It is a great honor and an unparalleled experience for me to have been given this opportunity to address such a prestigious audience. Up to now, I have participated in many conferences as an Iranian, as a woman or as a Muslim. However, this is the first time I embark on a discussion as an Asian, and on the subject of Asia.

Let me begin by asking if there exists the concept of a collective Asian identity (such as what appears in the expression, “We Asians”) that also encompasses Iranians. The answer can be put forth as both a negative and as a positive. No, because Iranians are not recognized as Asians. And yes, because we all inhabit the same continent of Asia. This is an Asia which, contrary to the prevalent Orientalist patterns, has chosen not to give way to such divisions as “far”, “middle” and “near” in the reconstruction of its identity.

I ask myself why –despite the obvious fact that Iran actually belongs to Asia– have I not encountered this Asian “self” within me. Whenever asked about my national and regional origins, I have invariably responded by answering, “I am Iranian” or “I come from the Middle East.” This is because there is a common understanding that “Asia” defines the countries of the “Far East” but excludes me, as an Iranian, from its application.

I ask myself why, in spite of my belonging to the Asian continent, am I not
inclined to regard myself as an “Asian” as such? Why have I never deeply reflected upon this Asian “self” in me? Why, in the works of Iranian thinkers and scholars, do we rarely find Asia being treated as a historio-geographical reality? And how has it come about that even in the modern period, Iranian thinkers have highlighted their Iranian and Islamic heritages as their two main pillars of identity? In fact, some have even added their western heritage as a third pillar, while rarely paying attention to their “Asia” side. Even when doing so in a positive light, though, why have they failed to go further than India? When did these “Far East” and “Near-west” notions emerge in our thought patterns? And in view of this background, is it still legitimate to speak of an all-encompassing Asian “identity” or “self”?

The call for self-reflection or a “return to self” was an essential theme presented by the Iranian thinker, Ali Shariati, who preached the necessity of returning to one’s authentic social culture, history and language in criticism of the vulnerability of eastern societies being manifest in such forms as alienation and assimilation; a return towards reinstituting self-belief and reclaiming a “self” which had been deprived of its identity in the process of cultural colonization. In defining his theory, which came to be known as “self-return” in the 1960’s, Shariati writes:

Self-return means regaining one’s human personality, historical authenticity and cultural heritage, and in one word, self-consciousness, and ultimately it means recovery from the illness of cultural alienation and intellectual colonization.”

By referring to “the pioneers of self-return in the world,” he marked his theory as a continuation of the works of such figures as Aime Cesaire, Franz Fanon, Al-e-Ahmad, and the like. The same problem was further explored by others after Shariati through introduction of such concepts as “critique of Eurocentricism”, “critique of cultural alienation” and “the necessity of regaining cultural identity by the nations with colonial background,” eventually being made well acquainted in such works as Edward Said’s “Orientalism.”

This theory was based on two concepts of “return” and “self,” each having a background in our historical and cultural context. As Shariati noted, “return” may have been interpreted in the reactionary sense, that is, a call for return to the past by denying the present, while it also had the capacity of being interpreted as a conscious return with the purpose of “rediscovering and purifying the religious sources.” On the other hand,
the concept of “self” could both refer to the “good predecessors in the Islamic world” and the “authentic philosophy” of Iqbal Lahori. Therefore, precision on these two concepts was necessary.

Shariati emphasized that the return to one’s authentic cultural identity does not mean hiding behind the outdated opinions of the past and being imprisoned in old conceptual frameworks. As he mentions, “One is able to know herself only if at the same time (s)he knows the other.” The “self,” therefore, finds meaning in its relation with the “other” and through the status afforded to the “other” in one’s “self.” But the question remains: which “self” do we mean?

He enumerates the various “selves” that claim to constitute our Iranian identity and criticizes each and every one of them. Among the competing “selves” mentioned and criticized by him are, “the Iranian of the antiquity,” or the Zoroastrian Iran, which in Jaspers’ terms, had established the foundations of the human wisdom together with Greece, China, India, and Palestine; the “national Iranian self” rising against colonization; and “the Islamic self” or the Islamic Iran which played an immensely important role in bringing about what is known as “the golden era of Islamic civilization.” Shariati highlights the fact that since Iran has been located at the crossroad of various ethnic populations, as well as great civilizations and cultures, Iranian society has never been self-enclosed; rather, it has always acted as an intermediary of different cultures. Iran has interacted with Greece in philosophy, with Africa in religion and theology, and with India and the Far East in mysticism, having both influenced them and having been influenced by them.

As regards the Islamic identity of Iran and with a view to drawing clear boundaries with historical Islam in this respect, Shariati immediately poses the question, “which Islam do we mean?” This leads him to speak about the necessity of reformation in Islam. Treading in the footsteps of Iqbal Lahori, he also brings into service the concept of the Orient (or the East) and speaks of an Asian “We” or an “Oriental Self,” dedicating hundreds of pages in his works to introducing the spirit of the Oriental religions, such as Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. However, this concept of the Oriental “We” was not highlighted in his self-return project and has often been ignored in recent times.

Half a century after Shariati, we live in a different world and are confronted by a different set of problems. “Globalization” and “Religious Fundamentalism” are phenomena belonging to our new world. In these circumstances, the concept of “self-
return” has also found a new resonance. This “return” has materialized not in the sense of “self-regaining” intended by Shariati, but in the form of reactionary religious attitudes that tend to disregard what Shariati called “the spirit of the time” and the “other.” The variety of “selves” has been reduced to “one self” against the “other” adopting a chauvinistic and violent guise. In its “waking” era, the colonized Islam of the past encountered a reactionary trend known as Salafism with the characteristic mottos of “exclusion” (excommunication) and “Jihad.” The notion of “Salafieh” presented by Sayed Jamal and Abdoh is no longer pursued in the form of a “movement” or in accordance with its rational and reformatory origins; it has fallen into the hands of illegitimate inheritors.

On the other hand, and in the non-Islamic context, the quest for self-identification in the face of globalization, which in its universalizing claim suppresses and eats up any expression of particularity, has transformed into blind chauvinistic self expressions.

With such a backdrop, it appears that we are faced with two equally evil alternatives: either to be assimilated into a world which is not our own and to continue playing the role of the “inferior” or the “aborigines” as in the past, or to seek shelter behind isolated, enclosed, and consequently violent and dangerous identities.

It is in this context that a re-reading of the project of “self-return” becomes mandatory. The term “return” has a vast application and may embrace reactionary calls for return to the past as reflected in Ibn Taymiyya’s and Abd al-Wahhab’s idea of the “good predecessors,” as well as the reformist Salafiyya of Sayyed Jamal and Abduh, while it may also be applied in the sense of “reformation” and “revision.” Accordingly, this term needs further dissection. Iqbal Lahori in his turn uses the term “reconstruction” to indicate his purpose of “reconstructing Islamic thought.” However, in our historical and cultural context, the idea of reconstruction may seem pre-mature because unlike Marx’s statement that “the critique of religion has come to an end in Germany and it is the presupposition of all critiques,” one may claim that in the Islamic countries, critique of religion has not yet come to an end. In this situation, would it not be necessary to think of a revision prior to any reconstruction or—in Shariati’s terms—while we speak of “rediscovering the cultural sources,” would it not be more advisable to put emphasis on their “refining and purification”? This involves a revision with the purpose of re-thinking all constitutive elements of one’s identity, and later on, a reconstruction which is no longer limited to one’s national or religious identity but is further enriched by proliferation of its formative sources. It appears that in the
contemporary circumstances, this process of revision and reconstruction has become not merely a necessity, but an emergency.

Could Asia play a role in this reconstruction? Could Asia become one of our constitutive “selves”? The first answer to this question would transpire as negative because our cultural relation with what is known as Asia is disjointed. Today, westernization is monophonic due to globalization. The West is so close and inevitable, while for us, the Iranians, the East is still far away. An eastern self would seem strange, exotic and fictional to us. We do not know it. This mysterious east has no presence to us except through the historical books and via its cheap products available in our markets. For us, what is termed as “Asian emergence”, “the New Asia”, or the “Asian Miracle” has no meaning outside of a capitalist pattern of development; it has no cultural echoes.

Once the French sociologist and Islamic scholar, Jacque Berque, called for a “United States of the Mediterranean,” whereby the Mediterranean would be regarded as a “creative Utopia” able to fill the contemporary gap between its eastern and western coasts. Is it possible to follow Berque in speaking of an Asian unification in a continent that was the cradle of all religions in the past and has turned into a battlefield of religions at present? How could an Asia whose very identity is woven of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic pluralities give birth to a singular “self”? How could one possibly speak of an Asian identity in an Asia where identity is born into cultural variety and plurality? What would be the possible unifying element of this Asia, the essence that makes Asia, as it were, Asian?

The Orient was once conceived as a possible answer to this question, that is, a philosophical and spiritual Orient; an Orient that could attain unity in what Shariati called the “Oriental Spirit and Insight.” This could be witnessed in the Islam that the Sufi’s brought to the heart of Asia, in the similarities discovered between the Islamic and the Indian mysticisms and in Buddhism which ran through half the continent. That is, the Orient as the world of meaning and of illumination. This would be an Orient defined non-geographically and could serve as a symbolic unity against western materialism and nihilism. This conception of the Orient, however, would still be prone to adopting an essentialist and culturalist form, thus positing Asia against the West, and thus creating a new gap between East and West.

It appears that resorting to the historio-cultural East could serve as another possible response to the above question. The remote past of ours, the inhabitants of Asia, tells of some core common culture. There used to be a road that linked all of us
Asians together. This was a network of mountainous roads that connected the east, the west and the north of Asia and led into eastern and northern Europe. This road used to be called the “Silk Road” or the “Spice Road.” Merchant caravans on this road established our connection with China and India on the one hand, and with Europe on the other. These caravans also ensured our cultural relations. History tells of rivalries among the political forces to dominate this road. In the course of the cultural disjunction in our relations with the East, the caravans stopped travelling on this road and gradually Asia became distant – leaving behind only the ruined remnants of this ancient connection in our memories and in history. However, in the words of the French poet, Louis Aragon, “what used to be, will still be if we remember it.”

The present meeting which has brought us, all Asian inhabitants carrying our cultural diversity, together, would be well to lend an ear: a summoning of our interrupted memories in order to reconstruct this network of roads which may connect us together once again and re-launch the cultural caravans. This renewed connection may lead to the emergence of a cultural Asia by departing from the Orientalist representations of Asia. This new Asia would seek its miracle not in capitalist development and hegemony anymore, but in proliferation and enrichment of its historical and cultural origins.

Professor, University of Tehran

テヘラン大学教授