



THE CONCEPT OF 'MECHANOSIS' BY JALĀL ĀL-E
AHMAD: A CRITICAL STUDY FROM THE ISLAMIC
PERSPECTIVE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's concept of 'mechanosis' in his masterpiece, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* was examined through a library and qualitative research to determine its relevance with Islamic teaching, amid the Iranian dependency of the West. The thoughts of selected Occident philosophers of technology were analyzed in finding the influence of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's 'mechanosis' in mechanization. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's argument of the negative impact of Western invasion through technology and machine stressed the weak side of dependency. The researcher found the relevant relationship between Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's 'mechanosis' and the Islamic perspective towards technological advancement and total dependent of Iran, in particular, and The Third World countries, in general, to the Western power. This study was significant in providing the conceptual boundaries between developing technology based on Western paradigm and enhancing country's own capability in applying scientific knowledge for machine and technology.

خالصة البحث

مفهوم جلال آل أمحد من "mechanosis" يف راء: مت فحص الطاعون من الغرب من خالل املكبة والبحث النوعي لتحديد أهميتها مع التعاليم الإسلامية، يف ظل التبعية الإيرانية من الغرب. وقد مت حتليل أفكار فالسفة الغرب خمتارة من التكنولوجيا إلباد أنثري جلال آل أمحد "mechanosis" يف امليكنة. وأكدت حجة جلال آل أمحد من الأاثر السلبية للغزو الغرب من خالل التكنولوجيا وآلة اجانب الضعيف من التبعية. وجد الباحث عالفة ذات الصلة بني جلال آل أمحد "mechanosis" وجهة نظر إسلامية حنو التقدم التكنولوجي وجموعه تعتمد إيران، على وجه اصوص، وعلى دول العامل الثالث بشكل عام، إبل قوة غربية. وكانت هذه الدراسة هامة يف توفري احدود امفاهيمية بني البلدان النامية التكنولوجيا على أساس النموذج الغرب وقدرة البالد تعزيز اخاصة يف تطبيق امعرفة العلمية آلة والتكنولوجيا.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Islamic Science.

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I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Islamic Science.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or currently submitted as a whole for any degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

The applied knowledge of science—technology—is very fundamental in the world at present time. No one will deny the role and significance of technology. For decades, human are depending on the technology to maintain their productivity in daily consumerism. The degree of that dependency ranges from the basic reliance to the extreme dependency of technology. A rough examination from the historical perspective gave us a reasonable outlook. The people from previous ages showed their appreciation and acknowledgement in tools and machines. From an essential tool to the most complicated machinery, an individual does not need much effort in ignoring those technologies. The scientists are very eager to continue the work of previous professionals in developing new and advance technology for the humanity in total.

A total dependency on the machine and technology may elevate humanistic value in general. Many philosophers and scientists discuss the influence of technology in the society. Various aspect of perspectives in related to the technology and machine make that discussion splits into two main important streams. Those who point out the total dependence of community in machine will support their ideology with the positive changed made by the assimilation of the technology in human life. An endured process of upgrading human value, boosting the economic power, and enhancing the human capital are among the good impacts of machine and technology. They probably do not

bother with the side effects of those advancements. Nevertheless, the other side of philosophers, thinkers, and scientists might rather emphasize the negative and destructive character of technological modernization. In addition to a certain degree of acceptance, there are groups of people who offer either a favorable reflection of machine in society amid the reality of the modern day or deformation of human existence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern Muslims often ponder on the issue regarding the interaction between the technology and the society. The values and outputs of the scientific knowledge, in one aspect are difficult to be evaluated in a non-technical domain, unless, its impact is examined from the perspective of social and economic value¹. In general, the technology was believed to be a relatively neutral, and its value only viewed as good or bad by its purpose.² Most of the evaluations of technological advancement base on the Western philosophy.

The technological advancements are prone to deplete the ecology and natural resources. Human life— in economics, communication, history, and even religion—is supported by the advance technology. In its philosophical terms, technology brings us the challenge to explore nature in a non-conventional way. The untouched natural resources may encourage human to seek for knowledge to manage it. In the past, a direct

¹ A. Y. Al-Hassan, *Science and Technology in Islam: The Exact and Natural Sciences* (Paris: UNESCO Publication, 2001), 63.

² Marc J. de Vries, Sven Ove Hansson & Anthonie W. M. Meijers, *Norms in Technology* (US: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 103.

manipulation of human in controlling the nature led to the historical events, described by the scientists as the Iron Age, the Industrial Revolution, and the Information Age.³

In its “golden era” of Islamic civilization, the Muslims had produced a number of technological inventions, based on their knowledge of science. The innovations took place, ranging from the water clock, the hydrological machine, to the building of technological advanced concept.⁴

According to the Islamic concept of science, the product of science—technology—is unrestricted to be questioned⁵. This is because technology is the product of science. In producing their innovative idea, the scientists even do mistakes in finalizing the product by examining the possible blunt of the machine and the technology to the environment. Therefore, the product of science is no longer exempted from any disregard. A rival of science may hold a long list about the negative impact of technology. The nuclear threat, the strip mines pollution, and the genetically modified organisms are among the bad impacts of technology towards society.⁶ In order to overcome the disasters, a huge economical budget should be allocated to maintain the ecology. The governmental agencies and private sectors once are struggling in finding the investors. Now, their endless effort will continue in finding the solution to minimize the catastrophe. It will not be so successful without a colossal budget.

³ David M. Kaplan, *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology* (US: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2009), xvi.

⁴ Sally Ganchy, *Islam and Science, Medicine, and Technology* (NY: Rosen Pub., 2009), 34.

⁵ Mazyar Lotfalian, *Islam, Technoscientific and the Culture of Curiosity* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004), 72

⁶ Aidan Davison, *Technology and the Contested Meaning* (US: SUNY Press, 2001), 100.

Western scholars had proposed a critical analysis about technological advancement in Western context. Some of them described the negative impact of technology in Western society. Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), a French Catholic philosopher and sociologist, in his book *The Technological Bluff*, presented four fundamental shortcomings of technology. First, he suggested that the society has to accept the price of all technological progresses. In addition, certain stages of technological advancement uphold “more and greater problem” than the solution offered. He also evaluated the harmful effects of technology, which could eliminate its beneficial effects. In the longer terms, these unpredictable effects are fundamentals of coming socio-cultural catastrophes.⁷

Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), an American thinker and a philosopher of technology raised up the issue of capitalism in scientific circulation. Rooted in technological innovation after Newton and Galileo, scientific knowledge had inspired the development of capitalism by changing the “new habits of abstraction and calculation” to the society.⁸ A critical perspective could summarize that the capitalists intend to increase productions by manipulating scientific knowledge without maintaining the cultural and the societal values.

Erich Fromm⁹ in his book, *The Sane Society*, critically examined and highlighted nineteenth-century capitalism. The character of a man, as an individual in a society, had rapidly changes from a traditionalist and a humane-centered to the economic and profit-

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 39.

⁸ Lewis Mumford & Langdon Winner, *Technics and Civilization* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

⁹ Erich Seligmann Fromm (1900-1980), a German social psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist.

centered. He suggested that a man was known as “the measure of all things” in economic and political sense is gradually reduced to “extension” of tools. The exploitation of the workers, most of them the men, is permissible by social laws. The indicator of happiness was measured by the profit that they earned, not by the value of living. In addition, the so-called traditional element of marketing (which is based on humanity) is gradually eliminated.¹⁰

Any technological innovation is meaningless without the impact on mass media and culture of communications, especially in the invention of the internet, mobile phone, and their applications. The devices getting faster and become affordable to be purchased even by the poorer group society. Nonetheless, that advancement is criticized. The new way of communication later created a boundary to the creativity in conventional communication. The quality of human writing and speech are decreasing intentionally.¹¹

‘Mechanosis’: A Total Dependency on Machine and Technology

The main part of the proposed study is to examine the thought of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1923-1969), an Iranian thinker, who died before the Iranian Revolution¹². In his influential book, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (original Persian title of the book is “*Gharbzadegi*”), the author criticized the Iranian society and all the Third World countries for its total dependence on Western technology without trying to improve their

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (US: Rinehart, 1995), 94.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 45.

¹² Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians* (Iran: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 1124.

own. He was influenced by the philosophy of Sayid Ahmad Fardid¹³. According to Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, to be an industrialized nation, the levels of consumerism from outsiders need to be lowered gradually in order to become the producer. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad was not against the West in terms of their hard work and research; rather he questioned the quality of always seeking help from others and depending on machine and technology and he called this process as ‘mechanosis’¹⁴. The negative impacts of Western-imported ‘mechanosis’ process on societal structure and socioeconomic were described by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad stated:

Although in launching its career of imperialism, the West, like a leech, only drank the blood of the East (ivory, oil, silk, spices, and other material goods), it gradually perceived that the East also has abundant spiritual goods, what universities and laboratories run on.¹⁵

The questionable impact of Western modernization, especially through science and technology had been evaluated critically, even in wider perspective than Iranian society by other thinker such as Oswald Spengler¹⁶, Lewis Mumford, José Ortega y Gasset¹⁷, Marshall McLuhan, Julius Evola, and René Guénon (Shaykh ‘Abd al Wahīd Yahya)¹⁸. The philosophy of Western science by itself is problematic compared to Islamic science—at least the concept of dualism, injustice science, and the objectivity of science. Western philosophers and scientists themselves feel comfortable in criticizing Western

¹³ Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (US: Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 187.

¹⁴ Houchang Chenabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Study, 2006), 57.

¹⁵ Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (US: Mizan Press Berkeley, 1984), 127.

¹⁶ Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler (1880-1936) was a German historian and philosopher of history. His interests included mathematics, science and art.

¹⁷ José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) was a Spanish liberal philosopher and the essayist.

¹⁸ René Guénon (1886-1951) was a French author and influential figure in the domain of metaphysics. He subscribed in Islamic esoterism in 1910 and obtained the name Shaykh ‘Abd al Wahīd Yahya.

science. The negative influence of applied science—technology and machinery—is another dark side of scientific drawbacks. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad questioned that the work of scientist was not for the sake of humanity but rather for the purpose of technological advantages per se.¹⁹

In describing the process of westernization in the Third World countries (including Iran), he stated:

The important factor that distinguish a transitional period of society with its characteristic crisis are, from one standpoint, the advance of science, from another, the transformations of technique, technology, and the machine, and from a third, the possibility to speak of Western democracy.²⁰

In spite of its positive and valuable benefits, the analytical evaluation of technology is needed from a generation to another generation. A failure of economic autonomy might be one of the bad impacts. Market competition could be less effective among the local industries. Technological invention from superpower will monopolize the machine and factory from the minor producers. The country could not become a mass producer by solely importing the technology and the skills from the international producers. It could lead to another weakness—“extraordinary dependence on supplies from other parts of the world.”²¹

Technology, in its absolute way, could lead to the inseparable connection between man and nature, and it may hinder human creativity. In order to describes that separation,

¹⁹ Ibid., 130.

²⁰ Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (US: Mizan Press Berkeley, 1984), 122.

²¹ National Research Council, *Marshalling Technology for Development* (Washington: National Academy Press, 1995), 78.

the term ‘technological bodies’ had been used. It could be the best imagination of how the human mind and physical might be manipulated to be inherent to nature.²² Wars, declination of spiritual reliability, the rise of critical disease, pollution, and political injustice were always denoted to the unbalanced modernity.²³ The philosophical and spiritual domains were finally excluded from natural science due to the extreme focus on scientific advancement solely.

Nevertheless, an Islamic perspective of science and technology offers more comprehensive thought compared to Western ideology. *Tawhidic* approach in uniting science, philosophy, and theology together provide unique dimension of the crisis. Victor C. Ferkiss suggested:

The Islamic position is not only that science and religion be kept together, but automatically precludes the Baconian use of science to conquer nature. Science and religion cannot conflict as they did in the West. Science in Islamic philosophy is, like everything else, judged on moral grounds, and real science is by definition almost good, since it must exist for the sake of social good.²⁴

The evaluation of science and technology should not reject the impact of machine and technology in society. In spite of the economic and the political values, technology might haunt the society in short and long terms periods. At the present day regulation, all policy makers are usually associated with the short-term as well as the long-term profits. The capitalists tend to put the term “good and bad” technology behind human conscious by

²² Chris Shilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London: Sage, 2005), 21.

²³ Jan L. Harrington, *Technology and Society* (Mass: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2009), 198.

²⁴ Victor C. Ferkiss, *Nature, Technology, and Society: Cultural Roots of the Current Environmental Crisis* (NY: New York University Press, 1993), 56.

hiding them the possible concern. Modern technology could be redefined as “good” and “bad” technology.²⁵ “Bad” technology influenced society badly. Another important issue is they are scientists who feed their hunger in gaining more profit by hiding the side impact of their products. In a serious case, they are even brave enough to back up their findings with a fake data of experiment.²⁶

Nevertheless, in spite of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s arguments about the adaptation and the imitation of Western technologies, the well-developed countries benefited from the research and development from the West. In Japanese automobile industry, Western engineering technologies were adopted. Later, Japanese engineers, with their own innovation, modified the technologies.²⁷ However, the proverb “Japanese spirit and Western technology” shows us that Japanese might prevent the assimilation of Western culture even they borrow the technique and technology from the West.²⁸

Another shocking argument is in the case of scientific research and development in Israel. A relatively small country and surrounded by non-developed territory, they promoted a free-trade technological investment of foreign countries, especially from United State of America and European countries. They invited the specialists and the

²⁵ Stephanie J. Bird, “Science and Technology for the Good of Society?”, *Science and Engineering Ethics*, vol.8, no.12 (2002):3-4.

²⁶ David R. Morrow, “When Technologies Makes Good People Do Bad Things: Another Argument Against the Value-Neutrality of Technologies”, *Science Engineering Ethics*, vol.17, no.4 (2013):12-24.

²⁷ Michio Morishima, *Why has Japan ‘Succeeded’: Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56.

²⁸ Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey & Andrew Feenberg, *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 240.

investors from those countries to set up new research and development in science and technology.²⁹

Since Islamic science has no trouble in dealing with nature, social, and its philosophy, a balanced overview of science and technology could be associated with the religious harmony successfully. The way Muslim scientists view the nature and extract it is the same way they comprehend the religion.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

A significant subject in philosophy of science—the critical evaluation of modern technology towards society—will be discussed critically according to Islamic science perspective. The researcher will be focusing on a book in extracting the concept and idea proposed by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad and reevaluates it in modern context.

An essential exploration will be the critical evaluation of the position of technology in the society. The effect of being too dependent on machine and technology seems useless without proper allegation of Islamic perspective of scientific knowledge and its application. This area will be based on the writing of Iranian thinker and intellectual, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. The research will be focused on Ahmad's analysis of social problem caused by Western technology as discussed as the concept of 'mechanosis'. That Persian-origin book was published in 1984 (amid the Iranian Revolution) by Mizan Press. Other relevant scholar—form Iran

²⁹ Mitra Das & Shirley Kolack, *Technology, Values, and Society: Social Forces in Technological Change* (US: Peter Lang, 2008), 121.

and outside Iran—post a momentous influence of the book in shaping Iranian societies of being dependent to the Western technology without preparing their own.

The writings will be extracted and the researcher intends to critically estimate and evaluate from the philosophy of Islamic science. The numbers of ideas from both authors are fundamental for the Muslim scientist and the society.

METHODS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the researcher will be applying a library research methodology. This methodology is based on library research, which includes reviewing the books, the articles and the journals related to the concept of ‘mechanosis’, the technological advancement, and the impact of scientific knowledge and technology in society.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the life and works of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad and his concept of ‘mechanosis’.
2. To investigate the possible links between the concept of ‘mechanosis’ and Western or Eastern philosophy.
3. To examine the catastrophic view of technology in Western distopias.
4. To critically evaluate Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s concept of ‘mechanosis’ from Islamic perspective.

Research Questions

The study is expected to answer the following questions:

1. What is the life and works of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad and his concept of ‘mechanosis’?
2. Which possible link between is crucial for Ahmad’s the concept of ‘mechanosis’ in Western or Eastern philosophy?
3. Which catastrophic view of technology in Western dystopias influenced Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s concept of ‘mechanosis’?
4. Which part of Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s concept of ‘mechanosis’ is rooted in Islamic worldview?

CHAPTERIZATION

This study will be composed of five chapters. In the first chapter, the researcher will describe the problem of the study, justification of the study, the objectives of the study, the literature review and the methods of the data collection. In the second chapter, the study will illustrate Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s life and works, as well as the concept of ‘mechanosis’. In the third chapter, the researcher will evaluate the concept of ‘mechanosis’ from the perspective of the ancient and pre-modern Western philosophy. The catastrophic views of technology in Western dystopian and the evaluation from Islamic perspective will be discussed in the forth chapter. The fifth chapter will be

including the conclusion, the limitations of the research and the possible recommendations.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER TWO: LIFE AND WORKS OF JALĀL ĀL-E AHMAD

CHAPTER THREE: 'MECHANOSIS' IN OTHER PHILISOPHIES OF THE WEST
AND THE EAST IN THE ATOMIC AGE.

CHAPTER FOUR: CATASTROPHIC VIEW OF TECHNOLOGY IN WESTERN
DISTOPIAN THOUGHT AND JALĀL ĀI-E AHMAD'S
'MECHANOSIS'

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

CHAPTER TWO: LIFE AND WORKS OF JALĀL ĀL-E AHMAD

JALĀL ĀL-I AHMAD: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Agreed upon among the most influential thinkers of Iran, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad recognized for a decade after the World War. He was born on December 2, 1923 in Tehran, Iran and died on September 9, 1969. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad passed away exactly ten years before the Iranian Revolution¹ with the downfall of Pahlavi regime.²

In general, he was known for his social critics of Iran. The occasion during the Iranian Revolution in 1978/79 was hard to be studied without examining the influence of his thought. The fundamental matter about the Iranian cultural and political determination was discussed by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad in his books and articles. From the age of a teenager, he was brought up with various ideologies and philosophies. The religious fundamental shaped his analytical characters. He became critical to positive rationalism with Ahmad Kasravī's³ thought and Marxism and mixed it with existentialism.⁴ One could assume that the earlier academic and the education environment might contribute in construction his later thoughts. It could happen to the various notable thinkers.

¹ Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) (also known as the Islamic Revolution or the 1979 Revolution refers to events involving the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was supported by the United State.

² Hamid Dabashi, *The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: Theology of Discontent* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 41.

³ Ahmad Kasravī-ye Tabrīzī (1890-1946) was a notable Iranian linguist, historian, and reformer.

⁴ Claus V. Pedersen, *World View in Pre-Revolutionary Iran: Literary Analysis of Five Iranian Authors in the Context of the History of Ideas* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 168.

Besides that, the impact of a religious family, notably in education, found to be very helpful in shaping Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's thought during the process of secularization in Iranian culture. He ought to be very defensive and critical of Western ideologies.⁵ As noted from valid sources in academia, Islamic ideology could encourage an individual to be more responsive and reflective upon any situation. Therefore, developing a possible idea in responding to the situation would be helpful in understanding the matter in better way.

Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's Education

Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's educational background could reflect the rest of Iranian civilians in terms of their religious education. As born into a religious family, he was first educated at a seminary in Najaf. Then, his successful education brought him to the Teachers College in Tehran, Iranian capital city. During his spare time as a student, he worked as a journalist for Tudeh publication.⁶ These memorable involvements in early writing had assisted in shadowing his later appearance.

After his graduation from Teachers College and receiving a Master in Arts degree, he worked as a teacher. Then, with his fashionable academic qualification, he continued his study at Tehran University in Persian literature for the doctoral program. Nonetheless,

⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: Theology of Discontent* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 41.

⁶ Stephen C. Poulson, *Social Movement in Twentieth-century Iran: Culture, Ideology, and Mobilizing Frameworks* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), 188.