Imagology and Exoticism in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*

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Abstract
This article aims at highlighting the specificities of Gaston Bachelard’s «*La poétique de la rêverie*» (*The Poetics of Reverie*), seen as the pivot of Montesquieu’s imaginary creation in *Persian Letters*. The Same and the Other are two essential terms when trying to find the place imagology plays in an intercultural approach where France and Persia are associated with an enchanted exoticism. Criteria such as space, taste, the marvellous and verisimilitude will be examined in order to analyse the images vehiculated by the perceived society (France) and by the perceiving one (Persia) and to evaluate Montesquieu’s genius for social irony.

Keywords
Imagology, France, Exoticism, Persia, Montesquieu, Reverie, Alterity.

Introduction
The faraway taste and the longing for an elsewhere turn Charles de Scondat de Montesquieu (1689-1755) into a talented philosopher, while his *Persian Letters* represent essentially the characteristics of an epistolary novel where imagology and exoticism occupy a prominent place; as the author himself meaningfully argues: Otherness is the reason. In other words, Montesquieu and his *Persian Letters* have brought a fresh look on the 18th century French society dominated by political despotism and social injustice. Here, the foreigner emerges as a revealing vector that tends to...
view the Other and observe his reflection in the image of an I. At a deeper level, the East as dreamed by Montesquieu is in fact a West, so reversed that the Western space almost becomes the East.

As such, exoticism reduces the distance between two cultures, sketching the true social picture by means of literary expressions characteristic to any representative image called imagology. In The Persian Letters, the relationship society-literature ennobles the primitive nucleus of social satire, to which Montesquieu attaches noble ideas in order to create a universe full of strangeness and astonishment. From this perspective, the presence of Persians in the French society evokes the importance of the cultural identity by means of which the notion of imagology acquires a legitimate meaning: the image is related to the author's sensitivity.

If we accept that in the seen culture (France), the mores and the customs are counter-models used to criticize the living conditions in the seeing culture (Iran), then imagology emerges as a reciprocal relationship between identity and alterity. In fact, cultural relativism and inveterate pessimism reveal in turns the judgements of the Persian lords, as well as Montesquieu’s own judgements, with a view to reach to a comparative synthesis likely to attest the place literary imagology occupies within the socio-cultural exchanges. This is how, on the one hand, we engage in studying the peculiarity of certain images conveyed in Rica and Urbek’s correspondence with their compatriots in Iran and, on the other, in fructifying, according to Gaston Bachelard’s theory as stated in La Poétique de la Rêverie (The Poetics of Reverie), Montesquieu’s exotic reverie in the faraway space. In what follows we will try to examine from an imagological perspective the Persian travellers’ impressions and remarks, turning them into Montesquieu’s motif of Oriental inspiration which rendered The Persian Letters into a philosophical, even exotic piece.

**Preliminary remarks**

For a better interpretation of Montesquieu’s exotic journey, it is important to take into account Gaston Bachelard’s global ideas regarding this exotic reverie: "Bachelard’s poetic reverie spontaneously finds the imaginary of the four elements [...] it is the faraway space which is placed at the centre of the dreamed world and which receives a unity of tone, one that is generally (but not always) harmonious. Consequently, it corresponds
to the free exercise of an ability to be touched by the amazing spectacle of the foreign and by the desire to capture its singularity by means of art.”

According to this view, we could establish the following diagram to assess the accomplishment of Montesquieu’s reflections depending on the imaginary space represented by Iran:

(The Same / The Other)

(The enchantment)

(Cultural otherness)

(Crystallisation of the real) realism  Exotic reverie (Oriental/epistolary) taste

These four cardinal points essentially determine the notion of imagology while revealing Montesquieu’s motivation to write the Persian Letters. In this context, it is important to highlight the fascinating attractions of Iran whose reflections are clearly visible in the writing of the French philosopher.

In Grandeur et décadence des Romains (Grandeur et decadence of the Romans), he attributes the Persians’ victory over the troops led by General Bélisaire to their “disciplined army,” a view probably drawn from Herodotus and the ancient historians. In Esprit des lois (The Spirit of Laws), his assessments are mainly based on the travellers’ accounts and, in particular, on those belonging to Chardin: “Chardin’s travels completed in 1720 alone are enough to prove that he only read them at the time, and thus they invite to situate their writing between 1717 and 1720.” He praises the old Persian institutes and all customs that could include cooperation and solidarity among Iranians.

Thanks to this kind of details we are able to look into the various works by Montesquieu, and we can understand the reasons determining him to choose “Persian” protagonists for his Persian Letters. He also did it for the “common sense” and the impulsive nature he attributed to this people. But drawing on the travellers’ accounts and the extensive documentation on the Iranians’ religions and customs he had access to, Montesquieu only chose the most striking features that he also exaggerated in order to strike imagination and stir interest.
Space

In the *Persian Letters*, the exotic space represents the cultural diversity reflected in the dialectic tradition of the same and the other, aiming to transform the visible into readable. Thus, this raises the opportunity to shed new light on the society where judging the other becomes an identity temptation: the ever-changing views are linked to the distinct or equivalent perspectives. Montesquieu simply describes this geographical space by means of an apparent alterity: “We have now been a month to Paris, and all the time constantly moving about [...] during the month I have been here I have not yet seen any one walking. There is no people in the world who hold more by their vehicles than the French: they run, they fly; the slow vehicles of Asia, the measures step of our camels, would put them into a state of coma.” Issuing such an observation, France as a seen society reveals not only the daily monotony in Paris, but it also projects the reflection of the Other who looks, speaks and writes. Rica’s astonishment regarding the precipitation of the people in Paris is inscribed in a referential register that could be the blueprint of all habitual rhythm.

In general, Paris provides a picturesque setting where the relationship between the same and the other appears to be most favourable: “We are now at Paris, that proud rival of the city of the sun.” In this fragment, the delights of the elsewhere turn into an interior distance and the Oriental space comes to resemble the Western place. According to the view that imagology is “the representation of the foreign” according to an expression dear to Daniel Henri Pageaux, the cross-cultural perspective effaces all geographical distance: “Yesterday I witnessed a most remarkable thing, although it is of daily occurrence in Paris. In the evening, after dinner, all the people gather together and play at a sort of dramatic game, which I have heard them call comedy. The main performance takes place upon a platform which is called the theatre [...] something after our own style in Persia.” The representation of this distraction awakens in Montesquieu a faraway closer to the same, whose similarity is the sign of a cross-cultural approach. And if Montesquieu opposes the same to the other with a view to an identity creation, the space emerges as a sort of exciting landmark that is at once resemblance and coincidence. For Montesquieu, walking in the space of the other does not impede discovering the enrichment of the culture of the same, which is actually the
very goal of the seeing culture. Consequently, Montesquieu’s mobility in the Persian space is not limited to a mere exotic fantasy, but it aims at indisputable irony: “Liberty and equality reign in Paris. Birth, worth, even military fame, however brilliant it may be, fail to distinguish a man from the crowd in which he is lost. They say that the chief man in Paris is he who has the best horses in his coach. In Persia, we count none great except those on whom the monarch bestows some share in the government.”

According to this statement it should be said that imagology on Persia was an ingenious route to the extent to which it could respond to Montesquieu’s mocking demands. In fact, the impact of the same on the other as regards cross-cultural relations is an imagological quest within which the I reveals what can be transmitted between the seen and the seeing society.

The I refers here to the creator of the situation, who brings together two distant cultures or nations.

**Taste**

In Montesquieu’s exotic reverie, the taste is revealed in the form of an Eastern fiction echoed in the *Persian Letters*, while focusing on receiving a more fascinating and remarkable exoticism. In other words, Montesquieu’s taste regarding Persia sends back to a formal representation where dissidence and resemblance constitute the imagological thread, conceived as an imaginative approach. From this perspective, Montesquieu’s cultural contribution is embodied in Claude Puzin’s opinion on the *Persian Letters*: “Letters of information, travel, erudition, philosophy, politics, love…”

Definitely, the merit of the *Persian Letters* is linked to the admiration of the author who renders an accurate image of Persia: “The Persians who wrote these letters lodged at my house, and we spent our time together. They
looked upon me as a man belonging to another world, and so they concealed nothing from me.”

From this angle, Montesquieu’s position among the Persians strengthens the link between the same and the other, in such a way that the revealed image is more familiar to the French rather than the Persian customs: “One thing has often astonished me, and that is, that these Persians seemed often to have as intimate an acquaintance as I myself with the manners and customs of our nation, an acquaintance extending to the most minute particulars and not unpossessed of many points which have escaped the observation of more than one German traveller in France.”

Thus, Montesquieu's epistolary art and his taste for the Orient is crystallised in an exotic reverie while he asserts to have chosen the Persians as two honest observers: “[...] people so far from home could hardly be said to have secrets. They showed me most of their letters, and I copied them.” If Montesquieu makes use of terms such as “so far from home” and “letters”, it is because he wants to designate an enchanted exoticism starting from which his distant desire adapts better to reality than to imagination.

Supernatural

As far as the supernatural is concerned, it is an essential component of the exotic reverie, since it obviously establishes communication between the same and the other, in such a way so as to fructify the curiosity of the seen culture: ”If I went abroad, everybody flew to the window [...] When I went sightseeing, a hundred lorgnettes were speedily levelled at me: in fact, never was a man so stared at as I have been.”

From this perspective, the main coordinates of such astonishment are based on the image of the Persians in which the otherness has an identity
nature: the Persian type is assessed by estimating the other. The creation of the Parisian scene where the Persians stand out through their indigenous clothes recalls Montesquieu’s desire to raise awareness to social facts among the French. However, we know well that the French people’s interest and sympathy for novelty depend on the discovery of the other and the same, in such a way that the surprising character leads to a reassuring confrontation. Thus, our author has shown not only the cultural gap visible in the clothing, but he has equally intensified the supernatural despite the European look of the Persians: “But if any one chanced to inform […] that I was a Persian, I soon overheard a murmur all round me, Oh! ah! A Persian, is he? Most amazing! However can anybody be a Persian?” From this perspective, the surprise and curiosity play a double role, enlarging and defining the reality portrayed. We notice a relevant vision while the extraordinary element ends by somehow displacing the limits of sensible perception, either by the force of physiognomy which gave rise to the different, or by the force of cultural identity that draws the other.

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\begin{align*}
\text{The same} & \quad \text{Cultural appearance} \\
\text{Alterity} & \neq \text{Curiosity} = \quad \text{The supernatural} \\
\text{The other} & \quad \text{Concrete reality} \quad \text{(Overlapping)}
\end{align*}
\]

Within this context, the imagological aspect agrees with the idea that the Persians’ figure in the French people’s psychology is a utopia particularly when it comes to becoming the other, which one is not. However, Montesquieu’s imaginary innovation associates the supernatural with reality the moment when the cultural paradox becomes an act of knowledge: “The first sight of a Christian town is, for a Mohammedan, a wonderful spectacle. I do not mean only those things that strike the eye at once, such as the difference in the buildings, the dresses, and the chief customs: there is, even in the merest trifles, a singularity,
which I feel, but cannot describe. ”17 In the eyes of the Persians, singularity in the image of the other is an opportunity to discover the supernatural by means of cross-cultural gaps.

Realism

In order to determine the place realism occupies in the Persian Letters, it is best to refer to the image of the other and the same, which is in fact likely to justify Montesquieu’s exotic inspiration for Persia.

In this respect, presenting the real through the image of the Persian travelers is an occasion to scorn the other in favor of the same that is more reasonable and more charitable: “In Europe a malcontent thinks of carrying on a secret correspondence, of going over to the enemy, of seizing some town, or of exciting foolish complaints among the people. A malcontent in Asia goes straight to the prince, amazes, strikes, overthrows: he obliterates all memory of his existence: in one moment slave and master, usurper and lawful sovereign.”18 Thus, in order to convincingly show the French public the social condition of the distant other, Montesquieu portrays both the enchanted and the disenchanted exoticism: delighted since the Orientals see a prosperous other, and disenchanted since they live in different conditions.

According to Aristotle, who advocated for “preferring the impossible realism to the possible unlikely”19 we can easily identify in the Persian Letters traces of a possible reality, particularly in the image of the social classes: “There is no country in the world where fortune is more inconstant than in this. Every ten years a revolution happens which plunges the wealthy into misery, and raises the poor on rapid wings to the summit of affluence. The one is astonished at his poverty; the other at his riches. The new-made rich man admires the wisdom of Providence; the pauper, the mischance of a blind fate.”20 This is where the glory of literary imagology comes from, since in order to turn the image of the same into reality, it is necessary to impress the other by means of an ironic tone. Thus, in the description of the same and the other, Montesquieu does not cease to criticize the society of his time, under the pretext of contributing to increasing the visibility of the other, the disadvantages of the same, which could establish a quasi-unlikely ideal: “There are in France three privileged classes: the church, the sword, and the gown. Each has such a sovereign contempt for the other
two, that sometimes a man who deserves to be looked down upon because he is a fool, is despised only because he is a lawyer.” However, imagology requires a cross-cultural exchange provided that it is the reflection of a bilateral vision: the crystallization of the real depends on the originality of the meaningful look.

Attraction ≠ touch = realism

↓  ↓
(Actuality) (Alterity) (Crystallization of the real)

This synthesis recalls in some respects the progression of the real until alterity is constantly opposed to present day to bring in a fresh perspective between the same and the other.

Conclusions

We have shown that the same and the other have all the characteristics of an enchanted or disenchanted exoticism by means of which France and Persia were analysed from a criss-crossing perspective. If Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* constitute a revealing source for literary imagology, the exotic reverie could constitute the framework of all cross-cultural creativity. The *I* has played an intermediate role between two opposed concepts, both through Montesquieu’s intervention as neutral observer and by the presence of the Persians as sincere narrators. In *the Persian Letters*, the longing for the elsewhere has shed new lights at a socio-cultural level; the epistolary art was Montesquieu’s formal target in order to “test the taste of the audience”. However, if Montesquieu was able to mock the social institutions of his time by writing the *Persian Letters*, his motivation for the emancipation of the French spirit would justify the relationship between the same and the other. Finally, imagology as presented in this research encourages us to ask ourselves “how can we become French” in order to examine the Iranian society.
References


2 “The Noble Savage has thus constituted an example of strangeness in literature, but also a counter-model used to criticize the European values (Diderot, *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*), argues Jean-Marc Moura.” Ibid. 54.
7 Ibid. 88.
9 Montesquieu. *op. cit*. 89.
10 Ibid. 209.
12 Montesquieu, *op. cit*. 35.
13 Ibid. 96.
14 Ibid. 35.
15 Ibid. 95.
16 Ibid. 95-96.
17 Ibid. 79.
18 Ibid. 235.
21 Ibid. 115.
Biographical note
Yousefi Behzadi Majid accomplished her PhD in Modern languages at the Toulouse II University in 2003. Her academic research cover several areas of investigation, and her recent publications, in the Harmattan Publishing House (Victor Hugo et la Perse- 2009) et Eurédit (Chateaubriand vu par Djamalzadeh ou la séduction moralisée- 2010) show the intercultural dimension of her research. She considers Kafka and Nerval as the forerunners of Iranian literary francophony, and she studied their reflection in La Chouette avengée by Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951), an article published in a journal of the Dunarea de Jos University, Galati, Romania, 2013. Several of her works appeared in Téhéran, an Iranian monthly journal in French, where the Occident and the Orient state the necessity of a new perspective on contemporary society.