

***Persian Letters* as a Representative Case for the Encounter of the
Enlightenment with the Other**

A Critique of Eurocentrism in relation to the concept of Universalism during the
Enlightenment

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Abstract

The research question: How does the concept of “comparison,” inspired by the enlightened concept of critique, act as an intercultural mechanism serving the Enlightenment’s ideal of universality?

The research hypothesis: As a transition period, the Enlightenment aims to build a new world, or more precisely, its goal is to rebuild the modern world based on human reason. The Enlightenment considers humanity to be a universal concept and tends to go beyond European borders to define global patterns of humanity. In this study, the *Persian Letters* is examined as a philosophical work, which represents the universalist tendencies of the Enlightenment era through a comparative study of the philosophical movement’s encounter with foreigners. The study aims to say that the concept of comparison plays a major role in replacing well-established ideas of the era in order to establish new ones. This process of change is initiated through comparisons made between European societies and exotic foreign cultures.

The research aim: The purpose of this work is to examine *Persian Letters* as a sample of efforts made by the Enlightenment thinkers to achieve the Enlightenment ideal: that is, making a “change”, or in other words causing *revolution*, *enlightenment* or even *modernization* in non-European societies, based on the new universalist concept of humanity. In the *Persian Letters*, this is attempted through the mechanism of comparison -between European and non-European societies- as a form of critique.

Keywords: Enlightenment, *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu, Comparison, Critique, Authority, Autonomy, Universality.

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Introduction

This research aims to investigate how the enlightened human reason actualizes the claim of universality in the encounter with the Other. To that end, this research concentrates on examining *Persian Letters* as a major philosophical work by Montesquieu¹, the prominent Enlightenment political philosopher, representing the encounter of the European Enlightenment with the cultural Other.

The *Persian Letters* is an epistolary novel which narrates the nine years of the travels of two friends, the Persian noblemen Rica and Usbek, in Europe (Mirsepassi 2003: 19). Their letters cover their itinerary from Persian [modern Iran] to France, and serve as a rather thinly disguised mask for Montesquieu's critique of "Oriental stagnation and decline", and also his "covert mouthpiece for criticisms [...] within his own society" (ibid).

This study contends that Montesquieu formulates his critique of Oriental decadence in the form of a comparison powered by a dilemma between Muslims and Christians, or between Asians and Europeans, which serves as a strong theme all over the book (for example see *PL* 22, 47, 53, 78, 91, 100, 108, 125, 130). Such a formulation is founded on an attempt to prove that the values of enlightened reason are universally correct; in *Persian Letters* Montesquieu sets out to conceive a strategy for cultural evolution by employing comparison as a mechanism for critique.

Despite the fictional quality of the book, Montesquieu's constant concern, in writing *Persian Letters*, was seemingly to reconstruct Persian mentalities with the greatest possible resemblance² and to illustrate the stages of the evolution experienced by the Persian travelers as they came into contact with the West (Chaybany 1971: 204).

1. Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755), simply referred to as Montesquieu.

2. Montesquieu in a letter dated October 4, 1752, to the Abbot Guasco writes: "a Turk should see things, think, and speak, as a Turk, not as a Christian" (Montesquieu 1777: 80).

Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* is examined here as a special case, in which the author criticizes his own society from the fictional foreigner's point of view. 'Criticism,' as the propelling component of the Enlightenment project, takes the form of a comparison in *Persian Letters* due to the encounter with Others. Meaning that Montesquieu's criticism of French society is realized through comparison with the cultural Other.

The unique situation sketched in this work, in relation to the main factors of this era, i.e. the maturity and emancipation of the human reason versus the authority of religion (known as the autonomy of human reason) -which is achieved through criticism-, criticism as the mechanism for reaching universality and autonomy, and universality of the judgments of human reason, provides an appropriate ground for studying the Enlightenment approach to cultural debate. *Persian Letters* is regarded as a unique case here, because it builds up an imaginary world depicting an encounter with an exoticized foreign culture. Furthermore, the novel contains detailed cultural cataloguing, and it criticizes these cultural features with a claim of universality, and with the goal of emancipating its subjects.

In fact, this research plans to question the function of criticism in *Persian Letters*. Therefore, a pre-consideration on the project of the Enlightenment as the organizing spirit of Montesquieu's project is also required as part of the study.

To achieve this aim, this study is divided into three main chapters:

In the first chapter, the main characteristics that constitute the spirit of the Enlightenment project are investigated. The metaphysical context of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries conveys ideas which lead to the emancipation of humanity from the former dominance of tradition and religion, discussed here as 'the project of Enlightenment'.

The first chapter discusses its main concern under the following question: How does the enlightened human reason systematize the procedure of knowledge acquirement through empiricism and rationalism? This systematic approach to achieving knowledge in the Enlightenment era, aims to produce science by relying on the autonomy of reason, through mastery of nature and claiming universality. Thus, the project of Enlightenment is defined here as 'a transition from authority to autonomy', which causes a revolution in the existing relations. Extension of this claim of the project, i.e. universality, into the realm of morality

and law, which in turn rely on a systematic approach to earning knowledge, leads to a new version of dominance which is discussed in the second section of the first chapter.

Since the Enlightenment project encourages human mastery of nature through earning systematic universal knowledge, namely science, the concept of universality will serve as the departure point of the second chapter. Therefore, the second chapter discusses (1) the conceptual meaning of universality in Enlightenment, (2) universality as the departure point for newly emerging understandings of law and morality (from individual action to social norms and universal law); and (3) the unifying role of the concept of universality in the European Enlightenment.

The third chapter starts by considering the issue of the claim of universality as embodied in the idea of a unified Europe, and discussing the role of Enlightenment in defining an identity for Europe versus non-Europeans. The discussion will also cover the ways in which the project of the Enlightenment supplies the required criterion for domination of the enlightened European over non-Europeans in consequence of an encounter. This domination is defined here as ‘Autonomous Authority’ or ‘Authority of emancipated Reason’.

The third chapter engages with these questions through direct discussion of the *Persian Letters*. ‘Criticism’ as the main tool for modernizing the world is materialized through a ‘comparison’ arising from an encounter with the Other. In other words, ‘comparison’ is a form of ‘criticism,’ which occurs through encounters with strangers.

According to Denis Diderot, one of the main figures of the Enlightenment, ‘the age of reasoning’ or the ‘philosophical age’, had the mission “to collect all the knowledge that lies scattered over the face of the earth, to make known its general structure to the men among whom we live, and to transmit it to those who will come after us,” (Diderot Quoted in Himmelfarb 2004: 151). The whole effort was based on an outstanding principle: Reason. The target of this mission was specifically to replace religion’s main function for humanity. Such a shift required establishing a new world according to its new criteria. Therefore, the Enlightenment is characterized as the age of transition to modernity or the modern world. This transition was realized through ‘revolution’ in various different fields such as industry, politics, sciences, law, ethics, and so on, which finally led to the emergence of the modern world.

The whole procedure of the Enlightenment – a mission for replacing god’s grace with human knowledge through reason – is contained by the concept of ‘revolution’.

Modernity was the consequence of a revolutionary procedure manifested in different aspects of human society: The Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution were the main events of the eighteenth century that formed our contemporary existence. They have greatly influenced what we today recognize as modern society and modern nation-state. (Geras & Wolker 2000: xi).

The claim of universality concealed under the guise of human reason served as the foundation of the modern age, and motivated a local and European event (Todorov 2008: 177) to become global. When a local event claims universality, it is eager to become global. The Enlightenment philosophers, believing that anyone could benefit from their ideas, eagerly wanted to spread them everywhere and to everyone (ibid: 182). Accordingly, modernity became globalized through a search for conflicts, which was in turn perpetrated with the goal of making a change, on the road to a new world (ibid: 182-3).

The present study uses the above two premises to argue that the style by chosen Montesquieu to introduce his ideas by necessity requires the device of comparison.

a) These letters were not actually written by foreigners observing European culture from outside. Rather, they depict the imaginations of a native European, who published the book anonymously. Montesquieu refused to acknowledge his authorship even after the novel was later on published in his own name, instead emphasizing his role as a mere translator of the letters in the book’s preface. So one can assume that he did not publish the book anonymously only due to censorship, fear of the authorities (the Pope and the king), or censure from his critics, but rather that his main goal was to take advantage of the influence of a so-called foreign narrator.

b) “Interspersed among these descriptive letters are the Persians’ reflections on what they see” (Bok 2014: 4). But here ‘reflection’ in accordance with the genre and the situation of the narrators requires ‘comparison’ as form. An observer visiting an exotic culture first and foremost notes and describes what differs from his own culture, and reflects on these differences in the form of comparison. There is a simple reason for this: In order to make sense of a new phenomenon, the observer needs to find its ratio within the spectrum of her

old perceptions (*PL*: 11). And then to begin to mull it over, she needs to start making comparisons to what she already knows.

In conclusion, the rhetorical device of comparison used in *Persian Letters* as a form of reflection and critique, is a requirement of this literary genre (epistolary novel-cum-travelogue) and the position of the novel's characters. The choice of genre is supposed to be the best representative for the thoughts and aims of the writer. And Montesquieu's book becomes a coherent work exactly because of his intentional choice of genre, form, story, and its target. Montesquieu expresses his thoughts through foreigners' point of view because it lays a proper groundwork for comparing the differences between two cultures, which would in turn usher the way for realizing the aim of universality as defined by the Enlightenment.

1. Montesquieu; the Philosopher of Enlightenment

Montesquieu, often mentioned as the pioneer of the French revolution, is the most important modern thinker as regards the constitutional principle of distribution of power, a position he shares only with John Locke (Hereth 1995: 7). Most encyclopedia entries and similar introductory texts introduce Montesquieu as “one of the great political philosophers of the Enlightenment” (Bok 2014:1).

Taking such descriptions into consideration and also since, almost anyone who has struggled with questions about contemporary moral and political issues, and problems faced by human civilization in general has felt impelled to take note of the Enlightenment Project (Wokler 2000: X), a research project relating to one of the prominent philosophical figures of the Enlightenment, namely Montesquieu, should definitely be considered within the context of its own era. Accordingly, prior to pursuing one of his major works, an analysis of the main concept of ‘Enlightenment’ has to serve by way of an exordium. This strategy will provide us with a more clear prospect which is best suited to the survey’s aims.

It bears noting that such a discussion should be offered at the beginning of this research, since it will serve as one of the required premises of the argument formulated in the last chapter, which concentrates on the novel itself. Hence, the topic discussed in this chapter functions merely as a theoretical introduction.

1.1. What is enlightenment? *The Enlightenment or the Enlightenment*s

The major thinkers of the Enlightenment varied across the geographical, temporal, cultural, and linguistic spectrum, and each declaring the multivocality of their ideas, both questioned the very coherence and unison of the term “Enlightenment”, and tempted many historians to abandon the search for a single Enlightenment (Gay 1995: X): “Does it [i.e., ‘Enlightenment’] denote an era, a process, or perhaps a “project”? Can one speak of *the* Enlightenment? Were there multiple Enlightenment^s? How did its different national, regional, cultural, and linguistic branches correspond and interact?” (Oz-Salzberger 2014: 33).

Peter Gay, the German-American historian, considers these questions “to fall into a despairing nominalism, to reduce history to biography, and thus to sacrifice unity to variety” (1995: X). He advocates for *the* Enlightenment and discusses it in his multivolume work *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*¹. In contrast, the American historian Gertrude Himmelfarb distinguishes three kinds of Enlightenments, the British one, the French one, and the American one. In the European sphere, while ‘reason’ characterizes the French Enlightenment, it is ‘virtue’ that serves as the main attribute of English Enlightenment – the latter does not define the Enlightenment as a whole. “In France, the essence of the Enlightenment – literally, its *raison d’être* – was reason. ‘Reason is to the philosophe,’ *the Encyclopédie* declared, ‘what Grace is to the Christian.’” (Himmelfarb 2004: 18).

This section does not aspire to cover the entire spectrum of the Enlightenment thought. Rather it tries to proffer an appropriate insight into the Enlightenment’s time frames, main characteristics, and key semantics, to clarify the current research matter, apart from the question of the theoretical possibilities and varieties of the Enlightenment.

Similar to other historical periods or eras, the Enlightenment’s timeline is defined by the prominent personalities and cultural artifacts recognized within its wide spectrum. (Oz-Salzberger 2014: 34). Nevertheless, In the European intellectual history, the term ‘Enlightenment’ in general refers to an era which spans “from the mid-decades of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century” (Bristow 2011: 1)².

It is characterized by the development of distinctively ‘modern’ forms of thought – in contrast with earlier forms – rooted in the works of such figures as Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and Hobbes, as early as the sixteenth century. These ideas reached their peak in the mid-eighteenth century in the writings of a number of Enlightenment thinkers commonly known in French as the *philosophes*³. The emergence of a new set of ideas

1. *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* is the common title of the trilogy written by Peter Gay: *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, 1966; *The Science of Freedom*, 1969; *The Enlightenment; A Comprehensive Anthology*, 1973.

2. CF. Thoma 2015: 67

3. “[...] ‘the Enlightenment’ is composed of the ideas and writings of a fairly heterogeneous group, who are often called by their French name *philosophes*. It does not exactly correspond to our modern ‘philosopher’, and is perhaps best translated as ‘a man of letters, who is also a freethinker’. The *philosophes* saw themselves

made way for a new way of thinking based on change and evolution which meant to prepare the world for transformation (Thoma 2015: 67)¹.

In this regard, the age of Enlightenment is embodied by substantial changes in various fields, such as science, philosophy, society, and politics; changes that would catapult the Western world from the Middle Ages to its contemporary worldview (Bristow 2011: 1). Or in the simplest sense, the Enlightenment was responsible for introducing a new idea of humanity, nature, and society, a new secular worldview which was in contrast with deeply-rooted notions offered by Christianity and other ancient European traditions (Hamilton 1992: 23).

It is important to bear in mind that the Enlightenment is a combination of a number of ideas, values, principles, and facts which in the past were in conflict, but are absorbed and articulated in this era. Therefore, the Enlightenment is an age of “culmination, recapitulation, and synthesis, and not radical innovation” (Todorov 2006: 9). The great ideas of the era originate from antiquity or bear signs of the late Middle Age, the Renaissance, and the classical period. These relics lend the Enlightenment both rationalist and empiricist strains, introduced by Descartes and Bacon. While the philosophes employ old and even controversial ingredients, the resulting concoction is new. The age of Enlightenment also known as the age of reason, should also be known the as the original age of revolution: the time when “ideas come out of books to move into the real world” (ibid).

Prior to bringing up the key ideas of the Enlightenment, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the Enlightenment was aware of its own unique historical features, as reflected self-consciously by many of its theorists. Hence, the Enlightenment chooses to define its own terminology for its dealings and endeavors. In the words of Alexander Pope (1688-1744), an ‘age of light’ begins with the Newtonian scientific revolution in physics. He notes this in an epitaph intended for Sir Isaac Newton: “Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light.” While British writers did not use the

as cosmopolitans, citizens of an enlightened intellectual world who valued the interest of mankind above that of country or clan” (Hamilton 1992:24-5).

1. Cf. Hamilton 1992: 18,19.

word “Enlightenment” itself until the nineteenth century, their common vocabulary for indicating the era during the eighteenth century included terms such as “improvement,” “progress,” and “refinement” (Oz-Salzberger 2014: 32)¹.

As early as 1684, Pierre Bayle termed the French understanding of this age as “siècle éclairé,” and his contemporary Bernard de Fontenelle habitually referred to it as “les lumières.” (ibid)

The German term “Aufklärung” first gained public visibility in the form of a question, “Was ist Aufklärung?” posed by the theologian J. F. Zöllner in 1783. Friedrich Zöllner was an 18th-century Berlineser cleric who made history for a question he raised in a footnote for an article he wrote in opposition to civil marriage. The footnote read: “What is enlightenment? This question, which is nearly as important as ‘What is truth?’ should be answered before one begins to enlighten.” The question later became the topic of a 1784 essay award in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, and led to a series of essays appearing in that journal and elsewhere. Most famously, Immanuel Kant wrote his “In answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” in response to Zöllner (Dec. 1784) (Kuehn & Klemme 2010). Immanuel Kant’s contribution defined the Enlightenment as “mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity”. He defined the aforementioned immaturity as a failure to use one’s own understanding without being guided by another (Schmidt 1996: 58). So what distinguished the German Enlightenment from its European siblings was its quest for self-questioning, both intellectual and terminological (Oz-Salzberger 2014: 32).

1.2. The Key Semantics of the Enlightenment

Given its variety, Enlightenment philosophy is characterized here in terms of general tendencies of thought, not in terms of specific doctrines or theories. However, what all of the Enlightenment philosophers share, regardless of their nationality and historical era is their great emphasis on human reason_(Bristow 2011: 2,3). Apart from geographical or linguistic diversity of the theories of Enlightenment throughout history and within cultural

1. Cf. Thoma 2015: 67.

borders, Enlightenment is considered here as an episode in the European history and culture – apart from asserting its singularity or plurality as an entity – composed from specific key semantics. Some key semantics of the Enlightenment, which metaphysically constituted the ideological and material fixations of the new conditions on the continent, can be concisely categorized as follows:

- (1) Francis Bacon’s revolution in the *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (1620) aims to **gain mastery over nature¹ through the method of induction, “founded on empirical observation and experimentation”** (ibid: 9);
- (2) *Cogito ergo sum* from Descartes’ *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) plays **the role of an undoubtable foundation built upon individual perception, resulting from the application of the method of rigorous doubt, to establish science upon a secure basis.²**
- (3) In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes introduces **the modern social contract theory, theorizing the relations between the individual and the state** (ibid:22).
- (4) Isaac Newton’s formulation of **mathematical laws or principles on the basis of which observed phenomena can be extracted or explained, establishes humanity’s ability to extrapolate those laws and thus to discover the secrets of nature** (ibid:4).

1. “Therefore, no doubt, the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge; wherein many things are reserved, which kings with their treasure cannot buy, nor with their force command; their spials and intelligencers can give no news of them, their seamen and discoverers cannot sail where they grow: now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity: but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action” (Bacon 1862: 125-6).

“Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 1).

2. “The investigator in foundational philosophical research ought to doubt all propositions that can be doubted. The investigator determines whether a proposition is dubitable by attempting to construct a possible scenario under which it is false. In the domain of fundamental scientific (philosophical) research, no other authority but one's own conviction is to be trusted, and not one's own conviction either, until it is subjected to rigorous skeptical questioning” (Bristow 2011: 5).

These remarkable works undertake to put emphasis on “humanity's intellectual powers both to achieve systematic knowledge of nature and to serve as an authoritative guide in practical life” (ibid:3).

1.3. The Project of Enlightenment

The main concept that can serve as the point of departure in our discussion is the human intellectual capacity i.e. ‘reason’. Because reason proves to be the main point shared by these key semantics.

The enlightened reason is actualized by two different kinds of reasoning: the rationalist approach and the empiric approach. Rationalist reasoning is distinguished from the empiric one because of its stress on the primacy of rationality, tempered by experience and experiment, in achieving knowledge: “the ‘rationalist’ concept of reason as the process of rational thought, based upon clear, innate ideas independent of experience, which can be demonstrated to any thinking person, and which had been set out by Descartes in the seventeenth century” (Hamilton 1992: 21).

The view of the enlightened rationalistic approach to reason, that should be moderated through experience, is allied with empiricism.¹ Francis Bacon (1561–1626), “the father of experimental philosophy,” (Bristow 2011: 9) founded the empiricist branch of the Enlightenment, while Descartes headed the rationalist branch (ibid). According to the empiricist Enlightenment, all ideas and bits of knowledge regarding both nature and society must be formed on the basis of empirical data, what anyone could reasonably understand by relying on their senses (Hamilton 1992: 21).

Bacon methodically revolutionized natural science in the Enlightenment, so much so that Newton's work is heeded as the greatest exemplar of Bacon’s method: The system of knowledge introduced by Newton revolves around the Enlightenment belief that nature is ruled by order and mathematical laws, and that human beings have the intellectual power to discover these laws (Bristow 2011: 4). Both of these rationalistic and empirical

1. “It is noteworthy that the Enlightenment’s reputation as ‘Age of Reason’, is an emphasis on its contrast with an age of religious faith, not with an age of sense experience” (Bristow 2011: 8).

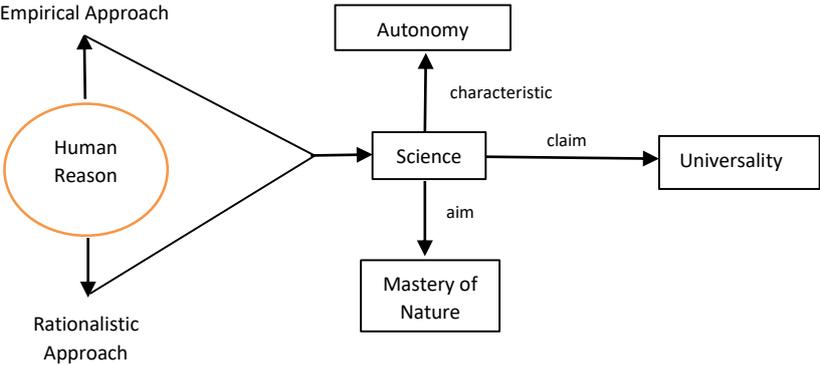
approaches for earning knowledge have helped shape the enlightened understanding of reason.

In this kind of understanding, the process of the earning knowledge is centralized on human beings and their intellectual faculties: The foundations of Enlightenment thinking lie on the principles of human reason.

The philosophical theories (both rationalistic and empirical) of the seventeenth century prepared a proper background for an emerging *turn*, a *shift* from a God-centered world to a human-centered one: All manners of authoritarianism, all figures and sources of authority were questioned by the Enlightenment and their powers were checked. But any authority that was to be allowed must have a human or natural source. The authority of the Church was downgraded because its source was supernatural. This was a beginning to the modern disillusionment with the divine¹ (Todorov 2008: 179).

The Enlightenment is based on a turn from the divine sphere of religion to a human-centered secular life. This turn articulates a new approach for earning knowledge, one that is entirely based on science. This scientific approach designates a new criterion for knowing and acting (Noema and Pragma) in the world.

The chart sketched below offers more clarification:



Enlightened Approach to achieve systematic Knowledge

1. In using the term ‘disenchanted world’ Todorov seems to have been inspired by Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of the Enlightenment: “Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:1).

This whole process, illustrated in the diagram above, defines the ‘Project of the Enlightenment’¹. Thus the first constitutive characteristic of the Enlightenment project is suspicion or hostility toward other forms or carriers of authority (such as established religion, tradition, superstition, prejudice, myth, and miracles), insofar as these are seen to compete with the authority of reason.

In other words, the project of Enlightenment transforms the Old World into the modern world². Thereby, the Enlightenment targets the ‘transition from authority to autonomy’ through critique, which is a function of the enlightened human reason.

We have already discussed some general characteristics of the Enlightenment era and we shall move to discuss in detail two facets of this project, i.e. the deconstructive aspect (criticism) and the constructive one.

The critical aspect of the Enlightenment project undertakes to deconstruct “the submission of society or the individual to precepts whose only legitimacy comes from what a tradition attributes to the gods³ or ancestors” (Todorov 2008: 179). On the other hand, the constructive phase of this project is science- and future-orientated. The authorities dominating the pre-Enlightenment era tended to neglect the influence of the past on human existence, and did not question the knowledge handed down by past generations, instead solely emphasizing the “humanity’s plan for the future” (ibid). This was clearly in contrast with the Enlightenment ideal.

1. Tzvetan Todorov uses this expression in *L'esprit des Lumières* (2006), to present his theory about the Enlightenment.

2. Getrude Himmelfarb titled her book about the Enlightenment “The Roads to Modernity”.

3. Since in pre-enlightenment era, human being lived under authority which first and foremost had a religious nature, and therefore its origin was supernatural; thus the most numerous critics will address to religion, in order to enable humanity for taking their own destiny in hand.

Critique of received wisdoms led to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, which was the key to expanding *all* human knowledge (Oz-Salzberger 2014: 32)¹.

Human reason, as the basis of achieving systematic knowledge in Enlightenment, is applicable to any and every scientific situation, with the same principles in every given situation. Science, in particular, requires general laws which govern the entire universe without exception.

Observing the general sketch of these key semantics in a coherent context constitutes almost the entire metaphysical content of the Enlightenment.

The characteristics of this metaphysical content consist in “future-orientation, critical daring, and social-political reforming ambitions,” (ibid: 31-2) which should, in turn, result in “critiquing received wisdoms, increasing human knowledge, ameliorating individual lives” (ibid).

The Enlightenment advocated the **destruction** of the traditional, hierarchical, political, and social orders, and the authority of the Catholic Church, and their **replacement** by a new political and social order. The Enlightenment achieved this through its method of critique, to achieve its ideals: freedom and equality for all. The principles of human reason acted as the foundations of this project (Bristow 2011: 1).

‘Destruction’ and ‘replacement’ therefore, constitute the two facets of the Enlightenment project. ‘Destruction’ functions as the main step of the Cartesian method of doubt, just as ‘revolution’ serves as the distinguishing symbol of the Enlightenment. This destruction rises against any authority to replace it with “one's own conviction”, known as human reason, as the foundation of Enlightenment thought.

The Enlightenment as the transition period or the road to modernity is based on foundations that claim universality; but this begs the question: is the Enlightenment truly an event with a worldwide breadth or it is just a European experience? Since the age of Enlightenment has emerged from a turn, a shift, on the basis of reason (from the divine to the humanistic sphere) then it could not be considered merely as a regional event, namely a

1. Cf. Hamilton 2006: 21.

European one. However, because of the cultural and historical roots of this shift, the enlightenment can be rigidly demarcated as a European occurrence and moreover identified with it as its essence. Europe¹ is strongly defined by the Enlightenment. “The Enlightenment is surely the most prestigious of Europe’s creations, which could not have seen the light without the physical reality of Europe, single and multiple at the same time. The converse is also true: it was the Enlightenment that generated Europe” (Todorov 2008: 177-8). The question of the essence of the Enlightenment would be directly connected to the question of Europe’s identity.

So carrying out a study into the history of the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment as a historical matter involves a dichotomy: The claim of universality, concealed within human reason as the foundation of the modern age, motivated a local and European event to become global.

When a local event issues claims of universality, it is eager to become global: “The promoters of this new way of thinking were keen to bring enlightenment to everyone, as they were convinced that enlightenment would be of universal benefit” (ibid: 182). In this case, the current study attempts to show how globalization and modernity have resulted from “comparisons with the Other” while failing to recognize the Other’s diversity (ibid: 178).

First and foremost, searching for conflicts is an essential component of the Enlightenment project, because of its goal, which is making changes on the path to modernity. The procedure of unification based on the claim of universality is manifested in a comparison of the European self with an Other hailing from remote nations, which then leads to judging these Others with the aim of changing them in the direction of modernity: “Such an affirmation of human universality aroused curiosity about societies other than one’s own. Travelers and scientists were not able to relinquish overnight the criteria, arising within their own culture, by which they had judged remote nations” (ibid 182).

1. Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1779), the author of many articles of the French *Encyclopédie*, in his article about Europe (1756) defines it as the smallest of the globe’s four continents, but the possessor of its richest cultural heritage: “it matters little that Europe is the smallest of these four parts of the world by area, for it is the greatest of all in its trade, its exploration, its agricultural yield, in its enlightenment and the industriousness of its peoples [...]” (Seth & Von Kulesa 2017: 30).

According to this topography of the Enlightenment, the procedure of turning or shifting from the current position to a new one is based on criticizing. Since such a procedure bears a claim of universality, encounters with remote foreign societies become a serious ground for testing universality, as displayed by Montesquieu in *Persian Letters*.

The current explanation of the Enlightenment as a historical subject matter presents a layout for this study to pursue and to accordingly interpret *The Persian Letters* as a paradigmatic textbook that leads the way to modernity based on comparative critique.

Prior to going through Montesquieu's work, we should clarify the importance of the role of universality in forming the relationship between enlightened Europe and remote nations.

Therefore, the next chapter concentrates on discussing the concept and position of universality in the Enlightenment, as a prerequisite for examining *Persian Letters* as an example of the encounter with foreign societies in accordance with the Enlightenment project.

“The human mind becomes more enlightened, and separate nations are brought closer to one another. Finally, commercial and political ties unite all parts of the globe, and the whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, toward greater perfection” (Turgot 322).

2. Universality as a Restriction on Individual Autonomy

The future-oriented project of Enlightenment, founded on human reason, emancipated individual choice from the divine domination of Christianity and tradition. The emancipation of humanity from divine domination, which is facilitated by their faculty of reason, enabled the passage from the divine to the secular and the human-centered, designated here as the ‘transition from authority to autonomy’.

This autonomous understanding of humanity reversed the perspective on the finality of human actions as well. This basic reversal of perspective can be compared with the Copernican upheaval, which placed the Sun in the position previously occupied by the Earth – except that here it is humanity that gets closer to the center. Therefore, the spirit of the Enlightenment consists in reducing the distance between action and the purpose of the action: the purpose of the action descends from heaven to Earth, and incarnates itself in humanity, not in God; thus the action itself is human-oriented and terrestrial. Furthermore, the project of Enlightenment connects theory and practice in the conception of humanity, through reducing the distance between human action and the purpose of the action (Todorov 2006: 87-8).

Diesen Tatbestand als solchen hat offenbar Kant im Auge, wenn er mit überlieferten ontologischen Kategorien sagt: Der Mensch gehöre zu den »Dingen, deren Dasein an sich selbst Zweck ist«; oder wie er einmal formuliert: »Der Mensch existiert als Zweck an sich selbst«; oder weiterhin: »Etwas, dessen Dasein an sich selbst einen absoluten Wert hat« (Kant Quoted in Heidegger 1976: 220).

“Humanity becomes the horizon of human will and activity, the focal point towards which everything converges” (Todorov 2006: 84). However, autonomy, emphasized on individual will, is not enough to represent the enlightenment ideal as earning_“all the knowledge that now lies scattered over the face of the earth, to make known its general structure to the men among whom we live, and to transmit it to those who will come after us” (Diderot Quoted in Himmelfarb 2004: 151). Humanity, as delimited by human actions, is characterized not by individual autonomy, but by universalism, because of the Enlightenment’s goal of universal reform (Todorov 2006: 83-4).

The common humanity opens something like a hatch through which the Enlightenment discovers the Others in all their strangeness. For instance, the *Persian Letters* represents an encounter with others, who are compared with the author’s own society in order to determine the ideal of universality.

This section is allocated to the consideration of universality as a gateway to understanding Montesquieu’s project, and his use of the Other’s point of view to criticize his own society and/or represent his ideals. Here the trihedral aspect of the so-called concept of universality is considered: 1. The twofold conceptual meaning of universality in the context of the Enlightenment 2. Universality as the departure point for the emergence of a new understanding of law and morality (from individual action to social norms and universal law); 3. The Unifying role of the concept of universality in European Enlightenment.

2.1. The Dual Sense of Universality in the Enlightenment

Among the features of Enlightenment thought, universalism is perhaps the most contentious concept. The impulse of the period to universalize the claims of reason, or to categorize a shared human nature, has been the subject of various controversies (Carey&Trakulhun 2009: 240).

The Enlightenment aimed to gain mastery of nature through knowledge; this is formulated by the aphorism “Knowledge is power” [scientia potentia est] presumably uttered by Francis Bacon, which centers science and the scientific approach as the target of any intellectual activity. The aforementioned goal has been founded on the enlightened faculty of reason, which shapes a dual sense of universality or better say dual components of the concept of

universality. Universalism posits “that reason and science could be applied to any and every situation, and that their principles were the same in every situation. Science, in particular, produces general laws which govern the entire universe, without exception” (Hamilton 1992: 21). The claim of universality was concealed within the definition of human reason as the foundation of science. In this manner, the dual sense of the concept of universality becomes connected to modern science.

The dramatic advancement of the natural sciences was achieved through the appeal of a few relatively simple, universally applicable, mathematical laws, inspired by Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687). Newton's system argues that nature is governed by strict mathematical-dynamical laws, and that the faculty of reason is capable of knowing those laws (Bristow 2010: 4): “Nature, [...], is what can be registered mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems. In the preemptive identification of the thoroughly mathematized world with truth, enlightenment [...] equates thought with mathematics” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 18).

On the other hand, the scientific approach introduces the natural fact that all men belong to the same species, and all are equal in possessing the ability to reason, and therefore entitled to be treated with the same amounts of dignity. Thus ‘universalism’ assumed that any educated person could in principle know everything (Hamilton 1992: 24).

The second sense of ‘universalism’ is evoked by the capacities of human reason. The faculty of reason enables humanity to extrapolate universal laws, and to gain mastery over nature via these laws. This capacity is divided equally among all men and consequently, this equality in human nature requires the implementation of inalienable rights.

The lust for mastery of nature through extraction of universal laws was extended to the domains of human rights and moral orders. In fact, it was advancements in the knowledge of the laws of nature and science in this period that encouraged the emergence of a natural law or a moral order. This asserted a relationship between natural scientific knowledge on one hand and the law and moral order on the other hand, both of which were already highly emphasized on during the Enlightenment. The question of how to ground our claims to natural freedom and equality is one of the main philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment. “According to a common Enlightenment assumption, as humankind clarifies the laws of

nature through the advance of natural science and philosophy, the true moral and law order will be revealed with it” (Bristow 2011: 25-6).

In conclusion, both achieving systematic knowledge of nature and serving as a pragmatic authoritative guide to oneself, constitute a twofold sense of universality. Since the current research aims to make a statement in the field of cultural studies, this division is clarified here in order to designate the source of the claim of universality in the domains of human law and moral order in this era. This research, then, concentrates on the practical application of the claim of universality in discussing universal morality and human rights.

2.2. Cosmopolitanism as Universal Citizenry: The Enlightened Understanding of Law and Morality

The aim of the Enlightenment, as discussed above, could be fundamentally determined through the emancipation of humanity, namely the emancipation of the faculty of reason from divine domination. The autonomous humanity is capable of govern nature, and its own life, which actualizes its freedom.

According to an extreme idea formulated by Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), French revolutionary politician and philosopher, the humanistic spirit of Enlightenment is nothing but unrestricted individual autonomy. Sade reduces humanity to the isolated individual and desiring subject, directed by her own particular interests: “No limits for your pleasures except of your forces or your wills,” (Sade Quoted in Todorov 2006: 88). But the alternative enlightened approach, goes against Sade’s reductionist approach, and stipulates that individual freedom of action should be restricted by the natural fact that all men belong to the same species, are equal with regard to possessing reason, and therefore they are all entitled to be treated with an equal share of dignity.

Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for everyone thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess. [...] what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men; ... (Descartes 2000:46).

This dichotomy addresses the required restriction of autonomy relating to the other concept of Enlightenment, namely universality: the limitations of human autonomy are determined by the claim of equality; “The use of freedom was [...] restricted by the need for *universality*” (Todorov 2008: 182).

The newly recognized ‘human rights’ materialized within this requirement, mainly discussed through the following question: When we talk about human rights, should we talk about the citizens of a country or the citizens of the world [all those who inhabits the earth]?¹

The idea of the ‘rights of man and citizen’ advanced in Enlightenment thought, signified that every ‘man’ should be conceived as a person or bearer of rights. This notion contrasted with those societies in which this idea of a person was altogether absent, or in which personality was a privileged status distinct from the majority of the population. Then, beyond the borders of the country, universality takes on another meaning (Fine 2011: 155).

The distinct concepts of man [human being] and citizen drive the discussion on rights and values in the two domains of law and morality. In the middle of the eighteenth century Christian Wolff, one of the most influential authors of the Enlightenment, defined Universal rights as what “belongs to each man as a man” (Wolff Quoted in Todorov 2006: 98). Stateless men obviously do not enjoy the same status as citizens, because there is no guarantee that citizens can benefit from their rights in the absence of a state that exercises a justice apparatus. From this point of view, these universal rights, versus citizenship rights, are similar to moral principles, which in the absence of a binding force, are perceived as desirable. Meanwhile, the idea of civil equality requires to be placed within the framework of a just state. It was Rousseau who began to think of how such a State should be organized, which led, in *The Social Contract* (1762), to a criteria of rigorous equality in the face of law. Rousseau has established the equality principle: “The social pact establishes such equality

1. Johann Karl Wilhelm Möhsen (1722-1795) was one of the most esteemed physicians of his day. He was a member the Berlin Wednesday Society, a secret society of Friends of Enlightenment that played a major role in the discussion of the question "What is enlightenment?". In relation to this debate, Möhsen posed the question “What Is to Be Done Toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry?” in a lecture, in which the Enlightenment is discussed an entity with regard to the concept of ‘citizenry’.

between citizens that they all are under the same conditions, and must enjoy the same rights” (Rousseau Quoted in Todorov 2006: 96).

Since these two distinguished concepts of man and citizen are related to their own specific domains, correspondingly, they provided the ground for two distinguished kinds of universalism: ethnocentrism and scientism.

Ethnocentrism consists of two aspects: a claim to universality on the one hand, and adherence to a particular context on the other. Ethnocentrism starts by considering a particular phenomenon, and proceeds to generalize the said phenomenon, because this particular phenomenon is necessarily supported by familiar circumstances: in practice, it [i.e. the phenomenon] must be readily found within one’s own culture. Since the ethnocentrist believes that his values are the only existing values, he never really attempts to prove their quality or veracity (Todorov 1993: 1-2).

In this respect, ‘Good’ universalism is, first and foremost:

a universalism that does not deduce human identity from a principle; rather, it starts by becoming thoroughly familiar with the particular, and then progresses by feeling its way. [...] ‘Good’ universalism is based, moreover, on familiarity with at least *two* particulars, and thus on the establishment of a dialogue between them. Hence the ethnocentrist’s point of departure is the deduction of the universal on the basis of a *single* particular. The universal is the horizon of understanding between *two* particulars; we shall perhaps never attain it, but we need to postulate it nevertheless in order to make existing particulars intelligible (ibid:12).

Meanwhile, the non-ethnocentric universalist would try to find a rational basis for the fact that she prefers certain values to others.

Denis Diderot, as the first illustrator of this attitude, is looking for a basis for human behavior, and he chooses to look to “nature”. Nature and morality become two candidates for the same title, as ‘Guides to Behavior’ (ibid 15).

By basing morality on nature – which also means basing law on fact – and thus, by basing what must be on what is, Diderot succeeds in eliminating any need for morality. His credo

refers to a phenomenon viewed as universal (i.e. human nature) rather than to any particular society (ibid). Human nature is the same everywhere; it determines everything that matters in human behavior. And science is the best way to know human nature; science must, therefore, govern ethics and politics.

A clear example of ethnocentrism in eighteenth-century France would be what Hippolyte Taine, in *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine* (in English, *The Origins of Contemporary France*), called ‘the classical spirit,’ which is sometimes identified with the spirit of France itself. To begin with, we need to note that mainstream thinking in those centuries was fond of representing man “in general,” above and beyond all his variants: “In short, Mens souls and Passions change not, they are yet the same still as they were, and as they are described by Theophrastus” (La Bruyère Quoted in Todorov 1993:3); “The world will be the same a hundred years hence as it is now; there will be the same stage and the same decoration, though not the same actors” (ibid).

What this classical approach involves is based on observing one’s own time and nation, and then drawing conclusions about the entire span of history, with the observer expecting his remarks to possess universal importance: “Though I frequently take them from the court of France and from men of my own nation, yet they cannot be confined to any one court or country, without greatly impairing the compass and utility of my book, and departing from the design of the work, which is to paint mankind in general” (ibid).

Scientific universalism is the result of the extension of the debate from the level of knowledge to the level of ethics: “What should be, can be deduced from what is”. Therefore “ethics can be deduced from science” (ibid 22). Accordingly, the ideas of scientism in the Enlightenment “come to be associated with the encyclopedist spirit” (ibid 20).

In order to discover what makes the Other different from ourselves, we would need to categorize specific features characterizing a given people, that is to say, we would need to practice ethnocentrism; and then if we know only our own country, our own countrymen, we view as natural what is only habitual. But after noting the differences, one must return to the universal idea of man, an idea that does not grow out of pure metaphysical speculation but that absorbs the entire body of accumulated empirical knowledge (ibid 11).

So the universalism of the Enlightenment follows Eurocentric patterns (Pickerodt 2015: 205) because both of these approaches tend to extend the cultural characteristics of a specific nation to others. While these two approaches begin from different points of departure, they both arrive at the same destination.

2. 3. The Unifying Role of the Concept of Universality in European Enlightenment

The Enlightenment generally refers to a period in European intellectual history which was geographically centered in France, but with important outposts in most of the major European countries. 'the Enlightenment' is composed of the ideas and writings of a fairly heterogeneous group, who are often called by their French name *philosophes* and ideally saw themselves as cosmopolitans, citizens of an enlightened world, who valued the interests of mankind above that of country or kinsmen. The French philosophe Denis Diderot wrote to his English counterpart David Hume in 1768: “My dear David, you belong to all nations, and you'll never ask an unhappy man for his birth certificate. I flatter myself that I am, like you, citizen of the great city of the world” (quoted in Hamilton 1992: 25). This *universalistic* cosmopolitanism has a strongly European or 'Euro-centric' nature (ibid).

Cosmopolitanism consists of universalized concepts of citizenship, human rights, civil society, and democracy which leaves no space for cultural diversity (Carey & Trakulhun 2009: 240).

The exploration of enlightened thought leads to a harsh conclusion: The Enlightenment ideals of human rights and democratic association cannot survive simultaneously with diversity, because the enlightened ideal is to reach universal principles even in the domains of law and ethics. Therefore, the philosophes “merely naturalize one particular political model or trajectory as a universal telos” (ibid 243).

There have been some attempts to theoretically counterbalance this neglect of cultural diversity -for the purpose of achieving universal principles- through the idea of ‘toleration’: “It is not the diversity of Opinions, (which cannot be avoided)”, according to Locke, “but the refusal of Toleration to those that are of different Opinions, (which might have been granted), that has produced all the Bustles and Wars that have been in the Christian World, upon account of Religion” (Lock Quoted in Carey & Trakulhun 2009: 244). But in practice,

enlightened reason oppresses and penalizes difference in order to achieve *uniformity*, rather than supporting toleration.

Europe's historical development on the basis of a unified conception of human nature results in the emergence of stadial analysis and Eurocentric patterns.

2.4. 'Autonomous Authority' or 'Authority of Emancipated Reason'

“The essence of the Enlightenment is the choice between alternatives, [...]. Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:25).

Achieving mastery of nature as the target of the Enlightenment “pushed aside the classical demand to ‘think thinking’ because it distracted philosophers from the command to control praxis” (ibid: 19). Attaining systematic knowledge became the enlightened way of reaching the goal of controlling praxis. Taking this path became possible only through ‘the power of repetition’: “repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects” (ibid: 8).

Enlightened humans, i.e. free subjects, rendered homeless as a result of the destruction of the old world, are tasked with the construction of a modern world. They seek refuge in ‘regularity’ to emancipate themselves from the divine domination of religion and tradition.¹ In this regard, human beings find ‘their security as free subject’ in the doctrine of repetition. Repetition, through which regularity can be accomplished, secures free subjects who destroyed the old world that was dominated by “the sanction of fate” (ibid).

“The explanation of every event as repetition” ushers “the [...] wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played

1. This sketch illustrates the procedure of criticism as method of Enlightenment.

out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation” (ibid).

This wisdom involves both ‘the classical spirit’ and ‘the encyclopedist spirit’ which are examples of ethnocentrism and scientism, the two figures of universality in Enlightenment. In turn universality in Enlightenment is resulted from an enlightened human in search of security, taking refuge in ‘regularity’.

The doctrine of repetition assumes that everything in nature is repeatable. This assumption enables the enlightened man to achieve the regularity required for **ruling** nature by taking advantage of his capacity for abstraction. But reaching the ideal of ruling nature (mastery of nature) bore the price tag of servitude for humanity: “Under the leveling rule of abstraction, [...], the liberated finally themselves become the “herd” (Trupp), which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment” (ibid: 9).

The ideal of an emancipated subject “was sublimated into a transcendental or logical subject” (ibid: 22); because mathematical formalism and discursive logic undertook to generalize ideas.

Transforming the old world to the modern world required capturing and manipulation of nature: “The self [...] was sublimated into a transcendental or logical subject, formed the reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action” (ibid: 22). Authority of action is the point of departure on the path to the modern world, and domination of nature. It is fulfilled by defining the human being as logical subjects, who act according to mathematical formalism and discursive logic. Thus the authority of action does not remain in the domain of nature but involves individual action of natural creatures.

Authority of human action develops from the quest for regularization of individual actions. The appeal for systematizing human actions involves the domains of morality and law first and foremost: “It brings about the situation for which Kierkegaard praised his Protestant ethic [...]: it [Enlightenment] amputates the incommensurable. Not merely are qualities dissolved in thought, but human beings are forced into real conformity” (ibid:8-9).

The claim of universality in practice functioned as a kind of unification process. While in this period the advancement of scientific knowledge was channeled in various ways, the

ideal of integration of scientific knowledge into a unified system of science remained out of reach.

Likewise, we face a plan of projecting a unified system unto morality, law, economics, and politics, which is the result of extending the aims and claims of scientific knowledge to these domains.

The narrative reconciled social difference with a unified conception of human nature. The determining factors in creating difference were social, political, and economic, while human nature itself remained consistent. Agreement of moral sense or sentiments was thus unthreatened, even as mankind was differentiated by historical circumstance. Those peoples whose customs failed to coincide with British or more widely European modes of economy and society did not constitute unassimilable figures of dissent from consensus; rather they existed at a different stage of development (Carey and Trakulhun 2009: 247-8).

Although a comprehensive system of ethical principles and social norms provides security to human beings, it diminishes their autonomy as free subjects, or at least pigeonholes them according to an ethnocentric perspective. The project of Enlightenment is aligned with “the trajectory of European civilization” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 9). Therefore, while “Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation” (ibid: 8).

The quest of the Enlightenment localities for universality enabled the European subjugation (or the partially synonymous “modernity,” and eventually “Westernization”).

3. Perusing *Persian Letters*: A Study on the Road to the Modernity

This chapter examines *Persian Letters* as an embodiment of the claim of universality in the idea of a unified Europe and argues that the Enlightenment stood for European identity in the encounter with non-Europeans. Montesquieu in the *Persian Letters* suggests a procedure in direction of the Enlightenment project, through which the Europeans (as enlightened men) dominate the non-Europeans in a hypothetical encounter. This domination represents a specific occurrence, determined here as *autonomous authority* or *authority of emancipated reason*, in the history of cultural encounter, leading to an identity crisis that is the main subject of this study.

Persian Letters, the first of Montesquieu's two major works, besides *The Spirit of the Laws* (original title in French: *De l'esprit des lois*), serves the purpose of the Enlightenment project, that is mastery over nature. But since in this context the project is evidently engaged with social and cultural concerns, its aim is realized in the form of mastery over the cultural Other. Therefore, in this chapter, it is argued that Montesquieu uses comparison as a critical mechanism for making a change.

'Criticism' as the main motive for transforming the former world to a modern one incarnates in the form 'comparison' resulting from an encounter with others. In other words, 'comparison' is represented as a form of 'criticism' which is realized through encounters with strangers.

A stranger's perspective, first and foremost, enables Montesquieu to reform his own society by profiting from what could be called *defamiliarization*, available through assuming such a perspective. This study claims that Montesquieu uses an ethnocentric approach to the universalist Enlightenment project, to offer a plan for reforming cultural Others and match them to his unified idea of Europeanism. To achieve such a purpose, it is claimed here that Montesquieu sketches a change-oriented procedure through comparison as a form of critique, which should be understood as a practice-oriented approach.

Firstly, it should be clarified and also specified what is meant by the critical mechanism of comparison, employed in this groundbreaking work.¹ Not all kinds of comparison function as critique. In this chapter, comparison is considered as a mechanism that aspires to cause a change or shift in direction of transforming the old world into the modern world. Such a shift, is based on an outstanding principle: reason, requiring the establishment of a new world according to its new criteria. In this respect, the Enlightenment is characterized as a transitive age, bringing about modernity or the modern world. This transition was actualized through ‘revolution’ in various different fields such as industry, politics, sciences, law, ethics, and so on, which finally led to the emergence of the modern world.

Persian Letters is presented in this study as a representative example of the Enlightenment project. Considering the style of the novel, its methodological approach and enlightened ideas, propounded metaphorically, it is placed within the Enlightenment as a practice-oriented era, which tries to change the world on the path to modernity. Modernity which announces its universality while remaining strictly European.

Consequently, comparison in this work, as required by its chosen style, i. e. an epistolary novel narrated by two Persian friends, and the situation of characters in it, acts as a critique-based form of reflection serving the aim of the Enlightenment as a transition era. Therefore, Montesquieu’s book should be considered a coherent work with respect to his intentional choice of genre, form, story and its target. Montesquieu expresses his enlightened thoughts through this specific perspective which mostly requires comparison but in a critical sense, finally providing the requirements for transformation, and realization of the aim of universality in Enlightenment.

1. It should be noted that the current consideration does not claim for comprehensiveness, but it is limited to consider such a function or understanding of ‘comparison’ in situation of encounter with others in context of the travelogues.

3.1. Strangers' Perspective as Content and Methodological Feed of Philosophy:

Travel and the Philosophy of Enlightenment

Travelogues in the seventeenth-century played the main role in introducing European philosophers to Oriental countries, especially Persia. Texts written by travelers¹ provided a plausible context for philosophers like Montesquieu to determine their own philosophical tendencies and even maintain that their abstract rationalist ideas are based on empirical scientific foundations (Chaybany 1971:199).

Montesquieu once in his early work, *Persian Letters*, published in 1721, and then again in a later novel, *Arsace and Isménie*, 1754 uses the framework of Persian culture to express his philosophical ideas (ibid: 200).

Raising the following question clarifies two different aspects that enabled Montesquieu to use such a context to illustrate his philosophical theories: why did Montesquieu choose a stranger's perspective, for instance the Persians, to explain his ideas about the French society and its political status?

This consideration, reveals on the one hand, the methodological approach traceable in *Persian Letters* and, on the other hand, displays

Montesquieu's specific perception of critique, that takes advantage of a stranger's perspective to critique his own society.

1. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) and Jean Chardin (1643-1713), are known as 17th-century French merchant and traveler, who undertook several journeys to Asia and especially Iran. Tavernier explained the story of his travels to Asia over forty years (between 1630 and 1668) in several books, of which the *Six Voyages*, published in 1675, is the best known. Chardin traveled in Asia and wrote the most detailed foreign account of the Persia of his time published in *Travels of Sir Chardin in Persia*, 1687 (Emerson 1991; Burger 2017).

3.1.1. Eighteenth-Century Travelogue as Empirical Content

Travel writing offered an extensive domain of information to 18th-century thinkers, which could provide proper content to empirically feed abstract rationalistic thought. Through travel writing, abstract philosophical imagination could base itself upon an empirical ground.

The Enlightenment as the age of reason applies criticism as a mechanism for transforming the old world into the modern world. This transformation has manifested as a revolution in economy, science and politics in the eighteenth century. Here we have already seen how the scientific revolution instigated by ‘philosophes’ functioned as a plan of action for the Other. The scientific revolution, which was methodically represented as an empirical and rational approach for achieving systematic knowledge toward the goal of dominating nature, and with the claim of universality, is traceable and recognizable in Montesquieu’s work.¹

It is known that Montesquieu had partial access to some editions of Chardin’s work, *Travels of Sir Chardin in Persia*, published in 1687 (Chaybany 1971:202). Furthermore, it is certain that Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s description of his voyage to Iran, published in

1. “In the same year [1748], Montesquieu published one of the enduring masterpieces of the century, *De l’Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu’s purpose was to conduct an empirical investigation leading to the formulation of the natural laws that determine political societies, in general and in the several historical forms into which they can be classified. He also sought to formulate laws for the major phases of their activities, such as legislation, religion, economics, population, and so forth. He laid great emphasis on the interrelationships of the social and political phenomena he examined. For these reasons, Montesquieu may be considered a founder of political science and sociology. In his work, however, he was not sufficiently empirical; despite his efforts, his mode of thinking remains basically Cartesian, or deductive. One feels that he had his generalities, or “clear ideas,” well in mind and that he selected the data and interpreted it to prove them. Nevertheless, Montesquieu was to be attacked by later utopians, such as Morelly, Rousseau, and Mably, for being too empirical, for respecting the “is” more than the “ought.” In fact, Montesquieu was a realist as well as a reformer. Unlike the utopians, he recognized the forces and the values of history and tradition and never thought it possible to start over from scratch in remaking men or their societies” (Crocker 1969:18-19).

1675 under the title of *Les Six Voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier*, had been bought in 1718 by Montesquieu (ibid).¹

Such contemporary works served as Montesquieu's material for an empirical investigation, leading to the formulation of his works, and his development of a style to match the purposes of the age of reason.

Concrete information, found in Chardin and Tavernier's travelogues, provided comprehensive empirical data which satisfied Montesquieu's wish to supply intellectual foundations based on empirical constructions. But during the Enlightenment, these empirical constructions were laid down on a more abstract level in the rationalist discourses of the age. "Therefore, Montesquieu employs imagination as a means of confirming imagery pro dominated rationalist discourse, long before emerging enshrined positivist scientific discourses in the paradigm of modernity" (Mirsepassi 2003:18-19).

Although these letters were indeed not written by actual foreign cultural observers, they do contain critiques of a fellow countryman about his own society expressed within the framework of his own imagination. Montesquieu who at first published the book anonymously, refused to own up to authorship even later and introduced himself as the translator in later editions². He did this not out of fear of attacks from his contemporaries or retaliation of the authorities, but because he believed in the powers of his style and his concealment behind his novel's characters.

1. "The conversation abandoned the sciences and turned to the latest news: he pronounced upon the latest news. Wanting to catch him out I said to myself: I must be very sure of my ground, I'll take refuge in my own country. I addressed him on the subject of Persia, but barely had I spoken four words to him than he contradicted me twice, basing his authority on Messrs Tavernier and Chardin. Good God, I thought to myself, whatever sort of man is this? He'll soon know the streets of Ispahan better than I do myself!" (*PL* 70).

2. "The Persians who wrote these letters lodged with me; we spent our lives together. As they thought of me as a man from another world, they concealed nothing from me. Indeed, men transplanted from such a distance could no longer have any secrets; they showed me most of their letters, which I copied; I even happened upon some that they would have been most reluctant to let me see, so mortifying were they for Persian vanity and jealousy. My role, therefore, is simply that of translator; all my effort has been directed at accommodating the work to our customs and tastes" (Montesquieu 2008: 3).

Usbek, the main character who serves as the mouthpiece for Montesquieu's philosophical ideas, is addressed in letter 10 as "a man", as "a citizen" and "not as a true believer" with regard to a "philosophical and ethical" question: "whether man's happiness depends on pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses or on the practice of virtue". To answer the aforementioned question in letter 11, Usbek begins to relay a story in the next four letters, instead of engaging in "purely abstract reasoning":

To fulfil your request, I think it best not to employ purely abstract reasoning: sometimes simply to persuade people of a truth is not sufficient, one must also make them feel it; moral truths belong in this category, and perhaps this little narrative will impress you more deeply than would a subtle philosophical argument (*PL* 11).

Montesquieu considers imagination and storytelling to be a better persuasive method in a moral discussion than abstract arguing. Because he believes emotional engagement to be necessary for persuasion in a debate on morality. Therefore, imagination plays a twofold role in *Persian Letters* as a philosophical work.

3.1.2. Comparison as a Critical Mechanism in Encounter with the Other

Why does Montesquieu choose a stranger's perspective, in this case, Persians, to critique his own social and political conditions? What is the function and relation of this perspective in criticism? Examining these questions will perhaps reveal Montesquieu's mechanism for critique, which incorporates this study's hypothesis about the relation between criticism and comparison.

The Enlightenment project's goal of domination over nature is a practice-oriented aim. This goal, determined to satisfy its purpose through achieving scientific knowledge about nature, planned to change the power relations of the world. Thus the project of Enlightenment aims to bring theory and practice together. Realization of this aim consists in the aspects of destruction and construction as well. These two aspects represent the procedure of criticism as the main feature of the Enlightenment. The Enlightened concept of Criticism as a twofold practice-oriented process is expressed in *Persian Letters* in the form of 'comparison'.

The *Persian Letters* involves correspondence exchanged between two Easterners and their friends, family and acquaintances at home in Persia, as the former travel in an imaginary world in the years between 1711 and 1720. Montesquieu began to write these letters from 1716 and published them anonymously in 1721 (Bok 2014: 3).

This work consists of 161 letters involving 27 persons as senders or recipients, and centers on two Persian friends, Usbek and Rica as the main characters, who participate in the biggest share of correspondence as writers or receivers. Usbek writes 77 letters (which is almost half of all letters), moreover, he receives 47 letters from his friends and his wives. Rica composes 47 letters but received only two. The significance of their role in the narrative is shown by the fact that only 4 letters (9, 15, 22, 37) are not written by or to them (Bremer 1971: 86).

This set of letters encompasses a great number of comparisons consisting of various themes from the social customs for walking to human nature:

You'll find this hard to believe, but in the month I've been here I have yet to see anyone walking; there can be no nation in the world that makes their bodies work harder than the French. They run, they fly; the slow conveyances of Asia, the deliberate, even steps of our camels, would give them a heart attack. For me, who am not used to such speed, and usually walk at a steady pace, I sometimes fret and fume like a Christian; it's not so bad being splashed from head to foot, but I can't forgive the digs and thrusts from elbows that I regularly receive; periodically a man who's overtaking me from behind turns me halfway round, while another, passing me on the opposite side, suddenly returns me to my original position; barely have I gone a hundred paces than I'm more exhausted than if I'd walked ten leagues or so (*PL* 22).

With us, character is uniform, because it is constrained; we do not see people as they are, but as they are obliged to be; in that slavery of heart and mind, it is only fear that utters a dull routine of words, very different from the language of nature which expresses itself so variously. (*PL* 61)

Montesquieu's work contains extensive comparisons between the Iranian society as an oriental society and the French society as a European one in various fields, like the status and relations between men and women (21, 24, 32, 36, 46, 84), religion and religious belief (22, 27, 31, 33, 37), politics (22, 35, 78), urban life (Letter 22, 29, 34), morality, moral characteristics and virtues (46, 48).

The position of a traveling stranger provides a unique situation which is first and foremost ideal for directing critique to a familiar situation, that is 'defamiliarization'. On the one hand, the traveler, who profits from an outsider's perspective, is capable of recognizing what is unrecognizable to the inhabitants of the host society because of its familiarity. On the other hand, since a foreigner hails from a different cultural background, other than recognizing differences, she is capable of critiquing the cultural content through comparison.

The current study posits that in *Persian Letters* 'comparison' has been used as a specific form of criticism. In comparisons which function as a critical model, there are always two sides that are weighed up alongside one another. One of them is held up as the criterion of correctness and the other side, which is admonished, needs to be revised and changed.

Montesquieu attempts this type of comparison for a reason. Before publishing *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu himself, who originally came from Bordeaux, had experienced a similar alienation during his stay in Paris, from 1709-1713 and again from January to March 1717. Paul Vernière in his annotated edition of *Lettres Persanes*, published in 1960, explains how Montesquieu as a judge hailing from French countryside turned into a critic during his travels to Paris, which was not his home:

The vocation of political moralist is a magistrate's affair. When this magistrate is Gascon, who loves Paris without being at home, and he hates Versailles, the court, the despotism, and the senile devotion of Louis XIV, then this moralist becomes a satirical observer. If the King dies and a nation wakes up to criticism, the place is free for a new La Bruyere who would paint the passage between the Grand Regne and the Regence (Vernière quoted in Chaybany 1971: 200).

Montesquieu as a rural man looks upon Paris with fresh, unaccustomed eyes, which enables him to find much material for critique. Therefore, Montesquieu, firstly, as a judge by profession and, secondly, as a stranger, profits from a unique position for criticism. In this regard his choice of the mode of comparison instigated by alien perspective for the purpose of critique makes sense.

3.1.2.1. Comparison as the Procedure of Reflection

The encounter between two different cultures provides an appropriate ground for comparison, which is identified in this study as a characteristic of the critical approach that Montesquieu applies in the *Persian Letters*. It should be noticed that any encounter between two different phenomena leading to comparison functions as a reasonable way of reflection. Reflection through comparison involves a simple mechanism: An observer in an exotic culture first and foremost notes and describes the differences in comparison with his own culture and reflects on these differences in the form of comparison, since a new phenomenon can only begin to make sense when the observer finds its ratio to old perceptions¹; it is only then that thinking can begin through comparing.

Therefore, in general, comparison functions as a thought-inducing mechanism; this is observable in the factual examples of this kind of encounter from the earliest examples of travelogue. *The Travels of Taleb in the Regions of Europe (Masīr-e ṭālebī fī belād-e afranjī)*, is the earliest known specimen of travel writing. It was written circa 1799-1805 in Persian by Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, also known as Abū Ṭāleb Khan Landanī, and recounts Abu Taleb's European travels. The text was edited and published in Calcutta in 1812 by his son (Baqir 1983).

This travelogue as an actual example represents the encounter of a true Persian writer with the Europe of the Enlightenment era. It contains different instances of comparison between Europeans themselves or between Europeans and Indians². In some cases, he compares the

1. There are certain truths which it is not sufficient to know, but which must be realized... (PL 11)

2. While Mirza Abu Taleb Khan had Iranian origin (his father was an Azerbaijani Turk by descent, had emigrated from Isfahan to Lucknow) was born in Lucknow and grown up in India (Baqir 1983).

same phenomenon between different cultures he visits in order to classify them for better comprehension:

I shall here endeavor to sketch the character of the Irish. [...] They are not so intolerant as the English, neither have they the austerity and bigotry of the Scotch. In bravery and determination, hospitality, and prodigality, freedom of speech and openheartedness, they surpass the English and Scotch, but are deficient in prudence and sound judgment: they are nevertheless witty, and quick of comprehension (Mirza Abu Talib 2009:111).

The Irish women have not such elegance of manners, nor the handsome eyes and hair of the English; neither are they as tall nor so good figures as the Scotch, but they have much finer complexions, are warm in their affections, lively, and agreeable (ibid:114).

In these two examples, the observer with an oriental perspective puts locates his perceptions within an interrelated network. This interrelated network appearing in the form of comparisons, reveals the procedure of the observer's comprehension, who is discovering the relation between different facets of the same phenomenon in different cultures.

Although Mirza Abu Talib could "sketch the character of the Irish" (2009: 111) by simply describing his observation, he brings them as a comparison to clarify their relatedness. The discovery of these relations leads to the formulation of regularities. Thus the observer seeks for regularity through classifying his perceptions, which use comparison to interpret a new phenomenon.

In another section of this book, Mirza Abu Talib uses comparison not merely to convey his observations of an interrelated network of social customs and thereby achieve a sense of regularity, but analyzes his perception of an unfamiliar situation according to prior knowledge to arrive at a personal interpretation. For instance, Abu Taleb experiences falling snow for the first time in Dublin, and tries to discover its effect on the Dubliners' lifestyle by comparing it with the different climate of India. In the following example, he does not use comparison to discover relations and regularize the different facets of the

same phenomenon in various societies, as was the case in the former examples. But what the observer does, in this case, is using comparison to make an argument about his interpretation.

The coldness of the climate in these islands is very beneficial, and attended with many advantages to the inhabitants. In the first place, it renders the men vigorous both in mind and body, and the women fair and handsome. Secondly, it obliges them to take exercise, which hardens and invigorates the constitution, and inspires them with that valor, by which they are enabled to encounter the greatest hardships, and to acquire immortal fame. During my residence in Ireland and England, I have frequently received contusions without being sensible of them at the time, the tenth part of which would in India have laid me upon the bed of sickness. Thirdly, it renders them openhearted and sincere, steady in the pursuit of knowledge, and not led away by the flights of fancy or sallies of imagination. I have frequently seen both men and women of twenty years of age, who possessed not an idea that could interfere with their acquirement of science or the useful arts. The excessive cold prevents their sitting idle; and the mind being therefore engaged, is prevented from wandering to, or dwelling on things that are improper. Boys and girls of fifteen years of age are, here, as innocent as the children of India of five or six, and have no wish beyond the amusement of playthings, or the produce of a pastry-cook's shop. I have even seen grown-up persons, who had acquired reputation in their own line of business, and many of them had accumulated fortunes, but who were as ignorant of the world as boys in the East (Mirza Abu Talib 2009:115).

In the above example, Mirza Abu Taleb's inference is based on comparison. The observer compares two different climates and argues how each of them affects their inhabitants' disposition leading to differences between their societies.

Both of these aforementioned kinds of comparison have been employed here as forms of reflection, but they should be distinguished from the mechanism of reflection through critique used by Montesquieu in Persian letters. Comparison as a critical form of reflection

is based upon a criterion of correctness, and aims to effect change, and it is an element absent in Mirza Abu Taleb's examples.

While there are two sides to a comparison, in accordance with the critical approach, one side is offered as a criterion for correctness which aims to destruct the other side and replace it with its own ideal instead. For example, at the beginning of the *PL* 87 "the desire for glory," considered as instinctive as self-preservation, is introduced as the criterion of correctness. Although the desire for glory is assumed to be instinctive, Usbek reasons that "just as not all men are equally attached to life, they are not all equally responsive to glory. [...] This difference, which exists between one man and another, is even more apparent between one nation and another". Further down in the same letter, Usbek in an affirmative quotation from a Frenchman compares the Iranians and the French in relation to the previously criterion of correctness:

one is much freer in France than in Persia; consequently, here men love glory much more. That delightful illusion induces a Frenchman to find pleasure and joy in doing things which your sultan can only obtain from his subjects by constantly confronting them with punishments and rewards. [...] Furthermore, here in France the monarch watches over the honor of the humblest of his subjects. To defend it there are respected tribunals, the nation's sacred treasure, the only one which the sovereign does not control; he cannot do so without hurting his own interests. Thus, if a subject believes his honor to have been injured by his king, either by a preference shown to someone else, or the smallest hint of contempt, he promptly abandons the court, his position, his service, and retires to his own estates. [...] But is not this noble emulation completely stifled in the heart of your Persians, for whom high offices and prestigious posts are conferred solely at the whim of the sovereign? In Persia fame and virtue are thought imaginary, unless they are accompanied by the favor of the prince, where they are born and where they also die. A man who enjoys the esteem of the public is never certain that the next day will not find him disgraced; today he is a general in the army; it may be that the prince will appoint him as his cook, and the only praise he can ever again expect will be that of having made a tasty stew." (*PL* 87)

In the latter example of comparison from *Persian Letters*, which in this study is held as an instance critical reflection, “the desire of glory” is considered to be an instinctual impulse, assumed to be natural, which according to the enlightened criteria is a “correct” and valuable feeling. In fact, Montesquieu compares the two French and Iranian nations based on what he considers to be natural factors.

Such reflection in form of comparison, based on a defined criterion of correctness (here also natural), differs from the two kinds comparisons already quoted from Mirza Abu Taleb. The latter were reflections in form comparison as well, but they did not function as critique. In this study, comparison as a critical approach is considered to be practice-oriented, and directed at making a factual change.

3.1.2.2. Comparison as the Critical Form of Reflection in *Persian Letters*

According to most interpretations, *Persian Letters* is considered as a representation or portrayal of French (or European) society, its particular manners, its political order, its major religion, and its customs and beliefs from the standpoint of a non-European observer (Bok 2014: 4), “for the purpose of making his readers aware of how relative the self-evident and how whimsical the normality of their own society is” (Hereth 1995: 16).

Furthermore, it may seem that the author uses the voices of these main characters as a defamiliarized oriental perspective to indirectly criticize his own society. But beyond these prevailing interpretations which mostly regard the letters either as a descriptive rendition of a remote culture or the author’s critique of his own society, this is a narrative about oriental observers who in visiting the West discover their own oriental society in a state of stagnation and decline, through comparing the latter’s negative aspects with the former’s democratic elements. According to this interpretation, Montesquieu uses the self-critique of the oriental travelers to metaphorically and implicitly attack blind tradition, despotism and authoritarian rule in his own society (see Mirsepassi 2003: 19-20).

Why did Montesquieu use defamiliarization and a foreigner’s point of view to criticize his society while it would have been enough to sketch the framework according to descriptive data characterizing a foreigner, thereby eliminating the need to compare any single situation between the two societies from a stranger’s perspective? And this begs the

question, why does Montesquieu use the device of comparison to offer such an extensive amount of cultural and definitive information in *Persian Letters*? These questions are discussed in this chapter as the main concerns of the current study, with a hypothesis about a specific sort of criticism which appears in the form of comparison.

With respect to the latter interpretation, fragments in this work, including comparison, play a mutual function in criticizing both eastern society, as the observer's origin, and the western, as the one which the travelers observe. Furthermore, this interpretation posits that Montesquieu considers the negative aspects of his own society to be "oriental," titled as "*blind traditions*," thus by sketching the *Eastern model* he provides an appropriate background to criticize blind traditions in his own society.

While considering the critical fragments, which issue the king of France or Pope (for example letters 23, 27, 35), indicated no comparison with a similar situation in the society foreign travelers' country of origin.

In Rica's first letter from Paris, "the seat of government of the empire of Europe" (*PL* 22), Montesquieu criticizes first and foremost the king of France and also the Pope by denoting them as two "great magicians". It bears notice that this part of Montesquieu's critique has not been issued in form of comparison, rather it has been expressed as a description of the foreigner early perceptions:

The king of France [...] unlike his neighbor the king of Spain, he owns no gold-mines, but he possesses greater riches than that king does; he draws these riches from the vanity of his subjects, [...]; he has been able to undertake or support great wars with no other resources than titles and honors to sell, and by a miracle of human vanity, his troops have been paid, [...]. Furthermore, this king is a great magician: he exerts his dominion over the very minds of his subjects, for he makes them think whatever he wishes: if he has one million gold pieces in his treasury, and he needs two, he has only to persuade them that one gold piece is worth two, and they believe him. [...] he even goes so far as to make them believe that he can cure them of all kinds of ills simply by touching them [...]. What I tell you about this king should not astonish you, for there is another magician [...], who [...] is called the pope; sometimes he makes the king believe that three

are only one, that the bread he eats is not bread, or that the wine he drinks is not wine, and countless other things of that nature. And to keep him constantly on the alert, and not let him lose the habit of believing, from time to time he gives him, as an exercise, certain articles of belief. Two years ago he sent him a very long document that he called a *Constitution*; he wanted to force this king and his subjects, under penalty of harsh reprisals, to believe everything that it contained (*PL* 23).

Nevertheless, Montesquieu does express parts of his critique in form of comparison, and this study distinguishes this type of comparison from other previously discussed types of comparisons, such as descriptive comparison or any other type of comparison that does not function as critique (as displayed by Mirza Abu Talib's travelogue). In this specified kind of comparison, one side of the compared issue is assumed to serve as the criterion of correctness and the other side offered up for correction according to that criterion. Therefore, this model of comparison is not able to satisfy the requirements of a mutual double-sided critique.

This study claims that such a pattern of critique, represented in the form of comparison applied in *Persian Letters*, is not a mutual, double-edged one, or not even a critique of the French society at all, but rather an attempt to critique Persians or Asians in order to change them or, in better words, to enlighten them.

As for me, I'm leading much the same kind of life that you saw me leading before you left; I go about in society, and attempt to understand it; **my mind is gradually shedding what little it still retained of the Oriental, and adapting effortlessly to European ways.** I am no longer so astonished to find, in a house, five or six women together with five or six men, and I begin to think that this is not a bad idea. I can say this: I've only come to know women since I've been here; in one month I've learnt more than I would have learnt in thirty years, in a seraglio. In Persia, all characters are identical because they are forced; we never see people as they are, but as they are constrained to be; in that enslavement of the heart and mind you hear nothing but the voice of fear, which speaks only one language, and not the voice of nature, which expresses itself in such different ways and assumes such different forms.

Dissimulation, among us so widespread and so essential an art, is here unknown; all is said, all is seen, all is heard; the heart, like the face, reveals itself; in customs, in virtue, and even in vice, you are always conscious of something artless. (*PL* 61).

According to the above quotation, the Persians' identity had already been recognized as a unit with a specific characteristic before the Iranians had an encounter with the western world. Montesquieu, as a European who speaks on behalf of an Oriental, actually introduces the Oriental identity as something that should be changed. Therefore his explanations have been founded on a comparison between the components of different cultures; furthermore, this comparison is constructed on a critique which means to come up with a criterion for correctness.

In *Persian Letters*, criticism as a mechanism for Enlightenment on the road to modernity, is based on the concept of comparison, which plays a major role in the procedure of destruction of actual conditions in order to replace them with new ones. To put it more simply, the process of change commences by making comparisons between European societies – in the case of Montesquieu, the French society – and Other (alien, exotic) societies – in this case, the Persian society. This comparison begins as a local experience. It is conceivable and makes sense since the comparison is founded on the basis of human reason, which is claimed to be universal. It is also this claim of universality that creates an inclination for making changes in other societies. But what should be highlighted here is that the necessity of change was initiated by a comparison. The comparison, in turn, requires a concrete situation to play out, and should be recognized as an intercultural process, hence the current study can be characterized as a cultural one.

3.2. The Metaphor of Travel in *Persian Letters* and the Transitional Aspect of Enlightenment

Usbek, as the protagonist of the *Persian Letters*, should be considered first and foremost as a metaphorical passenger on the path to the modern world. While the passenger of modernity is disappointed in the existing world, he should leave it behind in order to discover a new one.

Usbek explains in the first letter that “love of knowledge” is a positive motivation for “a nine-year migration to the West” (Mirsepassi 2003: 19): “Rica and I are perhaps the first Persians whom the appetite for learning has prompted to leave the land of their birth, and forsake the charms of a peaceful life in favor of the arduous quest for wisdom” (*PL* 1).

Alongside this motive, regarded here as a positive one, he offers the “corrupted court” (*PL* 8) as the negative factor which encouraged him to leave his familiar world:

I was extremely young when I first appeared at court, and I can say that my heart remained uncorrupted there; [...]. As soon as I became aware of vice, I distanced myself from it, approaching it later only in order to expose it. I brought truth to the very foot of the throne, where I spoke a language unknown until that time; [...]. But when I saw that my sincerity had made me enemies, that I had provoked the jealousy of ministers without gaining the favor of the prince, and that all that protected me in a corrupt court was my impotent virtue, I determined to leave. I affected a deep devotion to the sciences and, by dint of affecting it, in fact grew to feel this devotion. I no longer played any part in affairs at court, and retired to a house in the country. But even this course of action had its drawbacks: I was still vulnerable to the malice of my enemies, and I had deprived myself almost entirely of any means to protect myself. Some confidential warnings made me think seriously about my own safety, and I resolved to exile myself from my native land; the very fact of my retirement from court provided me with a plausible pretext. There, Rustan, you have the true reason for my travels; [...]

Usbek’s twofold reasons for his travel, namely “love of knowledge” and the “corrupted court”, represent the sketch which was illustrated here as the project of the Enlightenment. The inefficiency of the structure of his decadent Oriental world, i.e., the “corrupted court” in Persia, forced him to leave it behind. This indicates the destructive aspect of the Enlightenment project. The disappointing factors which motivate him for painful destruction meanwhile prepare the constructive aspect of the Enlightenment project through the metaphor of travel. Montesquieu’s metaphor of travel represents both the destructive and the constructive aspects of the Enlightenment project.

This journey is described as painful by Usbek in different parts of his letters (*PL* 1; 6),¹ which could be regarded as evidence for the destructive nature of the first step of the procedure of enlightenment.

It bears noting that the constructive aspect of Montesquieu's vision, which is expressed through Usbek's words, as a "quest for wisdom" (*PL* 1) functions exactly like the constructive facet of the Enlightenment project. The Enlightenment project is defined as a systematic procedure for achieving scientific knowledge based on universal principles in order to dominate nature. Montesquieu's original expression in this section, "*chercher* [...] *la sagesse*," translated in English as the "quest for wisdom" is worth being considered. 'Sagesse' from the root *sage* plus the noun-maker suffix *-esse* would be translated into English as wisdom. The French dictionary Larousse defines *sage* as having gained knowledge experience "[...] de l'expérience" (Grande Larousse: tome VI: p.5321) and *sagesse* as principles based on knowledge of sciences and the world: "[...] sur la connaissance des sciences et du monde" (ibid. p.5322). This aspect of science or skilled practice or experience-related of *sagesse* is in harmony with the revolutionizing spirit that wanted to transform the then-contemporary world into a better more modern one under the Enlightenment. Another French dictionary *Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française*, published in 1798, defines the term *sagesse* as knowledge of things "Connaissance des choses", being natural "soit naturelle", being learned "soit acquise", the lights of soul "les lumières de l'esprit". Here, again, this sense of being familiar with how things are and work is represented; the relation between wisdom – *sagesse* – and experiencing what is out there.

So Montesquieu's project follows an enlightened philosophical guideline, not a classical telos as a quest for truth, in which the main focus is on cultural differences. While the most recent quotation (from letter 61) indicates a difference that at first seems cultural, in

1. "Rica and I are perhaps the first Persians whom the appetite for learning has prompted to leave the land of their birth, and forsake the charms of a peaceful life in favor of the **arduous** quest for wisdom" (*PL* 1).

"I must confess to you, Nessim, that I felt a secret **pang** on taking a last look at Persia, and finding myself surrounded by perfidious Ottomans. [...]. My homeland, my family, and my friends filled my thoughts; my affections reawakened; a **nagging anxiety added to my unease**, and made me realize that I had embarked on an enterprise too great for my own peace of mind" (*PL* 6).

its origin the dissimilarity relies on a natural characteristic: an invitation to individual thinking which is regarded as “language of nature”. The emphasis on the individual’s intellectual power and ability to think (upon the criteria of human reason) is the foundation on which the Enlightenment establishes the modern world.

3.3. Montesquieu: Ethnocentrist or Scientist?

The Eurocentric Approach of Montesquieu

Usbek and Rica are travelers on the road to the modern world, guided by reason. Through their journey in search of wisdom, they find themselves in an antithetical situation, which manifests as doubts haunting their beliefs, and their attempt to achieve certainty.

Firstly, Usbek finds himself in doubt at the beginning of his journey. He expresses his doubts in letters (*PL* 15; 16) addressed to his divine guide, called the “source of enlightenment” (*PL* 16): “I have doubts, they must be settled; I feel my reason is going astray”. His doubtfulness conveys the turning point in the Enlightenment which caused the shift from Authority [of divine doctrines] to the Autonomy [of human reason]:

Why is it that our Legislator forbids us the flesh of the pig, and all meats that he calls unclean? It seems to me that nothing is either pure or impure in and of itself; [...] I cannot imagine any quality inherent in a thing that would render it such. [...] if the bodies of those who do not wash offended neither our sense of smell nor our sight, how could anyone have supposed that they were unclean? Therefore, the senses, divine Mullah, must be the sole judges of the purity or impurity of things; but, since objects do not affect all men in the same way—since what gives a pleasant sensation to some, strikes others as disgusting—it follows that the evidence of the senses cannot serve us as the rule; at least, unless it is said that each of us may decide this matter, and distinguish, as far as he personally is concerned, what is pure from what is impure (*PL* 16).

By posing this question, Usbek is searching for certainty, which could not be achieved through sensory perception. But in response his divine guide refers him to the authority of the divine doctrines of religion:

Impious men, who never penetrate the secrets of the Eternal; **the light of your understanding is like the shadowy darkness of the abyss; the reasoning of your intellect is like the dust your feet raise when the sun is at its highest point** in the blazing month of Chahban. Moreover, the zenith of your intellect does not reach the nadir of that of the least of our imams. Your empty philosophy is the lightning that heralds a storm and darkness; you live in the heart of the tempest, and drift at the will of the winds (*PL* 17).

Usbek who had addressed the divine guide at the beginning of his journey, ends up doubting divine doctrines after seven years of travels in Europe.

Of what use to us are the fasts of the imams, and the hair-shirts of the mullahs? Twice has the hand of God struck down the children of the Law; the sun has been obscured, its rays falling only upon their defeats; their armies rally, but are dispersed like dust. [...] Holy spirit of the imams, you weep night and day over the children of the Prophet, whom the detestable Omar has led astray; you are deeply moved by the sight of their tribulations; you desire their conversion and not their downfall; you would wish to see them gathered together under the flag of Ali, through the pitying intercession of the saints, and not scattered over the mountains and the deserts because of their fear of the infidel (*PL* 119).

These two letters could be considered as the point of departure and the destination point of Usbek's journey for the purpose of achieving enlightenment or arriving at the modern world. At the beginning of the journey, he writes to the divine guide because he doubts the authenticity of his religious beliefs, and also because he is confused by his perceptions (*PL* 17). But he found this correspondence to be disappointing. During the next seven years of his stay in Europe, Usbek does not get in touch with him anymore and finally ends up expressing his lost faith and trust in the divine Authority in *PL* 119.

The transitional outcome of their journey is an ethnocentric understanding of Autonomy: “each nation must itself ensure that justice prevails between itself and another nation” (*PL* 92).

Montesquieu asserts that “most Asians have not the faintest concept” of notions needed to understand the modern world, for instance, modern type of government like the republic. In a further step, Montesquieu even writes that “their imagination has not even enabled them to grasp that any form other than despotism can exist upon the earth” (*PL* 125).

It should be noted that although Montesquieu’s understanding of the claim the universality of the Enlightenment project in *Persian Letters* is represented as ethnocentric¹, it never leads to relativism; on the contrary, it proves to be Eurocentric.

Montesquieu, by taking advantage of the mechanism of comparison in his epistolary novel, and through his use of oriental characters, formulates his idea of the Enlightenment project as a local event with the capacity of becoming universal. But because of his ethnocentric approach to the Enlightenment, Montesquieu writes the *Persian letters* in the form of a guidebook to prove the universality claimed by the Enlightenment.

1. Alongside the quoted examples in text the following two fragments worth to be noted:

“We never judge anything without secretly considering it in relation to our own self. I am not surprised that black men depict the devil as brilliantly white, and their own gods as coal-black, that the Venus of certain peoples has breasts that hang down to her thighs, and, in short, that all idolaters have depicted their gods with human faces, and have endowed them with their own propensities. It has been quite correctly observed that if triangles were to make themselves a god, they would give him three sides” (*PL* 57).

“Whether the government be tolerant or harsh, punishment is always meted out by degrees; a lesser or greater punishment is inflicted for a lesser or greater crime. The imagination adapts itself automatically to the customs of the country one inhabits; a week in prison or a small fine weigh as heavily on the mind of a European raised in a moderate society, as the loss of an arm intimidates an Oriental. [...] I have not noticed that order, justice, and equity are better observed in Turkey, in Persia, or under the Mogul than in the republics of Holland and of Venice, or even in England; I do not see that less crimes are committed there, and that men, intimidated by the severity of the punishments, are more subservient to the law. On the contrary, I observe a source of injustice and oppression in these same states” (*PL* 78).

Conclusion

The *Persian Letters* is an epistolary novel whose main axis rotates around the theme of travel. In this philosophical work, the concept of travel perhaps functions as a metaphor for transition, which most appropriately describes the spirit of the Enlightenment era. Transition, as the most descriptive attribute of this era, has two main features: 1. It should not be simply considered as progress starting from point zero, but it requires the elimination of established guidance coming from others, while at the same time constructing a self-sufficing maturity based on one's own understanding. Thus, the Enlightenment's dynamism includes two destructive and also constructive aspects. 2. The enlightened transition is a human-centered and authority-negating act. Therefore, the project of the Enlightenment is characterized in this study as a transition from Authority to Autonomy. The Enlightenment is the era that brings about the transition from the old world to the modern world, a transition from a world ruled by divine authority to a modern world ruled by principles of human reason.

Montesquieu illustrates the project of Enlightenment through the narrative of a journey. Montesquieu's narration of the Enlightenment in *Persian Letters* was represented as the journey of two Persians to Paris, "the seat of government of the empire of Europe" (*PL* 21). Usbek, the main protagonist, mentions two reasons for their travel which corresponds with the two phases of the Enlightenment transition: emancipation from the Authority of the corrupted court (the destructive step), and earning wisdom (the constructive aspect). Thus, the journey metaphor covers the two aspects of the Enlightenment project: The two Persian men's travel from an oriental country to the West refers to the destructive aspect, and the transition from the old world to the modern world for the purpose of acquiring wisdom represents the constructive aspect.

This study has structured its argumentation upon a sketch of the Enlightenment as a project which aimed for the emancipation of human reason from the authority of divine elements. This emancipation project involved a double-phased transition from authority to autonomy, being closely related to the two main concepts of universality and critique. **A word on Universality:** as a first step it was argued that humanity aimed to discover the universal principles of nature to enable himself to rule over it. But the human mind lusted after more than was offered in the domain of natural science. In the eighteenth-century the many efforts for finding universal principles of morality or law manifested the desire to

achieve universality. The new consideration of human being as a natural being provided the proper metaphysical ground for searching after universal rules in morality and law. The claim of the universality of the Enlightenment project meant that the transition from the old world to the modern one should involve the entire humanity. The universalization of the ideal of the Enlightenment obligated the enlightened Europeans to undertake the role of reforming the foreign Other in the event of an encounter. *Persian Letters* narrates the encounter between oriental travelers and the French society to demonstrate the process whereby the former become enlightened, and thus proves the applicability of the universal principles founded by enlightened human reason.

Likewise, Montesquieu uses critique as a method to realize the goal of the Enlightenment project (i.e. enlightened transition). This study has argued in detail that comparison is applied as a fitting critical method to achieve this goal in *Persian Letters*. Montesquieu compares the original oriental society of the foreigners with the enlightened European society of France. Montesquieu uses comparison to present a criterion of correctness. In this regard, any of these types of comparisons potentially provide the proper groundwork for deconstruction and construction as the two aspects of the enlightened transition. By relying on the claim of the universality of the Enlightenment project, this philosophical work employs a specific kind of critique, based on cultural comparison.

Montesquieu's ethnocentric approach toward universality of principles on the one hand, and his use of a specific type of comparison for proposing a criterion of correctness as his critical method on the other hand, formed the main argument of this study: that *Persian Letters* as an eighteenth-century philosophical work mirrors its own era's goals, and contributes to a project that buttressed Eurocentrism.

The procedure of transitioning from the old world to the modern one, is actualized in *Persian Letters* through comparisons which gradually form a pattern for modernizing other societies, also through cultural comparisons. Critical comparison offers a criterion of correctness that in turn serves as a strong pattern for transforming non-European societies into modern ones, mimicking European universalism. For instance, the literature published during the recent century in Iran¹, a non-modernized society, is based on comparison with

1. Since the beginning of the 19th century and by the development of communication facilities, the encounter between Iran and European countries has been expanding quickly. In the past two hundred years, this

encounter has resulted in the formation of an approach the basis of which is founded on making comparisons between the Iranian and European way of life in different areas such as industry, economics, culture, politics, education and so on, which has been the most popular approach. This comparison was based on the concepts such as “backwardness” and “underdevelopment” which reflected the idea of simulating and imitating all that could be referred to as “westernization”. Therefore, one of the most significant topics of contemporary Iranian intellectual discussions is focused on studying the relations between Iran and the modern West, the latter being described mostly as the “modernized” world, or in other words “us and the Modernity”, which is itself the title of a book by a well-known Iranian intellectual, Dariush Ashoori.

In a chapter of Ashoori’s book, he describes a panel discussion between some Iranian thinkers, where the problem of “identity crisis” is brought up as the main concern of the encounter between Iran and Modernity. It is claimed that the discussion on the social Identity of Iranian thought must take priority over considerations of the encounter itself. He emphasizes that after two hundred years of encounter with modern thought (or the modernized world) Iranian social identity has now acquired multiple characteristics. This means that the use of the words “we/us” as a unified identity to be compared with the concept of modernity is obsolete. Thus we deal with a multilayered identity which could neither be counted as a modern identity nor as a united identity which in the past Iranians referred to as “we/us”:

What I would say will probably digress from the current discussion a bit. My question concerns the precise clarification of the concepts, to be more precise one of the main fundamental elements of the discussion. Here it was frequently questioned: How should we face the modern world? What is our duty toward Modernity? How could we be modernized? [But], the “we” is evaluated in comparison to the modern human. It means that modernity has already been accepted as a historical destiny by the whole planet, which is doubtful in a methodical discussion. Evaluating the word “we/us” in relation to the modern human pushes us to analyze the fundamental components of western thought and eastern insight, which are two different perceptions of the world; I, personally, am not too qualified to deal with it and I will only try to hint at some basics. On the one hand, we deal with the modern human, a being whose thoughts and life belongs in a natural ground, and his approach to reason, history, action, actuality of question, mechanical concepts, will and passion to gain cognition, which are the essences of modern spirit, originating from his subjective existence, and regarding himself as object of cognition. And on the other hand, we deal with “we/us” that undoubtedly could not be addressed because of its separation from the natural ground of thinking and living. This non-identity of “us” leads us to a kind of complexity which requires us to define what exactly it is that we are addressing. If the multiplicity of its identity is refused, it should be considered twofold at least: Who we have been and who we became [...]. ... we have accepted the apparent phenomenon of the modern thought but we have not yet grasped its essence. The “we” has formed from contradictory surfaces, which makes it frustrating and impossible to even commence with.

Western counterparts mostly in cultural matters, while the main foundation of the modern world is supposed to be human reason. To conclude, this article ends in a question: How is it possible to arrive at abstract reasoning through analyzing cultural elements? Or how can human reason reach a unified criteria, how can it go beyond various cultures, without ending up in an identity crisis?

My question concerns the identity of “we/us”. When encountering the modernity to which we are addressing “ourselves” (Ashoori 2005: 294-5).

As seen above, an important concern of contemporary Iranian intellectuals is “our encounter with modernity”. And it should be reformulated as an inquiry concentrated on three ambiguities: “we/us”, “modernism” and “our encounter with modernism”.

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