Introduction

What strange valleys
[We traveled –]
And the horse, do you remember?
It was white
And just like a pure phrase
Grazing upon the grass-like greenery of silence.
Sohrab Sepehri (Mosafer/Traveler, Babol, Spring 1966)

Just look at the grace and the confidence of Sepehri's lines! Where did these beautiful poems come from – what moral, imaginative, and historical forces inform and sustain the aesthetic sublimity, the poetic purity of these lines? Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980) was born early in the twentieth century and died late in that century. To come close to the poetic timbre of his voice and see how he arrived there, we need to pull back, way back, and cast a much longer look at the history that enabled him and his poetic voice.

Rewriting Histories

"All historians," Mir Seyyed Abd al-Latif Shushtari, the author of *Tohfat al-Alam/Gift from the World* (1788), writes early in his travel book, "be they Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, believe that after Noah's Flood the entire civilized world was destroyed and only a precious little part of it survived … All of course except the Indians who do not believe any such flood ever take place, or if it did it may have reached some countries but not others, and certainly it had no effect on India." This is a moment of wonder and pause for the learned traveler who has just left his home and habitat for unknown worlds and widening horizons. "They also trace the creation of this world to millions of years earlier," he reports to his readers, "and they completely deny the

story of Adam as the Representative of God on earth as we Muslims and many other historians believe."[1]

Throughout the nineteenth century, scores of prominent Persian speaking travelers such as Shushtari traveled from Iran or India around the world, and a few of them kept a diligent diary of what they saw, places and persons they met, and what they thought. Who were these travelers, what attracted and drew them to travel to the Arab and Muslim world and then beyond to Europe and the United States, what did they see, how did they interpret what they saw, and how did their published accounts of their experiences and observations transform their nations into the modernity of the age they lived?

In this book, I intend to look closely at a number of such travelogues and address these and similar questions. These journeys were not exclusively to Europe, some did not even include Europe, but all had an awareness of Europe as the site of a monumental thing called "modernity" to which they were exposed through European colonialism, and that grabbed their attention and sent them searching around the globe. Merchants, diplomats, students, and ultimately an emerging cadre of what today we would call "public intellectuals," these travelers were at once enamored of modern achievements of this colonial modernity and yet aghast at the state of affairs in their own homeland. The travelogues that they wrote, as a result, became a narrative record of an encounter with colonial modernity in motion, and in the context of a worldly consciousness. "Europe" was indeed a key character in the *dramatis personae* of this age and stage, but not the sole interlocutor or the defining moment of their experience. The goal was the very experience of traveling, to be *on the road*, *dar safar/in journey*, as opposed to *dar hazar/at home*. These travels were vastly changing the very conception of "the world," opening as they did the very experience of living to new horizons.

The purpose of this book is a close examination of a succession of travelogues written by Iranians traveling around the world, beginning late in the eighteenth down to the early twentieth century. This period is crucial, for it is at this time when Iran as a nation-state and Iranians as a people begin to emerge from the crumbling sites of their former

[1] See Mir Seyyed Abd al-Latif Shushtari's *Tohfat al-Alam*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by S. Movahhed (Tehran: Tahuri Publishers, 1363/1984): 32.

empires and assume a national self-consciousness as they enter a world dominated by European colonial modernity. These journeys were first and foremost to get out of a closed-circuited history, through a geographical venue, but evident in them was also a search for the secret of the global condition of this colonial modernity that had a European imprint on it, a modernity, to be sure, understood in a worldly context that now embraced Iranians (as it did people anywhere else in the world) and gave them a renewed understanding of themselves. This purgatorial passage from communal to regional and then imperial consciousness on one hand, and the encroaching contours of a colonial modernity on the other, is exceptionally important as a foregrounding of postcolonial nation formations, the public sphere upon which they were formed and the modes of postcolonial subjectivity they entailed and enabled. As you see in the case of Shushtari, these travelers did not all go to Europe, nor in fact was Europe their final or sole destination. Shushtari went to India, where he saw the effects of European colonial modernity. Wherever they went, these travelers had already inhabited a world, a towering, imperial, cosmic world, which now they saw expanding in emotive and topographical terms they did not completely anticipate or comprehend. They were the pioneering explorers of this unfolding planetary consciousness of themselves.

Throughout the twentieth century, these mostly nineteenth century travelogues have been read as indices of an encounter with "the West," a reading that is only partially true, a fragmentary and therefore flawed reading performed at the expense of a much larger imaginative geography evident in the texts of this body of evidence. I do not wish to rob these texts of their eventual awareness of Europe but intend to place that awareness in the more global context of a worldliness that is patently evident in their texts and that, as such, defines the normative and moral imagination of those travelers who wrote them. We rob these travelers of the totality of their worldly experiences as indeed recorded in these travelogues if we think "the West" was their final destination, as we would deny that totality a key component of their wonder and amazement if we were to disregard their European experiences. We should neither privilege nor downplay their European visits. We must embed those visits in their much more extended wanderings before and after those visits – as all evident (in black and white as it were) in the very pages of their travel narratives.

Righting Wrong Readings

Because of the extraordinary significance of these and similar travel narratives, they have been the subject of a number of scholarly investigations, each critically important in one way or another.

In his *Muslim Discovery of Europe* (1982), Bernard Lewis provides a typical example of reading these and similar texts by picking only one aspect of their varied narratives and magnifying it, thereby repressing the rest and thus constitutionally distorting their worldly disposition. In my book, which I write against the grain of such limited and forced readings of the much wider topography of emotive sensibilities they entail, I wish to retrieve their own world and worldliness, without suppressing that seminal colonial encounter with Europe (not with the vacuous abstraction Lewis and other Orientalists call "the West"). Bernard Lewis and likeminded Orientalists habitually comb through these and similar narratives and tease out such oddities as how Muslim travelers were amused by European women's behavior, or their clothing items, or the European homosexuals, or European men's habits of shaving, or other such amusements at Orientalized narratives.[2] I will not disregard or dismiss such encounters, but place them in the context of their textual idiomaticity and the community of self-conscious sensibilities they evoke.

Europe was not the destiny or the destination of these travelers. It was part of a much larger and more enabling world they were rediscovering. The world that they discovered, dwelling as it did more on the distance between a morning ride and an evening rest, included Europe but was not limited to it. The coupling of "Islam and the West," a dangerous delusion that has been handed down as the handiwork of nineteenth to twentieth century European Orientalism and the colonial modernity it enabled and served, exacerbated by militant Islamism that emerged ostensibly to oppose but in effect to consolidate it, continues to be the source of much carnage around the world. We need radically to alter and reverse the historical narrative that has engendered that false and hostile binary, and there is no better way to do that than to retrieve the cosmopolitan worldliness that once mapped the world, and remembering the travelers that traveled that

[2] See Bernard Lewis, *Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982): 279–294.

map. The map these travelers navigated informs a different and much neglected public sphere, enables a much different but maligned subject, and announces a different but concealed emotive universe. Printing machines would soon be introduced, Persian prose would be much simplified, newspapers published, and the public persona all of these enabled have all been lost under the heap of the rubric of a "Muslim discovery of Europe." Yes, these travelers were Muslims, but Muslim was not the only thing they were. Yes, they traveled to Europe, but Europe was not the only place they visited. "Europe," to borrow Fanon's insight, was not yet completely invented by the "Third World." A much vaster geography of sense and sensibility, politics and prudence, mapped the itinerary of these travelers. I wish to draw a new attention to that map.

To be sure, Bernard Lewis's *Muslim Discovery of Europe* was not the first or the only study of such texts to single out "Europe" as the primary focal point of these journeys. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod's *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (1963), based on his doctoral dissertation at Princeton University (1957), had done so almost a quarter of a century earlier.[3] Even before Abu-Lughod, Mojtaba Minovi, in his seminal essay, "Avvalin Karevan Ma'refat/The First Caravan of Knowledge" (1953), had also singled out the journey of the first group of Iranian students out of their homeland as exclusively to Europe, disregarding the journeys that were done before and after that visit and the fact that they were not done just to Europe.[4] The concerns of Abu-Lughod and Minovi, however, were different. Though equally fixated on their own colonially manufactured notion of "Europe" and thus oblivious to the world that these travelers were now discovering, they were the products of a time that "the West" had become a categorical imperative and a measure either to embrace or to dismiss. Scholars such as Abu-Lughod and Minovi were primarily concerned with the earliest accounts of Arab, Iranian, and Muslim encounters with Europe by way of excavating a genealogy of their own contemporary political preoccupation. For them, the towering binary of "Islam and the West" had become so politically consolidated and paramount that they never thought to question or dismantle it.

[3] See Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
[4] See Mojtaba Minovi, "Avvalin Karevan Ma'refat/The First Caravan of Knowledge," *Yaghma* 6:7 (Mehr 1332/September 1953).

Their wounded pride was deeply agitating in their respective scholarships, which in fact became anachronistically integral to the spirit of the primary sources they were investigating. Preoccupied with the overpowering politics of their time, they did the texts they were reading a serious disservice.

Far more in tune with Bernard Lewis's take on these journeys was Sir Dennis Wright's *The Persians amongst the English* (1990), later complemented by *The English amongst the Persians: Imperial Lives in Nineteenth-Century Iran* (2001), which also singled out Europe, and England even more specifically, as the very reason for these journeys. Studies such as those of Lewis and Wright are emblematic of a particular phase of European and US Orientalism when a condescending prose of imperial benevolence continued to look down at their former colonies as the source of pathological insight into the nature and disposition of the nexus holding the colonizer and the colonized together. In this respect, these studies too are symptomatic of a particular phase of the politics of knowledge production forcing the belated preoccupations of these scholars onto the texts they had excavated to read.

But soon, a much more robust and wholesome body of scholarship emerged around these texts. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subramanyam's groundbreaking work, *Indo–Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (2007), reversed and corrected that previous trend and concentrated on the inner worlds of Asia that these travelers traversed and discovered, with exquisite details of social history in such travel narratives within the Indo–Persian sources dealing with India, Iran, and Central Asia between around 1400 and 1800.[5] These authors' concerns were primarily with the Mughals, Safavids, and Central Asia in a period of historic transformation. Equally important, though still unduly privileging the European "destination" of these travelers, is a subsequent monograph by Naghmeh Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder: Nineteenth Century Travel Accounts from Iran to Europe* (2012), in which she has selected a few of these Persian sources and put a significant theoretical twist on them, suggesting that they can in fact reveal much more about the concerns and agenda of their authors back

[5] See Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subramanyam, *Indo–Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

in their homeland rather than where they were visiting.[6] In an excellent edited volume, Roberta Micallef and Sunil Sharma's *On the Wonders of Land and Sea: Persianate Travel Writing* (2013), some of these travel accounts have also been examined for their literary and linguistic aspects.[7] More recently, Nile Green's *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen's London* (2015) offers a close reading of just one of these travelogues, Mirza Saleh Shirazi's *Safarnameh*, and produces a lovely read that hinges on the idea of these "adaptable Muslim migrants" adventuring with their "mission . . . to master the modern sciences behind the rapid rise of Europe."[8] Though Green's account reverts back to the Lewis and Wright phase of Orientalist amusement with these "Muslim travelers," it happens in a much healthier environment where more serious scholars such as Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subramanyam have set a more robust academic agenda.

Discovering a Cosmopolitan Worldliness

Conscious of these significant works of scholarship done on aspects of this substantial body of literature, my book has an entirely different purpose: It offers a decidedly different angle; relies on a much wider body of primary sources, specifically concentrating on the critical period between 1788 and 1924; and seeks to correct a decidedly distorting emphasis on the European "destination" of these travelers at the expense of overshadowing their more global concerns.

In retrieving the worlds, and even more importantly the passage to those worlds that these travelers were discovering, we need to go back to the formative nineteenth century (and here the globalized Christian almanac is the key colonial calendar – though it is crucial to keep in mind that these travelers were mostly using the Islamic calendar) because it was precisely in this fateful period when "Islam and West," as two opposing camps, two Manichean poles of enmity, were being

[6] See Naghmeh Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder: Nineteenth Century Travel Accounts from Iran to Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[7] See Roberta Micallef and Sunil Sharma (eds.), *On the Wonders of Land and Sea: Persianate Travel Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Ilex Series/Harvard University Press, 2013).
[8] See Nile Green, *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen's London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

authoritatively narrated into a normative hegemony. The Orientalist construction of "Islamic civilization" (or Chinese or Indian "civilization") was definitive to the normative bourgeois manufacturing of the "the West." In the world that we will discover in these travelogues, however, the planetary vision of these travelers is not divided along an East–West axis. They have a worldly conception of the planet they are traversing, a cosmopolitan vision of the realities they witness and report. To show this, I will dwell on the entirety of their travel itinerary, from home to the worlds they were discovering and back to their tumultuous homeland. These journeys were neither exclusively to Europe nor were they sites of self-reflection within their Asian contexts; they were neither accounts of wide-eyed encounters with outside worlds nor a ruse for political commentary about their homelands. They were all of those and yet much more than all such things put together. They were and they remain what they write in black and white, a journey from home to the world and back to their homeland, which they now rediscover differently, for their own eyes are now equipped with richer sensibilities and more perceptive lenses. To think they just left home to go to Europe and bring back "modernity" is vastly to distort the very narrative logic, every road and every highway, every valley and every mountain they traveled to see the world differently.

These are narratives in motion, literally: books written on horseback, inside moving carriages, while walking, traversing between an origin and a destination that keeps moving, corners of midway teahouses and caravansary, perhaps under a tree or by a brook, through a valley, over a mountaintop, or when you reach a rambunctious urbanity and rest in wonder. Today's destination was tomorrow's origin for these travelers – peripatetic (literally) were these philosophers of the mobile modernity they thought they were chasing, but in effect inventing, overcoming, surpassing. Instead of dwelling on the moment, these narratives dwell on the duration, instead of now or then, on while, instead of here or there, on the distance in-between. This book, mimicking theirs, is about duration, about all the while, about the distance, about the liminality of time and space before here has become there, now then. I wish to dwell as much on the narrative disposition of these travelogues as to the lay of the land they traveled and narrated. In a profound and enduring way, I too have been a traveler like them, though I opted not to return home to Iran, made a home and stayed

right here at my destination in the United States, and kept writing books and articles about what I had learned on this journey. So, this book is as much about bygone ages and their record in some exquisite travel narratives as about the rest of Iranian history in its unfolding encounter with the world, with multiple worlds we keep encountering, discovering, overcoming, dreaming.

With this foregrounding, my principal contention in this book, which sets it categorically apart from all other scholarly attentions hitherto paid to some of these sources, is the formation of an alternative geography that these travel itineraries imaginatively posit, narratively perform, and emotively map out. These narratives, I contend, respect no colonial or postcolonial boundaries, observe but trespass all fictive frontiers, and effectively collapse and cross over every and all fictive formations of "East and West," or "Islam and the West," or, a fortiori, "the West and the Rest." Old Muslim empires from the Mughals to the Safavids to the Ottomans are falling down, the weakling Qajar dynasty is clueless about the worlds it encounters as the European empires are encroaching on their ruins, and these traveling troubadours of the emerging worlds are wandering around their known and unknown worlds in search of new meanings for the dawning of a new age, and more than anything else trying to find out who and what they are, their writing hands searching the dark of their white pages in order to narratively locate themselves. Their narrative fluidity stages the overriding topography of the worlds they discover, map out, populate, and narrate, not just outside in the opening horizons, but also inside, mapping the unfolding frontiers of their own searching souls. As they discover and map out the world in which they live, they navigate and place signposts within the soul that will inhabit that world.

In this book I wish to demonstrate how these travelers map a much richer travel itinerary than just going from East to West. That assumption both simplifies and distorts the multilayered worlds they encounter and record in their narratives. I will also show how the systematic simplification of Persian prose in these very narratives was a formidable feature of their reach and significance. They effectively created a reading public for themselves and their prose outside the royal court and deep into an emerging reading public. The rate of public literacy at this point is not significant enough to warrant the assumption of any wide circulation. But the simplicity of their prose and the novelty of the

worlds they encounter already force their Persian prose into an eventual assumption and gradual rise of a public readership.

Those emerging public readerships, I will then argue, were definitive and constitutional to the transnational public sphere upon which the post-imperial nations (nations that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of Muslim empires) were now taking shape. Through a close reading of these sources I intend to identify the principal institutions of civil liberties and the rule of law their authors begin to identify, celebrate, and advocate. As they traveled far and wide, these travelers knew exactly what they were looking for and marking for a particular attention of their countrymen back home. I will therefore introduce the authors of these texts as the first specimen of "public intellectuals," for their prose was definitive to the formation of that public sphere upon which they then laid a legitimate leading claim, and finally how they became definitive to the introduction of a civic discourse in the emerging nations.

Those emerging nations are the way stations, the space in between the itinerary of these troubadours of the rising truths of what it means to be in the world. Paramount to the moment of the in-between is the overarching world that is forming in the minds of these travelers as they move from here to there, from now to then, from past to present. That world is worldly, material, palpable, and aware of the distance between cities and habitats, customs and cultures, in the multiple pluralities of their whereabouts. I wish to discover that world of the in-between, the terra incognita that is waiting to be discovered, covered as it is under the site-specific territoriality of our conception of time and space, and today of a deeply colonial conception of "modernity." A mobile conception of being-in-the-world is what I am after discovering here, where we are neither in the East nor in the West. We are somewhere in between, and what is our West today is our East tomorrow.

Journey as Metaphor

With that mobility of East and West as our master metaphor, I place the central argument of this book in contrapuntal position to the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner's "Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), and propose the deliberate crossing of frontiers to be definitive to the post-imperial history these