historiography was based on political history, wars and events. Secondly, in the novel European historiography of the 18th and 19th century, characters represented heroes and causes of social and historic changes. David Hume, English philosopher and historian would day the merging of great empires was located in the center of the history. Books by Volter were about political events and kings’ history although he would consider attention to non-political history to be necessary. The influence of those two sources on the Iranian nationalist historiography had made its historians character- and politics-oriented. Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar, wrote about kings and their deeds in the letter of kings; other historians such as Pirnia and iqbah Nahad considered
politics as the basis of their historiography. On the other hand, Iranian nationalist intellectuals looked for a hero that would lead the Iranian society out of backwardness and decadence to civilization. In Pirnia's ancient Iranian history, the greatness of ancient Iran is based on the revival of ancient characters. The result of that character-oriented and archeological historiography was the revival of the concept of a king being the cause of changes. Political narration became dominant in the Iranian nationalist historiography, and the king became the basis of archeological nationalism, and national unification and independence was defined based on the king.

4.4. Islamophobia

Islamophobia had several causes in the Iranian nationalist historiography. The fear of religion in the European ideas and the thought of materialism in the European historiography found its way to the Iranian historiography. The secularist and humanist attitude would attack religion systematically and prevent historians from accepting any type of religious cause beyond human comprehension due to the mere recognition of scientific views. The other cause was the historic competition between Islam and Christianity. The political and cultural influence of Islam that went on to the core of Europe became an emotional annoyance for Europeans. During the era of enlightenment, that attitude remained in the quasi-scientific thinking about the east. Disrespect to Islam's prophet, Quran and considering Islam as the cause of backwardness were the focuses of research about the east. Those issues became dominant in the Iranian nationalist historiography discourse. Hatred towards Islam and accusing Arabs of destroying the ancient Iranian culture and civilization are present in most nationalist historic books. Individuals such as Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar and Ibrahim Poor Davood went out of Islam and accepted the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism due to those ideas.

4.5. Racism

The 18th and 19th centuries were the era of racist ideas. Those ideas which were expressed in so-called scientific patterns had disastrous consequences. Colonizers justified their actions with those theories. In the 20th century, the motto of race superiority was the basis of Nazism and the World War II. Those racist theories were expressed by scientists such as Stewart Chamberlain, Madison grant and Fredric Sheigel about the superiority of the Aryan race and exclusiveness of civilization to it. They considered people's cross-breed with what they called inferior races as the cause of civilizations' decadence [14]. According to them, the Sami race possessed all the characteristics an inferior race. The French Count de Gatineau was one of the pioneers of research about the east who had strong anti-Sami views and attributed all bad traits to the Sami race and considered the Aryan race pure and considered Iranians to be if the Aryan race and considered the cause of the decadence of their civilization to be their cross-breed with Arabs [26]. Thus, the Aryan race became a significant identity element for Iranians in the archeological nationalist discourse. Iranians embraced that great
discovery and considered it to indicate their similarity to Europeans and difference with Arabs and Turks [33].

The Iranian nationalist historiography was full of pride of being Aryan and humiliating and disrespecting Arabs as the Sami race. Sir Percy Sikes was always proud of being an Aryan. About the significant characteristics of Cyrus the Great, the ancient king of Iran, he writes, "We, too, can be proud that the first great Aryan individual whom we know well enough has such supreme and excellent characteristics."

4.6. Archaism

Archaism was an issue in Iranian reconstruction in order to revive the ancient civilization and create cultural and social groundwork based on those ancient traditions [3].

The legacy of ancient Iran is a layer in Iranian culture. The attitude towards the ancient legacy was intensified at some points in the Iranian history. Such attitude is present in the last decades of the Safaviah government. A Zoroastrian preacher by the name of Azar Keivan from Fars who resided in India used issues such as the ancient Iranian legacy and the Indian Sohrevardi and Parsian wisdom and founded Ashraghi Zoroastrianism which provided the groundwork for a novel culture in Iran. Tens of books and articles were written by followers of that ideology among which we can refer to Sharestan Chaman, school of religions, Dasatir, Vision Park and Jam-e Khosravan. That ideology titled Azar Keivanian was later during the Qajar era the beginning point for ancient-oriented intellectuals such as Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar in writing "Khosravan" [5].

Another achievement by AzarKeivanian was using only Persian words and creating new ones. Dictionaries such as Borhan Ghate’, Farhang Jahangiri and Farhang Rashidi are affected by that [6].

That type of literal influence is visible in books by poets such as Reza Gholi Khan Hedayat, Yaghmaie Jandaghi, Forsat Shirazi and Ahmad Divan Beigi. Another source for ancient-orientation among Iranian intellectuals is the influence by the west. The European renaissance and return to cultural revival of ancient Greek literature in Rome came to the attention of intellectuals such as Mirza Agha Khan Kermani and his followers as a nationalist basis. It was secondly influenced by research about the special political and social conditions of Iran at that time and became a dominant discourse in Iranian literature and historiography.

That discourse was promoted by many radical intellectuals in fields such as racism and hatred towards Islam. In historiography based on that view, the groundwork for reviving Iran and the Iranian nationality was provided and Iranian historiography replaced Islamic historiography. The forgotten ancient past emerged and looked much more glorious [34].
4.7. Influence by research about the east

Research about the east is an influential phenomenon in the recent centuries in eastern countries. It consists of studies and research carried out by Europeans about eastern countries' historic, social, cultural and religious issues and anthropology and linguistics. Researchers who studied the east were writers, sociologists, historians, philosophers and language experts who considered there to be differences between the east and the west based on a special understanding.

Regarding the emerging of the first books by Iran researchers, columniation can be traced easily. The book "Iranian history" by Sir John Malcolm which is one of the first sources for research about Iran was written based on the columniation requirements according to the author himself. Thus, the Iranian historiography was influenced by the discourse of research about the east in terms of both attitude and methods. Translations of European research about Iran was embraced and used as a pattern by Iranian historians. Books by writers such as Henry Rawlinson, Sir Hartford Jones, Grant Watson, Sir Percy Sikes and even recent European writers such as Alvil Satin and research by the University of Cambridge regarding a general history of Iran are examples of research about Iran. Research about the east had a hateful attitude towards Islam and its beliefs as it was mentioned before. They introduced Islam's prophet as the enemy of liberty and Islam as a promoter of dictatorship. Iranian intellectuals such as Taghizadeh and Poor Davood were heavily influenced by the discourse of research about the east and the Iranian ancient historiography proved Iranians were Aryan and found an absolute answer to the Iranian society's backwardness which is the entrance of Islam and Arabs [35].

4.8. Westernization

Westernization is another feature of the Iranian nationalist historiography. In general, the novel Iranian historiography would view ancient Iran from the perspective of western values. Iranian historians hoped to use the ancient Iranian history in order to create a developed country based on western values. They admired the modern Europe and disagreed with Islam and revived the Iranian identity. In that revival, historians found many links between Iranians and Europeans. For instance, Mirza Agha Khan Kermani found Persian words with the same origin of French words and considered the movements of Mani and Mazdak similar to political and social movements of that time in Europe [23].

Those historians and intellectuals considered westernization and imitation of European traditions to be a return to them. Those ideas became nationalist historiography's tool in justifying westernized reform by the Pahlavi government.
4.9. Attention to Persian

The significance of Persian is very important in creating the national identity. That is discussed in the nationalist discourse besides other issues such as the race of the ancient. Discovering the essence of the Iranian identity in Persian led intellectuals to clean Persian of the impurities that had found their way into it. Thus, writing in pure Persian became a principle in nationalist historiography. Pioneer historians such as Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, Jalal al-din Mirza Qajar and ideologies such as Azar Keivanian were active in that field. During the time of Pahlavi, intellectual centers such as "The Future" and "Kaveh" would emphasize on promoting Persian as a necessity for maintaining the Iranian national identity. During that time with the foundation of the Persian language house in 1935, a coherent plan began in order to replace foreign words with Persian ones, particularly Arabic and Turkish words, but it encountered reaction by poets and writers due to extravagance [17]. Kasravi required local accents and non-Persian languages gone because of Iranians' dispersal. He wrote his books including the constitutional history in pure Persian [20].

5. Conclusion

The idea of nationalism became the most significant factor in identifying nations in the modern era, and nationalist historiography was the most important tool for it. The emerging of new historiography in Iran in the European form came together with nationalism, which greatly influenced the new Iranian political and social historiography. The most important elements in the Iranian nationalist historiography are modernization, scientism, heroism, racism, ancient-orientation, Islamophobia, attention to Persian and influence of research about the East. This study has a criticizing view on elements affecting the new Iranian identity formation, and considers it necessary to reconsider some of those elements which are still effective.
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