

# Global, Local and Indigenous: Reading Ali Shariati

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Even after hundred years of the formation of the discipline of international relations, the relevance of non-western approaches has remained in the knowledge peripheries. This paper attempts to discuss the ideas, concepts and methods of Ali Shariati in the larger framework of international relations from an Eastern perspective. In doing so, it attempts to problematise the existing linear reading of international relations with its existing knowledge framework. The paper further discusses various challenges and dilemmas faced by scholars from the East while attempting to make sense of the world from the realities of East, in a discipline like international relations (IR), that is traditionally been hegemonised by State- Military paradox. It attempts to think upon the idea of plurality in IR by reflecting on ideas of Ali Shariati. The article thus seeks the attention of young researchers from the East into the role of method in discerning reality and truth and maintains that each civilisation of the world has rich intellectual resources. One needs a proper method to put their indigenous method, ideas, concepts into perspective to make sense of the world differently.

**Keywords** Ali Shariati, East, International relations, civilisation, plurality

Ali Shariati is the main ideologue of the Iranian revolution (Ibrahim, 1982). As a student in Paris, he actively participated in the student movement in France and Iran's ongoing movement against the Shah. He supported the Algerian revolution and the movement of Patrice Lumumba and served a shorter time in jail for his anti-colonial struggle (Abedi, 1986). During this period, he had translated several works of Frantz Fanon including Che Guevara's "Guerilla Warfare." He was also actively involved in the Iranian student's movement abroad against Pahlavi (Matin, 2010). After his studies and activism in Europe, he returned to Iran in 1964. He taught in Mashhad University, where his lectures attracted students and inspired them to take part in the Iranian revolution later. Shariati drew his inspiration from western sociology- particularly Marxist sociology; from theories of the third world especially Frantz Fanon – as well as from Muslim theology and the teachings of the early Shia martyrs (Abedi, 1986). In Iran, he had a difference of opinion with both Shia Ulama and secular intelligentsia. The conservative Ulama accused him of borrowing heavily from western school of thought whereas the progressive secular intelligentsia opposed him by arguing his certain thoughts which are grounded in his religious school cannot be considered as progressive ideas.

Ali Shariati is one of the few intellectuals from the East who could be read at multiple vantage points with respect to sociology, history and global politics. Kamran Matin argues that "a more adequate account of Shariati's political thought requires a social theory that registers, at the most fundamental level, the mutually constitutive relation between international and intra national social change" (Matin, 2010). Abrahamian points out that readers coming to read and research on Ali Shariati will have difficulties in understanding him, as he tries to synthesise modern socialism and traditional Shi'ism and tries to adapt theories of western thinkers with native thinkers of Iran. Ali Shariati is more eulogised than analysed, more quoted in a selective manner than published. Abrahamian contends that any researcher could find three separate Shariati while reading him. One is a sociologist, "interested in the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, between ideas and social forces, and between consciousness and human existence" (Abrahamian, 1982). The other Shariati is a devout believer in Islam especially Shia Islam. The third is a Shariati who is a public speaker striving for indigenous modernity and often contends with clergy of Islamic society (Ibrahim, 1982).

The relevance of non-western approach in IR is widely discussed and analysed. However, the inquiry for non-western traditions has occurred within the limited frameworks of western philosophy, theories, concepts. This paper discusses some of the observations made by Ali Shariati in problematising the way the social science discipline has been dealt with in the Eastern world. It shall mainly reflect on the idea of 'plural IR' through the readings of Ali Shariati. The paper points out how intellectuals in Eastern world are influenced by western ideas, concepts, theories and methodology. In this direction, it shall advance at three levels; the first part problematises the present IR in East with respect to academic IR and IR in praxis and discusses the dilemma of East in initiating an indigenous turn in IR from an alternative perspective. The Second part discusses the role of the intellectual and method in alternative IR through the idea of Enlightened Intellectual and cone model analysis of Ali Shariati. The third part extensively discusses the idea of civilisation in general and in the wisdom of Ali Shariati and argues the need for bringing civilisation from the margins of IR to the centre to understand the world better. Such a shift in IR would break the epistemic binary and the myth of 'West' in our teleological progression and obsession.

### **Where shall we begin: The Dilemma of East**

Where shall we begin? What is to be done in the discipline of International Relations to make the discipline truly International? How do we pluralise International Relations from constraints of hegemonic universalism that has caught up the discipline in the past? These are some fundamental questions that any critical scholar of International Relations who approaches from a non-western perspective would often ask. This section tries to address these pertinent questions. Ali Shariati contends that the questions such as where shall we begin? and what is to be done? arise "[w]hen a society is in the process of evolving from one state to another state". He argues that "[t]he social conscience warrants that certain step be taken to free the society from the domineering effects of the existing social order and the status quo on the actual, intellectual, and religious life of its members and to replace that order with another" (Shariati, n.d.). For several centuries now, the framework of the contemporary world order has been originating from Westphalia. This order is derived from a European experience based on the idea of sovereignty, and territorial state. The locus standi of this order is attributed to the power of a state in terms of military and capital. Shariati believes that an order which has emerged out of a specific context in Europe in a particular period cannot be considered as the order of the world for other civilisations. Hence, a rethinking is imminent on the existing order of the world.

Shariati considers that intellectuals play a vital role in deciding the future of any society. He contends, unlike the western society where the intellectuals and masses appreciate one another and share similar outlook, the misfortune in traditional societies like Asia and Africa in general and in the Muslim societies, is their limited conversation and sharing of thoughts between the intellectual and masses (Shariati, n.d.). In fact, there are few public intellectuals in these societies who communicate, engage and enlighten the masses about global politics. The reason for such a gap between the intellectual and masses is because of the modern culture and educational system, our young people are educated and trained inside invincible and fortified fortresses. He stresses that, "the greatest responsibility of those who wish to rebuild their society and bring together the unintegrated and at times, antagonistic elements of the society into a harmonious whole is to bridge the gap between these two poles- the pole of theory and the pole of practice and to fill this great abyss of alienation between the masses and the intellectuals" (Shariati, n.d.).

Does the discipline of International Relations in the Eastern world have an indigenous vision? Are the scholars of Asia and Africa committed to develop a new epoch for International Relations through their own historical, civilisational, and cultural turn in IR and by not overlooking into the dominant explanatory realm of the west? The trajectory of IR

in Eastern world has been the way originally paved by the west both in theory and practice and continues to be. The world history for the East begins in the West either at Peloponnesian war or by the Great War history. Both events are 'war', an undesirable event in the history of Europe or the world. There after the world history for Eastern world transcends through great depression of Europe in 1930s, second great war, followed by the formation of UN as a world institution dominated by European state, Cold war held between US and USSR. Whereas the anti-colonial movement which is at the heart of Eastern world history against the imperialist forces of the West have never been registered as an important event in history, theory, and narratives of IR.

Sixty years after the independence of Eastern world from now, the East has not been able to completely get rid of the West in economic, cultural, and intellectual aspects. Chimini argues that "the threat of recolonisation is haunting the third world" in economic, cultural and intellectual aspects through concepts, analysis and explanation (2006). However, the last three decades remain very promising as one witnesses a growth in new kinds of literatures in International Relations such as postmodernism, post colonialism, and decolonisation of IR. Richard Ashely and RBJ walker "have presented a deconstruction of the discipline IR" (Hansen, 2005). A deconstruction of the discipline is a necessary shift that IR should engage as a large extent of scholarship has been written against the dominant subject of the 'discipline as such'.

The post-colonial scholarship has also attempted for such a shift in the conventional IR methodologically. Post-colonial studies with "their root in subaltern studies, many of these scholars define the project as an effort to rethink history from the point of view of the post-colonial world, including ex- metropolis" (Weinstein, 2005). "Different from the notion of neo-colonialism, a fundamentally materialist concept, these historians recognise the anti-colonial struggle and formal political independence as marking significant ruptures with the past, but at the same time recognises the decolonisation will be incomplete, even illusory in a world where imperialism, racism and ethnocentrism persist in the forms and where hybridity makes the formation of an autonomous cultural sphere unimaginable" (Young, 2001). In his seminal work 'Provincializing Europe', Chakrabarty articulates how margins are as plural and diverse as the centres (2000). From a post-colonial point of view, the important concepts in conventional IR such as state, sovereignty, citizen, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality, all reflect European thought and history (Tickner & Waever, 2009).

In the last few decades, African historians have focused on rewriting their history. Much of their efforts is to decolonise their thoughts or "Africanizing the study of the African past" (Garcia, 2006). This is indeed a much-needed intellectual movement to create a more authentic history of the African continent. (Garcia, 2006). "The search for such authenticity has shown that African cultures and societies are often the result of a broad range of influences that the notion of what is indigenous or authentically African needs to take into account this historical complexity" (2006). In his book "*In My father's Houses*", Appiah states that, "ideological decolonisation is bound to fail if it neglects either endogenous 'tradition' or exogenous 'western ideas, and that many African intellectual have failed to find a negotiable middle way" (1992). What Appiah suggests is a negotiable way between nativism and eurocentrism which is a third way like Ali Shariati's.

Ali Shariati in his speech "*Extraction and Refinement of cultural resource*" contends that any society which has rich raw resources but cannot really transfer these resources into rich energy or assets is worthless. He uses this analogy to describe the nations of Asia and Africa which have rich cultural and intellectual tradition but cannot really transfer it into a useful direction with adequate effort and method. What some of the earliest and largest civilisations like India, Iran and Egypt, rich in their philosophy, classics and knowledge tradition are

facing, is a similar tragedy. “An inept and incompetent national will sit upon such rich treasures which are capable of making people comfortable, nevertheless its people will remain ignorant, stagnant and deprived” (Shariati, 1969). Ali Shariati brings up the case of large nations and societies in Asia and Africa which have rich cultural resources and have been essentialised as ignorant and weak in the imaginaries of the human mind through civilisational discourse and discourse of power. Shariati directs the generation, looking to resolve the problems of their own society. To alter its nation and society to a creative one, they should have a historical and cultural awareness of their past. He cautions the intellectuals and scholars to not emulate another progressive society.

The uncritical acceptance of western society’s methodology, ideas, and analysis has led the intellectuals of social science in general and IR in particular to an inability to be creative and to raise original problems of Asia and Africa such as Indigenous people in IR, race, caste, and increased inequality. Today the most widely discussed theoretical analyses are neo realism based on power and military and neo liberalism based on capital and liberal western ideals. Both theoretical analysis which dominate the non-western society in analytical understanding of the world have emerged out of the contextual experience and grounded reality of western society. Alatas explains that such uncritical imitation of western social science is manifested in the areas of problem selection and choice of research method as well as the suggestion of solutions and policies. It is also manifested at the metatheoretical and epistemological level as well as the levels of theory and substantive work” (1993). Asian and African IR today is an import of intellectual practices of western IR methodologically and in problems of selection. What is alarming is the dominance of the mainstream Eurocentric pattern of thinking in Asian and African states whose realities and concerns shouldn’t have been to acquire power or adapt capitalist models, rather to resolve the problem of Race, Caste, Inequality both Intra-nationally and internationally? J.P. Singh, writing in the Indian context, makes a similar observation about emulating a progressive “western social science in Asia in general and in India Particular” (Oberoi, 1968). Like Shariati, he was also concerned with the lack of indigenous approach in social science.

Ali Shariati points out that it is the conscious European intellectual who knows the Asian African subjects much better than themselves, utilising the eastern spiritual, cultural resources to build new schools of thought. He further argues that “as the East is trying to become self-sufficient and independent in the economic realm in order to consume European consumer goods, by utilising the same consciousness, it must try and become independent of western spiritual products and ultimately achieve moral and spiritual independence” (Shariati, 1969). Asia and Africa today are in a contest to achieve economic dominance over the west as our political leaders often claim that “twenty -first century belongs to Asia” in their rhetoric speeches on international platforms. Ali Shariati reminds us that economic momentum is incomplete without intellectual independence and vice versa. In his advice to the search of writers and thinkers, An Eastern intellectual “must look to those individuals whose pains, history, condition and fate are identical” (1969). The East today is also facing the same struggle that predicted no solidarity among the oppressed of the East. He lists out a few philosophers of the East such as Omar Mawloud, Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire instead of any western thinker who would alienate an Eastern intellectual from his own social reality.

### **Future of Alternative IR**

The alternative perspective of realism has been critical theory; of capitalism has been socialism. The alternative perspective of civilisation as a political community has been the Westphalian state as a political community, and humans have been citizens in the modern world. The most common feature of all these alternative perspectives is that these voices have been as western as the hegemonic. It is true that the sharpest critic of hegemonising knowledge of the West has come from west. However, these alternative perspectives to the

hegemonic knowledge are not satisfying for an Asian or African who is facing the challenge. The alternative voice must come indigenously. An uncritical acceptance of the Eurocentric model of governance will not resolve the challenge and the fate of the ruled in the East. Anarchy has never been at the centre of our analysis in the world views of Eastern political thought or philosophy. These abstract ideas and thoughts have been exported from the west to our knowledge system through certain thinking patterns, methodology and epistemology. This analysis has been normalised through discourse of power.

Shariati in his lecture on "*Approaches to the understanding of Islam*" stresses the role of intellectual and the importance of method in any research. He argues that "the correct cognitive method for the discovery of truth is more important than philosophy, science or the possession of mere talent" (1979). He raises a few questions on the reason behind the appalling stagnation of Europe for a thousand years and the reason for the sudden shift in its journey which resulted in the emergence of the civilisation and culture of today's world. He points out that "the fundamental factor in the stagnation of thought, civilisation, and culture which lasted for a millennium in Medieval Europe was the Aristotelian method of analogical reasoning" (Shariati, 1979). When this approach towards questions and objects changed, he reminds, the world also changed. Further, he notifies how fundamental is the methodology for a culture with thought and scientific movement which had resulted in renaissance in Europe.

### **Role of Method**

According to Shariati, "method is of far-reaching importance in determining progress or decline" (1979). "It is the method of investigation, not the mere existence or non-existence of genius that brings about stagnation and apathy or motion and progress" (Shariati, 1979). He compares the intellectuals of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries such as Aristotle and Plato with 15<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals like Francis Bacon and Roger Bacon. Ali Shariati reminds his audience how two Bacons caused the advancement of science in Europe despite their inferiority to genius of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. He argues that both Bacons discovered the correct method of reasoning which transcended the destiny of Europe. What Ali Shariati through this comparison conveys is that any intellect can discover the truth if he/she knows the methodology to discern the truth. He makes an interesting analysis of Greek civilisation and modern Europe. The history of mankind has remained under the influence of Greek civilisation, but Athens could not invent a wheel. On the other hand, in modern Europe, "an average technician who cannot even understand the writings of Aristotle and his pupils has made hundreds of inventions" (1979).

Shariati observes that "the choice of correct method is the first matter to be considered in all the different branches of Knowledge. The task of any researcher must therefore be the choice of the best method of research and investigation" (1979). In such a scenario, what is the correct method for deciphering truth in knowing, explaining, and understanding this world? Walt points out that "we should avoid attempts to impose a single method or theoretical perspective on the field as this would limit research agendas to a narrow scope of questions that could be addressed by the popular method of the day, we should also strive to produce methodologically rigorous research that meets the standards of inquiry within the methods and methodological traditions with which we engage" (2005). However, it is a veracity that many of the research scholars embark upon the selection of research methods without having a good idea about their subject and methodology. This has always been a challenge for much of the alternative perspective in International Relations from non-western world. Lamont observes that "IR is a discipline defined by its inclusiveness of competing approaches to methodology, although at times the perception that there is certain methodological intolerance toward research that falls outside a particular tradition is also visible" (2015).

Any discipline's future is highly dependent on its past. The current trajectory of the dominant scholarship in IR reflects an intellectual tradition based on scientific, western, Eurocentric past. The reason behind such a trajectory of IR lies on the philosophers, events, history, geography, and theory the discipline had privileged. Although this trajectory purely lay in the discretion of intellectuals of the past, the future course of the discipline could take a different trajectory if the contemporary intellectuals decide for an alternative path. Shariati in his speech, 'A Glance at Tomorrow's History' says that 'Tomorrow's History' is a new revolutionary expression, "it becomes clear that the world has become aware of the fact that today one must write tomorrow's history as well or at least think about tomorrow's history" (Shariati,1979). For this shift in the subject, everyone from intellectuals to the common mass should think of a different history of IR, unlike in the past. The history of IR has been a history of war, a history of power, a history of State. The contemporary intellectuals in IR have often seen or assumed tomorrow of IR through their theoretical assumptions. That is, the future of the world is often predicted through theoretical assumptions in contemporary practices too. In a way, the destiny of International Relations today is decided by the history of the past, Intellectuals of the present and certainly theories as well. A shift is inevitable through re-reading of world history, Events, Intellectuals with a turn from privileging the exercise of Explanation to the realm of understanding in IR (Hollis & Smith, 1990).

### **Genius, Intellectual, Masses and Cone**

Any learner in the discipline of International Relations has always had a fundamental question in mind, who decides the future of disciplines? Why could the dominant scholarship International Relations not speak the language of the masses? Is not the discipline of IR just limited to a few intellectuals and their closed discourses and discussion on state, war, and diplomacy etc.? The answer to this question within the dominant paradigm of IR revolved around the explanation of power, state, discourses etc. in traditional International Relations. However, this answer may not satisfy any critical insider from the East. Ali Shariati, when discussing how the future history should be imagined, proposes a 'Cone Model' as a framework to analyse our thoughts, judgements, and perceptions in the course of imagining, deciding and writing tomorrow's history. He argues that this model could help us in predicting the future course of the world and history. In his cone model, he explains that the base of the cone is a widest surface that is filled with common mass in each society. He places scholars, intellectuals, and thinkers of all ages in the upper part of the cone which is comparatively less wide than its lower part. He also mentions a third group of people 'Genius'- who number very less and cannot be included in either and are placed at the top of the cone model. For Shariati, genius speaks new words and opposes the tradition of intellectualism and the method of science and intellect of that age. Ali Shariati says that over the years, the volume of the common masses decreases as the volume is added to the Intellectual Classes (n.d.). What is interesting in his observation is that the number of intellectuals increases in each era.

Ali Shariati begins his 'cone model' with the analysis of the Middle Ages where the intellectuals were the priests, at the top of the cone and common mass who went to church, at the bottom of the cone. In those days in Italy, France and England, the Intellectuals in the name of Jesus ordered and the common people implemented the orders of these priestly scholars. However, in the new age, there is a shift in the class of intellectuals of Europe as it is replaced by science. Ali Shariati notes that the class of common people remains the same and has not changed. Hence Shariati stresses that all our thinking, especially of intellectuals, must be directed to find the peculiarities of each period. Following the intellectuals, a new educated class emerged in Europe in the 17th century, and they ran universities, science, and modern life. The new intellectuals who sprouted in the age of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century appeared

at the peak of the cone. It is this new intellectual who later “replaced the worship of god which has been the religion of intellectuals in the Middle Ages, with the worship of science” (Shariati, n.d.). Amongst the new intellectuals, if we apply the same cone model to the present era of the 21st century, we could observe that the common people have not changed. On the other hand, an in-depth analogy of the intellectual class of the new era must be following exactly what the Genius of the previous era to which intellectuals did not listen to. Thus, “there are always geniuses at the peak of the cone in society who are above the educated class, who express new ideas which opposes the current ideas of the intellectual class and then, in a deterministic way, in the next era, the words of these geniuses, who are rare, strangers and alone in society, take the form of a School of thought for the educated people of the future” (Shariati, n.d.). That is, “the school of thought of the next period consists of beliefs and a way of thinking which were expressed by rare individuals of the previous era”. Thus, in every period, “we see that at the peak of this cone, geniuses exist who oppose the current educated class and do not listen to them” (n.d.). In the contemporary world of IR, the American and British scholarship are the dominant educated classes which influence the masses with their Eurocentric vision of the world.

### **Enlightened Intellectual**

Apart from Intellectuals, Ali Shariati refers to a category of people called ‘Enlightened Intellectual’. They are the category of people who feel some commitment and responsibility to their society with respect to their times and want to deliver something about it (Shariati, n.d.). He explains that Enlightened Intellectual teaches their society to change from the existing conditions and directs the people how to go about in that direction of change and progress in their society. He points out that it is the enlightened soul within each society who plans a mission of becoming and directs their path (Shariati, n.d.). Ali Shariati’s Enlightened Intellectual or committed intellectual is similar to Antonio Gramsci’s ‘Organic Intellectuals’. In his book “*Prison Notebook*”, Gramsci contends that “all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci classifies intellectuals as traditional and organic intellectuals where the former are teachers, priests and administrators and continue to do the same thing from generation to generation and the latter are actively involved in society and always struggle to change minds and make changes in society. On the other hand, an extreme definition of intellectual is given by Julien Benda. For him, the real intellectuals are supposed to risk being at the stake, ostracised, or crucified. “They are symbolic personage marked by their yielding distance from practical concerns, as such therefore they cannot be in many numbers, nor routinely developed” (Said, 1994) because “intellectuals were no longer people who addressed a wide public; instead, they had become members of what he called a culture of critical discourse” (Gouldner, 1979). Each region of the world has produced intellectuals and each of those formations is debated and argued over with fiery passion.

Edward Said, in his book, ‘The Representation of Intellectual’ contends that “the particular threat to the intellectual today, whether in the west or non-western world, is not the academy, nor the suburbs, nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing house, but rather an attitude” he called ‘professionalism’ (Said, 1979). By professionalism, he meant to think of your work as an intellectual as something you do as an office work with a professional attitude. The professionalism in the academia does not allow you to speak outside the existing accepted paradigm and by conforming to the dominant voice, being yourself marketable, uncontroversial, and apolitical. He points out that specialisation is the first of the pressures resulting from a professional attitude in academia. Specialisation brings an increased technical formalism and less socio-historical sense of real experience in shaping up one’s opinion and analysis. “Another pressure of professionalism is the inevitable drift towards power and authority in its adherents, towards the requirements and prerogatives of power and towards being directly employed by it”. Said cites how the United States funded

some of the best universities in the US to do priority research with national security as the agenda when the US was competing with the USSR for world hegemony. Said points out that “not only the state departments but special interest lobbies like Rockefellers, Ford, Mellons all employ academic experts to carry out research and study programs that further commercial as well as political agendas”. There is nothing new about this way of professional approach in the free market system of Europe. He contends that “there are grants and fellowships to be had from think tanks, plus sabbatical leaves and publishing subventions, as well as professional advancement and recognition” (1974).

### **Moving beyond the Epistemic Binaries**

A general theory with the idea of homogenous universalism has always been in the epitome of knowledge, in the intellectual hierarchy of International Relations (Matin, 2011). Chakrabarty argues that “the idea of the universal is subverted or mutated precisely when it is actually universalised, i.e., when they are imposed on or adopted by a social formation different from the one in which it was originally formed” (2000). The subjective definition of Westphalian state as a political community, human as citizens, peace as absence of war is being definitive and is a homogeneous universal category in dominant scholarship of IR. In fact, IR considers these variables as an object of analysis, precisely as western subjects. It rarely takes other categories such as civilisation as political community, narrative as method, and culture into account. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the modern western civilisation is violent in nature as it is often held as a straitjacket over the East and justifies its universalistic claims and particular western ontology. Shariati while explaining his category of enlightened soul breaks this myth of universal category. He contends that unless there is a universal man, there cannot exist a universal enlightened prototype with common values and characteristics (Shariati, n.d.). “Man is far from the age when earth will be one human society or one nation with common language, culture ideals and common problems”. “There is no universal prototype for being enlightened”. One may be an enlightened soul in Black Africa, but the same person is not one in Islamic community. Or one may be considered enlightened in France, a genuine and honest enlightened person who has made a difference in his own society, but the same person in India will not be enlightened and may be unable to perform the role of an enlightened one there (ibid). In both ontology and methodology, Shariati gives more importance to the social, cultural, and religious context of the problem and the intellectual that he or she tries to deal with. Unlike positivism as a dominant methodology in IR tries to disassociate or divorce itself from subjects of culture with its value neutral claim. In his speech “where shall we begin” he cites the need of “Satrean Revolution” (Shariati, n.d.) in Western societies and notifies how a Sartre like saviour would be a catastrophe in the context of Africa and Asia where people are struggling from malnourishment, and poverty. Unlike International Relations which tends to push a state sponsored discourse of hegemonic modernisation, Shariati brings up an alternative approach with the discourse of civilisation as a bottom up and contextually grounded narrative.

### **Bringing ‘Civilisation’ Back Home**

In his book “Civilization on Trial” Arnold Toynbee makes an appeal to the historians of his generation and the generation to come. “If we are to perform the full service that we have the power to perform for our fellow human beings the important service of helping them to find their bearings in a unified world we must make the necessary effort of will to break our way out of prison walls of the local short-lived histories of our own countries and our own cultures, we must accustom ourselves to taking a synoptic view of history as a whole” (Toynbee, 1948). For Toynbee, “this was by no means a purely academic demand since a universal history of civilisations was a prerequisite for making the future of mankind in a unified world a happy one” (Jackson, 1999). Patrick Jackson opines that Arnold Toynbee



must not have realised that the study of civilisation will immediately disappear from the mainstream academic of International Relations. Today, civilisation is a less studied subject in International Relations. The literatures of International Relations make occasional reference to civilisations. The mainstream literature treats civilisation as a premodern community that has been subsumed by the global span of western civilisation (Gilpin, 1979). Unlike civilisations, which are considered as a fluid concept, the sovereign state which is a dominant concept in IR is treated as a more concrete representation of the political community. According to Jacinta O. Hagan “the tendency of international relations scholars and analysts to shy away from the concept of civilisations was also a result of propensity to marginalise issues pertaining to culture in International Relations (Hagan, 2002). In certain respects, the utility of culture as an analytical concept was compromised where it was seen as implicated in the exercise of power, employed as a tool to differentiate but also to diminish the non-western (William, 1999). Jacinta O Hagan argues that “it is not only these factors which helped to push culture and civilisation into the margins of International relations but the epistemological and universalist theoretical premises of International Relations have also constrained discussion of culture and thus tend to further marginalise the discussion of Civilisation in the discipline of International Relations” (2002).

Ali Shariati presents his “civilisational discourse as an alternative to the prevailing and state sponsored discourse of modernisation” (Saffari, 2013). According to Shariati, at least “since the eighteenth century the modern world has been characterised by the rise of the western civilisation and the decline of non-western civilisation” . For Shariati, “by advancing a Eurocentric discourse of civilisation, leading western thinkers since the eighteenth century have played a major role in facilitating European colonialism and imperialism and the formation of a globalised modern order” (2013). In Ali Shariati’s view the European philosophers, historians, and sociologists have tried to portray western modernity as the singular human civilisation and the same as the only path towards progress for humanity. With such an analysis of West vis-a-vis East, European thinkers tried to depict the east as a lesser civilisation and the period prior to the European Enlightenment and renaissance as the Dark Age. For European thinkers, The Eastern “societies must either follow in the footsteps of the modern west and join the civilisation camp or forever remain inferior to the west and its civilisational achievements” (Shariati, 1976).

In examining “the rise of modern west”, Shariati is simultaneously attentive to the consequence of the Renaissance, the protestant reformation, the enlightenment, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism, as well as to the influence of non-European cultures and civilisations, and the role of European colonialism since the fifteenth century” (Shariati, 1972). He perceived that “like all other historical civilisations, the modern west is the product of cross cultural and cross civilisational encounters, and through his writings and lectures he makes repeated references to the material and cultural contributions of Islamic, Indian Chinese and other civilisations to the rise of modernity in Europe and the formation of the modern western civilisation” (Saffari, 2013). Shariati further explains that it is the moral and thinking pattern of the non-West which has to be changed first and alleges “it was the business of enlightened European intellectuals to plan a special method of perverting the mind, the taste and the lifestyle of the non-European” (Shariati, n.d.) which results in homogenisation of Human being. He contends that, as a part of this intellectual process, the first task is to destroy the difference in thinking and make the non-western to conform to a single pattern in all aspects of life. He offers an insight into how three important concepts such as modernisation, Westernisation and Civilisation have been depicted as synonymous so that non westerners do not feel they have been reshaped in their intellect, mind and personality. Such a realisation would invoke resistance.

For a variety of reasons, the conceptual analysis of the role of culture and civilisational identities in international and world order has long been neglected. However, once we begin

to ask questions about their relevance to world order, a number of interesting issues emerge (Hagan, 2002). We become aware that the current world order is underpinned by a political system that is fundamentally based on the ideas, institutions, and experiences of western civilisation. We also note that the conceptual tools we employ to analyse the world order, drawn from the discipline of international relations are not cultural- neutral but deeply embedded in the intellectual and historical evolution of the west (2002). The school of post colonialism, postmodernism, and post structuralism which emerged as a new methodology too knew the world had taken birth out of the suspicion in the existing dominant narratives of world order. Saffari (2013) points out that, "Ali Shariati sees the mid twentieth century anti colonial and anti-imperialist movements around the world, and the increasing disillusionment with Europe's mechanistic civilisation and its promise of modernity, as a hopeful sign pointing to alternative civilisational possibilities". Ali Shariati argues that "a loss of faith in the modern epistemic regime and its philosophical tenets is important for the decline of present civilisation and for the emergence of alternative civilisation. Thus, he argues, increasingly European, Asian and African intellectuals are drawing attention to the "plurality of civilisational possibilities for present and future" (Shariati, n.d.).

Richard Falk (2014) observes that "Global civilisation experience in the modern era has been and continues to be primarily shaped by Eurocentrism that is, by values, ideas, hegemonic perceptions and organisational categories that derive or indirectly from the west". He observes that the domination of western civilisation has led, ever since the peace of Westphalia in 1648, to undisclosed civilisationally specific framing of such root concepts of world order as power, law as sovereignty, nation- state and justice (Falk, 2014). There is little mention of the civilisation of the East in such dominant discourse of world politics although, the greatest number of civilisations geographically is in the Eastern world. An important reference of literature in the civilisational discourse in International Relations is seminal work of Samuel P. Huntington "*The Clash of Civilization*" which predicts the west as a civilisation is in the decay and it will come in clash- that is Islam versus West. Many of those who were unhappy with discourse of civilisational clash came with the idea of dialogue of civilisation. To this end, the United Nations even celebrated the year of 2001 as the year of UN Civilisational Dialogue. International Relations as a discipline should have a new framework of learning civilisation especially from the perspective of dialogue, not in terms of clash which is undesirable from West to East in its historical account of the world.

## **Conclusion**

Shariati in the context of Iran advocates for a radical transformation of Iranian Society through an indigenous turn looking more into the civilisation of Iran. He is of the opinion that each civilisation of the world has rich intellectual resources. One needs a proper method to put their indigenous method, ideas, concepts into perspective. For him method is pivotal in any intellectual exercise. He explains how despite having an intellectual treasure in Athenian Greece with philosophers like Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, they could not transform the destiny of Greek. He points out the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe changed the destiny of European society from apathy and ignorance to the epitome of knowledge production. He strongly believes that the Eastern society also has such knowledge production which is as deep as the current western intellectual tradition. He argues that it is the role of contemporary intellectuals to restructure and transform the Eastern world by delving deep into the philosophy, history, and civilisation of the East. Ali Shariati strongly opposes the uncritical acceptance or import of western concepts to the Eastern context. Ali Shariati is of the opinion that social scientists in the East apply the colonial approach in the name of scientific approach. One needs to give much importance to the method of enquiry while discerning the truth. From this vantage point, contemporary IR scholars in the East do not seem to give much importance to the question of methodology while trying to discern truth in the non-west or East. For contemporary IR programmes in the East. The question of method of enquiry is least important. In Shariati's perspective, nothing could

change much in the destiny of the East in global politics through this new trend of non-western approach in academic IR.

Although categories of East West are very central to the reading of Ali Shariati, he is not a nativist or occidentalist. The study observes that, such an observation by his critic to paint him as nativist and occidentalist is a misreading of Ali Shariati. The critics have confused his commitment for authentic intellectualism through delving deep into our own civilisation which is not in binary opposite to the other. It is true that Shariati is criticising the blind acceptance of the west in the name of progress and modernity and East in the name of fundamentalism. What he proposes is a middle way in between strong anti-western or pro-western approaches towards western knowledge tradition. As an intellect, he is highly influenced by both western and Eastern philosophers and intellectuals alike. He is influenced by the writings of Muhammad Iqbal, Tagore, Al Afghani, Fanon, Sartre, Marx and Gandhi. But he has been more sympathetic to the line of Iqbal, Gandhi and Al-Afghani who were western educated but wanted to search for an indigenous modernity with the traditions within the East. His call for 'return to the shelf' is very much to this line of thought, that is to revive the civilisational diversity of the East which colonialism seeks to destroy. In the world view of Ali Shariati, International Relations as a discipline has a new framework of learning civilisation, especially from the perspective of dialogue not in terms of clash which is undesirable from West to East in its historical account of the world.

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