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Reading a medieval Romance in Post-revolutionary Tehran. Hushang Golshiri's Novella *King of the Benighted*

Abstract

In his modern novella, *King of the Benighted* (*Shāh-e siyāh-pushān*), an Iranian writer, Hushang Golshiri grafts a twelfth-century Nezāmi's epic, *Seven Beauties* (*Haft Peykar*), into an Iranian contemporary context, which strongly implies that the fate of Iranian revolution of 1979 has been foretold by a medieval tale.

Keywords: hypertextuality, *Wiedererzählen*, Iranian classical literature, Iranian modern literature, political allegory.

Literature is said to be "a ceaseless circulation of texts"[1] in which old works (so-called *avant-textes* or hypotexts) are absorbed into a circuit of new meanings. In this hypertextual act of retelling (*Wiedererzählen),* sacred traditions are legitimated and literary canons are sanctioned. The phenomenon of retextualisation and building new meanings on old stories is particularly noteworthy in Persian medieval fiction, which abounds in well-known Eastern tales retold again and again, not by the second-league of epigones but by the most distinguished Persian classical epic-tellers, such as Nezāmi Ganjavi (d. 1209), Faridoddin Attār (d. 1221), Moulānā Jalāloddin Rumi (d. 1273), Amir Khosrou Dehlavi (d. 1325) and Nuroddin Abdorrahmān Jāmi (d. 1492) to name a few.

Among modern Persian followers of the rhetoric of literary recycling one should mention Hushang Golshiri (1938–2000), a prominent and innovative Iranian writer and a trenchant literary critic of the second half of 20th century. As Hasan Mirʿābedini notes, Golshiri, while constantly "experimenting with prose, its texture, its malleability, and its range", "advocated a return to the roots and

[1] G. Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Ch. Newman and C. Doubinsky, Lincoln 1997, p. 400 (first edition: *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré*, Paris 1982).

sources of Persian culture and literature and proposed grafting them to techniques learnt through studying world literature".[2] Being thoroughly versed in Persian literary tradition, Golshiri was aware of the presence of classical narrative matrices embedded in apparently modern stories and admitted that "sometimes a man starts writing a story and, at the end, he recognizes, in what he has written, an old tale".[3]

On the other hand, he practiced a sort of "hermeneutics of recovery"[4] by bringing meaning from classical masterpieces into a current Iranian context. One such classical Persian narrative, which, in his opinion, can prove referential in signifying post-revolutionary reality in Iran comes from a medieval epic, *Haft Peykar* ("Seven Portraits/Seven Beauties"). This romanticized biography of the Persian king, Bahrām Gur (r. 420–438) was written by Nezāmi Ganjavi at the end of the twelfth century and its main part focuses on visits the ruler makes to the palaces of his seven brides. Each bride is a princess who comes from a different "clime" (*eqlim*) and resides in a palace, the colour of which symbolizes one of seven classical planets which governs her land. Bahrām visits each princess on a particular day of the week and is told a story matching the mood of his host's symbolic colour.[5] One of those tales, related to the king by an Indian Princess in the Black Pavilion, is a story known as *King of the Black-clads* (*Shāh-e siyāh-pushān*). To briefly summarize its plot:

An apparently powerful king, known for his hospitality, has a custom of holding a feast for every stranger that arrives at his palace, and then asking his guests to tell their stories. One day, a stranger dressed in black appears, and, after a banquet

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[2] See: Ḥ. Mirʿābedini and EIr, *Hušang Golširi* [in:] *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. XI, fasc. 2, p. 114–118, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golsiri-husang (access: 5.04.2014). In an interview with Faraj Sarkuhi, Golshiri said, "To my mind it's better for our writers that, instead of imitating magical realism and socialist realism, rewriting Romain Rolland and copying the mode of stream of consciousness, they should return to the roots of our literature and combine them with the world achievements in writing stories". H. Golshiri, Neveshtan-e romān sabr-e Ayyub mi-khāhad. Goftogu bā Faraj Sarkuhi on 27 Mordād 1369 (Writing a novel requires the patience of Job. An interview with Faraj Sarkuhi on August 18, 1990), "Ādine" 1369 (1990), no. 50, 51, see also: H. Golshiri, *Neveshtan-e romān sabr-e Ayyub mi-khāhad* (Writing a novel requires the patience of Job) [in:] idem, *Bāq dar bāq. Majmu'e-ye maqālāt* (Garden in Garden. A collection of articles), vol. 2, Tehrān 1378 (1999), p. 794.

[3] H. Golshiri, *Gostaresh-e dāstān-e kutāh: Goftogu bā Hushang Golshiri dar bāre-ye eqtebās az motun-e qadimi* (The spread of short-story. An interview with Hushang Golshiri on the adaptation of old texts), "Bāni Film", 24.10.2003, no. 26, 2/8/1382, on the basis of an interview from "Film-o Sinemā" 1375 (1996).

[4] I hope it is not a misappropriation to apply a Ricoeurian term here, perceived in a broad sense as bringing old meanings into a new cultural context, bearing in mind the high status of Persian classical texts in Iranian culture.

[5] F. de Blois, *Haft Peykar* [in:] *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. XI, fasc. 5, p. 522–524, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haft-peykar (access: 5.04.2014). A critical edition of the romance: Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Haft Peykar*, eds. H. Ritter, J. Rypka, Prague, printed Istanbul, 1934. In the following article all the references are to page and line of Abdolmohammad Āyati's edition: Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Gozide-ye Haft Peykar*, ed. A. Āyati, Tehrān 1373 (1994–1995), later referred as Nezāmi. All English translations of the epic are given with references to page and line after: Nizami Ganjavi, *The* Haft Paykar. *A Medieval Persian Romance*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by J.S. Meisami, Oxford – New York 1995, later referred to as Meisami.

given in his honour, he refuses to reveal the secret of his mournful appearance. At the king's insistence, he eventually confesses that he comes from a city called *shahr-e madhushān* ("the City of the Unconscious", which may be also translated as the Land of the Bedazzled/Benighted/Stupefied). *Shahr-e madhushān* is situated in the land of China and, despite its paradisiacal location, all its inhabitants wear black clothes:

گفت شهری است در ولایت چین
شهری آراسته چو خلد برین
نام آن شهر، شهر مدهوشان
تعزیت‌خانه‌ی سیه‌پوشان
مردمانی همه به صورت ماه
همه چون ماه در پرند سیاه

And said, "In China's land there lies,
a realm adorned like Paradise.
Its name, the Land of Lost Wit-Lack;
the mourning-house of those in black.
Its folk, fair-featured as the moon,
all, like the moon, black silk put on. [6]

The mystery of the Bedazzled cannot be revealed, but should be experienced, as "everybody who drinks wine from that city" becomes like them.[7] The story captures the king's imagination to such an extent that he becomes obsessed with it and abandons his kingdom to uncover the secret of the "stupefied mourners" (who apparently mourn without reason).

Finally, he finds the city which looks like the garden of Eden, yet black banners are waving over it. He enters the city as a wanderer and, after a year of fruitless research among its dwellers, he eventually makes the acquaintance of a handsome and refined young butcher, who invites him to his place and, having been bestowed with precious gifts by the king, he feels obliged to meet his every demand – which turn out to include disclosing the secret. The butcher reluctantly yields to his guest's request and leads him to the ruins outside the city where a basket tied to a rope is located. The king is asked to sit for a while (*yek dam*) in it and then he will know the secret of mourners. The basket is drawn up to the top of a sky-scraping hill and then the king grasps the claws of a giant bird (that by chance is perching there) and continues his magical journey until he reaches a meadow abundant in colourful flowers, fragrant rosewater springs with silver fish, scents of ambergris, sandal and aloes, cypresses and delicious fruit.

[6] Nezāmi 75–76:793–795, Meisami 109:64–66.

[7] Nezāmi 76:796. The translation by Meisami (109:67) does not precisely render the idea of "intoxication by wine of melancholy".

Amazed by the meadow's beauty, he enjoys its delights, then takes a nap and, when a breeze wakes him up at dusk[8], he witnesses a procession of heavenly beauties – houris or *peri*-like maidens with candles in their hands, who carry a throne and a carpet for their breathtakingly beautiful queen, who eventually appears. When the queen (called Nāzanin Tork-tāz – which happens to be also the king's name) sits on her throne, she announces that she can smell the presence of an earthly stranger there[9] who should be brought into her presence immediately by one of her maidens. Fetched by a beautiful maid, the king prostrates himself before the queen's throne. To his astonishment, however, he is received with honours, and asked to take a seat by her side. A feast begins, and the king drinks wine and enjoys special favours from his charming host. Her coquettish behavior, flirting gazes and kisses arouse his hope and a desire for sexual fulfillment. Nevertheless, at the most promising moment, the king's caresses are rejected (as too early or too fast) and he is offered a beautiful servant-maid instead (a surrogate, *badal*) to satisfy his lust.

The situation repeats for 29 nights during which the queen's behavior becomes more and more seductive and irresistible. Finally, when the king is about to lose control, his beloved tells him that only one night remains before their wedding and physical union, and asks him for a little more patience which will be soon rewarded. The feverish lover, however, cannot wait any more. At last, the queen promises to let him "in her sweet treasury" (*khazāne-ye qand*), but first she should prepare herself and asks him to close his eyes for a while.[10] When the king is told to open them, he finds himself back in the basket. Frustrated, he mourns his unfulfilled hopes and the paradise which he was promised and has lost:

کز چنان پخته آرزوی بکام
دور گشتم به آرزویی خام

That [his] desire, so nearly gained,
was, through [his] rawness, unattained.[11]

He returns to his palace in black garments, and is known thereafter as the "King of those clad in black" (*shāh-e siyāh-pushān*).

Nezāmi's tale about *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān* can be read from different perspectives. On a moral level, for instance, it can be interpreted as a parable on the virtue of patience, a warning of perils of inquisitiveness and dangers a story told by a stranger (a "dervish" as Golshiri would put it)[12] can pose to people's life. Re-

[8] Nezāmi 86:909, H. Golshiri, *Shāh-e siyāh pushān* (*King of the Black-clads*), s. 1 (Sweden) 2001, p. 16 (later referred to as Golshiri), Meisami 116:202.

[9] Nezāmi 88:929, Golshiri, p. 8, Meisami 117:229.

[10] Nezāmi 103:1095, Meisami 131:489–490.

[11] Nezāmi 105:1115, Meisami: 132:510.

[12] Golshiri, p. 6. The term *darvish*, which appears in Golshri's summary of Nezāmi's tale, sets the figure of a wanderer in a religious context and thus may denote ayatollah Khomeyni, coming from abroad in his black robes and turban during the Iranian revolution.

garding the powerful image of the "City of the Bedazzled" (*shahr-e madhushān*), it can symbolize, in general, large old cities suffering from a state of stagnation and lethargy, whereas the ebony garments of its inhabitants and the king himself imply a state, which in Nezāmi's times was named *soudā,* a melancholy, longing for a phantasm and suffering from a loss of something never in fact attained, mourning for an unobtainable object, a lost but never possessed reality, a Utopia.

Now, at the end of 20th century, Hushang Golshiri invites us to read Nezāmi's story of an unfulfilled Utopia in the "Black Dome" of post-revolutionary Iran.

His novella, entitled after the medieval tale, *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān,* was written ten years after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and first published in English translation, under the title of *King of the Benighted*[13], under the pen-name Manuchehr Irani, in the United States in 1990.[14]

Shāh-e siyāh-pushān resembles a palimpsest written on the old narrative background and, as Nasrin Rahimieh and Daniel Rafinejad note, "on the surface (…) has a minimal plot".[15] The story takes place in the early years of the Islamic Republic, the Iran-Iraq war and consolidation of the Islamic regime. Its main protagonist, a poet "goes about his morning routine"[16]: his wife has gone to work and his two daughters are at school. He remembers that he has to buy a black shirt and a black suit for the funeral of his friend[17], a veteran of the left-wing opposition in the Pahlavi era, who has just died of a heart attack. He thinks about the so-called "bridal chambers", *hejles*, which stand on the streets to commemorate the death of young martyrs who died in the Iran-Iraq war, about omnipresent groups of mourners, funeral ceremonies and phone calls, which these days usually announce the death of another friend or relative. He goes outside and, on his way to the grocery store, he passes people wearing black clothes (the number of whom is increasing) which reminds him of "a certain story" from Nezāmi's *Haft peykar* in which all become dressed in black.

The poet realizes that what is crucial to the story is an interpretation (*tafsir*) which should refer to an inner experience (*tajrobe-ye daruni*) and the failure of

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[13] Though a literal translation of the Persian title would be *King of Those Clad in Black*, Abbas Milani used a "translator's license" and rendered *siyāh-pushān* by "benighted" which combines the meaning of "dark" and "unconscious". A. Milani, *Translator's Afterword* [in:] M. Irani, *King of the Benighted,* trans. by A. Milani, Washington D.C. 1990, p. 109.

[14] M. Irani, *King of the Benighted,* trans. by A. Milani, Washington D.C. 1990. Its translator, Abbas Milani, mentioned that the author had "incrementally sent handwritten pages of the manuscript to him in California in the guise of personal letters to avoid the ever-watchful gaze of the Islamic censors". Ibidem, p. 91. The book appeared in its original Persian version, as *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān* in Sweden, one year after Golshiri's death in 2001. It has also been translated into German by Zana Nimadi as *Der König der Schwarzgewandeten* (Frankfurt 1998) and into French by Christophe Balaÿ as *Le Roi des Noir-Vêtus* (Paris 2002).

[15] The narrator gives the exact time when the story opens (10.30 a.m. on Saturday of 15th January 1983) and its time-frame may be assumed as "one hour and a quarter or a half", i.e. till the return of the poet's daughters from school. See: Golshiri, p. 7.

[16] N. Rahimieh, D. Rafinejad, *King of the Benighted* [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/king-of-the-benighted (access: 20.04.2015).

[17] Golshiri, p. 3, N. Rahimieh, D. Rafinejad, op. cit.

reaching one's personal Utopia.[18] Then, he spots a Toyota patrol, which follows him and, when back at home, he starts reading Nezāmi's poem, to remind himself of the description of the king's magical journey in the basket. He contemplates the ways such a symbolical journey into the "Land of Nowhere" (*'ālam-e mesāl, nā-kojā-ābād*, *mundus imaginalis,* the world of phantasms or ideas) is depicted in literary sources and concludes that it is usually a mythical bird, Simorq (that for him may be a symbol of a clergyman, *rāheb*) that carries those who want to face their "phantasmagoric" *ideal*. When he reaches the verse in which the heavenly queen recognises the presence of an earthly stranger in her kingdom and sends her beautiful maiden to bring him to her throne, the police break into his home, confiscate his books and arrest him. He is allegedly seized for a volume of his poems, *The Accursed Decade* (*'Ashare-ye mash'ume*) which was published abroad. With a sack on his head and legs bound with a rope, he is taken into prison in a Toyota car. The car circulates the city, in order to make the poet feel lost, but "he, who has given so many lectures on the *Black Dome*, knows his destiny". He dreams about a paradise meadow with high cypresses but, upon regaining consciousness, finds himself in a prison cell. Brutally awoken by a kick and shouting, which deafens the sound from the loudspeakers, he asks himself: "So who has been the interpreter today? (*Pas emruz ki tafsir migoft?*) and what is his connection with paradisiacal girls and boys created of milk and honey?"[19] Then, he is led to an interrogation cell and, when asked a standard question about his faith, he replies that he is a poet.

The plot then revolves around a series of scenes, including flashbacks to the poet's past intertwined with conversations with cellmates, his thoughts about classical Persian literature and the fate of blasphemous poets that he is supposed to follow.[20] His inmates, young oppositionists (probably *mojāhedin*) who are waiting for their death sentences, ask him to recite a poem before their execution, and he whispers for them modern verses of Nimā Yushij (1895–1960) and the "oldest ghazals told in Persian language" by Rudaki (d. 941). The sounds of rifle shots fired by execution squads are counted by the prisoners every evening and every few days another group of inmates joins the poet's cell. Some of them are wearing black shirts. Before their death he decides to tell them "the Black Dome" story. Once, however, he is interrupted by an 18-year old boy, Sarmad, who protests against the erotic content of Nezāmi's tale and denounces the poet to the prison guards. The poet is sent into solitary confinement and, after being released, he is desperately looked for by the same Sarmad, who was allowed to spend one night in his cell. The youth is now wearing a black shirt and wants to know the end of Nezāmi's tale. The poet, however, is reluctant to retell it and Sarmad begins to tell his own story instead.

He confesses that he has become a "repenter" (*tavvāb*), a person who cooperates with prison authorities. His task is to administer the *coup de grâce* (*tir-e khalās*) to executed girls and load their corpses into a truck. One day, among the

[18] Golshiri, p. 6.
[19] Golshiri, p. 10.
[20] N. Rahimieh, D. Rafinejad, op. cit.

girls waiting for execution, he sees his 15-year old fiancée (his "queen of houris"), whom he had never dared to touch before his imprisonment, but whom, after being detained, he had betrayed to his interrogators. Sarmad is not able to fire the final shot at her but, while loading her corpse onto the truck, he realizes that she is still alive, and rapes her.[21]

At the time of morning prayer, when Sarmad is taken from the poet's cell, he gives him his black shirt and says with laughter that though he has failed to hear the end of story from the poet, he will soon listen to it being told by Nezāmi himself.

The poet is released from prison. The line between past and present, memory and desire, dream and reality becomes so blurred that "the reader cannot conclusively discern whether the time-lapse in the narrative has been only an hour (*yek dam*), a year, or even a millennium".[22] (An ironic collapse of time is signified by the poet's watch which stopped in prison and needs to be wound). The novella concludes as the poet greets his black-clad daughters who return from school and weep upon seeing him. He is given a mirror in which he sees an old man dressed in black shirt, with his once raven-black hair, which has turned completely white.

By giving his novella a title alluding to a classical tale, Golshiri grafts the medieval epic into the contemporary context. This rhetorical device, which in traditional Persian poetics is called *talmih*[23], imposes a sort of obligatory intertextuality and a palimpsest reading of the hypertext[24] which is multiplicated by a Chinese box structure of both narratives.

The following table was developed as a preliminary attempt to show some similarities (*tanāsob*) and semantic tensions or antitheses (*tazādd*) between Nezāmi's story of *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān* (N) and Golshiri's novella (G):

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[21] The drama of this act is strengthened by a Muslim belief that as a virgin she could have entered paradise upon her death.

[22] A. Milani, *Houshang Golshiri: The Janus Face of Tradition* [in:] idem, *Lost Wisdom. Rethinking Modernity in Iran*,Washington D.C. 2004, p. 133.

[23] *Talmih* – a classical figure of speech that makes a brief reference to a myth, a famous story, a proverb, a verse in the Koran (*ayat*), a well-known *hadith*, etc., which usually demonstrates the author's words, and evokes the whole myth or the whole story in the reader's mind. See: M. Sharifi, *Farhang-e adabiyāt-e fārsi* (*Dictionary of Persian Literature*), 4th edition, Tehrān 1390 (2011), p. 433.

[24] Direct references to Nezāmi's tale in *King of the Benighted* go far beyond the novella's title. As Roxane Haag-Higuchi notices: "In the Persian-speaking context, Golshiri can rely on competent readers who will grasp the main intertextual contact areas. Direct references to Nezami that indicate the intended hermeneutic course, abound in the text. Direct textual references pertain first and foremost to the title of the novella, *Shah-e siyāh-pushān*, a title which leaves little room for associations other than Nezami. Moreover, literal quotations of verses from Nezami's epos appear in a number of passages throughout the novella; even a synopsis of key parts of the story of the Black Dome is related and combined with the narrator's ideas on interpretation […]". Last but not least, "the classical epos also appears [in Golshiri's story] in its physical shape, as a book". Cf. R. Haag-Higuchi, *The Medium is the Message: Story-Telling and Writing as a Subject of Intertextual Reference in Modern Persian Literature* (unpublished).

Diegetic levels and narrators		
	N	G
	The Indian Princess and the story of *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān* (related to her by a woman in black, who served the King of the Black-clads) with Bahrām Gur as listener	Narrator of the novella *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān* and the readers
	King of the Black-clads (and his maiden as listener)	Sarmad (and the poet as listener)
Nested narratives		
Frame story (1)	The Indian princess visited by Bahrām Gur in Black Pavilion (N1) and her story told one night to the king Bahrām Gur	A poet in Iran after the Iranian revolution and his imprisonment (both a main story and a frame story of Sarmad's story) (G1)
Main story (2)	King of the Black-clad's trip to the City of the Bedazzled (N2) and his magical trip to paradise (N3)	A poet in Iran after the Iranian revolution (G1) and his imprisonment (G2)
Sub-story (3)/Main story	King's visit to paradise (N3)	Sarmad's story related to the poet during one night in prison cell (G3)
Time		
Historical	Contemporary to the rule of the Sasanian King, Bahrām Gur (420–438) (N1, N2?)[25]	Post-revolutionary Iran (exact time given as 15th January 1983) (G1, G2?)
Collapse of time	One moment (*yek dam*) of sitting in the basket (N3 from N2 perspective)	One hour and a quarter or a half till the return of poet's daughters from school (poet's reading Nezāmi's tale at home?)/a millennium (time span of literary tradition) (G2, G3 from G1 perspective) – poet's stopped watch
Transitional time between day and night	Dusk when the feasts with the houri queen and her *peri*-like maidens are held repeatedly (N3)	Dusk when the executions of young girls take place repeatedly and Sarmad meets his fiancée (G3)

[25] Though Bahrām Gur is a historical figure, his life story (like Alexander the Great's) is highly fictionalized and romanticized in Persian literary tradition and in Nezāmi's epic he is virtually a literary person (perceived as one who lived "once upon a time", in pre-Islamic era) with a historical name. The story time and "veracity" of the tale of *King of the Black-clads* is suspended by a chain of transmitters.

Place		
	Black Pavilion (Black Dome) of Indian Princess (N1)	Islamic Republic of Iran (G1)
	City of the Bedazzled (*shahr-e madhushān*) (N2)	Islamic Republic of Iran (G1) Prison in the Islamic Republic of Iran (G2, G3)
	Paradise (as *mundus imaginalis*, the Land of Nowhere, *nā-kojā ābād*) (N3)	Islamic Republic of Iran (G1) Prison (arguably as *mundus imaginalis*, the Land of Nowhere, *Nā-kojā Abād*) (G2, G3)
Characters		
	King of the Black-clads (N2, N3)	Poet (G1, G2)
	– king's position as a stranger, an earthly worshipper (*nā-mahram-e khāk parast*) in paradise	– poet's status in post-revolutionary Iran (and the status of his predecessors in the orthodox Islamic states)
	– curiosity about black dress of the stranger	– realizing the transition of the society into "mourners dressed in black" and the inevitable necessity of buying a black shirt for himself, seeing the parallel between contemporary Iran and Nezāmi's story – curiosity about the character of inner experience one should undergo to join the society of "stupefied mourners".
	– black garment worn at the end of the story (as a result of the magical journey into paradise)	– black garment worn at the end of the story (as a result of prison experience)
	A young handsome butcher (N2)	A young handsome prisoner, Sarmad (G2)

		– his task as a *tavvāb* to administer the *coup de grâce* to executed girls
	– his mediatory role in the king's "black transformation"	– his story as a presumed turning point in poet's transformation and black shirt given by him to the poet
	Houris, paradisiacal beauties (N3)	Police or *pāsdār* officers (as the executors of queen's will), poet's cellmates, Sarmad (as a paradisiacal handsome young boy) (G2)
	King of the Black-clads (N3)	Sarmad (G3)
	The queen of houris (N3)	Prison's interrogator, prison's staff as the executors of the Islamic government, Sarmad (?) (G2)
	The queen of houris (N3)	Sarmad's fiancée (G3)
	– amorous dalliances of the queen and the king	– impeccability of Sarmad's relationship with his fiancée in pre-carceral reality
	– unfulfilled physical union with the queen	– sexual fulfillment with a quasi-cadaver of a fiancée
Vehicle of the magical journey		
	Mythical bird (Simorq) (N3) Basket tied with rope (N3)	A *rāheb* (clergyman) (G1?) Toyota car (G2) Legs tied with rope (G2)
	King's paradisiacal experience (N3)	Poet's carceral (infernal) experience in prison (G2), Sarmad's carceral (infernal) experience (G3)

To sum up, on the one hand Golshiri sets multilayered parallels (*tanāsob*) between the king from Nezāmi's tale and the poet of his story, the king's position as a stranger, an earthly worshipper (*nā-mahram-e khāk parast*) in paradise and the poet's status in the Islamic Republic; the City of the Bedazzled (*shahr-e madhushān*) and post-revolutionary Iran (as well as prison); the magical journey of the king in the basket and that of the poet in a sack tied by ropes; the young butcher and the young prisoner Sarmad who mediates the poet's transformation and on another diegetic level, as a story-teller, can be regarded as an equivalent of the Indian princess.

On the other hand, quotations from Nezāmi's romance provoke readers to confront paradisiacal images from the medieval tale and their infernal counterparts in the modern narrative: the paradise meadow versus the prison cell, a mythical bird versus the police Toyota car, heavenly beauties versus *pāsdār* officers, the queen of houris versus the regime authorities, the procession of houris versus the procession of girls to be executed, evening time when the feast with the queen begins and executions take place in prison, the unfulfilled physical union of the king with the houri queen versus Sarmad's sexual fulfillment with a quasi-cadaver of a fiancée. Such a *bricolage* of antithetic images (*tazādd*) brings about a semantic tension, ranging from grotesque and black irony to utter horror, and may lead to a conclusion that contemporary Iran resembles a distorting mirror in which the old Persian tale is reflected.

Hence, in Golshiri's new reading of the medieval epic as a political allegory, the figure of the houris' queen can be interpreted as a symbol of revolutionary ideology which, in fact, promised to the Iranians an unattainable Utopia. Those who were seduced by it, wake up "in the basket" of post-revolutionary reality of the Islamic Republic, which turns to be a "City of the Bedazzled".

Last but not least, *King of the Benighted* is an homage paid to Persian literary tradition, a rich Iranian Archetext, or a reservoir of meanings which resembles the Archetypal Book in Heaven (*umm al-Kitab,* "a well-guarded tablet", *al-lawh al-mahfuz*)[25] on which the history of the Iranian nation has been already recorded and just requires a competent decipherer.

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