

Iranians' Behavior as Reflected in Travel Books Written in Qajar Period by European Travelers

Dr. Ali Zamani Alavijeh

Abstract— Travel books provide invaluable sources for the nations to know themselves and other nations. What we find in travel books are invaluable owing to the fact that they are more often than not impartial and just accounts of people's way of conduct and characteristics and thereby giving more accurate and reliable information to know them better. Besides, foreign travelers usually accentuate the facts that may be overlooked by the natives as they may appear trivial. Cultural differences would be stressed in such contexts as well. The present paper aims to show how Iranian people are pictured in foreign travel books written in Qajar period. The author indicates some positive and negative personality traits that foreign travelers had attributed to Iranians.

Keywords— Travel Book, Qajar, European Travelers, Iranian's Behavior

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign travel books are considered as extremely valuable sources in order to know about a country and the qualities of its nation. They are important owing to the fact that they are devoid of that sense of patriotism which impresses the writings of native people and could be trusted easier for their honesty. Furthermore, many important details are often overlooked by native people due to the fact that they have been indispensable parts of their life through the history. Foreign travelers however, take note of them enthusiastically. However, it should be noted that the accounts of foreign travelers regarding one nation could be doubted in many cases because of their unfamiliarity with the land they have entered. That is what Edward Said (1978, p.58) points out in his *Orientalism*:

“The Orient and Islam have a kind of extra-real, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work.”

II. DISCUSSION

According to Benjamin (1311, p.258), Iranians show great flexibility in the face of novelties. In other words, they embrace new creations with open arms and readily forget what they used in the past. He, therefore, regards Iran as a great trade destination for Americans and Europeans. He believes

Iranian people always show inclination to replace their local products with new attractive western products.

Henry (1314, p.316) Rene is obviously taken aback in the face of familial integrity in Iran. He is surprised to see that people of different generations live under one roof in peace. A wife and husband live not only with their children but also with their parents, grandparents, son-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. He informs us of little dirty children who meander in streets without any parent taking care of them. Parents in such extended families usually neglect their children.

Madame Dio Lafoa (1318, p. 153), another traveler to Iran, is surprised to see how pigheadedly Iranians haggle over the price of their purchase. The seller is aware of that and always overcharges his customer. The process of bargain lasts for a long time and ultimately both sides reach an agreement over the price. She compares Iranians with southern villagers in France in this regard.

Eugen Evin (1362, p.32) accentuates Iranians' insatiable appetite for buying land. According to him, as soon as Iranians achieve huge amounts of money, they spend it on buying land. Possessing more lands has always been a sign of nobility and aristocracy in Iran.

Edward Brown (1307, p.256) , as one of the most prominent travelers to Iran, spent a lot of his time among the people and thus could be considered as the most familiar person with Iranian traits and customs. He undermines this western belief that Iranians are pessimistic people leading an ascetic life. On the contrary, he admires Iranians' sense of humor and their predisposition to satire and joke.

Henry Rene (1314, p.334) regards Iranians as vain and narcissistic people who see themselves as the most brilliant people in the world. He, however, reckons that Iranians rarely show novelty and creativity. They usually appear frustrating when they try to step beyond the boundaries of tradition. They are usually contemplative people whose minds are busy with far-fetched unearthly dreams. Their memory, according to him, is really strong and their men of letter had memorized great deals of their classical poetry.

They pay much attention to dignity and gentility. They therefore, rarely smile and often frown not to lose their sobriety. More often than not they remain silent in parties not to make a blunder. In some cases, however, they are interminably talkative in welcoming the guests. They are highly poetic in diction in such cases which is insincere and a means of showing off. According to Edward Brown (1314, p.127), they are more inclined to know metaphysical knowledge. Even common people like shepherds like to attain metaphysical power.

Writing phrases and engraving signs on walls and trees is also reckoned as an interesting trait of Iranians in Brown's (1314, p.223) travel book. They crave for immortality and like to record their name somewhere forever. These signs may not have any historical value but reading them amuses the viewers and gives them a nostalgic sense.

Madame Dio Lafoa (1318, p.429), who more often than not approaches Iranians cynically, believes Iranians are skilled liars. The old tradition of honesty, according to her had been diminished in the society and lie as a means of attaining worldly profits is acclaimed. Henry Rene (1314, p.341), in the same vein, points out that Iranians, unlike Westerners, never hold an opposite stance against lie and regard lie as a vital element in trade. Iranians consider westerners dull people who are not talented enough to advance through lying. They, therefore, are easily tricked by the Easterners. Denis Ross (1311, p.) believes Iranians' hypocrisy was a reactionary act against English vanity.

Madame Dio Lafoa (1318, p. 445) recounts how she resented Iranians' interest in physical punishment of wives, children and servants upon her arrival to Iran. However, she soon adheres to physical punishment similarly because she believed that was the only way for Iranians to stop their wives and servants from cheating and robbery and the only way to take control of their rebellious children. She feels shy for this confession.

Kludane (1326, p.159) praises Iranians' sincerity in showing themselves as they are. Unlike English people, he believes, Iranians do not make any endeavor to hide their real social class. Also, he is surprised to see that men of high social class associate easily and freely with the common people in streets. In Britain, the rich never depreciated themselves to hang out with the people of low class. The way two rich people talked in Iran was just the same as the case when a rich man talked to a poor man.

Kludane (p.160), however, condemns Iranians' lethargy and laziness. He introduces Iranians as a nation who does not care at all about time. While English people are always dissatisfied with their life and income, Iranians appear so contented and waste their time hanging out together in streets and gardens. Nevertheless, this is may be a misunderstanding by foreign travelers because Iranian life was dependent on agriculture that time and they naturally had to await the harvest. They never nag about hard conditions of life and conform themselves easily to the pervading atmosphere. Wilson Arnold (1348, p.188) points to Korsi _a table-like structure which was used by Iranians to warm up themselves while sitting around it. He resents the way Iranians sat around their Korsi chatting for many hours.

For Henry Rene (1314, p.334), Iranians' strong adherence to their traditional customs and rituals is peerless in the whole world. According to him, foreign colonizers could never affect Iranian way of thinking and more often than not they were impressed by their rich culture through history. In other words, foreign culture was always desperately solved in the vast sea of Iranian civilization. The fact is a testimony of Iranians' patriotism and love for independence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Benjamin, Samuel, Benjamin's Travel Book, Trans. Hossein Kordbacheh, Javidan pub. 1311AH
- [2] Brown, Edward, One Year among Iranians, Trans. Zabihollah Mansoori, Marefat pub.(1344 AH)
- [3] Dio Lafoa, Madame, Dio Lafoa's Travel Book, , Trans. Iraj Farahvashi, Tehran University pub. 1318 AH
- [4] Evin, Eugen, Iran Today, Trans. Aliasghar Saidi, Zavar pub., Tehran. 1362 AH
- [5] Kludane, Goerge, My Stay in Iran, Trans. Ebrahim Azimi, Simorgh pub., 1326 AH.
- [6] Rene, Henry, A Trip to Iran, Trans. Javad Eshaghian, Aram pub., 1314 AH.
- [7] Ross, Denis, , Iran and Iranians, Trans. Shayegan Malayeri, Tehran. 1311 AH
- [8] Said, Edward W., Orientalism. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [9] Wilson, Arnold, , Political and Economical History of Iran, Trans. Hussein Sa'adat Noori, Vahid pub., Tehran. 1347 AH