

Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Gharbzadegi/ Westoxification

By Abolfazl Ahangari | November 24, 2025

Introduction

“Gharbzadegi,” a Persian term translating to “Westoxification,” “West-struck-ness,” or “Occidentosis,” carries a profound and multifaceted history. The word “gharbzadegi” [غربزدگی] itself is a combination of two Persian components: *gharb*, meaning “West” or “Occident,” and *zadegi*, which translates to “struck,” “afflicted,” or “plagued.” The term mirrors, on one hand, the intricate interplay of cultural, intellectual, and historical forces shaping modern Iran, and on the other, the broader Global South’s ambivalence toward Western modernity—both seductive and domineering—while highlighting shared struggles over dependency, cultural erasure, and the effort to dismantle and reconstruct it on local terms. Although the term first appeared during the 1950s, in the speeches of Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994) and then fully developed in the writing of other intellectuals, most importantly Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), its origins predate the coining of the term. The origins of the concept can be traced to Iran’s formative encounters with the West in the mid-19th century, a period marked by colonization, modernization efforts, and the influx of foreign ideas or ideologies, which collectively sparked a sense of ambivalence and resistance among Iranian clerics and intellectuals.

Iran’s confrontation with the idea of the West began in its most complicated form during the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925), particularly in the mid-19th century, as European powers expanded their imperial reach in the Middle East. This era jolted Iran into a painful recognition of its own weaknesses, exposing its fragility on two fronts: military defeats and the influx of Western ideas and technologies. On one level, a series of devastating military defeats underscored Iran’s vulnerability. On another, cultural shifts began to take root as Iranian students and travelers—often labeled *farangī-maāb*, or “Westernized”—returned from Europe, bringing with them not only new technologies but also European clothing, customs, and intellectual trends. Captivated by Western technological and intellectual progress, many of these individuals deliberately distanced themselves from their traditional way of life, grounded in Islamic principles and communal values, thereby fostering a deeper cultural disconnection and a broader sense of unease within their society about identity and values.

This tension significantly escalated during the Pahlavi dynasty, beginning with Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941) and continuing under his son, Mohammad-Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979). This era marked a deliberate shift toward Western models, contributing to the cultural and political crises (including the CIA- and MI6-backed coup of 1953) later identified as “gharbzadegi.” Though the term “gharbzadegi” had not yet been coined, this period laid the conceptual groundwork for its eventual emergence, reflecting a growing tension between an invasive Western modernity and Iranian Persian-Islamic identity. At its core, the term expresses a

deeply rooted apprehension about the gradual erosion of Iran's historical identity, local traditions, and cultural values under the relentless expansion of Western modernity through globalization—a process perceived as both seductive and corrosive.

The Birth of *Gharbzadegi*

The term “gharbzadegi” was first coined during the 1950s by Ahmad Fardid, a philosopher and professor at the University of Tehran often referred to as “the oral philosopher” due to his preference for lecturing over writing. Fardid introduced the term in his typically ambiguous and abstract manner, likely influenced by earlier Iranian critics of Westernization, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh and Ahmad Kasravi. He used it to describe a profound spiritual and existential crisis inflicted by the West (specifically, Western secularism and modernity) upon non-Western societies—a crisis that disrupted their ontological foundations and severed their connection to historical-religious and metaphysical authenticity (Mirsepassi 2017, 140-141). Drawing on Martin Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics, Fardid employed the term as a form of nihilism, framing modernity (i.e. Western modernity) as a dehumanizing force rooted in instrumental rationalism and its inevitable byproduct, technology. The term then gained widespread recognition and broader appeal through Jalal Al-e Ahmad's seminal 1964 book, *Gharbzadegi*, first published by Ferdows Press. There, Al-e Ahmad dramatically broadened the term's scope, giving it a distinctly Persian dimension, and in doing so secured his position as one of the leading anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers of the twentieth century, alongside figures such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and C.L.R. James.

In the opening paragraphs of the book, Al-e Ahmad acknowledges borrowing the term “gharbzadegi” from Fardid, stripping it of its abstract metaphysical underpinnings and reshaping it into a cultural and political manifesto with a much-expanded scope (Al-e Ahmad 1999, 10). In the preface, he notes that he first drafted the work in 1962 as an essay for the *Vezerat-e Farhang* [Ministry of Culture], aimed at addressing the rapid Westernization taking place under the Pahlavi dynasty, which he regarded as a temporary, Iran-specific problem. However, when the ministry's journal declined to publish it and, once again, disillusioned by the committees' (including Fardid's) unwillingness to confront the real challenges facing the country, Al-e Ahmad reworked it as a short book for a general audience, issuing editions in 1963 (unreleased) and 1964. Contrary to his expectations, as Al-e Ahmad reflects in the preface, the book's reception eventually revealed that the issue was neither fleeting nor confined to Iran. Instead, it was rooted in a deeper, systemic crisis tied to the very nature of Western modernity. Accordingly, he closes the preface by noting: “I had thought it was merely a discussion of a temporary issue, one that would fade away within a year or two at most; but as you can see, the pain still lingers in the body, and the illness continues to spread its reach day by day” (1999, 11).[1]

In *Gharbzadegi*—especially in the extended 1964 edition available to us—Al-e Ahmad uses the term “gharbzadegi” as a conceptual lens to critically examine the contemporary global condition, positioning Iran's history as a case study—one that is not unique or isolated, but part of a larger, global narrative (Dabashi 2021, 140-141). In proposing the term “gharbzadegi,” Al-e Ahmad aims to expose the mechanisms by which the non-Western societies are invented by the West as “gharbzadeh” [Westoxified], leading to the erosion of the cultural history, identity, and autonomy of these non-Western societies. His ultimate goal

is to articulate a potential path toward liberation, a means of reclaiming authenticity and resisting this imposed dependency. However, the fragmented style of writing he deliberately adopted, riddled with internal contradictions, makes it difficult to clearly identify any concrete “exit strategy” within the text. These ambiguities have, over time, fueled a vibrant and ongoing scholarly discourse, with academics and thinkers striving to untangle Al-e Ahmad’s arguments and develop systematic responses to the enduring question of “gharbzadegi”—what it means, how it manifests, and most crucially, how it might be confronted and overcome.

What is *Gharbzadegi*?

At the core of Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* lies a simple yet striking dichotomy: “gharb” [the West] versus “gharbzadeh” [the Westoxified] (13). This seemingly straightforward binary transcends the traditional West/East dichotomy, which was grounded in a planetary framework where nations and cultural histories were seen as distinct, self-contained, and relatively autonomous entities coexisting alongside one another, with the West as merely one among many. Instead, Al-e Ahmad replaces this model with a more direct binary formula of West/Westoxified, which considers global history as a one unified but unequal entity where the West emerges as the defining element or center and the rest of the world becomes merely its byproduct, labeled as Westoxified (23-24). However, as Al-e Ahmad delves deeper into this division to develop his arguments, he fails to offer a clear or consistent definition of “gharbzadegi” [Westoxification].^[2] Consequently, the concept shifts ambiguously and often contradictorily throughout the book. At times, it is framed as a historical or geographical term, specifically tied to Iran’s encounters with the West. At other times, it serves as an economic term, focused on critiquing global colonial political and economic power structures. Occasionally, it even takes on an existential or philosophical (and even personal) dimensions, reflecting a broader crisis of identity and authenticity in the modern world. It should be noted, moreover, that these senses of “gharbzadegi” are not presented sequentially and are instead intertwined and cyclical.

Al-e Ahmad opens his book by asserting that the question of the West—its relationship with Iran or, more broadly, with the East—is neither novel nor recent. Setting aside ancient conflicts such as those between Iranians and Greeks or Alexander’s invasion of Iran, he notes that probably the most significant historical confrontation with the West occurred during the Middle Ages, in the encounter between Islam and Christianity. This confrontation, he stresses, is particularly important because the Crusades were not simply wars between two political forces; rather, they represented a clash between two distinct regimes of knowledge, Christians seeking to ideologically undermine the Muslims and push the Islamic world toward decline. For Al-e Ahmad, reflecting on these historical moments is illuminating, as they reveal that the primary historical and ideological challenges predominantly originated from the geographical West. By contrast, particularly in the case of Iran (and accordingly the Islamic world), no equally profound ideological conflict has ever been imposed from the Eastern side. Even the most destructive invasions, such as the Mongol conquest, were in his view merely a political conflict, lacking the deeper ideological stakes present in confrontations with the West.

According to Al-e Ahmad, the relationship between the West and the East gradually underwent a drastic transformation. Over the past three centuries, the industrial revolution,

by accelerating production and consumption, reshaped global dynamics and redefined the West/non-West binary, positioning the West as the “self” and the non-West as the “other.” This “other” was no longer viewed as a counterpart of similar standing, but was instead assigned to a new category, commonly referred to as the Westoxified, reduced to serving two primary functions for the West: first, as the site for the extraction of raw materials and, second, as a market for the consumption of manufactured goods. In this context, the West, metaphorically described as a plague, ceases to be a geographical concept and emerges as an economic one. More specifically, the industrial revolution allowed the West to reinvent itself through an economic discourse, or as an economic form. This transformation, in turn, redefined everything anew—for instance, it reimagined the Middle East (including Iran), stripping it of its traditional identity as the “The Abode of Islam” [*Dar al-Islam*] and recasting it as “The Abode of Oil” and other natural resources. It is also in light of the same economic framing of world geography—where the West/non-West binary is reinvented in economic terms—that Al-e Ahmad, in *Gharbzadegi*, insists on classifying Japan as Western and Mexico as non-Western.

This newly emerged economic vision of the West not only redefined the rest of the world through the lens of their economic relationship with Western powers, but also solidified Western economic (and accordingly, socio-cultural and political) supremacy as the dominant global paradigm. This solidification was achieved not merely through colonial conquest and military dominance, supported by advanced weaponry, but also through imperialism and ideological control. These colonial-imperial powers—whether through the spread of Christianity, Orientalist narratives, the seductive allure of technological progress, or the influence of media—deepened the West’s control over the rest of the world, spreading like a plague (a term he borrows from Albert Camus and discusses at length in the book’s concluding chapter), all in service of the West’s economic interests. As Al-e Ahmad writes early on in the book:

“Beneath the unrest, rebellions, uprisings, or chaos in places like Zanzibar, Syria, and elsewhere, the ambitions of corporate powers and their supportive governments can be seen, quietly pulling strings under the guise of riots, coups, or revolts. The economic motives behind modern regional conflicts and wars are now so obvious that they can no longer be disguised as ideological struggles—not even superficially. It is widely understood, even by schoolchildren, that the Second World War was fundamentally driven by the expansionist goals of international industrial powers. The same patterns are evident in the events surrounding Cuba, the Congo, the Suez Canal, and Algeria. Likewise, the bloodshed in regions such as Cyprus, Zanzibar, Aden, and Vietnam is increasingly recognized as part of a deliberate effort to establish footholds for securing commerce—the true force behind state-driven politics” (17).

The rise of the West, therefore, brought about a new, unified global condition in which every nation and cultural history became defined within the binary framework of West/Westoxified. Unlike the past—when relationships between nations and cultural histories were dialogic or dialectic, marked by dynamic and reciprocal exchanges—this new reality, as Al-e Ahmad sees it, has reduced “us” (whether Iranians specifically or non-Westerners more broadly) to mere dependents, stripped of any predefined identity, and reduced to the role of consumers of Western products, both material and cultural. To cement the West/Westoxified binary, the

West systematically severed our ties to cultural and political history, language and literature, traditional-religious ethical values, and other pillars that could enable us to articulate a sense of self. This deliberate disconnection drove non-Western societies to gravitate toward the West, adopting Westernization as the ultimate benchmark in nearly every sphere—politics, economics, and what is now referred to as culture and education. For Al-e Ahmad, this condition epitomizes the essence of “gharbzadegi” [Westoxification]: a state where historical awareness and self-consciousness are eroded, leaving societies incapable of reclaiming their identity or envisioning an independent existence outside the framework of the West. Following the same logic, in his recent book on Al-e Ahmad, Hamid Dabashi (2021) defines “gharbzadegi” as “the condition of coloniality.”

In this state, individuals and societies are reduced to hollow beings, outwardly alive but internally devoid of meaning. They are transformed into objects: voiceless, disconnected, and defined solely by their role as consumers of Western goods and ideas (1999, 124). Al-e Ahmad elaborates that this condition of “gharbzadegi” is not solely the result of Western technological products. It also stems from the cultural products that have infiltrated every aspect of life—the way we think, the way we dress, the way we judge, and how we distinguish between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. Al-e Ahmad highlights the critical role of Orientalists in this process. He argues that Orientalists turned the East into an object of study, producing so-called knowledge about it, which was then reintroduced to the East as the source for understanding itself “scientifically.” This “knowledge,” according to Al-e Ahmad, was far from neutral; rather, it became a tool for prescribing how the East should perceive and define itself. By framing the East through a Western lens, Orientalists played a key role in eroding the East’s self-awareness and autonomy, effectively transforming the non-West into yet another product of the West.

At this point in the argument, Al-e Ahmad’s conceptualization of “gharbzadegi” undergoes a third transformation. The West/Westoxified binary begins to transcend its initial geographical and then economic framework, taking on an existential meaning referring to the alienation of all humans—both Westerners and non-Westerners alike. At this stage, as the notion of “gharbzadegi” (as a form of disease) globalizes, traditional forms of colonization, imperialism, or exploitation no longer suffice. Instead, a new global totalizing reality emerges, reducing all of humanity to mere subjects of exploitation (on the one hand as a producer, and on the other hand as a consumer). Al-e Ahmad refers to this turning point as the rise of “the age of machines.” In this era, humanity becomes estranged from its essence, hollowed out from within, losing the ability to judge, act, or authentically exist in their own historical and cultural world (1999, 122). People are deprived of their religions and beliefs, and transformed into senseless semi-machines—both mass-producers and mass-consumers, not only of physical goods but also of images and information. Even their heroes, once a symbol of human ethical-existential excellence, is now a manufactured construct, stripped of its humanity and reduced to a product of laboratories.

For Al-e Ahmad, in a world dominated by “gharbzadegi” everything is inverted: the hero is no longer a human but a machine; and across the globe, oppression, injustice, tyranny, and discrimination are carried out under the guise of equality and freedom. In this distorted reality, a new type of human emerges, one whose existence is reduced to that of an animal or a machine, as illustrated in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, a reference with which he closes the

book.[3] This dehumanized figure, stripped of individuality and autonomy, is valued solely by their title or social position. Al-e Ahmad identifies this hollowed-out individual as the “gharbzadeh,” the Westoxified person who outwardly resembles a human but functions more like a lifeless machine, understanding no language but imitation. He captures this existential decay with a powerful metaphor: “I use the term ‘gharbzadegi’ [Westoxification] in much the same way one might speak of plague infestation... it’s more accurately akin to grain blight. Have you seen how wheat rots from the inside? Its outer shell stays intact, but it’s nothing more than an empty shell—like the husk of a butterfly left clinging to a tree” (1999, 13).

***Gharbzadegi* After Al-e Ahmad**

From the opening chapter to its conclusion, Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* presents itself to the reader as a prescriptive and sociological project. Yet, its lack of an explicit resolution has led (or misled) some to view it as merely descriptive. The danger of this reductive understanding lies in reading *Gharbzadegi* as a nativist project, rooted in nostalgia for an idealized past—a time when local and historical identities was clearly defined, and existential alienation was not a global concern (e.g. Boroujerdi 1996, 72). This reading suggests that Al-e Ahmad’s solution lies in a return to a past predating the rise of the West—a “return to Islam,” specifically Shi’ism, as Hamid Algar also notes in his introduction to the English translation of *Gharbzadegi* (1984, 13).

In the context of Iran, this particular Islamic interpretation of *Gharbzadegi* gained prominence, especially during the 1970s-1990s, a period defined by the dominance of Islamic ideology in Iran. During this crucial period, *Gharbzadegi* became so popular that even Ehsan Yarshater acknowledged, “No other essay in modern Persian history has had the same vogue or achieved comparable success,” further noting that “its title has become a catch phrase, used to epitomize in four syllables the basic ill of modern Persian society” (qtd. in Partovi 1998, 73). Undoubtedly, the endorsement of *Gharbzadegi* by Ayatollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, played a significant role in its widespread popularity, encouraging readers to interpret the book through Khomeini’s nativist-Islamic lens. However, nearly three decades after the decline of Islamic ideology, it is crucial to revisit Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* with a nuanced perspective, recognizing that while he occasionally referenced Islam in his writings, as Shirin Deylami argues, he “was not an Islamic thinker *per se*” (2011, 250). This is a crucial distinction, and its oversight has led to the marginalization of Al-e Ahmad’s work (Kohn and McBride 2011, 44).

In *The Last Muslim Intellectual* (2021), arguably the most systematic study on the life and thoughts of Al-e Ahmad, Hamid Dabashi liberates Al-e Ahmad from the constraints of a misattributed Islamic framework, situating him instead within a global anticolonial framework alongside figures such as Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, C.L.R. James, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, and José Martí. Here, Dabashi strongly opposes the nativist reading of Al-e Ahmad’s works. He begins the chapter on *Gharbzadegi* by asserting that it is, instead, the scholars who have misread and discredited Al-e Ahmad as a nativist who are, in fact, the true nativists (2021, 140). Along similar lines, by rereading Al-e Ahmad in conjunction with the 1955 Bandung Conference, Siavash Saffari also redefines *Gharbzadegi* as an anti-nativist and forward-looking project that proposes “an alternative vision of the future rather than a nostalgic call for a return to the past” (2022, 131). This forward-looking intent to propose a global solution to the question of “gharbzadegi” is powerfully embodied in Al-e Ahmad’s

striking earthquake metaphor:

While it's true that the exact details of an earthquake should be sought from the university's seismograph, by the time it records anything, the farmer's horse—no matter how unruly—has already bolted and found safety in the wilderness. The writer of these lines aspires, at the very least, to sense with sharper instincts than the shepherd's dog and to see with clearer vision than the crow, something that others have wilfully ignored. (1999, 15)

In this metaphor, Al-e Ahmad portrays "gharbzadegi" as a state of voicelessness, one that reduces him to an animal—able to understand instinctively like a dog and see sharply like a crow yet deprived of the means to express it. However, this inability to articulate does not imply silence or inaction; rather, like a horse that, though unable to articulate the impending danger, instinctively bolts during an earthquake and finds safety in the wilderness, one can still act. This act, in writing, manifests through form—or more precisely, through *per-form-ance*. For Al-e Ahmad, form, born of instinct and urgency, carries a meaning—accessible only to those with sharp perception. Through this immediate, embodied response to crisis, one begins to challenge the paralysis of "gharbzadegi," revealing that even without language, form itself can emerge as a potent means of resistance and understanding.

In this regard, unlike those who have attempted to extract Al-e Ahmad's definitive response to the question of *gharbzadegi* through a close rereading of the text (including Dabashi), I suggest that the solution lies not in the content of the book but in its form. A close reading of *Gharbzadegi* not only leads to abstract and impractical conclusions—such as the claim that only individuals with "principled, skilled, and radical personalities" can "overcome our technophobia and master the machine the same way we mastered the horse" — but also diverges from the creative and practical solution Al-e Ahmad sought to cultivate through the form of the essay itself (Al-e Ahmad 1999, 181; Dabashi 2021, 147). For Al-e Ahmad, as a literary author, form holds paramount importance, as it offers him a space to transcend his state of voicelessness—captured through the seismograph metaphor—and to express the inexpressible. This return to form prompts us to ask: How does exploring the question of form in *Gharbzadegi* allow us to move beyond its content? And what does Al-e Ahmad attempt to convey through the question of form in *Gharbzadegi* that cannot be articulated through its content? These questions invite deeper reflection: What if, contrary to the common assumption that *Gharbzadegi* is a sociological text, Al-e Ahmad, by returning to the question of form, is actually presenting a literary critique of sociology—exposing its limitations and highlighting its inability to envision or articulate freedom? If so, perhaps we should momentarily set aside the tendency to read Al-e Ahmad alongside other anticolonial thinkers and instead consider him a critic of the sociologically grounded anticolonial discourse of his time.

Why does this reframing—the question of form—matter? It reveals the Global South archive not merely as a storehouse of theories about dependency, development, and empire, but as a laboratory of forms—genres, rhetorical strategies, and aesthetic experiments—that interrupt the hegemony of social-scientific "explanation." Reading *Gharbzadegi* as a formal intervention opens space to rethink the epistemic authority of "method" itself: to distrust sociology's neutral voice, to privilege montage, aphorism, satire, and allegory, and to frame freedom as a problem of imagination as much as of policy. Along these lines, Al-e Ahmad stands with Global South writers who weaponize form to provincialize Western knowledge

and to reveal how “explanation” can operate as an instrument of governance and domination. The payoff, therefore, is methodological: rather than adding more cases to a universal sociology, Global South studies can cultivate comparative analysis that traces how texts from Tehran to Delhi, and from Dakar to Mexico City invent new forms of expression calibrated to postcolonial predicaments. If *Gharbzadegi* critiques sociology by means of literature, then Global South studies, too, might shift from extracting abstract concepts to listening for forms—treating form as a site of struggle where alternatives to domination are not just described but enacted.

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[1] All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

[2] Throughout the book, the author seems hurried, often jumping from one case to another without fully developing his arguments, yet maintaining a direct and conclusive tone. To justify his points, he frequently relies on metaphors, which, while effective at times, contribute to a narrative that feels short and fragmented.

[3] Al-e Ahmad was the first to translate Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* into Persian.

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How to Cite

Ahangari, Abolfazl. November 24, 2025. "Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Gharbzadegi/ Westoxification." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.