



Reversing the Colonial Gaze

Exploring the farthest reaches of the globe, Persian travelers from Iran and India traveled across Russian and Ottoman territories to Asia, Africa, North and South America, Europe, and beyond. Remapping the world through their travelogues, *Reversing the Colonial Gaze* offers a comprehensive and transformative analysis of the journeys of over a dozen of these nineteenth-century Persian travelers. By moving beyond the dominant Eurocentric perspectives on travel narratives, Hamid Dabashi works to reverse the colonial gaze which has thus far been cast upon this rich body of travelogues. His lyrical and engaging reevaluation of these journeys, complemented by close readings of seminal travelogues, challenges the systematic neglect of these narratives in scholarly literature. Opening up the entirety of these overlooked or abused travelogues, Dabashi reveals not a mere repetition of clichéd accounts of Iranian or Muslim encounters with the West, but a path-breaking introduction to a constellation of revelatory travel narratives that reimagine and reclaim the world beyond colonial borders.

Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. A key figure in the fields of Iranian studies, comparative literature, and postcolonial theory, he has written numerous books on these subjects, most recently *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (2019), *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (2015), and *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012).

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Reversing the Colonial Gaze

Persian Travelers Abroad

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In Memory of Mahmood Bashi (1940–2018)
Born a happy native in southern Iran,
Traveled far and widely,
Then settled and died a proud Swedish citizen –
Father, Husband, Grandfather, Friend

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Preface

By the sunset
 Amidst the tired presence of things
 The gaze of someone waiting
 Could see the vast expanse of time!

Sohrab Sepehri (Mosafer/Traveler, Babol, Spring 1966)¹

This is a book about travelers – a group of twelve travelers who roamed around the globe mostly in the nineteenth but some a bit earlier and some a bit after that crucial century. Somewhere between the Apostolic twelve and the twelve Shi'i Imams, this book determined the course of its narrative. Some of these travelers have been, individually or in twos or threes, studied before – but in this collective gathering, and with the totality of their written prose (and not just the fragment that deals with Europe), have never been examined in this particular manner that I do here in this book. These travelers wrote their travelogues in Persian, my mother tongue, and I write this book about them in English, the colonial language we postcolonial subjects have inherited from our conquerors and made our own. When I am done writing this book and it is published, it can be read by people throughout the world, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and then in immigrant communities around the planet – not because any one of them is British, but because they and their ancestors were the subjects of British imperialism. These travelers have been abused by generations of their readers who have reduced their travelogues only to the part where they write about Europe. But Europe was only part of their travels – they began writing about their travels and experiences long before they reached Europe, and long after they had left Europe. These travelers began writing their accounts while they were still in Iran

¹ All these translations of Sohrab Sepehri's poem "Mosafer/Traveler" from the original Persian that appear at beginning of all my chapters are mine. For the original, see Sohrab Sepehri, "Mosafer/Traveler," in Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab/Eight Books* (Tehran: Tahuri Publishers, 2536/1356/1977): 301–328.

or in India and they roamed the globe writing about what they saw and what they did. In this book I have restored the dignity of their actual words, the totality of their travels and thoughts, and the sense of their prose and purpose, before and beyond Europe. Against the grain of the manner in which they have been systematically abused, I have not privileged Europe as the sole destination of their purpose, for it was not – nor have I ignored the European fragment of their journeys. The result is the exposure of a full-bodied moral imagination that is in fact reversing the colonial gaze cast subsequently upon them and with them us, ignoring the truth that they were in fact remapping the colonial world.

This book is therefore about reversing the colonial gaze. It covers the vast spectrum of Persian travelers from Iran and India going around the globe fully aware of the colonial gaze cast upon them but not beholden to that gaze. I seek to right the wrong of the terrible epistemic violence that has been historically perpetrated on these travelers and their travelogues by forcibly casting them as “going to Europe.” You will read me repeatedly correcting that false assumption and chapter and verse showing how these travelers were actually going around the world and not just to Europe, though Europe certainly was part of their itinerary. They are fully aware of the rising power of Europe around the world but so are they of the power of Russia, of the Ottoman Empire, as indeed of the emerging power of nations around the globe against all these powers. But most of all, my book, in painstaking detail, is about a concerted project of regaining an imaginative grasp of the globe, reversing the colonial gaze, and thereby regaining visual, narrative, moral, normative, and imaginative agency in their contemporary history.

At the time these travelers were writing their travelogues, the European colonial gaze had dwarfed the world to rule it better. The task at hand is not a tit-for-tat; it is not to cast an anti-colonial gaze at Europe to shame, blame, or demonize it. The European colonial gaze has been just one among many other cases of imperial power, though the most recent and technologically the most advanced. Precisely for that reason, reversing the colonial gaze is to regain the world at large against the worst effects of the European colonial gaze. Reversing to correct the colonial gaze means to retrieve the world before in order to facilitate the world after the European colonial conquest. The European panopticon of modernity had a longer colonial window widely opened on the globe, which Michelle Foucault mostly ignored. The world at large, at the receiving end of that European gaze, needs to delve deeply and widely into its own history to

retrieve the world when the dehumanizing European conquest was neither final, total, definitive, or terminal. The body of the travelogues I closely examine in this book has been systematically and consistently abused to do precisely the opposite of what they actually do, and I have read them with focused attention to reverse that abuse and to reveal what they actually do. Under the overwhelming power and presence of the colonial Eurocentric imagination, those scholars who have cared to read these travelogues have abusively read them as traveling to Europe. Here I reveal in unprecedented detail how they did no such thing, that they were in fact traveling around the globe, including but not exclusively to Europe. This I do, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, page after page, in order to open the worldly horizons of the time in which these travelers crossed multiple frontiers to see, show, and map out the world they inhabited. In reversing that colonial gaze Europeans had cast upon the world, these travelers, and the travelogues they wrote, I detail the world they witnessed, discovered, and claimed for their posterities, for us, enabling us to retrieve the world lost under the epistemic violence of the European gaze cast on Iranians, Arabs, Indians, etc., who then in turn partook willingly or unwillingly in that colonial cast of mind, becoming the carriers of the colonial grain of humiliation that has denied them authorial agency. I do in pages that follow precisely the opposite of that denial, restoring that authorial agency.

Although the origin of my intention to write this book is much earlier, I began actively working on it during the US presidential election of 2016, soon after which Donald Trump became the US president, and among the first Executive Orders he signed was his “Muslim Ban,” disallowing travelers from seven Muslim countries (including Iran) to come to the United States. I continued to plough through my reading and writing one chapter after another with a bit of a bittersweet smile on my face: writing a book about Muslims traveling around the world (including the United States) mostly throughout the nineteenth century as I, the author, despite my US citizenship, was now among those who were subject to travel restrictions, while my friends and their families in Europe, in Iran, and in the Arab and Muslim world were limited in their ability to come and visit me and my family. These were two vastly different worlds: the one I was reading in Persian in these books and the one I was living as I wrote this book in English. But the two worlds were destined to meet, were integral to a colonial cast that had now reached its postcolonial edges, right in the heart of an embarrassingly dysfunctional American empire.



Figure 1 “Isle of Graia Gulf of Akabah Arabia Petraea,” 1839 lithograph of a trade caravan by Louis Haghe from an original by David Roberts. [Public domain] – The European gaze and visual imagination had at once romanticized and etherealized their “Orient” as the object of colonial conquest and voyeuristic fantasies. “Oriental” people and places were not real human beings or part of this earth. They were *Objet de Curiosité*, there to amuse Europeans and tickle their exotic fantasies. The Persian travelers I examine in this book decidedly reverse that colonial gaze against itself and remap the world and people it, before, beyond, and above Europe, for a renewed global conception with detailed realism, purposeful prose, and fiercely insightful reportage. These travelogues are the exact antidote to those Oriental fantasies.

Every traveler I examine in this book had a homeland to return to, the country of their origin Iran or India. I had no such point of return. By the time first Obama and then Trump had issued their travel bans, I had lived in the United States for some forty years, had made a home for myself and my family there, all my four children were born there, and had no reason, interest, or frame of reference in Iran to make it a viable home for us. I was home away from home, in the state of stateless wander that had defined my sojourn to America and beyond. These travel narratives were in effect the origin of my generation’s sense of worldly wonder – this is where “Iran” had in effect begun in its postcolonial rendition.

I was working on the final chapters of this book when the US Supreme Court, in a 5–4 ruling late in June 2018, sided with President Donald Trump’s Muslim travel ban, putting their legal stamp of approval on a patently racist and xenophobic limitation on Muslims like me being able to travel to the United States any more. I don’t therefore think it is any secret that turning to travel narratives as the subject of this book at this stage of my scholarship is prompted by an evident autobiographical urge. Yes, I have had and continue to sustain a course of critical interest in the historic formation of the postcolonial public sphere and its contingent subject in my work over the last decade in particular. This book is therefore certainly in the same trajectory as my books on Shi’ism, or Persian literary humanism, and Persophilia – in all of which I have been trying critically to consider these two concerns of public sphere and corresponding postcolonial subject. But even these crucial theoretical issues are rooted in the existential fragmentation of a spirit of the time that animates us all. I feel a sense of historical responsibility in between what has come before and what might happen after my scholarly records on these issues. “Traveling” has been the defining trope of my generation for as long as I remember – and in this book I wish to expand the active longevity of this collective remembrance. The seminal text of the towering critical thinker of my generation Jalal Al-e Ahmad was in fact not his iconic *Gharbzadegi/ Westoxification* (1962) but far more importantly his Hajj pilgrimage, *Khasi dar Mighat/A Straw where the Pilgrims Gather* (1964). From the time of the earliest generation of Iranian students who packed their meager belongings and left our homeland for good, traveling has been the principal *modus operandi* of our existence. I had always hoped to sit down and think through the larger historical implication of this defining momentum of our history.

Life is strange. I used to love traveling. I have long since lost my own wanderlust. I began writing this book when the memories of my own travels had all faded into the existential homeliness in me no matter where I was. As a project integral to my larger concern with mapping out the contours of the transnational public sphere upon which the postcolonial subject was constituted, no doubt this book sustained my scholarly concerns, but from the very beginning I was also conscious I was attending to a deeply autobiographical dimension of my generation. Who were we, where were we headed, when did such journeys begin, and to what end?

I began reading these travelogues and memoirs quite a long time ago – not just to learn where they went, what they saw, and how they wrote their experiences, but far more importantly to be a witness to their wandering souls, as their worlds were widening, their horizons unfolding beyond their imagination, where the inherited visions of their habitat and humanity were being remapped, expanded, reconfigured. I have a handwritten note in Persian dated Sunday 24 Farvardin 1365, which corresponds to April 13, 1986, in the middle of one of the major sources I have discussed in this book, Yahya Dowlatabadi's *Hayat Yahya* (1893), in which I have scheduled the timing in which I had planned to read that book. The fact that I had written this note in Persian and marked the date on the Iranian calendar indicate that up until this date my mind was still thinking in Persian and my life regulated on the Iranian calendar. It also means the initial idea of this book was with me only a few years after I had left my homeland and came to the United States. I now recall that at that point I wanted to call this book something like “The Troubadours of Modernity.” Those initial notes, scattered ideas, and raw sentiments needed decades to simmer and brew in my mind and my soul. I needed to move from the Islamic and Persian calendars to the common Gregorian calendar of my life as a scholar living in the United States and decidedly move from Persian sources into my academic English prose for this book to brew and be ready to be written in a prose that matched the searching souls of those bygone travelers, with whom today I deeply identify. I had come to the United States with an innate worldliness in my self-assured soul. The United States pathologically nativizes its immigrants upon arrival, robs them of the world and worldliness they had brought with them to these shores. The Alien Registration Card (the Green Card) they are issued prior to their fake citizenship effectively alienates them from who they are and what they were. There was always a deep and irreconcilable distance between this sense of alienation and the worldly confidence of poets like Sohrab Sepehri, between the stable but stale confidence of my Persian provenance and the hesitant English prose afforded the newly minted US immigrants. I had to learn and reimagine Sohrab Sepehri's poetic confidence in my English prose – and precisely for that reason I needed to cut deeply into the history that had enabled Sepehri's poetry. I needed to pull back at least two hundred years when these travelogues began to be written to rediscover the emotive and

epistemic roots of a poet like Sohrab Sepehri in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The terrorizing world of the boldly racist and xenophobic white supremacy Trump had unleashed upon the globe was narrowing in on us as I was reading and being a witness to a time when these Iranian Muslim travelers were moving exactly in the opposite direction – claiming and mapping the world around them, connecting it East and West, North and South, building upon it moral and imaginative bridges. I too was one of these travelers when I left my homeland some forty years ago, and I am still one of them today hundreds of years after their travels. I was initially unconsciously but eventually quite decidedly digging deeply into the genealogy of my own moral and intellectual predecessors. Who were we – we travelers, the sojourners of truth beyond our existing fields of visions, outside our own home and habitat, far beyond the colonial borders our conquerors had drawn for us, right into the heartland of those who saw us as their enemy? I no longer felt welcome in the United States – nor did I wish to be welcomed there or anywhere else for that matter. But that fact did not bother me. I thought I had finished my journey. The United States was not my destination, nor was the idea of getting back home to Iran. I had no metaphysical conception of a homeland. I was at home in the wanderlust of this shrinking universe, and my last and lasting home was with my four American children, two of them born in Allentown and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the other two in Manhattan, New York.

As I saw my own children growing up with other immigrant children, in the ennobling vicinity of Native, African, Latinx, and myriad of other Americans, I was made more conscious of how these travelers beyond their times and anticipations were in effect reversing the (white) colonial gaze historically cast upon colonized nations. Without these travelers writing the world anew, claiming it all, my generation of Iranians will not have had a pride of place among these other immigrants living in gratitude to the First Nations who had inhabited this landscape. We too could stand up and say “I” against the racist white supremacist that hoped to rule this land by virtue of where these travelers went, what they saw, and what they wrote. I followed the footsteps of these travelers in print as they were remapping the world while I was (literally) walking my younger children to their public

school in New York to greet their mostly Latinx classmates – in a dual language education in which they were learning English and Spanish in the same classrooms. At this point I cared far more for them to grow up bilingual in English and Spanish than in English and Persian. As under initially Obama (paradoxical is it not) and then decidedly under Trump I and my ilk were branded as unwanted aliens, it occurred to me that we Iranians living in the United States had in fact joined generations and histories of all other denied and denigrated people on these shores – the Native Americans, the African-Americans, all the subsequent immigrants, generation after generation, coming here to build this country under the racist tutelage of a gang of European settler colonialists who had a bizarre affliction of amnesia and with astonishing arrogance thought this was actually their land.

How do we (Iranians, Indians, Arabs, Africans, Latin Americans, Jews, Muslims, etc.) breach our totality, if I were to ask Emmanuel Levinas's Jewish question in a Muslim mind – is there any infinity left in us? How do we transcend ourselves? Can we even fathom transcending ourselves? It seems to me I have written this book on bygone Muslims traveling at the time of a Muslim travel ban as an occasion to reflect on the im/possibility of a Muslim person ever fathoming to transcend himself, herself, itself. We seem to be condemned, and we seem to have had no say in the matter, to be all potential terrorists, and as such actual threats to our own very existence. We were made to contradict ourselves. We were being denied our own others, our own alterities. We were condemned to be the same, an identity that was cauterized on our forehead without our consent – or even the permission to scream our pain. We did not live in this world except as allegories of terror to others. We were the radical alterity of others, denied having any radical alterity of our own. Are we our own selves, once we have been cast as our self-designated enemies? We did not choose these enemies. They choose us. How can we ever move, from here to there, as James Baldwin once said, without ipso facto threatening their very existence? I went back to these travelers and to the *terra incognita* they were remapping to find the factual footing of where we were and how far we have traveled. We must know how far we have traveled and how before we are certain where we go from here.

I was reading these travelogues, volume after volume, page after page, asking myself: Are we Muslims allowed to transcend

ourselves – and more importantly, why should we even ask permission to do so? We are no longer at home in the so-called Islamic world or anywhere else for that matter – for the privileged travelers of yore have now become desperate refugees and migrant labors. We are now the same with this world, our own alterity having escaped and denied us. That is a terrible moral flatness for a people, a culture, a collective consciousness to have allowed itself. The travelers you will encounter in this book were discontented with what and who they were. That discontent was moving toward a transcendence, inclined toward the reconstitution of a mora agent, the particular contours of which they mapped out in thick descriptions and copious notes. Generations of abusive readings have denied these travelers that transcendence by disallowing them the confidence with which they were traveling the world (not just “to Europe”), remapping the globe, as they were writing the inaugural moment of their history. I have tried gently to ease that transcendence from the midst of their thinking, the thicket of their meandering souls – and this not for their sake, for they are no longer here with us, but for our own sake, so from them we may learn how to teach ourselves the terms of the intuitions of our own transcendence.

Acknowledgments

The idea of this book has been with me for decades. I have carried this idea with me around the globe. As I mention somewhere in the body of the book, in the middle of one of the texts I examine in this study I found a handwritten note in Persian in which I had outlined the timetable of reading it. This was at a time when I thought and wrote in Persian; right now I have no idea in what language I think but I write almost exclusively in English. Such is the life of a postcolonial person who is neither here nor there but traveling, as were the subjects of my study in this book, somewhere between here and there, in thoughts, languages, and locations.

The writing of this book would have been impossible without the help of my Iranian friends and colleagues who have procured for me copies of books, essays, articles, and manuscripts in Persian from Iranian libraries and online resources. Chief among these friends is Mahmoud Omidsalar. I am eternally grateful to him.

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I write these acknowledgments and put other finishing touches on my book while sitting at a café called Joe and the Juice in midtown Manhattan, in the neighborhood of my two younger children's public schools. This book has been with me literally around the globe. The fact of my life, one Iranian traveler among others I have read in this book, is the premise and promise of all their work – I am a New Yorker.