How Intellectuals Censor the Intellect: 
(Mis-)Representation of Traditional History and its Consequences

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Abstract

This essay will explore how the intellects of both scholars and their audiences are censored. In addition to various Western thinkers, particular attention will be paid to Ali Shari’ati, one of the most influential thinkers of modern Iran, and how he represented an important Islamic tradition. Not only did his ideas inspire revolutionary acts by generations of Iranians, but Turkish, Arab, Malay, Indonesian, and Indian philosophers, sociologists, theologians, and politicians have all employed his definitions of concepts such as justice, injustice, revolution, corruption, and bliss. This article sheds light both on how intellectuals influence their audience, and their long-term impact on broader communities. In order to do so, it will analyze the material and political conditions that censor both what scholars are able to say, and what their audiences are allowed to hear.

Keywords


1 Introduction

How religions bring people close to – or push them away from – their personal and social rights, has been widely discussed by numerous intellectuals, revolutionaries, philosophers, and religious scholars. The twentieth century
witnessed various controversies around such issues, and many leaders tried to compare themselves and their duties to those of prophets and their followers. A good example is Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68), winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1966, a leader famous for having promoted “non-violent disobedience.” While attempting to reach African-American citizens and the oppressed more generally during his time in prison, he compared himself to Christian Apostles such as Saint Paul:

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

King, 2003

Such “non-violent disobedience” is also seen in the works of Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) who, inspired by Quranic verses such as “Your creation and your resurrection will not be but as that of a single soul” (Q 31: 28), agreed that “a living experience of the kind of biological unity, embodied in this verse, requires today a method physiologically less violent and psychologically more suitable to a concrete type of mind” (Iqbal, 2012). One of the central points of these leaders’ arguments was their call to their audiences for independence, resistance, and freedom. Many of them explicitly or implicitly presented their interpretations of their religion, and it is this issue which is discussed in what follows.

This article is the result of several factors. While talking to a Christian American colleague, I sought his opinion about both Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X (1925–1965); the former was a Christian civil and African-American activist while the latter was a Muslim convert and an African-American activist. In summary, he said that the latter, unlike the former, used violence to condemn and battle racial discrimination of African-Americans in the United States, where, according to Malcolm X, “white people … remained guilty of a collective and historic devilishness toward the blacks ...” (Goldman, 1979). Having heard his thoughts, regardless of its accuracy, I wanted to see whether intellectuals in Iran, a context with which I am more familiar, similarly applied and instrumentalized religious teachings – in this case, Islamic ones – to incite protest against oppressive conditions. On this subject,
I found that Ali Shari’ati (1933–1977) opinions were controversial, provocative, and very popular; he was someone who was influenced not only by Shi’ite Islamic teachings but also by European intellectual traditions. He is seen in various different guises, from a revolutionary figure to a sociologist, yet he is principally viewed and most widely known as an intellectual in contemporary Iran, and today, large numbers of Iranian philosophers, sociologists, literary figures, artists, and students’ study and adhere to his teachings. Some scholars have connected Shari’ati’s views to those of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and Edward Said (1935–2003), among others; some of whom interpret and occasionally justify Shari’ati’s more controversial views in light of the abovementioned scholars’ ideas.¹

As such, I wondered how intellectuals draw on earlier traditions (either historical narratives or religious teachings) to fight discrimination and oppression. To do this and to clarify the notion of censorship, I had further questions: to what extent are the earlier traditions used by scholars reliable? How could this affect their audiences’ approaches to inequality? And does it make any difference if intellectuals apply neglected historical source material when addressing such social matters? An examination of the main parts of Shari’ati’s ideas, built upon the history of Islam and of Shi’ism, may help to shed some light on these issues.

Today, Shari’ati’s influence is not limited to Iran. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, his works have been frequently translated, particularly in places where (Persian) Shi’ism has gained a strong foothold, such as Indonesia.² Since 1998 and the collapse of the Suharto regime, the Iranian government has developed connections with Indonesia, established Shi’ite educational and cultural centres in Jakarta, and provided scholarship programmes for Indonesians to study Islam in Qum, Iran (Zulkifli, 2014). Furthermore, as will be seen, they oversaw the translation of Persian-language Shi’ite works, and particularly those by Shari’ati dealing with Islamic social uprisings, into Bahasa Indonesian.

Indonesians have developed a very different perception of Islam compared to that found in the Near East (Riddell, 2001). Islam arrived in Indonesia in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, centuries after its emergence in Mecca. It also fell into a region that is far from the birthplace of Islam and close to Indo-Chinese culture, as well as lands steeped in the Buddhist and Hindu religions. Over the centuries, it has also established a pluralistic integration

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¹ For example, see Bijan ‘Abdolkarimi’s lectures, a philosopher and advocate of Shari’ati.
² Although his works were read by Indonesians before the Iranian revolution, Indonesian scholars paid more attention to his works after the revolution.
of Sunnis, Shi’ites and Sufis. As such, the end of this article will allow readers to imagine what the consequences of reading Shari’ati’s account of revolution beyond the geographical borders of Iran, i.e. in Indonesia, may be.

2 Outline and its Literature

This study considers different scholars in order to provide a comparison between intellectuals and their audiences in the West and in the Islamic world. As indicated above, twentieth-century intellectuals used religious teachings to stimulate the “powerless” (such as the general public and the poor) to confront the “oppressors” of their time. The first part, “Traditional History and Intellectuals”, sketches the way in which Shari’ati, as an intellectual, utilized one of the most important events in the history of Shi’ite Islam to describe the significance of “revolution” for the Iranian public, and addressed the combination of religion and politics as seen from Shari’ati’s perspective.

Although the works of (Abrahamian, 1982) and (Rahnema, 2000) have paid particular attention to how Shari’ati’s thoughts influenced the Iranian Revolution, this study goes one step further by examining whether his ideas were based on religious and historical teachings and, if so, whether he provided his audiences with a comprehensive view of history or just a partial image.

In earlier studies, Shari’ati’s life and role have been examined, yet there is a dearth of attempts to shed light on his (in)complete reading of religious teachings and the reception of his work beyond the borders of Iran. Most have simply admired him as an intellectual and examined his social theories. Even those works that have attempted, at least partially, to situate him outside the Iranian context are limited to his readings of Asian and European intellectuals (e.g., Iqbal of Pakistan and Fanon of France) (Halilović, 2011), or compare him to his contemporaries in other Muslim countries (Zeiny, 2017). Such studies are certainly useful since they provide an analytical perspective on various intellectuals’ political engagement and their efforts to free Muslims from both physical and intellectual colonization by Western powers.

However, questions surrounding how intellectuals understand history and whether they censor and/or domesticate it for their own ends remain. In order to address these issues, this article examines the identities of intellectuals and how they instrumentalize their past and their concerns in order to warn their audiences of oppression. The role of Western intellectuals such as Edward Said and Toni Morrison will be considered. Both attempted to critique American imperialism in the context of the Muslim world. Most studies dealing with these two figures revolve around their political and cultural statements rather
than their reception by the general public (Gillespie, 2008). After highlighting these concerns, I will discuss how the domestication of the past has affected the popularity of both Said and Morrison among Muslims.

The second part of this article discusses intellectuals’ reading of history what may have happened if intellectuals such as Shari’ati had read a wider range of Shi’ite historical traditions regarding the revolt and killing of Husayn (the third Imam of the Shi’a and the symbol of the oppressed) by the Umayyads (the symbol of tyranny) than they did. Although other scholars, including Abrahamian, have discussed Shari’ati’s presentation of this well-known story, the significance of other narratives surrounding killing of Husayn remain unexamined. These stories have been widely read by various Muslim communities, including Indonesians, but were censored by Persian Shi’ite authorities following the emergence of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century (Daneshgar, 2018). The article will end by exploring what could happen in Indonesia should Indonesian Shi’ites encounter a different reading of Husayn’s death by Shari’ati, one which would stand in sharp contrast to their current cultural and historical understanding.

Part I

Traditional History and Intellectuals

3 Karbala, Shari’ati and Revolutionary Slogans

Bayn al-haramayn (“Between the two holy shrines”) is the area in Karbala where the tombs of both Husayn and Abbas are located. Although they had different mothers, both were the sons of ‘Ali (607–661), the fourth caliph and the first Imam of the Shi’ites. Every year, thousands of Muslims, and Shi’ite Muslims in particular, visit this place to commemorate Husayn’s and ‘Abbas’ deaths in Karbala, which, according to the sources, happened in the month of Muharram in 680. Once, my uncle and numerous other relatives walked many kilometres, for days, barefoot in the hot Middle Eastern summer in order to reach the place, and a vast amount of people, from all walks of life and from many different countries, continue to visit it. Regardless of the main purpose of such visits to Karbala, everyone who goes knows about these two Islamic figures. The Iranian government is proud of this “pilgrimage” (ziyarat), as it is sometimes known, which they claim is spontaneous. The pilgrims have been taught that both brothers, Husayn and ‘Abbas, were brutally killed in battle on
the plain of Karbala when they failed to pledge allegiance to Yazid (644–683), the son of Mu'awiya (603–680), who according to some sources, was a cruel and unjust ruler, and the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. Having killed both brothers, Yazid then incarcerated their sister Zaynab (625–682), whose tomb is located in Damascus, Syria. This is the basic outline of the story of their death that pilgrims to these tombs are presented with through textual, audio, and visual sources. The popular story, which is read or heard by the majority of people visiting the site, is a tragedy that primarily focuses on the suppression of Muhammad’s family by the Umayyad dynasty.

Nonetheless, this tale is not, at least for its Iranian readers, a simple, traditional folk story like one from The 1001 Nights (The Arabian Nights). Instead, it has become a symbol of efforts to defeat people(s) they view as their enemies, in confrontations both large and small. Thus, for some Iranians, the story of Karbala is a revolutionary one, and it played a role in prompting them to revolt against what they viewed as tyranny. As Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson argue in Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, “[t]he Islamists cast the struggle against the shah as a reenactment of the Battle of Karbala” (Afary and Anderson, 2010). The 1979 Iranian Revolution, as a result of which Ruhullah Khomeini (1902–1989) became the leader, owed a considerable debt to how this story was presented by revolutionary-minded figures and thinkers who had achieved more authority, and thus had become more powerful, than the rest of the (powerless) population. The people (i.e., powerless) generally trusted official versions of this story, particularly when it was narrated and expounded by well-educated revolutionary thinkers of their time, such as Shari’ati. According to Shari’ati, the gist of the story of Karbala is that “all Shi’is, irrespective of time and place, have the sacred duty to oppose, resist and rebel against contemporary ills, [such as] corruption, and world- and cultural imperialism” (Abrahamian, 1982).

Shari’ati completed a PhD in sociology in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1964. It is said that he was friends with Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and was significantly influenced by their ideas (Rahnema, 1998). It is said that Shari’ati translated Fanon’s works, such as Les Damnés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth), into Persian, and was greatly influenced by Fanon’s ideas surrounding colonialism and Western imperialism. Fanon had earlier stated that “Europe intended to captivate the non-European by the machine. Can a human or society be enslaved by a machine or certain European product without taking away or depriving him of his personality?” (Mohamed, 2017) Shari’ati later expressed his view that Muslims, whose civilization had, for several centuries, been “unparalleled in the world and had the whole world
under its influence,” had been reduced to mere consumers of Western products (Shari’ati, 1984).

Borrowing such notions from non-Persian and non-Muslim scholars, Shari’ati produced an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-Western Shi‘ite version of Islam. According to him, Islam “was both an ideology and a social revolution which intended to construct a classless and free society on the basis of equality and justice, and in which would live enlightened, responsible and free people” (Rahnema, 1998). “For Shi‘ism”, in Shari’ati’s own words, was not an opiate like many other religions, but “a revolutionary ideology that permeated all spheres of life, including politics, and inspired true believers to fight all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social injustice” (Abrahamian, 1982).

Although anti-Western statements had been pronounced by the Muslim ulama for a couple of centuries, Shari’ati’s were well received by the general public. One of the main methods Shari’ati – someone with a PhD in sociology from a Western university – and his co-thinkers used, was to indigenize and “Islamify” Western theories in order to eradicate what they called zulm and injustice, and one way they did so was through their presentation of the story of Husayn’s “revolt” against the ruler of the time, Yazid, and his subsequent death.

Through the works of Shari’ati, Iranians could demonize the Shah and his entourage by comparing them to Yazid while at the same time lauding Khomeini as the true follower of Husayn. However, before Khomeini’s return to Iran, it was Shari’ati who carried the banner of the Islamic Revolution, and archives demonstrate that people put both Khomeini and Shari’ati at the forefront of their demonstrations and gatherings for several years after the revolution.

For Shari’ati, Muslim revolutionaries are the heirs of Husayn and his family and should continue to act in such a way (Shari’ati, 1970) until all traces of every form of tyranny have been eradicated. The tyranny of Shari’ati’s time was manifest not only in the Shah’s court but also in the form of Western imperialism, the very thing that had produced anti-Western sentiment in Fanon and many others.

Shari’ati’s anti-Western sentiments were well received by lower-class citizens who found that their desires were vocalized in his railing against capitalism, poverty and injustice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their protests moved towards Shari’ati’s version of Islam, which was originally focused on revolution alone, and this encouraged the continuation of the struggle with the Shah and his supporters. Revolutionary slogans by Shari’ati, alongside those of Khomeini, were written on buildings and on the banners carried during marches. Both thinkers harshly criticized the West. One of the focal points of each of these two thinkers’ ideas was the story of Karbala and the death of Husayn: the latter, the grandson of Muhammad was the symbol of justice and piety for being
killed by Yazid, the son of Mu’awiya and thus the personification of injustice and corruption. The posters and banners produced in the years both before and after the Iranian Revolution show how revolutionary mottos against the Shah evolved and helped to shape anti-Western sentiment.

4 Intellectuals and Domestication

Shari’ati, who is famous among Iranians as having been an intellectual for shaping various social and philosophical movements in the Muslim world, wrote numerous works and delivered hundreds of lectures in mosques, religious centres and universities based on the story of Husayn’s death in Karbala. Not only were his works a stimulus for revolutionaries but they have also come to form the model for all contemporary Iranian thinkers wishing to write, act or protest against oppression and injustice. Yet what would have happened if Shari’ati had taken into account other important reports on the history of Islam in general, and the battle of Karbala in particular (not all of them necessarily accurate) which, for political reasons, have not been read by Shi’i Muslims for centuries?

The references Shari’ati made to the Karbala story were not scrutinized for reliability by the protesters, which may suggest that they believed them without thinking. This could be a form of intellectual censorship; when people define the notions of being, living, thinking and acting, as well as social concepts such as demonstration, revolution, justice and corruption, by placing their faith in part or all of a statement made by an intellectual while at the same time ignoring other possible sources of information.

Censorship occurs when an individual, a group, or a work and their significance are systematically and thoroughly modified (i.e. demonized or canonized), and/or removed by “powerful” people or organizations in order to preserve in whole or part the ideological, ethical and/or legal values and benefits they wish to promote, and to reject or prevent opposition. Censorship can affect audio, visual and textual sources. Its impact can be enormous, as censored material can be gradually altered with regards to the historical, theoretical and/or scientific facts it contains. According to Marx, censorship is inherently problematic as “it protects the interest of entrenched elites ... and perpetuates the domination of the powerless by the powerful” (Jansen, 1988). Censorship is the link between power and knowledge in any society. As Jansen says,

The Powerful require knowledge to preserve, defend, and extend their advantage. For them, knowledge is power. The way the powerful say
things are is the way they are, or the way they usually become because the powerful control the power to name ... the powerful use this power to generate and enforce definitions of words and of social reality that enhance their sovereignty.

JANSEN, 1988

It is easy to employ the term “intellectual” or call someone “an intellectual.” However, it is more complicated to define the term and the people who are referred to as such, in any language. In Arabic, for example, the suitability of the terms al-mufakkir and al-muthaqqif are still discussed. The former generally refers to a thinker while the latter is more popular and deals with someone who has an impact on culture, education and civilization (Said, 1994).³ It is the same in Persian, with the terms Roushan-fikr, munavvar al-fikr, and mutafakkir, each of which conveys a different impression but neither clearly defines what and who is an intellectual. Does it refer to an author, poet, activist or scholar of the humanities or social sciences (Johnson, 1988)? Do they work in the private or public sphere? Should we call Darwin and Freud, whose works are little read by the public but who have had a significant impact on almost everybody, intellectuals? Should they be famous (Sowell, 2009)? Are they “organic” and found in every society, or are they found primarily among philosophers and sociologists?⁴ Are they traditional, like teachers? Are they professional or autodidacts? Whoever they are, they are people known for their ideas and which journalists, students, universities and the public to some extent, use to expand their views of themselves as humans and their surroundings (Sowell, 2009).

Whether they are public or private intellectuals, they will influence writing, publishing and broadcasting to a point that leads to enhanced awareness among various people of their identity, their rights, and their past, present and future (Said, 1993). It is only rarely that people call a physicist or a mathematician an intellectual – such as when he finds a solution for an important computational question – yet if that physicist or mathematician replaces his formula and/or engages his expertise with what is going on in the human mind, life and the universe, he will be known as the producer of an idea, or as an intellectual, and thus as one who can affect humanity, to a greater or lesser extent.

The term intellectual was used by scholars and seen in the media in Europe and North America in the 20th century more frequently than in any other

³ However, the term muthaqqif is occasionally defined as ‘bookworm.’
⁴ The term is also used by Edward Said in his podcast lecture on the *Representations of the Intellectual*, BBC, 1993.
period. Although the term “intellectual” emerged in Russia in the 19th century (Aron, 1962: 208), it was often applied in order to show the scientific progress of a nation or human reason before the 20th century. As such, the works of John William Draper (1811–1882), an English-American scientist of the 19th century, on “the history of the intellectual development of Europe” is relevant. Draper said:

I intend, in this work, to consider in what manner the advancement of Europe in civilization has taken place, to ascertain how far its progress has been fortuitous, and how far determined by primordial law.

Draper, 1875

In the 20th century, philosophers, linguists, sociologists, and literary critics such as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), Charles Wright Mills (1916–1962), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Edward Said (1935–2003), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Noam Chomsky (*1928), among others, became symbols of freedom, courage and morality for many people in the Muslim world. They raised fundamental questions about the nature of power and knowledge, justice and injustice, and oppressed and oppressive, revolution and violence.

Some of them, such as Foucault, primarily engaged politically as gay rights activists, while others, like Said, fought predominantly for Palestinian rights. Of course, because of their profound academic background and their social concerns, intellectuals may have more to say and much more power and symbolic capital (as such, and due to their popularity, I call them powerful) than other groups of people who have less power (the powerless). Due to their influence, power and popularity, intellectuals are often well-received by academics, authors, activists, and other groups who are powerless. However, two points are troubling: To what extent is an intellectual's idea accurate and reliable? And how and to what extent are their ideas taken up by audiences and followers?

Certainly, these thinkers made use of both historical sources and socio-philosophical works. It is clear that they mix personal experience with socio-philosophical ideas and critical analysis, although it might be more accurate to say that they domesticate the history and opinions of earlier generations. For instance, Said, who spent most of his life in New York, thousands of miles from his homeland of Palestine, paid particular attention to the issue of the Other and Otherness. He did not want to be so far away from his motherland; these points are also discussed by African-American novelist and activist Toni Morrison who, she stated, suffers from being away from her continent and “native country” (Morrison, 2017: 17) while also being a foreigner in her homeland. She believed that being a true American means, for black people, being separated from their original [imaginary] land.
Edward Said stated that he was influenced by Foucault, while Foucault (Said, 1994) was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (Mahon, 1997) and so on. Nonetheless, not only did each of them echo the other, but also, and more significantly, they “domesticated” and selected the opinions of earlier scholars by defining them through their own logic and combining them with their own concerns.

For instance, the terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” are selective for Said. For him, these are only Western phenomena, in the form of those colonists who invaded Muslim lands. He is silent about both the Ottoman and Japanese rulers who were not merely the victims of colonialism but who also were themselves colonizers interested in expanding their imperial territory. Had he also highlighted those Oriental imperial powers, surely, he could no longer have exclusively blamed Western powers such as Britain and America (Nisihara, 2005)?

Hundreds of other anti-Western works have been written by Muslim authors on the basis of only a select part of the works and lectures of Said, such as Orientalism. However, it seems that none of them refer to Morrison, who, actually no less than Said, challenged the politics of America and imperial powers as regards slavery and colonialism. Even more so than Said, she denounced the notions of social racism, racial self-loathing, racial superiority, and “Othering” (Morrison, 2017). What prompted Muslims to refer primarily to some (though not all) of Said’s work was not, to my knowledge, his approach towards the West, which earlier scholars had taken, but the way in which he echoed Muslims’ sense of inferiority (‘uqdat al-naqisa’) and oppression by non-Muslims in English something that had been expressed by Muslim thinkers for a couple of centuries.

This “domestication” of the Other’s opinion may be the central reason why one, as will be seen below, should be cautious about the reliability and applicability of any intellectual’s ideas.

The “domestication” of a concept leads to questions surrounding its reliability: do intellectuals truly understand their past and earlier traditions, or do they simply change them to what they want them to be? Do they reconstruct meaning retrospectively? This leads on to my second concern, regarding the extent to which an idea is applied by audiences. Indeed, audiences – and individuals within the audiences – also domesticate the ideas of the powerful (i.e. the intellectuals) according to their own concerns and desires, meaning some of them soon become intellectuals or form new intellectual movements.

Indeed, they need to domesticate ideas in order to render a point understandable for their audience. And as Aron says, “all doctrines, all parties—traditionalism, liberalism, democracy, nationalism, fascism, communism—have
had and continue to have their oracles and their thinkers” (Aron, 1957: 209).
Domestication is something akin to the translation and interpretation of a foreign text, and so it is inevitably selective and does not guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the idea as presented. Not only are the intellectuals themselves selective in what they present, but there are groups within their audience that are selective, choosing to pick up on just one or a few aspects of the intellectuals’ opinions. Despite the fact that almost all of them address common notions of justice, equality and co-existence, intellectuals have both advocates and opponents. And this also happened to Shari’ati, whose advocates and opponents are still arguing with each other in Iran, and beyond its borders in Iraq and Indonesia, too.

It seems that intellectuals who fight for justice are the victims of two groups of people: (a) opponents who do not consider them just thinkers; and (b) other intellectuals, activists, scholars, officials and other powerful individuals or groups who domesticate them and use their ideas in order to develop their own message, influence, control and agenda over the powerless.

The first group is made up of fundamentalists who deliberately destroy intellectual ideas and intellectualism both inside and outside of the territory in which they live. There are many books and studies which have been banned or destroyed by fundamentalist Jews, Christians, Islamists, Hindus, Buddhists and secularists. Yet it is the second group who are, remarkably, more selective than the first group regarding the intellectuals’ works, as they domesticate the latter’s opinions and draw the “approved” line for their readers and audiences. Indeed, “they tell the powerless what they are up against. The powerless use this knowledge of power to negotiate their own recipes for survival” (Jansen, 1988: 7). Thus, not only do intellectuals censor each other but they also censor other public intellects. Powerful people, including intellectuals, show which aspects of knowledge should be allowed and which parts should not. In this regard, real intellectuals, according to Shari’ati, are those who to search “for a method, an ideology and a solution to the problems of their nation would return to the greatest book [the Qur’an]; they would learn the best lessons from it” (Shari’ati, 1984).

Here, Shari’ati outlines the features of a true intellectual using Islamic teachings in service of his powerless audience. Thus, Shari’ati sees social progress, moral doctrines and ethical sensibility in the light of Islamic teachings.

It is true that intellectuals stimulate their audiences to control the controllers (whether political, religious or cultural) but, ironically, through domestication they themselves send people down a path that they were looking for or have suffered from in the past. It is true that “intellectuals felt themselves
united by the knowledge they shared and by the attitude they adopted towards the established order, [which] ultimately inclined them towards revolution” (Aron 1957: 208). However, coming from a different culture and tradition and being an intellectual, each of them actually causes their followers to blindly or deliberately accept and follow what they are saying. For the followers (the powerless), an intellectual’s (the powerful) empathy and sympathy with them is more valuable and important than the reliability or accuracy of their statements.

This has happened to Shari’ati, the origins of whose thought were, for decades, not analyzed or deconstructed by revolutionaries (Aron, 1957:208). Did he, as an intellectual, really apply reliable sources to expand his theories? Did he apply a selective method and domesticate sources? Why did Shari’ati, who was fluent in French, not seriously take into account the important and controversial French works of his time dealing with the authority of national, rational and racial passions as well as political parties of left and right such as *La trahison des clercs* (The Betrayal of Intellectuals) by Julien Benda and *L’Opium des intellectuels* (The Opium of the Intellectuals) by Raymond Aron. Finding responses to these questions would allow us to know the extent to which an intellectual may affect his audience and the direction of a social movement.

In this regard, Abrahamian expresses that:

Shari’ati [the main ideologue of the Iranian Revolution] drew his inspiration from outside as well as from within Islam: from Western sociology—particularly Marxist sociology—as well as from Muslim theology; from theorists of the Third World—especially Franz Fanon—as well as from the teachings of the early Shi’i martyrs. In fact, Shari’ati devoted his life to the task of synthesizing modern socialism with traditional Shi’ism, and adapting the revolutionary theories of Marx, Fanon and other great non-Iranian thinkers to his contemporary Iranian environment.

**ABRAHAMIAN, 1982**

As I said earlier, one of the main elements of his ideology was played out in the story of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn.

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5 It should be noted that many works have been published on Shari’ati’s political role, sociological perspective and discourse. Yet there is a dearth of studies on the origin of traditional history used by him.
5 Revisiting the Source

5.1 Pre- and Post-Safavid Accounts of Husayn’s Death

As mentioned above, the story of Karbala and the death of Husayn played an important role in the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The sources applied by the Iranians who made use of the story of Karbala, including Shari’ati himself, to express their emotions and passions come mainly from traditional religious literature, either in Arabic or Persian. Such texts were often revised and widely promoted during the rule of the Safavids from the early 16th until the early 18th century. The Safavids selected Shi’ism as the official state religion, a policy which is currently in place in Iran.

In comparison to previous rulers, their policy was to revive and preserve Shi’ia teaching through politics, literature, arts and science. It is reported that “the state employed religious propagandists (tabarra’iyan), whose task was to vilify Sunnis” (Matthee, 2008). They also promoted various popular notions among Shi’ia, such as intercession (shifa’a) and visiting shrines (ziyara). It is reported that Shah Ismail I (1487–1524) was among the first Safavid rulers to visit the shrine of Husayn in Karbala during his military campaigns (Izadi, 2012). Later on, one of the main literary works frequently reproduced and expanded by the Safavids was the story of Karbala.

All versions of the Karbala story produced during this period revolve around the contrast between the justice of Muhammad’s family and the injustice of the Umayyad dynasty, highlighting the contrast between mazlum and zalim. Although Shari’ati frequently disagreed with the Safvids version of Shi’ism as a result of the way in which they promoted religious figures and thinkers as politicians and statesmen, he was impressed by the works produced or revised during their reign.

In the popular sources about the Karbala that Shari’ati and his followers made use of, the main figures are defined by their primary role: Husayn as an oppressed (mazlum) Imam, ‘Abbas (Husayn’s half-brother) as a sacrificial

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6 It is said that Muhammad and his household are “intercessor on behalf of the members” of their community on the day of judgment. For more see: Andrew Rippin, Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. 2nd edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 53.
warrior, and Zaynab (their sister) as a courageous lady. In contrast, Yazid, his father Mu'awiya and his followers are cruel and violent.

Shari'ati does not admire Mu'awiya at all and presents a cruel and hypocritical image of him (Shari'ati, 1970: 40).

For Shari'ati, it is primarily Husayn and his family, the ones around whom the story revolves, who are the symbols of freedom, justice, and the struggle (Shari'ati, 1970: 28). Husayn is at the centre in the story, and he has taken his authenticity and leadership from ‘Ali, Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, Noah, Abraham and Adam. From Shari'ati's perspective, Husayn was the true successor and he transferred ‘Ali's biological and spiritual gene to the next generation. Shari'ati believed that Muslims in his day should at least be the follower of Husayn's sister Zaynab, who, according to these stories, strongly opposed Yazid and his army.

Thus, for Shari'ati, learning more about Husayn means learning more about Shi'i politics and ideology, and about the continuity of leadership.

6 Shari'ati and Censored Materials

Nonetheless, one may wonder what would have happened if Shari'ati and his fellow revolutionaries had examined or read other versions of the story. The story, On the Killing of Hasan and Husayn, was originally part of a larger volume called Durr al-Majalis or The Jewel of the Remembrance Sessions (henceforth, JRS) which was written by the 7th century AH Persian mystic, Sayf al-Din Zafar Naw-bahari Bukhari (Daneshgar, 2018).

It includes a chapter on “Karbala,” though its main part starts after the death of Husayn. In this story, as well as Husayn, there is another important figure: an obscure half-brother of Husayn named Muhammad Hanafiyya (died circa 700). Upon the death of Husayn, it is he who becomes the focal point of the story. This text, which is sometimes called the Story of Muhammad Hanafiyya, presents a lion-hearted and chivalric image of him, and presents him as the Imam (leader) of his age as well as a messiah. It has been popular among South Asians and Malay-Indonesians since the fourteenth century. Historical sources suggest that it had been translated into Malay and that it was recited by Malay warriors during battles (Brown, 1970). It was also one of the best-selling books in Indonesia in the nineteenth century (Wieringa, 1996), and was the fundamental text on the life of Husayn among Malay-Indonesian readers. The character of Muhammad Hanafiyya is clearly described in the Malay-Indonesian story of Husayn's death. According to this work, upon the death of Husayn in Karbala, it was Muhammad Hanafiyya who was asked by Husayn's family for
assistance and revenge. He will one day reappear, based on some Shi‘a minorities’ beliefs, and invite his allies from different corners of Asia to join him in the fight with Yazid.

Traces of stories dedicated to him can be found in various parts of Western Asia, particularly in the Middle East, in places such as Kharg Island, in Bushehr province or Guilan of Iran, where a tomb ascribed to him (Buq‘a-yi Mir Muhammad-i Hanafiyyah and Imamzada-yi Muhammad-i Hanafiyyah, respectively) is located. Nonetheless, according to my own observations, there appear to be very few Iranians who know about this tomb. The messianic facet of Muhammad Hanafiyya has been seen for many years in the Bamyan valley in northern Afghanistan, where an area is dedicated to the “dragon-slayer” Hazrat-i ‘Ali (Calmard, 1998). Local people believe that Emir (Shahzada) Hanifa, the son of ‘Ali, is in an underground passageway, waiting to reappear and fight for peace, along with his horse and his bien-aimée wife, Bibi Hanifa (Calmard, 1998) Indeed, the legends of this region have Muhammad Hanifa as al-Mahdi al-muntazar (“The Awaited Mahdi”), which is an important principle of Twelver Shi‘ism.

Given the fact that the Safavids established the Twelver Shi‘i school of Islam as the religion of their empire, storytellers tended to, or perhaps had to, produce more works on the subject that marginalized the messianic and leadership aspects of the story of Muhammad Hanafiyya. Thus, on the basis of earlier stories about him, they produced new, or reworked older, “epico-religious” texts such as the Junayd-namah (“The story of Junayd”), Mukhtar-nama (“The story of Mukhtar”), among others, in which Muhammad Hanafiyya is merely a warrior and Zayn al-‘Abidin (the son of Husayn) is, instead, the central figure of the story, introduced as the only Imam of his age (Calmard, 1998), the one who, according to Safavids, can transfer the blood of ‘Ali and Fatima to the next Shi‘i Imam.

More importantly, in the story of Muhammad Hanafiyya, read by Central Asians and particularly by Malay-Indonesians, there is not one reference to the name or role of ‘Abbas, and Zaynab is very marginal.

According to Naw-bahari, the author of Muhammad Hanafiyya’s story, and in contrast to post-Safavid literature, Yazid’s father, Mu‘awiya, was a good person, and only had Yazid by accident. The story goes that Mu‘awiya was poisoned by a scorpion and, to cure himself, he was advised by his physicians to have sex with a woman, an event that ultimately led to the birth of Yazid.

Unlike the contemporary viewpoint, in this story, the evil of earlier Umayyad rulers is not mentioned, and it does not show the patrimonial aspect of mischief and crime. Naw-bahari replaces Husayn and his son with Muhammad Hanafiyya who, for the author, is a messiah and will not die.
Certainly, in all stories and Islamic traditions it is Husayn who is the oppressed Imam, although this particular story does not revolve around the concept of oppression but of revenge. The reader of this story, particularly in Indonesia, will inevitably conclude that the oppression of Muhammad's family, especially Husayn and Zaynab, is not viable and should not be continued, and thus it is replaced with the revenge of Husayn's brother by Muhammad Hanafiyya.

While, in all stories, Husayn is a virtuous servant of God, a martyr, and an oppressed member of Muhammad's family, the immortal Imam, the one who will not die, in JRS it is Muhammad Hanafiyya, whose role will become more important than Husayn and his son, Zayn al-'Abidin.

According to the author of JRS, the leadership (imama) is not inherited by future generations. Simply speaking, no-one is the heir of Husayn, Zaynab and Zayn al-'Abidin and Muhammad Hanafiyya. More importantly, statements or notions regarding freedom, justice and anti-corruption sometimes ascribed to Husayn are not found in this manuscript. If so, one may wonder whether a reader of this story would view Shi'ism as a religion of protest, revolution, revenge, and so forth. Unlike popular versions of the Karbala story, which are full of mourning, JRS's main theme is not tragedy but victory and a happy ending.

It may be wondered, if Shari'ati and his advocates had seen the Story of Muhammad Hanafiyya, how they would describe the notions of the revolutionary Shi'a, injustice, and corruption. If he had examined this story, would he still have said “[va amma tu ey Husayn!]...Iman-e ma, millat-e ma, tarikh-e jarday-e ma, kalbud-e zaman-e ma bi khun-e tu muhtaj ast (and you O Husayn ... our faith, our people, the history of our tomorrow, the body of our time requires your blood)” (Shari'ati, 2017) For Shari'ati, who was influenced by post-Safavid versions of Husayn's death story, Muslims should revolt against the successors of Yazid and act like Husayn and his sister Zaynab:

those who left (were martyred) did a Husayni job; those who remained, they must do something Zaynabi; otherwise, they are Yazidi (anha ki raftand, kari Husayni kardand; va anha ki mandand, bayad kari Zaynabi; va-gar-na Yazidi-and). Shari'ati (2017),

What seems to have happened is that historical traditions and previous intellectuals' opinions were combined and domesticated by Shari'ati. His concerns regarding the continuity of Shi'i heritage (revolution) and leadership did not allow him to be critical of his own history, which one would expect of a well-educated scholar and intellectual. Of course, it is not to be expected that he
would include every tradition in his works, but he should at least have clarified the method and sources he used in order to stimulate the powerless people to revolt against the Shah. Did he realize that he was reading materials censored by the Safavids and did he question how such censored materials could lead to different conclusions? Did he realize the story of Muhammad Hanafiyya, which had been popular among various Muslims (Persians, Central- and South East Asians) for centuries, was no longer published in the Muslim world? It seems he did not critique the historical accounts before presenting his views.

6.1 Final Note
Domestication is both a valuable and a dangerous project as it transfers ideas to other corners of the world by means of translation.\(^7\) It can simultaneously awaken a group of people and restrict their views of the past. Muslims in Iraq and Indonesia are currently translating the works of Shari’ati dealing with revolution, justice and oppression (Fig. 1). It may be expected that the (re-)publication of his works in various countries that are under the influence of revolutionary Shi’ism, such as Syria, where Shari’ati’s and Zaynab’s tombs are located, will see a renewed engagement with his works.

One may wonder what the response of Indonesian readers of Shari’ati will be as his work does not reflect their own previous cultural understandings of

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**FIG. 1** An Indonesian translation of Shari’ati’s work on Husayn’s martyrdom and uprising.
Muhammad Hanafiyya, who has been at the centre of positive and happy folk stories read by Indonesians for centuries. A possible answer could be that they will likely become interested in the sad, tragic, anti-Western and revolutionary version of Shi’ism that has already penetrated the Middle East. Ultimately, intellectuals view history in a certain way – often for their own ends – and readers follow them in doing so.

As discussed above, contextualism and deconstruction of the past can be useful tools for checking the reliability of claims made by scholars or intellectuals. In order to understand the notion of revolutionary or non-revolutionary Shi’ism, it is appropriate for readers, intellectuals and academics to first deconstruct (not reconstruct) what Shari'ati and his co-thinkers said and then consider what might happen if their ideas were based on all available sources. To put it more normatively: we need to be more deconstructive before making history for the next generation. The selective nature of intellectuals’ use of history is the main obstacle preventing the powerless from achieving justice and understanding; it prevents them from being critical of their own traditions and ancestors.

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