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Limning an Original Iranian Manhood from Mazdusht to Javid

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Abstract

The early twentieth-century nationalist discourse in Iran reviled, on the one hand, a Qajar hegemony on account of an exhausted “manifest destiny,” and lauded, on the other, a discourse of masculinity that assumed moral responsibility to protect the imaginary “geobody” of Iran. In this paper I examine how this discourse of patriotism resonates through Mehdi Akhavan-Sales’s poem “This Autumn in Prison” (1966) and Esmail Fassih’s novel *The Story of Javid* (1981). With a comparative—and conducive—focus on Akhavan-Sales’s poetic figure Mazdusht at the outset of analysis, before turning primarily to Fassih’s protagonist Javid, I argue that the construction of an archetypal form of gender, or what I term an “original Iranian manhood,” is integral to both men of letters as they have channeled their nationalist concerns through literary expression. As I proceed with *The Story of Javid*, I propose that gender—nationally reimagined—shapes a quest narrative set, quite symbolically, during the historic decade of 1920s when the politically bankrupt Qajar rulers were giving way to the iron fists of a Pahlavi state apparatus, with fateful repercussions for Javid’s performance of masculinity—particularly with regard to the novel’s treatment of female characters.

Keywords: Esmail Fassih, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Iranian nationalist discourse, men and masculinities in Iran, gender archetype

Introduction

Mazdusht and Javid, the poetic figure in Mehdi Akhavan Sales's poem "This Autumn in Prison" (1966) and the protagonist of Esmail Fassih's novel *The Story of Javid* (1981) respectively, are pre-Islamic, male, and patriotic Iranian emblems that represent the artists' nationalist concerns. Both literati, who to different extents form the focus in the following pages, cast retrospective looks at the significant period of Qajar rule in Iran (1785–1925), and register the historical present in their literatures. As I will demonstrate, Akhavan-Sales and Fassih seem to have appropriated an early twentieth-century nationalist discourse that, on the one hand, castigated an attitude ascribed to the Qajar state apparatus without which the nation would have reached its true and historically ordained potentials (Kashani-Sabet 41). On the other hand, both men, while inspired by the same nationalist rhetoric, laud a discourse of masculinity that has assumed moral responsibility since the nineteenth-century to protect the sacred and imaginary "geobody" of Iran (Najmabadi 98).

"This Autumn in Prison," which initiates the argument in a comparative framework to introduce my consequent reading of *The Story of Javid*, centers on the poetic persona of Akhavan-Sales in Tehran's Palace Prison (*Zindan-i Qasr*) in 1966. There the persona mourns the loss of freedom in the Iranian society most probably due to Operation Ajax, which reinstated the Shah following an American orchestrated coup in 1953. In the poem, then, the self-reflective persona invokes his now famous quasi-Zoroastrian trope of Mazdusht, who, if granted the opportunity, could have ideally delivered the Iranian nation from tyranny and stagnancy. While at it, Akhavan-Sales also highlights the importance of masculinity to the viability of the persona's political vision.

The Story of Javid, moreover, is the story of a Zoroastrian Yazdi teenager who travels to Tehran in 1922 in search of his missing family. As it turns out, Javid's father, a travelling merchant who has had regular dealings with the Qajar Prince Malik-Ara, had in his last trip to the capital got into a dispute with the Prince, and been consequently murdered. Unaware of the tragedy at hand, Javid arrives in Tehran and knocks at the palace of his father's slayer. Unsurprisingly, then, Javid becomes captive in Malik-Ara's household, and finds his mother and little sister in a dungeon. *The Story of Javid* thus centers

on the ordeals of the title character as he is enslaved for eight consecutive years, while witnessing his mother and sister perish at the hands of Malik-Ara and his lackeys. The *Bildungsroman* of Javid's life, a story of innocence to experience, turns gradually into a revenge tragedy as the protagonist becomes determined to avenge his family's blood, and confront the Qajar Prince. This is why the historical backdrop of the novel becomes significant, since the eight-year span of the narrative, during the 1920s, is signposted by the contestation of Qajar rule and the gradual rise to power of Riza Khan later to be crowned the first Pahlavi Shah. In fact, as the figure of Riza Khan represented in the narrative arrives to undermine Prince Malik-Ara's authority, it in turn facilitates Javid's revenge towards a resolution. In the end, Javid manages to confront a fugitive Malik-Ara in his own palace, and drown him in the cistern.

As a comparative overview of the novel in light of Akhavan-Sales's "This Autumn in Prison" will demonstrate in the next section, there are two axes around which the narrative unfolds in *The Story of Javid*. First and foremost is Fassih's imaginative investment in a body of Zoroastrian tropes that associate Javid's thoughts and actions to an ancient and pre-Islamic (as opposed to Islamophobic) conception of Iran. Secondly, there is a dualistic worldview, predominating Javid's hardships in Malik-Ara's household, between decency and corruption. A religious minority and an immediate outcast as soon as he enters Tehran, Javid is characterized as a righteous outsider who is affectionately introduced in the preface as Fassih's "Iranian kid" or "*pisarak-i Irani*." (vii). Then pitted against the tyrannical figure of Prince Malik-Ara, Javid is juxtaposed against a waning Qajar hegemony that Fassih has portrayed in evident disdain. In fact, as Fassih has also suggested, the overriding conflict between the righteous protagonist and his princely nemesis lends itself to a series of interpretations that vary from a polemical narration of late-Qajar history to a celebration of the Iranian collective unconscious (Interview by Emami et al. 218). Considering both views, I argue in this paper that Javid's quest from the utopian world of plentitude in Zoroastrian Yazd to the dystopian world of uncertainty in Qajar Tehran is also the story of a development from innocence to experience that constitutes the character as the exemplar of what I term an "original Iranian manhood."

In-depth critical works on the corpus of Fassih's writing are scant if not nonexistent. And while the majority of these studies focus on the well-

established Aryan family saga, very few works (and all in brief) have considered *The Story of Javid* in earnest. Anahid Ujakiyans, for one, has reviewed the novel in terms of an organic unity that firstly reflects the historical context of the narrative on the “corrupt atmosphere” of Malik-Ara’s household (105), and secondly furnishes the description of Javid’s inner thoughts to the moral crises that the boy will undergo throughout his quest (106). Beyond such formalism, Hasan Mir-Abidini has focused on “the struggle of the lonely individual” within “the chaotic society” of Qajar Tehran so as to read a *Bildungsroman* in light of the historic events that mark the chronology of the plot (1015–17). While I am likewise determined to unearth the aesthetic subtleties of the novel and examine how they transpire through context, I am equally concerned with the vital but hitherto unexplored notion of Javid’s gender identity—which takes the form of an Iranian archetype. Reflected both on the surface and within the dramatic structure of the narrative, masculinity is a significant theme in *The Story of Javid* that informs every stage of the protagonist’s development from as early as the Arcadian atmosphere in Yazd at the outset wherein Javid is initiated during his *Sidrih Pushan* as a “complete and virile Zoroastrian man” (10), well towards the end when Javid is literally emasculated in the hands of the tyrannical Malik-Ara (242). Javid the Iranian man, I am going to argue, bears more symbolic significance than Javid the Zoroastrian boy.

Before going any further, I must comment on the significance of a gendered reading of both “This Autumn in Prison” and *The Story of Javid*. Despite the fact that studies on men and masculinities have been increasingly established as an independent and often profeminist field of research, there is still a lacuna in the field of Middle Eastern Studies with respect to the visibility of men as gendered bodies (Ouzgane 1, Sinclair-Webb 8). Men, Michael Kimmel famously argues, “are the invisible ‘gender’” in the sense of being “[u]biquitous in positions of power” and yet “invisible to themselves” (5). In other words, while the unmarked and normative status of manhood establishes the power of patriarchy, it nevertheless glosses over the fact that “the invisibility of gender to those privileged by it reproduces the inequalities that are circumscribed by gender” (6). It is my commitment to study representations of manhood in literature not simply as men but more importantly as

masculinities that need to be retraced, challenged, and potentially redefined. My reading of *The Story of Javid*, for instance, sheds light on Fassih's pursuit of a highly poetic and imaginary but eventually problematic conception of Iranian masculinity made manifest in the protagonist.

The following analysis consists of four sections. In "Mazdusht and Javid," a comparative analysis of Akhavan-Sales's poem and Fassih's novel demonstrates that two of contemporary Iran's eminent literati construct their own ancient tropes to express their disappointment at political tyranny. Such pre-Islamic (as opposed to Islamophobic) invocations, I argue, are retrospective and highly nostalgic endeavors to cast—what Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet terms—"glimpses of glory" at a once magnificent Iran (41). Moreover, this comparative analysis reveals that Qajar Iran has often been rendered as a temporal and geographic metaphor to signify political defeat and national stagnancy. In both literary works, most significantly, such doleful ruminations over national loss are juxtaposed against a conception of masculinity that can potentially salvage the nation from moral bankruptcy.

Following this pathbreaking comparison, I turn primarily to *The Story of Javid* to state that the journey from an Arcadian Yazd to a dystopian Tehran is the means to understand Fassih's gendered discourse of nationalism. In the second section of analysis, "On the Road," the harmonious life of Javid in Zoroastrian Yazd constitutes a moral high ground that is to be contradicted upon arrival in Qajar Tehran. In particular, Javid's *Sidrih Pushan* or male initiation rite at the outset of his journey reveals that a supposedly authentic and geographically rooted sense of Iranianness is tied closely to Javid's performance of masculinity. Moreover, the politics of Javid's religious experience, also highlighted during the very rite, foreshadows the battle between good and evil that is to follow in Malik-Ara's household. In the third section, "In Qajar Tehran," I thus suggest that the Iranian capital under Ahmad Shah's rule—which is represented through the microcosm of Malik-Ara's palace—is undeserving of true men such as Javid. The archetypal vision of Javid's masculinity, therefore, is to be violently subdued and emasculated through Malik-Ara's repressive and castrating authority in Tehran. Yet in the fourth and final section, "Post Qajar Tehran," I demonstrate how the rise of Riza Khan, leading eventually to Malik-Ara's downfall, facilitates Javid's ultimate triumph over the Ahriman in the Qajar Prince. As Javid's naivety turns

into a combative form of tortured defiance, I argue in conclusion that the final twist in his performance of original Iranian manhood emulates a prototype of Riza Khan as the “hypermasculine savior” of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128), which is highly problematic particularly with regard to Javid’s treatment of female characters in the narrative.

Mazdusht and Javid

In the aftermath of the 1953 coup, Akhavan-Sales proclaimed himself a Mazdushti, the imaginative creation of a pre-Islamic faith, and a portmanteau made up of “Zoroaster,” the founder of the ancient religion and the reformist “Mazdak,” its Martin Luther. Akhavan-Sales’s recourse to a partly fabricated religion is on a social level a coping strategy and desperate attempt to perhaps come into terms with the mortifying consequences of the coup. As Mudarrisi and Ahmadvand have suggested, “incessant political defeats” and loss of hope in freedom from political tyranny diverted Akhavan-Sales’s attention “to Iran and its former glory,” a nostalgia rechanneled through an expression of poetic sensibility in the form of Mazdusht, the fictive prophetic figure who signifies the loss of national dignity (47). In fact, the significance of Mazdusht in one poem, “This Autumn in Prison” sheds light on my reading of Fasih’s Javid. Note, in the following, the poet’s disappointment at political tyranny, his need for an alternate vision seen through the eyes of Mazdusht, and, above all, the importance of masculinity to the fulfillment of the poet’s vision. “*Dar in zindan baray-i khud havay-i digari daram,*”

I have, in this prison, for myself another fantasy;
Oh world, hark, be mirthless, for I have another joy;
We are slaves, chained to fears and hopes, yet still
In the midst of these, I long for another place. (181)

Akhavan-Sales’s utopian hankerings for “another place,” reiterated through matching rhymes, crystalize, on the one hand, the moribund condition of the poem’s immediate context which is Iran under political tyranny, and pronounce the need to bring about or at least dream of change on the other. There are in fact three pillars that elevate the poet’s vision—and which potentially shed light on the unfolding of the plot in *The Story of Javid*. First is Akhavan-Sales’s

setting of stage in a “prison” as a spatial metaphor wherein his passion for Iran is held captive. The poet’s vision, at once poignant and cheery, is articulated from within this “lonely crypt” particularly as “the autumn cloud weeps bitter tears at the dead of night over the prison” (183). In the next stanza, Akhavan-Sales sarcastically compares the bitter state of such life under tyranny to a wonderland inside a “Qajar palace” out of which he yearns for a pastoral haven: “What a wonderland it is this Qajar palace, I too / Have a village of my own in this land of wonders” (183).

While the “Qajar palace” is a direct reference to *Zindan-i Qasr*, the Tehran Palace Prison wherein the poet composed his work in 1966, there is a more negative connotation attached to the poem’s locale. Akhavan-Sales’s frustrated vision in a prison cell, allusively compared to a Qajar mansion, parallels the opening sections of *The Story of Javid* on that “Qajar morning” in 1922 when Javid first enters the ramshackle Tehran and knocks at the door of the Qajar Prince Malik-Ara, alas to be held captive and deprived of his livelihood for the next eight years (31). In fact, given the patriotic disposition of both men of letters, it is my contention that the skeptic attitude of Akhavan-Sales and Fassih towards the idea of Iran under Qajar rule is a doleful rumination over loss and defeat in nationalist terms. As citizen poets of an Iranian “imagined community” (Anderson’s term), the two literati draw upon the retrospective metaphor of Qajar Iran to brood over national loss and social stagnancy rampant in theirs as well as the readers’ historical presents. The long period of Qajar reign (1785–1925), of which Prince Malik-Ara is the chief representative in Fassih’s novel, is a period in Iranian history often characterized with “Manifold Defeat,” Kashani-Sabet’s innuendo that points to the frustrated ambitions of an imperial “manifest destiny” during the Qajar period (30, 41). In the Iranian nationalist discourse, she suggests, informing a reading of Akhavan-Sales and Fassih here, “‘Qajariya’ became synonymous with treachery, or literally, ‘country-selling’ (*vatan furushi*)” (168). The tendency to view the Qajar dynasty as the epitome of corruption and despotism, as Tavakoli-Taraghi has rightly noted, “is a common feature of Orientalist, nationalist, and also Marxist historiography of nineteenth-century Iran” (7). Both Fassih and Akhavan-Sales seem potentially informed by such totalizing perspectives on this historical period.

“This Autumn in Prison” addresses my reading of *The Story of Javid* on a second level in revealing the importance of masculinity to the ideal of Iran the poet envisions in captivity. Back in his “lonely crypt,” still dreaming of a way out of this Qajar wonderland, the poet deems it necessary to make a point clear: “I am in this prison guilty of being a *man*; oh Love, / Call me a rogue if I am convicted of anything but” (182). For Yusif • Ali, being guilty of “manhood” has been one amongst a plethora of individual and social reasons that undergird the epistemology of Akhavan-Sales’s “defeatism” in his poetry (63). There is in “This Autumn in Prison” a repressive and domineering masculinity disguised and implied as a warden who has undermined the poet’s vision of an Iranian masculinity for which the only means of expression is but to dream of “another place” through poesy. Insisting to his “Love” that he must be a “rogue”—“*khata nas!*”—should he be imprisoned for anything except his manhood only proves the importance of a masculine self-image to Akhavan-Sales’s sanity, and the viability of his patriotic vision inside the prison cell.

By the same token, masculinity is part and parcel of Fassih’s nationalist concerns. If we assume that *The Story of Javid* is, following Northrop Frye, a “mythos of autumn” or the narrative of Javid’s journey from innocence to experience, then masculinity is a crucial signifier that informs every stage of his development from Yazd to Tehran. In other words, masculinity lies at the heart of the novel’s conflicts, especially, the antagonism between Javid and Malik-Ara. From the Arcadian opening of the novel with Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* ceremony in Yazd—which is the Zoroastrian *rite de passage* to initiate a boy into adult manhood—all the way to the emasculating ordeals and mortifying episodes of religious persecution that Javid must suffer through in Tehran, Fassih seems consciously aware of his protagonist’s masculinity, first constructed in Yazd as an archetypically Iranian identity, and later put to test through a series of ordeals in conflict with Prince Malik-Ara, a repressive omen not unlike the apparition of warden in Akhavan-Sales’s poem that silences the fulfillment of a perfect masculinity.

On a more complex level, Javid, who has thus far been established as “guilty of being a *man*,” to quote Akhavan-Sales again (182), is poignantly embedded in the novel’s historical context. Given the significance of gender to the Iranian nationalist discourse (Najmabadi, de Groot), my analysis of Javid’s

masculinity cannot evade an examination of his role as a participant observer in 1920s Iran. Because *The Story of Javid* is particularly set against the 1922–1930 period, with recurring references to the emerging contestation of Qajar power, the shadow of Riza Khan’s masculine authority—reinforced as the “hypermasculine savior” of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128)—cannot go unnoticed in the unfolding of the plot. In fact, while the iron fist of Riza Khan’s state apparatus undermines the authority of Malik-Ara, and in turn leads to the coronation of the first Pahlavi Shah, it also facilitates Javid’s ultimate triumph over the Ahriman in the Qajar Prince—hence, the resolution: the fulfillment of Javid’s revenge. In this vein, I am going to argue, Javid’s quest from innocence to experience entails the performance of a hypermasculine identity in tandem with the normative vision of manhood reinforced by Riza Khan.

Eventually, Fassih and Akhavan-Sales’s hankering, imbued with an authentic sense of Iranian manhood, dovetail again through their nostalgia for a vision of pre-Islamic Iran. Having made clear the necessity of breaking free of his chains, Akhavan-Sales’s persona now speaks of a pact he has made with an old sage, Mazdusht, “the fruit of Mazdak and Zoroaster / whose message to humanity, hark, is another deliverance” (184). Just as instinctively, it so appears, Fassih has imagined Javid, a Zoroastrian figuration, to revisit a significant period in Qajar history. As the author has suggested in an interview with Goli Emami et al., Javid is the beneficiary of the Iranian collective unconscious, and the imaginative end-product of a “genetic impulse” to draw upon the “rites and traditions” of ancient Iran (218). One may venture to imagine that Fassih’s fascination with the Zoroastrian Javid stems from, or is at least inspired by, the rekindled “historical consciousness” of the earlier stages of Iranian nationalism (Ansari 17), when the intelligentsia were driven to retrace their ancient past to perhaps catch “glimpses of glory” (Kashani-Sabet 41).

Nevertheless, while Akhavan-Sales ventures to reimagine an ancient faith in his search for a socio-political renaissance, Fassih takes the more taken road of Realism. Javid, a teenage boy from the religious minority of Zoroastrians in early twentieth-century Yazd, begins a journey to Tehran in search of his family. On a simple and conventional plotline as such, the quest of the protagonist from the peripheral community of marginal Zoroastrians in Yazd

(innocence) to the centralizing authority of a corrupt state apparatus in Tehran (experience) opens a window for Fassih to laud his protagonist as a nostalgia provoking national trope. Masculinity, I have suggested, plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the plot to the extent that a study of Javid's role as a participant observer in 1920s Iran is incomplete without taking into account the significance of masculinity to each and every stage of his development.

On the Road

Upon entering Tehran after twenty-three days on the road, Javid is far from impressed by the nation's capital. The unwelcoming atmosphere that strikes the boy is the first of several indications that gesture at the sequence of dreadful events that unfold to shape the *Bildungsroman* of Javid's life. "A city made of dust, wood, and tiles; silent and despondent; wide as a wilderness" (30). What seems particularly hurtful to Javid, however, is not the poverty-stricken state of Qajar Tehran per se, but the depressing fact—in his eyes—that the city "was not what he expected of the capital of his great ancient and imperial country" (ibid). This utopian vision of homeland contradicted at first sight of Tehran conjures up the Arcadian state of harmony during Javid's *rite de passage* to which Fassih opens the novel. But first it helps to reflect more on Javid's first impressions of Tehran.

In search of his parents, Javid has found his way uptown towards Malik-Ara's mansion in a short journey that poignantly reflects a wide class-divide. "With an enormous and magnificent exterior in the midst of a humble and despicable market," Malik-Ara's residence protrudes against the rest of the buildings in the area (31). In fact, the tension that characterizes Javid's first encounter with Malik-Ara's household foreshadows the bigger conflict at hand. In the short and densely worded space of the seventh chapter, Javid's initial encounter sums up the torturous chain of events that is follow. From verbal abuse to religious profiling, to mental and physical violence, Fassih gives the reader a peek at the catastrophe upon Javid. Approaching the house "timidly" and "shaking with fear," Javid knocks at the door before facing the furious butler of the house, the sickly and pathetic Ghulum-Ali Khan. Fassih, at his sarcastic best, ridicules the butler's fury at Javid, emulating the royal pomposity that the Prince's mansion best represents: "As if the intrusion upon that stately

Qajar morning [*an subh-i dulat-i Qajar*] in the hands of this strange peasant boy was utterly ill-advised” (31). Deriding him as an “untouchable *Gabr*,” a bigoted slur applied to Zoroastrians, and smacking his face with a cherry stick to punish the boy for his inquisitions, Ghulum-Ali juxtaposes the corrupt state of affairs inside Malik-Ara’s abode with the Iranian moral high ground that is manifest in the character of Javid.

To add insult to injury, Abu-Turab, Malik-Ara’s other lackey, and one of Javid’s chief enemies later on, walks out of the gate to clean the front yard. An enthusiastic puppy then walks towards the lackey looking for a playmate. The dog’s innocence, obviously, does not rhyme with Abu-Turab’s brutality, and turns into a conflict that can only lead to one end. With Javid still a first hand witness, Abu-Turab tramples on the puppy, picks it up, and chokes it to death (34). *Sag kushi* or “dog killing,” according to Dekhoda Persian Dictionary, connotes an inconsequential act of “murder that goes unreprimanded.” If Javid, then, is put in a position to witness such horrendous act, he could potentially foresee his own fate—and clearly that of his family—inside Malik-Ara’s mansion. With Abu-Turab’s *sag kushi*, Fassih externalizes the vehicle in a metaphor, and gives gory reality to a verbal expression in order to highlight the plight of the protagonist ahead of his ordeals. It is only after this momentous event that the gates of the mansion finally open wide and Prince Malik-Ara’s carriage rides out and passes by Javid indifferently, leaving the boy unnoticed, “his lips swollen, and his injured mouth still burning” (35).

Yet despite of the air of impending doom throughout Javid’s first impressions of Tehran, the novel has not just begun with the *sag kushi* at Malik-Ara’s gate. Before that, Fassih has contrastingly set up an Arcadian atmosphere at the outset of the novel in Yazd so as to make Javid’s later hardships resonate more poignantly. In short, Yazd and Tehran characterize two diametrically opposed worlds not just in Javid’s but also in the narrator’s mind. As importantly, the road between the two cities becomes a liminal space between the utopian visions of homeland highlighted in Javid’s male initiation or *Sidrih Pushan* and the darkly realistic and emasculating ordeals that the boy will and must go through in search of his family. It is therefore interesting that the exposition of the protagonist should take place *on the road*—within the very gap that separates the two cities according to the novel’s dualistic cosmology.

When the novel opens with Javid and his old uncle Bahram on the road on a hot summer day in 1922, we are invited to a world at odds with the distressing air of their planned destination: “A delicate kid in white, fourteen or fifteen years of age,” he “was born in a village near Yazd, his name [was] Javid, and his ancestors had been Parsee Zoroastrians in the outskirts of Yazd for hundreds of years” (2). The narrator thus describes Javid’s innocent disposition as radiant, naïve, and positive. As the extension of the narrator’s voice, moreover, Bahram too reveals Javid’s innocence in the broader frame of the narrative. He attempts to at once warn the boy of the ordeals ahead and provoke the reader’s conscience so s/he would take sides with him. For instance, as they approach Tehran nearing the city of Qom, a revered religious centre in Shia Iran, Bahram warns his nephew to stay alert lest they get harassed since “the people around here,” he would surmise, “are not particularly fond of [us] Zoroastrians” (4). While Javid reacts rather defiantly, asserting that “I am not afraid of anyone for who I am,” Bahram echoes the voice of the narrator who has previously noted that “the people of this land [of Iran] have forgotten their roots and origin” (ibid).

Of course, we are meant to believe that Javid’s position vis-à-vis “this land” of Iran is far more organic than that of “the people” the narrator reprimands. I have noted that in response to Bahram’s cautious skepticism, Javid puts up an air of naïve defiance. It is also important to add that Javid owes such tone of confidence to the recent initiation rite he has passed through prior to the journey. “*Sidrih Pushan*,” the narrator notes, “was a day during which the [Zoroastrian] boy would leave the realm of childhood and enter the world of adult manhood” (6). Significantly, the account of the rite is given in the form of a flashback on a “sleepless night” when Javid “had lain down on the warm soil of the plains of Iran”—on “*khak-i garm-i dasht-i Iran*” (7). Such affectionate setting of stage on the Iranian “land” warmly embracing the reminiscing boy is noteworthy. In fact, Javid’s entry into the sphere of adult masculinity is not completed without Fassih’s reformulation of the boy’s masculinity in terms of a utopian vision of homeland that establishes him as the agent of a highly imaginary but original Iranian manhood—not unlike Akhavan-Sales’s mythopoetic Mazdusht who, as we noted, stands at the heart of the poet’s patriotic disquiet, redeeming a prisoner who is “guilty of being a

man” (182). Similarly, “the complete and virile Zoroastrian man” that Javid turns into after the initiation rite has become for Fassih an ideal prototype to contrast the dystopian state of Malik-Ara’s household in Qajar Tehran (10).

The account of Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* proceeds from “the warm soil of the plains of Iran” as the boy walks down the memory lane back to the day the ceremony was performed. That the rite, according to Bahram, is a prerequisite for Javid’s quest impacts the overall thesis of the novel. *Sidrih Pushan*, the narrator notes, “was not just an occasion to wear *Sidrih* or *Kushti*” (7), sacred badges of initiation (Snoek 92), but also an event to recite and celebrate the articles of faith in the presence of a religious authority. This also provides the opportunity for Fassih to lay out the ethical principles on which Javid is characterized. Accordingly, Javid will become a self-proclaimed follower of Zoroaster, an adherent of “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” (8–9). Yet more revealingly, particularly with regard to his fateful encounter with Malik-Ara, Javid’s vows continue with a commitment “to follow the path of his ancestors and fight against evil” (8). Jan Snoek, too, unearths a deeper layer of the ceremony, concluding that the rite demands from “the newly initiated” to confront “the powers of evil” (97). The politics of Javid’s religious experience, therefore, shed light on the construction of the boy’s masculinity through a passage solemnly predicated on defiance against evil. In sum, Javid’s naïve defiance is rooted in his *Sidrih Pushan*, the symbolic impact of which is to be projected through Fassih’s nationalist concerns as he portrays the reminiscing boy lying down on “the warm soil” of Iran thinking of the moral imperative to find his parents and counter evil, if necessary (7).

While the flashback to Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* is the first highlight of the journey from Yazd to Tehran, the death of Dastur Bahram is the second and final climax before Javid finally arrives in Tehran. In fact, Bahram’s will and testament is the narrator’s second opportunity to yet again emphasize the Zoroastrian line of Javid’s descent and thus underline his righteousness before pitting him against Malik-Ara. In the third chapter, Bahram halts the journey with a premonition of imminent death to address Javid for one last word of wisdom. Reiterating all that need to be told to a Zoroastrian man, Bahram revalidates Javid’s Iranianness and thus highlights the geographic rootedness of his quest: “We are rooted in this land,” my boy, “do keep that in mind” (16). Since Bahram insists, moments before passing, that he is alas dying “in exile”

(15), he deems it necessary to remind Javid of their line of descent. Going through the facts with “a fading voice,” Bahram is almost obsessively concerned—and with him the narrator—that “our family history is as old as the ancient history of this very land [of Iran],” and that “we have always lived in this country practicing this faith” (ibid). Highlighting his rootedness in an imagined community—nationally shared at least by Bahram, the narrator, and Fassih—Javid is nationalized as an inherently Iranian trope. In conclusion, Javid is established as the *sui generis* figuration of an Iranian youth from the construction of an archetypal man in his *Sidrih Pushan* to a celebration of the character as a national trope upon Bahram’s death. Fassih’s *pisarak-i Irani* is indeed the mythopoetic yet historically rooted, highly imaginary but original exemplar of Iranian manhood—to be severely put to test as he finally enters Qajar Tehran.

In Qajar Tehran

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye introduces his theory of myths by stressing the “affinity between the mythical and the abstractly literary” as the link to comprehend various “aspects of fiction, especially the more popular fiction which is realistic enough to be plausible in its incidents and yet romantic enough to be a ‘good story,’” that is, “a clearly designed one” (139). This is the case with a popular novel such as *The Story of Javid*, which has just been through a fifteenth reprint in Iran by the year 2012. As one of Fassih’s widely read works—yet lingering on the thresholds of the Canon of Persian fiction—*The Story of Javid* promotes a polemical approach to contemporary Iranian history, incorporating the linear development of the protagonist with a body of Zoroastrian myths and allegories that inscribe the novel’s nationalist theme. Fassih’s nostalgic recourse to ancient history, therefore, informs the conflict that permeates Javid’s relationship with Malik-Ara. From the emblematic image of *Huma*, the Achaemenid griffin on the book’s jacket as a symbol of “splendor and glory” (Dehkhoda) to the protagonist’s ultimate triumph over the Ahriman in Malik-Ara, Javid is meant to represent a manly figure of national splendor, contested by a Prince who is the incarnation—in Fassih’s mind—of Qajar inefficacy: unpatriotic tyranny, political corruption, and social stagnancy.

Following Frye's theory of myths, one way to read *The Story of Javid* is as a "mythos of autumn," the tragic account of a hero's life from the ideal world of innocence and plentitude to the real world of experience and uncertainty (206). Such pattern of character development would on a broader scope constitute Fassih's commemoration of the protagonist as an emblem of national loss. Pitted against the cultural and political context of late Qajar Iran, Fassih contrasts the morality, human decency, and manly patriotism of his protagonist with the air of pomposity, apathy, and decadence characteristic of the age. In the remainder of the essay, I demonstrate that Fassih's historical perspective highlights Javid's pain and suffering on account of a Qajar state apparatus that is undeserving of men such as Javid, the exemplar, as his *rite de passage* revealed, of an original Iranian manhood manifest as humane, virile, and defiant.

It is in fact no coincidence that the account of Javid's ordeals in Tehran, following a mythopoetic initiation rite and a symbolic road trip, must begin at Malik-Ara's gate with Abu-Turab's *sag kushi* or "dog killing" (34) as the inconsequential act of murder that foreshadows forthcoming hardships. As the plot proceeds from there, the morally bankrupt condition of an ill-governed state—also summed up in the microcosm of Malik-Ara's household—is rendered as the perpetrator of Javid's pain, undermining the Iranian man portrayed through character. From the narrator's bird's-eye view, the "Tehran" of Javid's time "was in an endless Qajar stupor, from morning till the dead of night (134). The connotations of this metaphor are dominant throughout the narrative, conveying a despairing sense of regression from the ideals set by the nation's forefathers: "In this city, in the capital of this nation, at this point in Iranian history," the narrator pontificates:

They had crowned the last Qajar monarch (Ahmad Mirza, the youngest heir to Muhammad Ali Shah) to sit on the Peacock Throne to head an imperial nation, a position long ago occupied by Great Cyrus and Darius, Achaemenid kings. The pompous and corrupt Qajar Princes, however, were holding on to the crown, abusing power to secure their corrupt and immoral kin, and to plunder the nation's resources. (229)

The narrator's treatment of Qajar history is biased and unbending, his rhetoric polemical and far from impartial. Not that the novel makes any claim to historiography, but it does give memorable form to Ahmad Shah's reign to the effect of highlighting Javid's humanity in contrast to the presumed darkness of the age. There are, in effect, numerous occasions when villainous characters are effectively juxtaposed with the ruling regime both to question the moral grounds on which the society is built, and to accuse the Qajars as partners in crime. For instance, Javid is on one occasion talked into a secret dealing with Abu-Turab, Malik-Ara's lackey, in an effort to save Layla, Javid's future wife who is kidnapped and confined in a brothel. Repulsed at the sight of the man, Javid has to convince Abu-Turab to reveal the whereabouts of the missing woman, tempting him with the money and jewelry that Layla's impoverished family has provided. Yet to avoid Abu-Turab's uncontrollable urge to steal, Javid has to initially hide half of the money. This is precisely when Fassih is at his tongue-in-cheek best: Having hidden half the bribe away, Javid puts forth a bunch of bills torn from the middle with "half of Ahmad Shah's face on the banknote ripped off" (161). This observation conjures up the historical backdrop of the occasion in the reader's mind through the mutilated image of a banknote—and that of monarch himself—to highlight the impoverished state of the characters involved in the episode from Abu-Turab as the emblem of immorality to Layla as the epitome of battered womanhood. The torn bills will of course be reattached, but the tarnished image of the Qajar monarch is forever associated with the bleak atmosphere of *The Story of Javid*.

The chief representative of this late Qajar hegemony is the repressive figure of Malik-Ara. A prince active in "court and parliament" (46), Malik-Ara's suffocating presence over "Javid's life" resembles "the shadow of a giant eagle" that is unforgiving and predatory (120). The instant Javid arrives in the Prince's household, he becomes the target of sustained mental and emotional abuse, religious profiling, and physical torture by a lot who summarily find Javid guilty of being an "outsider" to their Qajar realm (69). As I have noted, from the construction of his image as an archetypically male figure to the celebration of his character as a national trope, Javid is established as the naïvely defiant representation of an Iranian youth. Fassih's *pisarak-i Irani* is the mythopoetic yet historically rooted, imaginary but original exemplar of

Iranian masculinity. This ideal, however, is violently subdued through Malik-Ara's authority as he undermines Javid's self-regard, forcing him, in the first of many assaults, into circumcision before eventually decreeing to castrate the boy. As if murdering his father and driving his mother into insanity were not enough, Malik-Ara subjects Javid to domestic work, and decrees that he must first "be turned into *human* lest people speak ill of the household" (66). It is only after a mohel enters the house that it becomes apparent what Malik-Ara's euphemism has signified. Javid "must be a Muslim good and proper," circumcised and admissible to the family (67). Javid's circumcision, according to the narrator, is not to convert him into the faith as Islamic tradition might require, but "to suppress and subdue a wicked outsider who had invaded the territory of this [Qajar] household" (69). Javid's foreskin, therefore, becomes a token of Otherness to mutilate so as to undermine his autonomy. In what at first appears to be an act of religious policing, Javid's circumcision becomes an act of silencing the outsider. Submitting finally—and for the last time—to Malik-Ara's whim, the defenseless Javid lets go of resistance, trying instead with all his might "not to shed a tear" in defeat (70). For as it turns out, *The Story of Javid* will not end with his defeat.

Post Qajar Tehran

Highlighting the historical setting in *The Story of Javid* is the period of transition between 1921 to 1926, beginning with the coup d'état of Sayyid Ziya al-Din Tabataba'i and Riza Khan, and ending with the latter's assumption of throne as Riza Shah Pahlavi. The progression of plot is also signposted by key dates and events that mark the increasing authority of Riza Khan, and that eventually ascertain Malik-Ara's downfall as the symbol of Qajar power. In his earlier days in Tehran, for instance, Javid would overhear that the capital "had found stability," and that "a new government" was in place. The new War Minister Riza Khan, the narrator basks in victory, "was playing tough, scaring the Qajar Princes witless, and making them more cautious than ever" (62). Javid, it is noteworthy, watches the unfolding events in earnest, and keeps track of the changes underway (204).

The authoritarian, politically savvy, and at some level reformist image that Fassih wishes to convey of Riza Khan is on one level to undermine the pompous and apathetic Qajar state wherein Javid is victimized. Overhearing the

word on the street, the narrator echoes the voices content with the way the new Minister “had arrived to cut short the hands of the corrupt aristocracy, and the Princes who were leeching off the nation’s blood” (86). Equally important to my analysis is also the more implicit gendered rhetoric promulgated, or more accurately taken to a new level, with the advent of Riza Khan to the Iranian nationalist discourse. Recognizing the impact of this new masculine authority is curiously informative to an understanding of Javid’s conclusive actions in the plot, particularly since Fassih has consciously embedded the gradual rise of the first Pahlavi monarch in the dramatic structure of the narrative. This, I must warn, is not to romanticize Riza Shah’s role in Fassih’s moral imagination, but to suggest that Javid’s eventual development from innocence to experience entails the performance of a hypermasculine identity in tandem with the dominant vision of manhood reinforced throughout the 1920s (Najmabadi 128).

The inception of “significantly gendered discourses of nationalism in Iran during the later nineteenth century,” Joanna de Groot notes, were triggered by manifold “military defeats, loss of territory, and adverse treaty settlements” that revealed “the real deficiencies” of the Qajar rule in protecting Iran against colonial or internal threats (141). In words not strange to readers of *The Story of Javid*, de Groot’s analysis indicates how Fassih has appropriated aspects of the Iranian nationalist discourse in recounting Javid’s tragedy. With the growing influence of an image of Iran as a “land” in need of defence and protection, the “masculinity of nationalist projects,” de Groot notes, was “explicitly expressed in a range of bodily and emotive depictions which imaged the *vatan* as a wounded/sick patient or endangered/violated girl or mother requiring the medical care or chivalric devotion of patriotic male healers/lovers/sons” (144–45). Iran, in other words, was imagined as a “geobody” not simply defined through postcolonial cartographies, but more organically “envisaged as the outlines of a female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for” (Najmabadi 98). Javid, emulating the latent image of such masculine prototype aggressively manifest in the apparition of Riza Khan, is inscribed as a national trope whose eventual act of revenge over Malik-Ara reads as the patriotic protection of Iranian “land,” a female “geobody” poetically—but much reductively—aligned with a character such as Malik-

Ara's daughter Suraya, a feminine symbol of Iran incarnate (to whom I will return in conclusion).

Fassih has carefully contextualized the increasing contestation of Qajar rule throughout the novel with the plot beginning *in medias res* following Riza Khan's 1921 coup and ending with the War Minister turned Prime Minister crowned a Pahlavi King while Malik-Ara is abjectly (and symbolically) drowned in the cistern of his own palace. Ironically, it is Javid who, though traumatized and emasculated, acts in the latter half of the novel as a ruthless iron fist exacting revenge on the Prince. Indeed, the spirit of Javid's conflict with Malik-Ara in all its ultimately ruthless enmity towards the repressive Prince parallels the structure of feeling in 1920s Iran conveyed through the hypermasculine authority that Riza Shah reinstated against the beleaguered Qajars. For instance, in a paragraph that opens with an account of Malik-Ara's undermined authority in the new regime, the narrator reflects Javid's careful watch over the Prince in partisan terms such as "a vigilant male warrior," who must "study his enemy," before assault (205).

Thus militarizing Javid's attitude, the narrator gestures at the inevitable direction of the plot, and that of Javid's development into a vengeful character. For a bold example, Javid wishes if "Riza Shah mustered the entirety of corrupt and decadent Qajar statesmen, and sent them all off into their ultimate and Ahrimanic demise" (253). Such resentful and unbending rhetoric on the part of Javid and the narrator, embedded at the heart of the novel's dualistic cosmology, indicates how a terrible hypermasculine aggressiveness is increasingly at work not just to avenge Javid's loss of virility and livelihood, but to also reinstate his symbolic position as a manly national trope following his ordeals. If, then, Fassih's archetypal vision of an original Iranian manhood has been subdued and shattered in catastrophe, it potentially returns in partisan form in tandem with the figure of Riza Khan who is often described as the "hypermasculine savior" of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128). Concurrent with Malik-Ara's waning political star, therefore, Javid regains his autonomy, and takes matters into his own hands while heading for revenge—even though the personal image of Riza Shah himself portrayed in the novel fails to deliver the promises in, say, reaching a fleeting compromise with Malik-Ara (253).

Nevertheless, the mythopoetic ideal of masculinity initiated through Javid's *Sidrih Pushan* characterizing the boy's innocence and naïve defiance,

develops following a chain of ordeals in Qajar Tehran into a much frustrated but resilient, vengeful, and combative performance of masculinity characterizing his experience and tortured defiance. Both conceptions of manhood, I have attempted to demonstrate, are in part shaped through the gendered discourses of nationalism characterizing the novel's immediate context. While the initiation rite in Yazd followed by the road trip to Tehran established Javid's image as an Iranian youth archetypically rooted in the "warm soil" of Iran (7), his encounter with Malik-Ara turns into an allegorical conflict with the politically bankrupt Qajar hegemony on account of a manly and patriotic passion for the "geobody" of Iran. Yet In the end, what remains problematic is the femininity of this "geobody" particularly with regard to Fassih's portrayal of female characters Suraya and Layla. In conclusion, I will stretch the argument a little further to suggest that a deeper component of Javid's construction as an original Iranian manhood is the boy's problematic treatment towards Suraya and Layla as stereotyped representations—the former put on the pedestal as the last remnant of a decent "Iranian nature" in a Qajar age of darkness, the latter drowned in the cistern alongside Malik-Ara for exactly the opposite reason.

While protecting the "geobody" of Iran, Javid's respect for Suraya, his only true friend in Tehran and a rare symbol of "human decency" (79), turns gradually into an obsessive preoccupation to guard the woman's honor and chastity against Malik-Ara's tyrannical patriarchy. Javid's reaction to the rumors surrounding Suraya's pregnancy is a telling example of how a legitimate concern for the plight of a friend intertwines with a discourse of Iranianness and becomes, quite reductively, an expression of hypermasculinity ruing the violation of "Miss Suraya, a Virgin Mary in her own right" (208). Reduced to the totalizing femininity of Iranian land in need of protection against a Qajar patriarchy, Suraya's character reads as a vehicle to salvage Javid's sexual honor, and a proxy for Fassih to highlight the national heroism of his protagonist. By the same token, any potential for a feminist undertone in the novel is subdued in the denouement with the distressing—and somewhat unfair—destiny of Layla, Javid's wife. The ultimate figure of battered womanhood, Layla becomes entangled in Javid's nest of intrigue after he finally corners the fugitive Malik-Ara in a cistern, and decides to drown him.

Having been coerced into taking sides with the Prince following a fleeting affair, Layla becomes a wanton incarnate in Javid's mind, and the obvious target of his eventual wrath, hence murdered next to Malik-Ara.

It may therefore not be as easy to characterize Javid's "mythos of autumn" as that of a moral triumph as some have misleadingly suggested (Ujakyans 106), for Fassih complicates—perhaps inadvertently—the dualistic cosmology of the novel that has thus far demarcated Javid's noble cause from Malik-Ara's evil treachery. After murdering Malik-Ara and Layla, for instance, Javid looks "up the sky, which was a clear blue. And smiled. Whatever he had been told of the pure faith [of Zoroastrianism] was true" (378). Reading these closing lines, which no doubt complete Javid's revenge-tragedy, is almost as disturbing as Layla's own dismal fate, for it is not the "clear blue" of the sky only to which Javid is a divine witness. One must not overlook the pool of blood he has filled as a coffin for Layla—a woman no less a victim than Suraya in the patriarchal society of Qajar Tehran. The epic triumph upon the narrative closure is a morally ambiguous one as *The Story of Javid* fails at the pressing issue of addressing the other half of the population on "the warm soil" of Iran (7), that is, women who do not necessarily exemplify (Suraya) or erode (Layla) the last remnant of a decent "Iranian nature" (79).

As for Javid, who, we have been meant to believe, does embody an inherent sense of Iranianness, enactment of masculinity is more problematic than at first blush. In fact, the treatment of gender in *The Story of Javid* is—however idealistic and poetic in sensibility—too grossly at odds with the everydayness of Iranian experience. From as early as the Arcadian days in Yazd well through violent days in Tehran, Javid's aestheticized masculinity is the manifestation of what Connell terms "gender archetype" as opposed to "gender identity" (14). Fassih is, in other words, more inclined to naturalize an inherent sense of Iranianness than envision a fully humanized character conceived in all-too-human flesh. In truth, the protagonist is a symbolic representation whose masculinity is as romanticized as his practice of Zoroastrianism—to the effect of countering a Qajar hegemony that hampers, in all its moral and political bankruptcy, the fulfillment of an original Iranian manhood. For as Javid might put it in Akhavan-Sales's words,

I am in this prison guilty of being a *man*; oh Love,
Call me a rogue if I am convicted of anything but (182).

Note:

This is for Fedallah the Parsee, the Zoroastrian character in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

For transliterations, I have followed the Library of Congress system for romanization without diacritical marks. Translations of all primary and secondary sources from Persian are mine.

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