

Political Philosophy of Iran: Role of Ali Shariati

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Islamic Iran in its present form would have been a distant dream without the scholarly, revolutionary and progressive contributions of Ali Shariati in 1960s and early 1970s. Dr. Ali Shariati was a teacher, scholar and writer and influenced the young people of Iran through class room discourses and free lectures. Shariati, a sociologist, subjected contemporary society to careful examination, using the experiences and concepts from Islamic philosophy and culture for his analysis. He formulated and presented a coherent Islamic world-view and an ideology of social, political and economic change after a careful examination of the contemporary society.

Ali Shariati was an intellectual with an acute sense of social responsibility. He devoted all his time to the propagation of religion, and transmission of Islamic ideas to the young generation.^[1] He waged a constant struggle against what he called the evil temper of the modern age and society, the withered root of which could be watered only by the renunciation of all things, even life itself, by martyrdom, according to him.

Family Attribution

Shariati's strong family background had influenced his approaches towards life. His ancestors had sentimental attachment with their homeland, Iran. This sense of attachment with the place which he believed was in trouble had been guiding force in the revolutionary thinking of Ali Shariati. In his own words:

“About eighty-five years ago, before the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution, my grandfather studied theology, philosophy and jurisprudence even though he was living in the remote and obscure village of Bahmanabad, his fame spread to the learned circles of Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan and Najaf... Nasiruddin Shah invited him to the capital. There he taught philosophy at the Sipahsalar madrasa, but the urge for solitude and isolation, strong in his blood, drew him back to his retreat in Bahmanabad.”^[2]

Shariati regarded the entire legacy of humanism and scholarship that his ancestors had left behind as his own. He considered their spirit as living to guide him in the path of his life. From the very beginning, he was not only concerned with the shaping of his life and imbuing it with meaning, but he also felt intensely the weight of the burden of the trust that he had inherited from his forefathers and ancestors. In his last letter; he wrote to his father:

“By the grace of God Almighty, whose miraculous love for me induces shame and pain in my heart and nearly causes my spirit to explode in its agitation, and without in any way being worthy of it, I have entered on such a path that I cannot permit myself to spend single instant of my life on personal happiness... and what pleasure could be greater than this, that my life destined to pass in any event, should pass in this fashion”?[3]

His father, Aqa Muhammad Taqi Shariati was his spiritual teacher. His father was a great teacher and the founder of the “Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truth” in Mashhad. Shariati was very close to his father and he wrote that my father broke with tradition and did not return to the village after completing his studies. He stayed in the city, and strove mightily to endow himself with knowledge, love and jihad in the midst of the swamp of urban life... I am the result of his decision to stay... I am the bearer of his cherished trust, laboring beneath its awesome weight..[4] Shari’ati gives credit to his father for creating a congenial religion-revolutionary atmosphere in Iran. Shariati says “The idea of taking the Quran as the central means of teaching, studying and propagating the teachings of Islam and Shi’ism, and the creation of a special school of Quranic exegesis during the last few years, is largely his work.”[5]

Shariati was well aware of the restrictions and the hold of traditions in society. However, he was determined to subject them to his own purposes instead of being subjected by them. He started his scholarly and intellectual life through delivering lectures to the students and learned at the Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truth in Mashhad. It was his love for learning and thought, and his firm faith in the Islam, as well as from his earliest environment, which always remained a source of guidance for him.[6]

Shariati was of the opinion that Islam might be regarded as a “median school” among the different schools of philosophy, one intermediate between socialism and capitalism, which incorporated the advantages and positive aspects of other schools of thought while avoiding their negative aspects. He was chiefly concerned, with the ideological and anti-imperialist movements which were sweeping across the Islamic world from North Africa to Indonesia during his time.

Radicalism & Western Influence

Shariati, during his stay at the University of Paris came in contact and was influenced by radical writers and intellectuals of Europe, particularly of France. His five years stay at the University provided him the opportunity not only to continue his studies, but also to get acquainted with books that were unavailable in Iran. In the process, he got opportunity to read different schools of social and philosophical thought and social behaviours, as well as the works of philosophers, scholars and writers such as Bergson, Albert Camus, Sartre, Schwartz, sociologists such as Gurwitsch and Berque, and Islamologists such as Louis Massignon.

He was particularly attracted to Islamic studies and sociology, and he studied these subjects formally. The analytical and critical school of French sociology left a considerable impression on him but despite the interest which he showed to this school of sociology, his social vision was a compound of ideas and action. In the process of evaluation he found the positivist approach to society, which regarded sociology as an absolute science, and the Marxist approach both, as

unconvincing. According to him neither of these approaches were able to comprehend or analyse the realities of the non-industrialised world, the so-called “Third World”.

His stay in France coincided with the tumultuous period of the Algerian revolution. The revolution provided an occasion to Shariati to devote attention to the developments in Algeria. The essays and books of Franz Fanon influenced him to a major extent. Franz Fanon originally from Martinique had taken Algerian nationality, joined the ranks of the Algerian revolution at its very inception, and produced number of important works, such as *The Wretched of the Earth* and *The Fifth Year of the Algerian Revolution*.

Ali Shariati, regarded the book *The Wretched of the Earth*, with its profound sociological and psycho-logical analyses of the Algerian revolution important to all those engaged in the struggle for change in Iran. Under the influence of Fanon, phrases such as the following began to appear in his pronoun-cements: “Come, friends let us abandon Europe; let us cease this nauseating, apish imitation of Europe. Let us leave behind this Europe that always speaks of humanity, but destroys human beings wherever it finds them.”^[7]

Shariati also projected the ideas of other African revolutionary writers, including Umar Uzgan, author of *The Best of All Struggles* (Afdal al-Jihad), as well as a number of non-Muslim writers and poets. Shariati was convinced that ideas taking shape in various parts of Africa could instill a new intellectual dynamism in the social and political struggles of the Iranian Muslims.

Shariati's stay in Paris coincided with the formation of the progressive group inside Iran. As the freedom movement started gaining momentum in Iran, tyranny and repression was let loose to suppress it. ^[8] It was followed by arrests and trials, long sentences of imprisonment, and barbaric torture. The chief targets of the repression were religiously-oriented nationalists, particularly who had joined the Freedom Movement (*Nehzat-e Azadi*).

Shariati belonged to Freedom Movement (*Nehzat-e Azadi*) and hence he did not desist from writing and analysing the movement that had been shaped by the powerful leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini.^[9] Shariati along with number of like minded persons, were able to publish one of the most widely read Persian-language journals in Europe, and with his intellectual capacity and powerful writing skills, he made it the most serious and powerful organ published in support of the popular movement. It was based on the coexistence of real harmony between the ideas of the intellectuals abroad and the struggle of the people within Iran.^[10]

Shariati on Iranian Soil

Shariati's return to Iran in 1964 instilled new vigour among his symapathiser. Shariati's idea for the Islamic revolution did not go down well with the Shah regime. Therefore, before he could build any Islamically oriented opposition to the Shah's regime, he was arrested and imprisoned. Six months later, under the international pressure, he was released and permitted to assume a series of teaching posts. After being released from prison, he worked for many years as a teacher at various high schools and the College of Agriculture, at the same level he used to teach before going abroad, inspite of holding a doctorate from Paris. Later, he was appointed in the

University of Mashed. Shariati preferred free methods of teaching to conventional methods, and found no distinction between freedom and knowledge. However, he could not teach in University for long and was soon coerced to retire.

The forced retirement turned a blessing in disguise for him because it provided him an opportunity to enter a new phase of intense activity. By means of lectures and free classes he was able to generate a new current of thought in the younger generation and in society as a whole. Shariati used to lecture at the celebrated Husayniya-yi Irshad, a religious centre in Tehran on the evolution of his theories on the sociology and history of Islam. Seeing the rising support and popularity of Shariati among the youth, Husayniya-yi Irshad was closed down and Shariati was imprisoned for a period of 18 months.

Shariati's Understanding of Islam

Shariati's understanding of Islam was different from the religious clergy of Islam. He was an intellectual with a sense of social responsibility. he was a man of action. He argued: "Until now, we have constantly talked and discussed our sufferings without doing anything or undertaking any action. We must therefore close the era of talking, and everyone must begin acting by reforming his family or city."^[11]

Shariati, however, perceived that all the actions had to be in the framework of religion. According to him "We are a religious society; the basis of our work must be religious; but we still do not know our religion".^[12] Shariati emphasized that Islam stood for action, and action would lead to a change. He argued that inaction had resulted in stagnation in Iran and elsewhere in Islamic World. He said that "the reason is that when they set to work, they did not know what needs to be done, and it is certain that as long as we do not know what needed to be done, and it is certain that as long as we do not know what we want, we will also not know what to do."^[13]

Shariati emphasis was on the knowledge of Islam and its various schools of thought. Shariati underlined the wareness of the outstanding personalities of Islam and compared them with the prominent figures of other religions and schools of thought. According to Shariati - "The duty of today's intellectual is to recognise the know Islam as a school of thought that gives life to man, individual and society, and he is entrusted with the mission of the future guidance of mankind."^[14]

Shariati, reflecting on the Quranic vision, tried to prove that the fundamental factor behind social development and changes were not - personality, tradition or accident but the *al-nas*, "the people". It is for this reason Quran addresses to *al-nas*. The prophet is sent to *al-nas*, he addresses to *al-nas*; it is *al-nas* who are accountable for their deeds; *al-nas* are the basic factor in their decline— in sum, the whole responsibility for society and history is borne by *al-nas*. The word *al-nas* is extremely valuable one and there a number of equivalents and synonyms for it. But the only word that resembles it, structurally and phonetically, is the word "*mass*". *Mass* means, therefore, the people without any particular class or social form.^[15] While defining the *al-nas* Shariati reminded the people of their duties and roles in restructuring and reforming the society.

Shariati and the Sociology of Islam

Shariati was instrumental in popularising Islam as a way of life and attracted a mass support in Iran for setting up a government based on Islamic principles and doctrines. He utilised the *Shiite* doctrines and the teaching of the first Imam, Hazrat Ali (according to Shi'ite belief) to justify his thought and philosophy. He wrote: "I, in the part of the world and at this moment of history, am expecting, in a future that might be tomorrow or any other time, a sudden world revolution in favour of Truth and Justice and of oppressed masses; a revolution in which I must play a part; a revolution which does not come about with prayers... but with a banner of a sword, with a holy war involving all responsible believers. I believe that this movement shall naturally triumph."^[16]

He advocated the return of the spirit of equality and compassion taught by Hazrat Ali. However, his proposition did not go down well with the clergy and they accused him of being an *Islamic Marxist*. In a war of words, the Mojahedin and Shariati explained to their critics although they "respected Marxism as a progressive social philosophy but their true culture, inspiration, attachment and ideology was Islam."

To substantiate his ideas of Islamic principles, Shariati used symbolic and highly philosophical language. While discussing the language of religion, Shariati wrote "The language that a religion chooses in order to convey its concept must, then, be a versatile and multi-faceted language... religion must employ a symbolic language, it is addressed to different human types and different generations of men."¹⁷ Shariati provided a radical interpretation to the concept of *tauhid* (monotheism) by defining it as a world-view. He interpreted *tauhid* by stating that "*tauhid* in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body. It means regarding the whole of existence as a single form, a single living and conscious organism, possessing will, intelligence, feeling and purpose. There are many people who believe in *tauhid*, but only as a religious-philosophical theory, meaning nothing but 'God is one, not more than one'. But I take *tauhid* in the sense of a world-view, and I am convinced that Islam also intends it in this sense."^[18]

According to Shariati *Tauhid* views the world as an empire; *shirk* (polytheism) as a feudal system. He wrote that: "I regard *shirk* in a similar fashion; it is a world-view that regards the universe as a discordant assemblage full of disunity, contradiction and heterogeneity, possessing a variety of independent and clashing poles, conflicting tendencies, variegated and unconnected desires, reckoning, customs, purposes and wills."^[19]

Shariati's description of *Tauhid* represents a particular view of the world and demonstrates a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate axes—God, nature, and man—because the origin of all the three is the same. All have the same direction, the same will, the same spirit, the same motion, and the same life.^[20] Shariati opined that being is divided into two relative aspects: the unseen and the manifest. He also added that the division into unseen

and manifest is, in reality, an epistemological one, not an ontological one. It is also a logical division, not only accepted but also applied by science.

Shariati concluded that *Tauhid* bestows upon man independence and dignity. He also added that submission to God alone—the supreme norm of all beings—impels man to revolt against all lying powers, all the humiliating fetters of fear and of greed.

Shariati and the Ideal Society

Shariati wanted to create a committed and radical leadership for a revolution and resulting an ideal society. According to him the Ideal Society of Islam is called the *Umma*. *Umma* is the single word for different languages and cultures and it designates a human agglomeration or society, such as “society”, “nation”, “race”, “people”, “tribe”, “clan”, etc. It is a word imbued with progressive spirit and implies a dynamic, committed and ideological social vision.^[21] The *Umma* is therefore, a society in which a number of individuals, possessing a common faith and goal, come together and co-exist in harmony with the intention of advancing and moving toward their common goal.

Shariati was of the opinion that Islamic social system was based on equity and justice, with an ownership by the people and the revival of the “system of Abel,” the society of human equality and of brotherhood—the classless society.^[22] He clarified that the political philosophy and the form of regime of the *Umma* is not the democracy of heads, not irresponsible and directionless liberalism which is a plaything of contesting social forces, not putrid aristocracy, not anti-popular dictatorship, not a self-imposing oligarchy. He also believed that a leadership must be responsible for the movement and growth of society on the basis of its world view and ideology and for the realisation of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation.

Shariati welcomes the Ideal man for revolution. To him Ideal man must be a rebel against oppressive regime. The Ideal man is the theomorphic man in whom the spirit of God has overcome the other half relating to *Iblees* (satan) to clay and to sediment. He has been freed from hesitation and the contradiction between the ‘two infinities’, “taken on the characteristics of God”—this is our whole philosophy of education, our sole standard! For it is a negation of all fixed and conventional standards in favour of assuming the characteristics and attributes of God.^[23] Shariati advocates it as a progression towards the absolute goal and absolute perfection, an eternal and infinite evolution, not a molding in stereotyped forms of uniform men.

Ali Shariati further added that “This man, the man that ought to be but is not, is a bi-dimensional man, a bird capable of flying with both wings. He is not the man of those cultures and civilisations that cultivate good men and powerful men separately from each other— on the one hand, men— pure and pious but with weak consciousness and awareness, and on the other hand, powerful and brilliant geniuses, but with narrow hearts and hands polluted by sin. There are, on the one hand, men whose hearts are devoted to the inner life, to beauty and the mysteries of the spirit, but whose lives are spent in poverty, decline, humiliation and weakness, like those hundreds of thousands of Indian ascetics who despite their spirituality, their inner wonders, their subtle and exalted feelings, were for long years the playthings and wretched prisoners of a handful of English colonels. On the other hand, there men who fend the earth, the mountains the

sea and the heavens, with the power of their industry, who create a over flowing with abundance, enjoyment and prosperity, but in whom feeling and all sense of value have been suspended, and the peculiarity human capacity to perceive the spirit of the world, the profundity of life, the creation of beauty, and the belief in something higher than nature and history has been weakened or paralysed.”[24]

In Shariati’s opinion Ideal man passes through the very midst of nature and comes to understand God; he seeks out mankind and thus attains God. He does not by pass nature and turns his back on mankind. He holds the sword of Caesar in his hand and he has the heart of Jesus in his breast. He thinks with the brain of Socrates and loves God with the heart of Hallaj. As Alexis Carrel desired, he is a man who understands the beauty of science and the beauty of God; he listens to the words of Pascal and the words of Descartes... like the Buddha, he is delivered from the dungeon of pleasure-seeking and egoism; and like Confucius, he meditates on the fate of society. Like Spartacus, he is a rebel against slave owners, and like Abu Dharr, he scatters the seed for the revolution of the hungry. Like Jesus, he bears a message of love and reconciliation, and like Moses, he is the messenger of *jihad* and deliverance. And thus, an Ideal man, is a man whom philosophical thought dose not make inattentive to the fate of mankind, and whose involvement in politics does not lead to demagoguery and fame-seeking.[25]

Ideal man, as envisioned by Shariati, has three aspects: truth, goodness and beauty— in other words, knowledge, ethics and arts. In nature, he is the vice regent of God; he has a committed will with the three dimensions of awareness, freedom and creativity. He is the great rebel of the world. His existence is a smooth path trodden by the will of God, who desires to accomplish the ultimate purpose of His creation in him and by him.Resurrection is about to begin, and a project unfolds among God, man and love, a project for the creation of a new world, for telling the tale of a new creation.

Thus, it was the Trust God proposed to the earth, the heavens and mountains, they all forebore from assuming; it was only man that accepted it.

*Man, this rebel against God
Who has given one hand to the devil intellect
And the other hand to Eve— love,
Who bears on his back the heavy burden of the Trust,
Descended from the paradise of painless enjoyment,
Alone and a stranger in this world.
He is a rebel, but constantly yearning to return.²⁶*

References and Endnotes

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5. Ali Shariati, *In Answer to Some Questions*, (Published), p. 162.
6. Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, op. cit., from Introduction by Hamid Algar., New Delhi.
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18. Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 82
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25. Ali Shariati; *The Ideal Man—the Vicegerent of God*, On the Sociology of Islam.(Ibid.)
26. Ibid.