



# Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* and the Spirit of Bandung: A Decolonial Reimagination of Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Iran\*

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Sixty years after the original publication of *Gharbzadegi* (1962) by dissident Iranian writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the controversial book remains an important marker in the formation of the mid- and late-twentieth century perceptions of Iranian intellectuals about the relationship between their country's past, present, and future. Building on the recent scholarship which considers *Gharbzadegi* as an alternative vision of the future rather than a nostalgic call for a return to the past, this article situates the book's piercing critique of the Pahlavi state's modernization and development agenda in a decolonial register. This is done through a reading of *Gharbzadegi* against the background, on the one hand, of the 1955 Bandung Conference at which representatives from various Asian and African nations gathered to discuss the futures of their countries after colonialism, and on the other hand, of the local experiences of semi-coloniality and dependent development. This reading helps to foreground an alternative conception of modernity in *Gharbzadegi*, and a decolonial vision in the book of development through delinking from Eurocentric designs. Reading it against the background of the Bandung Conference further helps to situate *Gharbzadegi*'s engagements with the Islamic tradition in the wider context of a postcolonial turn to religion. The article thus argues that Al-e Ahmad's turn to Islam reflects a postcolonial sentiment that in developing alternatives to Europe's colonial modernity the peoples of the Third World ought to reengage with the ways of life and modes of knowledge and norm production which were dismissed and suppressed by the dominating colonial structures and knowledge systems.

**Keywords** Bandung Conference, decolonization, development, dewesternization, *Gharbzadegi*, Iran, Islam, Jalal Al-e Ahmad

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## I. Introduction

The publication in 1962 of a controversial book titled *Gharbzadegi* by prominent Iranian writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) marks a critical moment in the formation of the mid- and late-twentieth century perceptions of Iranian intellectuals about the relationship between their country's past, present, and future. *Gharbzadegi's* piercing criticism of the prevailing order under the Pahlavi monarchy struck a chord with many dissident Iranians, and despite a government ban on its distribution clandestine copies of the book travelled far and wide. Six decades later, *Gharbzadegi* continues to generate debate and disagreement. For some readers, the book is a nostalgic call for a return to an authentic past, a retreat to tradition in the face of modernity. For others, it exhibits a reimagination of modernity and an alternative vision of the future. Most agree that Al-e Ahmad's chastising rhetoric is motivated by a discontent with what he saw as the Westernizing bent of the Pahlavi state's modernization program.

The term *gharbzadegi*, which was originally coined by the Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid, has been variously translated to English as occidentosis, Westoxication, Westoxification, Weststruckness, plague from the West, Westitis, Westernmania, and Euromania. Al-e Ahmad conceives of *gharbzadegi* as a type of intellectual and cultural paralysis caused by colonial and neocolonial relations of dependency between "the West" and "the East." By the former he means the dominant industrial economies which utilize the machine to transform raw materials into sophisticated value added products that can then be marketed on a global scale. By the latter he means formerly colonized, and currently underdeveloped, countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America that supply raw materials to and purchase manufactured products from the wealthy and developed countries of the West (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 15). These asymmetrical

relations render the East dependent not only on Western technologies and manufactured goods, but also on Western cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic standards (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 19). As a result, Eastern countries such as Iran increasingly take on the appearances of the West while losing their own unique “cultural-historical character” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 20). This condition, Al-e Ahmad further observes, has created in mid-twentieth century Iran a widening gap between the ruling elites who are increasingly Westernized in their consumption patterns, and the masses who are largely disenfranchised from the state-driven modernization and who opt to take refuge in tradition (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 73, 89).

For Al-e Ahmad, as a colonially induced manner of cultural self-alienation, the affliction of *gharbzadegi* disrupts the continuum in Iranian society between past, present, and future. He deplores that in the school and university curriculum there is “no indication of engagement with tradition, no trace of the culture of the past ... no relationship between yesterday and tomorrow” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 148). This erasure of the past in the modern education system, he believes, reinforces self-alienation and perpetuates the paralysis of *gharbzadegi*. The inevitable product of such an education system is a *gharbzadeh* (Westoxicated or Weststruck) person with no meaningful relationship with the local culture and tradition; “a being with no connection to the past and no conception of the future” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 117). The *gharbzadeh* person is incapable of thinking outside of Eurocentric frames of reference, undertaking innovative scientific research, or producing original art. “Among Iranian painters and architects,” Al-e Ahmad writes, “it is rare to find those who do not imitate Western styles and whose works are characterized by artistic authenticity and innovation.” He adds: “We have even gotten to the point of importing judges and critics from the West to evaluate the work of our painters” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 152). And a few pages later:

We jabber about ‘symphony’ and ‘rhapsody’ but dismiss our own music as jarring noise. We are entirely oblivious to Iranian traditions of miniature and portraiture painting but look to the ‘biennale’ to tell us whether ‘fauvism’ and ‘cubism’ are in or out of trend. We have abandoned Iranian architecture with its symmetrical designs, its small ponds and fountains (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 173).

During the 1960s and 1970s, *Gharbzadegi* was read and discussed by dissident Iranians of all ideological stripes and it helped to shape a burgeoning oppositional consciousness against the Pahlavi state. Following the 1979 revolution, the newly established Islamic Republic drew on Al-e Ahmad’s critical discourse to give ideological substance to the post-revolutionary state-building project and to justify a range of suppressive measures. One such instance was the 1980s Cultural Revolution in the course of which thousands of leftist and liberal university students and professors were expelled as the state sought to purge higher education of Western influence (Mojab, 1991; Golkar, 2012). The rhetoric of countering *gharbzadegi* was also — and remains today — a central feature of the post-revolutionary state’s gender policies. According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, the shift to Islamist politics included a rejection of “the *gharbzadeh* woman.” The latter was defined as “a propagator of the corrupt culture of the West” whose “unveiled” public presence undermined “the moral fabric of society.” The state’s imposition of gender segregation and mandatory veiling for women was consequently presented as a necessary measure for restoring and preserving the traditional Islamic notion of “modesty” (Najmabadi, 1991: 65).

The Islamic Republic’s appropriation, what Hamid Dabashi calls “abuse” (Dabashi, 2021: 275), of the concept of *gharbzadegi* has enabled a reading of Al-e Ahmad’s critique as an anti-Western discourse of return to an authentic Islamic past and a precursor to the reactionary Islamism of Iran’s

post-revolutionary rulers. Milad Odabaei thus argues that by advocating “a revolutionary ‘return to self’ in reference to Shi’i Islam” and presenting “Western cultural traditions as poison and Islam as the remedy,” Al-e Ahmad paved the way for the Islamization of Iranian politics in the period leading to the revolutionary uprising (Odabaei, 2020: 564). Likewise, Shabnam Holliday opines the essentialist rejection of the West by Iran’s current leader Ali Khamenei, and Khamenei’s propensity for the politics of cultural authenticity, “is reminiscent of Jalal Al-e Ahmad and his *Gharbzadegi*” (Holliday, 2007: 35).

Islamist appropriation has not, however, precluded the possibility of reading Al-e Ahmad’s seminal book in entirely different ways. One such reading came early on from Al-e Ahmad’s close friend and collaborator, Reza Baraheni. According to Baraheni, although Al-e Ahmad is attentive to local histories and local traditions, his cultural discourse of resistance in *Gharbzadegi* is developed in dialogue with other global revolutionary discourses such as those of Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon (Baraheni, 1984: 88). Al-e Ahmad, Baraheni argues, envisions a new world in which humanity is no longer divided into the “Western lord” and the “Eastern vassal” (Baraheni, 1984: 92), and where just and equal relations between nations facilitate the birth of a “new humanity” and the germination a “new global culture” (Baraheni, 1984: 95). Reading Al-e Ahmad in ways that are perceptibly similar to Baraheni’s, in recent years a number of scholars have questioned the existence of a direct correlation between *Gharbzadegi* and post-revolutionary Islamism. These readings have challenged the designation of *Gharbzadegi* as an antimodern manifesto of a return to an authentic Islamic past, foregrounding instead Al-e Ahmad’s anticolonial reimagining of modernity and development.

Building on the recent scholarship, the present article situates *Gharbzadegi*’s critique of the Pahlavi state’s dependent development and

Westernizing modernization in a decolonial register. This is done through a reading of *Gharbzadegi* against the background, on the one hand, of the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia—commonly known as the Bandung Conference—at which representatives from various Asian and African nations gathered to discuss the futures of their countries after colonialism, and on the other hand, of the local experiences of semi-coloniality and dependent development. Situated in this historical context and evaluated in relation to the decolonial spirit of the Bandung Conference, *Gharbzadegi* may be read as an account of Iran’s encounter with European colonial modernity, a traumatic memory which disrupted the connection between past and present. By narrating local history against the backdrop of global colonial designs, Al-e Ahmad invites his readers to see *gharbzadegi* as a colonial affliction which may only be cured by delinking from Eurocentric designs through a reimagination of modernity and development, renewed engagement with local traditions, and enhanced Third World solidarity. *Gharbzadegi*’s vision of the future brings together Iran’s past, present, and future in what Lorna Burns and Birgit M. Kaiser term “a new continuum,” one that proceeds not by “building on a continuous relation” between past, present, and future, but instead “by ruptures” (Burns and Kaiser, 2012: 14). In this new continuum, Al-e Ahmad’s decolonial reimagination of tomorrow draws on the precolonial yesterday without being determined by it.

## II. Echoes of Bandung in Pahlavi Era Iran

Between April 18 and 24, 1955, amidst a sweeping wave of decolonization, representatives from twenty-nine Asian and African nations met in the Indonesian city of Bandung to discuss the futures of their countries

after colonialism. The prevailing opinion among them was that while formal colonialism was coming to an end, relations of coloniality continued to cast a shadow over the world. The final communiqué of the Bandung Conference put forward proposals aimed at breaking the colonially imposed chains of economic and intellectual dependency. Alluding to the historical dynamics under which Asian and African countries became suppliers of raw materials to European colonizers, the document recommended economic diversification through the development of local manufacturing capacity, and it urged the more technologically advanced Asian and African countries to share their know-how with other countries in the region (“Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955,” 2009: 95-98). Maintaining that centuries of European colonialism had “interrupted” cultural contacts among the peoples of Asia and Africa, the communiqué also reiterated the imperative of fostering cultural cooperation to overcome the colonially facilitated forms of “cultural suppression” (“Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955,” 2009: 97).

Taking place against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, the Bandung Conference was a declaration of Asian and African independence not only from classical European colonialism but also from what India’s Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru described as the indignity of becoming “camp followers of Russia or America” (Nehru, 1984: 127). Recalling this will to independence, Vijay Prashad describes Bandung as having been integral to the birth of the non-aligned movement (Prashad, 2007: 15). The “Bandung Spirit,” he writes, was “a refusal of both economic subordination and cultural suppression,” and it asserted that “the colonized world had now emerged to claim its space in world affairs, not just as an adjunct of the First or Second worlds, but as a player in its own right” (Prashad, 2007: 45-46). For other commentators too, the spirit of Bandung lies precisely in this simultaneous rejection of Eurocentric designs—what Robert K. A.

Gardiner called “the white man’s standards” (Gardiner, 1967: 302)—and the assertion of the independence and the distinct identities of Asian and African peoples. Robbie Shilliam hence defines the “spirit of Bandung” as a determination by the formerly colonized people “to break free from the global architecture laid by the colonizer” (Shilliam, 2016: 426) in the pursuit of “decolonial alternatives” (Shilliam, 2016: 433). Walter D. Mignolo similarly discerns the spirit of Bandung in the resolve of Asian and African countries to delink from both capitalism and communism as “the two major Western macro-narratives,” and to give historical grounding to a decolonial “vision of the future” (Mignolo, 2011: 273).

In its immediate aftermath, and for some years to follow, the reverberations of Bandung were heard around the world. Throughout what came to be known as the Third World, the Bandung Conference set the stage for the rise of critical intellectual interventions including dependency theory and postcolonial theory. The former, originating in Latin America, proposed that the paradigm of “development and modernization was a myth” which functioned “to hide the fact that Third World countries cannot develop and modernize under imperial conditions” (Mignolo, 2011: 276). The latter encompassed a wide range of contributions that reflected critically on colonial histories and legacies, and proposed strategies for transcending Eurocentrism and asserting self-determination (Kohn and McBride, 2011). One such contribution was Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which the Martiniquais intellectual laid out his vision of delinking from Europe. Fanon urged the colonized and formerly colonized peoples to cast aside “the desire to catch up with Europe” and to resolve not to be tempted by “European achievements, European techniques, and the European style” (Fanon, 1961/1963: 312-313). Rather than trying “to turn Africa into a new Europe,” Fanon argued, the urgent task at hand was to create “states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from” sources other



than Europe (Fanon, 1961/1963: 315).

At around the same time when Fanon, inspired by the anticolonial struggle in Algeria, was calling for a turn away from Europe, in Iran, which was one of the participating countries in Bandung, Al-e Ahmad published *Gharbzadegi* in which he pathologized the country's dependent development and Westernizing modernization against a historical context shaped by semi-coloniality, imperialism, and client-patron relations. The emphasis, throughout the pages of the book, on the urgency of delinking from the colonial relations of economic and cultural dependency, echoes the sentiments across the global South which were voiced in Bandung and reiterated by Third World intellectuals in the post-Bandung era. *Gharbzadegi*'s varied engagements with the non-Western world, and Al-e Ahmad's call on his fellow Iranians to learn from the experiences of industrial modernity in Japan and India, are reminiscent of a proposal in the Bandung Conference's final communiqué inviting Asian and African countries to foster "mutual cultural exchange" and acquire "knowledge of each other's country" ("Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955," 2009: 98). Although it makes no specific mention to the debates at the Bandung Conference, the book's piercing critique of neocolonial relations in the form of Western economic and cultural hegemony, as well as Al-e Ahmad's explicit assertion that Soviet Russia, Europe, and North America are part of the self-same West which dominates and exploits Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 27), bear the unmistakable echoes of Bandung. Moreover, even though no direct references to Fanon are to be found in *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad's citation in a subsequent book, titled *Dar Khedmat va Khianat-e Roshanfekran* (*On the Services and Treasons of Intellectuals*) (1964–8), of a passage from *The Wretched of the Earth* is indicative of the affinity he saw between his own views and those of Fanon. These echoes and affinities ought to be understood in relation to the postcolonial

zeitgeist in which Al-e Ahmad wrote *Gharbzadegi*. And still, *Gharbzadegi* cannot be separated either from its author's personal and intellectual trajectory or from the particularities of Iran's encounter with Western colonialism and imperialism.

Al-e Ahmad was born at a time when Western domination had turned Iran into a semi-colony with little control over its domestic and foreign affairs. Although he came from a religious family and in his youth he briefly attended a theological seminary, in his early twenties Al-e Ahmad was drawn to communism and became a member of the Soviet aligned Tudeh Party. Before long, however, disillusioned with the Tudeh's subservience to the Soviet Union, he joined a group of defectors led by the prominent social-democratic politician and intellectual Khalil Maleki. In Maleki, Al-e Ahmad found a political mentor, and in 1953 he joined Maleki's newly founded Third Force Party. The new party which sought to introduce an indigenous social-democratic alternative to the Tudeh Party, backed the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh during his campaign to end British control over Iran's oil industry. It advocated independence from both Western and Eastern blocs, and it defended an independent "socialist road to social and economic development" on the basis of Iran's local cultural and historical experiences (Katouzian, 2018: 127-129). Maleki's attempt to find a uniquely Iranian ideology of social and economic change as an alternative to Western capitalism and Soviet-style communism, some scholars have argued, is a crucial link in the development of Al-e Ahmad's arguments in *Gharbzadegi* (Vahdat, 2000: 60; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2021: 177).

The historical context of *Gharbzadegi*'s publication was one in which Iran, having emerged from a condition of semi-colonial subordination to Russia and Britain, was becoming a client state of the United States and this cliency relationship was cementing the processes of Westernizing modernization and dependent development. Almost a decade before the

book's publication, in August 1953, amidst rising tensions with Western powers over Iran's attempt to nationalize its oil industry, an American and British orchestrated coup d'état brought down Mosaddegh's democratically elected government and saw the reinstatement of absolute monarchy under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Abrahamian, 2013). The anti-imperialist sentiments to which the movement for the nationalization of oil had given a political expression and which were intensified in the aftermath of the coup were front and center not only in *Gharbzadegi* but also in many other works by Iranian intellectuals and literati during the latter half of the twentieth century. Nikki Keddie thus observes that *Gharbzadegi* marked a shift in the intellectual climate of mid-twentieth century Iran, arguing that in the 1960s a hitherto prevailing Westernist disposition among Iranian intellectuals gave way to an intellectual and cultural effort to stage a "defense against Westernization [by] returning to Iran's cultural identity" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 189).

Aside from Al-e Ahmad and Fardid, some of the other Iranian intellectuals who engaged in the critique of Westernization in this period included Daryush Ashuri, Ehsan Naraqi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Seyyed Fakhroddin Shadman, Ali Shariati, and Daryush Shayegan. Among them, Shariati's ideas most closely resembled Al-e Ahmad's and left the deepest social imprint. The critique of the state-driven Westernizing modernization also emerged as a major theme in the cinematic and literary works of the 1960s and 1970s. Hamid Naficy points out that throughout this period "dichotomous relations" between the Iranian self and the Western other, the native and the foreign, emerged as popular tropes in Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2011: 230). Such tropes, which Naficy attributes to "postcolonial disruptions" caused by rapid modernization and asymmetrical relations with the West, were present in the works of prominent filmmakers including Samuel Khachikian, Masud Kimiai, and Dariush Mehrjui (Naficy,

2011: 234-236). Likewise, works of fiction by Simin Daneshvar, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, Ebrahim Golestan, Taqi Modarressi, and Gholamhossein Saedi depicted the social divisions and cultural anxieties that resulted from the Pahlavi era modernization policies (Hillmann, 1982; Ahmad, 2015). Furthermore, the proclivity of painters, sculptors, and calligraphers such as Massoud Arabshahi, Mohammad Ehsai, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Faramarz Pilaram, Parviz Tanavoli, and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi to introduce “Perso-Islamic iconographical subject matters” into their works led to important transformations in Iranian visual arts including the emergence of the *Saqqa-kbانه* school in the 1960s (Daneshvari, 2013: 102). In architecture, Houshang Seyhoun, among others, rejected “the formal duplication and imitation” of Western designs, pioneering a style that blended “the principles of modern architecture with forms and materials taken from traditional Persian architecture” (Shirazi, 2018: 46).

These intellectual, literary, and artistic shifts, much like Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi*, were varied manifestations of a broader postcolonial zeitgeist, and they may be viewed, as Naficy suggests, through the lens of Fanon’s “formulation of the combative phase of creating a national culture” (Naficy, 2011: 230). The translations into Persian and the popularity of works by prominent postcolonial thinkers like Fanon and Aimé Césaire in mid- and late-twentieth century Iran was another manifestation of the same zeitgeist and another incarnation of the spirit of Bandung. The postcolonial affinities and solidarities to which Bandung had given voice were manifest in the revolutionary atmosphere of the late 1970s Iran. As Val Moghaddam reports, in the lead up to the 1979 revolution, writings on the Bandung Conference and works by postcolonial and dependency theorists such as Fanon, Césaire, Régis Debray, Paul A. Baran, Paul Sweezy, Samir Amin, and André Gunder Frank were read and discussed by revolutionary students in underground study circles (Moghaddam, 1987: 9).

### III. Semi-Coloniality and Dependent Development

In *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad designates Iran as part of the colonial periphery drawing parallels between the experiences of coloniality in his homeland and in other places in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Although it was never formally colonized, Iran's entry into the modern capitalist world-system took place under the shadow of coloniality and against the backdrop of the global expansion of Western (i.e. European and subsequently American) colonial and imperialist structures. The country's first encounter with such structures may be traced to the early sixteenth century, when the Portuguese Afonso de Albuquerque conquered the island of Hormuz. Located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, the small island was at the time a politically independent entity ruled by a Sunni Arab kingdom. Nevertheless, for nearly a century after Albuquerque's conquest, Hormuz served as an outpost from which the Portuguese "controlled all Persian Gulf shipping movements and trade coming from the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia" (Tazmini, 2017: 278). The ruins of the Portuguese castle on the island are a reminder today of this history, and the episode is established in popular Iranian perception as "the harbinger of a long-term pattern of Western interference" (Tazmini, 2017: 287).

A gradual increase in commercial and diplomatic relations between Iran and Europe during the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) led to more frequent contacts with the rising European colonial powers. At the turn of the seventeenth century, in the heyday of the Safavid dynasty, Iran became a favorite destination for European visitors (Mathee, 1998: 219). These included diplomats seeking to sway the Safavid king to support European campaigns against the Ottomans, merchants establishing trading posts in Persian Gulf ports, and Catholic missionaries setting up convents in various Iranian cities (Mathee, 2012: 10). Although the Safavid era saw an increase in

Western interest and presence in Iran, it was not until the Qajar dynastic period (1785-1925) that the imperial rivalry between Russia and Britain to control Central and South Asia (i.e. the Great Game) resulted in open foreign interference in Iranian affairs (Hopkirk, 1990). In the course of the nineteenth century, these rivaling empires used their superior military force to secure territorial control as well as favorable terms of trade. Their escalating encroachments culminated in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente which divided Iran into a British sphere of influence in the south and a Russian sphere of influence in the north.

Iran's somewhat peculiar, albeit not entirely unique, position in the colonial formations of the modern world prompted the prominent Italian historian of the Middle East, Alessandro Bausani, to observe that during the Qajar period Iran "had all the disadvantages of being a colony without any of the few advantages, such as the creation of industries either to the direct benefit of the colonizers or for their military purposes, improvements in the juridical system, and so forth" (Bausani, 1971: 172). For other commentators, however, the semi-colonial status did not preclude Iran from undergoing major economic, social, and political transformations. Ahmad Ashraf, for instance, argues the condition of semi-colonization set the stage for the transition in Iran from "a precapitalist mode of production" to "dependent capitalism" (Ashraf, 1981: 5). Similarly, John Foran provides a detailed account of major economic transformations that resulted from Iran's "dependent development" during the nineteenth century (Foran, 1989: 6). This dependent development, which according to Foran was facilitated in part by a significant increase in trade between Iran and Europe and a series of "concessions" to British and Russian subjects "to exploit or monopolize raw materials or infrastructural development in Iran" (Foran, 1989: 11), integrated Iran's economy into the world market and brought the country to the periphery of a modern capitalist world-system

whose core was located in Europe.

Even though some groups in Iran benefited from the social, political, and economic transformations that were set in motion as a result of dependent development, the country's integration into the capitalist world-system and its increased dependency on Western powers negatively impacted the lives of many Iranians. One important consequence of colonial penetration during the Qajar period was the demise of local "manufactories which were important during the Safavid period" (Ashraf, 1969: 68). According to Ashraf, as Iran became an exporter of raw materials and as "European manufactured goods superseded Persian local products," industrial activities in the country began to decay. Occasionally, this decay was accelerated by foreign interventions, including dumping practices that were intended to sabotage local industries (Ashraf, 1969: 68). Ashraf's observations are corroborated by Keddie who notes that Iran's entry into the world market had disastrous consequences for the country's textile manufacturing. According to her, the nineteenth century saw a decline in Iran's textile exports to Europe, and Iran became an importer of "cheaper factory-made textiles, chiefly from Britain and Russia." She further argues the growing dependence of Iran's economy on the export of raw materials to the West put Iranian peasants at the mercy of fluctuations in the world market. According to her, the conversion of land from food to export crops such as cotton and opium "contributed significantly to the terrible Iranian famine of 1869–72 and to later scarcities" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 51-52).

Iran's subordination to Western colonial and imperial powers continued through much of the twentieth century. During World War I, despite its declaration of neutrality, the country was used as a battlefield by the major powers, and before the end of the war nearly all of Iran had come under British and Russian occupation. Foreign occupation set the stage for the collapse of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment in its stead

of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979). The first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah, ruled with an iron fist for sixteen years before he was overthrown by yet another Anglo-Russian invasion of Iran in the course of World War II. His massive modernization program, which resulted in the creation of many new industries, did not change the path of Iran's dependent development. With industrialization came the inflow of Western capital and foreign technicians. Although Reza Shah's final years saw increased German economic and political influence in Iran, the major European power in the country remained Britain, reaping tremendous financial profit from an exclusive right to extract and sell Iranian oil (Keddie, 1981/2006: 101).

Following World War II, the United States replaced Britain as the major imperial power in Iran, and it used its dominant economic and military position to secure the pro-American disposition of the Pahlavi state in the emerging Cold War context (McGlinchey, 2012: 16). The 1953 coup put Iran firmly on a path of "client relationship" with the United States (Gasiowski, 1991: 15), a relationship based on "reciprocal oil and arms sales and a geopolitical alliance geared toward repressing all forms of dissent in Iran and containing the Soviet Union to the north" (Foran, 1992: 12). The post-coup period also saw the acceleration of the process of dependent capitalist development. As Keddie notes, under the second Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran's economic dependence on the West greatly increased, partly owing to the Shah's emphasis "on big showy projects, supersophisticated and expensive weapons, and fancy consumer goods, all of which put Iran in a position of long-term dependence on Western countries, especially the United States" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 134). These economic policies, Keddie adds, encouraged "Western-style industries" and resulted in the further deterioration of the local "small crafts and industries" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 161). The presumption that what is Western is good also informed the Pahlavi state's much-touted land reforms. The initiative, which



was legislated in 1962 and implemented over several years, reinforced Iran's dependence on Western imports including of food and agricultural machinery while also producing severe social dislocations and ecological degradation (Mahdavy, 1965; Hooglund, 1982; McLachlan, 1988).

The Pahlavi state's preference for "Western style" was not restricted to its industrialization program. In addition to a series of Westernizing reforms in Iran's military, legal, and education systems, Reza Shah's modernization policies included discouraging the traditional Islamic veil for women and requiring men to wear European-style suits and hats. Houchang E. Chehabi reports that shortly before announcing his dress policy, Reza Shah "told his assembled ministers that Iranians had to become Western, and as a first step they had to put on *chapeaux* (European felt hats)" (Chehabi, 1993: 215). Although Reza Shah's desire to Europeanize the appearance of Iranians betrayed a preference for Western European styles, his unveiling campaign echoed aspects of the Soviet Union's *Hujum* policy which required Muslim women to remove their veil (Cronin, 2014: 26). Under Mohammad Reza Shah, and owing partly to American aid and higher oil income, Westernizing modernization continued at a more rapid pace creating a deep social and cultural divide in the country. According to Keddie, the Pahlavi state's modernization policies helped to create a condition, more acute in the late Pahlavi period, of two "mutually uncomprehending and hostile" cultures in Iran (Keddie, 1981/2006: 320). While a minority, particularly among the upper class and the new middle class, "became increasingly Westernized" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 102), a majority of Iranians, particularly those who felt disadvantaged by the modernization program, came to "associate Westernization with suffering and dictatorship" (Keddie, 1981/2006: 188).

#### IV. *Gharbzadegi* and Development Otherwise

The experiences of Westernizing modernization and dependent development in Pahlavi era Iran, to which Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* was a scathing response, were common to postcolonial contexts. The post-World War II years saw the rise of an international development regime predicated on modernization theory and sustained through a complex web of international financial institutions, national aid agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, private sector actors, and networks of foreign investors, academics, and practitioners. Cultivated primarily in American academic institutions, the declared objective of modernization theory was to help transform newly independent and underdeveloped countries into modern and developed ones. Underpinning the works of its proponents were the presumptions not only that modernization is always desirable and possible, but also that it would occur along a linear and predictable trajectory (Saffari, 2016: 37).

Privileging the modern West as the universal model of progress, modernization theorists saw non-European cultures and traditions as hindrances to technological advancement and economic growth. Among others, Daniel Lerner argued the antirationalist characters of the Muslim culture prevent an organic transition to modernity in Muslim-majority societies. His "Mecca or mechanization" thesis favored top-down modernization reforms such as those implemented in Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavist Iran (Lerner, 1958: 405). Taking as their *modus operandi* Max Weber's binary classification of tradition and modernity, modernization theorists constructed a monolithic and static ideal type of traditional society which they then applied to the non-West and juxtaposed against Western Europe and North America as the ideal type of complex and dynamic modern society. The Eurocentric metanarratives within which these ideal types

were constructed universalized otherwise parochial Western histories, cultures, and development paths, proffering that although non-Western societies lacked the necessary cultural resources for an organic transition to modernity they could nevertheless modernize by adopting Western designs (Saffari, 2016: 37-38).

The Bandung Conference was one of the first concerted efforts by the countries of the Third World to challenge and present an alternative to the hegemonic post-war development paradigm. Whereas modernization theory decoupled Western experiences of development from colonial histories and attributed underdevelopment in non-Western contexts to endogenous factors, the participants in Bandung were cognizant of the link between development/underdevelopment and colonialism. The emphasis in the conference's final communiqué on the importance of South-South cooperation including through "technical assistance" and the creation of "regional training and research institutes for imparting technical knowledge and skills" ("Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955," 2009: 95), as well as the document's call on participating countries to "diversify their export trade by processing their raw material" ("Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955," 2009: 96), reflected postcolonial anxieties in Asia and Africa about remaining beholden to former colonial powers. The communiqué's recommendations, as Heloise Weber points out, "specifically addressed concerns relating to the colonial (international) division of labour that the newly independent (and soon to be independent) states had inherited" (Weber, 2016: 156). Weber's reading of the Bandung Conference "as a counterpoint to the dominant framing of the post-1945 development project" ("Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955," 2009: 153), helps us to see both the colonial logic of the latter project and the struggles throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America to advance alternative visions of development. "The 'spirit of Bandung'," she writes, "resonates today not only as a

memory of political struggle but also in concrete struggles for development otherwise” (“Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955,” 2009: 155).

Writing *Gharbzadegi* at a time when Iran had been thoroughly brought into the fold of the international development regime, Al-e Ahmad sought to articulate an alternative conception of development along the lines of what had been previously articulated in Bandung. Already in 1950, Iran had become the first country to join the United States government’s Point Four program for technical assistance to underdeveloped countries. Introduced in 1949 by President Harry S. Truman, the Point Four program was an important part of American foreign policy in the Cold War era and its approach to development was consistent with the prescriptions of modernization theory (Macekura, 2013: 130-131). The program’s administrators considered Iran to be “especially important” because of its border with the Soviet Union, its valuable oil resources, and its preparedness to implement Westernizing reforms (Embry, 2003: 101). *Gharbzadegi*’s arrival on Iran’s intellectual scene also coincided with the launch of the land reform program, a major component of the Iranian state’s development strategy during the 1960s. Consistent with modernization theory which regarded urbanization as a necessary step in a linear trajectory of development, the land reform program was intended to encourage the migration of the rural population to cities. According to Charles Kurzman, when the United States’ ambassador suggested a rural electrification plan, Mohammad Reza Shah responded: “Mr. Ambassador, don’t you understand? I don’t want those villages to survive. I want them to disappear. We can buy the food cheaper than they can produce it. I need the people from those villages in our industrial labor force” (Kurzman, 2004: 82).

For Al-e Ahmad, the main objective of the international development regime is to maintain a division, rooted in colonial history, between the developed and industrialized countries of the West that manufacture and

export “the machine,” and the underdeveloped and exploited countries of the East that export raw materials and import Western industrial goods (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 13-14). “From the vantage point of those who make the machine and dominate the international economic order,” he writes, “the longer it takes us to acquire the machine and technology the better.” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 105). One of *Gharbzadegi*'s key propositions is that rather than fostering genuine development, the Pahlavi state's technological modernization serves to further Iran's position of subservience and dependence within the dominant capitalist world-system (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 109). This, the book contends, is because the Iranian state essentially functions as an appendage of Western powers (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 179), and its development plans whose terms are largely determined by the World Bank and foreign advisors ensure the interests of American and European companies (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 112). As an example of this, *Gharbzadegi* discusses Iran's agricultural mechanization policy, which according to the book has utterly failed to achieve its stated goals, but as a consequence of which the country's oil income is spent to purchase Western industrial equipment that Iranian peasants are ill equipped to use (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 74). It notes that despite the push for agricultural mechanization Iran remains an importer of grains and processed foods from the West, and the introduction of the machine has resulted in the loss of local industries and crafts (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 75-80). The book further argues that instead of supporting local industries and the local production of technological knowledge, the Pahlavi state's modernization policies encourage assembly plant industrialization which keeps Iran in a cycle of dependency to Western technology and expertise. “Assembly plants for Jeep and Fiat and radios and batteries,” Al-e Ahmad writes, “are all annexes of Western industries, and at any rate to assemble a machine is ... different from industrialization and manufacturing the machine” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 111).

In a context where the Pahlavi state's modernization program espoused the rhetoric of catching up with Western industrialized countries, *Gharbzadegi* raised questions about the desirability of Western industrial modernity as an anticipatory horizon for Iran and other underdeveloped countries. According to Al-e Ahmad, although European industrial modernity has resulted in improvements such as higher wages for workers, higher per capita annual income, lower mortality rates, availability of food and of social services, and "a semblance of democracy which is the legacy of the French Revolution" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 15), it has also unleashed a range of negative consequences including imperialism abroad and fascism at home. The former, he contends, is fueled by a desire to acquire greater resources and raw materials to be processed by the machine (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 165), while the latter results from the "regimentation" of social relations "in the service of the machine" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 167). Whereas the dehumanizing "conformism" which results from the modern industrial order may be somewhat mitigated in the West through democratic mechanisms, in a country like Iran "with its backward form of government" these consequences are "doubly dangerous" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 136).

*Gharbzadegi's* skeptical take on technological modernization and Western industrial modernity has been the subject of much academic discussion. In Mehrzad Boroujerdi's reading, "Al-e Ahmad laments the crumbling of his traditional society at the hands of machines" and he is "willingly oblivious" to the "positive results of technology" (Boroujerdi, 1996: 70). According to Boroujerdi, in his critique of the machine Al-e Ahmad parrots the twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Boroujerdi, 1996: 71), whom Boroujerdi describes as an antimodern skeptic of technology (Boroujerdi, 1996: 176-179). Likewise, Mohammad Taghi Ghezelsofla and Negine Nooryan Dehkordi read *Gharbzadegi* as a technophobic manifesto, arguing that Al-e Ahmad detests modern technology and

regards the machine as a demon who casts a terrifying spell on those who embrace it (Ghezelsofla and Nooryan Dehkordi, 2010: 167-168). Other commentators, however, have dismissed the suggestion that Al-e Ahmad's critique of industrial modernity and the Pahlavi state's technological modernization are tantamount to a technophobic rejection of modernity. Among them, Brad Hanson argues that Al-e Ahmad's vision of Iran's future is one of "indigenization of technology" (Hanson, 1983: 1) and "taming the machine without being tamed by it – becoming familiar with it, building it, not just consuming machines manufactured abroad" (Boroujerdi, 1996: 11). Abbas Manoochehri and Moslem Abbasi similarly contend that Al-e Ahmad understands industrialization as the inescapable fate of all societies, but he insists that countries of the Third World ought to industrialize based on their own needs and in accordance with their unique historical and cultural characters rather than in accordance with the logic of imports (Manoochehri and Abbasi, 2011: 309). Their view is shared by Aram Ziai for whom *Gharbzadegi* "sketches an appropriation of industrial modernity" within a broadly Islamic frame of reference, and it represents "a third way, alongside surrender to the machine and retreat into national and religious traditions" (Ziai, 2019: 162).

In *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad distinguishes between three possible responses in underdeveloped countries to the arrival of the machine. The first, which he pathologizes and condemns, is to remain on the periphery of the capitalist world-system as mere consumers of Western technological products. The second possible response would be "to shut the machine and technology out of our lives and escape into the depths of our antiquated customs and our national and religious traditions" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 95). This too is a nonstarter. In a context where "half of the country has already been put under the shovel and drill of foreign corporations," the idea of a return "to primitive means of production" is but a futile

fantasy (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 96). Al-e Ahmad thus mocks the traditionalist literati and clergy who “in the face of the onslaught of the West have taken refuge in their ancient manuscripts and recoiled into their cocoons of zealotry and fanaticism” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 155). He warns that the tendency among some Iranians to “fear the machine” and to “remain fanatically locked in the bonds of tradition” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 96) only benefits those who seek to keep Iran in a cycle of dependency and exploitation (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 98). The third possible response, the only sensible response according to Al-e Ahmad, is to build the machine and use it to improve the lives of ordinary Iranians rather than to secure Western capitalist interests. To do so, he postulates, would require ending relations of dependency with the West, developing local industries, and facilitating the local production of technological knowledge (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 96-97).

Although *Gharbzadegi* makes an urgent plea in favor of the third response, the book, its author readily admits (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 97), does not contain a detailed account of what this response would entail and what type of alternative future may result from it. Still, throughout the book, Al-e Ahmad lays out the broad strokes of what this alternative conception of development may look like. His assertion that the ultimate goal of development ought to be “to eliminate poverty and to provide material and spiritual welfare for all people” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 96) is consistent with what Weber identifies as the holistic and just conception of development in Bandung which stood in contrast to the “economically reductive terms” of the prevailing paradigm in international development (Weber, 2016: 155). Moreover, *Gharbzadegi*'s vision of industrialization without Westernization, its assertion that adopting Western technology needs not necessarily be followed by adopting Western cultural and aesthetic standards, and its call on “the nations of the East” to value their distinct cultures and share with the world the “wealth of their heritages” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 174), are in



line with the decolonial spirit of the Bandung Conference.

Occasionally, *Gharbzadegi*'s proposal for development otherwise is spelled out in more concrete terms. For instance, noting the disastrous consequences of the Pahlavi state's technological modernization in rural areas, Al-e Ahmad suggests that any comprehensive industrialization strategy in Iran must include measures to improve the quality of rural life and to adequately integrate the rural population in the process of industrialization. One such measure, he stipulates, would be to preserve and support local craft industries (e.g. carpet weaving, fabric printing, etc.) which have long been "part and parcel of pastoral and rural economy" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 81). Other key measures would be to extend highways and electricity to rural areas, and to train rural residents to use and repair agricultural machinery (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 135). Furthermore, in a passage in the book which echoes the call at the Bandung Conference for increased South-South technological cooperation and knowledge sharing, Al-e Ahmad proposes sending Iranian students to "India or Japan," rather than to Europe and America, to learn from the experiences and challenges of industrialization in Asian contexts (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 161). Finally, Al-e Ahmad's conception of development entails a genuine participatory democracy predicated on civil and political rights (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 144), as well as "material and spiritual equality" between men and women, including equal legal and political rights, equal access to education, equal employment opportunities, and equal pay for equal work (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 83-84).

## V. Returning to the Past or Decolonizing the Future?

As Alena Kulinich observes in her contribution to this special issue,

in developing postcolonial visions of tomorrow in West Asian contexts some Muslim intellectuals have drawn inspiration from the resources of the past, particularly those within the Islamic tradition. This postcolonial turn to religion was not exclusive to Islamicate contexts. Richard Wright's account in *The Color Curtain* (1956) of travelling to Indonesia and attending the Bandung Conference as a freelance reporter, shows how a renewed interest in the religious traditions of Asia and Africa animated discussions inside and outside of the summit. This proclivity was captured both in the conference communiqué's acknowledgement of the religious heritage and spiritual foundations of Asian and African cultures ("Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955," 2009: 97), and in the speeches of delegates such as Sukarno of Indonesia who spoke of the "dominating importance" of religion in Asia and Africa ("Speech of President Sukarno at the Opening of the Conference," 1955: 13), and John Kotelawala of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) who proclaimed the people of Asia and Africa "have it in their power to apply to the problems of the present-day world ... that traditional respect for the spiritual values of life and for the dignity of the human personality which is the distinguishing feature of all their great religions" ("Sir John Kotelawala, Ceylon," 1955: 17). Situating the postcolonial turn to religion in a wider context, Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride note that while some postcolonial writers such as Fanon and Ho Chi Minh articulated their visions of the future in a broadly secular language, others including Mohandas Gandhi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and José Mariátegui "looked to the religious traditions and institutions of the past to mobilize resistance and legitimize alternatives to the economic and political structures of the colonial state" (Kohn and McBride, 2011: 5).

Although *Gharbzadegi* does not articulate its alternative vision of the future in explicitly Islamic terms, the book aims to establish connections between the present and the past through a conception of Islam as a

civilizational totality within which Iranian identity has long been defined. Drawing parallels between Iran's encounter with Western colonial modernity and the historical clashes between Muslim and Christian empires, the book argues that throughout many centuries Islam has been a unifying force sustaining a spirit of defiance against Western aggressions. In the course of the encounter with European colonialism, Al-e Ahmad hypothesizes, it was precisely this Islamically sustained collective identity that helped the Islamic East to fend off colonizers even after Africa, India, South America, and Oceania had fallen under colonial rule. At the end, however, the effectiveness of European plots to sow division between and among the Shi'i Safavids and the Sunni Ottomans, combined with the technological advantage of the West, rendered Muslim resistance ineffective. Today, Al-e Ahmad argues, the disintegration of the Islamic totality and the global hegemony of the modern West has ushered in a crisis of identity in the Islamic East one of whose consequences is the paralysis of *gharbzadegi* (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 23-26). In Iran, in the course of the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution, the Shi'i clergy sought to mount a last-ditch resistance against the onslaught of Westernization. However, the victory of the constitutionalists and the execution of the anti-constitutionalist cleric Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri marked the calamitous triumph of the *gharbzadeh* elites (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 62).

For some critics, *Gharbzadegi's* appeal to the Islamic tradition as a bulwark against Western colonialism betrays the book's nativist disposition, its animosity to the West and all things Western, and its antimodern nostalgia for a return to an authentic Islamic and Shi'i past. Reading history backwards and evaluating Al-e Ahmad's text in light of the rise of Islamism during the 1970s and the establishment following the 1979 revolution of a religious state, these critics have regarded *Gharbzadegi* as part of the ideological foundation of the revolution, and Al-e Ahmad as a precursor

to Iran's post-revolutionary Islamist rulers (Boroujerdi, 1996; Mirsepassi, 2000; Ghezelsoufla and Nooryan Dehkordi, 2010; Odabaei, 2020). To be sure, no critical engagement with *Gharbzadegi* can disregard the text's spurious conception of Islam as a homogenous civilizational totality, its historically reductive account of the encounters between Iran and Europe as clashes between the Islamic East and the Christian West, and its contentious praise for the conservative detractors of the Constitutional Revolution. The reading of *Gharbzadegi* as an antimodern vision of a return to an authentic Islamic and Shi'i past, however, exaggerates the book's religious predilection and misconstrues Al-e Ahmad's response to the modern condition. Although he laments the disintegration in the modern period of a purported Islamic totality, Al-e Ahmad is unambiguous that in the face of the irreversible globalization of industrial modernity Iranians ought not to retreat into the religious and cultural traditions of the past (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 95). Furthermore, the charge that Al-e Ahmad abhors the West and all things Western overlooks Al-e Ahmad's extensive engagements with European philosophy and literature including his translations from French to Persian of works by Sartre, Albert Camus, and André Gide. In *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad is emphatic that instead of mimicking the West, Iranians ought to familiarize themselves with the foundations of Western philosophy by reading "European and Western books" (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 127).

An alternative strand of scholarship has in recent years challenged the designation of *Gharbzadegi* as a technophobic and antimodern nativist manifesto, proposing instead that the book signals an attempt to conceptualize modernity and development otherwise. Reading *Gharbzadegi* in this spirit, Shirin S. Deylami makes a case that for Al-e Ahmad nativism is a misguided response to the predicament of "westoxification," for nativists cannot distinguish between "technological modernization and western mimicry" and they would "stifle the possibility of modern

advancements by and from the people” (Deylami, 2011: 259). Al-e Ahmad, she argues, decouples “globalization and modernity from westernization” and “proposes the development of an alternative modernity” (Deylami, 2011: 263); an alternative which would allow Iranians and other people of the Third World to participate in a “reconstitution or renovation of modern global life” on their own cultural terms (Deylami, 2011: 245). In Deylami’s assessment, that *Gharbzadegi* is read by some as a nativist text is closely related to the ways in which the book’s rhetoric has been utilized by the post-revolutionary Islamist state (Deylami, 2011: 250). Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi too believes the characterization of Al-e Ahmad as a proponent of nativism and xenophobic Islamism has much to do with the post-revolutionary state’s use of the term *gharbzadeh* to target “those who fail to subscribe to the self-described Islamic order’s conception of orthodoxy, or those deemed of dubious loyalty vis-à-vis the political system.” The “disciplinary parochialism” and “methodological nationalism” that informs this characterization, he argues, removes Al-e Ahmad’s thought from the wider context of anticolonial thought in the Third World (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2021: 174), and conflates *Gharbzadegi*’s apt critique of modernization theory and colonial modernity “with a rejection of ‘modernisation’ and ‘modernity’ *tout court*” (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2021: 175).

In the same vein of scholarship, Dabashi’s recent intellectual biography of Al-e Ahmad contends the academic literature on *Gharbzadegi* “has historically suffered from a mode of bizarre nativism” perpetrated at the hands of “Iranian or Iranist scholars” who, blind to the postcolonial global context in which the text was written, have projected their own nativism onto Al-e Ahmad, misreading and distorting his cosmopolitan intellectual and political disposition (Dabashi, 2021: 140). The reading of *Gharbzadegi* as a nativist intervention, Dabashi believes, is the sign of a “deeply colonised ... Eurocentric imagination” and symptomatic of the intellectual paralysis that

Al-e Ahmad pathologized in his seminal book (Dabashi, 2021: 58). According to him, although Al-e Ahmad was fiercely critical of “the colonial constitution of European modernity,” he was “not anti-Western, and his kind of critical thinking cannot be reduced to anti-modernity” (Dabashi, 2021: 275). Dabashi further argues that apart from the nativism of its detractors, the misreading of *Gharbzadegi* as an anti-Western or antimodern text stems from the untranslatability of the term *gharbzadegi* as well as the momentary lapses in the book’s otherwise cosmopolitan frame of reference (Dabashi, 2021: 166, 275). He observes that in *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad oscillates between using the terms West and East as economic signifiers for describing colonially rooted asymmetrical relations within the modern capitalist world-system, and as dichotomous civilizational categories denoting Christian and Islamic totalities. Whereas the former designation is helpful for understanding the globalized condition of coloniality, the latter, which according to Dabashi betrays Al-e Ahmad’s “historical illiteracy” and “conspiratorial predilections,” perpetuates an ahistorical binary construction of Islam and the West (Dabashi, 2021: 146). Stripped of its “superfluous fat,” he argues, *Gharbzadegi* is a critical intervention calling for resistance against a prevailing “condition of coloniality” that has its roots “in the economic domination of advanced capitalist societies over the globe” (Dabashi, 2021: 166). For Dabashi, denativizing Al-e Ahmad and reclaiming him as a key participant in the development of the mid-twentieth century postcolonial thought alongside with Fanon, Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, C. L. R. James, and others, is integral to the task of articulating narratives of the past and visions for the future that are free from colonial hangovers (Dabashi, 2021: 16, 66, 292).

## VI. Conclusion

Sixty years after its publication, *Gharbzadegi* is being belatedly absorbed into the postcolonial canon and read as a contribution to decolonial reimaginings of the future. Building on the corrective interventions of Deylami, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, and Dabashi, among others, and reading Al-e Ahmad's seminal text against the backgrounds of the 1955 Bandung Conference and the local histories of semi-coloniality and dependent development, this article has sought to foreground a decolonial conception of development in *Gharbzadegi* as a counterpoint to a neocolonial post-World War II paradigm of international development. Questioning both the desirability of catching up to Europe and the possibility of development within the prevailing capitalist world-system, *Gharbzadegi's* alternative vision invokes the possibility of development through delinking from Eurocentric designs and colonial relations of dependency. By reading *Gharbzadegi* against the background of the Bandung Conference, this article has also sought to de-nativize Al-e Ahmad and to situate his turn to Islam in the broader context of a postcolonial turn to religion. As discussed in the previous section, Al-e Ahmad's religious engagements, even though in *Gharbzadegi* they remain perfunctory and ahistorical, reflect a postcolonial sentiment that in developing alternatives to Europe's colonial modernity the peoples of the Third World are to reengage with the ways of life and modes of knowledge and norm production which were dismissed and suppressed by the dominating colonial structures and knowledge systems.

In reconsidering Al-e Ahmad's seminal work in relation to the theories and practices of decolonization, it may be also worthwhile to take account of the ways in which *Gharbzadegi* goes beyond the decolonial imagination of the Bandung Conference. For one thing, whereas Bandung put forth

a proposal for decolonization through increased economic and cultural cooperation among Asian and African nations, *Gharbzadegi* conjures up a more global vision of coloniality and decoloniality, one which includes not only Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but also subaltern groups in Western industrial countries (Dabashi, 2021: 143-144). Moreover, *Gharbzadegi* represents a departure from what some scholars have described as Bandung's nationalist and state-centrist approach to decolonization. According to Joseph Hongoh, Bandung narrowed down self-determination to state sovereignty and privileged "the economic and political power of individual states," thus constraining the possibilities for "meaningful solidarity" (Hongoh, 2016: 375). Likewise, Sharon Cheong argues that Bandung's conception of decolonization rested on "sovereign statehood" and "local anti-colonial nationalism" (Cheong, 2019: 992). In Cheong's assessment, the nation-building project that was imagined in Bandung and advanced thereafter by the postcolonial elite in Asia and Africa was often exclusionary and patriarchal, with a disappointing human rights record (Cheong, 2019: 990).

Although Al-e Ahmad is sympathetic to anticolonial national liberation movements, in *Gharbzadegi* he lambasts the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavi state with its propagandistic aggrandizement of Iran's past, postulating that the state's invocation of the rhetoric of national sovereignty serves only to justify its expanding authoritarian apparatus (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 183-184). Furthermore, while he perceives the state as the main implementer of development strategies, Al-e Ahmad nevertheless suggests that the goals of development and the conception of the good life which underpins development strategies ought to be defined by ordinary people in a bottom-up process. To that end, he emphasizes the importance of democratic processes and the intermediary role of intellectuals with organic links to the masses of the people. Despite his scathing criticism of the *gharbzadeh* intellectuals, Al-e Ahmad is hopeful that with "the



spread of culture and the growth of intellectualism [*rosbanfekri*],” intellectuals may emerge as a counterforce to the Eurocentric Pahlavi state and the reactionary clerical establishment, offering an alternative path toward a decolonial future (Al-e Ahmad, 1962/2006: 89 n. 2). His own attempt in *Gharbzadegi* to articulate such an alternative is staged as a response to a prevailing condition of dependent development and Westernizing modernization. Nevertheless, Al-e Ahmad’s wariness of state-centrism, his primarily cultural frame of reference including his postcolonial turn to religion, and his approach to literature and art as sites both of colonization and decolonization intimate a cultural and aesthetic conception of decoloniality in *Gharbzadegi*.

By pursuing decolonization within a cultural-aesthetic frame of reference, Al-e Ahmad anticipates a later conception of decoloniality by theorists such as Mignolo as a move toward “epistemic and aesthetic” reconstitution (Mignolo, 2020: 616). Mignolo’s conception rests on an important distinction between dewesternization and decoloniality. The former refers to a statist project pursued by a number of emerging non-Western actors seeking to delink from the Western-centric order and to assert their own sovereignty and authority over the existing, and colonially globalized, political and economic formations such as the nation-state and the capitalist economy. The latter, however, connotes options for delinking not only from Western dictates but also from the logic of coloniality and the colonial structures of authority and governance; it cannot be advanced through the state or other domains that exist within the “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2010: 16).

If invoking Bandung is useful for situating *Gharbzadegi* in the historical context of mid-twentieth century postcolonial thought, reading the text in dialogue with later interventions such as Mignolo’s allows for a reappraisal of Al-e Ahmad’s vision in relation to the diverse trajectories of postcolonialism since 1955. Applied to the Iranian context, these

interventions may help to differentiate the post-revolutionary state's reactionary dewesternization project from Al-e Ahmad's open ended decolonial imagination. Mignolo's postulation that freed from its institutionalized authority religion could have a "liberating" role in advancing decolonial options (Mignolo, 2017: 11) may also be drawn upon to distinguish Al-e Ahmad's postcolonial turn to religion from the Islamic Republic's state-driven Islamization agenda. And yet, Mignolo's proposal for a departure from the ontology of "progress and development," which he regards as an extension of the logic of coloniality (Mignolo, 2020: 614), constitutes a more radical move toward decoloniality than Al-e Ahmad's effort to articulate alternative conceptions of modernity, progress, and development. Further exploration of these and other points of convergence and divergence between *Gharbzadegi* and a range of post-Bandung contributions to decolonial thought can open new vistas for reconsidering the capacities and limitation of Al-e Ahmad's text in our contemporary contexts. The newly emerging scholarship on Al-e Ahmad, on which this article builds, is a step in that direction.

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