

## To Have an Ethos Transplant, as It Were: Iranian Organizations in Washington DC in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### Abstract

Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2004 to 2006 among a range of Iranian organizations in Washington, D.C., this article argues that the studied organizations were engaged, without being always necessarily aware of it or formulating it as such, in what we may call an “ethos transplant:” a transformation of “Iranian character” and political culture to make it more susceptible to “democracy;” a subject-making project in the Foucauldian sense. We trace this medicalized discourse about “national traits” and “political culture” to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and review several outbursts of this approach in the Iranian and international scene thenceforth. Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel, *Dracula*, is discussed at length as the epitome of this kind of approach.

**Keywords:** ethos; Iranian-Americans; non-governmental organizations; *Dracula*; political culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2004 to 2006 among a range of Iranian organizations, from political to civic and from scholarly to cultural, in Washington, D.C. My argument is that these organizations were engaged, without being always necessarily aware of it or formulating it as such, in what we may call an “ethos transplant:” a transformation of “Iranian character” and political culture to make it more susceptible to “democracy;” a subject-making project in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1976). Granted that both the “Iranian subject” and the “democratic subject” are construed in a certain way in this particular juncture, and that like all constructions they have a history, a politics and a poetics, one could argue that my field was a scene of encounter between interpretations, histories, politics, and poetics of what it meant to be Iranian and what it meant to be democratic. Whether through training new Iranian-Americans in the practical skills of participation in a democracy (how to vote, how to get small business advantages, how to network, how to contact one’s representatives in the government), or by teaching Iranians how to reconfigure their understanding of the individual, rights, life, and sovereignty in democratic as opposed to totalitarian terms (through such assets as the “human rights database” and the “democracy library”), the organizations in question both tried to “cure” Iranians of their political sentiments, knowledges, and experiences (their “malfunctioning” political culture) and cultivate in them new attitudes, norms, ways of seeing, and of making sense; new connections and configurations. This “ethos transplantation” was the gist of their subject-making projects: making “democratic subjects,” helping Iranians become Americans –albeit with an ethnic touch, color, flavor, accent, what is commonly referred to as “heritage.”

To make this argument, I draw on Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel, *Dracula*, where a similar assault on ethos is launched, this time in the name of modernity at the footsteps of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a scene of encounter between the “modern” West and its ultimate Other, described in medical and pathological terms. Women perceived as especially in need of rescuing in modernizing/democratizing missions figure prominently in both my field in early 21<sup>st</sup> century America and

in Bram Stoker's late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Draculaesque figures of speech and illustration are already quite commonly used in political contests and contexts by Iranians across the spectrum. In their illuminating chapter on the post-revolutionary Iranian visual projections, Fischer and Abedi (1990) provide several examples of such portrayal: A group of vampires flying out of the American capitol, depicted as a castle in the dark, and dropping bombs on what appears to be the Middle East (Fig 6.1: 336), the reaper of death, a skeleton draped in the American flag, with the Soviet hammer and sickle on his shoulder and the Star of David in flames below, suggesting the conspiracy of the three powers against Islam (Fig 6.7: 351), the powerful hand of Islam chocking the serpent of imperialism draped in an American flag (Fig 6.19: 367), and imperialism as a screaming skull with blood dripping from its jaws, draped in the British and Israeli flags and with the flags of the US and the USSR in its eye sockets, again, being chocked by the powerful hand of Islam (Fig. 6.21: 369). In this article, I try to show how the myth of Dracula, and particularly the Irish writer's late 19<sup>th</sup> century rendering of it, can help us understand the subject-making projects and "ethos work" of Iranian organizations in my field better.

### **PATHOLOGIZATION OF IRANIAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

In March 2007, I attended an award ceremony held by one of the Iranian organizations in Houston. Upon learning that I was in the process of defending my dissertation about Iranian organizations in Washington DC, a very well-dressed slim Iranian woman pressed me to explain what types of people I had found we were. Seeing my reluctance to respond to such a broad question, she offered: "we are complex people, right?" Right. She then continued: "we never trust each other, we are always suspicious, we can't work together ...." I told her that my findings confirmed some of those statements, but that Washington was a kind of place that lent itself to suspicion and mistrust because of its small scale and the overwhelming density of places and people of power that made you think you were constantly being watched (and a lot of times you were), trying to suggest that it was not so much a question of what type of people we were as what types of situations we lived in. Later, a well-dressed, clean-shaven

Iranian man approached me and said: “I hear you have a Ph.D. on Iranians. I have two questions for you, if you can tell me in two seconds: How can we deal with paranoia? And how can we deal with envy?” I laughed and said that he needed to make an appointment and come to my clinic for such serious chronic ailments. It was clear that in that party, surrounded by Iranian doctors with different specialties, I had become the Culture Doctor and they expected my diagnosis and prescription. He, then, told me that he didn’t think his generation could be “fixed,” anyway, and if anything could be done by or for Iranians, it would have to be by people under thirty-five years of age.

My fieldwork pointed to a pathology of organizational development amongst Iranians that both those studying Iranian political culture and Iranians themselves love to talk about. There have been several outbursts of accounts by both foreigners and Iranians about Iranian “national character” traits (in other words, their “culture”) as the cause of their socio-economic and political situation at different junctures in the Iranian and international scene. One of these outbursts could be argued to have taken shape during the Qajar era when European travels to Iran and “the East” in general were on the rise, and the Iranian elite were also beginning to visit Europe, resulting in travelogues obsessed with differences observed in technological advancement, gender and sexuality norms and practices, dress and leisure, level of education and hygiene, and so forth (see for example Lady Sheil 1856, Sackville-West 1926, and Bell 1928). It was around this time that Iranian intellectuals first started to look at Iran through the eyes of the West and probed Iranian ways of being in the world and doing things for seeds of Iranian backwardness.

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi in his account of “patriotic and matriotic nationalism” points to the characterization of the homeland (*vatan*) as a mother infected by multiple diseases in the Constitutional era medicalized political discourse (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001). Bringing several examples from prominent papers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *Iblaq*, *Rahnama*, *Habl Al-Matin*, and *Tarraqi*, Tavakoli-Targhi shows how Iranian intellectuals of the time lamented about the motherland being ill, having a high fever, confined in bed and stuck with the corrupt “Iranian physicians” (a metonym for statesmen) who instead of curing her illness are prescribing mortal poison, infected with chronic and immobilizing diseases (only to be saved by

vaccinating her with “knowledge”) and the like (Ibid). According to Tavakoli-Targhi, these “perennial illnesses of the motherland were metonyms for the social crises of the social body and the body politic.” (2001: 124) In the serialized “Diagnosis of Iran” in *Rahnama* (1906-1908) discussed at length by Tavakoli-Targhi ” (2001: 124-127), for example, Iran’s sons gather to do something for the dying motherland and they invite over all sorts of foreign physicians, from Russian to British and from Ottoman to German, only to realize at the end that they ought to seek a native cure. Native physicians then diagnose mother-*vatan* with melancholy, apoplexy, paralysis, dropsy, and rabies – all transmitted to her by foreigners from ancient Greek and Arab invasions to the Mongolian conquest. The symptoms enumerated in the account for the Iranian “national character” are symptoms of Iran’s “political disease,” its infection, its national and political paralyses, which eventually brought Iran to a state of coma until its awakening at the eve of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, after which the physicians’ prognosis is that there are exciting signs of recovery. At the end of this serialized account, there is a call for nursing and curing the motherland through a demand for public security, for the protection of life, honor speech, and thought, and for justice and equality (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001:132)

In 1926, Vita Sackville-West, an English writer and avid traveler, also a close friend of Virginia Woolf’s, wrote about what she called the “internal rot” to describe the characteristics of the Iranians she had visited during her trip to “the East”:

For the ruler of Persia, however, half the problem lies precisely in the character of that nation; easy to dominate, because energy meets with no opposition, they are, once dominated, impossible to use; there is no material to build with; like all weak, soft people, they break and discourage the spirit sooner than a more difficult, vigorous race; there may be nothing to fight against, but equally there is nothing that will fight in alliance with the leader. This character leads naturally to the innumerable abuse and corruption from which Persia suffers; the absence of justice, the sale of offices, the corruption, bribery, speculation, and general dishonesty that appalls the beholder, not only from a moral point of view, but also from

exasperation with the stupidity and elaboration of such a system. This internal rot, no less than the political pressure from England and Russia, must complicate the position of any energetic ruler; it is the most urgent thing, the thing which must be cleaned out before any other problem is dealt with, such problems as transport, under-population, irrigation, the condition of the peasant, the cultivation of the land (1990: 128).

Towards the end of World War II, the need to “understand” (and not just blindly fight) US “enemy countries” such as Japan and the Soviet Union, the perceived challenges and threats from Communism, the emerging Cold War, and the increasingly passionate decolonization prospects and processes in Africa and Asia, convinced both liberals and conservatives in the US of the need to sharpen their ability “to understand and act effectively in previously unfamiliar nations and societies all across the globe” (Szanton, 2004). This led to an outpour of scholarly attention and government budget to international, global, and area studies in the US, and with it, another outburst of accounts about the Iranian “national character” and “political culture” in the 1970s. James Bill and Marvin Zonis are among the most prominent scholars in this field. Their accounts are not necessarily pathological, but do see culture and “collective personality” or ethos at the foundations of forms of “governmentality” (note that Foucault poses this concept around the same time in the 1970s to suggest that government is also about a set of habits, and not just pure suppressive power).

Perhaps the most elaborately discussed concept in the portrayal of Iranian political culture in this era is the “web-system” put forth by James Bill in 1972. In this system, political power is perceived to be exercised by means of informal gatherings and personal ties rather than through formal institutions. Inter- and intra-group suspicions and quarrels are part and parcel of this web-system:

Committees, commissions, associations, and formal organizations have never been prevalent and where they existed they have not operated as such. They have been characterized by fissures, arguments,

inactivity, personalism, and in general, by organizational chaos. Even professional organizations such as the Iranian Medical and Bar Associations have been little more than gatherings characterized by strife and factionalism. The more subtle, intricate, and complex facets of tension and rivalry do not thrive in a formal setting where votes are counted and minutes recorded. (Bill 1972:45)

Bill states that, instead, Iranians negotiate power through a network of cliques, called *dawrahs* or *dowrehs*. *Dowrehs*, which William Beeman (1986) also discusses in his linguistic ethnography based on his fieldwork in Iran of the 1970s, and Hamid Naficy(1993) in his account of the Iranian community in Los Angeles during the 1980s and early 1990s, are small groups of people who meet periodically, usually rotating the meeting place among the membership. There could be professional *dowrehs*, family *dowrehs*, political *dowrehs*, intellectual *dowrehs*, former-classmate *dowrehs*, gambling *dowrehs*, religious *dowrehs*, and so forth. *Dowrehs* have a long history in Iran: Dervishes and Sufi leaders would gather in such small groups to chant, the “debating Muslims” in Fischer’s account (1990) discuss things in that manner, and important political and business decisions have been commonly made over card tables, in gardens, and during hikes and hunting trips. Of course, knowing only too well how personal the political and how political the personal is, the police has historically subjected these *dowrehs* and private gatherings among family and friends to surveillance and scrutiny.

Reza Behnam (1986) expresses a similar idea when he says that Iranian sociality is traditionally defined in terms of kinship; citizens think of their leader as a charismatic father figure that they respect and fear and never directly address. There are no formal written rules and regulations about how to treat each other, but generally it is the father’s role to provide for his family and protect the honor of the motherland, particularly against outside forces. Iranians have traditionally tended to socialize exclusively within their homes, separated from the outside world by high walls; everybody outside the home has been viewed with mistrust and suspicion; therefore, opportunities for cooperation and association amongst citizens have

been lost. Behnam then goes on to say that it is common in the Middle East in general for people to work through sprawling conglomerates of personal cliques, familial networks, and regional factions, hence the lack of a formal group structure and the absence of organizational rationale. He contends that while modern institutions have been introduced to Iran, the social structure has remained traditional and people have continued to work through “an ad hoc constellation of miniature systems of power, a cloud of unstable micro politics, which compete, ally, gather strength, and very soon overextended, fragment again” (Behnam 1986:113). For an effective administration, these structures and patterns of socialization must change, the father figure must be demolished, and new norms leading to a self-governing political system in which power is shared not centered must take its place.

Similarly, Dal Seung Yu (2002) states that democracy (note that in Bill’s and Behnam’s accounts, the question is modernity, not democracy) cannot be brought about merely through democratic institutions but that a democratic attitude is needed, a combination of beliefs, knowledges, and feelings pertaining to political processes. According to Yu, the Eastern or Asiatic syndrome from which Iranian political culture suffers is made of certain sentiments with regards to politics, such as fear, distrust, suspicion, submission, alienation, indifference, opportunism, hypocrisy, insecurity, pessimism, etc., and in order for democracy to take effect, these sentiments must first be changed.

There has been another outburst of accounts of “affective malfunction” amongst Iranians in the 1990s at the close of the eight-year war with Iraq and the beginning of the “Rebuilding Era,” characterized by neoliberal policies, the Reform discourse, and a tendency towardspsychologism, particularly Positive Psychology. This time a genre perhaps best labeled as “homey sociology” (*jame’eshenasi khodemani*) by one of its producers, Hasan Naraghi, has emerged that lists character traits popularly held responsible for Iranian social malfunctioning, such as “Our Aversion to Truth and Our Secrecy,” “Our Hypocrisy,” “Our Predisposition to Despotism,” “Our Self-Centrism and Rivalry,” “Our Aversion to Schedules and Timing,” “Our Opportunism,” “Our Sentimentalism and Love of Slogans,” “Our Conspiracy Theories,” “Our Aversion to Law and Tendency to



Violate It,” “Our Constant Complains and Expectations,” and so forth (Naraghi, 2003). My research on Iranian organizations in Washington DC, then, took place against the backdrop of this already existing widespread perception of the “Iranian disease” and its cure in changing our norms, attitudes, patterns of sociality, and the systems through which we “traditionally” make sense of the world and negotiate power. In a sense, it could be said to be the common scenario of encounter between the colonized peoples and normative modernity, repeating itself in an encounter between Iranians and American democracy.

As one of my informants in Washington pointed out, the question of culture as pathology was all too familiar even in the personal lives of Iranian-Americans at the time of my research: When she had sought help at a concealing center for unbearable depression, she had been told that there was nothing in her life but something about the way she perceived it that was wrong. Having been familiar with the European psychoanalytical techniques widely practiced in Iran roughly since the 1950s, she had been shocked to be told that the source of her discomfort was to be found in her attitude and not in her life. After all, she had lived a rather full life of dramatic events, what with the revolution and the eight-year war; couldn't they find enough ground for her feelings of insecurity and loss there? Instead of analyzing her past in search of the roots of her unhappiness, she had been asked to make lists of ten things that she had done that had made her happy in a day, ten good things that she had done for other people, ten good things that other people had said about her, and so forth. Her US diagnostics had it that something in her mind was not quite working; and the part of it that could not be fixed by balancing her chemicals could be improved by re-training her mental capacities to perceive differently; a change of attitude, of patterns, and systems of making sense. Somewhere, in the process of listing and numbering and recording, instead of remembering and analyzing, she said, her mind had started to learn how to see and make sense of data differently. She was told to let go of the association between sadness and profundity, of taking professional feedback personally, of feeling guilty for being treated well, of experiencing sensations of loss and nostalgia every time things changed even for the better; and as she cut those connections and made new ones between things, she felt the

landscape of her self was reconfigured, the structure of her feelings transformed, new norms for loss and triumph were set, and she was on her way to cure. Not just the fact that you can get an “ethos transplant” if yours is malfunctioning, but the sheer practicality and affordability of becoming (instead of the existentialist concern with being), was to her so American. She told me that of all the changes of language and dress and conduct and consumption that having been in America for almost a decade had entailed for her, this reconfiguration of ways of seeing and making sense was what had made her wonder just how “Americanized” she had become.

### **DRACULA AS FIGURE OF THE UNDEAD OTHER OF MODERNITY**

The Irish writer Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel, *Dracula*, starts with an account of travel from Britain Eastward (although the East here is not the “Orient” typically trekked by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, i.e. the Middle and Far East, but Eastern Europe), told as a narrative of modernity versus tradition. Jonathan Harker the solicitor is on a train from London to Transylvania where he is to close a real estate deal with Count Dracula who is intending to purchase a house in London. Harker’s account reads a lot like those of the actual accounts of Eastward travel by Europeans of the period referred to earlier in the previous section, with an acute sense of transition from one state of being (not just of customs but of mind, not just spatially but temporally, as the East is the Past) into another. Once he is settled in the Dracula’s castle in Transylvania, his encounters with this ultimate Other turn his shock and awe at the cultural and ethnic differences of East Europeans into fear of a completely different creature: “What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man?” (Stoker, 1970:33) Or “This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless.” (Ibid.:48-49). Of course he does not get to close the deal with the dreadful Count and instead is taken hostage at the castle.

In the meanwhile, Dracula does mysteriously land in Britain on a stormy night, while Harker is still a captive at his castle, later to escape and join the good fight against evil in London. In contrast to the Eastern Other, the Westerners (not just the British nobleman who is engaged to the first fair British lady to be victimized by Dracula, the British psychoanalyst who runs an asylum, and Harker's wife who is an exceedingly clever and virtuous woman, but the Dutch professor who is invited from Amsterdam to work on the case and the American fellow, a lover and friend of the British, who becomes part of the team against evil) are the possessors of Knowledge and Power. Throughout the novel, these six Westerners (Nobleman, Psychoanalyst, Wife, Professor, American, and Harker himself) employ a variety of modern technologies of the period to communicate their knowledge and exercise their power against the mysterious element of evil. Those include trains (the Victorian railway mania), telegraphs, typewriters, phonograms, newspapers, medical procedures such as blood transfusion, and so forth. All through their battle, they obsessively record and document things, their almost religious faith in scientific method and evidence being in contrast with the superstitious religious beliefs of the commoners in Eastern Europe that were only passed on locally and orally (different ways of collection, representation, and circulation of data/knowledge). While the novel starts in the genre of travelogue, it continues in the form of letters, telegraphs, journals, typewritten transcriptions of phonographed observations, newspaper clippings, memorandums, etc.; so not just the content but the form of the novel is indicative of this obsession with modernity and scientificity.

When the Psychoanalyst's most interesting lunatic, classified as a "zoophagous (life-eating) maniac" (Stoker 1970: 67), turns out to be mysteriously related to Dracula, another one of modernity's favorite others joins the club. Now we have the Eastern cultures/races, the supernatural element of terror and evil, and the mentally abnormal. All three represent, in the spirit of the period, anomalies of the brain. Advances in science are to eventually figure out this question of the brain, of why it is that other races, supernatural creatures, and abnormal individuals share the apparent cognitive inability (as of yet – but they may evolve) to be rational and make sense. One thing all three aforementioned entities share is, in fact, a "child-brain.": "Our

man-brains that have been of man so long and that have not lost the grace of God, will come higher than his child-brain that lie in his tomb for centuries, that grow not yet to our stature, and that do only work selfish and therefore small (Ibid.: 318).”

Interestingly, a second feature they all (Slovaks/gypsies/other races, Dracula, and the lunatic) share is “lack of freedom.” In recounting the history of his race for Mr. Harker (who, to his regret, fails to take precise notes and record everything), Count Dracula refers to the blood that runs in his veins and in those of his ancestors as the blood of the brave leaders who freed their people from the slavery they had to endure back in the Hungarian fatherland (Transylvanians were in fact Hungarian exiles), only to be sold off by less able leaders to the Turks later as slaves. Obviously, Dracula narrates his history (through blood: genealogy) as one of constant battle for freedom, of leaving one’s land or driving the others out of it. Ironically, now Undead and with all his supernatural powers, he is no more free than ever, and the only place in which he can rest is a box filled with the soil of his ancestral land, “his earth-home, his coffin-home, his hell-home” (Stoker 1970: 223) which he keeps in the basement of his castle and drags along with him when he travels. He is only free to move about at night and can only change shapes at sunrise, noon, or sunset. He cannot cross running water and suffers from a number of other limitations. And as only death could set his soul free, he is also imprisoned in his undead mortal figure. According to Harker’s wife, the poor fellow is to be pitied rather than detested and eliminating him is only going to make him feel better.

But as was mentioned before, evil and irrationality ride very close to each other in Bram Stoker’s novel: Irrationality itself is a prison for the mind, as it blocks modern advances. The Eastern natives and the lunatic alike are prisoners of their own inferior minds. As for the Western team of Dracula hunters: “we have sources of science; we are free to act and think; and the hours of the day and the night are ours equally (Stoker 1970: 222).” And they are “pledged to set the world free” (Ibid.: 300). Freedom, it seems, is a matter of physiology. It is having the right kind of brain. The child-brain is a tyrant brain. Those who have it must be confined (lunatic) or eliminated (Dracula). Just as Evil is irrational, Good is rational. Even the “lunatic” patient in his sane moments grasps that the progressive world belongs to those

who by nationality (American), heredity (nobleman), or natural mental gifts (Professor and Psychoanalyst) are superior to others (Easterners, peasants, and psychopaths).

For all we know, Dracula could be Irish or Arab, Ireland and Syria being locations that we are told Stoker had been considering before choosing Transylvania as the location for his novel. Eleni Coundouriotis argues that the choice of Eastern Europe was not random and that Stoker's narrative was meant to set "in motion an incoherence that aims to blur and repress the cogency of Eastern Europe's claims on Europe" (1999-2000: 157). Clearly, the defeat of Ottomans by Russia in the region and Russia's presence as a threat to Britain are at the heart of the anxiety Bram Stoker voices, as the ship in which Dracula finally flees Britain is named Tsarina Catherine after the modernist Russian empress (Catherine II) who defended neutral ships against Britain during the American Revolution and refused to fight in that war on the side of Britain. That Russia could represent a "new order of being" over Britain is an obvious anxiety of the Victorian era. What the Professor says of Dracula could very well have been said about Russia.

Obviously, Victorian territorial and power anxieties were multiple (from the Russians to the Orientals and from the Indians to the Irish), but whatever the people in question, like most conquests, the question of territory is linked to the question of women (remember Tavakoli-Targhi's account of the mother-*vatan* in the Constitutional era in Iran): Both can be described as *virgin*, both can be *invaded*, both can be *corrupted*, both can be the ground upon which men are born and raised, and so forth. To love, honor, and protect the land has been paralleled with loving, honoring, and protecting women. It is no wonder, then, that Dracula's victims in Britain are two women, loved literally to death not just by their husbands but by all the men on the Dracula campaign team. When Lucy, the first woman, is dying of bloodlessness, each and every one of the men willingly gives his blood for transfusion to her. When the second woman, Harker's wife, gets bitten despite all the preventative measures taken by men, battling Dracula becomes almost a personal matter. If not for the whole humanity and as a moral duty, just for the sake of Madam Mina, the men have to go to war and sacrifice their lives. That the American should be the one who at the end dies for her and whose name the

Harkers' child would bear is itself interesting. It is clear that she is not just a woman but all of Britain. The novel ends with the Professor, having the Harkers' child on his lap and trying to reassure the Harkers who think that all their "record" of their battle is nothing more than a bunch of typewritten papers that nobody would believe anyway: "We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us! This boy will someday know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care; later on he will understand how some men so loved her, that they did dare much for her sake (Stoker 1970: 354). By this point it is clear that Mrs. Harker is not just the mother (the proper role for a woman, as she has been saved from being a lustrous lustful sexual prey/predator and protected from the men's battle) but also the motherland. Why else would the whole point of the book and the battle be that Madam Mina was a much prized woman, loved by so many men? Dracula, then, voices not just the "Eastern question" but the women's question and all the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of their increasing transformation.

While Stoker portrays Madam Mina as a "modern" woman who knows how to use a typewriter and a phonogram and who memorizes train schedules, he also has his men exclude her, in a loving but most humiliating way, from their adventures against Dracula despite all her proven utility, brains, and commitment. She, instead, has to fall victim to Dracula and almost become one of his minions. Most of the accounts of Eastward travel written by men contemporaneous with Stoker voice an anxiety about the loose morality and unleashed sexuality of the East, embodied in their preoccupation with the harem. Their mixed desire/disgust towards this matter resonates with the mixed admiration/exclusion that Stoker expresses towards Madam Mina and her transformation into a modern woman but also almost into a monster. This is similar to the way that, according to Hamid Naficy in "Lured by the East" (2006), Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack treated Marguerite Harrison in the making of *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* in 1925: Schoedsack referred to her as troublesome or at best "cute" on film, even though she was the one who spoke the language, helped immensely with the funding, and certainly made it through the trip just as well as the men did. Interestingly, their next film, *King Kong*, famously portrays a cute

woman in a love-trap by a monster, being rescued by men. If for these women being modern connotes being more like men, in a sense; for the men, this is a worrisome case of the oriental or monstrous Other corrupting the woman-Other.

The embodiment of territorial, national, cultural, sexual and other anxieties of encounter in women (and their attire, profession, and sexual expression) is, of course, shared by Persian men traveling in Europe or those writing accounts of their encounters with European women in Iran around the same time (end of 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century). For them, too, the European women's unveiled figure stood for all liberty in Europe, something that was desired but also feared. Europe, too, thanks to its unveiled women, was thought of as a land of loose morality and unleashed sexuality, even when it was dubbed by some as "paradise on earth" (Tavakoli-Tarqi 2001).

To sum up, Dracula and the actual accounts of encounter contemporaneous with it (by Iranians and Europeans alike) tie modernity to culture, race, nationality, heredity (class), gender, and physiology (brain structure); but they also tie it to a certain idea of freedom, and of morality, that finds expression in sexuality (For interesting discussions of how nationality and sexuality have been linked in the context of Iran/Persia, see Najmabadi 2005 and Amanat 2000). These accounts embody a certain erotics of encounter, one that finds expression in troubled love affairs, stories of penetration and infatuation, of invasion, violation, and yet the irresistible urge to know and to mimic and to mix with and even to become the Other. The child, the woman, the Oriental, the lunatic, and the monster.

## **21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ENCOUNTERS: IRANIAN ORGANIZATIONS IN AMERICA AT A TIME OF "WAR ON TERROR"**

Is democracy just the new modernity? A condition inherently Western in its genealogy (blood), culture, and mind-set (brain); one, again, with women as its site of battle and transformation? During the Bush administration's "War on Terror" when I was doing my fieldwork in the American capital, to liberate a nation from its despotic and evil regime had become synonymous with liberating its women from their veils and promoting sexual liberalization as a prerequisite of political liberation. Images of Burqa-clad women had

come to symbolize all that was perceived to be wrong with the Afghans' system of knowledge (world view, mind-set, etc.) and power (authority, governance, etc.). All the cruelty and oppression of Dracula, all the superstition and ignorance and helplessness of the people of Transylvania, all the dangerous nonsense of the life-eating lunatic, all the predisposition of women to become victims was easily translated into the black veils of Afghan and Iraqi women (the two countries America was at war with at the time). When 21<sup>st</sup> century state-of-the-art technologies failed to find the hiding place of Osama Bin Laden, to prove the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, or to photograph a veiled Muslim woman for an official document or to examine her face for security reasons, faith in the destructiveness of the Other rose to higher levels. The unfamiliar geographies of Iraq and Afghanistan become carbon copies of the difficult geography of Muslim women's veiled bodies: hard to read, hard to navigate, and hard to communicate with. Again, territorial and cultural anxieties were linked to how much of themselves women could reveal; their unveiling was conceived the unveiling of a mystery that 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies of inspection and data collection have not been able to unravel. The transition and transformation that the transnational War on Terror was to bring to nations seized by evil was dependent for its site on women who, like Stoker's Madam Mina after she was kissed by Dracula, were thought to be in a state of trans: they could become minions of evil or they could be saved, and that was the primary question, the primary site of battle.

The organizations I studied worked in such an atmosphere, and their subject-making efforts should be viewed against this backdrop. Many of my interlocutors subscribed to similar internal rot analyses as Vita Sackville-West described in 1926 (quoted in the first section of this article). At one of the organizations, they called this rot a "totalitarian mindset" from which they believed both the authorities in power and the Iranian opposition equally suffered. To them, this "mindset" was manifested in a variety of cultural rituals and religious practices, arts and literature, attire, kinship and amorous ties, economic decisions, ethical judgments, and legal system of a nation as well as in its political situation. To combat this mindset took nothing less than a revolution of minds, hearts, and habits, which explains why my interlocutors were often outraged by advocates of cultural



relativism and political correctness, whom they thought of as apologists for the totalitarians. There was also an evolutionary aspect to the sort of internal rot analyses that my interlocutors engaged in: We have not yet developed this or that characteristic; we have never had our Renaissance, we are, in the words of Daryush Shayegan, “on holiday from history” (1992). Shayegan was, in fact, quite popular with my interlocutors at this organization, and they particularly appreciated his rendering of “Muslim civilization” (resonant to them with the civilizational language of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, which they were also fond of). In the foreword to his book, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, Shayegan says:

Cultural Schizophrenia is an essay on the mental distortions afflicting those civilizations that have remained on the sidelines of history and played no part in the festival of changes. Although this book owes its existence to my personal existence in the world of Iranian Islam, I believe that its scope extends beyond this world and applies (to some extent at least) to most of the civilizations whose mental structures are still rooted in Tradition and have difficulty in adapting to modernity. (1992: vii)

So we are back at the question of physiology again. To be modern is to have a certain kind of brain or mental structure. In the same foreword, Shayegan also characterizes the conflict of Islam and the West (capital-T Tradition with small-M modernity) as one between “two different blocs of knowledge” and “two antagonistic modes of being” (1992: vii). His solution? For Islam to stop postponing the end, so that it may be able to begin. The malaise that Muslims suffer from results in his mind from a “non-comprehension” of modernity “in terms of its philosophic content, but always in terms of its traumatic impact on our traditions, our ways of living and thinking” (1992: 3). The West has not been understood by Muslims as “a new *paradigm* to break with the past” (1992: 4). What Muslim civilizations still have not embraced is this shift of paradigm, so while the outside reality has been changing, their mental projections still function in terms of the old modes of perception and representation.

Since they played no part in the succession of crises and means of production that resulted in the new paradigm in the West, the Muslims cannot trace the genealogy of modernity and to them it remains a rupture. Shayegan believes that the “logic” of the Muslims works in such a way as to veil concrete reality (after all, veiling, too, is not just a form of attire or a symbol of a faith but part of a whole system of perceiving and representing reality). It is this logic, this configuration of consciousness that needs to change in Shayegan’s mind, and this is what my interlocutors at the above organization also adhered to and saw their work as moving towards.

Besides the problem of the mindset, there were a variety of character traits that my interlocutors at this organization believed Iranians suffered from. Important among those was the Shi’i concept of *ketman* (concealment, denial) that had not escaped the eyes of even the early travelers to Iran. As a prominent Iranian character trait, *ketman* gained utmost authority in my field when, in his article about intellectuals in totalitarian regimes, Christopher Hitchens (2004) called attention to Czeslaw Milosz’s use of the concept (as an “ancient Persian” practice) in *The Captive Mind* (1990). Since then, *ketman* came to explain many things that were wrong with Iranians and their political concepts and practices. Trapped as Iranian were, according to my interlocutors, in a culture of concealment, denial, and multiple personalities, the “captivity” they suffered from was clearly a condition of the mind not of circumstances.

Infantilism and the need to achieve (through education and training) maturity as full-fledged modern and democratic citizens characterizes a common way of looking at Iranians in America by the Iranians in America who were my interlocutors. Another one of the organizations that I studied in Washington defined its mission as transforming Iranians from the rather “skittish” individuals that they supposedly were with regards to American politics to full-fledged US citizens who could vote, call up their representatives, and sign petitions to voice their opinions (like any “normal” citizen, indeed like a “naturalized” citizen). Below you can see one of their educational charts for Iranian-Americans:

FIGURE 2: Community Impact on Decision Making – The Dynamic Model

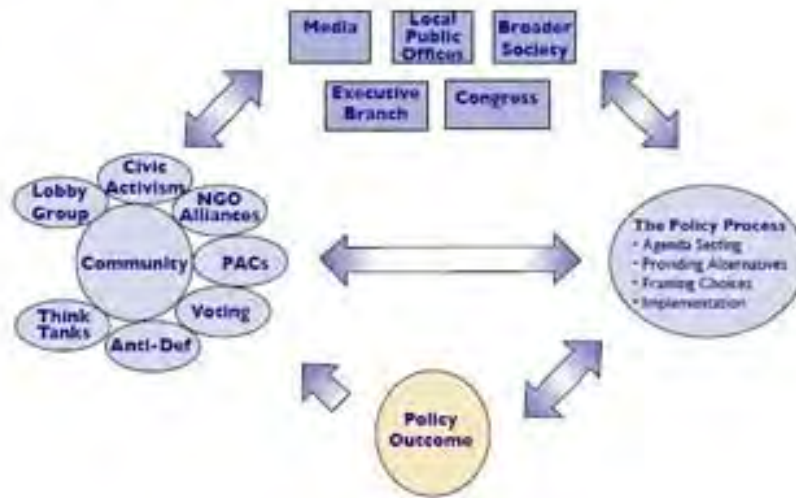


Figure 1: a chart on the website of one of the organization studied in Washington DC

Efforts like this were meant to complete the process of “naturalization” that Iranian-Americans had completed on paper for a while but had not quite started in practice; to fill in the gap between nominal and practical citizenship. Their pedagogy entailed “demystifying democracy” through teaching Iranians the everyday and very tangible methods of democratic participation (how to pay less taxes, how to benefit from Small Business Status, how to secure a visa for a visiting relative, how to protest discrimination at the workplace) So while the first organization addressed the individual’s conscience and opted to transform consciousness, the second addressed the community’s common sense (everyone wants to have a more convenient, effective, and productive life and get the most out of their citizenship) and opted to transform practice.

All in all, one could say that “culture” was not a favorite concept among my interlocutors. It was often understood as a nuisance on the face of the good fight for democracy and human rights. It connoted a blockage, at best a road hump. Most of the times an excuse for not getting to democracy and human rights as fast as one should to avoid

further harm; at best an unnecessary complication. Since rights do not bend (one either has them or doesn't), they believed culture had to follow the implementation of rights and make the necessary adjustments.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I tried to offer a reading of the efforts of at least a certain prominent substrata of Iranian organizations in Washington DC as projects that aim to transform Iranian character and political culture through retraining Iranians in new political habits; what we have called "ethos transplant" here. The choice of a pseudo-medical term here is not arbitrary but builds on a long history of medicalization and pathologization of "culture" at least since the 19th century, well represented in Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*. Of course not all accounts of different "political cultures" are medicalized or even necessarily critical. Many try to show that there is more than one way to see the world and relate to it, and that to understand these differences can facilitate communication and minimize conflict. But to decide where to stand between this sort of cultural relativism on one hand and the drive to "fix" and "cure" "cultural wrongs" on the other is not always easy. In fact, this could be one of the most challenging questions organizations and activists have to face at these difficult junctures in our interlocked world.

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