Anxious Men

Sexuality and Systems of Disavowal in Contemporary Iranian Literature

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On 24 September 2007, during a question-and-answer session at Columbia University, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad memorably declared, “In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like your country.” His statement prompted immediate outrage among activists and scholars, who saw this assertion as a resolute denial of the existence of homosexual (and queer) activity in the country. However, such a powerful announcement demands further consideration. Without devaluing the severity of the statement, might we suggest that Ahmadinejad’s evaluation represents—in a sense—an accurate account of the situation in Iran? He established at once a critical dichotomy between Iran and “your country” (the United States) and thus generated a sense of dissimilarity between the two cultures. This rhetorical strategy may have served to intimate that the systems of homosexuality and homoeroticism function differently in Iran than in the United States and other Western countries. He further stressed his point about
homosexuality by indicating that “in Iran this has no basis in reality.” Difference, then, and not negation rests at the centre of his message.

David Halperin classifies the Western notion of homosexuality as “part of a new system of sexuality, which functions as a means of personal individualization: it assigns to each individual a sexual orientation and a sexual identity” (134). Certainly, such a system of open identification does not exist in Iran, and its society discourages this kind of public self-representation. Indeed, Ahmadinejad closed his discussion of homosexuality by saying, “[W]e don’t allow people to say such things.” His particular stress on words and speech, rather than acts or performance, suggests that the problem emerges from a vocalization of sexual identification. Certainly, it is worth remembering British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith’s 2008 statement that the Islamic Republic represents no threat to gay and lesbian citizens as long as they keep their behavior “discreet” (Verkaik 1). This statement, though severely misguided, is telling here because it attests to the cultural limitations of sexual identification in Iran. It also raises several questions: How does one identify or fail to identify sexuality outside of the “system of sexuality” that Halperin describes and within a society that promotes rigid homosociality? In what ways do various sexualities manifest themselves, and how do these signs permeate literary texts? In this chapter, I address these questions by examining the representation of men in one short story by author Ghazaleh ‘Alizadeh (1947–96). I consider the system of homosociality in Iran and the story’s representation of alternative sexualities within the context of male bonds. More specifically, I will demonstrate that while Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “homosexual panic” proves instructive to interpretations of Iranian society, so too ‘Alizadeh’s text can contribute to a restructuring of Sedgwick’s theory to account for non-Western modes of expression.

When asked to comment on the process of writing, ‘Alizadeh once said, “I took a dive into the depths of human nature. Everyone had a pearl and that’s what was important to me” (‘Alizadeh, “Dar har roman” 50). The quest to understand the human condition beats like a pulse in much of her fiction, and in this chapter, I seek to uncover one such pearl by locating within “Such,” the fourth and final story in the collection Chahar-rah (Intersection, 1995), a provocative and personal corollary of the male-based homosocial system in Iran. Eve Sedgwick’s concept of “homosexual panic” flows as an undercurrent in this text, gushing not explicitly, like it might in American or European literature, but rather under the surface and behind the scenes, dictating actions and determining behaviour in a bizarre way. Indeed, I attempt in this study both to establish the existence of homosexual panic.
in “Such” and to demonstrate that the two male protagonists in the story literally objectify two female characters and use them to relieve this anxiety.

MOVING IN AND STRETCHING OUT

In her now famous study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Sedgwick boldly asserts that any study of Western culture devoid of a “critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” is necessarily “incomplete” and “damaged in its central substance” (1). Ghazaleh ‘Alizadeh’s “Such” enables us to stage an encounter between Sedgwick and Iran that might not otherwise be possible, and such a philosophical juncture is significant insofar as it shows the centrality of the construction of this homo/heterosexual distinction to studies of Iranian culture as well. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Sedgwick built her theories based on a centuries-long Western narrative. While her ideas remain pertinent to the present discussion of Iran, they require a certain amount of contextualization. By comparing Sedgwick’s observations to similar Iranian phenomena, I hope to make a case for the application of her theories. At the same time, this comparative approach will underscore differences in systems of sexuality in Iran and the West. It is a central argument of this chapter that a universalist approach to queer theory ultimately denies some of the complexity of the formation of sociality and sexuality in Iran.

Of the homosocial system in the Anglo-American tradition, Sedgwick argues that “because the paths of male entitlement . . . required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of . . . homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement” (*Epistemology* 185). She contends that male homosocial desires—or more simply, relationships between men—maintain a “potentially erotic” element (*Between Men* 3). As a means of disavowing such a possibility, the code of masculinity demands a rigid submission to heterosexuality and equally rigid subscription to homophobia. Men’s pervasive fear of homosexuality—enacted by “the permanent threat that the small space they have cleared for themselves on this terrain may always . . . be foreclosed”—explodes from this homophobic arrangement (*Epistemology* 186). Potential threats to normative heterosexuality—including the fear that one might be homosexual—give rise to an enduring abjuration of same-sex desire. Importantly, then, “homosexual panic is . . . a problem only . . . of nonhomosexual-identified men” (201).
Accordingly, homosexual panic both emerges from and contributes to the delineation between hetero/homosexual definitions. The closet, as “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century,” represents a space that compounds clean distinctions and thereby raises anxiety (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 71). Homosexual panic, for Sedgwick, is tied to the closet, a closet that presupposes an epistemology of sexual self-revelation. Although this kind of revelation and disclosure may not be available in Iran, by considering Sedgwick’s theory in terms of *movement* rather than *structure*, we can broaden the applicability of her ideas to accommodate contemporary Iranian society. That this moment of self-revelation marks the act of “coming out” is telling insofar as it signals the kind of movement of which I write. The closet—unlike a box, for example—has a door that permits passage in and out. Sexual self-revelation, which is at the core of Sedgwick’s analysis, represents travel from the closet’s interior to its exterior. “Coming out,” though technically possible in Iranian society, does not exist in the same way that it is understood in a Western context. However, the basic movement between the closet and “out” did occur in Iranian society, though the directionality of that movement was markedly different.

Recent historiographies, like Afsaneh Najmabadi’s *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards* (2005) and Willem Floor’s *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (2008), have successfully demonstrated the existence of a “pre-modern and early modern Persian homoerotic culture” (Najmabadi 15). This culture, based on *amradparasti*, or love for young men, positioned adolescent males who were not yet showing all of the signs of manhood (e.g., a beard) as the objects of older men’s desires.² Najmabadi’s work proves especially useful as we attempt to explain the shift from a homoerotic culture to a rigid homophobic society. She contends that increased relations between Iran and Europe in the late nineteenth century inadvertently triggered this change. Sedgwick covers approximately the same period in her examination of the centrality of the Romantic Gothic in the rise of homophobia in Britain (*Epistemology* 186–87). The implication of Najmabadi’s argument is an incisive and unilateral exchange of homophobic idea. Najmabadi maintains that Iranians, obsessed with evading the European scorn directed at their social and sexual practices, “began to reconfigure structures of desire by introducing a demarcation to distinguish homosociality from homosexuality” (38).³

An alternative and queer structure for sexual desire thereby existed openly (and poetically) in Iran, albeit in a form radically different from our modern conceptions of homosexuality. Ultimately, this system of sexuality was packed away and
hidden. Najamabadi’s suggestion that this sexual restructuring occurred because of contact with the West implies that this homoerotic culture was placed in the closet and that an oppressing structure was imposed over Iran’s queer culture through scorn and evasion. Sedgwick’s discussion underscores movement out of the closet; meanwhile, the Iranian case demonstrates a movement into the closet. Without a doubt, the directionality of these movements is different, even opposite, and the contents of the closet are not necessarily the same. But the similarity of the movement alone clears the way conceptually for the application of Sedgwick’s “homo-sexual panic” to the present study. After all, these parallel motions are responsible for carving forcefully the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality. In what follows, I consider what has happened to the homoerotic culture that was so carefully locked away and interrogate its manifestation in contemporary Iranian literature.

TOWARD A THEORY OF IRANIAN HOMOSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Central to Sedgwick’s discussion of homosexual panic are the social bonds among men. The contextualization of these social relations in the Iranian field marks an important hurdle to understanding male sexual identity in contemporary Iran. Therefore, before continuing, it is worth considering one of the most compelling literary representations of male homosociality in Iran. Goli Taraqqi’s Khab-e zemestani (Winter Sleep, 1973) illustrates effectively the powerful pull of Iranian male homosocial bonds. This novella examines a group of seven men trapped in the crux of significant change. It demonstrates the dynamics of homosocial exchange and the effects of those bonds. It significantly positions masculinity—which informs and benefits from homosociality—as a limiting rather than freeing agent in the lives of the male characters.

Caught in the tension between tradition and modernization, the men in Khab-e zemestani are left dazed and emotionally stagnant but find comfort in the group and protection under their undisputed leader, Mr. Heydari. As one character, Ahmadi, puts it, “under Mr. Heydari’s umbrella the world is safe and sound,” going on to declare that the men in the group “are my friends; they’ll become my shield and protect me” (24–25). However, by subscribing to this group mentality, the characters forsake their individuality. Early in the novel, the narrator comments on the group by asking, “What did we ever say? Actually, who were we? Whatever Heydari said, Mr. Heydari” (6). Taraqqi further denies her characters’ individuality
in her naming of them. The narrator introduces the group: “In the winter we were always together: Hashemi, Anvari, ‘Azizi, Ahmadi, Mahdavi, me, and of course Mr. Heydari” (1). It is no coincidence that these six names rhyme, each consisting of three syllables and ending in the long ī sound. Only the leader, Heydari, carries “aqā” (Mister/Sir) as a mark of distinction. Taraqqi shifts her narrative repeatedly, switching the character of focus often. She only sporadically gives the characters depth, providing the reader with a robust depiction of the group as a whole but giving the individual characters importance only vis-à-vis their particular role in the group.

Set in the mid-twentieth century during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the book’s historical context holds great importance. During the 1950s and 1960s, Iran’s uneven development had immediate and direct ramifications for all branches of Iranian society (Abrahamian). It created an overwhelming sense of confusion as power was repeatedly shifted and artificially created and as the Shah tried to modernize and industrialize the country from the seat of an ancient ruling system. The men’s resulting stagnation is represented in Taraqqi’s writing—more specifically, through a languid style unique to Khab-e zemestani, which is at times painfully slow. The writing in Taraqqi’s other stories is typically more lively. This particular writing style appears to be an extension of Taraqqi’s hibernation theme. One way in which the author confuses both her characters and readers is by disrupting their sense of time. On one hand, time progresses incredibly fast: “How fast it passed. Seventy-five years or seventy-seven, or more. I don’t know. I have lost track of days and years. Two years less, two years more, what difference does it make? When did old age begin?” (1). On the other hand, time also seems to be slowing to a standstill: “It’s twenty minutes to eight. It’s nineteen minutes to eight. Sixteen minutes, fifteen minutes, ten minutes, nine minutes, five minutes. It is exactly eight o’clock” (5). The contradicting representation of time muddles one’s temporal perceptions and adds to the book’s overall disorienting feel.

In many ways, Khab-e zemestani is the antithesis of the travel narrative genre. Modern Persian fiction grew partially out of a tradition of travelogues (Ghanooneparvar 156), but this novella is a book of failed journeys. Although men in Iran have the freedom to travel, the men of Khab-e zemestani go nowhere. They never leave the comfortable confines of their group, and the characters’ stagnation is the direct result of their aforementioned intermediate position between tradition and modernity. Significantly, their inability to travel extends beyond
physical—their journeys fail on three levels: the physical, the mental, and the emotional.

At the heart of *Khab-e zemestani*, in the fifth of ten chapters, lies the depiction of Taraqqi’s quintessential failed journey, as Anvari attempts to take the train to Gorgan to visit his best friend, Mahdavi. His decision to depart represents no small feat. After Mahdavi’s departure, Anvari’s friends tell him he should visit anytime he wants. However, it takes him a full seven years to work up the courage to go. Wrapped up in Taraqqi’s theme of stagnation rests the notion that tasks are started but never completed, attempted but never successful. Ultimately, Anvari’s inability to progress emotionally blocks his ability to progress physically. Embarking on this journey, a process seven years in the making, marks a significant psychological development. At the same time, the fact that he does not complete the trip is no less significant. Along the way, Anvari encounters a series of obstacles. First, his fellow travellers are exceptionally rude, seemingly only toward him. He is also weighed down by a potted flower and a bird that Shirin, the group’s motherly figure, sent with him. Then his letters are confiscated and an old woman takes his seat, while the other passengers in his car do not even protest on his behalf. The final straw, however, is the train’s unexpected stop. No one knows how long the delay will last and the only explanation offered is, “It’s orders” (67).

Frustrated, confused, and feeling the effects of an irritated ulcer, Anvari unsuccessfully tries to find solace by thinking of his friends, by “walking and trying to remember all Mr. Heydari’s advice” (69). Ultimately, though, he is struck by “something heavy” that “floated in the air, like a bad omen, like a disaster that was gently approaching” (69). His attempts are quickly thwarted by fears of an ominous and immediate future. In the context of obstacle and delay, the train—and by extension, the freedom of mobility—seems “ugly and frightening.” Confronted only with himself, Anvari has no idea how to deal with the pressures of reality. Finally pushed to his limit, he concedes defeat and hails a nearby cab returning to Tehran. He “got into the car, and curled up next to the door. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the seat. He thought of Shirin-khanum, who had said ‘Don’t listen to them. Get up and go’” (70). Anvari is ultimately not prepared to complete this journey. He is like a small child when he describes himself as “happy,” “excited,” and “giddy” (61). Ill-equipped to deal with the hostile environment that he encounters on the train, he begins the return home to the company of his friends. Significantly, in this moment of defeat, Anvari assumes a fetal position, regressing to a comfortable, childlike state.
It is interesting to note that Shirin, a woman, encourages Anvari to take the trip and that throughout the book, it is the women who challenge the men to look past the group. In a book about men, the rare presence of women automatically assumes an important role. While Taraqqi nominally mentions several women, only two of them function as significant—though marginal—characters. Both women are married to men in the group and are, therefore, perceived as an extension of it.

As translator Francine Mahak notes, “Taraqqi’s psychological portrayal is unique in Persian literature in that it is Jungian rather than Freudian” (viii). The notion of archetypes functions as a keystone in Jungian theory, and the two women of Khab-e zemestani exemplify Taraqqi’s archetypical system. Shirin and Tal’at jointly represent the mother figure, each taking on a particular set of characteristics central to that figure. Shirin is the warm and nurturing side of motherhood, with “pockets [. . .] always full of chickpeas and candy, coloured string and jasmine flowers” (7). Although she is only married to Hashemi, she acts as a mother to all of the men. She looks out for the accident-prone Ahmadi, expresses dismay at their behaviour toward Jalili, and gently encourages Anvari to visit Mahdavi.

In contrast, Tal’at exhibits cold and rigid behaviour. She wears manly shoes, curses while driving, and punches men. She is a firm disciplinarian. But in a bizarre way, her actions are just as motherly. At one point in the narrative, her husband, Mahdavi, who is sick, finds comfort “in the middle of her bosom” and is able to “forget everything else” (89). Additionally, Tal’at undertakes the responsibility of nursing Anvari back to health after the death of Mahdavi. The women, therefore, represent two sides of the same figure, which is precisely why the men love Shirin and despise Tal’at. The former exudes warm maternal love while the latter represents the strict and demanding side of mothers. The significance of this dual system rests in the fact that the men are unable to see women outside of the context of mothers. This inability signals a failure to complete the journey from childhood to manhood. The reconfiguration of the female figure away from a strictly motherly role constitutes an important feature in the development to manhood.

One frequently finds this dual maternal paradigm in fairytales, which often feature an evil stepmother and her counterpart, the fairy godmother. Taraqqi is undoubtedly aware of this existing model and constructs her own system upon it. She mythologizes elements of both female characters. Shirin, for example, appears mysteriously from a fountain and later returns to the powers of water when her body vanishes in the Caspian Sea. Likewise, the first time Mahdavi sees Tal’at, he
senses that “something invisible, and yet tangible, floated through the air. He sat up and, spellbound, looked around” (77). And Tal’at maintains this air of fantasy at her wedding: “With splendour and magnificence, she stood in the middle of the room like a mythological woman, who had emerged from the depths of the farthest dreams” (75). These fabled elements function as more than just allusions to the maternal archetype; they also serve to enhance Taraqqi’s commentary on the men’s relationship with women and their dependence on them.

Like children, the men of *Khab-e zemestani* view woman as a part of some larger mythological narrative. Women are, therefore, limited to either the realm of mothers or of myth and magic. Taraqqi uses the word “farthest” to suggest the extremity of their “otherness.” The men pursue their relationships with each other and with women like children, markers of a failed emotional passage to adulthood. By suspending the male characters in a state of childhood, the author achieves somewhat contradictory effects. The men continue to view all women as mothers, which can be sexist and reifying, but after all, young boys need their mothers, and so women retain some power. Moreover, by keeping the characters in a kind of childhood, Taraqqi suspends what is supposed to be their ultimate ascendance to mature heterosexuality. Because their sexuality is not yet decided or fully achieved, a certain potentiality remains immanent, and that potential—that threat—demands rather forcefully the separation of homosociality and homosexuality. And, indeed, Afsaneh Najmabadi notes that the “disavowal of homosexuality out of homosociality” represents “a cultural work that has continued into the present” (38). Nevertheless, despite a growing interest in homosexuality in Iran, there have been few attempts to delineate the precise nature of this disavowal or the mechanisms that permit it in contemporary Iran.

**SEXUAL NEGATION AND THE SYSTEMS OF DISAVOWAL**

Najmabadi’s observation, coupled with Taraqqi’s narrative, prepares the way conceptually for a discussion of homosexual anxiety in ‘Alizadeh’s short story “Such.” The story represents a complex system of missed opportunity and lost love. The disjointed text, which resists a fluid linear narrative flow and persists only as a series of segmented scenes, is organized around four middle-aged main characters. They, along with the minor characters, form a series of overlapping and intricate love triangles. The story opens with Ahmad Izadpanah, an unmarried antique dealer. The reader quickly learns that he remains a bachelor because he has never
overcome a childhood crush on Leyli Nabavi. She ultimately marries Dr. Khosrow Shaqayeqi, who confesses his love for her cousin, Parichehr, during the course of the story. In the meantime, Farideh Mirboluki, one of three spinster sisters, approaches Izadpanah, hoping to sell him several antiques. Although Izadpanah’s friend Navvab, a high school teacher, has requested Farideh’s hand in marriage, she is in love with Dr. Shaqayeqi, whom she encountered only once, briefly, at a bookstore when they were both students. He left behind a white Pentel pen, which she took and continues to cherish.

In the middle of the narrative, the local university’s president dies. Until this point, he has played no role in the story; however, his death shakes these middle-aged characters, reminding them of their mortality. Farideh and Izadpanah run into each other on the outskirts of the cemetery during the funeral. Suddenly confronted with the prospect of dying alone and struck by a mutual interest in literature, the two begin a courtship. They eventually marry and the story ends in the bedroom on the night of the wedding. Izadpanah, whose eyes are heavy with sleep, dreams of Leyli: “When he opened his eyes, Farideh was next to the window. [. . .] She said a prayer under her breath and threw the white Pentel pen toward the overturned jasmine” (246).

Critics have analyzed this story by attempting to reconcile the meanings of its title. “Such” is a nonsensical word in Persian, but it functions in the context of the story as an interjection. At the wedding reception, Farideh’s father, recognizing that his daughter’s future looks bleak, cries out with a shaky voice, “Such!” Hasan Asghari reads the word “Such” as an expression of the characters’ realization of their discontent and suggests that the story signifies a kind of futility; that the “negation of one kind of life is the birth of another kind (561).” Therefore, “Such,” which is a powerful cry, serves as “a sign of the love and excitement that does not exist in the lives of the people of the story” (561). The present study does not attempt to overhaul Asghari’s reading of the story but rather to add a nuanced dimension to it by locating homosexual anxiety as a contributing factor to the male characters’ despondency.

Sedgwick positions homosociality as a prerequisite for homosexual panic. And indeed ‘Alizadeh depicts a homosocial system that is similar in some ways to Taraqqi’s Khab-e zemestani. In “Such,” Ahmad Izadpanah has a group of old friends who, every day at noon, “would come looking for him during their lunch hour. They’d eat chicken sandwiches and drink Coca-Cola, discuss politics, stand by the window red with excitement, and smoke cigarettes. All of them had a wife and children” (212).
While Taraqqi’s men embrace a lifelong immobility, ‘Alizadeh’s men represent a different kind of stagnation, woven directly into the story’s despondent fabric.

Once vibrant, enthusiastic, and full of potential, the men of this group have stumbled into mid-life tedium. One character, for example, Amir-Hushang Mostowfi, “composed poetry . . . in his university days. Once SAVAK [the Pahlavi regime’s secret police and intelligence agency that was known for detaining, torturing, and executing members of oppositional groups] arrested him for breaking windows. After that incident, he wrote political poems.” And yet throughout the story, Mostowfi, who is preparing for the construction of his new house, talks “constantly about the quality and price of stones; marble, travertine, and porphyry.” Similarly, Bahman Tafazzoli once travelled Europe and subsequently worked at the provincial theatre office, bringing important pieces of world-literature to the stage. However, “gradually his interest waned and for the past several years he has been content with a position in the office of the under-secretary of culture.” The narrator goes so far as to describe him as “dull and taciturn. You’d think in the course of his life, he had done everything and realized that there was nothing new left under the sky” (212). Certainly, Tafazzoli’s name, which means “charismatic,” is indicative of the subtle humour that marks ‘Alizadeh’s writing. The author, therefore, carefully constructs her descriptions of these two characters, juxtaposing their previous ambition with their current acquiescence. “Such” features the same kind of paralyzing homosocial apparatus that the reader finds in Khab-e zemestani. It functions slightly differently in this context but produces the same crippling effects.

By noting that Izadpanah’s friends each have a wife and children, ‘Alizadeh makes an important distinction, separating Izadpanah, a bachelor, from the rest of the players on this homosocial field. “He had remained unmarried,” she writes. “People said that he didn’t have an interest in women. Gossips spread this rumour to the point of discomfort” (212). Society prods his hetero-normative status by suggesting that he is uninterested in women. This threat generates an environment conducive to homosexual anxiety, as Izadpanah is an active participant in homosociality but not necessarily in heterosexuality. However, he is not the only character who fails to fulfill both terms of this interconnected dichotomy. The narrator suggests that in his youth, Khosrow Shaqayeqi “didn’t pay any attention to girls” (218). These two statements form the foundation for a reading of this text with homosexual panic at its core. The narrator questions the characters’ sexuality early in the story and devotes much of the subsequent text to the relief of an anxiety engendered by such public query.
In order to settle this score, Shaqayeqi and Izadpanah marry Leyli and Farideh, respectively. Such acts certainly put the rumours to rest, but the story's ending, which I examine in depth below, questions their sincerity. The women, consequently, become chips in a game, reduced to paltry anecdotage or anti-dotage pills. And, indeed, the male protagonists see the two women in these terms. Before employing them in defensive battle, Shaqayeqi and Izadpanah relegate Leyli and Farideh to the status of mere objects: prizes won in victory or fine paintings for show. This concretization of women, their presentation as items to be gazed upon, is an important feature of the text.

Just as the women of *Khab-e zemestani* are strangers or outsiders, the women in “Such”—at least in the eyes of the men—are static objects, occupants of an alien and external proximity. At times, ‘Alizadeh’s writing style appropriately reflects this distance. One example is the narrator’s nostalgic description of Izadpanah’s childhood crush on Leyli:

> The first time Izadpanah spotted Leyli, she was in the Spring Blossom Ice Cream Shop. A group of girls were sitting around a sticky table. Leyli put a spoonful of ice cream between her lips and sucked softly. Green spring flies circled all around the table. The afternoon sun was shining on her honey-coloured eyes and lit up the peach fuzz behind her ears. (213)

This scene strongly resembles a painting. Specifically, ‘Alizadeh’s use of light captures a kind of transcendent radiance. The afternoon sun and green flies set a lethargic tone, and even the most unspectacular details, like the flies and the sticky table, are cast in a nostalgic glow. More importantly, however, the scene traps Leyli: she endures as a figure in a romantic picture. Significantly, the description’s first word, *didar* (view/sight), is directly related to seeing. Therefore, although the story is told from a third-person perspective, this particular image is mediated through the gaze of Izadpanah. It is important to note that this visually intense and highly descriptive writing is typical of ‘Alizadeh’s style; however, in the context of “Such,” she employs it with regard to the women and in the presence of men.

The narrator offers this scene in response to Izadpanah’s apparent disinterest in women, explaining that he had a “simple reason for abstaining from marriage: a broken heart in adolescence. Before finishing high school, he fell in love with Leyli Nabavi, the daughter of Colonel Nabavi of the Gendarmerie” (212). From adolescence to mid-life, then, he has taken cover under the pretext of a broken heart,
thereby deflecting and refiguring questions about his sexual apathy. And yet the persistence of this rumour points to its ineffectiveness as a cover.

Izadpanah must approach this topic afresh and remitigate his anxiety by marrying Farideh, who is described as having an “outward appearance” that “consisted of thick gray socks, manly flat shoes, and furled up eyebrows” (216). In this way, ‘Alizadeh denies Farideh her femininity. It is with some irony that ‘Alizadeh assigns her a deep interest in the early twentieth-century poet Parvin E’tesami. Scholar Farzaneh Milani notes that throughout the twentieth century, many people were convinced that the author of E’tesami’s Divan was a “man posing as a woman” (Veils and Words 106). E’tesami even battled this rumour poetically, claiming, “Some literary persons believe Parvin to be a man / She is not a man, this riddle better be solved” (qtd. in Milani, Veils and Words 106). Therefore, Izadpanah ultimately marries a woman who could be described as “manly.” Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel Middlesex (2002) helps to elucidate this description. In the book, an Asian-American woman says, “Haven’t you ever heard that? Asian chicks are the last stop. If a guy’s in the closet, he goes for an Asian because their bodies are more like boys” (184). By extension, we might suggest that Izadpanah’s selection of a “manly” woman is telling in the same way.

Before the courtship even begins, however, Izadpanah objectifies Farideh in a fluid motion. During their first encounter, “Ahmad’s eyes lit up. Everyone said that Mr. Mirboluki had nice, old goods in his house, and with a smile they’d add his daughter to this statement!” (219). Farideh thus joins the rank of object-for-sale. Once again, ‘Alizadeh tellingly draws attention to the eyes. Although this classification of Farideh is ascribed to the general public (“everyone”), Izadpanah’s ocular reaction marks his subscription to and excitement by the idea. Seeing her in the same terms as the antiques he sells allows him to clear the way for bartering, bargaining, and the regular exchange of goods. The use of lists marks an important feature of ‘Alizadeh’s text. The objects of each textual space are introduced not with full sentences but within lists. Izadpanah’s antique store, Farideh’s house, and Shaqayeqi’s clinic are all described in this manner. As a result, the women of the text get lost at times among the objects that populate these lists.

Farideh’s commodity value rises in Izadpanah’s mind because of her relationship with Navvab. In Between Men, Sedgwick examines the power dynamics of this kind of male-female-male relation and builds on René Girard’s study of erotic triangles. She suggests that in a society which at once encourages and depends on intense male bonds, but at the same time violently renounces homosexuality, men
must navigate their intimacy through the currents of a female bystander (1–27). Sedgwick therefore refines Girard’s triangular schema to accommodate the female mediation of a desire the two men have for one another.

In light of this argument, the introductory scene between Farideh and Izadpanah assumes new meaning because it comes to an end with Navvab’s arrival. The two are chatting casually when “Ahmad looked to the street. Mohsen Navvab’s Peykan [an Iranian-made car] was turning into the parking lot” (220). Although Farideh and Izadpanah are engaging in a rather personal conversation, upon seeing Navvab’s car, Izadpanah abruptly steers its trajectory back to business, quickly bringing their pleasantries to a close. Then Farideh “opened the door and came face to face with Navvab. She bit her lip and quickly went out” (221). At this point in the text, both Izadpanah and the reader remain unaware of Navvab’s pursuit of Farideh. This moment meaningfully marks ‘Alizadeh’s initial construction of the male-female-male triangle. The blocking in this scene is particularly important. Caught in the threshold of the door, Farideh is literally stuck between the two men.

The triangular formation posited in this scene comes to a head several chapters later, when Izadpanah learns of Navvab’s intentions. Izadpanah asks, “Who’s the bride?” and Navvab, winking at his friends, replies, “A really respectable person! Farideh Mirboluki” (228). This news clearly agitates Izadpanah:

Facing the oval mirror, Ahmad saw his own tired face. He looked at the ground and thought it all over. [. . .] With the tip of a pen, he drew a line on the wooden table. [. . .] [H]e got up from the table and walked the length of the room. He grabbed the button on Navvab’s coat and pulled, “If only you knew the antiques they have! Tomorrow or the day after I am going with a loan with interest and buying them all.” (228–29)

Threatened by Navvab’s positional coordinate point, Izadpanah angrily asserts his ownership of the antiques—and to that list he has previously added Farideh. Navvab’s wink and Izadpanah’s physical attack perhaps signify the kind of exchange of intimacy that Sedgwick charts in her discussion, and the conversation about Farideh (as object) negotiates this transference.

The asymmetrical gendered features of the erotic triangle provide it with complexity and depth, and this system does not simply generate a unilateral or linear product. In this case, although rivalry functions as the means through which the men express their desire, it is no less real for the men. Izadpanah and Navvab both
contend for Farideh, and the former emerges as the victor. Ironically, the wedding reception is held at Navvab's house. Since Farideh rejected Navvab earlier in the story, the reception's location strikes the reader as strange, especially after the awkwardness of the encounter between Farideh and Navvab at Izadpanah's store. However, by situating the celebration in Navvab's house, 'Alizadeh actively reinforces the triangular formation—and her ironic writing style—to the end.

Male rivalry extends beyond Izadpanah and his group of friends. Indeed, 'Alizadeh broadens her observation to a theoretical level by also attributing this feature to Shaqayeqi. Two short chapters after the reader learns that, as a student, he did not pay attention to girls, he admits:

Leyli does nothing for me. [. . .] Perhaps in the beginning I wanted her. I don’t know. Do you remember? Half of the city’s young men were her victims. I threw myself forward out of obstinacy, like a person who wants to be the winner of every competition, and snatched her from everyone else’s clutches. [. . .] We are not each other’s mate. (223)

In this revealing statement, Shaqayeqi himself suggests that a competitive drive roused his interest in Leyli. Just as telling are his moments of doubt. His wife has no sexual effect on him and he cannot recall if she ever has. In the course of this conversation, he sets side by side his sexual doubts and his professions of love for Leyli’s cousin, Parichehr. Therefore, in a single gesture, he alludes to and attempts to resolve his anxiety. When Parichehr questions what he is looking for, Shaqayeqi replies, “As we men say, feminine allure. (He fixed his eyes on the sunset sky)” (223). This particular phrasing reveals a performance in his act. Rather than speaking to any specific attribute, he offers a generic answer that emphasizes his involvement in the masculine system. Yet once again, ‘Alizadeh draws meaningful attention to the eyes. By looking away from the other participant in the conversation, Shaqayeqi undermines—and expresses discomfort with—his preceding statement. Therefore, just as he follows in suit as the young men of the city chase after Leyli, he blindly pursues “feminine allure” simply because it is what “we men” do. These actions together form a sort of social-sexual artificiality.

Although they are contemporaries, Shaqayeqi represents Izadpanah’s future. Shaqayeqi’s marriage has all but failed. The reader knows that despite Leyli’s continuing beauty, he stays—or perhaps always has been—uninterested. Moreover, in the face of a long marriage, the couple remains without child, perhaps a symptom of Shaqayeqi’s sexual apathy. And when he professes love for Leyli’s cousin, Parichehr,
she senses the insincerity of his confession, claiming, “I know men like the back of my hand. Tell the truth! How many women have you said this to?” (224).

Meanwhile, ‘Alizadeh shows the reader Izadpanah's failing marriage before it has even begun. The book’s final scene is particularly powerful, fraught with expectation, anticipation, and ultimately disenchantment:

The nanny appeared in the doorway and offered a mysterious smile. She proudly looked at the room’s bed and decorations. Farideh went toward her and kissed her on the forehead. She looked to the picture of her mother and after whispering something, they wept endlessly. The neighbour pounded his shovel against the wall. The man suddenly remembered the week before. While passing through Thirty-Meter Street, he had seen, among the masses of brick and cement, colourful pieces of tile. The shape of the peacock on the wall of Colonel Nabavi’s house had taunted him for years. His eyelids felt heavy and he dreamed that he was lowering a bucket with holes into a well. When he opened his eyes, Farideh was next to the window. Her white wedding clothes were blowing in the wind on the back of a chair. The bride was wearing thick jeans with a long-sleeved cotton shirt. She said a prayer under her breath and threw the white Pentel pen toward the overturned jasmine. (246)

In the tradition of classical Persian literature, the nanny is present in the wedding chamber, mediating the couple's first encounter. Her location is important because it signifies the ensuing consummation, yet the subsequent text clearly reveals that the couple fails to follow through with that act. The book ends and the marriage is, quite significantly, never consummated. Instead, Izadpanah falls asleep dreaming of Leyli. He is unwilling—or perhaps unable—to relinquish that fantasy and accept a future with Farideh. She, however, throws away her pen, abandoning her infatuation with Dr. Shaqayeqi in an act of practicality. “Such” thereby destabilizes Hasan ‘Abedini’s notion that ‘Alizadeh’s women are dreamers (50). In the moment of realization that Asghari posits (561), the men of “Such” are caught up in the delicate threads of their dream-web, but the women push forward and accept their lot.

The preceding discussion creates a space for sexual ambiguity in this text. Yet Sedgwick asserts that “so-called ‘homosexual panic’ is the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century . . . men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail” (Between Men 89). And so society (unlike the text) does not permit variant degrees. The global rise of a
homosexual identity—whereby sexual practice constitutes lifestyle rather than physical act—demands that heterosexual men define themselves against this identity. Thus, heterosexuality becomes nonhomosexuality. It seems appropriate in that case to return to Asghari's classification of “Such” as a dual-negative, a site in which one disaffirmation leads to another (561). Might we, then, suggest that for Shaqayeqi and Izadpanah, the denial of homosexuality—through a submission to compulsory marriage—actually gives rise to the effective negation of their heterosexuality?

CONCLUSION: MALE HOMOSOCIAL BONDS AND FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

In her reading of Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle,” Sedgwick privileges the character May Bartram—as a woman—with the power of observation: “May Bartram sees and Marcher does not” (Epistemology 208). She contends that “it is always open to women to know something that is much more dangerous for any nonhomosexual-identified man to know” (210). Applying Sedgwick’s idea of female observation to acts of authorship productively complicates our understanding of homosociality in Iranian literature. Suddenly, the female author (as woman) is charged with a certain kind of information about male desire to which even men are not privy. The implication for this chapter is that this observation on observation explains the sole presence of two female authors in a study of men, a value judgment grounded in and based on Sedgwick’s notion that women have access to information too dangerous for a nonhomosexual-identified man.

No book more powerfully depicts these Iranian homosocial bonds than Khab-e zemestani. Goli Taraqqi draws particular attention to her exclusive commentary on men by narrowly depicting their world and thus limiting the role of women in the narrative. Her text, therefore, all but resists feminine reading and primarily concerns itself with the kind of critical information with which Sedgwick might privilege it. With the failed journey as a central motif, Khab-e zemestani constructs the homosocial system as a cage. The men of the book, caught up in each other—in their bonds and mutual desires—go nowhere and do nothing. They hide behind a shaky communal identity, too afraid and too comfortable to defy the group mentality. The two women of the story, typical of Taraqqi’s use of archetypes, conflate into a single motherly figure, thereby demonstrating the men’s inability to see women outside of the context of their mothers. Desire and intimacy, therefore,
bounce among the men and within the group. These men, who function in a patriarchal domain, are not empowered by but rather imprisoned in their masculinity.

In light of Sedgwick’s theory of female observation, this book signifies new meaning. Taraqqi, much like her female characters, is outside of the homosocial structure she builds, yet this external position provides her with a unique perspective. She is able, therefore, to write critically about men—about their extensive relationships with each other and their limited interaction with women. It is Taraqqi’s status as a woman that affords her this opportunity. Undoubtedly, had a man written this novel, its evaluation of homosociality would have been markedly different. Taraqqi can recognize and subsequently comment on the intensity of male bonds precisely because she is outside of that system and cannot fall victim to homophobic panic. Ironically, then, her position as female author affords her this candid analysis. Therefore, the book as a whole represents a moment of subversion as Taraqqi finds freedom in her female authorship and concurrently locates masculinity as a limiting force.

While Taraqqi’s text confines masculine space, imposing and supposing limit and restraint, Ghazaleh ‘Alizadeh’s story opens it up, creating a place in that homosocial arena for sexual ambiguity and thereby broadening masculine space to include new possibilities. While the women of Khab-e zemestani remain outside of the homosocial system, the two main female characters in “Such” function as mediators in this scheme, reconciling the men’s desire for another and redirecting questions of male sexuality. They therefore occupy an intermediary and internal position. The men, whom ‘Alizadeh describes as “uninterested” in women, subsequently reduce women to objects, which then function as currency in a desirous exchange. Meaningfully, by objectifying women, the men deny them their sexuality, and ‘Alizadeh thus narrows their purpose. Sedgwick’s erotic-triangle paradigm allows us to examine the nature of mutual masculine desire in this story. However, the text only points to possibility and, ultimately, functions as an endless chain of negation.

NOTES

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2 For a compelling account of this system in classical poetry, see Julie Scott Meisami’s “The Body as Garden,” in which Meisami argues that the garden functions in the context of amradparasti as a signifier of the loss of and/or hope for bliss (271).
In his article “Modernist Re-orientations: Imagining Homoerotic Desire in the ‘Nearly’ Middle East,” Joseph Boone complicates this dynamic between Europe and the Middle East by arguing that just as practices of Middle Eastern homoeroticism were being repressed (because of a scornful European gaze), the Middle East came to represent a new space for sexual possibility in the Orientalist imagination. He writes that “the sheer possibility of erotic contact with or between men of the ‘Arabic Orient’ has underwritten much of the appeal and practice of the phenomenon we call Orientalism” (566).

See, for example, her earlier work _Man ham Chegvara hastam: Majmu'eh Dastan_ (A Che Guevara in My Own Right: A Collection of Stories) and later works like _Khatereh-haye parakandeh_ (Scattered Memories).

In _Sexual Politics in Modern Iran_ (2009), Janet Afary considers the modern manifestation of premodern homoerotic practices. However, her work focuses on open acts of sexual identification and in particular on _MAHA: The First Iranian GLBT e-Magazine_. She also describes the legal system built to control sexual transgression. She thereby establishes the political tension and exchanges of power among the individual, his sexuality, and the legal system in Iran. My reading of Alizadeh’s short story suggests that literature has created a space for different and differing sexual identifications that do not necessarily aggravate cultural, legal, and political norms.

For more on this figure, see Milani, “Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds,” and Mostasharnia.

**WORKS CITED**


