

## **Something Separates Me from Other People<sup>1</sup>: The Matter of Sexuality in Golshiri's Short Story**

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### **Abstract**

First published in a collection with the same name in 1975, Namaz Khaneh-e-Kouchak-e-Man (My Little Prayer Room) deals with the narrator's biggest secret, which happens to be an extra piece on his left toe. Houshang Golshiri, the writer of the collection, is known as one of the most celebrated Iranian modern fiction writers, who influenced Persian prose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by creating works of fiction that incorporated the literature of the world while maintaining its Iranian authenticity simultaneously. Until the constitutional revolution in Iran, same-sex relationships for men and women were implicitly recognized cultural practices, so long as they remained discreet and respected certain conventions. However, the 1906 constitutional revolution which introduced new literary forms to the country such as drama, novel, music, and film, was followed by many contradictions, inner conflicts, and extravagancies. Greater interactions with the

west provided the ground for cultural interactions and made those Iranian visitors to the west realized that it would be the better way to dissimulate and disavow male-male sexuality in Qajar Iran as polite European society had same-sex relations in great disdain. Consequently, by the late Pahlavi era, Iranian society had moved away from statues-defined homosexuality to normative heterosexuality. Nevertheless, there was a gradual acceptance of the modern gay lifestyle in small, elite circles by the 1970s. Regarding Golshiri's concerns towards controversial Iranian issues of his time, this essay aims to display the ways the extra piece may resemble the male narrator's homo or bisexuality that makes him feel ashamed among other people in the society who condemned same-sex relations.

**Keywords:** Houshang Golshiri, Sexuality, Iranian Society, My Little Prayer Room, the Extra Piece

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<sup>1</sup> (Golshiri, 10)

## Introduction

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, a revolution occurred in the western world [1]. People started banishing the alternative sexual practices, which led to a Gay and Lesbian liberation movement. The movement correlated with the work of feminists who were concerned with issues of sexuality and gender identity [2]. On the other hand, abandoning the standard sexual practice passed a different process in Iran. By the late Pahlavi era<sup>2</sup> (1960-1970) Iranian society had moved away from statues-defined homosexuality [3]. However, there was a gradual acceptance of the modern gay lifestyle by the 1970s within small elite circles [4]. This paper focuses on a notable short story, *Namaz Khaneh-e-Kouchak-e-Man* (My little prayer room), by Houshang Golshiri in which the writer objects the dominance of heterosexuality. First published in a collection with the same name in 1975, the short story deals with the narrator's biggest secret, which happens to be an extra piece on his left toe. This essay aims at displaying how the extra piece may resemble homosexuality that makes the narrator feel ashamed among other people in society. To do so, first, an introduction to the writer and his style of writing is required. Second, the paper presents a brief introduction to the queer theory and the way it progressed in Iran especially by the time *My Little Prayer Room* was published. Afterward, the essay goes through the story and analyzes the dialogues in order to develop the main idea.

As one of the most celebrated Iranian modern fiction writers, Houshang Golshiri influenced Persian prose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century [5] (Taheri 96) in a way that he involved himself towards controversial Iranian issues

of the time such as religion, politics, and women's situation [6]. Although the writer became famous for his novella, *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (Prince Ehtejab), he wrote numerous considerable works of fiction such as *My Little Prayer Room* which was first published in a collection with the same name in 1975. Similar to most of Golshiri's works of fiction, *My Little Prayer Room* keeps no order in time and the reader learns concurrently about the incidents that happened at different times [7]. He uses poetic diction and stream of consciousness the way each word may contain several meanings depending on personal experiences [8]. Moreover, Golshiri is an expert in taking modern western forms and blending them with Persian culture [9]. "His writings are distinguished by their complex structure, vivid language, and subtle manipulations of narrative time." [10]. As far as the style of writing is concerned, Golshiri claimed that his work took a greater effort because he created works of fiction that incorporated the literature of the world and maintained its Iranian authenticity simultaneously [11]. Whereof Golshiri's notable works cannot be analyzed merely within some pages, they require a thorough knowledge of Iranian literature and history. As critics discussed, Golshiri poses questions that need profound considerations not only in its own time but also for posterities. In fact, he knew that if he answered each question, his work would not find its way to the future [12]. Accordingly, the writer poses a question in *My Little Prayer Room* which requires deep cerebrating and understanding.

"The emergence of a gay and lesbian liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the west interested necessarily with the work of feminists who were concerned with issues of sexuality and of gender identity." [13]. Those who supported the movement believed that "gender identity seemed more subject to the contingencies of

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<sup>2</sup> The ruling house of the imperial state of Iran from 1925 until 1979.

culture and history, more something constructed in and variable across society and through history.” [14]. However, this perspective passed a different process in Iran: until the constitutional revolution<sup>3</sup> in Iran (during the eighteenth and nineteenth century), “same-sex relationships for men and women were implicitly recognized cultural practices, so long as they remained discreet and respected certain conventions.” [15]. The 1906 constitutional revolution in Iran which introduced new literary forms to the country such as drama, novel, music, and film [16] followed by many contradictions, inner conflicts, and extravagancies [17]. Accordingly, “greater interaction with the West in the nineteenth century had resulted in a gradual adoption of some modern gender and sexual norms in Iran.” [18]. After Iranian visitors to the west realized that “polite European society had same-sex relations in great disdain”, they thought it would be the better way to dissimulate and disavow male-male sexuality in Qajar<sup>4</sup> Iran.” [19]. Not until the late Pahlavi era, “Iranian society had substantially moved away from statues-defined homosexuality that was out of the west relationship with the country, to normative heterosexuality.” [20]. Nevertheless, there was a gradual acceptance of the modern gay lifestyle in small, elite circles by the 1970s [21].

Even though my little prayer room is a prominent modern Persian fiction, few gender critics have viewed it separately in their analytic essays. This essay seeks to answer the question of what is the extra piece in the toe that effects the narrator’s entire life. To do so, the author of this paper goes through dialogues, the repetitions, symbols, and important scenes in order to answer the main question. Thus, this study gives a better

understanding of Golshiri’s short story and investigates the secret that the narrator is keeping through the western queer theory, which was not acceptable in Iran’s society during the time that My Little Prayer Room was published.

### **Getting through My Little Prayer Room**

My Little Prayer Room narrates the life of a boy who happens to have an extra piece on his smallest toe, which he calls “a piece of red meat”<sup>5</sup> [22]. Whereof the point of view is the first person, the reader gets to know the story from the narrator’s monologues and descriptions. Apparently, everything else in the story circles around the protagonist’s extra piece. In other words, this extra piece on the toe affects the narrator’s relationships the way he rather hides it from others. Additionally, the narrator’s family are so ashamed of the extra piece that they change their neighborhood from time to time so that nobody can notice their son’s imperfection. Even kids do not seem to show respect toward the narrator, Hasan, when they find out about his toe and start to call him “The six-finger Hassan!” [23]. From time to time during the story, the narrator recalls a small boy with two red chicks, whom he met as a kid and revealed his imperfection to; however, the little boy sneered and made the narrator feel ashamed [24]. As an adult, the narrator feels alone, for he is afraid of reviling his extra piece to others. Later, he gets the courage to show his imperfection to a woman whom he proposes to; but she rejects him since she thinks the extra piece in Hasan’s toe makes their marriage unusual and inappropriate [25].

As it was mentioned before, this essay aims at answering two main questions: what does the imperfection possibly represent and how

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<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the parliament that took place between the years 1905-1911

<sup>4</sup> An Iranian royal dynasty during 1785-1925

<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author

do the narrator and other people react toward it. Relying on the queer theory, the extra piece can resemble homosexuality or bisexuality. In a sense that, this imperfection is not socially acceptable. The protagonist not only is humiliated among other children as a child but also rejected from the woman he decides to marry as an adult. "The neighborhood must have forgotten. They might even have forgotten me. I am the only person who knows it exists as something that separates me from others." [26]. "I had a thing. A thing that no one would see." [27]. In addition, his family are so ashamed of this imperfection that they move their neighborhood from time to time, warning the narrator never let others notice the toe. Thus, the extra piece makes the protagonist socially rejected since it happens to be abnormal and out of harmony, something that the owner is afraid to reveal. The narrator explains this imperfection something more than what it seems; evidently, it bears more serious connotation. "In the light, everything is the way it shows, separated from other things. On the contrary, in the dark or where there exist shadows, things are not exactly what they represent; even lines of the templates are faded or invalid." [28]

As the story starts to begin, it describes the reaction of the family toward the narrator's issue. Although the father believes that everyone in the society has a kind of imperfection, he, similar to the mother, insists on hiding his son's extra piece from others. "My mother would say: do not take off your socks, never take them off." [29]. The imperfection happens to be so much of a disaster that the narrator's parents not only insist on hiding it but also leave their neighborhood. "She meant in front of strangers, and for me, everyone was strangers except her or maybe my father. Each time my father and I wanted to take a bath, we would

not go to a public bathroom. Mother would not let us. No one knew about it in this neighborhood. Maybe that is why she always warn me not to go swimming with other kids." [30]

As it was mentioned earlier, society does not accept the extra piece as it seems to be unnatural; thus, the protagonist starts to feel ashamed of having it. He understands that he has an extra piece on his toe and that it is not appropriate to talk about it with other people. Due to the society's reaction, the narrator finds out that his body has differences with the fixed picture of the human body which the society refers to as natural [31]. Accordingly, he tries to cut the piece off in when he is a child: "Now, every time I remember the incident, my right-hand start to shake. It happened in that neighborhood and to be honest, I would have cut it if my mother had not arrived." [32]. As an adult, Hasan assumes that the extra piece is the reason why he is alone, for it separates him from other people. On the other hand, he eulogizes his situation since he is aware of his imperfection and he deals with it, unlike those who run away from theirs. "Even at school (I am a teacher) I feel sad. Whenever I look at my foot, I know the extra part is there with that delicate curve and small red tip. Thus, I do not have to smoke or search for a cozy little bar that only has one table and one chair similar to other people." [33]. Further, the narrator simulates his loneliness (which happened due to the imperfection) to a little prayer room, which is sacred for him "I mean the loneliest, most pitiful room that one can imagine. If I were religious, I would definitely make myself a little prayer room. Like aristocrat's prayer room." [34].

Besides his parents, the narrator mentions only two people whom he had a conversation with about the extra piece: a little boy that he meets as a kid and a woman that he proposes

to later. Describing the little boy, the narrator does not reveal the sex of the boy until he starts a conversation with him. Since his descriptions of the little boy seem erotic, the reader might assume that Hasan is describing a girl<sup>6</sup>. "No one calls me 'the six-finger Hasan' here. Actually, it was my fault. I am not talking about this last time. He was so small and thin, and I do not know, maybe his black hair was on his moonshine forehead, or because he had bright eyes, I thought he was not a stranger. For me, strangers are those whom I hardly reach to their belt, or I would fit in their hands, and if they wanted to, they could play with the hair, which sticks to my forehead. If I could see their eyes, their cheek either was dirty or bloody, and not as pale as his or with no dimple under it. Without a stick under their arm which they had leaned on a wall." [35]

Then, the narrator talks about the little boy's reaction toward the imperfection: "he did not say anything. He just looked, probably at my left foot sock, which I was taking off. I thought I should not have made him promise not to tell anyone. He would not say, for sure. His lips were small and red. Then he said: it is nothing." [36]. Furthermore, Hasan simulates the extra piece on his toe with the little boy's appearance "Well, what can be done? If it were not that small and red, I would have played with the hair on his forehead." [37]. As an adult, the narrator starts to have an affair with a prostitute whom her appearance "yells that she is a stranger." [38]. However, he claims that he loved her more than any other 'woman' in the whole world [39]. In fact, the narrator differentiates between loving 'a person' and 'a woman'. "When it is possible just to sit down and think about all these things, all things in darkness, in shadow, or think about all the closed doors

or the dark corners of an old foyer, it's not possible to tell a person or even the best girl in the world, that you love them." [40]. He mentions that he is sleeping with the woman because while being with a prostitute he does not need to take off his socks [41]. That is, he would be able to hide his homosexual part by sleeping with a woman. As soon as the woman finds out about the protagonist's toe, she asks him to remove it. However, the narrator shows his dissatisfaction, mentioning the little boy in his monologue: "I know it was impossible when I remembered 'him.' I did not want to lie to her or hide something from her." [42]. Afterward, he objects the fact that humans have a fixed meaning of natural gender either male or female: "She did not understand, or did not want to. For her, humans have the eternal shape of those pictures that is printed next to the word human in encyclopedias. Head, neck, chest, feet. Two feet, and the left foot with five toes." [43]. "Tell me that you love me, she asked. I answered: should I put it into words? Don't you see it? And I do not know why they would not believe it until you say it, just like that boy with the broken leg." [44].

## Conclusion

The intellectual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the western world resulted in an abandonment of the alternative sexual practices and led to a Gay and Lesbian liberation movement. The movement correlated with the work of feminists who were concerned with issues of sexuality and gender identity. On the other hand, abolishing the so-called 'natural' sexual practice passed a different process in Iran. The male homosexual practices in the Qajar era was replaced by heterosexual marriage by

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<sup>6</sup> The Persian language does not have gender-specific pronouns while referring to people. Accordingly, one

would not know the gender of the person who is being mentioned until the narrator reveals it.

the late Pahlavi era (the time that *My Little Prayer Room* was published). However, small elite circles opposed normative sexual practices in their ways. This paper focuses on a notable short story, *Namaz Khaneh-e-Kouchak-e-Man* (My little prayer room), by Houshang Golshiri that was first published in a collection with the same name. It aims to answer two main questions: what does the imperfection (the extra piece on the narrator's left toe) possibly represents and how do the narrator and other people react to it.

There are less than a few critical works on the content of *My Little Prayer Room* even though it is a prominent modern Persian fiction. This paper seeks to answer two main questions by investing through dialogues, the repetitions, symbols and essential scenes. It intends to give a better understanding of the story and to discuss the secret that the narrator is keeping based on a theory which was unacceptable in Iran's society during the time *My Little Prayer Room* was published. First, the essay presents a summary of the story; then, it supports the idea that the narrator's extra piece can resemble homosexuality or bisexuality. Afterward, it discusses the way the narrator's family, the narrator himself, and the society confronts the unnatural extra piece on the toe. Moreover, it analyzes the name of the story and its relation to the main idea. Thereupon, it reveals how the extra piece can be linked with the little boy whom the narrator meets as a child. To sum up, analyzing *My Little Prayer Room* in this paper is an effort to show how homosexuality was reflected in a modern Persian fiction despite the restrictions. It depicts the way the individuals react toward this abnormality which imparts a different perspective to readers.

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