

Article

An Ante Litteram Critique of Orientalism: The Case of Abu'l-Faḍā'il-i-Gulpāyigānī and E.G. Browne

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Abstract: Since the late 1970s, the term Orientalism has been closely associated with Edward Said (d. 2003) and his influential monograph of the same name. First published in 1978, *Orientalism* advanced a number of critiques about the discipline of “Oriental Studies”, its frequently condescending portrayal and depiction of the Eastern world, and the complex relationship between knowledge and power in the context of the Middle East. As revolutionary as a number of Said’s theses have been, in his critique of Orientalism and in particular his penetrating analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power, Said was not breaking entirely new ground. In fact, seven decades earlier, a voice from the Orient itself, the Persian Bahā’ī scholar Mīrzā Abu'l-Faḍā'il-i-Gulpāyigānī (d. 1914), expressed a similar, albeit embryonic, critique of Orientalism. Abu'l-Faḍā'il's analysis, presented in the opening chapters of his final book *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, focused on one of the foremost Orientalists of his time, the Cambridge scholar Edward Granville Browne (d. 1926). Rather than studying the extent to which Browne fits the paradigm of Orientalism (a topic some scholars have previously expressed views on), this article explores ways in which Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of Browne's study of the Orient can be viewed as a nascent prefiguration of some of the theses developed and advanced by Said decades later. Gulpāyigānī's precedence as a Bahā'ī scholar in discerning and addressing the link between Western scholars' knowledge production and the colonial power relations of their respective governments with the countries or areas they studied, helps correct a misconception forged about Bahā'īs. Historical narratives produced in anti-Bahā'ī polemics decades after Gulpāyigānī's death created a master-narrative that cast Bahā'īs as agents of colonial powers, sweeping under the rug counterarguments such as those posed by Gulpāyigānī's critique. The authors of this article have been motivated by this corrective goal.

Keywords: Abu'l-Faḍā'il-i-Gulpāyigānī; Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani; Edward Said; Orientalism; Edward Granville Browne



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1. Introduction

The politicization of Shī'ī Islam in Iran in the twentieth century weaponized anti-Bahā'ī polemics to depict Bahā'īs as “agents of imperialism” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2008). Building the master-narrative of Bahā'īs as tools of colonialism was accomplished by such activities as the widespread publication of the forged memoirs of a former ambassador of Russia in Persia, whom it was claimed had created the Bābī and Bahā'ī religions in order to divide and weaken the Muslim community (Yazdani 2011b) on the one hand, and deliberate amnesia of all counter-evidence on the other hand. An example of such counter-evidence can be seen in a book written by a well-known Bahā'ī scholar in the second decade of the twentieth century that highlights the connection between knowledge and power and the ways in which the knowledge of the scholars working on Persia can be used to serve the colonial ambitions of their respective governments. Seventy years later, a celebrated Palestinian-American cultural critic and scholar of Comparative Literature at Columbia University

published a groundbreaking book with a similar core message. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said (d. 2003) set out to elucidate how “the western study of the so-called Orient, and specifically the Islamic world, constitutes a pervasive attempt to deprive it of its identity and sovereignty, and that the academic pursuit of ‘Orientalism’ . . . continues to be an extension or reflection of a fundamentally political will to power and domination” (Said 1979, p. 1). The chief catalysts of Said’s paradigm were the Orientalists, predominantly nineteenth century European scholars who studied “the Orient” and often translated its writings into European languages, based in part on the assumption that a truly effective colonial conquest—the like of which the European powers had embarked on—required knowledge of the conquered peoples (Said 1979, p. 1).

This article proposes that Said’s penetrating analysis regarding the relationship between knowledge and power was not breaking entirely new ground. Almost sixty-five years before the publication of *Orientalism*, a voice from within the Orient itself, the Persian Bahā’ī scholar Mīrzā Abu’l-Faḍā’il-i Gulpāygānī (d. 1914), expressed what in some ways is a similar—albeit far more embryonic—critique of Orientalism. Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s critique was focused on one of the foremost Orientalists of his time, the eminent Cambridge scholar, Edward Granville Browne (d. 1926). In order to highlight historical evidence that problematizes the narrative of Bahā’īs as “agents of imperialism”, this article suggests that Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s general critique of Orientalism constitutes a nascent prefiguration of some of the theses developed by Said in greater detail decades later. As such, Abu’l-Faḍā’il was the forerunner of a debate that occupied Iranian intellectuals in the early to mid-twentieth century. While this article does not intend to evaluate whether or not E.G. Browne fits the Orientalist typology described and criticized by Said, it will provide a summary of the views of some contemporary scholars on that question.

2. Said and Orientalism

Before turning to Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s critique of Orientalism, we must acquaint ourselves with those salient features of Said’s project for which we find traces in Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s writings, namely, Said’s discourse on epistemology and the use of knowledge by Orientalists in the service of power.

Said defined Orientalism as a “system of knowledge about the Orient” (Said 1979, p. 6). Orientalism “presents itself as a form of knowledge that is both different from, and superior to, the knowledges that the Orientals have of themselves” (Inden 1990, p. 37). Said observed in the opening pages of his influential monograph that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (Said 1979, p. 1). After examining this “European invention” carried out under the guise of the academic discipline of Oriental Studies, Said argued that the distortions and misrepresentations of the Orient were systematic and part of a much larger structure of thought that was prevalent in the West’s whole enterprise of dealing with the East: Orientalists presented information that they had gathered about the Orient based on the assumption that a successful conquest, the like of which European imperial powers had embarked throughout Asia, demanded knowledge of the conquered peoples. By acquiring and presenting information about the Orient, the West was able to demonstrate its intellectual superiority. By publishing their new-found knowledge of the Orient, Orientalists created “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it”. Therefore, Said argued that Orientalism was “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1979, p. 3).

How was this knowledge procured? It was obtained as a result of the relationship between these same Orientalists and the Orient, a relationship that was skewed, for its terms were defined from the outset by the Orientalists. The input of the peoples and societies being studied was seldom solicited or welcomed. The Orient served to be observed and studied. As an object of study, Said argued that “the Oriental is given as fixed, stable, in need of investigation, and in need even of knowledge about himself . . . There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist)” (Said 1979, p. 308).

Said accentuated the imbalance in this association when he argued that the “relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony” (Said 1979, p. 5).

According to Said, the manipulation of knowledge gave impetus to the exploitation of power, the most blatant manifestation of which lay in the policies of European colonialism. Knowledge about the Orient, therefore, came to constitute “the collusion of scholarship with the imperatives of colonial domination” (Dallmayr 2007, p. 49). Said maintained that “to reconstruct a dead or lost Oriental language meant ultimately to reconstruct a dead or neglected Orient; it also meant that reconstructive precision, science, even imagination could prepare the way for what armies, administrations, and bureaucracies would later do on the ground, in the Orient” (Said 1979, p. 123).

But what other implications does this manipulation of knowledge have for academics? Anticipating this question, Said affirmed that “after all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of . . . the late 1840s until the present . . . must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies” (Said 1979, p. 5). Rather, Said averred that in order for Orientalism to prosper, it had to be institutionalized. He argued that “knowledge of the subject races is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (Said 1979, p. 36). Thus, the knowledge being procured and presented about the Orient contributed to and validated the growing power disparity, which in turn led to additional knowledge about the Orient being developed and made available, creating a self-sustaining cycle called “Orientalism”. As knowledge merged with power, the opportunities for the proliferation of Orientalism became endless, with durable implications well into the present time.

Said provided evidence from the works of several prominent Orientalists (mostly British and French) to support his thesis. He did not intend to analyze the work of every Orientalist. Rather, his goal was to present a model of Orientalism into which individuals identified as Orientalists could be placed. The name Edward Browne is mentioned only once in *Orientalism* (Said 1979, p. 224), with no specific information about him, besides the fact that he was numbered amongst those who exerted influence on future generations of Orientalists.

3. Abu'l-Faḍā'il and Orientalism

We are now ready to turn to Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of Orientalism. However, first, a few words by way of introduction about this individual are needed. Mīrzā Muḥammad-i Gulpāyigānī, who had adopted the epithet Abu'l-Faḍl, was perhaps the most prominent scholar of the first century of the Bahā'ī religion. Born in Persia to a Shī'ī Muslim family in 1844, he received training in the traditional Islamic sciences in Isfahan before his conversion to the Bahā'ī Faith at the age of thirty-two. His biographers have called attention to, among other things, his erudition—especially in philosophy and religious history; his mastery of the Persian language; and his remarkable oratory skills (Mīhrābkhānī 1988; Iṣfahānī 166 BE/2009; Momen 1985, n.d.; Mīhrābkhānī 1990, p. 56). He engaged in scholarly and intellectual debates with contemporary Persian thinkers (Amīnī 2015, pp. 16–19). Playing on the meaning of his adopted epithet, Abu'l-Faḍl (meaning “the father of erudition”), the Bahā'ī leader, 'Abdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921), designated him Abu'l-Faḍā'il (meaning “the father of [all] erudition”) to recognize his encyclopedic knowledge and prodigious abilities.

Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of Orientalism occurs in the Persian-language treatise *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā' 'an Ḥiyālī'l-A'dā'* (“Exposing the Machinations of the Enemies”). In the introductory notes of this work, we learn that following Edward Browne's publication of the *Kitāb-i Nuḡṭatu'l-Kāf*—a history of the Bābī movement attributed to the early Bābī martyr Ḥājī Mīrzā Jānī (d. 1851)¹—many questions about this chronicle were forwarded to Abu'l-Faḍā'il by students at the Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University of Beirut). At the time, Abu'l-Faḍā'il was recuperating from an illness. Upon receiving explicit

instructions from ‘Abdu’l-Bahā to respond to these queries, Abu’l-Faḍā’il commenced writing a treatise which was later titled *Kashfu’l-Ghiṭā’ ‘an Ḥiyālī’l-A’ḍā’* or, as it is more commonly known, simply *Kashfu’l-Ghiṭā’* (*Gulpāyigānī and Gulpāyigānī n.d.*; all page numbers in this article relate to this book unless otherwise attributed). As he passed away in 1914 before the book could be completed, it was finished and published posthumously by Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s nephew, Siyyid Miḥdī Gulpāyigānī (d. 1928) (*Miḥrābkhānī 1988*, pp. 422–31). The discussion of *Kashfu’l-Ghiṭā’* in this article is based on the first 132 pages, written by Abu’l-Faḍā’il-i-Gulpāyigānī himself.

Abu’l-Faḍā’il begins *Kashfu’l-Ghiṭā’* by observing that, since the founding of the Bābī and Bahā’ī religions, a number of both Eastern and Western scholars have written works either praising and supporting these movements or vilifying and rejecting them based on their own preconceived notions and beliefs. He defines an “Orientalist” (*mustashriq*) as a scholar who has mastered one of the Oriental languages (p. 7), yet he distinguishes between two groups of Orientalists. The first are scholars who truly seek to increase awareness and understanding of Eastern peoples and civilizations. These scholars study, edit and publish rare and valuable literary and historical works, neglected by native rulers and religious leaders, and make them available to other interested scholars. The second group of Orientalists are those who seek fame and fortune by exploiting the peoples and civilizations they seek to study.

Among the Orientalists discussed by Abu’l-Faḍā’il are the French aristocrat Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (d. 1882) and the diplomat and historian A.L.M. Nicolas (d. 1939). However, it is Edward Browne who receives the bulk of his attention. After providing an account of Browne’s trips to Persia, Cyprus and Palestine, Abu’l-Faḍā’il turns his attention to Browne’s literary contributions:

Strangely, there were many contradictions in the writings of this author [Browne] that have puzzled experts. In certain places, his works reflect the beliefs of a devoted Bahā’ī. In others, they mirror the convictions of a zealous Azalī. In still others, he attempts to come across as an impartial and objective historian and an unbiased Orientalist. Such contradictions have not escaped the discerning eyes of intellectuals and scholars. Consequently, during the past quarter century, over and over, verbally and in writing, many friends have asked for my opinion of Mr. Browne’s works. (p. 7)

According to Abu’l-Faḍā’il, Browne built his reputation on being a historian of the Bābī and Bahā’ī religions. As the Bahā’ī religion grew and became more widespread, so did Browne’s reputation.

At first Abu’l-Faḍā’il questions Browne’s scholarship: “This professor’s efforts in editing and publishing certain oriental texts have often had an adverse effect. Some of the meanings of these texts have been altered and they have been rendered useless . . .” (p. 8). One example cited by Abu’l-Faḍā’il is Nizāmī-yi ‘Arūḍī-yi Samarqandī’s *Chahār Maqālīh* (“Four Essays”), which Browne published using Gibb’s endowment. “Three renowned editors”, Abu’l-Faḍā’il writes, spent four years providing an introduction, annotations, indexes, etc., but, ignorant of the meaning of the passages in this text and the intentions of the original author, they redacted and made unnecessary changes to this book. He adds, “in other words, three Eastern scholars and the Orientalist [Browne] have taken great pains and collaborated to render an accurate and useful book incorrect and profitless”. Intent on warning his fellow countrymen of the harm Orientalists are capable of effecting, Abu’l-Faḍā’il proceeds to cite examples of improper “corrections” Browne and his coeditors have made to the published text of *Chahār Maqālīh*. In a clear and provocative reference to these same Orientalists, Abu’l-Faḍā’il expresses hope that “perhaps the Persian people will come to understand [this] and while there is still yet time, arise to protect their language from plunderers bent on pillaging (them)” (pp. 9–11).² It is not difficult to see that through this critique, Mīrzā Abu’l-Faḍā’il is implying and attracting his readers’ attention to the fact that Browne and his collaborators have similarly distorted the Nuḡṭatu’l-Kāf.

Abu'l-Faḍā'il then recounts the first time he learned of Browne. He records that in 1889 he received news from Bahā'īs living in Yazd that Browne had arrived in the city from England, introducing himself as a steadfast Bahā'ī—a claim whose veracity was immediately called into question by Abu'l-Faḍā'il. The next time Abu'l-Faḍā'il recalls hearing of Browne is when the Russian Orientalist Alexander Tumansky (d. 1920) showed him some of the essays Browne had published on the subject of Bābī history in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Gradually Abu'l-Faḍā'il discovered that Browne and Tumansky were privately corresponding with one another. He relates that a friend of his—a certain supporter of the Russian government who considered himself an impartial and fair-minded thinker—once said to him jokingly: “Naïve man! Don't be so pure-hearted and optimistic about the friendship between these two politically motivated individuals [that is, Browne and Tumansky]. One pretends to be siding with the Bahā'īs, and the other claims to be supporting the Azalīs so that through this stratagem they prevent the rapid spread of the new cause!” (p. 15).

Abu'l-Faḍā'il recalls that later, in 1903, while living in Egypt, he read a biographical article ('*Awaḍ 1320/1903*) about Browne written by Ḥāfiẓ 'Awaḍ (d. 1950), an Arab journalist and historian.³ The information in this article appears to have been dictated by Browne himself. Abu'l-Faḍā'il includes the entire biography, and a summary of its Persian translation, in *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, because, in his words, “. . . it reveals to discerning minds the true nature of Edward Browne. After all, it was dictated by him directly and written by his close friend” (pp. 16–17).

The following five points made in *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'* can be considered a critique of Browne and his Orientalism:

(1) After incorporating Ḥāfiẓ 'Awaḍ's article, Abu'l-Faḍā'il highlights the Egyptian journalist's extreme admiration of Browne: “These passages clearly reveal how delighted, proud and pleased Ḥāfiẓ 'Awaḍ is of his friendship with this professor”. Wanting to understand the adulation 'Awaḍ lavished upon Browne, Abu'l-Faḍā'il states: The excessive flattery and praise is due to Browne's skills in “. . . attracting peoples' hearts through glorifying their culture and ancestors” (p. 29). To prove this point, Abu'l-Faḍā'il writes:

Ḥāfiẓ 'Awaḍ recounts his conversation with Mr. Browne regarding the manner in which certain British nationals have behaved towards Arabs in general and Egyptians in particular. He asked Browne: “Why have the British treated the Egyptians so harshly and why do they harbor such a sense of superiority toward them?” Browne apologetically replied that if the British people you are talking about had the least amount of knowledge concerning Arab culture and the Arabic language, or were even slightly aware of the contributions Arabs have made to civilization, they would certainly have acted differently. Here lies the reason for Mr. 'Awaḍ's affection for Edward Browne. It is not because he has received financial favors from Browne or shares his faith. Browne simply charms Ḥāfiẓ 'Awaḍ with his words. (p. 30)

An important point is being implied here by Abu'l-Faḍā'il. He is connecting Browne's popularity to the generalizations that the British scholar continues to make about an abstract “classical” Oriental history, thereby catering to a desire on the part of people to revel in their past glories. This is a point that Said underscored years later when he argued that for many Orientalists the essence of something Oriental lay in its pristine origins. The overwhelming majority of Orientalists advocated a careful study of the past. Said argued that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a “classical” Oriental civilization, were always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. Those specializing in religious studies, for example, set out on quests to discover the historical Gautama Buddha or the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Richard King has called this desire a “nostalgia for origins”, a longing for the past which soon became an important piece of the Orientalists' representations of the East, for it “provided, on the one hand, a much needed sense of continuity with archaic traditions and the natural world, and on the other a way of defining the West as quintessentially ‘modern’

in contrast to the ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional’ cultures of the East” (King 1999, p. 147). Yet, concentrating on the past also provided Orientalists room to make necessary constructions about what they were studying. It allowed them to use this knowledge to demonstrate their authority over the subject.

(2) In the next section of *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, Abu'l-Faḍā'il turns directly to issues of power and politics and their connection to the field of Oriental Studies. He quotes Browne as saying the following in Ḥāfiz 'Awaḍ's article: “Many people ask me why I study Persian. This is an appropriate question to pose to an Englishman. However, the same question would be out of place if addressed to a French, German, or Russian, because these governments have political intentions in assisting their citizens to acquire oriental languages” (p. 30). Abu'l-Faḍā'il understands Browne to be saying that *the only* factor that motivated him to study Persian was his interest in the history and literature of Persia. Abu'l-Faḍā'il's criticism of this statement is particularly noteworthy:

One could accept his statement had Browne not mentioned that the French, the German, and the Russians establish schools of Oriental Studies to train experts in Oriental languages and cultures so they will raise an ample force of capable and well paid agents to serve their interests in the East, their intentions are obvious, and it would be meaningless to ask citizens of the abovementioned countries why they are interested in pursuing Oriental Studies. But [Browne asserts that] the British government has no such policy, so it is surprising to find an Englishman eager to learn an Oriental language and therefore, seeking an explanation from him is more than acceptable. (p. 31)

Abu'l-Faḍā'il adds that he is not judging whether other governments have set up such schools to meet the goals mentioned by Browne, but he strongly rejects Browne's claim that the British government is an exception in this regard, for Abu'l-Faḍā'il sees with his own eyes that the British are more active in the region than any other European country: “In this regard, there are no differences between France, Germany, Russia and England. They all have established institutions for teaching Oriental languages. In fact, it is familiar to those knowledgeable about history that the British are much further ahead than the others in this effort” (p. 31).

(3) Browne's rapid “scholarly and political advancements” (*taraqqiyyāt-i-'ilmīyyih va sīyāsīyyih*) also capture Abu'l-Faḍā'il's attention. How did briefly studying Persian under a certain Muḥammad Bāqir Shīrāzī qualify Browne to travel to Persia, reside in the country for one year, and join the faculty of Cambridge University and become a member of the British Academy soon after his return? Here, Abu'l-Faḍā'il is keen to point out that, based on his autobiographical notes, Browne studied Persian and Arabic for a short period of time. He asserts: “This is adequate proof of the extent of his inadequacies in these languages. Is it possible that with such little instruction, one can become qualified to occupy high positions and publish credible works on the history and literature of Persia?” He follows this comment with a quote from a “competent writer”, Ardishīr Zarkūb, speaking to stylistic weaknesses present in Browne's Persian writings (p. 37).

Moreover, according to Abu'l-Faḍā'il, Browne sought assistance from contemporary Persian scholars to edit classical Persian texts. He recalls the occasion when Browne needed Muḥammad Barakatu'llāh Hindī's help to translate a passage. Hindī in turn forwarded the question to Abu'l-Faḍā'il, who was visiting New York at the time. He adds that asking questions is a virtue only if the respondent's contribution is acknowledged and due credit is given—an indication that he was not credited.

(4) This next point is another illustration of Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of the political dimension of Orientalism. Abu'l-Faḍā'il notes that, when dictating his biography to Ḥāfiz 'Awaḍ, Browne recalls the extent to which he sympathized with the Ottoman Turks when they were defeated by the Russians. He was so moved by the Turks' defeat that he was ready to lay down his life in support of the Ottomans.⁴ In an effort to explain what he may have felt to be an irrational comment not becoming of a professional English Orientalist, Browne quickly dismisses his words, attributing them to the naiveté of youth. Yet, Abu'l-

Faḍā'il hones in on Browne's words. He adduces a statement made by Browne seven years later and recorded in Persian newspapers. Browne was reported to have told a Persian journalist in 1910: "If Persia loses its independence, I would prefer to die rather than witness that day". Abu'l-Faḍā'il questions Browne's sincerity in his remarks: "Mr. Browne dismissed his own statement about wishing to be dead after the Russians defeated the Ottomans as the naive and innocent imaginings of a sixteen year old. How sincere can he be, when at the age of forty-eight, he states that he would rather die than see Persia subjugated to foreign powers?" (p. 33). Abu'l-Faḍā'il then quotes another person, who, upon reading the aforementioned statement from Browne, said, "I don't know who to be surprised at: a person who does not understand [what is going on] despite the obvious intentions of the foreign powers in Persia, or a person who intends to cover up his own intentions despite the plans revealed". Either Browne does not understand the obvious intentions of the colonial powers in Persia, or he is trying to conceal his own role with such statements" (p. 34). Then, Abu'l-Faḍā'il very suggestively adds that, while there may be plenty of benevolent individuals among the British who serve humanity through performing praiseworthy deeds, there are also those who disguise their unseemly deeds with deceptive words (p. 34).

(5) Finally, in writing about Shaykh Aḥmad Rūḥī (d. 1896) and Āghā Khān Kirmānī (d. 1896) (two intellectual reformers and followers and sons-in-law of Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī (d. 1912)) in a different section of *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, Abu'l-Faḍā'il expresses another opinion that reveals a great deal concerning his views on Orientalists: "Another work attributed to Shaykh Aḥmad Rūḥī is the translation of Ḥājī Bābā which is a satirical piece about Persians written by someone similar to Mr. Browne. I don't think anyone has written anything more worthless than this [book] and [the book] *The History of Persia* by Sir John Malcolm". A few pages later, after quoting some of Āghā Khān's poems which Browne had published in his own book on the Constitutional Revolution, Abu'l-Faḍā'il voices how "cunning and deceitful" certain Orientalists can be, before adding: "Despite the afflictions that certain corrupt clerics (*ākhūnd*), a few spiteful pseudo-intellectuals, a handful of ignorant journalists, and certain deceitful Orientalists have brought upon this nation, the poor quality of such poetry will not go unnoticed by the people of Persia" (p. 128).

4. Before and after Abu'l-Faḍā'il

While a study of the history of critique of works of Orientalists in the Middle East is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique is likely the earliest such critique written in Persian. Nearly a decade before Abu'l-Faḍā'il wrote *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, Pirozeshah Kershasp, a Parsee and employee of the Indian Civil Service, had written a book criticizing the disregard of Western Orientalists (including Browne) for ancient Persia. In *Studies in Ancient Persian History* (published in 1905), Kershasp glorified Persia's pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian past, and denounced Western Orientalists for the "biased standpoint" from which they approached ancient Persian history. Kershasp sought to counter their biased narrative and to "lay down the foundation of a correct view" of history. He found it impossible to accept the "disparaging views" expressed in English books about the pre-Islamic civilization of ancient Persia (Kershasp 1905, pp. 1–4). Specifically, Kershasp criticized Gibbon, Malcolm and Rawlinson for betraying "consciously or unconsciously, too much partiality for Greek and Latin writers" vis-à-vis Persian history, while admitting that they "have rendered valuable aid" in elucidating Persian history (Kershasp 1905, pp. 1–2). While giving Malcolm credit for being "more sympathetic" than the other two, Kershasp argued that "[Malcolm] is not altogether free from the assumption of superiority which English and German savants affect in their treatment of Oriental history, and which is almost fatal to a scientific appreciation of historical facts" (Kershasp 1905, p. 2).

Abu'l-Faḍā'il's reference to the critique of another writer, Ardishīr Zarkūb (p. 37), apparently also of Zoroastrian background, leaves us with the possibility that Abu'l-Faḍā'il was familiar with a Parsee circle of scholars. We know that he was in touch with Mānikchī Limjī Hātariyā (d. 1890), also known as Mānikchī (Manekji) Ṣāḥib, who was appointed in

1854 as an emissary on behalf of the Parsees of India to assist their coreligionists in Persia. Abu'l-Faḍā'il was employed as the personal secretary of Mānikchī Šāhib from 1876 to 1882 (Bahā'u'llāh 2006, p. ii; Amīnī 2015, p. 34). Therefore, he might have been familiar with Kershasp's ideas as well, but, importantly, the nature of Kershasp's critique was different than that of Abu'l-Faḍā'il: Kershasp made no mention whatsoever of the link between knowledge and power—the main focus of our attention in Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique.

Following Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of Orientalism, several of his contemporaries dealt with the idea of Western scholars studying Eastern societies. Given the relatively limited number of texts published in Persian at the time, the publication of any book was a significant event, let alone one on a topic of interest or concern. It is, therefore, quite possible that these scholars had read *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*. Eight years after Abu'l-Faḍā'il's death, Ḥusayn Kāzimzādih Īrānshahr (d. 1962), a close associate of Browne and Muḥammad Qazvīnī⁵ (see below) devoted a three-page article in his monthly journal *Īrānshahr* to the discussion of “*sharq-shināsi*” (“Orientalism”) and “*gharb-shināsi*” (“Occidentalism”). While he acknowledged that the knowledge of the Orient became important to European governments after they began expanding their power and influence over the East, his tone was inert, and he leveled no criticism of this situation. He went so far as to state that Orientalists, in addition to serving the political interests of their own countries, had been quite beneficial to Eastern countries. He then suggested that, in order to benefit from Western civilization, the East also must develop groups of Occidentalists (Kāzimzādih Īrānshahr 1301/1922, pp. 12–14). After Browne's death, Kāzimzādih Īrānshahr eulogized him in his journal and indicated that he would publish an extensive article on Browne written by Qazvīnī in the next issue (Kāzimzādih Īrānshahr 1305/1926, pp. 48–51).

In the decades that followed, criticism of Orientalism, or occasionally praise of the discipline, remained a subject of intellectual debate. While most agreed that Orientalism, as a discipline, was the child of the colonial goals of European states, there were some who saw merit in the kind of knowledge produced by it (Rāsikh 1351/1972, pp. 115–19). Among these scholars, one is of particular relevance here: Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad made the following passing remark in his *Gharbzadigī* (“Westoxication”):

I haven't the foggiest notion when Orientalism became a 'science.' If we say that some Westerner is a linguist, dialectologist, or musicologist specializing in Eastern questions, this is defensible. Or if we say he is an anthropologist or sociologist, that again is arguable to an extent. But what does it mean to be an Orientalist without further definition? Does it mean to know all the secrets of the Eastern world? Are we living in the age of Aristotle? This is why I speak of a parasite growing on the root of imperialism. (Āl-i Aḥmad 1984, p. 99)

Ironically, Āl-i Aḥmad, who elsewhere implicitly accused Bahā'īs of complicity with imperialism (Yazdani 2011a, pp. 21–23), perhaps had no idea that, in criticizing Orientalism in the service of European dominance, he was echoing a Bahā'ī scholar.

5. Views on Browne as an Orientalist

Although our aim in this article is not to discuss the extent to which Browne's scholarship and activities fit Edward Said's paradigm of Orientalism, a brief survey of how a number of other scholars have evaluated Browne in this regard is useful.

Following his criticism of Malcolm and Rawlinson discussed above, Kershasp relied on the credibility of Browne for rejecting Malcolm and added that “professor Browne, the author of ‘A Literary History of Persia,’ who makes excursions into political history, votes Malcolm down as already obsolete” (Kershasp 1905, p. 2). However, Kershasp then criticized Browne:

He has, however, sworn fealty to Mahomedanism [sic] and Arab writers, and on that account is debarred from doing justice to the ancient Persians. Political history does not strictly fall within his domain, but he has chosen to dogmatise on it. (Kershasp 1905, p. 3)

As an example, Kershasp wrote that Browne had a “heavy score to settle with the Sassanian kings, and Nushirwan as well, on the account of the persecution of Christians”. According to Kershasp, Browne’s research on the issue is flawed because the sources he had tapped were “notably the Syrian writers” (Kershasp 1905, p. 160). Elsewhere in the book, he criticized Browne for “assimilating the superficial and commonplace ideas of some critics of Persian history”, adding that Browne “avowedly regards the old Persian legends as entirely mythical” (Kershasp 1905, p. 76). Kershasp’s later communications with Browne during the period of the Constitutional Revolution show that his criticism was not to a degree that it damaged their acquaintanceship (Bonakdarian 2006, p. 219).

Years after Abu’l-Faḍā’il, the prominent Persian scholar Muḥammad Qazvīnī (d. 1949) questioned the motives of Orientalists in their study of Persia. He recognized in the majority of them a feeling of contempt and enmity towards the country. Qazvīnī states that the enmity that he perceived in Orientalists regarding Persia originated in ancient Roman and Greek literature that demonized Persians as a result of the Greco-Persian and Roman-Persian wars. He further provided a list of other motives for various Orientalists. Some, he stated, studied Persia either for their pure love of knowledge; others did so for academic promotion; and still others had the goal of serving the history of the Aryan race, i.e., their own race. Since Persians were also of the same race, this latter group of Orientalists believed that by studying Persia they would manage to glorify the Aryan race vis-à-vis the Semites, particularly the Jews. Categorically, however, Qazvīnī excluded Browne from such negative attitudes and self-serving motivations. He emphasized that Browne had no political motives and did not study Persia to benefit his own country. Qazvīnī believed that Browne genuinely liked the world of Islam and, in particular, Persia, and considered him a “God-given bounty” for Persia (Qazvīnī 1305a/1926, pp. 75–77; Jurbuzihdār 1363/1984, pp. 829–33). This statement is not a surprise given Qazvīnī and Browne’s years of close association, collaboration and cordial relations. Their partnership was so close that, as Qazvīnī himself confided to a likeminded friend, he was the real author of the Persian introduction to *Kitāb-i Nuḡṭatu’l-Kāf*, published under Browne’s name. This introduction offered an Azalī reading of Bābī history (Qazvīnī 1305b/1926, pp. 148–58; Balyuzi 1970, pp. 73–76; Yazdani 2013, pp. 153, 166–67 n.65). The long multi-section article which Qazvīnī wrote on Browne after the latter’s death, emphasizing his lack of political motivations and pursuance of the colonial interests of his own government, one can even consider to be a tacit response to Abu’l-Faḍā’il’s critique of Browne. This impression is reinforced when one reads Qazvīnī’s praise of Browne’s historiography of the Bābī religion and of the schism between the followers of Mīrzā Yaḥyā and Bahā’u’llāh as “complete and impartial” (Qazvīnī 1305a/1926, pp. 86–87). This was, of course, a historiography to which Qazvīnī himself had contributed, and for which he may well have been a source.

More recently, two prominent historians have explicitly separated Browne from the types of Orientalists Said criticized. Abbas Amanat wrote in his *Resurrection and Renewal*:

Contrary to the prevailing Orientalism of his time, he [Browne] writes with great sympathy and understanding towards Persians in general and Babis in particular. Most of his writings, including *A Year among the Persians* and the introductions to his translations of Babi works, bear witness to this attitude. (Amanat 1989, p. 439)

In 2006, at a time when Said’s ideas had been embraced and the field of post-colonial studies was in full swing, Mansour Bonakdarian, in his magnum opus, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911*, called into question the “essentialist critiques of Western orientalism”, and highlighted some convergence points in Western–Oriental encounters, among them “cooperation between groups of Western and Oriental thinkers and reformers” (Bonakdarian 2006, p. xxv). On account of Browne’s championing the Constitutional Revolution, Bonakdarian counted Browne among those Orientalists who were influenced by the intellectual and cultural currents of the societies they studied (Bonakdarian 2006, p. xxvi). Bonakdarian’s views on Browne are summed up in his referring to Browne as “an orientalist in the service of the Orient” (Bonakdarian 2006, p. 94).

These views of Bonakdarian are echoed in Amanat's comprehensive survey of the history of modern Iran. In highlighting Browne's support of the Constitutional Revolution, Amanat averred that Browne's account in *The Persian Revolution 1905–1909*—which Amanat described as a “remarkable work of contemporary history”—questioned “the validity of the all-embracing critiques of Orientalism and the common assumption that Orientalists invariably were pioneers of imperial hegemony” (Amanat 2017, p. 375).

A study by Marziyeh Ghoreishi focuses on Browne's travelogue, *A Year Amongst the Persians*. Ghoreishi argues that for the most part Browne maintained “a fair and just representation” of Persians, depicting them in ways more positive than some other travelers. However, she claims that there are “occasional instances” in which Browne seems to perpetuate an “Orientalist” portrayal of Persians. These occur, according to Ghoreishi, when Browne “glorifies the ‘uncivilized’ nature of Iranians and Easterners and puts Oriental versus civilized as two contradictory opposites”. Ghoreishi makes the surprising remark that Browne's behavior is of the type criticized by Said as “Orientalist” when his “keen interest in the non-Muslim people of Iran” leads him to attempt “to justify some of their acts, which then leads him to express his dislike of Muslims” (Ghoreishi 2022, pp. 126, 129, 130).

6. Conclusions

We have sought in this article to demonstrate that Abu'l-Faḍā'il's critique of Orientalism in *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'* prefigures Edward Said's critique, albeit in a form and style that are markedly different. *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'* was of course not written with the objective of critiquing the academic discipline of Oriental Studies but rather to, in part, critique the scholarship of E.G. Browne. However, as we have seen, in the process of critiquing Browne, Abu'l-Faḍā'il offers a number of insights concerning the motivations, methods and agendas of Orientalists.

Although others before Abu'l-Faḍā'il had criticized Orientalism, the nature of their criticism was different, and, furthermore, Abu'l-Faḍā'il was likely the first person to make the connection between the knowledge of the Orientalists and the power of their respective governments. The subtle allusions Abu'l-Faḍā'il made about the complex relationship of knowledge and power would, more than sixty years later, serve as Edward Said's core thesis that Orientalists were inherently political actors advancing a discipline (Oriental Studies) that was inextricably tied to, and often served to legitimize, the practice of imperialism. Given the comments the intellectuals contemporary to Abu'l-Faḍā'il made on the topic after the publication of *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'*, Abu'l-Faḍā'il was likely the first in the network of intellectuals engaged in matters of their common concern.

As an ante litteram critique of Orientalism, Abu'l-Faḍā'il subverts the false “agents of imperialism” accusation that would later be leveled by Shī'ī Islamists against Bahā'īs. The manner in which his critique has been marginalized by the master narrative, which casts Bahā'īs as spies and the internal “Other”, is further evidence of the historical amnesia that has ensued in modern Iran.

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Notes

¹ On *Nuḡṭatu'l-Kāf*, see Milani (2008).

² MacEoin, not having noted Abu'l-Faḍā'il's statement that the editors of the book were three Eastern scholars, criticized him for attributing the editing to Browne (MacEoin 1992, p. 137).

³ Abu'l-Faḍā'il provides the publication details of the article: *Majjalatu'l-Majjalāti'l-'Arabīyyah*, nos. 2 & 3, vol. 2 (February and March 1903/Dhi'l-Qa'dah and Dhi'l-Hijjah 1320), pp. 159–62.

- ⁴ Browne makes similar statements in his travelogue (Browne 1893, pp. 7–8). Siyyid Mihdī Gulpāyigānī, who, as mentioned, completed *Kashfu'l-Ghiṭā'* after Abu'l-Faḍā'il's death, states the following in a footnote added to Abu'l-Faḍā'il's quoting of Browne: "I do not know if Mr. Browne was equally sad when Basra fell into the hands of the British in 1914, or if his sadness for the Ottomans was because of the rivalry with the Russians and not love for the Turks" (p. 33)
- ⁵ On the connections between these scholars, as well as the circle of Persian intellectuals formed in Berlin between the years 1915 and 1930, see Bihnam (1386/2007).

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