

Dariush Ashouri on role of language in Iran's underdevelopment

Dariush Ashouri



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ANALYSIS EXCLUSIVE

The book "Dariush Ashouri's Account of Development and Underdevelopment in Iran," authored by Mokhtar Nouri, faculty member of the Department of Political Science at Razi University of Kermanshah, was written with the help of the Iranian non-governmental institution "Pooyesh Fekri Tose'e" (meaning: Intellectual Movement of Development) and published by Shargh Newspaper Publishing House. The book is dedicated to exploring the philosophy of a thinker who has devoted several decades of his life to reflecting upon the "troubled soul of Iran" and its intellectual, political, social, and cultural transformations. A well-known Iranian intellectual such as Dariush Ashouri, who, over the course of the recent decades, has traversed diverse intellectual, political, and cultural ascents and descents.

Ashouri commenced his intellectual endeavors, from the period of adolescence, in the proximity of a politician such as Khalil Maleki, and, with passage through diverse political and social actions on the stage of history, he now abides in the domain of language, or, in the words of Martin Heidegger, the "house of Being". Ashouri, in the manner of many contemporary Iranian intellectuals, is a man of the arena of modernity and its struggle with tradition. According to Ashouri, we Iranians entered the orbit of global issues from the 19th century onward. Therefore, Ashouri seeks to ascertain who we are and what has transpired for us Iranians over the past two centuries. With concentration upon modernity and its boundaries and contours, Ashouri intends to demonstrate how the West attained progress and subsequently, as a world-consuming discourse, embarked upon incursions into other cultures and nations, including Iranian society. Ashouri is an intellectual who observed the bipolar atmosphere dominant during the Cold War era and the ideological conflicts between capitalism and socialism, and their development-oriented outlooks. On the other hand, he is familiar with the literature and works of the field of development, in its conventional sense. Yet he rather quickly abandoned these conventional spaces of development sociology and began seeking his lost piece in the linguistic and cultural realms.

As is known, development possesses diverse political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, yet Ashouri, who from youth was inclined toward development in the Third World and Iran, reoriented himself from the economic and political aspects of development toward its cultural and social dimensions. In other words, although modernization and development constitute Ashouri's principal concern, he considers their pathway not through economic metrics but through language and culture.

By passing beyond the models and indices of the development field, Ashouri, in his works, has placed emphasis upon a more significant theoretical model. In fact, if we consider the principal crisis to be the underdevelopment of Iranian society in the contemporary period, the roots of the crisis, in Ashouri's view, reside in the linguistic and cultural sphere, and he regards himself as a researcher in pursuit of "language-therapy" and "culture-therapy."

The adoption of this type of linguistic and cultural approach to development has drawn him, on the one hand, toward understanding Western modernity, and, on the other hand, toward recognizing



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the historical, identity-based, linguistic, and cultural corridors of Iran and Eastern lands. Therefore, in his desired model, he links all aspects of modern life to language and believes that it is through exploring and reflecting within the linguistic space that one can grasp, at the very root of the matter, the fundamental differences between modern and traditional mentalities and between developed and underdeveloped worlds. It is from this perspective that Ashouri regards the Persian language as one of the fundamental factors that must receive special attention in order to attain comprehensive development. He believes that it may be possible, through imitation, to achieve accomplishments in industry and technology, yet for authentic modernization and being able to genuinely generate something new, the principal task is reflection upon the self and upon mental structures, through which reflection upon the Persian language, as the instrument of the formation of thought and the creation of new concepts, acquires undeniable importance.

As a result, Ashouri consistently regards himself as a seeker within the cultural arena, and his thought concerning culture becomes connected with science, literature, art, philosophy, and language. With regard to such concern, namely, the linguistic and cultural dimension of development, Ashouri turns toward

mentality, historical legacy, ancient structures, and our Iranian bottlenecks in confrontation with Western modernity. This matter, as his principal issue, has also become material for the production of diverse scholarly works. In Ashouri's own words, the further he has progressed, the more prominent the cultural dimension of development has become for him.

Ashouri believes that his understanding of issues has been profoundly altered as a result of living in the Western world. He maintains that the discourse of "Westoxication" (or, "Occidentosis") — which, in the pre-Islamic Revolution period, influenced him as well, in the manner of a multitude of Iranian intellectuals, and which required many years for him to cleanse its sediments from his mind — was indicative of a type of indigenous pathology that arose from our Third-World resentment and obstructed our understanding of diverse issues.

In Ashouri's view, Westoxication and the dialogue surrounding it constitute the discourse of a particular period in the history of our modern Iranian intellectual life. In Ashouri's perspective, Westoxication is a negative concept and bespeaks a pathological condition in our life and culture, and the portmanteau with "intoxication" itself signifies precisely this pathological nature of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, Ashouri, by passing beyond these types of intellec-



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tual resentments, has discovered other aspects in confronting modernity, and, in his own expression, has identified a "linguistic abyss" that has created a chasm between us and the foundations of modernity, a chasm that is, with great difficulty, fillable.

In formulating this type of linguistic gap, Ashouri invokes the "language of the adult" in contrast to the "language of the child". In his view, the adult human speaks with expansive words, prepared for the expression of innumerable concepts, whereas the child's language is crude and limited. Consequently, Ashouri states that the language of us Iranians today is an incomplete, childish, and deficient language, with which we cannot articulate profound concepts. This is not the language in whose use our predecessors displayed virtuosity in poetry and prose and manifested genius. They expressed their concepts and thoughts with a mature, refined, and complete language, whereas the language we employ is the language of children who wish to speak with the concepts of other complete and mature adults: with the language of Western civilization.

Within this framework, Ashouri divides languages into two categories, "developed" and "underdeveloped," and believes that underdeveloped languages, just as underdeveloped countries follow developed countries in their economic, social, and political systems, likewise become followers of developed languages in their regularities and capacities. It is observed that Ashouri associates the gap between us and the modern world with a linguistic gap and speaks of the globalization of modern Western civilization through a "linguistic revolution," and believes that this world-consuming model has also entangled us within itself.

Thus, in the essay "The Troubled Soul of Iran," he regards the modern world as a world that does not release us with its instruments and techniques, and we are compelled to clarify our position toward it. In any case, Ashouri's intellectual turn is evident, and he has arrived, through a passage beyond prior political and ideological issues, at a new outlook in confronting the modern Western world, in which, in this transition, the linguistic element has acquired great importance for him.

Examining the thought of a thinker who has devoted several decades of his life to intellectual labor, and considering how he regards issues such as modernization, development, and progress in human life, can undoubtedly be compelling.

Dariush Ashouri, language, and development

As stated, Ashouri's principal issue is understanding development and progress in the Western world and comprehending Iran's underdevelopment. For understanding this gap between us and the modern Western world, he has concentrated on the linguistic and cultural dimensions of development. For this reason, it is first necessary to elucidate, to the extent possible, Ashouri's principal issue, namely, the relationship between language and development.

In Ashouri's view, engagement with language and its issues is always exhilarating, and this exhilaration arises from the fact that every person senses an intrinsic and authentic belonging to his or her language, and one's language is one's "world," and the length, breadth, and depth of one's "world" correspond to the length, breadth, and depth of one's language, and every manipulation and transformation in language manipulates and transforms one's world.

From Ashouri's perspective, our relationship with our language in everyday



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