



## **Modernity: Keep Out of Reach of Children**

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I was invited to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture Workshop as an Iranian animation/media studies researcher who is interested in the question of modernity in the Islamic Countries; an interest that no doubt has arisen as a result of hand-on experience of being a member of the club. It was a rare opportunity to observe what happens when such diverse group of scholars with such variation not only in terms of their professional fields and level of scholarship, but in their relationship to the subject of scrutiny as “Moslem countries” would meet. It was obvious that coming to terms with such a historically problematic term such as modernity in an even more multifarious context called the Moslem countries was a site for conflict and challenge; here I have in mind those established scholars who have theorised extensively on the field but were not themselves part of that world, and those who had the opportunity to leave that “world” and look at the question from outside (sometimes staying too far or perhaps losing real contact with the contemporary accounts of the question) and those who still felt part of that world/problem (like me).

During the Workshop I was amazed at how many different anti-modern views could exist amongst a panel of individuals who were trying to spot tangible elements of modernity. I couldn't believe that the problem of overlooking the elegant distinctions of “modernity” with “modernism” or even “modernisation” (not to mention the use of these words with capital Ms, *pace* Charles Jencks (1996) in *What is Postmodernism?*) or the blurring of the boundaries between these terms could cause such hot debates. Neither could I imagine I could be sitting in a group of so many high-calibre scholars and hear that Muslim countries might not qualify for passage on the train of modernity, and that furthermore they would better be aware of the “dangers of modernity”, the Holocaust being the indisputable example.

It doesn't seem enough to inform these so-called Muslim countries that they are not eligible to be “really” modern because their women are “still” wearing *hijab* and not allowed to wear “normal” clothes (Prof. Deniz Kandiyot) or to warn them against the drawbacks of modernity (relying on reason, for instance Prof. Jencks's ideas) because the so-called West has decided the project is no good anymore, thus announcing its termination. Get off the train, everyone!



I do not believe that the Western modern world has ever abandoned or even afforded to leave modernity at all. If the modern thought allows interrogating itself, and recognising its flaws, it is certainly its strength and validity as a system of thought, something which has allowed for the “anti”s to arise. What the Western experience of modernity and its critique shows, considering the whole possible spectrum of positions towards it, still cannot question themselves as discourses outside modernity. Subversive perhaps, and with all dangers that threatens “reason”, it is not possible to avoid it. Scientific discourses with all the Foucauldian scepticism towards it, when coming to the experience of everyday life, do not meet the expense of shying away from that. The proposition of undermining modernity in theory seems a valid argument. Coming to the harsh and violent living conditions of the millions of humans, whose basic needs are endangered by a pre-modern order of life (as much as the price they are paying for the so called Western modernity) seems bizarre to me.

Here an explanation seems necessary to me. However much we hate the simplistic view of the world as divided into the West and the East, in our minds there exist such distinctions and categorisations, sometimes unavoidable, sometimes unconscious, and in certain contexts even helpful. Hence, I won't make any apologies for using the term “the West” since it represents, in my mind, not a unified or homogeneous entity but a whole set of diverse discourses which converge at a certain point when dealing with the “other”. *This* West knows a lot about itself and handles each aspect of its discourses with so much care, so much subtlety. Coming to the other, however, it behaves entirely differently. It positions itself 1) in the position of Knowledge 2) Power 3) Decision-making. *This* West is the Parent of the World. Sometimes I imagine that the problem is located when the West forgets all its costly-earned “modern” capacities and treats the “other” in a pre-modern discipline.

If it doesn't sound familiar to you, to me it does. As an Iranian woman being born in the time of Pahlavis, and seeing that world collapse, witnessing a bitter war with Iraq for 8 odd years and living my adulthood in a country tolerating the aftermath of that horrific war plus my experience of living in the Western world of academia for 5 years, it does. I think *that* West theorises for itself, sees things in that light and excludes others, decides for them, stands in the position of knowledge, power and supervision. *That* West is not interested to see the subtleties and the differences (which are not all due to its relative deficiencies) of the other world. It does not take into account the history of its own dominance and the effect that has had on that other world. It has no patience for that other world to get modern, and validates only certain ways of achieving that modernity. It holds the right, even, to abandon the project of modernity, because of the flaws and failures of the Western world (not to mention the consequence of modern history that the other world has had to put up with), and forecloses any possibility that other countries can learn from the Western way of modernity. I am surprised at the level of sophistication with which the Western mentality examines itself, which stops to understand problems of a “similar” make-up in a different context. Has that sense of involvedness been forgotten, that capacity of taking in complexity all vanished?

Perhaps the main question here is *representation*. As a researcher in the field of animation I have learned to critically evaluate representations in a modern Western school of thought.<sup>1</sup>





These illuminating and great theories originating almost all from the West are supposed to be applicable to all artefacts and works of representation. This has informed how I have come to see the treatment, and representation, of “others”. For instance, I have been trying to answer the question of how certain fragments of a book called “Arabian Nights” in the so-called Western World became representative of a host of countries and ethnicities, religions and cultures, from India to Egypt, stories expanding from pre-Islamic history to the post-Islamist time of Haroun-al-Rashid’s Baghdad? Animation representation deals with stereotypes and shortcuts. Why do people who talk about “Persian Fairy Tales” associate them with images of deserts, camels, Arabic script, Baghdad and not to forget exotic veiled women? Where is the evidence of the sophisticated, multilayered, modern system of thinking?

Recently I have been trying to publicise the emergence of the animation culture in Iran and attempt to trace the roots of this emerging semi-industry. I have been thinking of how the socio-cultural changes which came with the reformist government allowed for a much more open-minded view towards cultural and artistic productions. I brought from Iran a range of animations from student to more professional work produced for broadcasting there on state TV and as commercials to conferences in the Europe and America. I always received the most desirable response from the audience. The people marvelled at how “modern” Iran is becoming, something which satisfied my initial aims, but left me with a feeling of unease and discomfort. Who do they think we are? Musing over the problem for a long time, the question changed to how really modern are we, and whether this matters at all.

I know it sounds boring. I understand that within the realm of theory we are tired of repeating old Orientalist notions and I completely understand that it is not at all fashionable to talk about postmodernism as a way to let “others” speak for themselves these days. Even modernity seems to be one of those words best avoided these days. Yet, we all know that the problems that invoked those old-fashioned terms persist. If you would like to replace the word “modernity” with some new term... take your choice. I am sure that “the world” including Muslim countries cannot afford not to go for modernity by any name, just as one cannot afford to treat cancer with “over the counter” pills and herbal remedies.

Obviously Muslim, or non-Western, countries need their own kinds of modernity, which are localised, domesticated, and made possible. The imagined or alleged discrepancy between Islam and Democracy (while some argue that there is not an essential relationship between that debate and Modernity) is an open question, or rather a red herring. We have to question whether liberal democracy in certain Western countries is *the* democracy, or whether it has anything to do with our modernity debate. We have to ask to what extent each country is indeed a Muslim country and how do we categorise a country as such? Are we talking about forms of government or about “people” in the broadest sense? Is 2007 Iran a less modern country, in all the senses of “modern”, than what it was in 1975, when women

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<sup>1</sup> To put it briefly, the Althusserian theories of ideology (re-readings of Marx)/Lacanian psychoanalysis/Metzian Semiotics/Derridan deconstruction as well as Foucauldian discourse/textual analysis provide the basis for critical theories of representation, especially in the moving image, and mainly cinema.





legally did not have to wear hejab nor could they divorce their husbands? Is the so-called “new Islamism” which is believed to have mobilised intellectuals and masses in some Muslim countries against modernity? Above all questions, is being anti-Western, and rejecting the West’s omni-power/omni-science equal to being anti-modernism?<sup>2</sup>

I am mostly talking about Iran, the place where I am most in touch with the zeitgeist. In a recent lecture Masoud Kamali tried to show that the basis of the Islamic Revolution was a modern one. Political Islam, whether we like it or not, is a modern school of thought. Asef Bayat has shown us its failures and deficiencies since it had an opportunity to be practiced as the ideological force behind the Iranian Islamic Republic. Nowhere in the history of Iran have we witnessed so much challenge put forward for ideological Islam to confront. There are several trains of thoughts based on re-readings of Islam currently being debated in Iran, discourses of Islam that are deliberately or otherwise ignored and simplified in the outer world. Even more, the secular trends are totally uncared for, as if Islam is the only way one can get to know a nation as diverse as Iran. There is so much eagerness to give certain representations of Iran which can dynamically veil that diversity. And, unfortunately, this is the case with other so-called Muslim countries.

Perhaps we really need that timeless definition of modernity that Prof. Sadria suggested: “the capacity to accept the anti; disagreement, challenge and conflict”. Perhaps this is what Prof. Weber calls modernity’s diverse manifestations in different moments of history. It seems that we desperately need a foundation as broad as this which cannot be challenged on the mistakes, the catastrophes, even, of Western modernity. Even if the so-called Muslim countries have taken on Modernisation more eagerly than Modernity, let’s not censure them just for that. Let’s believe in that “capacity” which they are struggling to attain in their own altered way.

We need to know the “individual” in these countries as much as we need to know the specific social/political/cultural milieu in which the individual dwells. We can’t afford to defer to the representations of collective/individual entities. Representations do not seem to re-present; they block our understanding and our access to individuals. They have blunted our senses, made our images of the world homogenised and unproblematic. The artist/architect who represents their own spatial model of their country’s identity can also lead us to their take on modernity. There should be a ripeness of locality in a modern building which is made in a non-Western context, be it in Cairo, Tehran or elsewhere; the living space being representative of the quintessence of that gene. Highlighting the specific properties of modernity, in its multiple nature, within each specific context can show the way modernisation should take place in architecture, and perhaps not vice-versa. Perhaps we need a post-modern take on modernity and modern architecture in Muslim countries, after all. Not totally abandoning “over the counter” solutions and approaches, but keeping them in a safe relationship with the prescribed medicines.

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<sup>2</sup> That’s the way for instance Fredrick Jameson (1991) describes Iranian Islamic Revolution as an anti-modern one in his Postmodernism; or the logic of late-capitalism.

