

The Abject Outsider: “*The Story of Two Gay Men*”

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Introduction

In his “Homosexuality in Arabic Literature,” Frederic Lagrange offers the following categorizations regarding the presence of diverse sexualities, and representation of (male) homosexual characters in Arabic literature: “a typical aspect of traditional society, either to be denounced or simply neutrally described [. . .], a homosexual character, whether central or secondary, is often represented as undergoing a *malaise* and loss of self-worth, possibly leading to death or suicide; thirdly, homosexuality may be articulated in the traumatic relationship with the Other.”¹ While Persian literature, to some extent, suffers from a paucity of discussion about (male) sexuality, Amir Soltani and Khalil Bendib’s graphic novel, *Yousef*

¹Frederic Lagrange, “Homosexuality in Arabic Literature,” *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Mai Ghousoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 175.

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and *Farhad Struggling for Family Acceptance in Iran: The Story of Two Gay Men* (referred to as *Yousef and Farhad* hereafter), Arsham Parsi's memoir, *Exiled for Love*, and Jean Beaini and Mohammad Khordadian's biography, *For the Love of Mohammad*, provide us with homosexual characters similar to the ones in Lagrange's categorization.²

Yousef and Farhad breaks the silence on diverse (male) sexualities and redefines masculinity as non-singular, rather than the outcome of a biological or social construction. The graphic novel chronicles the struggles of a gay man, Yousef, after coming out to his family. Yousef and his lover, Farhad, are exposed to harassment and violence after revealing their true sexual orientation.³ They appeal for acceptance and dignity from their family and society, but are instead rejected and abandoned. The graphic novel illustrates that central to the construction of the dominant (heterosexual, middle-class) masculinity is the subordination of the gay masculinity as a repository for everything that heterosexual masculinity deems as weak and feminine.⁴ This subordination of gay masculinity normalizes heterosexuality while deeming homosexuality as abnormal. Although today's Iran is considered one of more than 75 countries globally that criminalize homosexuality by punishing with death, Soltani and Bendib show that the new generation of Iranian society is undoubtedly evolving toward a more tolerant and accepting relationship with the LGBTQ community.

²Amir Soltani and Khalil Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad Struggling for Family Acceptance in Iran: The Story of Two Gay Men* (OutRight Action International, 2015); Arsham Parsi and Marc Colburne, *Exiled for Love: The Journey of an Iranian Queer Activist* (Halifax: Roseway Publishing, 2015); and Jean Beaini and Mohammad Khordadian, *For the Love of Mohammad: A Memoir* (U.S.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

³The names of the protagonists might be of significance to our discussion in this paper. Yousef shares his name with Prophet Yousef (Joseph) who was one of Jacob's twelve sons. In Islamic tradition, Yousef is the ideal of male beauty. However, Yousef's male beauty and sexuality is contested as it is portrayed as fluid in Persian cultural productions throughout history. See Claudia Yaghoobi, "Yusef's 'Queer' beauty in Persian Cultural Productions," *The Comparatist Journal* 40. 1 (Fall 2016): 245-266. Farhad is the name of the most important character in an ancient tragic Persian love story written by many poets including Nezami in his *Khosrow and Shirin*, which projects Farhad as the epitome of true and pure lover.

⁴See Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (CA: University of California Press, 1995).

Exploring the characters, this paper considers Yousef and Farhad as the “abject outsiders” of their society, who simultaneously mark the boundaries and initiate the destabilization of hegemonic masculinity while their sexuality is constituted and defined in relationship to the dominant heterosexual and middle-class masculinity.⁵

To explore the hierarchy of masculinities in Iran within various genres, I also examine two memoirs: Arsham Parsi’s *Exiled for Love* and Jean Beaini and Mohammad Khordadian’s *For the Love of Mohammad*. *Exiled for Love* delineates Parsi’s coming to terms with his identity as a gay man in Iran and his attempts to bring the LGBTQ community together via the Internet, while raising awareness about the Iranian LGBTQ community in the world. It expounds on the torture and imprisonment of gay men (and all LGBTQ individuals), the brutal socio-cultural environment, and the harsh Islamic laws in Iran against homosexuality. *For the Love of Mohammad* discloses the complexities of a relationship into which a young gay man, the renowned Iranian male dancer Mohammad Khordadian, has been manipulated while in love with another man. It hints at the socio-cultural constraints mandating men marry women, and the fact that many gay men enter into these marriages to avoid ostracism, while maintaining a relationship with another man on the side. This type of secrecy within relationships not only elucidates the impact of such marriages on the lives of gay men, but also shows how such decisions alter the lives of the women involved. Utilizing Parsi’s and Khordadian’s accounts of lived experiences, this paper brings to light the influence of suppression and silencing on those whose lives are affected. Focusing on all three works, this paper attempts to show what has been excluded in the construction of the dominant masculinity and to address the public silences about diverse sexualities and sexual practices.⁶ In Joan Scott’s words, “[W]orks such as these

⁵For a discussion of the relationship between homosexuals and heterosexuals see Clyde W. Franklin II, “‘Ain’t I a Man?’ The efficacy of black masculinities for men’s studies in the 1990s?” in *The American Black Male: His Present Status and His Future*, ed. R. Majors and J. Gordon (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1994).

⁶Judith Newton, “White Guys,” *Feminist Studies* 24: 3 (Fall 1998): 575-560.

provide evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic construction of social world,” in this case to the hegemonic, socio-cultural construction of gender and sexuality.⁷ By bringing Parsi’s and Khordadian’s experiences to the fore, the memoirs make visible the experiences of a group of men who are deemed different, and they simultaneously expose a long history of repressive mechanisms. While memoirs are viewed as more authoritative because they attribute a sense of authenticity to a narrative, graphic novels are often deemed less credible in academia. Nonetheless, this paper considers Soltani and Bendib’s choice of graphic novel as a means of subversion to the hegemonic discourses of not only masculinity in Iran, but also literature in academia.

Hierarchy of Masculinities

Regardless of the fact that the title of the graphic novel and the storyline revolve around the relationship between Yousef and Farhad, the character who provides us with the most pertinent characteristics regarding the question of masculinity is Yousef’s father, Mr. Jafari. Though he does not fit into the traditionally constructed category of a protagonist, he is not entirely an individual antagonist either. He can, however, be considered as the embodiment of heterosexual, homophobic masculinity in current Iran. Of course, Mr. Jafari is not the archetypal representation of the community’s hegemonic masculinity, in his capacity as the head of the family; however, he can implement power over Yousef. As Connell points out, “The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support.”⁸ The preferred hegemonic masculinity is “an unattainable ideal” that most men representing sub-hegemonic masculinities strive for.⁹ Hegemony is established through the “correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power,”

⁷Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797.

⁸Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 185.

⁹Connell, *Gender and Power*, 185.

which claims authority.¹⁰ These dominant masculinities are those that benefit from the “patriarchal dividend” of the instituted hegemony, while not being subject to the risk of those few that do embody the wholly archetypical exemplar of that hegemony.¹¹ Mr. Jafari falls within this category of masculinities.

Since masculinity is a culturally specific construction, answers about Middle Eastern masculinities should be sought in the cultures where they are shaped.¹² The ideal of masculinity in Muslim societies generally, and in Iran particularly, revolves around the institution of family and procreation; that is, a man is expected to marry, have a wife, and father a child. Maleeha Aslam writes, “The most central and almost universal expectation from the masculine gender is to be and to perform like a breadwinner. Men fall down the appropriate gender order if they fail to fit into this assigned gender role.”¹³ According to Amanullah De Soudy, “Masculinity is constructed around the tenets of power, and the powerful needs a power base. In the lives of most Muslim men this locus has become the heterosexual family.”¹⁴ Since homosexuality is not a topic of discussion or debate in countries like Iran, Asia Siraj’s words ring true that “the accommodation of ‘deviant’ identities is considerably more difficult In countries . . . where Islam predominates, the subject continues to be clouded in ignorance and intentional neglect. Indeed, the traditional and continued silence on the issue prevents many with homosexual feelings from identifying themselves publicly.”¹⁵ In such

¹⁰Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

¹¹Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

¹²See D. D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1990) and *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

¹³Maleeh Aslam, “Gender Theory,” in *Gender-Based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* (Tokyo: UNU Press, 2012), 85. Regarding the importance of establishing family in perception of masculinity, see also Marcia Claire Inhorn, *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁴Amanullah De Soudy, “Feminists’ Nonothering Hermeneutics,” in *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London, NY: Bloomsbury Publishers, 2015), 72-3.

¹⁵Asif Siraj, “On Being Homosexual and Muslim: Conflicts and Challenges,” in *Islamic Mas-*

societies, “coming out,” which S. Seidman defines as “the dramatic quality of privately and publicly coming to terms with a contested social identity” is more often than not accompanied with violence and disavowal from family and society.¹⁶

In *Yousef and Farhad*, the very fact that Yousef is afraid to “come out” to his family and when he does, is faced with violence and abandonment, confirms the rationale behind this imposed public silence and neglect in regard to representations of diverse human sexuality, particularly homosexuality. In his memoir, too, Mohammad Khordadian echoes the complexity of this fear and public silence. He writes, “By the age of nineteen, I was already beginning to realize the implications of having been born into a culture and religion with many restrictions on how, who, or when one should love, and a pervading intolerance towards the crossing of those lines.”¹⁷ It takes Khordadian experiencing a painful marriage and distressing struggles in exile to be able to “come out” to his wife, family, and friends. Likewise, in his memoir, Arsham Parsi chronicles similar traumatic experiences. It is only in exile that he is able to tell his family the truth about his identity. Regarding violence against the LGBTQ community in Iran, Parsi touches upon the grave matter of the criminalization of homosexuality and the brutal executions of homosexuals as well. He writes that murdering a homosexual “bestowed blessings on those that inflicted these punishments for they were carrying out the will of God.”¹⁸ He keeps questioning, “How does a person feel when they discover that their life is worth nothing to those that hold the power in their society?”¹⁹ While Khordadian’s and Parsi’s families seem to be understanding, such tolerance cannot be overgeneralized or extended to all Iranian families. Although Khordadian and Parsi critique society for upholding traditional beliefs

culinities, ed. Lahoucine Ouzgane (New York: Zed Books, 2006).

¹⁶S. Seidman et al., “Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States,” in *Sexuality and Gender*, ed. C. L. Williams and A. Stein (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), 427.

¹⁷Beaini and Khordadian, *For the Love of Mohammad*, 25.

¹⁸Parsi and Colborne, *Exiled for Love*, 13.

¹⁹Parsi and Colborne, *Exiled for Love*, 13.

regarding homosexuality, and the state for exerting strict laws and punishments, in *Yousef and Farhad*, the authors focus on the family's struggles to come to terms with Yousef's homosexuality. Of course the truth is, behind the family's troubles in accepting their sons are such thoughts as "what will others think?" and "I do not want them to hang him up", giving voice to the aforementioned traditional and political perspectives operating against the idea of homosexuals as human and homosexuality as a crime against the state.

In *Yousef and Farhad*, once Mr. Jafari becomes aware of Yousef's homosexuality, he reacts in a way that exerts his hegemonic power position immediately. Soon after confronting Yousef, Mr. Jafari strikes him across the face and degrades Yousef and Farhad's poetic correspondences, calling them "filth".²⁰ He physically eliminates his son from his life, tearing down posters and impetuously throwing Yousef's belongings out into the street. In order to further assert his son's subordinate position, Mr. Jafari humiliates him by throwing him out into the rain, thus solidifying his position as a dominant heterosexual male, as well as the patriarch of the family.



Figure 1: Panels from p. 9 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. Here, Mr. Jafari, who has just become aware of Yousef's relationship with Farhad, slaps Yousef, condemns him for his correspondences with Farhad, and throws Yousef out of his house.

²⁰Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 7.

This illustrates that to the heterosexual Mr. Jafari, homosexual masculinities fall at the bottom of the gender hierarchy and must be subordinated. To Mr. Jafari (and by extension to all who desire to punish homosexuals), his son's sexual orientation is what is banished from hegemonic definitions of masculinity. De Soudy discusses the hierarchy of masculinities in Islam referring to the "prophetic tradition [that] places emphasis on the valiant and heroic form of Islamic masculinity above the more softer form of Islamic masculinity," exemplifying that traditions are always "partially subjective to suit the needs and desires of individuals who choose as they desire."²¹ In fact, Mr. Jafari's understanding of his son's gayness falls along those same binary lines which are distorted with homophobic notions that consider male homosexuality as the softer type of masculinity parallel to femininity. As Siraj argues, "Heterosexist norms construct heterosexual masculinity based upon a static binary of male/female; the antithesis of this construct is, in effect, the homosexual male."²² Therefore, through his self-identification, the homosexual male (and female) challenges the dominant gender binary and disrupts hegemony.

Discussing male homosexuality in Iran, Najmabadi argues that what made homosexuality "a cultural assault and moral insult [in Iran] was ... the shame of being *kuni*. The most derogatory word in the realm of sexuality, *kuni* literally means anal, but in Persian it exclusively means to be receptive of anal penetration."²³ Given the story was allotted a mere 20 pages for the tale of events to unfold, Yousef is almost immediately painted as a passive-receptive participant in the relationship. Such expediency helps explicate why Mr. Jafari deems Yousef's actions defamatory toward the family reputation as well as actions that are not worthy of a living person. Mr. Jafari's attitude is mirrored in another encounter Yousef has when a passerby in a

²¹De Soudy, "Introduction," 10.

²²Asif Siraj, "On Being Homosexual and Muslim," 212.

²³Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 138. I have used the spelling of the word 'kuni' or 'koonie' the way it has been spelled in various works.

vehicle approaches him as he is wandering the streets as a homeless youth. The driver yells out to Yousef, “Hey, Good Looking! How much?” and when Yousef denies giving his attention to the driver, the driver angrily shouts out, “You filthy homo! You’re too good for me?!” Correspondingly, when his father initially throws Yousef out of his home, the neighborhood kids proceed to call him “faggot.”²⁴



Figure 2: Panels from p. 11 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. After being thrown out of his house by his father, Yousef is exposed to verbal harassment by the neighbors who call him a “faggot.”

These instances reify the lack of humanity and masculinity culturally associated with male homosexuality. The word that Soltani and Bendib use in the Persian text is “*koonie*” which harps on the passivity of one partner in same-sex relationships following the rhetoric of positionality. The importance of the word choice and limitation is emphasized in Khordadian’s memoir where he indicates, “Yet at the same time our language did not possess a single decent word for homosexual. A homosexual was a *koonie*, ‘one who gives arse’, and so I dared not speak of my love for this man who had captured my heart, because I did

²⁴Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 8.

not want my parents to know or to suffer the shame of their youngest son being labeled in this derogatory way: a ‘*koonie*’.”²⁵ A conversation also comes up in Parsi’s memoir where he is asked if homosexuality means being a “sodomite.”²⁶ In another instance, Parsi is called a “faggot” which is a literal translation of the Persian word “*koonie*.”²⁷ The belief that the passive-receptive partner deserves condemnation is consistent with pre-modern Arabo-Muslim (also Greek) discourses on same-sex desire and relations which regard “a preference for the passive-receptive role in sexual intercourse ... as the very antithesis of masculinity.”²⁸ Such discourses emphasize the importance of positionality; that is, the active-passive roles of the participants in the relationship.²⁹ In pre-modern Arabo-Muslim societies, the role of the passive-penetrated was perceived to be either feminine, diseased, pathological condition, or a great sin, as it was assumed the penetrated or passive partner enjoyed the act.³⁰ Traditional Arabic medical discourse, following the Greek, regarded a man who desired to be penetrated as being afflicted with a disease with prescribed remedies. This was considered an innate condition and was called *ubnah*. The individual afflicted with the disease was called *ma’bun* and was “perceived as being at odds with the ideal of masculinity.”³¹ The belief in female-passive and male-active gender roles continues to this day as Najmabadi remarks that this gender-binary renders any fissures in hegemonic masculinity as effeminization.³² While discussing his son’s homosexuality with Zahra and Miriam, not only does Mr. Jafari consider him feminine (passive-

²⁵Beaini and Khordadian, *For the Love of Mohammad*, 27.

²⁶Parsi and Colborne, *Exiled for Love*, 24.

²⁷Parsi and Colborne, *Exiled for Love*, 37.

²⁸Khaled El-Rouayheb, “Pederasts and Pathics,” in *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World: 1500-1800* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 21.

²⁹Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 107.

³⁰El-Rouayheb, “Pederasts and Pathics,” 16. See also Frederic Lagrange, “Homosexuality in Arabic Literature,” 171.

³¹El-Rouayheb, “Pederasts and Pathics,” 19-21.

³²Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* (CA: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

receptive partner), but also he distraughtly declares that his son has an incurable disease.³³

Documenting the experiences of its characters as “abject outsiders,” *Yousef and Farhad* demonstrates how Yousef’s father continuously condemns his son’s membership in his family and even denies him human existence. Talking to Miriam and Zahra about his son, Mr. Jafari uses the past tense, completely dissociating himself from Yousef.³⁴ He considers Yousef’s sexuality and vivacious self-embrace as a prudent attempt to defame and detract from his and the family’s honor and thus an unbelievable embarrassment in his life, asking, “How could you be so selfish, my son?”³⁵ When Yousef attempts to commit suicide, it is an even additional impudence and disgrace to Mr. Jafari, who remarks while sitting in the hospital waiting room, “First dishonor, and now this...,” an implacable comment when read alongside the one made previously to Zahra and Miriam suggesting that Mr. Jafari’s life would be painless if his son was actually dead.³⁶ Mr. Jafari’s aloofness and the insensitivity of his comment prompts Miriam to remind him to be thankful that Yousef is not dead.³⁷ Yousef’s “coming out” and public act of subversion through suicide is what Mr. Jafari believes has brought shame and dishonor to the family. Not only does Mr. Jafari view Yousef as the passive-receptive partner in his relationship, he also perceives Yousef’s suicide attempt as a weak and thereby non-masculine act.³⁸

In addition to physically undermining subordinated masculinities, a very important factor in maintaining hegemony for heterosexual, middle-class men is denying “cultural definition and recognition as

³³ Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 4.

³⁴ Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 2.

³⁵ Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 4.

³⁶ Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 13.

³⁷ Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 13.

³⁸ Yet, Yousef is not the only character that Mr. Jafari subordinates. In the same scene in the hospital waiting room, he confronts Farhad during his attempt to visit Yousef. He accuses the young man of corrupting his son, calling him a “bastard” and a “faggot” and asserting that he has “no rights” before harshly dismissing him with a threat of further violence (*Yousef and Farhad*, 13).

alternatives” to different sexualities.³⁹ In *Yousef and Farhad*, this denial is enacted through Mr. Jafari’s repudiation of Yousef’s humanity and a refusal to name him. When asked, “Who is this?” while looking at the torn fragments of Yousef’s photograph, he answers that “He has no name.”⁴⁰ This dismissive attitude about naming and acknowledging Yousef’s identity persists throughout the graphic novel. Mr. Jafari’s disinterest in acknowledging Yousef’s identity is parallel to renouncing Yousef altogether from the Jafari family. In this way, Yousef is stripped from his familial and societal identity. While Mr. Jafari is the one who estranges Yousef from his family, he is also the one character who is recognized by his last name (denied first name) only and is addressed by the honorific “Mr.” throughout the graphic novel. Mr. Jafari’s lack of identity, however, has a contrastive effect which makes him to be easily generalized as a representation of Iranian hegemonic masculinity.

Calling normative narratives into question, Mr. Jafari’s prejudice and homophobia are set at odds with his brother Taymour’s acceptance and support for his nephew. Teymour becomes the voice of reason for Yousef’s father as he points out the hypocrisy in the fact that Mr. Jafari had premarital sex with the woman who became his wife because they were so in love. For Yousef’s uncle, true love is true love, whether between a man and a woman or a man and another man. Yousef’s uncle draws connections between Yousef’s parents’ premarital sex and Yousef’s homosexuality, questioning Mr. Jafari’s beliefs about the superiority of iteration of one love over the other.⁴¹ The two Jafari brothers’ physical appearances are, however, juxtaposed significantly (disused fully in the next section). Taymour is tall, broad, muscular, wearing a full beard, whereas Mr. Jafari is short, thin, gaunt-looking, with a thin mustache. While Taymour is respectably employed at his own print-and-copy store and Internet café, Mr. Jafari drives a taxi which he parallels with a coffin, and which is frequently associated with lower-income class of the society. The contrast between the brothers illustrates that the

³⁹Connell, *Gender and Power*, 186.

⁴⁰Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 2.

⁴¹Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 15.

relationship between the dominant and subordinate group is not a fixed one. In particular situations, this power structure changes. This is further crystalized in the scene where another irritated driver confronts Mr. Jafari and proceeds to call him a “faggot.”⁴² This greatly insults and enrages Mr. Jafari and results in a physical confrontation between the two drivers. Scott’s argument resonates with the scene: “Not only does homosexuality define heterosexuality by specifying its negative limits, and not only is the boundary between the two a shifting one, but both operate within the structure of the same “phallic economy” –.”⁴³ Even though Mr. Jafari (like other men similar to him) holds and exercises power in the society for being heterosexual, at any point, he too might be exposed to subordination by other masculinities that are higher than his on the hierarchy. However, these subordinations do not mean that those who are subordinate submit to the power structure. As we witness in the memoirs and graphic novel, they challenge and disturb such power structures.



Figure 3: Panels from p. 33 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. This is when the tables are turned and another driver calls Mr. Jafari a “faggot”. This name-calling drives him mad and he treats the other driver violently.

⁴²Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 20.

⁴³Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 779.

Mr. Jafari's reactions to Yousef's "coming out" demonstrate how family and home shape men's public image. The domestic sphere or the home has a fluid, yet pervasive relationship with the male body.⁴⁴ The private sphere, although confined within the walls of the home, influences gender performances. The male self must not only act as a son, husband, or father in the private space of the home, but also wrestle with being a politically, culturally, and professionally active figure in society.⁴⁵ Likewise, openness is potentially deadly. Like Yousef, not all Muslim homosexuals are received with love and acceptance. The act of identifying as a gay man means risking rejection, because of which Yousef is forced to find a new space to enact his masculinity and social status.⁴⁶ The identification with the LGBTQ community and potential rejection from a previous community may require the drawing of new boundaries between private and public spaces. Judith Butler notes that gender is not stable; rather, gender is the combination of body movements, gestures, and acts that all constitute an illusion of a gendered self.⁴⁷ Butler's definition of gender as performative, and not a rigid or fixed identity, pushes for a better understanding of gender as an identity. In *Yousef and Farhad*, Yousef must answer for himself what it means to embody masculinity as a man and as his identity, and perform it. Yousef's abrupt, yet forced departure from home suggests his departure from the traditional male role and rejection of conformity. Yousef's father not only forces Yousef out of a private space where his sexuality is no longer secret, but he also crumbles Yousef's poems and throws them outside of his home. While walking in the rain and receiving insults from gossiping neighbors, in his mind, Yousef notes a

⁴⁴Joanna De Groot, "The Bureaucrat, the *Mulla* and the Maverick Intellectual 'at Home': Domestic Narratives of Patriarchy, Masculinity and Modernity in Iran, 1880–1980," in Raffaella Sarti, ed., *Men at Home, Special Issue of Gender & History* 27, no.3 (2015): 791–811. See also Joanna de Groot, "Brothers of Iranian Race": Manhood, Nationhood and Modernity in Iran 1870-1914," in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 137-56.

⁴⁵de Groot, "The Bureaucrat, the *Mulla* and the Maverick Intellectual 'at Home'," 795.

⁴⁶de Groot, "The Bureaucrat, the *Mulla* and the Maverick Intellectual 'at Home'," 794.

⁴⁷Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40. 4 (December 1988): 519-531.

line from the well-known thirteenth century Persian poet Sa'di Shirazi: "I am in love with all of creation for all of creation emanates from the Creator."⁴⁸ However, unable to retort vocally, Yousef chooses not to embrace typical the masculine emotion of anger. He chooses to cling to his own definition of masculinity while at the same time rejecting society's identification of him as a "faggot".

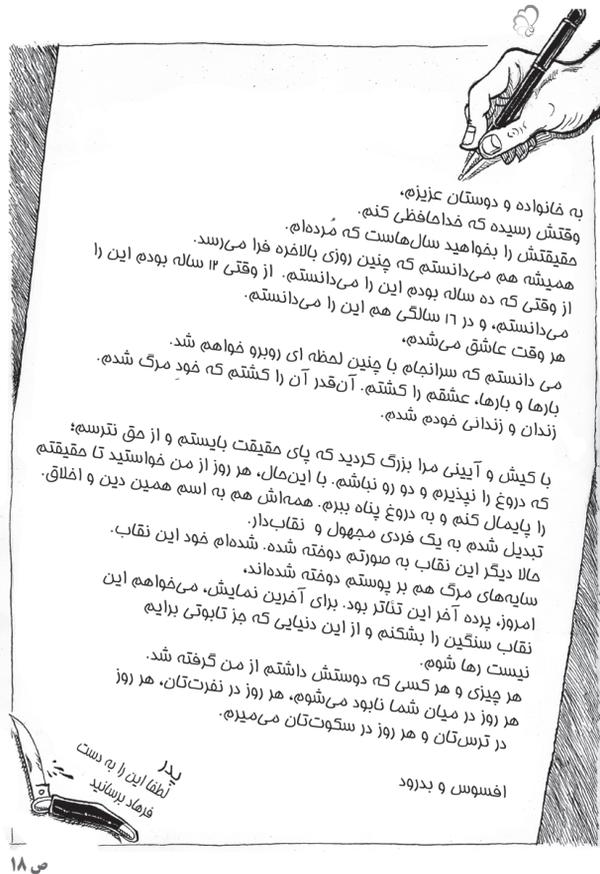


Figure 4: Panel from p. 18 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. This is the letter Yousef leaves behind before his attempted suicide.

⁴⁸Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 8. This line is from Sa'di's Ghazal number 13, which is considered to be his most mystical (Sufi) line. It refers to the belief in love mysticism where all creations are emanations of the divine and through contemplating and loving the creations, even if they are subversive, a Sufi or individual will be guided to divine beauty and love.

As a safer space, Yousef chooses the ‘third space of writing’ where he can embrace his own definition of masculinity. The line of poetry that Yousef reads in his mind is suggestive of Yousef’s choice of love through Sufism rather than anger and resentment. Mr. Jafari’s denial and disavowal creates the possibility for Yousef to redefine and form his masculinity. Within the “third space of writing” in his letter to his family, he seeks forgiveness, engaging in a different masculine behavior—humility. Yousef’s departure from the domestic sphere reinforces his departure from his role as a child and offers him a way to reshape his masculinity. In this way, not only does Yousef challenge the hegemonic notions of masculinity, he also marks its boundaries as his own sexual identity is defined in relationship with that same hegemony.

Facial Hair and Bodily Form

To what extent does “the body, as the locus where experiments are played out and attitudes performed, both [replicates] the status quo and [provides] challenges to it[?]”⁴⁹ In *Yousef and Farhad*, whether the authors intentionally present stereotypical features or not, the characters’ outward appearances disclose much about their sexual orientation. Conventional beliefs dictating that a man who is gay should perform his sexual identity through make-up or hairstyle, form much of the public’s (mis)perception about the gay community. In his memoir, Parsi explains how while waiting to be interviewed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, another Iranian waiting asked him why he was there. When he responded that it was because of his sexual orientation, he was perceived to be a liar because he had not shaved and he was not wearing make-up.⁵⁰ This type of interaction harks upon stereotypical views and highlights the public’s misunderstanding of gay individuals and their outward appearance.

In *Yousef and Farhad*, the characters’ physical features, especially the

⁴⁹Anthony Shay and Jennifer Fisher, ed. “Introduction,” in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

⁵⁰Parsi and Colborne, *Exiled for Love*, 1-2.

use of “feminine” features for Yousef and Farhad, are exaggerated. One aspect of these illustrations is the use (or lack thereof) of beard and facial hair. Historically in the Muslim world, beards and mustaches have been viewed as the most visible characteristics of masculinity and male honor.⁵¹ Soltani and Bendib’s unbearded characters, Yousef and Farhad, challenge notions of dominant masculinity. In contrast, the other males of the graphic novel sport facial hair, mustaches and beards. Bendib chooses to omit facial hair on his protagonists so as to draw on typical stereotypes and perceptions of homosexuality as feminine. On the other hand, a beard, a mustache, or both features adorn his older, masculine subjects’ faces.

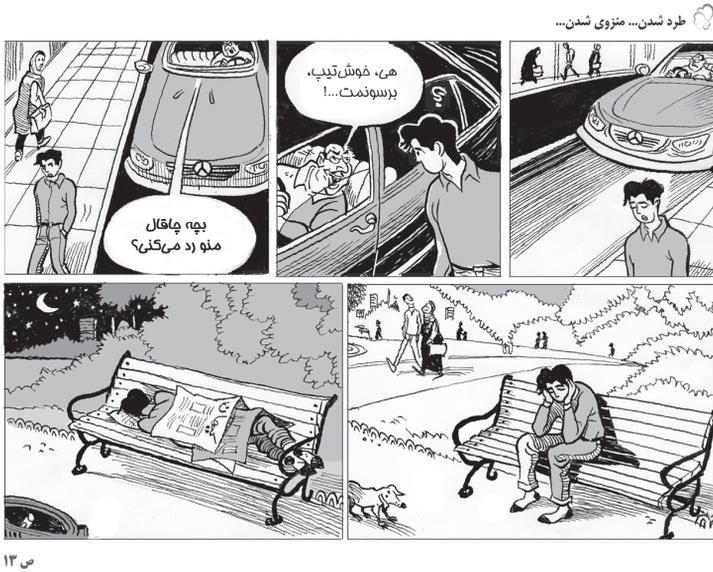


Figure 5: Panel from p. 13 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. This is when Yousef is wandering on the streets after being thrown out of his house. He is verbally harassed, spends time with stray dogs, and uses the state-run newspaper “Keyhan” as a blanket.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Jafari and the stranger who harasses Yousef on the street lack a beard. The stranger boasts a thin, well-groomed

⁵¹El-Rouayheb, “Pederasts and Pathics,” 26.

mustache whereas Mr. Jafari wears a thick, untrimmed mustache. As he is walking on the street, Yousef becomes the object of this much older man's desire. When Yousef rejects his invitation, he calls Yousef a "filthy homo."⁵² Yousef's clean-shaven face provokes the driver's stereotypical understanding of male homosexuality. It is important to note that this older man's comment is a reference to a certain population of heterosexual men who besides their heterosexual marriages and families, have tendencies for homosexual sex as well. Ironically, Mr. Jafari lacks what Yousef and Farhad lack: a beard. Mr. Jafari's thick eyebrows and the taxi driver's angular and linear facial features serve as physical representations of their restricted, linear views on homosexuality. These contrasting bodily representations are an apropos reminder of the discourse that to shape his own subjectivity, a heterosexual individual needs an "abject other." Judith Butler astutely comments that, "The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of "sex," and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge."⁵³ Yousef and Farhad's unbearded presence places them in the category of "abject outsiders" through the repudiation of those whom the heterosexual father and stranger use to assert their own subjectivity.

In addition to their facial hair, Yousef and Farhad are characterized with long eyelashes, sensual, quasi-feminine lips, and fluid curves. Their long, slender fingers intertwine and embrace one another. In the scene where Yousef and Farhad rekindle their love under the nighttime sky, both gaze at the other with large, beautiful, narcissus-eyes during their night together. But Yousef and Farhad are not exclusively drawn with feminine physical traits, an attempt to break away with stereotypes. In their intimate night in the mountains, within their own private space, Yousef and Farhad are shown to embody broad muscular physiques, and hairy arms. Their fit, muscular bodies differ from the jolly, curvy,

⁵²Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 9.

⁵³Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London, NY: Routledge, 2014), 3.

husky bodies of Yousef’s uncle, Taymour. Their bodies also differ from Yousef’s scrawny, angular father. However, Bendib does not zoom-in on the eyes or lips of his “masculine” men, rather, Mr. Jafari’s thick eyebrows and angular face are emphasized. The contrasting aesthetics of Yousef and Farhad and the heterosexual males of the story are an attempt to show the prevalent hierarchy within masculinities, to disclose the public’s stereotypical misperceptions of the gay community, and to break away from those conventional perceptions. Through image and text the authors emphasize that “both masculinity and femininity are learned performances, affected but not dictated by genetics and societal expectations, with as many nuances and meanings as there are individuals who adopt, embody, or redesign them.”⁵⁴



Figure 6: Panel from p. 8 of *Yousef and Farhad* in Persian. This is an image depicting the intimate moments between Yousef and Farhad in the mountains. Here, they use symbolic religious and Sufi language.

⁵⁴Shay and Fisher, “Introduction,” 12.

Religion and Sufism

The relationship between religion and gender is interdependent, with religion at the male ego's service, as Aslam notes.⁵⁵ However, in Soltani and Bendib's graphic novel, religion is not portrayed as the problem or root of the issues the young gay men are having. For the authors, cultural norms, state laws, and familial expectations regarding male sexuality and masculinity are the key issue while religion, particularly Sufism, is seen as a potential solution. Soltani and Bendib's narrative seeks to subvert heteronormative discourses about male sexuality through the use of Sufi discourse and religious symbolism.

Throughout *Yousef and Farhad*, allusions to, and imageries of, the twelfth hidden Imam in Shi'ism, Mahdi, abound.⁵⁶ Yousef's movement between social spaces or states of being in relation to his community can be compared to Mahdi's occultation. To draw these parallels, looking at Soltani and Bendib's other graphic novel, *Zahra's Paradise*, is necessary. In *Zahra's Paradise*, Soltani and Bendib tell the story of a young man named Mehdi, gone missing after participating in the 2009 protests in Iran following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election to presidency, and of Mehdi's mother and brother's search for him. Though Mehdi's (the character) occultation is slightly less concrete than that of Yousef's since he is not actually present in the story, both are seeking "refuge" in response to personally targeted injustice. Mehdi's mother Zahra, her Armenian friend, Miriam, and Yousef's father are actually present in both novels, and it is in Zahra's home that *Yousef and Farhad* begins. When Mr. Jafari relates his struggle with discovering his son's sexuality to Zahra and Miriam at the beginning, he is unwilling to speak frankly about it, forcing the women to guess the source of his vexation. Once it is revealed that Mr. Jafari is grieving

⁵⁵Aslam, "Gender Theory," 73.

⁵⁶Shortly after the death of his father, the twelfth Imam, also called Mahdi, or "the one who is guided by Allah", is said to have retreated into protective hiding or occultation (*al-Ghayba*). This hiding represented a withdrawal of Allah's guidance from humanity as a result of the injustice in the world at that time, and when the end of time arrives and Mahdi is revealed again, it is the Shi'i belief that with him will come a time of perfect peace, justice, and rebirth.

his son's sexual identity, Miriam asks, "So he's not an addict, not a thief and not a murderer...but *worse* than all of them combined?" to which Zahra replies, "Almost sounds like my murdered son, Mehdi..."⁵⁷ When Zahra mentions that the situation reminds her of her murdered son, Mr. Jafari says "your Mehdi may be dead, but lives inside you. Mine is alive, but he's dead inside me."⁵⁸ Here, Soltani and Bendib seem to be making a point about the way in which being homosexual in Iran is perceived. The authors adequately demonstrate the inanity of viewing homosexuality as worse than murder. Yousef has not harmed any individual by theft or violence, and yet he is like Mehdi, someone who stood against the state. So, Yousef is standing against the state and in danger of the same fate as Mehdi simply by being who he is. This idea is further supported when Mr. Jafari throws Yousef out of the house and rips a "One Love" poster down from his wall, drawing another parallel to the poster and music in Mehdi's room and the shirt sporting the same design that Mehdi wore during the protests when he disappeared.⁵⁹ The descriptive terms used by Mr. Jafari to denote his son's supposed "devious" act all focus on family shame and dishonor. At a later point in the story, after Yousef's suicide attempt, Mr. Jafari gives him the money saved for his future wedding and tells him to "go find another country" after informing him that there are "no gays in Iran."⁶⁰ This is an obvious jab at the comment made by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but also a statement about the ways in which "homosexual" and "Iranian" are seen as mutually exclusive identities.⁶¹ Yet at no point does Mr. Jafari specifically use an Islamic reference or religious source to condemn Yousef's love for another man, although he does refer to the fact that the state punishes gay men by hanging them from the crane.⁶² Hence,

⁵⁷Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 3.

⁵⁸Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 3.

⁵⁹Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 8; Soltani and Bendib, *Zahra's Paradise* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), 95, 126, and 188.

⁶⁰Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 16.

⁶¹See www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483746/We-dont-gays-Iran-Iranian-president-tells-Ivy-League-audience.html.

⁶²Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 16.

the problem comes from culturally based gender constructions of masculinity and the theocratic state laws against diverse sexualities, and not an inherently religious adjuration of same sex love.

Soltani and Bendib audaciously utilize Sufi symbolism and metaphors to shine a positive light on Yousef and Farhad's love for each other. In the scene where the two exchange a tender moment in the mountains, they reference the well-known medieval Persian Sufi poet Rumi and his master-beloved, Shams, as lovers.⁶³ The relationship between Rumi and Shams and the reference to them in the graphic novel hints at the Sufi philosophy of *shahed-bazi* which allows "the possibility of love between man and creator, and ... accept(s) the likelihood of a beatific vision or of an experience leading to the presence of God."⁶⁴ According to this Sufi philosophy, considering all God's creatures as His emanations and contemplating their beauty, the individual is led on a spiritual path toward union with the divine. The beauty of God's creations becomes the *shahed*, witness or testimony, to God's beauty and love. While Soltani and Bendib might have this philosophy in mind, their view of Sufism is also in line with D. S. Ahmed's argument that "Sufism glorifies contemplation and a passive-receptive attitude. The word 'Islam' itself has profound connotation of submission, acceptance and surrender – all resounding, stereotypically feminine attributes."⁶⁵ It would follow then, that much like homosexuality, Sufism challenges the dominant discourses about strict religiosity, surrender, and acceptance.

In addition to the allusion to Imam Mahdi, Yousef and Farhad also make use of religiously charged terms such as "Kaaba" and "pilgrimage" in their declarations of love to one another.⁶⁶ Teymour also uses religious

⁶³Some scholars believe that Rumi and Shams were actually lover-beloved while others deny such a relationship.

⁶⁴Dror Ze'evi, "Morality Wars: Orthodoxy, Sufism, and Beardless Youth," in *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 81.

⁶⁵D. S. Ahmed, "Gender and Islamic Spirituality: A Psychological View of 'Low' Fundamentalism," in *Islamic Masculinities*, ed. L. Ouzgane (London and NY: Zed Books, 2006), 18-20.

⁶⁶Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 6.

language and emphasizes the beauty of everything God creates. He tells Yousef after his suicide attempt that “we have enough martyrs” and that he should “practice resurrection.”⁶⁷ Eventually, Yousef is taken to Qom, a city with much religious significance in Iran, and given refuge with Farhad’s uncle, an ayatollah. Farhad describes his uncle as a “friendly fanatic” which evokes the question “a tolerant ayatollah? Isn’t that an oxymoron?” from Yousef.⁶⁸ We find the ayatollah working in his garden commenting on nature as part of God’s beautiful creation. In line with Sufi beliefs, this comment gives the impression that the ayatollah sees Yousef and Farhad, as well as their love for each other, as part of what God creates. Yousef is surprised by the ayatollah’s acceptance of his sexual orientation, yet his acceptance is indicative of Sufi teachings of love. Through love, the characters in *Yousef and Farhad* are able to find peace and acceptance. The ayatollah is associated with knowledge as he lives in Qom, the center of theological learning, but he also seeks love, and shows action by giving refuge to the young couple.

Graphic Novel as a Means of Subversion

Historically, the comic and graphic novel mediums have been shunned for depicting serious topics. There is a stigma surrounding the use of graphic novels, as they are believed to depict lighthearted subjects, mainly appealing to adolescents. Graphic novels have been stereotypically presented as “intellectually devoid fodder.”⁶⁹ However, there have also been a number of graphic novels which conveyed a serious message such as *Maus*, Art Spiegelman’s classic graphic novel which tells the story of a boy learning about his father’s experiences during the Holocaust. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* is another example which “introduced personal biography to the form.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 14.

⁶⁸Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 18.

⁶⁹Steven Hoover, “The Case of Graphic Novels,” in *Communications in Information Literacy* 5. 2 (2012): 174-186.

⁷⁰Jeremy J. Llorence, “Exploring Graphic Literature as a Genre and its Place in Academic Curricula” in *McNair Scholars Journal* 15. 1 (2011): 30-40.

While many scholars look down on the graphic novel as an inferior art form devoid of any intellectual fodder, it is gradually gaining recognition as an alternative for portraying evocative messages, due to the creative expression in literary form that primarily deals with the arrangement of images and words to emphasize points in a story, or to dramatize an idea.⁷¹

The use of the graphic novel medium is an interesting choice to depict the love story of Yousef and Farhad. Both the medium by which the story is told, and the story itself are unconventional, and draw parallels from each other, such that they force the reader to seek a different approach in understanding the struggles of the characters, the disavowal of homosexuality in Iran, the hierarchy of masculinities, and the lack of legitimacy that graphic novels are given in the world of academia. The story and medium encourage the acceptance of alternate forms of not only masculinities, but also writing styles. In *Yousef and Farhad*, a few elements of visual imagery particularly invite critical thinking. One such scene is the presence of a dog when Yousef is thrown out of his home and walks the neighborhood.⁷² The dog is seen later again when Yousef rests at the bench.⁷³ In traditional Islam, dogs are considered impure and contact with them is to be avoided. It may be inferred that among his family Yousef's newfound identity as a homosexual is equated to the impurities of a dog, and therefore has cast an obscene light on him, which is insupportable to his family. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that Yousef's homelessness is a circumstance directly caused by the laws of the state, as is seen in the image of Yousef lying on the bench covered in *Kayhan*, a state-run newspaper, with the crescent moon and stars in the background sky.⁷⁴ These are but a few small examples found throughout the novel,

⁷¹Hoover, "The Case of Graphic Novels," 178.

⁷²The dogs are present in *Zahra's Paradise* where they are killed and thrown into the river, foreshadowing the incident which happen later to the youth, including Mehdi, during the protests. This symbolism refers to the fact that the subversive youth in Iran who challenge conventions are viewed as impure dogs that need to be eradicated.

⁷³Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 9.

⁷⁴Soltani and Bendib, *Yousef and Farhad*, 9.

but references like these make the graphic novel, contrary to popular belief, a notable method of storytelling as it forces the reader to be more analytical and conscientious of what is on the page in terms of visual cues and text, versus simply analyzing blocks of scholarly text, which is often done in academia.

Using graphic novels as non-traditional sources of information in higher education challenges the conventional hierarchical notions of appropriateness in academia.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, in the special case of homosexuality in Iran, it seems as though a nontraditional mode of storytelling fits the mood for portraying and celebrating the story of Yousef and Farhad, as the story of the LGBTQ community in Iran deserves recognition. Utilizing the graphic novel as their platform, the authors provide a combination of thoughtful images and key words that require the reader to use critical information literacy skills in deciphering the strong message that is being conveyed. Both topics of homosexuality in Iran as well as the stage of graphic novels have received much criticism for not living up to heteronormative standards that society has arbitrarily placed values on. Furthermore, both medium and subjects require the reader to question conformist methods and to appreciate the vast multitudes in differences of perspective that every writing medium as well as every lifestyle and person has to offer.

⁷⁵J. B. Carter, "Comics, the Canon, and the Classroom," in *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*, ed. N. Grey and D. Fisher (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008), 47-59.