

## ARTICLE

# Intertextuality and Subversion: Nezāmi in Modern Persian Literature

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## Abstract

This study proposes an innovative, triangular close reading of three Persian authors: Nezāmi, Golshiri, and Mandanipour. It argues that the two modern authors, Hushang Golshiri with his famous novella *Shāh-e siyāhpushān*, the “King of those clad in black,” and Shahriar Mandanipour in his *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, are not only bound to each other in a close master-disciple relationship, but also consciously expound on the subversive potential of the twelfth-century poet Nezāmi. In the process, the divide between modern and classical narrative traditions in Persian literature is bound to disappear, allowing for novel interpretations and perspectives on Nezāmi and for his epics to be heard.

**Keywords:** Zahrā ‘Abdi; *différance*; Hushang Golshiri; Sādeq Hedāyat; intertextuality; Shahriar Mandanipour; Nezāmi; subversion

Most studies on Persian literature continue to be neatly divided into the two separate realms of classical and modern. In the writing of literary history, there is an occasional mingling of the two spheres in the transformative period of the neoclassicist “literary return” movement (*bāzgasht-e adabi*) in the nineteenth century and in early experiments with new forms of writing in the constitutional era and the following decades of the twentieth century. Still, a holistic view of narrative forms and strategies in Persian literature that bridges the gap between classical and modern remains exceptional.

The unease with regard to this division is becoming more widespread, as is questioning of the still dominant discourse on the origins of Iranian literary modernity. Challenging the story of how certain literary genres or forms were introduced or imported from Europe is an integral part of a new postcolonial approach in Persian literary studies. Consequently, in the words of Hamid Rezaei Yazdi and Arshavez Mozafari, it is necessary to “disburden modernity of its aseptic remoteness from tradition by acknowledging tradition’s role in shaping Iranian modernity.” On the other hand, the authors warn of the other extreme, the “celebration of tradition as modern.” Indeed, the pitfalls of navigating Orientalism and nativism in dealing with questions of modernity and tradition within Persian literature are manifold.<sup>1</sup>

A rare appeal to surpass the artificial divide between classical tradition and modern writing has been made earlier by Mohammad M. Khorrami, pleading for perception and

<sup>1</sup> Yazdi and Mozafari, *Persian Literature and Modernity*, 1–3.

identification of a multiplicity of narratives (and spaces) embedded in contemporary works of fiction:

In other words, the explication of the simultaneous presence of multiple spaces in many Persian fictions through reference to the kinship between these works and their classical predecessors is more logical than through an artificially constructed genealogy rooted in other traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Of special note in this context is his early mention of Hushang Golshiri as a contemporary Iranian author who was well aware of this challenge. Khorrami argues very convincingly—and actually by following suggestions raised by Golshiri himself—that the frequent competing narratives in contemporary Persian fiction can be linked to traditional techniques and are not in need of European models. He demonstrates such an approach in his detailed analysis of Golshiri's short novel *Āyenehhā-ye dardār* from 1992, with its multiple narrative layers.<sup>3</sup>

Once one begins to look at specific texts from the wide range of modern and contemporary literature, one realizes that many of them deliberately and consciously refer to the vast literary heritage of classical Persian literature, be it with small citations, in the use of tropes and themes, or with the mentioned adoption and appropriation of narrative techniques. In contemporary literature, the ambiguity, multilayered-ness, gender fluidity, and opaqueness of classical metaphorical writing has exercised a particular fascination for authors and writers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is here that one can read and understand Persian literature as an open narrative space that easily transcends the borders of a modernity that has repeatedly and erroneously been labeled and understood as Western. By the same token, classical works with an established authoritative reading gain by being exposed to modern literature, changing their bearing. They gain a different meaning through processes of “rewriting” once they are appropriated by contemporary authors. Such reappropriation also can involve new critical interpretations in the form of literary speculation or adaptation.

The present article offers to look at two modern authors and their literary works that are intimately connected in their attempt to narrate experiences that cannot easily be told. I argue that Shahriar Mandanipour and Hushang Golshiri are linked not only in an intergenerational, open master-disciple relationship, but that both refer to the twelfth-century epic poet Nezāmi as a transcendent model of narration and subversion, using a similar approach. In a reverse understanding of intertextual relationship, these authors do not simply employ Nezāmi to narrate and express their own stories; they also allow a new reading and understanding of Nezāmi's work itself, building a narrative triangular pyramid of reciprocal intertextual relationship that is not bound to a chronological sequence or hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> The possibility of such a triologue rests as much in the ingenious and complex narrative forms and interpretive openness of Nezāmi as in the experimental character of these two modern writers' works. What I try to show is that a close, even philological, intertextual reading of these three different authors is not only possible, but highly beneficial to our understanding of a wider Persian narrative tradition. A consideration at the end of this article of current examples of contemporary Persian fiction recalling Nezāmi demonstrates the validity of such an approach for future research.

<sup>2</sup> Khorrami, *Modern Reflections*, 84, with special reference to the authors Hushang Golshiri and Hoseyn Sanāpur.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–98.

<sup>4</sup> Studies on the multiple facets of Nezāmi have become more numerous in recent years; of note are Talattof and Clinton, *Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi*; as well as Bürgel and van Ruymbeke, *Key to the Treasure*. Van Ruymbeke highlights the importance of Nezāmi's relation to previous authors and his influence on later literature in the introduction to this collection, marking it as a direction for future Nezāmi studies; this collection does not include any contribution on modern or contemporary literature and its relation to Nezāmi.

## Mandanipour and Nezāmi's *Khosrow and Shirin*

In 2009, the novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* by the Iranian author Shahriar Mandanipour was published by the renowned publishing house Alfred A. Knopf as an English translation from “the Farsi” by Sara Khalili. This work had not—and still has not until the present day—been published in its original Persian language version, although Mandanipour at that time counted among the most prominent Iranian contemporary authors.<sup>5</sup> The increasing tendency of Iranian authors to publish their work abroad and in translation only also is exemplified by Amir Hassan Cheheltan, who is quite successful on the international book market.<sup>6</sup> This involves a certain discord, as the label “censored in Iran” increasingly serves as a marketing incentive for Western audiences. Consequently, such works can be read in multiple ways, as part of a diasporic, Iranian-American/European literature or as part of a broader understanding of Persian literature.

Mandanipour's novel sets out to narrate the love story between two young Iranians, Sara and Dara, and the obstacles they encounter to come together. Their names are the first among numerous other intertextual references in this novel, as they allude to the protagonists of Iranian primary school textbooks, marking them as decidedly symbolic figures. Highly innovative in its narrative technique, the story is told on two levels: the autodiegetic and at the same time extradiegetic level, where Mandanipour talks about himself and his increasingly desperate attempt to write a love story, and the intradiegetic level of the actual love affair between Sara and Dara. These two levels are typographically clearly separated from one another. The auctorial text, or framing commentary, is set in *Perpetua bold*, whereas the *hashiyeh*, or text in the margins, is set in *Fairfield light*. In addition, we are witness to a third level that comprises censored and deleted words, expressions and passages in the auctorial text, which are marked as strikethrough text. Mandanipour's censorial interventions into his own auctorial text make visual the degree of constant self-censorship and highlight the fictive dialogue between the author and his censor. The fictitious interventions by the censor-author are in this way integrated as a prominent component of this novel and trigger immediate attention on the part of the reader. However, to limit this novel, and *pars pro toto* most of contemporary Iranian literature, to the question of censorship carries its own risk of reductionism.<sup>7</sup>

The censor's target is not only the auctorial text written by Mandanipour, but also Nezāmi Ganjavi, the poet who established an innovative genre of romance epic in the twelfth-century Persian world. Nezāmi's epic *Khosrow and Shirin* serves as the classical archetype for the Iranian romance and, in a long citation of Nezāmi's verses, Mandanipour recounts the famous bathing scene where the Sasanian ruler Khosrow beholds the Armenian princess Shirin half-naked in a pond. The idea of gazing at nude women and the cinematic imagery evoked clearly trigger religious censorship. According to Mandanipour, Nezāmi, like himself, had to avoid direct language to circumvent criticism and censorship. The twelfth-century author's usage of highly ornate botanical and food-related metaphors to express explicit erotic content visibly falls victim to both the modern censor and the self-censorship exercised by Mandanipour. Nezāmi's romance is introduced in the novel as the love story par excellence:

<sup>5</sup> All subsequent international editions are in fact secondary translations of this English version, which is authoritative and used in the following pages for citations. Personal names of most modern Iranian authors appear in a wide variety of spellings; in the following I use either the spelling employed in English language publications or the standardized transliteration, whichever is more common.

<sup>6</sup> See Cheheltan, *Revolution Street*. See more on this novel and sexuality as a controversial topic in Sprachman, “Love and Lust.”

<sup>7</sup> Abiz, *Censorship of Literature*, 157–58. Abiz refers to Mandanipour's novel as a prime example of the impact of self-censorship on creativity. See also Nanquette, *Iranian Literature*, 230–34. She discusses the sales, reception, and audience of Mandanipour's novel in the US and stresses that his success was partly due to the fact that he was personally invested in censorship issues, and the American audience had a desire to hear about his direct experience.

In this romance, as in all romances, there are many incidents and events that impede Shirin and Khosrow from meeting each other and from being alone together away from the eyes of the fiercely devout who behaved much like modern-day censors.<sup>8</sup>

We will return later to the category of the “fiercely devout” and the people they represent. For now, in the eye of censorship and against all attempts to propose an allegorical or transcendental interpretation of Nezāmi’s eroticism, Mandanipour celebrates with relish a literal reading of sexual union that is full of irony and humor:

سر اوّل به گل چیدن درآمد  
 گه از سیب و سمن بُد نُقل سازیش  
 چو گل زان گل به خندیدن درآمد  
 گهی با نار و نرگس رفت بازییش

*At first he began gathering flowers, like blooms on that face laughter blossoms  
 Of apple and jasmine sugar-plums he made, at times with pomegranates and narcissus he  
 played*

Mandanipour continues and explicates the original text in all its details:

These verses are a work of genius in depicting a sex scene in which the woman is active:

گوزن ماده می کوشید با شیر  
 برو هم شیر نر شد عاقبت چیر

*The doe and the lion together traveled, upon her at last the lion prevailed.*

Then comes the act of plunging into the jewelry store, meaning Khosrow tore the agate seal of Shirin’s virginity:

شگرفی کرد و تا خازن خبر داشت  
 به یاقوت از عقیقش مهر برداشت

*Wondrously to the treasure-trove’s depth he went, with his ruby her agate seal he rend.*<sup>9</sup>

All these verses are taken from the final scene of Khosrow and Shirin’s wedding night. It might appear redundant to emphasize the correctness of this explicit and literal reading, but Mandanipour is of course aware that, the way Nezāmi is traditionally read and taught, such passages are either glossed over or given a more innocent meaning. In reversing the natural order of events—first encounter, courtship, lovers’ difficulties and distress, and finally the happy end—Mandanipour places this scene of marital consummation right at the beginning of his novel: “The garden trekking, zoo traveling, fruit picking, and scuba diving of the two lovers takes an entire day and night.”<sup>10</sup>

The readers’ expectations are heightened, and the standard narrative plot development is turned upside down—and the pressure on the novelist becomes an enormous, self-imposed weight, as he must create and work out a similar happy ending for his own protagonists, Sara and Dara, who have yet to properly meet and get to know one another. One must be careful, however, as the discussion of the immorality of Nezāmi and its censorship in Iran is in itself a topos, repeated and employed by both sides, the hardcore Islamists in Iran who can prove their moral rigor, and the secular diasporic Iranians who can ridicule them or show their

<sup>8</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28 (translation of Nezāmi by Mandanipour/Khalili); Nezāmi, *Khosrow va Shirin*, 453 (ch. 88, verses 84, 86, 89, 90). The original Persian text is not included in Mandanipour, who addresses a non-Iranian audience. Reinserting the Persian original may be seen as deliberate orientaling of his text; however, it restores the visibility of the original poet, Nezāmi.

<sup>10</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 29.

abhorrence of such practices of censorship.<sup>11</sup> For Mandanipour, evoking the erotic aspects in Nezāmi at the beginning of his novel is a playful cheekiness which sets the tone for what is to come and challenges the reader and the reader's internalized censorship on moral grounds. There is, however, more to Nezāmi and Mandanipour than mere descriptions of sexuality, especially when it comes to the physical text of the manuscript and the fate of the lovers.

Soon after, Mandanipour's heroine Sara begins to dream of "the romantic poem *Khosrow and Shirin*." She becomes Shirin in the pond, but her erotic dream of bathing naked in the silvery waters turns into a nightmare: the water turns a murky green, and she is attacked by a fiery dragon and drowns.<sup>12</sup> The playful eroticism of the beginning turns into an increasingly darker love story. It also is in this episode that the author-narrator (Mandanipour) compares the act of writing to an erotic relationship: "And now, for the first time, the writer and the words begin a strange lovemaking, like two ambisexual creatures that have created a new composition."<sup>13</sup> In this running commentary on the act of writing we see the active involvement of the author-narrator—who is a fictional version of Mandanipour—and whose presence in his own work is constantly shifting.

In the course of the novel, the author-narrator's fascination with *Khosrow and Shirin* becomes more and more distanced; in fact its view is systematically deconstructed. Already in one of the scenes where a blind censor of movies is told about the contents of a film, the mighty king Khosrow is likened to a "wine-guzzling philanderer."<sup>14</sup> In sharp contrast to Nezāmi's playful depiction of Khosrow and Shirin's wedding night at Mandanipour's novel's outset, Mandanipour now imagines an alternative reading:

What if King Khosrow's lovemaking with his bride Shirin was not as our great poet Nizami has described, ever so romantic, ever so soft, as soft as flower petals and stamens. . . I am shocked and terrified to think that Nizami too may have been afraid of censorship and has offered an account contrary to reality.<sup>15</sup>

The reader is witness to a wild fantasy of Sara and Dara in the emergency room of a hospital, watching Shirin being brought in on a stretcher by four men wearing Sasanian armor to be treated by Dr. Farhad. Shirin has become the victim of a brutal rape during her wedding night: "It is a violent world. Some brides end up with excessive bleeding."<sup>16</sup> Khosrow is not just a drinking womanizer, he has turned into a savage wild beast, a rapist, hated by Sara. How different from Nezāmi's earlier cited verses, celebrating "a sex scene in which the woman is active."<sup>17</sup>

Another late echo of the introductory scene of marital consummation between Khosrow and Shirin is imagined—and immediately self-censored—in a later passage full of bitterness, when Sara and Dara stroll down Lalehzar street. First, they pass an old theatre, perhaps the famous *Tamāshā-khāneh-ye Tehrān* established by Sayyid 'Ali Nasr, where, as Mandanipour points out, romantic plays such as *Khosrow and Shirin* were staged. Instead, the two are offered an illegally recorded porn flick by a street vendor, and their desire is both kindled and immediately crossed out: "And in each other's eyes they see images of forbidden words such as 'kiss,' 'pomegranate,' 'milk and honey,' and 'oyster.'"<sup>18</sup> Nezāmi's imagery is once more invoked, but its initial playful charm has disappeared. The idea of Sara and Dara finding sexual fulfillment, as promised by Mandanipour and Nezāmi at the outset of the novel,

<sup>11</sup> Khorrami, *Literary Subterfuge*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 67–68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

has become impossible. Sara cannot forget the rape of Shirin: “Ever since she saw Shirin bleeding, resentment and fear of men has lingered in her mind.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, this is the premature end of the love story Mandanipour intended to write.

Although *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* has been read and analyzed by Marie Ostby in the context of Iranian-American diasporic autobiographic memoirs and life narratives, the present reading focuses on Mandanipour’s engagement with Nezāmi and other intertextual references from Persian literature he uses in his novel.<sup>20</sup> The novel therefore is located more firmly within a Persian literary tradition that deliberately invokes Nezāmi as an equally modern, political, and subversive author. Nezāmi becomes a fellow author, a companion in the daily fight against the Pharisees, the censors, the moralists—and, yes, the Islamists and Basijis. We consequently enter an intricate web of intertwined intertextual references that point to the past, but equally to the future, as more authors will certainly turn to Nezāmi for literary inspiration. Intertextuality is much more than adaptation or a mere play with quotes, citations, and literary *déjà vu*. Enlisting Nezāmi as a modern author of subversion modifies and changes how we read the original work as well—we will no longer be able to read the marriage scene of *Khosrow and Shirin* depicted above without the image of scuba diving coming to our mind. However, we also will question the veracity of Nezāmi, his hidden motives, and the realities he so carefully narrates, describes, and illustrates.

Mandanipour’s novel is a collage and wickerwork of meandering, episodic plot that remains without a clear-cut ending and denies us the happy end of a pleasurable wedding night. In the final dialogue between Mandanipour as author-narrator, the censor Petrovich, and the protagonists of the love story, Sara and Dara, it is the voice of the author that is victorious and gives leave to his novel’s protagonists:

In the process of writing this story, I have again come to the conclusion that writing a love story with a happy ending is not in the destiny of writers of my generation . . . and my work on this story is done. I no longer have any control over it or its characters.<sup>21</sup>

### **Intertextuality: From Nezāmi to Hedāyat, Shāmlu, and Golshiri**

Reading across the divide of classical and modern Persian literature creates intertextual relationships that go beyond mere quotations or allusions and are in need of a theoretical foundation. Similarly, the relationship between literature and literary theory is not always free of tension. Narrative and its interpretative framework are linked, but rarely does an author preempt his own theoretical framework of interpretation. Mandanipour in his novel does exactly this, with explicit references to Jacques Derrida’s *différance* and to the oeuvre of Roland Barthes, which allows us the unusual freedom of weighing questions of narration, intertextuality, and literary echo chambers. It also justifies a theoretical digression:

Clearly girls and boys in Iran have no school-related discussions and no need to exchange educational information. Like everywhere else in the world, discussing Derrida’s “*Différance*,” debating the Planck wall or the chaos theory and the butterfly effect, are consciously or unconsciously excuses for a girl and a boy to establish a private relationship that will end in sin.<sup>22</sup>

Discussing Derrida is merely an excuse to establish sinful relationships, the author suggests at the beginning of his narrative, but once the idea of *différance* has been uttered, it

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>20</sup> Ostby, “De-Censoring”; Ostby references works as diverse as Shirin Ebadi’s *Iran Awakening* and Nahid Rachlin’s *Persian Girls*. Another reading, partly in response to Ostby, is Bibizadeh, “Death to Freedom.”

<sup>21</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 294.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

puts his authorial stance into doubt. The ultimate meaning (signification) of his text—a love story still to be written—is continuously deferred, making it temporary and provisional.<sup>23</sup> Mandanipour demonstrates how censorship creates subtexts that did not exist before, how it rewrites meanings far beyond the author's original intention and thus supersedes the concept of authorship (i.e., his own authorship) completely. Vividly depicting a scene in which fuel is transferred from one car's fuel tank to that of another with the help of a plastic hose, he concludes:

If I and my novelist friend and all Iranian writers had put our heads together, we would never have consciously recognized the subtext of this modern, sexually explicit, gasoline-related, motorized scene. It is thus that the late Roland Barthes' theory of the Death of the Author is, in my dear homeland, subconsciously practiced.<sup>24</sup>

The fragile position of the author-narrator Mandanipour is in this way not only addressed through the reference to censorship and the running commentary on his writing progress, it is simultaneously moved one interpretative level higher. Intertextuality appears on the concrete textual level, as in the literal quotes from Nezāmi, while at the same time the textual level refers explicitly to the theoretical level that informs it.

As an integral component of postmodern literary theory, intertextuality can be traced back to ideas first developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. With different emphases and concepts, their common effort aimed at breaking up the idea of a monolithic text and understanding authorship as a relative rather than absolute concept. Intertextuality, in this line of thinking, deals with that which takes place in between texts, not in the sense of a strict linear or chronological dependency, but as a continuous, discursive, and dialogical as well as reciprocal relationship.<sup>25</sup> At times, intertextuality, if understood in this way, is in no need of a concrete proof of direct influences, quotations, or references—intertextuality is like an echo that resonates within an author or a reader and thus creates a perceptual space that is different (or delayed through *différance*). The concept of dialogism informs the understanding of an uninterrupted and unhindered communication between texts and other cultural products over unlimited distances of time and space that is behind any epistemological process of reception.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Gian-Paolo Biasin with reference to Bakhtin, "Intertextuality is the notion through which a critic can establish dialogues between different texts, authors, and languages, in order to arrive at the network of ideas and images that make up the varied geography of writing."<sup>27</sup>

Central to my understanding of intertextuality is the active role played by texts in the discursive space of a culture and investigation of the creative tension that originates from the unbiased reading of texts of the present and the past. Crucial are both the discursivity of texts and the dialogue between the texts. Intertextuality is always an expression of subversion, as it contradicts and opposes authoritative readings and descriptions of texts and stresses their autonomous character. These theoretical ideas become visible in Mandanipour's novel, as it uses references and allusions to caricature and mock the

<sup>23</sup> Derrida's understanding of *différance* is not fixed. In his *De la grammatologie*, it is associated with the idea of a movement that leaves a furtive trace (142). In *L'écriture et la différence*, he playfully invokes the concept of *délai*, in the Freudian sense of *Aufschub* or *Denkaufschub* (333).

<sup>24</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 57. Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur" (1968), in *Le bruissement de la langue*, 61–67.

<sup>25</sup> This theoretical recapitulation is necessary, as a traditional understanding of intertextuality as primarily the summary of textual sources or citations, references, and allusions still largely informs work on Middle Eastern literatures, both classical and modern; see Deheuvels et al., *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature*. For a summary of theoretical discussions since Bakhtin, see Allen, *Intertextuality*.

<sup>26</sup> For a contrast to the narrower understanding of dialogue and dialogism in linguistic theory, see Imo, "Dialogizität," 341.

<sup>27</sup> Biasin, "Periphery of Literature," 981.

ensorship of the Islamic Republic by rereading classics of Persian literature out of context; they also inform the underlying structure and motivation of his work.

Consequently, postmodern theory and Islamist censorship are not in opposition to one another. They both share a deep distrust in the empty promises of modernity. In the words of the censor Petrovich, who carries the name of the investigator from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Porfiri Petrovich:

But I want you to be able to write an Islamic love story. And if it happens to be post-modern, then all the better. In other words, for everything in it to be all muddled and confused and yet for it to criticize modernism, which incites sin. Don't forget, we take no issue with postmodernism. After all it promises a return to tradition.<sup>28</sup>

The tradition to which such return is promised, however, remains unidentified, as the ambiguity of classical Persian imagery and poetics is certainly a part of it.

It is almost impossible—unless one would compile an exhaustive encyclopedic tabular listing—to name all of the authors, works, and films mentioned and referenced in Mandanipour's novel, some in detail, others just in passing. Quite often, his novel resembles a collage of accidental allusions tossed out with a wink. However, in addition to Nezāmi, there are three modern Persian authors who take prominence amid his numerous references.

First, there is the exemplary representative of Persian literary modernity, Sādeq Hedāyat and his novel *The Blind Owl*.<sup>29</sup> *The Blind Owl* symbolizes most prominently the blacklist of forbidden literature in the early years of the Islamic Republic that for a long time was only available from under the counter. It is the first book through which Dara attracts Sara and starts communicating with her. Mandanipour inserts a number of friendly nods toward Hedāyat, raising the suspicion of his alter ego, the censor Petrovich. Still, his allusions are rarely explicit and help to create a certain atmosphere by introducing images and motifs: the hunchback, the uncle whose hair turns white, the shadows on the wall, the conquest of the fortress on the wedding night, and the black locks of the beloved. Although the recurring figure of the hunchback is borrowed from a tale in the *Thousand and One Nights*, in his outward appearance and the fear he invokes he clearly echoes one of the main characters in Hedāyat's *Blind Owl*, who first appears as a bent old man sitting under a cypress tree.<sup>30</sup> Again, the references are deferred, they are invoked by appealing to the timeless and archaic memory of the reader, they emerge and disappear again as floating images. In this way Hedāyat forms a link between the imagery of Nezāmi and the postmodern world of Golshiri and Mandanipour.

Then there is the famous modern poet, Ahmad Shāmlu, who appears incognito, without providing his real name, almost making a cameo appearance. Dara is stunned:

He is shocked. He did not expect to see Iran's great romantic poet in such a state. Before the revolution, in literary and women's magazines that were now bought and sold in secret, Dara had seen the poet's special sections and his photograph—a sad looking man with long disheveled hair, a cigarette between his fingers, his forehead resting on his hand, his eyes staring at a point away from his camera—and next to his large photograph his erotic love poems, all in praise of the bodies of his multitude of lovers

<sup>28</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 247.

<sup>29</sup> Hedāyat, *Bu-f-e kur*, first published in 1936, with numerous translations in all major languages. The official stance on *Bu-f-e kur* in the Islamic Republic of Iran remains ambiguous and is full of contradictions. Nanquette, in *Iranian Literature* (101), insists that permissions for official reprints have not been given. However, the catalog of the National Library of Iran does list a number of recent reprints by renowned publishers, which at times can be found on the shelves of regular bookshops (and sometimes not).

<sup>30</sup> Hedāyat, *Bu-f-e kur*, 12: *pir mardī quz kardeh*.

who had all thought they would be his last. After the revolution, none of his books had received a permit to be printed or reprinted.<sup>31</sup>

The poet, who reappears at several other places in the novel, is openly lusting after Sara and presents her with a valuable manuscript right on the street: “Beautiful young lady, this handwritten narrative in verse of *Khosrow and Shirin* dates back to five hundred and thirty-eight years ago. . . Do you know *Khosrow and Shirin*?”<sup>32</sup> In return, he asks her to take off her headscarf for him, a frivolous demand for symbolic nakedness on the verge of sexual harassment. However, the roles reverse and, clearly aroused, she defies Dara’s admonishment, follows her desire and agrees to this *Indecent Proposal* (here with reference to the 1993 movie by Adrian Lyne).

In the end, when the two lovers finally meet in Dara’s house, and everything seems possible again, the illusion created by Nezāmi and the promise from the wonderfully illustrated manuscript given to her is destroyed:

Dara opens the book. All the bright and vibrant colors of the miniatures and illuminations have faded. A dark shadow has spread over the unveiled and exposed hair, arms, and legs of the women, and it seems a coarse eraser has scraped and smudged certain words and sentences. The book’s pages reek of mold.<sup>33</sup>

The third modern author appearing on several instances is Hushang Golshiri, who is first introduced as the author’s (i.e., Mandanipour’s) mentor: “In 1990, I was thrilled to learn that on the advice of Hooshang Golshiri, one of Iran’s great writers, a reputable private publisher had agreed to publish a second collection of my short stories, titled *The Eighth Day of the Earth*.”<sup>34</sup> Intertextuality clearly involves references to the author’s own previous literary work. We understand this as an acknowledgment of literary debt, and furthermore as a hint of, already, a literary pedigree. Golshiri too has repeatedly been the victim of censorship, passing away with his work still under review: “I remember Hooshang Golshiri, not having seen his new novel published and reprinted, died several years ago. . . I am very cold.”<sup>35</sup>

This *éminence grise* plays a crucial role in this novel and, as we will see, is a model for the reinterpretation and appropriation of Nezāmi into modern Persian literature. In fact, one might read *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* as a complex and hidden homage to Hushang Golshiri—and to the twisted and circuitous paths of Iranian literary modernity. Despite the multiple and liberally displayed references to other works of literature throughout *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, one other crucial point of reference is only alluded to in a very indirect manner, although it is both a model and a key to the understanding of Mandanipour’s singular collage. A small hint toward the end of the novel points us in the right direction:

I turn onto another street. The sidewalk is so deserted that seeing a frail man walk toward us is somehow comforting. . . Just as he walks past us I recognize him. He is no other than Hooshang Golshiri. . . He has played an important role in my life as a writer, and I happily shout: “Mr. Golshiri!” In the light of the streetlamp his face looks tired and old. He seems to be straining his memory to remember me. Then in a cheerless voice he says: “I didn’t recognize you! Your hair has turned so white. . . Is it snow?”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, 104. Numerous iconic photos exist of Ahmad Shāmlu with a cigarette in his hands and a pensive, remote glance.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. The collection *Hashtomin ruz-e zamin* was published in 1371 (1992) by Enteshārāt-e Nilufar.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

The text indirectly alluded to in this chance encounter between the author-narrator and his imagined mentor is Golshiri's novella *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, literally the "King of those clad in black."

### Golshiri and Nezāmi's *Haft Peykar*

*Shāh-e siyāhpūshān* was first published under the pseudonym of Manuchehr Irani, but has since been reliably ascribed to Hushang Golshiri.<sup>37</sup> Similar to Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, Golshiri's novella also appeared first in English translation in the United States (1999) before a discreet edition of the original Persian version in a limited print-run was published in Sweden in 2001, at this time still only attributed (*mansub be*) to Hushang Golshiri.<sup>38</sup>

The "King of the Benighted," the title chosen in the translation by Abbas Milani, is a parable of totalitarianism, violence, censorship, and the role of the politically engaged and later resigned author and poet. The strong presence of the poet-narrator and the way Golshiri recounts the process of narration immediately come to mind when read in conjunction with Mandanipour's novel, as do his struggles in constructing his narrative and the frequent citations and intertextual references in his composition. The most important among them is the story of the king clad in black, taken from Nezāmi's *Haft Peykar*.

The *Haft Peykar* is a complex collection of stories, arranged in the narrative framework of the deeds of King Bahrām and his seven storytelling princesses, who hail from seven color-coded climes and reside in seven, cosmologically marked domed palaces.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most intricately woven epic by Nezāmi, it essentially constitutes the masterpiece of Nezāmi's five poetic works, his *Khamseh*.<sup>40</sup> Already in the title, Golshiri's novella follows closely the central tale of the Black Dome, the *Gonbad-e siyāh*, and the ill-fated journey of his protagonist.

The Indian princess, who resides in the black-domed palace, tells Bahrām the tale of the king who, upon hearing rumors about a city of people all wearing black, desires to find out about their secret:

تا بدانی که هر که خاموش است      از چه معنی چنین سیاهپوش است

So that you may know why everyone who keeps silent is thus dressed in black.<sup>41</sup>

The anonymous king sets out on a journey that brings him miraculously to the realm of a fairy queen by the name of *Torktāz* and her consorts. Driven by curiosity, and ultimately unable to resist his burning desire, he is expelled from this paradise garden and joins his equally unsuccessful predecessors, clad in black to mourn the failure and resulting trauma they have experienced.

In Golshiri's adaptation and reinterpretation of Nezāmi's epic in verse, the anonymous narrator is a poet in the early years of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>42</sup> The first encounter with those dressed

<sup>37</sup> Rahimieh and Rafinejad, in "King of the Benighted," provide an overview of the publication's history and translations and a synopsis.

<sup>38</sup> The text is currently available in pirated versions on the Internet, but it has not seen an authorized reprint with a publisher. The text quoted is from the original print edition by Baran (Sweden).

<sup>39</sup> The most widely available edition is that by Dastgerdi. I cite a recent reprint with commentary, together with the outstanding translation by Meisami. Still appreciated because of its text-critical apparatus is the edition by Ritter and Rypka from 1934. Recent studies on the *Haft Peykar* include Cross, "Colors of Love," and Orsatti, "Order of Climes."

<sup>40</sup> A classic introduction to Nezāmi's *Khamseh* is Chelkowski, *Mirror of the Invisible World*.

<sup>41</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 163 (my translation); trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 112, verse 132: Perhaps you'll learn why those who lack—the will to speak, wear robes of black; Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 18; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> For a previous, preliminary comparison of Golshiri and Nezāmi, see Rusek-Kowalska, "Reading a Medieval Romance."

in black, the modern *siyāhpūshān*, occurs right at the beginning of the novella, when the poet-narrator observes a memorial setting of a young martyr to the war, with the young men all dressed in black (*sar tā pā siyāh pushideh*).<sup>43</sup> The poet, who explains that he has been teaching the story of the Black Dome for years, is arrested and has to undergo an involuntary journey. Far from being a king like Nezāmi's protagonist, his journey is nevertheless a consequence of his inquisitiveness and intellectual curiosity. Upon his arrest by men clad in black, another category of *siyāhpūshān*, the author is wrapped up like a parcel abducted in a Toyota; the analogy to the black-clad king who begins his journey in a basket and is then carried away by a magic bird to an unknown destination is drawn explicitly. In the words of Nezāmi: "I was traveling and he [the bird] was distressing the traveler" (*man safar-sāz-o u mosāfer-sūz*).<sup>44</sup>

However, Golshiri's poet-narrator does not end up with a fairy queen on green meadows, but lands directly in prison, a place he knows only too well from incarcerations under the previous regime. Confronted with his own literary past, he questions his role as an author, like Mandanipour after him, and increasingly doubts his previously assumed social function as a committed writer.<sup>45</sup> In the narratives by both Nezāmi and Golshiri, the protagonists are subject to dislocation, both spatial and temporal, through their travels. Their journeys bring with them a loss of control, and, although they allow the travelers to surpass physical temporal and spatial limitations, they come with the heavy cost of inflicting lasting trauma. Julie Meisami has analyzed the motif of the journey in the *Haft Peykar* in great detail, interpreting the progress of Bahrām Shāh from temporal to sacred kingship as an inward journey.<sup>46</sup> This is actually echoed by the poet-narrator Golshiri, who emphasizes it thus: "It has to be an inner experience (*tajrobeh-ye daruni*), everyone must go through it." And whereas for Nezāmi it is supposed to be the experience of never reaching the "place of nowhere," the famous Sohravardian notion of *nākojā-ābād*, the aim and destination is even more unclear for the modern traveler.<sup>47</sup>

The most traumatic experience the poet-narrator of Golshiri undergoes is not the confrontation with the censor and judge under interrogation, but the encounter with the traitor and black-clad repentant (*tavvāb*) Sarmad, and the latter's participation in mass executions of leftist revolutionaries in prison. Released in the end, like Nezāmi's black-clad king, the modern Iranian poet-narrator is forced to live without any further illusions, without hope and without any awareness of time:

با این پیراهن سیاه چند سال، چند قرن بر او گذشته بود که موهاش همه دانه به دانه سفید شده بود؟

In this black shirt, how many years, how many centuries must have passed for his hair to have turned, one by one, so completely white?<sup>48</sup>

The end of Golshiri's novel is incorporated almost verbatim into one of the final scenes of Mandanipour's novel, albeit with exchanged roles. It is now Mandanipour whose hair, unknown to himself, has turned white.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 6; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 166 (my translation); trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 114, verse 171: From early morn until midday, I travelled, filled with great dismay; Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān*, 23; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 40.

<sup>45</sup> Ghanoonparvar, "Golshiri and Post-Pahlavi Concerns," 354. Ghanoonparvar discusses Golshiri's early challenge of the concept of committed literature (*ta'ahhod-e adabi*).

<sup>46</sup> Meisami, "Theme of the Journey," 164.

<sup>47</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān*, 17; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> The final sentence of the novella, Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 79; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 99.

<sup>49</sup> And before him, it was the father or uncle of the narrator in Hedāyat's *Buf-e kur*, who, locked into a room with a terrible snake, escapes as an old man with white hair (*az sheddāt-e vahshat 'amuyam bā muhā-ye sefid az otāq khārej mishavad*).

The texts by Mandanipour and Golshiri do not only share close intertextual references to Nezāmi, whose epic romances serve as a foil for their own narratives, themes, and plots. Although the intertextual references and allusions to other texts and authors within Golshiri's novella are not as numerous as in Mandanipour's panopticon, he does not restrict himself to Nezāmi alone. We encounter references to the father of modern Persian poetry, Nimā Yushij, and to the French surrealist Paul Éluard.<sup>50</sup> Golshiri's poet-narrator also explicitly creates a genealogy of classical poets lingering in prison and persecuted by those in power who serve as a reminder of the timelessness of persecution. Mentioned are Ka'b b. al-Ashraf (d. 624), a satiric poet murdered during the lifetime of the prophet, and Bashār b. Burd, an Abbasid poet famous for his licentious poetry.<sup>51</sup>

Even in small details, Golshiri and Mandanipour use comparable means of citation: Golshiri's poet-narrator has developed a mnemonic code in prison, stenciled with a needle on paper, to remember the keywords of verses from Nezāmi's *Gonbad-e siyāh*. The choice of keywords at the beginning of a verse, such as *sar* (head), *yāftam* (I found), and *sadafi* (a pearl), point to a particular verse.<sup>52</sup> However, there is more to it, as the limitation to note only select keywords deliberately hides the "immoral" context and content from the non-initiated. As such, it points to the opening scene in Mandanipour's novel, where single words and metaphors can form a vocabulary of forbidden thoughts and items. Dara in Mandanipour's novel also uses a code of purple dots to communicate with Sara through books they share.

One of the special attractions for both authors in the use of Nezāmi lies in his poetic eroticism which, as we have seen, does not easily give way to an imposed metaphorical or mystical interpretation. The texts by Golshiri and Mandanipour both deliberately play with erotic passages and exploit their subversive potential:

هر دو برها به بر آوردیم	سر به بالین بستر آوردیم
نازک و نرم و گرم و سرخ و سپید	یافتم خرمی چو گل در بید
مهر برداشتم ز گوهر او	صدفی مهر بسته بر در او

We laid us down, embracing, on the pillow; clasping her, I found  
A harvest like red roses in white willows, slender, soft, and warm  
She was a shell whose door was sealed; I took the seal from her jewel.<sup>53</sup>

These are the verses that Golshiri's poet-narrator finds in his copy of *Haft Peykar* on his return from prison.<sup>54</sup> They begin with the mnemonic keywords mentioned by Sarmad, cited earlier as *sar*, *yāftam*, and *sadafi* (head, found, pearl), used by him to tell the poet-narrator not only that he had decoded his system, but also suggesting that he might have secretly been defiling the warm corpses of executed female prisoners in a similar embrace.<sup>55</sup> The reader slowly understands that Sarmad thus embraced his former beloved, unable to give her the coup de grâce he delivered to the other victims. Nezāmi's eroticism is subverted in an almost perverse turnaround, unmasking and debunking the hypocritical stance of some of the poet-narrator's prison companions.

The canonical character of the classical texts and the unassailability of the author allow the narrators (Mandanipour and Golshiri) to challenge Islamist zealots, who are furthermore depicted as a timeless phenomenon. It would be too easy, however, to assume that the fear of erotic readings from Nezāmi is limited to modern Islamist sensitivity. In fact, conservative

<sup>50</sup> Reciting Éluard: Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 70; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 23; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 72; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 175; trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 121, verses 305–7.

<sup>54</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 78; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 72; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 92.

British translations, such as the translation of the *Haft Peykar* by C. E. Wilson from 1914, present a pattern of censored passages similar to the citations by Mandanipour. Instead of crossing the text out, Wilson reverts to Latin, thus simultaneously hiding and tagging inappropriate verses. Here again are examples from Nezāmi's *Gonbad-e siyāh*:

وانگه از جوش خون و آتش مغز  
در گنجینه را گرفتیم زود  
حمله بردم بر آن شکوفه نغز  
تا کنم لعل را عقیق آمود

Then in the ferment of my blood and brain I threw myself towards that lovely flower.  
*Thesauri portam repente arripui, ut rubinis sardachatem insererem.*<sup>56</sup>

The result is a fractured text that openly displays signs of self-censorship. When it comes to dipping into the sugar-box, Wilson even resorts to changing the language within a verse—reminding us once more of Mandanipour's "sugar plums" at the beginning. Apparently, we are not supposed to know what the sugary treasure is, at the same time that turning it into censored Latin makes it even more obvious.

گفت یک لحظه دیده را در بند  
تا گشایم در خزینه قند

She said (to me), A moment close your eyes, *ut sacchari receptaculi portam aperiam.*<sup>57</sup>

Another aspect that brings the three works together in a dialogue, as a mutual echo chamber, is the rather special role of the storytellers, narrators, and authors in the narrative structure of Nezāmi, Mandanipour, and Golshiri: all of them document their narrative process. In the case of Nezāmi, this is achieved through the carefully arranged framework of stories. The author Nezāmi himself is not invisible, to the contrary, he states his authorship proudly in his proemium to the *Haft Peykar*. Also, in the opening to the tale of the Black Dome, he issues a warning to himself: "Nizāmî, flee the rose garden: its roses are but sharpest thorns."<sup>58</sup> With this the story cycle of the seven domes begins, and Bahrām begins his visits to the seven palaces and the seven storytelling princesses. In the "Black Dome," the Indian princess awaits him and tells him her story. But the tale she tells him is relayed from the story she has herself received from a relative who again had heard it from an unidentified lady clad in black who used to visit her. Already here, the curiosity to uncover the reason for wearing black is the prompt behind the narrative. In the retelling by Golshiri, when the king arrives in the city where everybody is clad in black: "So everyone knows. Yet no one speaks" (*Pas hamēh mi-dānand. Kasi nemiguyad*).<sup>59</sup> We learn that the black-clad lady was the servant of the black king and had pressed him to confide in her. Only then does the narrative switch to a homodiegetic perspective, as she begins to tell her story directly, allowing the black-clad king to speak through her memory. At the end of the tale, the narrative perspective changes back to that of the lady servant, who after hearing the story joined the custom of wearing black. Finally, the main narrator, Nezāmi, takes over again and leads on to the next dome.<sup>60</sup>

The narrative perspective chosen by Hushang Golshiri in his version of the *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān* also is quite remarkable in its fusion of an auctorial presence and a self-

<sup>56</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 187; trans. Wilson, *Haft Paikar*, 1:141. In the commentary on this verse, Wilson keeps writing in Latin, explaining that ruby should be read as virginal blood spilt and jacinth as penis: 1,366. 'Rubini' ad sanguinem in virginis supratione effusum spectant. 'Sarchadates' ad penem spectat; *ibid.*, 2:142.

<sup>57</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 188; trans. Wilson, *Haft Paikar*, 1:142.

<sup>58</sup> Nezāmi/Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 105, verse 25; Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 154: Ey, Nezāmi, ze golshani begriz – ke golash khār gash-t-o khārash tiz.

<sup>59</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 17; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> For further analysis of Nezāmi's narrative techniques in the *Haft Peykar*, see Emāmi and Qāsemipur, "Taqābol-e 'onsor-e revāyatgari."

commenting, narrative self-reflection.<sup>61</sup> Golshiri achieves the fascinating effect of narrating his story on a heterodiegetic level, while creating the illusion of a first-person narrative. In fact, we witness a rather rare narratological construction: a homodiegetic and intradiegetic narrator who tells his story as a third-person narrator. This peculiar effect is achieved through the creation of a timeless stream of consciousness in the mind of the imprisoned protagonist, frequent introspective remarks, and the associative movement between the postrevolutionary present and the prerevolutionary past. The process of writing and narrating is a recurrent motif that carries the novella:

Why couldn't he write of these [the plaster swan and angel in his garden]? . . . If he were to write for himself, these are the subjects he would write about, instead of all that he had written for those who had fled abroad, or those who had remained home but only enjoyed the literature of cryptic allusions.<sup>62</sup>

This desire is not abstract, but actually an answer to a long preceding paragraph where he does exactly this: describes himself washing the white protruding belly of his plaster garden-cupid. The framework provided by Nezāmi's tale of the Black Dome provides an overarching structure that holds the novella together and offers both motivic material and a clear target focus. Sometimes, Golshiri uses verses from Nezāmi as an ironic comment to the plot. The following verses he reads at home just prior to being snatched by the black-clad agents, quoting the words of the Fairy Queen, ordering her consorts to search and find the intruder:

می‌نماید که شخصی اینجا هست	که ز نامحرمان خاک پرست
هر که پیش آیدت، به پیش من آر	خیز و برگرد گرد این پرگار

"It seems to me an earthly wight has trespassed here, without the right.  
Rise, swiftly round this compass wind, and bring whomever you may find."<sup>63</sup>

The longer passages, where the poet-narrator retells the story of the Black Dome to his fellow inmates, present a selective summary of the story with verse citations of the original. As in Mandanipour's novel, the end, however, is continuously deferred. The following, final, and concluding part of the tale of the Black Dome is consequently not included in Golshiri's retelling—it is outside of the text (*hors-texte*), yet inside it and present by intimation.

Can the injustice and violence depicted by Nezāmi be compared to the one experienced by our modern authors? Nezāmi summarizes the experience of his travelers, the freshly returned king and his guide, the butcher who had helped him to reach the Fairy Queen's garden, in this final dialogue:

وز تظلم سياه پوشيدم	من درين جوش گرم جوشيدم
راي تو پيش من پسندیده	گفتمش کای چو من ستم دیده
ناگزير است ازین سيهپوشي	من ستمديدهر را به خاموشي
رفت و آورد پيش من شب تار	رو پرند سياه نزد من آر

"I too from that hot passion burned, and dressed in black at being wronged."  
I said, "Like me, you've been oppressed; I find that your decision's best.  
I, wronged, in silence, have no choice but to wear black; go now, and fetch  
Black silks." He went, and quickly brought the very blackness of the night.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> On Golshiri's special connection to Hedāyat's *Buf-e Kur* and his short story *Yek dāstān-e khub-e ejtemā'i* (1968) about a young writer who is charged with composing a social criticism story, see Khakpour, "Beyond the One-World Frame of Fiction," 453.

<sup>62</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 15; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 170; trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 117, verses 229–30.

<sup>64</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 189; trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 131, verses 503–6.

As is often the case with Nezāmi, these crucial final verses can be read with slightly different emphasis. In the words of Golshiri, Nezāmi is always in need of interpretation (*tafsiresh mimānd*).<sup>65</sup> This becomes evident once one compares different renderings of this passage. In the translations by Meisami and de Gastines, the red-hot boiling (*jush*) is clearly linked to the overwhelming, sexual passion experienced, a reading supported by the wording of a preceding verse.<sup>66</sup> In this line of interpretation, Cameron Cross concludes “that these [the Black Dome and the White Dome] are two stories about love and desire, in which temptation, self-control, and legitimacy are the crucial matters at stake.”<sup>67</sup> Meisami, in turn, suggests reading the Fairy Queen Torktāz as the traveling king’s spiritual guide whose counsel—to temper desire with patience—he failed to heed, losing everything he had.<sup>68</sup> One could question, of course, whether a spiritual guide who loses all her protégées, and in fact creates a whole city of black-clad mourners, is a successful guide.

In the understanding and translations of Wilson and Bürgel, however, the hot burning sensation is either a reaction to or a direct expression of the injustice and oppression suffered.<sup>69</sup> This also is the explanation offered by Dastgerdi, who rephrases Nezāmi’s argument in his notes: “In the heat of this injustice that the times wrought upon me, I was badly hurt and following the custom of the oppressed suffering from oppression by the violence of times, I dressed in black.” In this equally valid interpretation, the more immediate, personalized reading of a man who could not control his passions and keep his hands away from the Fairy Queen’s undergarments, an action for which he consequently—and today one would say, rightfully so—gets banished and expelled as many other men before him, is transcended by Nezāmi and becomes a parable of universal oppression and tyranny. The approaches are not exclusive, as Nezāmi ultimately refrains from passing a judgment on either the impatient king or the queen who puts his patience to the test.

The Persian keywords in this passage are *tazallom* (injustice, injury) and *setam-dideh* (oppressed), both in their own way designating the suffering and distress under oppression, injustice, and tyranny. The political dimension of *zolm* (tyranny) and *setam* (oppression) indeed leads us straight into the modern period and the revolutionary times of Golshiri, and in consequence, to the Islamic Republic of Mandanipour. In fact, the question of tyranny is a key component in most discussions on Islamic political ethics and legitimacy. It resurfaces in the extended Islamist discourse of the Iranian Revolution in connection with unbelief (*kofr*), notably in the purported prophetic tradition that a government (of the Shah) can persist with unbelief, but not with tyranny. For an author like Golshiri, Nezāmi’s parable of oppression and tyranny is attractive, and he adopts the perspective of the victims who, unable and ashamed to speak about what they have experienced, can only wear black. Nezāmi’s message, if read like this, is directly linked to the twentieth century, and its diffraction in modern Persian literature highlights continuities and relationships beyond chronological sequences.

It is at the end of the story of the Black Dome, once the passionate love affair fails, that Nezāmi’s king finds himself again bound in the basket. In the case of Golshiri’s poet, one can argue that the tale is told in a reverse circle: the poet also is tied and bundled up at the beginning, but his actual journey had begun much earlier with his love and passion for committed literature and a just society, carried through a long decade of struggle. Only after he has lived through another total disillusionment, he witnesses his release, being transported back by the same guards, the same Toyota. He refuses, however, to join Sarmad in his ascent

<sup>65</sup> Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> This reading is supported by the previously cited verse that describes his boiling blood (*jush-e khun*) when he assailed the Fairy Queen; Nezāmi, *Sept portraits*, 165: *J’ai, moi aussi, brûlé au feu de cette passion; depuis, en pareille tyrannie, je porte le deuil.*

<sup>67</sup> Cross, “Many Colors of Love,” 55.

<sup>68</sup> Meisami, “Theme of the Journey,” 159.

<sup>69</sup> Nezāmi/Wilson, *Haft Paikar*, 1:143: *Since from such tyranny we hotly chafed, in our complaint of it we dressed in black; Nezāmi, Die Abenteuer des Königs Bahram*, 165: *Da wallt ich heiß auf ob der Gewalt und legte Schwarz an, wie der Kläger tut.*

(*me'raj*) to see where the black-clad king has gone, distancing himself from the regime's dehumanizing terror.

In fact, Golshiri questions and challenges the principal tenets of Nezāmi, just like Mandanipour. What if the wedding night of Khosrow and Shirin was not a joyful, consensual erotic “fruit picking” and “scuba diving” as Nezāmi makes us believe, but a brutal and violent rape, Mandanipour asks. What if the ascent (*me'raj*) to higher spheres and the inner journey proposed by Nezāmi led only to disillusionment in the case of the poet-narrator, or even worse, to the ultimate defilement of one's beloved in the case of Sarmad, is Golshiri's central question. Modern authors employ the subversive potential of Nezāmi to turn against censorship and suppression; however, they also deconstruct and subvert some of the basic assumptions of Nezāmi's writing.

### Outlook: Nezāmi beyond Golshiri and Mandanipour

Our main discussion has focused on the triangular pyramid with its three sides comprising Mandanipour, Golshiri, and Nezāmi. The reception of Nezāmi by Golshiri and Mandanipour is based on direct citations and a very close reading of the twelfth-century author, including an intertextual appropriation of plot and content. This triangular dialogue in turn offers lucid new interpretations of Nezāmi and therefore changes and modifies the reading of all texts involved. But there are more recent examples of Persian literature with direct or indirect references to Nezāmi. One or even two generations further on, in contemporary fictional writing of the last ten years, we discover another, more casual approach to Nezāmi that does not necessarily take extensive quotes or plot elements from Nezāmi's epics. Instead, references to Nezāmi come as epigraphs, as part of titles, or with the naming of characters.

These references to Nezāmi are less conspicuous, they can be passed over easily or taken as the occasional odd quote, reminiscent of literature once read in school. Taken seriously, however, they once again provide not just a comment on Nezāmi in the context of a contemporary work of fiction, but relate back to Nezāmi, offering fresh perspectives and creating a natural exchange between classical and modern literature.

In the case of the novel *Ruz-e halazun* by Zahrā 'Abdi, published in 2014, one does not notice at first that the two main characters are deliberately named Shirin and Khosrow.<sup>70</sup> Only gradually, as the family setup is introduced, we understand that the three siblings were deliberately named by their father, a fervent reader of Nezāmi, as Khosrow, Farhād, and Shirin. Khosrow is the oldest son, who went missing in action during the last year of the Iran–Iraq War and is mourned as a martyr. Shirin as one of two women narrators of the novel is his little sister, and Farhād is the financially and professionally successful middle brother. In one scene, the reason for the characters' names is revealed:

The boy comes to help. He quickly flips through the films. He is sweating and his hands are wet; he says: “Your father should have simply named you Talkheh (bitter), like the Arabic name Talha. How does Shirin (sweet) relate to your life in these unhappy nights?”

This time he is right. Father loved Nezāmi. He used to sit in front of the house, on the stone bench, with the water canal of Daryān Now gushing forth in his imagination, like a dream of Shirin in the early morning. He often read Nezāmi with Afsun's father, Mr Raf'at. I had grown up with my feet in this water canal.

Leylā says that the story behind a name has an effect on a person's fate. But in our house, everything has turned out different. Nezāmi's Khosrow has gotten his Shirin, but

<sup>70</sup> 'Abdi, *Ruz-e halazun*. The Italian translation by Anna Vanzan was published in 2017 as *A Tehran le lumache fanno rumore*. Zahrā 'Abdi's novel emulates Mandanipour, with her myriad intertextual and inter-media references, including poetry, prose literature, and a whole canon of film classics, both Iranian and foreign.

my father's Khosrow did not reach Afsun, nor our mother. He went to war and never returned. Nezāmi's Khosrow had the royal tomb of Bisotun built for him, but my father's Khosrow does not even have a grave. Farhād died of love and heartbreak, but father's Farhād does know nothing sweeter than money and would die for it. Nezāmi's Shirin had the love of both Farhād and Khosrow. Farhād as her soulmate and Khosrow for intimacy. No one is so stupid as to fall in love with father's Shirin, bitter as she is.<sup>71</sup>

The love triangle of Nezāmi is transformed into an awkward and painful sibling constellation; similar to other modern pairings of such classical scenes, it influences our vision. The patriarchal father figure recreated by 'Abdi, based on Nezāmi, has been unable to take care of his children. Through him, Nezāmi's auctorial authority is questioned and subverted once again. In the interpretation of 'Abdi, the members of this dysfunctional family have to come to grips with their past. That Afsun, the former girlfriend of Khosrow and the second female narrator of the novel, works as a psychologist with systemic family constellations makes the above presentation plausible. We are far from a deeper psychoanalytical reading of Nezāmi, but the seed of an idea is planted, and we will remember Khosrow as both a victim of the Holy Defense and of a family constellation that he could not escape.

Another remote echo of the literary past is offered by Majid Qeysari in a novel published in 2018. Qeysari's book, a highly innovative approach to the genre of historical novel, is a fictitious translation of a Christian report contemporary to the aftermath of the events at Karbala that carries the title *Shammās-e shāmi*—the Syrian priest.<sup>72</sup> For those, however, who remember the opening verses of Nezāmi's tale of the black-clad king in the *Gonbad-e siyāh*, the title resonates differently:

دیده در نقش هفت پیکر بست  
خیمه زد در سواد عباسی

چون که بهرام شد نشاط پرست  
روز شنبه ز دیر شماسی

When Bahrām pleasure sought, he set his eyes on those seven fair portraits;  
On Saturday from Shammāsi temple went in Abbasid black to pitch his tent.<sup>73</sup>

The blackness of the Abbasid banners is remembered and also reminds us of the black-clad mourners, the *tavvābun* of the early Shi'a.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Qeysari's title provides a very subtle hint of the novel's theme. The apparent white dress of the Zoroastrian temple's priests in Nezāmi (*deyr-e shammāsi*) can be read as the black robe of the orthodox Christian priest (*shammās*).<sup>75</sup> Even within the color logic of Nezāmi, black and white are interchangeable—and we remember the black-white binary in the novella by Hushang Golshiri, oscillating between black shirts and white snow.<sup>76</sup>

Whereas Nezāmi's Black Dome is linked to the first clime, India, and the plot leads us to far off China, the association of the Black Dome with an imaginary Syria is taken up in yet another recent literary work. Mohammad Tolu'i's collection of seven short stories, published

<sup>71</sup> 'Abdi, *Ruz-e halazun*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> Qeysari, *Shammās-e shāmi*. He is best known for his short stories of the Holy Defense genre.

<sup>73</sup> Nezāmi/Dastgerdi, *Haft Peykar*, 155; trans. Meisami, *Haft Paykar*, 105.

<sup>74</sup> We remember Sarmad in Golshiri's novella, who also presented himself as a "repenter," a *tavvāb*, although with a completely different subtext; Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān*, 64; trans. Milani, *King of the Benighted*, 84. If we follow this echo further into the early modern historical context, we encounter the *siyāh-pushān* in a Safavid context in Abisaab's "Peasant Uprisings."

<sup>75</sup> Nezāmi/Wilson, *Haft Paikar*, 2:126: "1.181. According to the [the dictionary] *Burhān-i Qāṭi*' Shammās was the name of the man who first instituted fire-worship. Hence, the Shammāsian temple is a fire-temple, and the reference is either to its brightness, or to the white robes of the priests."

<sup>76</sup> On the black-white binary of the Black and White domes, see Cross, "Many Colors of Love." Find more on colors in the *Haft Peykar* in Krotkoff, "Colour and Number," 103 (on the Black Dome).

in 2017, is entitled *Haft Gonbad* and narrates travels to seven countries neighboring Iran.<sup>77</sup> The collection's epithet is a short quote from the *Haft Peykar*'s "Black Dome" that we have encountered before: "I was travelling and he was distressing the traveler" (*man safar-sāz-o u mosāfer-sūz*).<sup>78</sup> This hemistich refers to the magical voyage of the curious king with the enormous bird that carries him to the land of the Fairy Queen and was used by Golshiri to mark the start of his journey into captivity and prison. Tolu'i's first story (or the first "dome") in his collection is devoted to Syria. Here, the reference to Nezāmi is explicit, in both title and opening epithet; still, the content and structure of Tolu'i's stories do not necessarily follow up on this. His is therefore a rather conventional form of intertextual referencing, unless we remember Golshiri, the Toyota, and the men clad in black. Nevertheless, the motif of travel, so dominant in Nezāmi's *Haft Peykar*, is taken up and developed further. Shall we read Nezāmi as a travelogue, as a *safarnāmeḥ*?

This limited outlook is intended to extend this article's argument for a reciprocal reading between classical and modern literature with and through Nezāmi into the contemporary field. It is an open invitation, not just to watch for references easily overlooked, but, further, to return to the original and reconsider ingrained interpretations.

## Conclusion

The division of Persian literature into two separate realms of classical and modern is artificial, and continuities of narrative techniques, themes, and tropes are much more frequent than what traditional literary histories would have us believe. Intertextuality is a strong tool modern authors may use to reach back to their literary heritage and question and subvert the conditions of contemporary authorship. More than that, the creative dialogue with classical authors changes their own perceptions of narrative strategies and, in turn, established interpretations of these classics are put to the test. Equally, modern authors are closely linked to each other if they rewrite plots and texts from their literary past.

*Censoring an Iranian Love Story* by Shahriar Mandanipour and *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān* by Hushang Golshiri both use and adapt works by the medieval author Nezāmi. They do this not simply by retelling a story, but by employing the ambiguous and meaningful potential of Nezāmi to subversively break through the totalitarian experience of modernity—a modernity that should not be confused with literary modernity as an autonomous field. Mandanipour employs the sexual and erotic passages of Nezāmi's epic *Khosrow and Shirin* to provoke and challenge Islamist censorship. He also uses these passages by Nezāmi to seduce the Western reader with the unexpected libertarian imagery found in classical Persian literature. Soon, however, these promises of playful eroticism are deconstructed. The mighty king Khosrow is depicted as a potential alcoholic and rapist, and Mandanipour asks whether Nezāmi also was afraid of censorship and forced to offer an account contrary to reality. Mandanipour offers himself the theoretical keys to the interpretation of his intertextual approach, referencing Derrida's *différance* and Barthes's negation of authorship. Intertextuality, as we have shown, is much more than inserting quotations from literary predecessors into one's own work. It defines new relations between texts, beyond their chronological history, and changes them in both directions.

Mandanipour, in a subtle manner, introduces his literary mentor Hushang Golshiri as his model for rewriting Nezāmi and alludes to both the author, Golshiri, and the main protagonist of Golshiri's *Shāh-e siyāhpūshān* with the image of hair suddenly turned white. The mourning black-clad king from the episode of the Black Dome in Nezāmi's epic *Haft Peykar* turns into a desperate poet in Golshiri's version, who suffers from his failure to influence and shape modern society. Ultimately, he is subjected to the same fate as his twelfth-century predecessor: after a timeless journey, he barely escapes, with his hair turned white.

<sup>77</sup> Tolu'i, *Haft Gonbad*.

<sup>78</sup> See note 44.

The white hair becomes emblematic, much like the black clothes of the *siyāhpūshān*, the people wearing black. The black-white color symbolism of Nezāmi is artfully employed—as dressing in black has become the symbol of the oppressors and thugs of the new state, being white-haired is now a sign of undergone trauma and the stigma of failure. The black-clad king, however, also turns into the figure of the traitor Sarmad, who embraces his beloved on her cruel deathbed and longs for black clothes that he borrows and collects from his cellmates. Nezāmi’s single story line is broken up, and the black-clad king multiplies and splits into several entities. Golshiri also employs central plot structures taken from Nezāmi, notably the motif of the journey, both physical and spiritual. Neither Nezāmi nor Golshiri offers their travelers an easy road to redemption; both the black-clad king and the disillusioned poet are unable to adequately express their experiences. Hinged on the keywords of “tyranny” and “oppression” in Nezāmi’s concluding verses of the Black Dome, Golshiri stresses the interpretation of this episode as a universal parable of violence and suffering.

With intertextuality creating an active dialogue between texts, we witness new interpretations of Nezāmi. After reading the double entendre of Mandanipour and Golshiri it becomes almost impossible to read Nezāmi’s erotic passages in an allegorical way. Further, in both instances, the eroticism of Nezāmi’s verses is questioned and contextualized in an atmosphere of violence and oppression. Fleeting love scenes are interrupted as the figure of the hunchback, reminiscent of Hedāyat’s *Blind Owl*, intervenes in the novel by Mandanipour, as does the persona of the universal censor, crossing out lines and words, such as “pomegranate” and “shell.” New questions arise when Mandanipour and Golshiri are read together: is the Fairy Queen in Nezāmi’s Black Dome not just another incarnation of Dostoevsky’s censor Petrovich or the investigating judge, Hājj Āqā, in Golshiri’s prison?

Nezāmi is a valuable presence in modern Persian literature, sometimes more, sometimes less explicit and visible. More than other authors of the classical canon, Nezāmi appeals to modern and contemporary writers because of his thoroughly crafted narrative structure and techniques, his fascinating plots and characters, his open and ambiguous meaning, and his apparently secular and liberal stance. The divide between modern and classic Persian literature is much less pronounced than literary histories and outlines have us believe, and both sides profit from an open, intertextual reading. Such a new type of reading fosters awareness of the complexities of the ever-renewing signification-making process, allowing, counterintuitively, classical texts to find modified, even rejuvenated, meaning through contact with modern texts.

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