

"Imagology" of Esfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square from the Perspective of Safavid Travel literatures

Abstract

As one of the most popular areas of research in contemporary comparative studies in works of art and literature, imagology aims to explore the image of one's own culture as presented in the literature of another and vis-e-versa. Such study posits that exoticism forms the foundation for portraying other nations' image which is rooted in the clichés and stereotypes written on the destination society.

Since antiquity, Iran has always attracted the attention of oriental and occidental travelers. Concurrently with the developments in world and regional interactions, Iran-EU connections entered a new era and obtained a new form. Numerous travelers from different backgrounds and with different intentions, made their journey to Iran from the European countries and each of them left his own set of reports, notes and travel literatures on his experiences of the journey made.

The narration of these travel literatures could be considered as a way of expressing one's ideas and thoughts wherein the distinction between eastern and western identity, nature and understanding had been portrayed. These travel literatures hold a very important position because they not only portray the characteristics of the destination society but also contribute to better understanding of the formation of the society of origin. Therefore, the way modern societies have been established and the characteristics of western societies, such as economic booms, the powerful, orderly political system and other features could be related to cultural and economic interactions with other countries.

Safavids' reign was the golden era of the promotion of arts and culture in Iran. On the other hand, their rule marks the beginning of a new chapter in Iran-EU relations and so, many well-known European travelers made their journey to Iran, whether as officials or ambassadors of the European countries, to become acquainted with the country and its rich arts and cultural traditions. They used to spend most of their time in the court in Esfahan which was the royal capital of the Safavids' Kings and record their personal reflections.

That is the reason why most of the travel literatures on Iran have been written during this period and such records are brimming with accounts of Esfahan city as well as the manifestations of arts and culture therein. Such manifestations, which have always been the center of attention of travelers of Safavid era, include the Naqsh-e Jahan Square with its four main architectural landmarks which are Ali Qapu Palace, Imam Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and Qeysariyeh Bazaar.

Hence, travel literatures of the era, considered as literary texts, represent the western viewpoint regarding the Iranian lifestyle, arts and culture and thus, they constitute a proper platform for studying the prevailing stereotype views towards Iranian arts and culture.

Employing a historical-analytical approach with the data collected through desk study of library sources, this research article intends to conduct an imagology study of Esfahan's art from the perspective of travel memoirists such as Tavernier, Chardin, Kaempfer who have mainly focused on the art traditions manifested in Naqsh-e Jahan's architectural landmarks.

Since authors are not single, independent creatures but are part of the history of the society that has formed their identity; re-studying the images created by the western travel memoirist of Esfahan's art could contribute to recognizing their colonialist backgrounds as well as the chronology of the culture of orient vs. occident.

The imagology studies take this assumption that although the understandings and experiences the travel memoirists have been obtained through their direct contacts with the destination culture, yet their accounts are profoundly affected by images and texts already portrayed and written on the oriental culture by the westerners.

In fact, although in most travelogues, the nature of the narrator's relation with 'others' is direct conversation he has made during his real trip, still his accounts are overshadowed by the stereotype, cliché and hegemonic perspectives which are the characteristics of the western literature.

Through the study of the travel literature written during the Safavids' rule by those western travelers who had journeyed to Iran for whether trade purposes or just for the sake of travel, we find out that in their travel records, even where they are

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admiring the Iranian arts and culture, they are comparing them with their western examples as if the west has been the cradle of art and creativity. On the other hand, the prevailing stereotype views regarding the residents of the orient, including jealousy, hatred and etc. is considered the origin of the Iranian art.

Keywords: Safavid Travel literature, stereotype, imagology, exoticism, Naqsh-e Jahan Square.

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