

The Question of Identity in the Thought of Daryush Shayegan

Ali REFICE

Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila

laxiologie26@gmail.com

Abstract:

Daryush Shayegan perceives a clear divergence and contrast between Eastern and Western societies. He believes there is an ontological difference between Eastern societies (such as the Islamic world, Buddhism, and Hinduism) and the West. According to Shayegan, the essence of philosophy and science in Eastern civilizations is fundamentally different from that of the West. While Western philosophy is based on rational thinking, Eastern philosophy is rooted in intuition and faith. Shayegan points out that identity-based movements emerged as a reaction to Westernization, secularization, and the cultural and colonial presence of European modernity in the Islamic world. Tracing the history of the identity crisis reveals that this concept only evolved into a philosophical current and ideological drive after various Western attempts to dominate and erase diverse cultures, aiming to incorporate all peoples into a single global identity. The tools used included secularism and globalization. For Shayegan, identity is as diverse as the cultures and intellectual orientations that shape it. The contemporary human is on a constant quest to explore these scattered, diverse identities. Thus, no homogeneous civilization exists in the world. Despite the numerous cultural differences and contrasts, we are witnessing the emergence of a major global civilization marked by technological excess and a loss or absence of meaning.

Keywords: Identity, Modernity, Westernization, Secularism, Globalization.

La question de l'identité dans la pensée de Daryush Shayegan

Résumé :

Daryush Shayegan perçoit une divergence et un contraste évidents entre les sociétés orientales et occidentales. Il pense qu'il existe une différence ontologique entre les sociétés orientales (telles que le monde islamique, le bouddhisme et l'hindouisme) et l'Occident. Selon Shayegan, l'essence de la philosophie et de la science dans les civilisations orientales est fondamentalement différente de celle de l'Occident. Alors que la philosophie occidentale est basée sur la pensée rationnelle, la philosophie orientale est ancrée dans l'intuition et la foi. Shayegan souligne que les mouvements identitaires sont apparus en réaction à l'occidentalisation, à la sécularisation et à la présence culturelle et coloniale de la modernité européenne dans le monde islamique. L'histoire de la crise d'identité révèle que ce concept n'est devenu un courant philosophique et un moteur idéologique qu'après diverses tentatives occidentales de dominer et d'effacer les diverses cultures, dans le but d'incorporer tous les peuples dans une identité mondiale unique. Les outils utilisés étaient notamment la laïcité et la mondialisation. Pour Shayegan, l'identité est aussi diverse que les cultures et les orientations intellectuelles qui la façonnent. L'homme contemporain est en quête constante d'exploration de ces identités éparses et diverses. Ainsi, il n'existe pas de civilisation homogène dans le monde. Malgré les nombreuses différences et contrastes culturels, nous assistons à l'émergence d'une grande civilisation mondiale marquée par l'excès technologique et la perte ou l'absence de sens.

Mots-clés : *Identité, Modernité, Occidentalisation, Laïcité, Mondialisation.*

Introduction

In truth, the concept of identity is one of the issues that has sparked much debate and controversy among Arab intellectual elites. This is due, on one hand, to the transformations the world has undergone and the shifting balance of power across political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual levels. On the other hand, it is also the result of the interpretations and readings produced by Arab and Islamic thought, as well as the ongoing debates among Arab and Muslim thinkers concerning this concept. The topic of identity cannot be addressed or studied outside the dialectic of East and West, especially in light of the influences carried by Western civilization—most notably, technological and technical advancement and its impact on many concepts, particularly identity. Among the most prominent contemporary thinkers who have engaged deeply with the concept of identity is the Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan, especially through his books "*Identity with Forty Faces*" and "*The Illusions of Identity*." This raises important questions: Why did Daryush Shayegan describe identity as having forty faces? And why did he consider it merely an illusion?

1. The Concept of Identity (Linguistically and Terminologically)

1.1 Linguistically:

According to *Lisān al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr, the word **hawīyya** (identity) is derived from the verb in the form *hawā – yahwī – hawayan*, which signifies "to fall from above to below." The verb *inhawā* also means "to fall downward," while *ahwāhu* means "he caused it to fall." It is said *ahwaytuhu* when one throws something down from above. In the

Qur'anic verse "*and He destroyed the overturned cities*" (referring to the towns of the people of Lot), the verb *ahwā* means "He caused them to fall," i.e., they were brought down and collapsed. The phrase *hawā al-sahm* (the arrow fell) means it dropped from a height to the ground. The term *hawiyya* also refers to a deep well with a concealed opening, often covered with soil, which deceives those who walk over it and leads to their fall and destruction. Similarly, *al-huwat* refers to a deep pit with a remote bottom. (Manzur, pp. 4727- 2729)

According to Jamil Saliba's *Philosophical Dictionary*, the term *identity* (*al-huwiyya*) is not originally Arabic. Rather, it was adopted by some translators who derived the term from the particle "*huwa*" (he), which in Arabic signifies the essential link between the subject and the predicate, as in the phrase: "*Zayd is a human being*" (*Zayd huwa insān*). (Jamil, 1982, p. 529)

Similarly, in Lalande's *Philosophical Encyclopedia*, *identity* (*identité*) is defined as the mark of what is identical, or the characteristic of an individual or entity that, from this perspective, allows it to be likened to another individual said to be identical—or to be *the same self* across the various stages of its existence.

1.2. Terminologically:

According to Alex Mucchielli, the concept of identity is one of the central notions that consistently appears across various scientific disciplines, particularly in the social sciences. It is, therefore, one of the most deeply embedded concepts in our cultural and social daily life, and among the most widespread and frequently used. For Mucchielli, identity is not a fixed entity that is given once and for all. Rather, it is a reality that is born and develops, forms and transforms, ages, and undergoes existential crises and aliena-

tion. The concept of identity refers to "a set of criteria by which an individual is known and recognized – criteria that also extend to the identity of a group, society, or culture." (Alex, 1993, p. 7)

According to Hassan Hanafi, identity is specific to the human being and society, to the individual and the collective. It is a purely human subject. The human being is the one who experiences internal division, who senses disparity or transcendence, or a split between what is and what ought to be – between reality and ideal, between present and past, between present and future. It is the human being who feels estrangement, and in whom identity may turn into alienation. Only the human being can exist in a state different from what he currently is. Identity, therefore, is "an expression of freedom – of subjective freedom. Identity is a possibility that may or may not exist. If it exists, it is self-realization; if it is absent, it is alienation." (Hassan, 2012, pp. 11-12)

Hassan Hanafi believes that although identity is a metaphysical subject, it is also a psychological issue and an emotional experience. A person may either be in harmony with themselves or deviate from their own essence towards something else. The individual is divided into two parts: identity and otherness. One feels alienated when identity leans toward or shifts into otherness. *Alienation* is a philosophical term, while *deviation* is a psychological one. Identity, according to Hanafi, means: "for a person to be themselves, in alignment with their own essence, while alienation occurs when one is no longer oneself – split into a remaining identity and an otherness that pulls at it." (Hassan, 2012, pp. 11-12)

Richard Jenkins speaks of *social identity*, which refers to how we perceive who we are and who others are, as well as how others perceive themselves and others. In his view,

identity is:
“An integral part of social life, formed only through distinguishing between the identities of various groups, which can be associated with other people. Understanding different identities gives us a clue about the type of individual we are dealing with, and thus how to relate to them. Our understanding of identities may be limited or incorrect, but it remains a vital part of social life, as it enables interaction.” (Harlemps & Holborn, 2010, pp. 93-94)

Zygmunt Bauman sought to adopt a postmodern perspective on identity, viewing it as:
“Not only fragmented, but also no longer grounded in any fixed foundation. Identity has simply become a matter of choice – one that does not necessarily have to be coherent or consistent. Individuals can change their identities whenever they wish.” (Harlemps & Holborn, 2010, p. 100)

2. The Question of Identity from the Perspective of Daryush Shayegan

2.1 Who is Daryush Shayegan?

Daryush Shayegan was born on January 24, 1935, in Tehran. His father was an Azerbaijani (Turkish-Iranian) Shiite merchant, and his mother was a Sunni descendant of Georgian princes and sultans, with a Russian-Caucasian cultural background. Her family had suffered greatly under the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution – some were executed, others imprisoned, and the rest fled to Turkey. Shayegan grew up in a household that included not only his parents and sister but also his aunt and her husband. As a child, he thus found himself in the embrace of “two mothers and two fathers.” The linguistic environment in his home was diverse: family members spoke several languages. His mother and aunt spoke Georgian and Russian. His father and moth-

er communicated in two different Turkish dialects—his mother spoke Ottoman Turkish to his father, who responded in Azerbaijani Turkish. His father spoke Persian with him. Shayegan attended the *Saint Louis* School of the French Fathers in Tehran, which welcomed students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews. His closest friends were Armenians. It was at this school that he first encountered Western music through his Polish teacher. Shayegan recalls his Armenian-English teacher, the family's Assyrian driver, and their Zoroastrian doctor. He learned French at an early age and began reading French books alongside Persian ones, which was the other language commonly used at his school alongside Persian. (Daryush, 2016, pp. 5-6)

He went to Britain in 1949 at the age of fifteen and continued his studies at *Paddington College* in London. After four years, he obtained his high school diploma. In 1954, at his family's request, he moved to Geneva to study medicine. However, his true interests lay far from the medical field and the path his parents had envisioned for him—he was drawn to literature, the arts, and philosophy. He found that enrolling in the Faculty of Political Science offered a middle ground. In Geneva, new horizons opened up for him when he met the French philosopher and psychologist Jean Piaget. He also discovered the work of Carl Gustav Jung through a colleague who was one of Piaget's students and attended the conferences where Jung lectured. Around the same time, he joined Jean Herbert's classes on Indian mythology. During this period, Shayegan became interested in *Perennial Philosophy* (or *Perennial Wisdom*), and the works of René Guénon became a source of inspiration in his exploration of it. Two years before graduating from the University of Geneva,

Shayegan married his classmate Farideh Zandieh, who was studying aesthetics alongside him. After spending six years in Geneva, Shayegan returned to Iran and began teaching Sanskrit at the University of Tehran. Sanskrit opened the door for him to delve into the vast and rich field of Indian religions and philosophies. In 1961, Shayegan met the French Orientalist Henry Corbin for the first time through his colleague Seyyed Hossein Nasr, after joining what he called the circle of the *People of Hermeneutics*.

Shayegan left Iran again in 1965 and enrolled at the Sorbonne University, where, under the guidance and supervision of Henry Corbin, he continued his studies on Hinduism and Sufism. He earned both a master's and a doctorate degree from the Sorbonne in Indian studies and comparative philosophy, with a dissertation titled "*The Relationship Between Hinduism and Sufism According to the Narrative of 'Majma' al-Bahrayn' by Dara Shukoh.*" Upon returning to Iran, he resumed teaching at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the University of Tehran, responding to an invitation from his colleague Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who was then the dean of the faculty. He became an assistant professor of mythology, Indian studies, and comparative philosophy – first in the Department of Philosophy, then in the Department of General and Ancient Languages. His affiliation with the University of Tehran lasted from 1962 until 1980. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, he withdrew from the university and returned to France, where he spent a period managing the Persian division at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. (Daryush, 2016, p. 10)

The Iranian thinker Daryush Shayegan passed away in Tehran on March 23, 2018, at the age of 83. Daryush Shayegan left behind numerous intellectual works and articles in various languages. Among his most prominent works are:

Religions and Philosophical Schools of India, a translation of the Upanishads from Sanskrit into Persian, The Golden Idols and Eternal Memory, Asia versus the West, The Relationship Between Hinduism and Sufism, What is a Religious Revolution? Traditional Civilizations Confronting Modernity, The Amputated Self: The Western Obsession in Our Societies, Identity and Existence: Enlightenment Rationalism and Religious Heritage, An Identity with Forty Faces, and The Illusions of Identity.

3. The Concept of Identity According to Daryush Shayegan

Shayegan's intellectual project took shape over the course of his career, which can be divided into three main phases:

3.1. The First Phase:

In this phase, he advocated a central idea: the existence of a fundamental difference and divergence between Eastern societies and the West. He also showed a strong inclination toward venerating Eastern civilizations and their spiritual heritage. This perspective is evident in his two books: *The Idols of the Mind and the Eternal Memory* (1976), and *Asia versus the West* (1977). Shayegan believed in "an ontological divergence between Eastern societies (the Islamic world, Buddhism, Hinduism) and the West," asserting that "the essence of philosophy and science in Eastern civilizations is completely different from its Western counterpart. While Western philosophy is based on rational thinking, Eastern philosophy is grounded in revelation and faith." (Daryush, 2016, p. 16)

In his book *The Idols of the Mind and the Eternal Memory*, Shayegan employed Francis Bacon's theory of the "Idols of the Mind," also known as the illusions of the intellect, which include: the idols of the tribe, the cave, the marketplace, and

the theater—but in an inverted way. Bacon, in his book *Novum Organum*, called for a revolution against these idols—that is, against memory. However, Shayegan considers these idols as a kind of trust in Eastern thought, carrying a hidden message and signifying the national memory. The East cannot preserve this authenticity unless it remains connected to that eternal memory and keeps its keys. Shayegan said: “What is astonishing is that modern thinking begins with a struggle against memory in humans. When Francis Bacon attacked and condemned the idols of the mind under the banner of empirical knowledge, he actually expressed a tendency that emerged in the 13th century... Bacon’s idols have their equivalents in the heritage understood as Islamic trust—that is, the eternal memory of the treasures inherited by humans from their ancestors, to which they remain loyal as to a sacred covenant.” (Daryush, 2007, p. 25)

This is a call to preserve the repository of mythical images that constitute the abundant perennial wisdom. Severing ties with it leads us to alienation, which throws its bearer into the abyss of nihilism. Shayegan said: “What Bacon calls the idols of the mind and condemns, in Eastern thought is a trust that remains preserved in the national memory. The great Eastern thinkers try to explore the foundation of thought amid their relationship with this trust and in recalling the hidden message within it. This is because severing the source of the national memory represents a severance from the roots, and consequently alienation that throws its bearer into the abyss of nihilism. This is an experience that Western thought has lived through to its utmost degree.” (Daryush, 2007, p. 32)

In his book *Asia versus the West*, Shayegan collected some of his studies on the most important social and cultural transformations experienced by the ancient Asian societies

and how they confront the West. In this book, he spoke about the declining, regressive course of Western civilization until it reached a degraded and low level which he calls “nihilism.” This nihilism was embodied in: “the descent from the highest to the lowest, from the cosmic visionary perspective to the cosmic technical perspective, from the hereafter and resurrection to the glorification of history. Does this mean development and progress, or decline? There is no doubt that the stance is renewed in light of our position on the history and fate of humanity. We have delved for many years into the essence of Western thought, which represents, in terms of vitality, diversity, richness, and capacity for attraction, an exceptional and unique phenomenon on the globe. This led us to believe that the trajectory of Western thought was toward the gradual destruction of a set of beliefs that formed the spiritual heritage of Asian civilizations.”

3.2. The Second Stage:

Shayegan discovers that the “eternal memory” of Eastern civilizations was nothing but a reflection of stagnation, inability to renew and rejuvenate, and the fading of vitality in these civilizations since the 17th century. This is the century in which the West and its rational modernity ascended to the pinnacle of human civilizations. This realization led Shayegan to focus his study on the inevitable confrontation between this modernity – which had become the object of veneration – and the traditional Eastern civilizations. One of the most prominent books expressing Shayegan’s thought during this stage is *What is the Religious Revolution? Traditional Civilizations Facing Modernity*, which was published after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The book addresses the condition

of the civilizations that the author calls “traditional civilizations,” specifically referring to Islamic, Indian, and Chinese civilizations, with a clear focus on Islamic civilization. These civilizations are undergoing a transitional phase: they neither remained loyal to their vast spiritual heritage nor managed to properly embody the values of Western modernity that began with the emergence of the scientific and technical era in the 16th century. They exist between what will never return and what has not yet happened. They are in a stage of fragmentation, manifested in the emergence of hybrid thought that is neither purely traditional nor genuinely modern, neither spiritual nor material. The author calls this thought “ideology,” meaning a false consciousness that settles for half-truths, mixes cultural contexts, and combines incompatible terms and concepts. He exemplifies this with the “Iranian Revolution” as a model of so-called religious revolutions. He says: “The double illusion that characterizes it manifests on the one hand as a negative and unconscious form of Occidentalization (Westernization), and on the other hand as an increasing (and at the same time unconscious) alienation. These two forms of unconsciousness reflecting this double illusion (which sees the decline of values as reform and defects as gains) obscure the abyss upon which the fragility of these dreams rests, where desires are mistaken for realities.” (Shayegan, 2004, p. 159)

3.3. The Third Stage:

In this stage, Dariush Shayegan sees identity tendencies as a reaction to processes of Westernization, secularization, and the cultural and colonial presence of European modernity in the Islamic world. Returning to the history of the identity issue, it becomes clear that this concept did not become a current, tendency, or philosophical will until after various

Western attempts to dominate, erase, and assimilate different cultures into a single global identity. The tools used were varied, such as secularism and globalization. According to Shayegan, identity is diverse, as diverse as cultures and intellectual trends, especially in this era, which is characterized by a variety of ideas. The contemporary human being is on a continuous journey of exploration amid these diverse, scattered identities here and there. Thus, no civilization in the world is homogeneous. Despite the many cultural differences and distinctions, we witness the emergence of a major global civilization, characterized by an excess of technology and an emptiness or loss of meaning, as if today's world "has no other goal but to return backward." Shayegan criticized the concept of identity as pure, authentic, eternal, monotonous, stable, simple, one-dimensional, and closed. He worked to deconstruct, refute, and undermine it, then formulated a new concept of identity derived from our age and its shattered ontology, the coexistence of diverse cultures, and how the world in this era has become a specter, which he called the "identity in forty pieces." This identity is composite, woven from a network of fine connections, like a garment stitched from forty pieces of fabric in a thousand colors. The cultural plurality, the mixing of nationalities, the blending of ideas, and continuous hybridity are all phenomena that prepare us for a composite identity. The pure identity no longer exists objectively due to the collapse of the worlds that established it. (Shayegan, 2004, pp. 27-29)

The concept of identity is one of the fundamental ideas that deeply occupied Shayegan's thought and which he especially discussed in his two books: *Illusions of Identity* and *Identity in Forty Faces*. He described identity as a **rhizome** (Rhizome), named after the rhizome plant, which is charac-

terized by roots spreading horizontally underground and continuously emerging above the surface, making it difficult to eradicate. The rhizome is decentralized and non-hierarchical; it has no beginning or end, and any small part of it can grow and renew continuously.

The rhizome is inherently multiple, and its multiplicity is free from all constraints of unity and centralization. A system based on multiple pieces represents a rhizome, which differs from roots and their branches. The rhizome is: “a factor of connection and generation, capable of creating an infinite network, where every point can connect with any other point. Even if the rhizome is broken or torn, it can resume life and grow in other directions. Although it is made up of layers and needs a place, it can detach from the ground and move on it, forming new networks of connection. The rhizome can link very different and even heterogeneous systems. The rhizome does not consist of separate units, but a collection of different directions; that is, it has no beginning or end and is always on the move, its essence constantly changing.” (Habtish, 2022)

4. Illusions of Identity in Daryush Shayegan’s Thought

Shayegan believes that identity is nothing but an illusion. All the values accumulated over thousands of years and all the efforts made to cultivate the spirit have suddenly become mere illusions. The truth, he argues, is nothing but the will of these forces inscribed on the face of the technological human.

Identity in today’s world is open to all kinds of hybridization, mixing, division, fragmentation, integration, creation, and expression, with new meanings emerging that reveal the world’s illusory nature. Shayegan pointed out that: “The human suffering from an identity crisis today is because

identity is no longer a fixed, absolute, and orderly set of values. He found that pure, rigid identity – such as that derived from a closed people or religion – can only be established by negating others. Identities are intertwined, coexisting, and complementary. Within us lie all the epics of generations – epics and myths present deep within us with all their rituals, images, and collective dreams. In the modern era, we dwell at the crossroads of interpretation, extending our arms in all directions. We are a map stretching from our cognitive past to our future crowded with changes.” (Habtish, 2022)

Daryush Shayegan’s View of Identity in Traditional Civilizations

Shayegan bases his analysis of the identity issue on the ancient Eastern civilizations. He imagines that the clash that occurred between Eastern civilizations is due to the thought of modernity and Western civilization. These civilizations tried to preserve the original components of their culture and to remain within their traditional civilizational framework. However, this attempt ultimately failed, as they were influenced by modernity at the same time they were fighting and resisting it. He says: “If conflict is conceivable in post-industrial countries spread throughout the globe, it not only creates shockwaves between traditional civilizations in the Third World and modernity, but also between those civilizations and the various waves of this civilization. Thus, we live under multiple cultures and multiple influences simultaneously – not like aquatic beings in separate and distant seas, but as forces that affect us concurrently.” (Daryush, 1993, p. 121)

What confirms this is the religious reform movements that speak of religion as a valid element in every time and place, and that it does not contradict science and modern

values such as democracy and human rights. In reality, these movements **secularize** religion and separate it from its traditional spiritual content. In other words, when we say that religion does not conflict with science or democracy, this means religion has become legitimized through its harmony with universal civilization rather than through faith. Shayegan calls this process “unconscious secularization” and “unconscious occidentalization.” (Daryush, 1993)

Conclusion

Through our study of the issue of identity in the thought of Daryush Shayegan, we have attempted to draw a number of conclusions, most notably:

First: At the beginning of formulating his intellectual project, Daryush Shayegan defended a fundamental idea, which is the existence of difference and divergence between Eastern and Western societies, in addition to his greater tendency to revere Eastern civilizations and their spiritual heritage.

Second: According to Daryush Shayegan, the eternal memory of Eastern civilizations is nothing but a reflection of a state of stagnation, inability to renew and regenerate, and the fading of vitality in these civilizations since the seventeenth century – the century that witnessed the rise of the West and its rational modernity to the peak of human civilizations.

Third: According to Daryush Shayegan, identity tendencies emerged as a reaction to the processes of occidentalization, secularization, and the cultural and colonial presence of European modernity in the Islamic present.

Fourth: The pure, singular identity – whether Western or Eastern – according to Daryush Shayegan, is nothing but a

great illusion. This illusion is based on a barren reduction of the vast human diversities into a false dichotomy: (us and the other).

Fifth: Our future, according to Daryush Shayegan, depends on our ability to integrate traditional Eastern civilizations with Western civilization, on human integration, true communication between civilizations, and dialogue among cultures.

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