

**WESTERNIZATION IMPACT ON IRANIAN CULTURE IN  
ZOYA PIRZAD NOVEL: *THINGS WE LEFT UNSAID***

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**Abstract**

*Westernization is the most debatable issues in the post-Revolutionary Iran. It is a gradual process of adaptation or influence of western (European) culture among societies across the globe in areas including, lifestyle priorities, education, values, economics, architecture, clothing, politics, entertainment technology and industry. Iran has a very long and traditional culture based on thousands of years of history in the Middle East. It was the home of the Persian Empire, one of the most successful empires of early history, and it became one of the strongholds of Islam. In Iran, the process of westernization dates back to the country's attempt to westernize by Shah Rezā Khan during the 1930s and continued by his son during the Cold War.*

**Keywords:-** culture, Middle East, westernization..

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**Introduction**

**W**esternization is the most debatable issues in the post-Revolutionary Iran. It is a gradual process of adaptation or influence of western (European) culture among societies across the globe in areas including, lifestyle priorities, education, values, economics, architecture, clothing, politics, entertainment technology and industry.

Iran has a very long and traditional culture based on thousands of years of history in the Middle East. It was the home of the Persian Empire, one of the most successful empires of early history, and it became one of the strongholds of Islam. In Iran, the process of westernization dates back to the country's attempt to westernize by Shah Rezā Khan during the 1930s and continued by his son during the Cold War.

Iran was never formally a colony of the Western country but its natural resources and strategic location made it subject to the indirect colony of Western powers. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, a prominent Iranian social critic and novelist, in his masterpiece *occidentosis :A Plague from the West* (Gharbzadeghi in Persian) criticized Westernization process and the so-called "West" that made Iran a dependant country in the guise of modern technology and industry. He questions the western imperialism, which causes loss of Iranian identity due to the indirect colonization of Iranian minds, culture, and traditions and assertion of their superiority over Iran. In *occidentosis* he writes of Iranians as if they were a colonized population. For instance, he asks rhetorically, "[A]re we Iranians not

today a subjected province of the West?" (52). Undoubtedly he was aware of the indirect domination of western countries on the economic, political, and cultural aspects of his homeland country by importing the western industry and ideology and spread of consumerism by the Western capitalist. Since Iranian glorious past, their culture and language continuously are devalued by the concept of modernity and Western imperialist, Iranians feel inferior and see themselves without identity. Al-e Ahmad notes, "We now resemble an alien people, with unfamiliar customs, a culture with no roots in our land and no chance of blossoming here" (64).

*Occidentosis* is one of the basic parts of the de-Westernisation discourse in Iran. Edward Said in *Orientalism* criticized the development of Westernization in the Middle East due to the colonization process. Like Al-e Ahmad he describes the imbalance between the West and East by reinforcing the superiority of West over East. He writes, "A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because he was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (44).

Both Edward Said and Al-e Ahmad highlight the colonial ambitious of Westerner by emphasizing on binary oppositions of "self" and "the other". In *Occidentosis*, Al-e Ahmad strongly encourages Iranians to stop imitating Western-lifestyle, belief, and values and return to their authentic self. He declares how Westerners under the rubric of progress, impose their beliefs, values, and technologies throughout the world. Thus, Iranians must reclaim their identity by educating themselves based on their own tradition, values, and beliefs.

Zoya Pirzad is a contemporary and well known Armenian-Iranian novelist who was born in Abadan in 1952. Her collection of short stories *The Bitter Taste of Persimmon* and her international bestseller novel, *Things We Left Unsaid* (*Cherāgh-hā-rā man khāmush mi-konam*) won the international prize of France in 2009. *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001)

narrates the everyday life of Iranian who lives in the capital oil city of Iran, Abadan, from a female point of view, Clarice Ayvazian.

Clarice is an Armenian-Iranian housewife in her thirties who lives in Abadan in the early 1960s with her husband, Artush, her teenage boy and her twin daughter. Clarice's unmarried pudgy sister Alice and her quarrelsome mother live in the oil city, too. Clarice is an unhappy and dissatisfied wife who is bored by the workload of domestic affairs and host for friends and family. On the emotional side, she feels alienated by Artush who works for the national oil company and is preoccupied with his job and his own interest, politics and his old Chevy.

When Simonians family including, a strong-willed grandmother, Elmira, her son Emil and his daughter Emily move into the neighboring area Clarice grows fond of Emil and little in little falls in love with him since he was kind and attentive to Clarice's needs. Clarice's marriage incompatibility caused her to spend most of her time with Emil and shared with him her feeling and interest including gardening and reading literary books. However, toward the end of novel Emil has made a pass on another woman, Violet, and wants to marry her. Since Emil's mother was against the marriage, Simonians family disappeared and secretly moved out from Abadan. Clarice reconsiders her life again and decides to stand by her family while many things left unsaid at the end of the novel. She finally joins Mrs. Nurollāhi women's rights association to fight for women's right to vote. Although Zoya Pirzad's novel, *Things we left unsaid*, centers on the feminist themes, it examines the impact of westernization on city structure, Iranian culture, and Persian language in Abadan, modern oil city of Iran, by giving a vivid picture of westernized Abadan in the early 1960s.

## **The City of Abadan**

The novel set in Abadan, Iran's largest oil city in the early 1960s, prior to the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979. Abadan and its British oil refinery of is setting of many Pirzad's novels. Abadan (Persian, آبادان) is a capital of Abadan County, Khuzestan Province and a city which is located in the southwest of Iran. It places on Abadan Island which is bounded by the Arvand waterway in the West and the Bahmanshir outlet of the Arvand Rood to the East from the Persian Gulf near the border of Iraq-Iran.

When oil had been struck at Masjid-e Soleyman on 26 May 1908, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) chose the island of Abadan as the oil terminal to export oil to England. Abadan was a very convenient site for a refinery since it was close to the port of Khorramshahr. In January 1913, 26 Europeans already worked at the refinery. In 1913, the refinery continued production, reaching an export level of 163,000 tons a year. During the World War I, two third of refinery productions exported to British Admiralty and by the end of World War II Abadan oil refinery produced more than seventeen tons annually. This officially culminated when it became the biggest refinery in 1960, which was produced twenty-one million tons per year (Dumper and Stanley 2).

The centrality of Abadan for oil production coupled with the rise in importance of oil has resulted in the immigrant of many young male workers including a new community of Armenians, British, and Americans. The city also had had Christian and native Jewish resident for centuries with Roman Catholic and American Protestant church (Costello 2).

APOC and then NIOC (National Oil Refinery) provide the segregating housing and supplies for workers in the company town in Abadan. There were more than 40,000 employees of the oil company in 1950(3). Thus the new city of Abadan became the fifth – largest city in Iran and model of the industrial and modern city in the Middle East. The residential area of the oil company was the most *westernized* place in Iran. Life in “the

company town” of Abadan was according to the western lifestyle and culture, especially for elites. Thus the gradual influence of western (European) culture among Iranians in Abadan take place in areas such as lifestyle priorities, education, values, economics, architecture, clothing, and entertainment. Parties in the Caravanserai Hotel, dances in night Clubs, Abadan Band Club and the luxurious living condition of managerial elites meant that some called Abadan Iran’s “Paris” (Dumper and Stanley 4).

The westernized residential neighborhoods of American and British workers pave the way for the indirect influence of Western powers in Iran especially in the southern oil city of Abadan. When the refinery had been established in Abadan during 1910, collections of bungalows were built for British oil industry experts in the area known as Braim. In contrast to the poor local’s neighborhood, Braim’s resident embodied the high degree of comfort and accommodations. This unfair division leads to the splitting up of the Iranian and British neighborhood in Abadan:

The workers lived in a shantytown called Kaghazabad, or Paper City, without running water or electricity, let alone such luxuries as iceboxes or fans. In winter, the earth flooded and became a flat, perspiring lake. ... (In the summer) the dwellings of Khaghazhad, cobbled from rusted oil drums hammered flat, turned into sweltering ovens. In the British section of Abadan there were lawns, rose beds, tennis courts, swimming pools, and clubs; in Kaghazabad there was nothing—not a tea shop, not a bath, not a single tree. The tiled reflecting pool and shaded central square that were part of every Iranian town, no matter how poor or dry, were missing here. (qtd. in Karimi 78)

In 1979 Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, visited Abadan. He depicts Iran’s largest oil city, Abadan, as a half-industrial and half-colonial city:

It is a surprise to find (Abadan) to be so huge, yet rather old-fashioned, surrounded by corrugated iron, with British-style management buildings, half-industrial and half-colonial, that one can glimpse above the flares and the chimneys. It is a colonial governor's palace, modified by the austerity of a big Manchester spinning mill. But one can see that (this) powerful institution ... has created (misery) on this island of sand between two yellowish rivers. The misery starts around the factory with a sort of subtropical mining village, then very quickly one enters the slums where children swarm between truck chassis and heaps of scrap iron, and finally one arrives at the hovels of dried mud bathed in filth. There, crouching children neither cry nor move. Then everything disappears in the grove of palms that leads to the desert, which is the front and the rear of one of the most valuable properties in the world. ( Afari et al 217)

Al-e Ahmad hates Iran's growing cities, which he compares to "malignant tumours" (38), as much as he hates the world of machines. He believes urbanization with its mechanical culture is the main cause of Westernization and indirect colonization of Iranian society that uproots Iranians from their identity and culture:

The logic of machine consumption compels urbanization, which follows from being uprooted from the land. To migrate to the city, you must be uprooted from your ancestral lands, flee a landlord's village, or tire of tribal migrations and forsake them. This is the first contradiction ensuing from our occidentosis: to respond to the machine's call to urbanization, we uproot the people from the villages and send them to the city. (66)

In the novel, all the male characters, including Armenians, the Dutch engineers and even the female women's rights activist, Mrs. Nurollâhi, and Alice are employed in the oil refinery. Alice, Clarice's sister, is a nurse who works in the oil company's hospital. Alice and her friends often order "fish and chips" from the "Annex" instead of Iranian snacks.

In general, the novel gives a picture of a real Abadan, which was divided into different isolated sections with a different class of the population. Clarice's family lives in one of the European-style villas built by the oil company in a middle-class section of the city named Bawarda. there is a library, sports club, and cafeteria for the middle and upper-class employees of the refinery. Opposite to the quarters of working class workers, all families in the area live comfortably surrounded by the gentle bickering of their children and their gossiping friends and relatives. Pirzad depicts the upper-middle class section with houses with pools, namely Braim. She also describes the misery of working-class slum in Piruzabad (Kaghazabad). Shatit, a nearby village, is a poor area in which Arabs live in mud huts without water and electricity. Artush mentions their quarters in a harsh contrast to Abadan's technological splendor.

## **Culture**

Abadan embodies the semi-colonial ambitions of westerners and their impact on people's culture and lifestyle. Abadan with its charming neon lights at night and glamorous gardens in daytime deceived Iranians to believe their city as a symbol of progress, and discipline. According to the translated report of a journalist published in *Kandaniha* in 1947 Abadan is a city of

Technicians: The City Where All Public Services Are Free emphasizes the glamour of the city at night with its British-style architecture glowing under neon lights and the flames of fire sputtering atop the oil refineries' equipment . . . And indeed, everyone in Abadan is protected by the fire of the refineries that help guarantee all sorts of public services free of charge. (qtd. in Karimi 74)

Regardless of the industrial progress, Pirzad paints the negative influence of western culture in losing of national identity and detachment of Iranians from their traditional culture and lifestyle due to the absorption of dominant Western culture. Clarice's friends

Nina and Garnik are representatives of American consumer culture. They have recently moved from Bavarde to Braim (upper-class resident), and buy all the new things that are imported to Abadan for their daughters. They also introduce Clarice's family to fast food and other Western shops in the town.

Food is a main cultural indicator and cultural practiced in all societies. Pirzad shows how going to fast food restaurants (food bought in town, not homemade food) is more common among the Iranian particularly young people in Abadan. They spend more time in a fast food restaurant or coffee shops and are well aware of these shops in the city. Indeed, they go to these fast food restaurants to experience the different atmosphere and enjoy their time in a pleasant gathering place. Nina, Garnik and most people in the city buy Pepsi (پپسی) and Canada (کاتادا) soft drinks, hula hoops (هولا هوپ) and yoyos (یویو).

Clarice's son's room is occupied with Western actors, Alan Delon, Romy Schneider and posters of Western movies such as Laurel and Hardy and Tom Thumb. It is a fashion for people to watch Western movies in the oil company's open-air cinema, the cinemas Rex, Taj and Khorshid and listen to western music in Abadan's Clubs. In Milk bar of the town, most people listen to recently released music played on the jukebox, *Hit the Road Jack*, either the Ray Charles' version from 1961 or a cappella version by Percy Mayfield from 1960. Clarice and Mrs. Nurollahi have ice coffee in that same milk bar and talk about women's liberation movement. Even Artush with his Marxist ideology is not untouched by the Western culture since he loves his old Chevy, almost more than he does his wife.

## Language

Language is one of the key factors that determine one's identity. Remland et al. claim, "language is an expression of cultural identity" which can shape the culture of the users by influencing their perceptions and thoughts. Language and culture are not separable

from each other. Barber asserts “without a language one does not claim to have a culture”(qtd. in Alfarhan 3). As Western culture and lifestyle have invaded Abadan, the English language pervaded the Persian (Farsi) all through the novel. Since the British are the bosses of the city both in the refinery and the connected institutions like the hospital, it is natural that the English language permeates into the Persian speech of the characters in *Things we left Unsaid*. Alice studied in England and peppering her Persian language with English expressions. She finally married a Dutch engineer and moved to the Netherlands. She), says “hello” to people, shows her “interest” in Emil, gets “off” from work, and she is often “impressed”. Other English words that are often used in the novel are “dairy”, “store”, “grade”, “supermarket” for the people employed at the oil refinery, “Smarties” and “seniors”.

## Conclusion

Zoya Pirzad’s *Things We Left Unsaid* depicts the Westernized society of Iran in Abadan in the early 1960s. It mirrors the negative outcome of indirect colonization of Iran by the Western powers. Pirzad realistically highlights the loss of Iranian culture, tradition and even language in Clarice family and other citizens of Abadan due to the adaptation and imitation of Western models and culture. In the novel, the process of Westernization is seen as a threat to the Iranian local culture and tradition by reducing cultural diversity and cultural homogenization.

The wave of modern *western culture* makes the citizens “*mimic men*” who are alienated from their origins. Thus, westerners turn traditional society of Abadan to a class-divided society that suffers from language and cultural dislocation. Pirzad real description of Abadan expresses the superiority aspect of English language and culture that has contributed to the loss of Identity and local culture of Iranians. The globalization of English causes most people normally use English and willingly forget about their first languages. Most people prefer to mix their Persian language with English since their own

language and culture was devalued by indirect colonization of Westerners. Even Clarice's mother, who hates English words that enter the Persian and Armenian languages of her family, unwittingly uses English words.

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