

## Racism among Iranian Intellectuals (1925-1979)

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**Abstract:**

The works of contemporary Iranian intellectuals have been researched from many perspectives, but many of their thoughts have not been explored deeply, widely, and academically regarding the issue of racism. In this research, I used the qualitative content analysis method to examine the works of some prominent and contemporary Iranian intellectuals regarding having or not having racist elements in their writings published between 1925-1979. After methodically and analytically examining the works of contemporary Iranian intellectuals such as Ahmad Kasravi, Hasan Taqizadeh, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and Sadegh Hedayat, we found evidence, elements, and signs of racist thoughts in their books and articles. In this thesis, you will learn about the views, thoughts, and racist approaches of the intellectuals whose names are determined towards Turks, Arabs, Mongols, Jews, and Islam. In addition, among the works of the five intellectuals whose names were determined to examine, racist thoughts were not found only in the writings of Reza Baraheni. With this research, I have tried to fill the existing research gap about the racist content of the works of contemporary Iranian intellectuals.

**Keywords:** Arabs;Iran; Jews; Mongols; Racism; Turks

## INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, when I entered school as a student, my first encounters with racist thoughts began while studying elementary, middle, and high school textbooks in Iran. Especially when reading history and literature books, I encountered expressions like "wild Arabs, desert Arabs, wild Turks, Turkish slaves, desert wandering Turks, and wild Mongols".

In those years, this issue became a question for me, why, especially in historical books, Turks, Arabs, and Mongols are called savages, desert wanderers, marauders, etc.? However, I did not know enough to answer this question during those years. I did not even know that using these traits for other nations is condemned and criticized as a racist act in sociology and political science literature. Later, when I met the first Persian speakers who came to our city as guests, I noticed they laughed a lot when I spoke Farsi and made fun of my Turkish accent. This was my second experience encountered with the issue of racism in Iran.

Nevertheless, during this period, I felt to some extent that I was being racially humiliated by someone else or others. However, again, I had no study or knowledge about racism. Nevertheless, I realized I was racially humiliated in the third incident in Tehran. When I was a boy, 13-14 years old and we were a guest of one of our family friends in Tehran together with my family. While playing with other children in the alley, I was called the derogatory name of 'Turk-e-Khar' (Turk Donkey) by other Persian-speaking children. Moreover, after hearing this insulting, racist slur, I realized fully conscious that I, as a "Turk", was racially insulted by the other "Persian".

Later, when I was 15-16 years old, I consciously started writing poems, stories, and articles in my mother tongue, Turkish (Turks in Iran do not have the right to study in their mother tongue.). On that date, while studying the poems, stories, novels, and articles of prominent contemporary Iranian writers and intellectuals, I realized that some have racist thoughts against Turks, Arabs, Jews, Mongols, and Islam.

The racist content of the works of some contemporary Iranian writers and intellectuals, such as Ahmad Kasravi, Hasan Taqizadeh, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and Sadegh Hedayat, formed the basis of one of my main research questions.

By studying the works of some contemporary writers and intellectuals of Iran, I understood that racist thoughts, antiquarianism, and extreme nationalism are based on a kind of historicism, giving

importance to the special position of the Persian language, defending the supremacy of the Aryan race, clearly expressing ethnic hatred of Arabs, Turks, Jews, Islam and Mongols, the emphasis on the historical distinctiveness of the position of Iranians compared to other nations is promoted as undeniable and uncritical facts.

Those personal concerns during my elementary, middle, and high school days turned into intellectual and research questions over time, and I started researching the characteristics of the racism of Iranian intellectuals. In this research, I will try to discover the characteristics of racist thoughts in the works of some contemporary intellectuals of Iran using the qualitative content analysis method. To carry out this research, I will refer to the theories and works of some prominent thinkers in the field of humanities about racism.

In this research, our meaning and definition of an intellectual are based on the definition of this term by philosophers, thinkers, and sociologists such as Edward Shils, Raymond Aron, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Mannheim, Antonio Gramsci, and Nicos Poulantzas:

“Intellectuals go beyond traditional frameworks in any field, create new values, or cover old values with a new society. They offer new intellectual devices to explain life's aspects; they solve problems using thinking and critical power. They develop new philosophies for living, criticize the existing social and political situation, and go out of the common frameworks in thought, culture, science, and art. Interest in the public interest, doing continuous intellectual work as the main profession instead of physical work, criticizing the existing political and social situation, rationality and thinking in the affairs of society, politics, and culture, awareness of conflicts in society over political power, creation and transmission of culture, creation of social theories, and connection with the subjective dimension of social life in contrast to its objective and productive dimension, presenting a symbol of the social interests of the ruling or non-ruling classes, turning away from popular traditions, guiding the society towards the true desires and interests and ideals in front of every day and transitory interests, dissatisfied with any existing situation, recognizing the main problems and conflicts of the society and providing solutions, and predicting the future path, interest in abstract and general issues”. (Bashiriyeh, 2011, pp. 247-248)

## RESULTS

After carrying out the research based on the methodology of qualitative content analysis, which was carried out in a specific theoretical framework, the presence of racist thoughts in the works of Ahmad Kasravi, Hassan Taqizadeh, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and Sadegh Hedayat was confirmed. But in Reza Baraheni's works, apart from the fact that there were no traces of racist thoughts, this intellectual and writer has fought against the racism of the government and the racism of Iranian intellectuals civilly and democratically.

## DISCUSSION

From my studies until today, while reading the texts of some prominent contemporary Iranian intellectuals, the sentences and ideas they used about the Arabs, Turks, Jews, Islam, and Mongols caused me to give rise to some questions. Over time, day by day, studying the works of these intellectuals, the presence or absence of racism in their works became one of my intellectual, research, and even personal concerns. For example, Ahmad Kasravi, one of the most prominent contemporary Iranian intellectuals, in an article in the newspaper 'Parcham' (Flag) in 1944, called for the elimination of all Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, and other local languages and dialects in Iran. (Kasravi, 1944, p.1)

Also, BozorgAlavi, one of the leading intellectuals and novelists of contemporary Iranian literature, in one of his books, compared the Arabs to the devil and recommended their killing. (Alavi, 1978, p.14)

In one of his stories called *The Mongol Shadow*, Sadegh Hedayat, one of Iran's most prominent novelists and contemporary intellectuals, introduces the Turks as ignorant and the Mongols as bloodthirsty, with low faces and dirty accents. (Hedayat, 1932, p.44)

One of the reasons we have limited the subject of our research to 1925 to 1979 is the emphasis of some political science and sociology scholars on Pan-Iranianism, and the extreme nationalist and racist nature of Reza Shah and the Pahlavi government. (Katouzian, 1981, p.134)

And this period is known among political science, history, and sociology scholars as the period of the establishment of the modern nation-state in the political-social history of contemporary Iran. The period in which Reza Shah Pahlavi and the nationalist intellectuals in the Pahlavi government

united with him and sought to build a common identity for all the different nations, tribes, and religions living in the geography of Iran.

For this reason, during Reza Shah Pahlavi, the program and goal of the government education system in schools, which was imitated from the French education system, was mostly based on integrating all the linguistic and ethnic diversity throughout Iran. In this regard, with the extreme nationalist policies of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the teaching and learning of all Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, etc., languages that could be taught in minority schools in the past were completely banned in the country's education system. These new educational strategies tried to Persianize the linguistic minorities of the country with a racist and nationalist perspective.

On this basis, while celebrating the history of ancient Iran and highlighting this historical period, at the same time, they began to systematically clean the Persian language, especially Arabic words, in the government newspapers of Ettela'at (Information) and Journal de Teheran. Farhangestan (Cultural Academy) was responsible for finding Persian equivalents of foreign words and radical cleansing of Persian from Arabic, Turkish and other languages.

With the expansion of these extreme nationalist policies, The Geography Commission of Reza Shah Pahlavi changed the names of 107 geographical regions of Iran before scientific and practical investigations of the plan to remove all Arabic, Turkish, and Armenian names. (Abrahamian, 2008, pp. 85, 86, 87)

In addition, Reza Shah Pahlavi and his government had emotional feelings and empathy toward the racist ideas of the Nazi German government. Because Nazi Germany, due to the Aryan race of the Iranian nation, while having good relations with the Pahlavi government, also admired and encouraged the Aryan race of the Iranian nation. (Foran, 1998, p.368)

Fred Halliday, a well-known political scientist who compares the Pahlavi era's extreme and harsh nationalism, archaism, and leader-worshipping features based on chauvinism to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, draws attention to the fact that the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, accepted this many times and called himself the Aryan race and the King of Aryans.

In addition, the Pahlavi regime, which established state policy based on extreme racism, did not grant any cultural rights to non-Persian-speaking nations and prevented Turks, Arabs, and Kurds from studying in their mother tongues and developing their own culture.

According to a study conducted in 1960, only 17 percent of the elites of non-Persian ethnicity gained a place in the ruling class during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Persians, who called Turks "Donkey Turks" and Arabs "mouse eaters", used the textbooks in schools to be read by children in such a way as to include this racist ideology. (Halliday, 1979, pp 60, 61, 225, 226)

The famous writer, poet, and founder of Iranian Literary Criticism, Reza Baraheni, explained the systematic racism of the Pahlavi regime in detail. In contrast, the former Iranian head of state opened English-language schools for 3,000 American workers who came to Iran. However, millions of Turkish, Arab, Kurdish, and Baloch children could not study in their mother tongues. He says his rights were not officially and legally given due to Shah's racism. Therefore, when the famous writer explained the two basic features of his literary work: "Especially my inner feelings related to my repressed nationality as an Azerbaijani Turk, whose mother tongue was taken away by the Pahlavi regime after 1946 and never given to him, is the second basic feature of my literary work. " he says. (Baraheni, 1979, pp. 11, 12, 110, 111)

Also, according to Brenda Shaffer's research, between the 1960s and 1970s, some Turkish writers and intellectuals working in Tabriz started working in the fields of Turkish dictionary, Azerbaijani music, and poetry to protect their Turkish identity and culture from destruction to prevent the racist policies of the Pahlavi regime. When the racist policies of the Pahlavi state of Iran were going on, Reza Baraheni, who openly identified himself as an Azerbaijani Turk, stood against the Persianization project of the Pahlavi regime.

He defends his national identity, his mother tongue, and the oppressed rights of other ethnic minorities living in Iran and criticizes the political and cultural oppression by the Pahlavi regime. In his book "The Crowned Cannibals", published in America at the end of the 1970s, Baraheni wrote that Turks do not have the right to write Turkish even on their tombstones and that Turkish was declared a forbidden language by the Pahlavi regime. (Shaffer, 2002, pp. 60)

According to these examples, our main thesis in this research: There are racist themes in the approaches, writings, and thoughts of some contemporary Iranian intellectuals (1925-1979).

## CONCLUSION

The main hypothesis in this research was the existence of racist thoughts in the works of some of Iran's prominent intellectuals from 1925 to 1979. The research findings of this study confirm the main hypothesis.

In this research, to find answers to my research questions, I carefully explored the works of five prominent Iranian intellectuals who have had a profound impact on the history of Persian thought, culture, and language. In response to the first question of the research, which was about the presence or absence of racist thoughts in the works of some contemporary Iranian intellectuals, the answer's the research findings are positive.

After carefully examining the works of Ahmad Kasravi, Hasan Taqizadeh, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and Sadegh Hedayat, I found the characteristics of racist ideas in their published works.

The second research question of this research was about the characteristics of racist thoughts of some contemporary Iranian intellectuals (1925-1979). Based on the theoretical framework of the research, one of the signs of racist thoughts is the presence of prejudice and hatred towards foreigners. In the works of Ahmed Kasravi and Sadegh Hedayat, the intensity of this prejudice and hatred of Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Jews, and Islam is extremely high. Of course, Ahmad Kasravi did not openly express her enmity with Islam and only criticized the superstitions and ignorance of Iranian Muslims. However, Sadegh Hedayat, in addition to criticizing the superstitions and ignorance of Iranian Muslims, insulted and ridiculed the religion of Islam and the call to prayer. In an official article, Ahmad Kasravi called for the destruction of Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, and other non-Persian languages from the geography of Iran. Kasravi wanted the supremacy of the Persian language and the removal and destruction of all non-Persian elements from Iran's cultural and political geography.

For this reason, she removed all Arabic, Turkish, and Mongolian elements from the contemporary Persian language with her efforts and created a new language called the Pure Language (Zaban Pak). Kasravi believed in the religion of Islam and the prophethood of Muhammad, but he completely criticized the Shia religion, which was recognized during the Safavid period. He fought against the ignorance of Iranian Muslims so much that he finally created a political-cultural current called Pure Religion (Deen Pak). Kasravi has considered the presence of non-Persian languages in

Iran to threaten Iran's territorial integrity. In his works, he has humiliated the Arabs by using the derogatory word "Tazi". Kasravi considered the existence of non-Persian cultural and linguistic elements in Persian culture and language as a kind of disease, and therefore he was strongly hostile to these foreign cultural and identity elements. Kasravi's extreme chauvinism and racism had grown to such an extent that he openly claimed in his works that the pure language he created would eventually become the world's language. Kasravi firmly believed in the existence of the Aryan race and its cultural and civilizational superiority over others. In addition, he does not hide his hatred and prejudice against all the Kurdish speakers of Iran and considers all of them to lack moral and good qualities.

On the other hand, Kasravi has also suffered from ideological contradiction. Because on the one hand, he claims that the Aryan race and Iranians are one of the best races and peoples in the world, and on the other hand, he claims that the Iranian nation is very low, ugly, and dirty. Also, he saw the cause of all these low and dirty Iranian characteristics in the foreign nations that entered Iran. By denying the history, identity, and language of the Turks in the geography of Iran, Kasravi claimed that from the beginning of history to the arrival of the Turks in Iran, the main inhabitants of the geography of Azerbaijan spoke one of the ancient Iranian languages called Azari. It can be said that Kasravi, with a strong sense of hatred and prejudice towards non-Persian elements, was against the existence of any ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, and cultural diversity in the cultural geography of Iran. According to the obtained evidence, Ahmed Kasravi, like the German Nazi groups, has carried out terrorist attacks against the opponents of his racist ideas in the two Turk cities of Tabriz and Maragheh. In addition, it seems that Kasravi was fired from his job for writing a critical article against the Pahlavi government. Moreover, after this incident, he developed hatred toward the people of the Persian language.

Like Ahmad Kasravi, Hasan Taqizadeh believed in race, racial superiority, and the Aryan and the Iranian race. According to his writings, he worked for the German government during the First World War for a monthly salary of 200 dollars. Moreover, he believed that Germany was a prophet, Prophet David, and a savior for them. Even though he wanted the supremacy of the Persian language and Iranian culture, in his articles and speeches, he did not want the destruction and elimination of the non-Persian languages of Iran. Unlike Kasravi, he does not want to destroy and deal harshly with the non-Persian nations living in Iran. Taqizadeh's racism is mostly based on the



belief in the cultural and intellectual superiority of the Iranian race. In this regard, with a humanistic reading of Islam, he considers all the residents of Iran as his religious brothers; But his purpose in expressing this idea was to expand and deepen national unity and prevent Iran's disintegration.

For this reason, he was against the language policies of the Pahlavi government and the extreme Farsi intellectuals who wanted to remove all Arabic and Turkish words and languages from the Persian language. Taqizadeh, as a forward-looking politician, considered the extreme anti-Turkishness of Iranian intellectuals as a danger to Iran because he considered the constant humiliation of Iranian Turks as an effective factor for provoking Turkey to attack Iran. In Taqizadeh's view, purifying the Persian language from Turkish and Arabic elements will prevent the dominance and cultural sovereignty of the Persian language over the neighboring Turkish and Arab countries. It seems that Taqizadeh acted like a self-interested politician in proposing all these views. Because in his works, hatred, prejudice towards the Mongol nation, and the removal of all elements of the Mongolian language from the Persian language can be seen. It seems that Taqizadeh tried to hide his racist thoughts to consolidate the foundations of the emerging Pahlavi government and the new nation-state of Iran. However, with all his efforts, anti-Mongolism and hostility to the Mongolian language and culture are evident in his works.

Moreover, in this regard, in the racist view of Taqizadeh, the Pahlavi government must protect the Iranian race and ethnicity while implementing its cultural, political, and economic modernization programs. Also, Taqizadeh's essentialist thoughts show themselves more in examining historical categories. He denies all the scientific, artistic, and cultural achievements of the Mongol era and calls them barbaric and bloodthirsty. As we mentioned earlier, Taqizadeh tried to hide his racist thoughts for expediency. Because in one of his writings, he called the entire Turkish nation of the Ottoman period miserable and all the intellectuals of the Ottoman period illiterate and ignorant. Taqizadeh once tried to evaluate the value of a writer's works and mocked and humiliated him for his Jewish origin. As we have shown, due to Taqizadeh's social personality, he has avoided expressing his racist thoughts in public gatherings. However, he has addressed the Arab nation with the derogatory title of Tazi. In addition, he considers the Mongols, Turks, and Arabs to be barbaric and uncivilized. He even called the Turk nation marauders, corruptors, and Turani devils. Taqizadeh's racism, like his other like-minded people, has an anti-Arab aspect because he believed

that the superior spirit of Iran and the superior language and culture of the Iranian race had transformed the wild and uncultured Arabs.

During the presidency of Mohammad Ali Foroughi at the Academy of Persian Language, even though in his articles and speeches, he considered the extreme cleansing and destruction of Arabic, Turkish, Mongolian, and other foreign languages from the Persian language to be irrational, during his presidency, these racist language policies were implemented quickly. In addition, he has spoken clearly and clearly about the existence of the Pure Race and the Iranian Race. Also, his ethnocentric view was so deep and extreme that he claimed that the kings of the Iranian race established the greatest government in the history of humanity. In Foroughi's thought, political power and racism were so intertwined that he claimed Reza Khan's nature was pure Pahlavi. To prevent Iran's disintegration, Foroughi believed in the ethnic cleansing of the Turks of Iran's geography, forced migration, and keeping them away from the Turks of Turkey. In addition, during his presidency of the Persian Language Academy, most of the Turkish, Arab, and Armenian cities, villages, and regions were changed to Persian names. According to Foroughi, Iran is the most civilized nation in the world, melting all the barbaric Turkish, Arab, and Mongolian nations that have invaded Iran into its great civilization and culture.

On the other hand, Foroughi was one of the theorists of the cultural and linguistic genocide of the Turks of Iran during the Pahlavi period. He emphasized the need to spread the dominance of the Persian language among the majority of Turks in different cities of Iran. By designing a cultural project, he has tried to keep the language of the Turks of the geography of Iran away from the language of the Turks of Turkey. The dominance of racist thoughts in Foroughi's thought has been so deep and wide that he has claimed that the Islamic civilization was built only by Iranians. Moreover, he believes Iranians are the most civilized and superior nation in the Islamic world. Like other Iranian nationalist intellectuals, he used the racist term "Tazi" instead of the Arab nation. He has identified the reason for Iran's backwardness in the Arab, Mongol, and Turkish attacks on Iran. Therefore, in his research works, he calls the Turkish kings lusty, bloodthirsty, and savage. In his intellectual world, all non-Persian and non-Iranian elements are worthless, mean, dirty, and backward. In his linguistic research, he considered the Turkish language and culture devoid of thought, civilization, and culture, with a highly racist view.

The characteristics of Sadegh Hedayat's racist thoughts, like those of other intellectuals whose works were examined, have strong anti-Arab, anti-Mongol, and anti-Turkish aspects. However, unlike other Iranian racist thinkers, he has also expressed his hatred and prejudice against Islam and Jews. Hedayat also sees the cause of Iran's backwardness in "the attack of Muslim Arabs, Mongols, and barbaric Turks". In his works, he attributes the worst, dirtiest, meanest, and most evil traits to Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Jews, and Muslims. In the racist mind of Sadegh Hedayat, the entire period of ancient Iran was beautiful, magnificent, flawless, and without the slightest crime and ugliness. He considers all Iranian traditions, ancient Iranian culture, and the Persian language without shortcomings and defects. The intensity of racism in Sadegh Hedayat's works is so high that most of the satanic, dirty, bad, ugly, ignorant, and murderous characters in his novels and stories are non-Iranian and non-Persian.

Reza Baraheni, a prominent writer, intellectual, and poet of Iran, has fought both the racism ruling Iran and the racism of contemporary Iranian intellectuals in his works. No hatred or prejudice against other nations and other languages can be seen in Baraheni's works. He has been one of the pioneers in the fight against state racism and the racism of Iranian intellectuals. During the Pahlavi period and in the Islamic Republic of Iran period, he severely criticized the racist government policies and the racist thoughts of contemporary Iranian poets, writers, and intellectuals. In this regard, he wrote about the right to study in the Turkish mother tongue in Iran. Because, in Baraheni's view, the Pahlavi government and the Islamic Republic of Iran wanted to destroy non-Persian languages with their racist policies. One of the features of Reza Baraheni's democratic struggle against racism in Iran is his humane and democratic defense of the rights of the oppressed Turkish nation. He has been one of the pioneers in criticizing the racist ideas of Iranian intellectuals.

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