



## HAJJI BABA OF ISPAHAN

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**HAJJI BABA OF ISPAHAN**, hero of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* by James Justinian Morier (3 vols., London, 1824), the most popular Oriental novel in the English language and a highly influential stereotype of the so-called “Persian national character” in modern times. Morier (1782-1849), a former diplomat who had resided in Persia for nearly six years (1808-1809 and 1810-1814) at a critical juncture during diplomatic entanglements with European powers, fashioned his novel on his personal observations and direct knowledge about Persia, but with a decidedly hostile and satirical overtone. An Orientalist project *parexcellence*, *Hajji Baba* lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent. Morier’s satire, a bestseller in England and elsewhere, is an entertaining picaresque novel embellished with Orientalist motifs. To English and other Western readers (*Hajji Baba*’s French and German translations both appeared as early as 1824), Morier’s display of the Persian vagaries served as a reassurance of Europe’s cultural and moral superiority and the civilizing mission of the imperial powers. Morier depicted the East, not simply through the condescending eyes of a European traveler, like his own accounts of his visits to Persia (published in 1812 and 1818), but in the form of a biography of a “native,” a composite Persian character whose imagined identity was wrapped in deliberate ambiguities. Morier’s success in adopting the picaresque genre for this purpose was in no small measure due to the style and presentation of *The Thousand and One Nights*, translated into English as the *Arabian Nights*, which was in vogue at the time. Not only the Europeans, but Persians, too,



were impressed by *Hajji Baba* when it first appeared in print in a free Persian translation in 1905. Bizarre though it may seem, the Persian translation of *Hajji Baba* was seen as a critical depiction of Persia's backwardness and moral decadence, a self-image that begged for Westernizing remedies.

*Structure, narrative and style.* A long, and at times tedious novel of eighty chapters, *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* recounts in the first person the extraordinary adventures of its hero, the son of a barber from Isfahan who in the course of his many years of travel and adventure frequently changes guises and professions. He gets into trouble because of his own mischief and he manages to get out of it through his resourcefulness. He experiences sharp vacillations between poverty and wealth and between undeserved power and punishing powerlessness. His life is dictated in the main by a blind and fickle fate, which Hajji Baba seems to be able miraculously to turn each time to his own advantage. His gift is an inherent propensity for detecting opportunities, playing on the need and greed of others, and clinging to an amoral pragmatism for the sake of his own shifting and prurient desires, albeit with a belated sense of guilt toward his victims.

*Plate I.* Hajji Baba utilizes his skills as a barber to please a military chief.

With a generic nickname (*bābā*, lit. father or grandfather, common in the Qajar period), Hajji Baba begins his career in the same profession as his father, but stumbles through at least a dozen other occupations in the course of the novel: a servant to a merchant, a robber accompanying Turkmen raiders, a water-seller and a vendor of tobacco in Mašhad, a crafty assistant to a malicious royal physician, a callous executioner in the service of the court, a hypocritical mullah in Qom, a “promoter of matrimony” in Isfahan, a merchant in Baghdad, a rich Aga (*āqā*) in Istanbul, and finally a secretary to a Persian diplomat abroad. Yet his greatest innate talent is his formidable adaptability. He crosses the boundaries of wealth and power, of privacy and privilege, without making any moral progression or regression, neither accumulating experience and wisdom, nor reflecting on his past adventures. He is quick to display his chameleon-like ability to exploit institutional loopholes and cultural weaknesses, playing on the vulnerabilities of individuals to improve his own lot. However, his ultimate failure each time is meant to highlight the impasse that Persian culture and society had reached, plagued by vicious circles and vacillations that the author views as inherent to Oriental societies. Despite the swings in fortune, Hajji Baba remains an unchanging personality, revealing the lack of character development in the



novel. The general lack of thematic progression renders the book a collection of discrete chapters, such that the episodes may be read out of sequence.

In the absence of a storyline, Morier resorts to other literary devices to make his account intriguing and to give it a certain cohesion. As though consciously borrowing from *The Thousand and One Nights*, he uses the familiar device of a frame narrative, within which he interjects numerous semi-independent narratives, including those about Dervish Sefer, an itinerant storyteller (chap. 11), Hajji Baba's Kurdish lover, Zeenab (chap. 26), the Armenian couple Yusuf and Mariam (chap. 37), Mulla Nadan (chap. 59), and the Persian ambassador Mirza Firouz (chap. 73). These narratives complement a system of stereotypes throughout the novel designed to include Persians from all walks of life and geographical regions. It includes also characterizations of the Chief Physician, the Chief Executioner, a high-ranking *mojtahed* from Qom, the Persian ambassador, and above all the shah and his court, which are based largely on Morier's own observations of the Persian elite. Similarly, his portrayal of people in the bazaar and on the caravan trail, in the city and in the villages, in the center and in the periphery, at home and at work, at war and in peace, draws a vivid and realistic picture of the lives of ordinary Persians.

Despite Morier's biases, one can still read *Hajji Baba* as an informative source for the early Qajar period, by virtue of its Persian expressions and proverbs, portrayals of historical figures (often under a thin fictionalized disguise), and the general sense of everyday life in the Persian environment that it conveys. What emerges from an informed reading of the novel is a society in transition, one that is barely regaining its vitality and strength while still scarred by the civil wars and havoc of earlier decades. It is a society suffering under misgovernment by an oppressive elite and from the legal abuses of an entrenched clerical establishment. Yet one can detect, even through Morier's sarcastic prism, the workings against the odds of the forces of cultural homogeneity and resilience, especially among ordinary Persians, the marginalized and the oppressed. Their drive is not just for survival but also for material improvement. The fact that Hajji Baba could move from humble origins to a high status itself implies the absence of insurmountable barriers in the hierarchy of Persian society at the time. This upward mobility stood in striking contrast to the English society where Morier, by origin a French foreign-born Jewish convert to Protestantism, had his own direct experience of social barriers. This may be savored as an alternative reading to the acute Orientalistic attitude cultivated by Morier throughout his novel.



The author's stylistic innovations also contributed to its popularity and success. In general, the novel conforms to the simple prose style of popular European novels at the turn of the 19th century. Yet within this form Morier skillfully inserted Persian modes of expression and proverbs in translation (as well as in the original Persian), if at times rather overzealously, giving thus an extra humorous dimension to his English prose. Literal translations of proverbs which at times sound meaningless were intended not only to give an Oriental flavor but an air of authenticity to the work, thereby supporting the author's claim that his role was no more than to translate faithfully a genuine work by a native of Persia. This ploy, accepted as a convention in Oriental novels, was transparent to most if not all the readers. It allowed the author to present himself as an expert, depicting an alien culture and its cache of ideas and practices through an authentic linguistic medium.

*Historical context.* In a fictitious letter that appears as the Introductory Epistle to the novel (Morier, 1824, I, pp. xxi-lxxv) written by a certain Peregrine Persic (an avian allusion to the wandering Hajji Baba himself) to a certain Chaplain of the Swedish ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Morier offers his motives for writing Hajji Baba. He states that he considers the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* as the best "delineation of the Asiatic manner," because it is the "work of their own community." Persuaded by Alain René Lesage's *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (4 vols., Paris, 1715-35) as "an excellent picture of European life," Morier searches for a narrative to give a similar correct idea of "Oriental manners" and "vicissitudes attendant upon the life of an Easterner, of his feeling about his government, of his conduct in domestic life, of his hopes and plans of advancement, of his rivalities and jealousies, in short of everything that is connected both with the operations of the mind and those of the body." The translation of *Gil Blas* into English in 1749 (and an English adaptation of it a year later) enjoyed much popularity in the early 19th century, which no doubt provided an incentive for Morier to produce a similar account, that of Hajji Baba of Ispahan after *Gil Blas de Santillane*. Other Oriental novels, such as Thomas Hope's *Anastasius* (London, 1819), a historical novel set in Egypt that depicted social decay and political corruption using similar condescending satire, may have also influenced Morier (Nāṭeq, pp. 108-10).

Like other contributors to this genre, Morier believed that the "full and detailed history" penned by an Oriental about his own life had the advantage of demonstrating the "manners of the East," as ancient "stereotypes" which



are only worn out by the passage of time. He held the conviction that his diplomatic appointment to Persia, “that imaginary seat of Oriental splendor, that land of poets and roses, that cradle of mankind,” had allowed him to discover at first hand the ancient “stereotypes.” It is as if he was excavating the national stereotypes exactly like an archeologist digging in their ancient ruins. He found, for instance, a close resemblance between “numerous faces seen among the sculptures of Persepolis” and the faces of modern Persians, “more particularly the natives of the province of Fars.”

*Plate II.* Hajji Baba converses with the royal physician, Mirza Ahmak.

In “representing” this Oriental type, Morier aspired to be a “humble translator” for that “imaginary manuscript which some imaginary native of the East must have written.” This deliberate allusion to the origins of *Hajji Baba* is further enhanced by the claim that he himself “in certain measure identified” with “natives” of Persia, a hint perhaps to Morier’s later identification with Hajji Baba in the course of the novel. The introduction in the Epistle of a supposedly real “Mirza Hajji Baba,” a Persian envoy whom he had met in Tukat in eastern Anatolia while on his way back from Persia, is thus a transparent literary ploy designed to enable him to hide his real identity behind the veil of an imaginary character. This Hajji Baba, whom Morier cures from a grave illness, in gratitude readily offers the author a manuscript containing the story of his own life. Morier finds the manuscript amusing, and most of its incidents “grounded upon fact.” He translates it into English intact, adapting it only for the sake of “the taste of the European readers.” His adaptation, he hopes, will help Europeans to appreciate the diversity of cultural values and differences between themselves and “the Mohamedans.” Despite his expressed hope for greater European understanding of Muslim culture, Morier nevertheless insists that “the Mohamedan will continue to hold fast to his bigoted persuasion, until some powerful interposition of Providence shall dispel the moral and intellectual darkness which at present overhangs so large a portion of the Asiatic world.”

The strategy presented in the Epistle and its millennial aspirations for Providential interposition were shaped by Orientalist presuppositions and with a strong Protestant slant sprung from Morier’s Huguenot background. Yet aside from the cultural panorama, the Epistle hardly presents any of the realities behind the creation of *Hajji Baba*. We know, for example, that having failed to secure a diplomatic posting Morier resorted to writing fiction primarily to compensate for his insufficient salary. His career as a diplomat



was apparently thrown into jeopardy, in part because of his unwise conduct as the English chargé d'affaires in Tehran between 1811 and 1816, but also partly because of his publication of sensitive details against the wishes of the Foreign Office (Johnston, pp. 205-8). Since his two travel journals had not sold well, he decided to try popular fiction. However, *Hajji Baba* was far from an overnight financial success. During the first decade after its publication only 2,655 copies were sold, with 95 remainders having to be returned to the author, thus netting a total income of just over 400 pounds sterling (Johnston, pp. 213-14). This was despite the fact that he had tried to satisfy the English readership's thirst for authentic Oriental narratives in order to boost sales.

The highly publicized visits of the flamboyant Persian envoy, [Ḥājī Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Širāzi](#), the Ilči, may have enhanced this desire. During his first visits to London in 1809-10, and later between 1816-19, the charming Ilči kept an entertaining diary of the adventures of his journey, his observations of English culture and society and its oddities, his own diplomatic mission, and the circles of high society that he frequented. The Ilči's escapades with certain ladies of the English aristocracy and other widely publicized affairs made him the talk of the town. His fame was complemented by entertaining statements in the press in a Persianized pidgin English. If we view the Ilči's letter to the London *Morning Post* as authentic (Wright, pp. 226-27), it is possible to speculate that his rendering of Persian expressions into English and other grammatical inaccuracies were exploited by Morier in his *Hajji Baba*'s manner of speech. He certainly employed the Ilči's imperfect English to insinuate that he is the author of a fictitious letter in the introduction to his sequel novel *Hajji Baba in England* (Morier, 1942, pp. 22-23).

The insistence on the literal translation of Persian proverbs and expressions in the same word order persuaded some commentators (such as Mojtabā Minovi) to suggest a possible Persian subtext for Morier's first novel. His surprisingly weak knowledge of Persian, evident in many spelling and pronunciation errors, and his poor grasp of Persian syntax, were offered as justifications for vague or meaningless sentences and phrases in his prose, as though the author had translated from Persian without grasping its actual meaning. These observations may be reconciled, at least to a limited extent, with Morier's desperate attempt to gain access to the Ilči's journal (Johnston, p. 209). Perhaps he had access to parts of it, but even if this were the case, he so radically fictionalized the characters that they cannot be seen as accurate renderings of the original account to any significant degree.



Yet Morier's position as the Ilči's secretary and companion should have taught him a great deal about the intricacies of his superior's personality. The close dealings with Morier over a lengthy period are evident both in the content of the Ilči's journal, *Ḥayrat-nāma*, which the Ilči kept presumably at Morier's insistence, and Morier's own published journals. Morier's Persian *Gil Blas* had gone through many ups and downs in his life. Born into an influential family of urban officials in Shiraz, the Ilči began his career presumably as an entertainer, but moved up to become a successful merchant in Shiraz, and soon afterwards the governor of Šuštār. In 1800, he witnessed the destruction of his powerful relative, Ḥāji Ebrāhim Kalāntar, E'temād-al-Dawla, the *šadr-e a'zam*, and his own extended family. The Ilči too was condemned to death, but received a pardon and eventually departed for India, where he served the Nizam of Hyderabad. It was later, through his family connections with the new *šadr-e a'zam*, that he was appointed to the post of Persian envoy to England.

Fath-'Ali Shah's premier, Mirzā Šafi' Māzandarāni.)

The Ilči is seemingly represented in *Hajji Baba* and its sequel by the relatively benign character of Mirza Firouz, the Persian ambassador to England. However, it is in the character of Hajji Baba himself that Morier depicts many of his former friend's personality traits. This complex juxtaposition, especially in the first novel, did not escape the Ilči's notice. On a number of occasions he angrily complained of Morier's ingratitude and accused him of dishonesty, ill will, and false characterization (e.g., Fraser, p. 3). In response Morier only adds insult to injury by including, in the introduction of *Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England*, a letter in broken English which was supposedly written by the Persian envoy to complain of Morier's abuse of himself and his countrymen in the book: "You call me Mirza Firouz, I know very well, and say I talk great deal nonsense. When I talk nonsense? Oh, you think yourself very clever man; but this Hajji Baba very foolish business" (Morier, 1942, p. 22).

Yet the Ilči was not the only Persian dignitary angry at Morier's vengeful caricatures. Ḥāji Bābā Afšār (later Mirzā Bābā), a court physician and one of the first students sent by 'Abbās Mirzā to England, where he studied medicine, felt that he too had been unfairly targeted. His account of the clashes he had with Morier while studying in England, which had led to heated verbal exchanges, supported this claim. He believed not only that his name had been deliberately used for the swindler who is the chief character of the novel, but that he had also been portrayed as "Mirza Ahmak" (Mirzā Aḥmaq), a vain,



ignorant, and greedy physician. Among other Persian figures satirized by Morier we may recognize Faṭḥ-‘Ali Khan Ṣabā, the poet laureate (*malek-al-šo‘arā*), which Morier erroneously transcribes as *Melek al-Shoherah*), as the poet “Asker,” an opportunistic and sycophantic figure (chaps. 6 & 7). Ṣabā’s apparent platonic musings about the young and fair Morier, which were the subject of poetic exchanges with another court poet, may have had some bearing on this portrayal (Rā’in, p. 130). Further research may reveal a similar historical grounding for Morier’s other characters.

As the sequel to the first novel, Morier wrote *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England* (2 vols., London, 1828), in which Hajji Baba’s career develops as secretary of the Persian mission to England. In the 28 chapters of this volume the author describes in detail Hajji Baba’s journey from Persia to England, his formal engagements and informal encounters there in the company of the Persian envoy, and his reflections on England and the English, a course which closely corresponds to Morier’s own experience as secretary of a diplomatic mission. The journal kept by the Ilči during the period 1809-10, known as *Ḥayrat-nāma*, also bears a striking resemblance to Morier’s fiction. Considered far less original and engaging than the first book, in *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England* Morier may have tried to balance off some of the hostile sarcasm of the first volume with measured criticism of English society and its institutions. By identifying with Hajji Baba, Morier may have wished to imply that he is capable of “turning native” as much in reality as on paper. Yet in this ploy one may detect other complex motives, cultural ambiguities, and identity anxieties in the age of empire.

Curzon remarked on the “intrinsic merit” of Morier’s work not only as “a contemporary portrait of Persian manners and life,” but also because it “continues to reflect, after a lapse of three-quarters of a century, the salient and unchanging Oriental people” (p. ix). Curzon is so convinced of *Hajji Baba*’s timeless value that he even dismisses the statement of Morier’s contemporary and chief, [Harford Jones Brydges](#), who had noted “one may allow oneself to smile at some of the pages of *Hajji Baba*, but it would be just as wise to estimate the national character of the Persians from the adventures of that fictitious person as it would be to estimate the national character of the Spaniards from those of Don Juan, Raphael, or his worthy coadjutor, Ambrose de Lamela . . . Knowing the Persians as well as I do, I will boldly say the greater part of their (the Persians) vice originates in the vices of their Government, while such virtues as they do possess proceed from qualities of the mind.”



True to his unshakable imperialist spirit, Curzon labels Brydges's remark as "entirely affected." He further cites the above-mentioned letter in *Hajji Baba in England*, supposedly written by the Persian envoy, that "Persian people very bad people, but very good to you, sir," in order to conclude that this is an "unconscious admission" of *Hajji Baba's* "caustic but never malicious satire" and its value as "a historical document" based on real personalities (*op. cit.*, pp. xiii-xiv).

This view was not entirely shared by other observers. In addition to Brydges, other contemporaries of Morier found fault with his depiction of the Persians. In the 1850s, Justin Sheil, himself not known for his kind words or deeds toward the Persians, felt compelled to fault Morier at least for doing a "great injustice" to Persian soldiery by depicting them as cowards deficient in "the art of dying" (Sheil, pp. 81-82). Joseph Polak, whose observations were far more balanced than those of Sheil, believed that Morier's caricatures mostly applied to the Persian ruling elites and their associates and cronies, rather than to the majority of Persians (*Persien*, pp. 8-9), a view supported by modern observers (Nāṭeq, pp. 115-32; Ašraf, pp. 231-32).

Rezā-qoli Khan Hedāyat could only assert that "it has been reported that Mr. Morier has compiled two books in which he recorded whatever he had observed or heard of the good and bad of his mission [to Persia] and has related many stories and opinions about the Persian envoy Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan" (Hedāyat, IX, p. 535). However, it took two decades for a Persian translation to be prepared and another two decades for that translation to be actually published. It is obvious that by 1892 there existed in manuscript form a Persian translation from the French edition by the dissident writer and poet in exile, [Mirzā Ḥabib Eṣfahāni](#), which had been rendered in Istanbul in the 1880s. An able translator of *Gil Blas* and Molière's *LeMisanthrope*, Mirzā Ḥabib produced a free translation of Morier's first work with many additions and omissions, and with many stanzas added by the author to satisfy Persian taste. His translations of European popular novels are indisputably superior to those of many of his contemporaries in style and complexity, as well as his grasp of the original message. Yet Mirzā Ḥabib, a sophisticated Persian intellectual of his time, was in heart an early example of the masochistic Persian modernists who were fascinated with everything Western, even to the extent of deprecating their own culture. This internalization of Orientalist stereotypes found resonance especially among the intelligentsia of the Constitutional Revolution and thereafter. The first edition of Mirzā Ḥabib's translation, as



*Tarjoma-ye sargodašt-e Hāji Bābā-ye Eṣfahāni az Engelisi be Fārsi*, was edited with notes by D. C. Phillott (Calcutta, 1905), but Phillott misattributed the translation to Shaikh Aḥ-mad Ruḥi Kermāni (for details see Jamāl-zāda, introduction to the 1348 Š./1969 edition). This edition was largely geared to the needs of students of Persian in England and India. It was soon followed by another edition of Mirzā Ḥabib's translation, this time without any mention of the translator, published as *Hāji Bābā* (Calcutta, 1304 [sic.]/1886, read 1324/1906) by the well-known journalist of the Constitutional period, Jalāl-al-Din Ḥo-sayni, Mo'ayyad-al-Eslām, the publisher of the Calcutta edition of *Ḥabl al-matin*. In the title page, the editor states: "verily in this treatise the author has depicted in best possible style a picture of all the morality and manners and customs of the Iranians," a theme reasserted in Mo'ayyad-al-Eslām's foreword to the book. Having evidently produced it for the growing book market in Persia, Mo'ayyad-al-Eslām found it necessary not only to omit the name of the assumed translator because of his Bābi affiliation (Shaikh Aḥmad Ruḥi, who came from a well-known Bābi family in Kermān, was executed in Tabriz in the aftermath of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's assassination in 1896), but to identify in his foreword the Bābis of Persia as one example of the moral defects of Persians (pp.1-6).

Even before publication, manuscript copies of Mirzā Ḥabib's translation were available to the Persian reader, though it is difficult to measure its impact. Another translation by Asad-Allāh Khan Širāzi, Šawkat-al-Wozarā', titled *Sawāneḥ-e 'amdi-e Hāji Bābā-ye Eṣfahāni* (Bombay, 1323/1905) was also published by Mirzā Moḥammad Malek-al-Kottāb (Minovi, p. 312). Several further Indian editions followed, but its publication was banned in Persia under Reżā Shah Pahlavi on the grounds that the book presented a hostile and false portrayal of the nation. Among later editions was that of the well-known author Moḥammad-'Ali Jamāl-zāda, *Sargodašt-e Hāji Bābā-ye Eṣfahāni* (Tehran, 1348 Š./1969), a rushed effort to revise Mirzā Ḥabib's superior prose, without even consulting the English original. *Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England* was translated by Asad-Allāh Ṭāheri as *Hāji Bābā dar Landan* (3 vols., Bombay, 1325/1907).

It was only in the latter part of the 20th century, with the emergence of Orientalist and post-colonial critiques, that the myth of *Hajji Baba* as an accurate representation of the Iranian national character was gradually laid to rest. Nonetheless, even as late as 1970, *Hajji Baba* saw its sixth reprint since the 1924 edition in the World's Classics series of Oxford University Press.



Other editions and reprints have appeared since.

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