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# “Are you gay or do you *do* gay?” Subjectivities in “gay” stories on the Persian sexblog shahvani.com

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**Abstract:** The main goal of this study is to demonstrate the influence of local-traditional perceptions of sexuality in the construction of subjectivity among men involved in same-sex sexual practices in contemporary Iran. In order to do so, I shall briefly outline some essential features of the local-traditional understanding of sexuality, which I consider to be epistemologically and ontologically different from the modern concept of human sexuality. Subsequently, the continuity of the local-traditional understanding of sexuality in the identity construction of those individuals involved in same-sex sexual practices will be demonstrated through an inquiry on contemporary pornographic stories written by users of an online platform with erotic and pornographic content. I will argue that the perception of and the explanation for same-sex desire as well as the categorisations of subjects found in these stories point to the predominance of local-traditional patterns of thought in the imagination of the authors of these stories. However, it will also be demonstrated that the modern idea of sexuality is present among some other users of this platform, whose modern worldview is in conflict and competition with the local-traditional views on sexuality. This conflict is best illustrated in the commentary sections of the stories on this website, where modern-thinking users question the “truth” of the epistemology behind these local-traditional narratives. This modern users’ criticism of the local-traditional view on same-sex desire shall be addressed in the last part of the paper.

**Keywords:** homosexuality in Iran; local discourses on sexuality; same-sex desire in Iran; sexuality and identity; sexuality and subjectivity.

## 1 Introduction

One of the academic controversies which we face in the recent scholarly debate on the history of sexuality in the Muslim world involves the question of the impact of

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modern (Western) discourse on sexuality in Muslim societies. Frequently, we face the assumption that the regime of sexuality in Muslim societies has undergone a substantial change through the encounter with the Europeans during the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> The supporters of this idea often point towards the disappearance of the local forms of male same-sex sexual practices in the Muslim world in the era of modernisation, which is understood as an indicator for an ontological and epistemological shift towards a modern regime of sexuality.<sup>2</sup> This idea of heterosexualisation of the Muslim world through ontological and epistemological adaptation of modern categories of sexuality, however, has been contested by other scholars, for example Joseph Massad. Massad argues that although the encounter with colonial Europe has resulted in the emergence of certain classes in the Muslim world which have adopted a Western habitus,<sup>3</sup> the majority of the population of Arab/Muslim societies has not become affected by the modern discourse on sexuality. This is evidenced by continuity of local patterns of behaviour and interpretation of same-sex desire and the absence – or marginality – of modern sexual identities (such as gay or lesbian):

The advent of colonialism and Western capital to the Arab world has transformed most aspects of daily living; however, it has failed to impose a European heterosexual regime on all Arab men, although its efforts were successful in the upper classes and among the increasingly westernized middle classes. [...] Although members of these classes who engage in same-sex relation have more recently adopted a Western identity (as part of the package of the adoption of everything Western by the classes to which they belong), they remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as ‘gay’ nor express a need for gay politics.<sup>4</sup>

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**1** The idea that Western Europeans have spread or imposed their views on sexuality in their colonies or areas of influence at the time of their colonial-imperial dominance is a common notion in post-colonial studies. In the context of the Muslim world, see Bauer 2011: ch. 8; for Iran see Najmabadi 2005: ch. 1 and Kjaran 2019: 48–54.

**2** The modern regime of sexuality refers in this paper to the way of thinking in which sexuality “represents the most intimate feature of an individual, that dimension of the personality which it takes longest to fathom and which, when finally known, reveals the truth about much of the rest. A sexuality is a thing and I can have one. [...] Sexuality is a field with many compartments and subdivisions. Finally, sexuality is thought to provide a key to unlocking the mysteries of the self, even for *my* self: that is, I can explore and discover what my sexuality is. Sexuality in this sense is not just the modern interpretation of sex, on a par with the (different) ancient interpretations of sex. It has become a new category – central and centralized; universally organized as a tool for understanding, placing and controlling individuals; ramified into many branches so that everyone sits somewhere on the schematic tree,” Halperin et al. 1990: 5–6.

**3** In this paper, the term “Western” refers to the societies of Western Europe and North America.

**4** Massad 2007: 172–173. For Massad’s criticism on the assumption of predominance of the modern notion on sexuality in contemporary Arab world, see Massad 2007: ch. 3; Massad 2015: ch. 3.

In this paper I support Massad's idea by demonstrating the continuity of traditional-local patterns of thought and behaviour in the identity constructions of individuals who are involved in same-sex sexual practices in contemporary Iranian society. Agreeing with Massad, I demonstrate and hence argue that the traditional-local patterns of thought regarding male same-sex desire have *survived* the process of modernisation. I argue that these local-traditional patterns play a significant role in the construction of subjectivities among Iranian men involved in same-sex sexual activities and compete hereby with the modern discourse on sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Due to their epistemological and ontological differences regarding sexual desire, the local-traditional understanding of desire and the modern concept of sexuality produce two essentially different types of subjects with different senses of self, understandings of their own behaviour and explanations for their sexual desire.

In order to support this argument, I analyse same-sex pornographic stories published anonymously by the users of a Persian online platform for exchange of erotic and pornographic content.

I ask how the narrators of these stories interpret the same-sex desire of the characters in the stories and what types of sexual subjectivities are constructed by the worldviews underlying these interpretations. This analysis shows that the local-traditional patterns of thought are well present in the authors' interpretation of sexual matters. In addition, the analysis draws the conflict lines between the local-traditional way of thinking and the modern understanding of homosexuality in the authority over the interpretation and the reception of same-sex desire, as well as dealing with it. Before starting the discussion, however, the characteristics of the local-traditional discourse, which are crucial to this study, are briefly illuminated.

In advance, however, I would like to clarify a few points to avoid some possible misunderstandings. First, the idea of continuity of local and traditional perceptions of sexuality in the Muslim world is by no means a new finding. Many of the scholars who have done anthropological studies and made observations on the issue of same-sex desire in Muslim societies in recent decades have found that traditional patterns of behaviour have remained stable in this context.<sup>6</sup> This paper

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<sup>5</sup> Serena Tolino uses the term "competitive discourses" to demonstrate the conflict between the modernist understanding of homosexuality and the Muslim jurists' traditional behaviouristic views on sexual acts; see Tolino 2014a: 82; Tolino 2014b: 187–205; or Tolino 2016: 187–205.

<sup>6</sup> Serena Tolino, for example, has focused on the continuity of traditional discourse on sexuality in legal debates on same-sex desire in the Arab world. She demonstrates the influence and predominance of traditional understanding on desire in the discussions of contemporary Muslim Jurists on homosexuality; see Tolino 2014a: 72–91 or Tolino 2016: 141–158. See accounts in *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies* (1992) edited by Schmitt and Sofer; also El

addresses the continuity of local-traditional patterns of thought and behaviour on the subjective level once again in order to contribute to a critical discussion on the idea of the ontological-epistemological dominance of modern discourse on sexuality in contemporary Iran.

The second point I would like to address here is the difficulty of accessibility to and visibility of the queer community, which has far-reaching consequences for research. Because of the state's repression of queer narratives, lifestyles and sexuality at various levels and through various means, the visibility of queer people is extremely limited. The state criminalises all forms of sexual conduct outside of heterosexual marriage and not only controls the public behaviour of citizens, but also invades their private spaces to combat "moral transgressions", as well as exercising strong control over the circulation of knowledge by controlling the media, censorship and persecution of unwanted opinions.<sup>7</sup> In addition to state oppression, queer individuals face oppression and harassment from their queer-hostile and homophobic social environment, which hinders them from expressing their gender and sexual identities publicly. In short, the queer community is underground due to threats from the regime and "in the closet" due to societal repression.

On top of these general difficulties accessing the queer community, I had one more challenge in collecting data for my research question, which was accessing those individuals whose self-identification did not conform to modern categorisation regimes. The part of the queer community that is more visible and more accessible to researchers is composed mostly of those who identify with modern

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Feki 2014: 216–248 or Mahdavi 2012: 223. Even Afsaneh Najmabadi, who supports the idea of a paradigmatic transformation in modernised Iran, also through the adoption of the modern categorization regime, notes that this transformation has hardly changed the patterns of same-sex sexual behaviour of men in modernised Iranian society; see Najmabadi 2005: 57.

<sup>7</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to address the states' repression of non-heteronormative identities and practices in detail. However, in the context of this article, it is worth mentioning that any sexual act between individuals of the same sex is punishable by criminal law. The Iranian penal code is based on classical Islamic law in this regard and imposes the penalty of execution for the passive male partner in the case of an anal penetration that has been proven after admissible evidence (testimony of four men or fourfold confession). The active partner faces the same punishment, if he has had access to legal sex – i.e. if he were married at the time of same-sex sexual encounter. This difference between the punishment of the active and the passive partners is an amendment to the Penal Code of 2012 but existed already as a minority opinion in the legal debates of pre-modern jurists. This differentiation between the treatment of the passive and active partners is congruent with one of the premises of this study, which will be elaborated more later, that in local-traditional perceptions of sexuality there are categorical differences between the passive and active person in sexual encounters. For the legal situation regarding male homosexuality see Guitoo 2018: 36–40; Bayatrizi/Karimi 2019: 417–434.

categories. Since the 1990s, and especially with the emergence of the Internet, which provided new possibilities for networking as well as increased cultural contact through satellite television and diaspora Iranians, a queer scene has emerged in Iran whose language, symbols, self-perception and aspirations are not far from those of the global LGBTQ movement. However, those who identify as queer (gay lesbian, etc.) are just one part of the community. Those who do not identify as queer still remain invisible to an inquiry which focuses on this part of the society. They might even remain invisible in a field study conducted through interviews – which was not possible – since those individuals not identifying with modern categories and even denying them might not feel addressed by a field researcher using those categories. This obstacle makes sources such as the erotic blog which I study in this paper in my opinion more valuable, since the stories on this website seem to make those individuals more visible. I am of course aware of the limitation of this single source which I used in this study. I consider the fictionality or factuality of the stories is irrelevant to my question because the point here is to show *how* a sexual encounter as well as an identity is being narrated. However, this essay by no means claims to provide a representative image of the gay community in Iran. The excessive focus on local-traditional perceptions of sexuality in this paper is purposeful and should not suggest to readers that this over-reliance on traditional perceptions also reflects the real situation in Iran.

## 2 Same-sex desire and the same-sex sexual act in the traditional Iranian world

In this section, I shall briefly point out some characteristics of local-traditional perceptions of human desire and argue how these local-traditional perceptions are in epistemological conflict and rivalry with the modern discourse on sexuality.

First, sexual misconduct in the traditional-local understanding is not an indication of the particularity of the sexual drive of the person concerned, but a manifestation of the failure of the moral force. Put briefly, in the traditional understanding of sexuality in the Muslim world, sex drive was regarded as an animal-like and arbitrary force that didn't have moral capacity. The human soul, endowed with moral capacity, was hence responsible for controlling this force. If the mind failed to control it, outbreak of the sex drive could take any form. Therefore, undesirable manifestations such as same-sex sexuality, zoophilia or necrophilia were in their essence the same, namely an outbreak of the sex drive, and there were no psychological distinctions made on the base of the type of expression of the sex

drive.<sup>8</sup> Since outbursts of sex drive were considered random and arbitrary, the repetition of an unwanted act was still not an indication of any peculiarities in the personality of the person who performed it. Rather, this longing came from remembering the pleasure the person experienced while committing the act and therefore wanting to repeat it. To put it simply, anything might be fun, and anyone could get used to anything. If some people were socially marked for their sexual choices, for example the *amradbāzān* (literally: the boy-players, Engl. pederasts), they were called so not because of their identity but because of misguided habits, which could, by the way, be imitated by other people. Hence, the labels these subjects received referred to their behaviour or preferences and not to a quality inherent to them.<sup>9</sup>

The second local-traditional perception which affected subjectivities related to same-sex desire in the Muslim world is the active versus passive dichotomy. While the sex of the sexual partner was – due the mindset described above – not an essential issue, the role of a person in the sexual encounter was an important factor in drawing the line between “right” and “wrong” sexual behaviour. The active role in a penetrative sexual act was a distinguishing feature of manhood and the desire of a man who wanted to be penetrated was hence considered as abnormal. The active and the passive partner of the same sexual act were classified in completely different categories: The active one was simply a man – more explanation was not necessary – and the passive one was an individual whose behaviour needed to be explained. The tendency of men who wanted to be penetrated was treated as a pathological case. The disease was called *ubna*, and the person affected was *ma'būn*. Often this disease was considered as innate (both psychological and anatomical explanations were given), which worsened with the continued exercising of the passive role.<sup>10</sup> It was, however, also believed that once a person had played the passive role (without really longing for it in the first place), it would be possible that the need for passivity might be created or awakened in him. Those *ma'būn* men who insisted on playing the passive role also carried the risk of becoming effeminate (*mukhannath*) over time.<sup>11</sup> These passive adult men, however, did not embody the physical ideal for the role of sexual object. Ideal objects of

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**8** This anthropology can be found in various pre-modern text genres, such as works of ethics, medicine, philosophy or law. See for Example Ghazālī 1333sh: 13–20; Ibn Sīnā 1360sh: 77–106; Narāqī 1371sh: 21–22; Tūsi 1372sh, 22–24. Sexual behaviour as an unwanted habit still plays a major role in the legal arguments of contemporary modern jurists in the Muslim world. For legal positionings of Arab jurists, see Tolino 2014: 78–82.

**9** For the absence of the notion of (homo)sexuality in premodern Muslim world, see El-Rouayheb 2005: conclusion; see also Schmitt 1992: 1–25.

**10** El-Rouayheb 2005: 19–21; Rosenthal 1978: 52–58.

**11** Rosenthal 1978: 52–58.

desire for men were – besides women and concubines – beardless pubescent boys, as long as the secondary characteristics of puberty (beard, voice change, body hair) had not “ruined” their beauty.<sup>12</sup> There are some references in pre-modern texts that show that effeminate men tried to get rid of these masculine traits by plucking their beards and body hair, wearing make-up and mastering feminisation of voice and gait, and were treated with mockery and ridicule in the literary texts.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the traditional-local understanding of sexual existence is behavioural, i.e., sexual preference is seen as a habitual behaviour acquired through repetition. Moreover, in the Muslim world, a regime of categorisation has prevailed in which the role in sexual encounters determined the boundary between normal and abnormal. As long as a man played the active role ascribed to him by society, his behaviour was no threat to the gender order. The passive man, on the other hand, was marked, pathologised, stigmatised, and made the object of explanation or justification. This worldview is against the modern concept of sexuality, in which preferences are seen as an expression of a quality inherent in human beings and the dichotomy active versus passive is not a decisive category for the construction of identity.<sup>14</sup>

### 3 “Are you gay or do you do gay?”

The subject of analysis in this section are stories of same-sex male sexual encounters published on the Persian pornographic website *shahvani.com*. This website serves among other things as an exchange platform for users who want to share their sexual experiences anonymously with the readers. The stories can be tagged by users with keywords. The stories that underlie the analyses in this part are those that have been tagged by the authors with the keyword *gay*. At the time of writing this article (the autumn of 2020), approximately 3,200 stories are tagged with this keyword, some of which have been clicked on more than 300,000 times according to the statistics on the website. The diversity of styles of the stories and their style and grammatical peculiarities (or mistakes) suggest that they were written by different people and not just a small circle of authors who run the website, who remain anonymous. The stories are mostly written in the first-person

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<sup>12</sup> Najmabadi 2005: 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> Sa’dī, an Iranian poet of the 13th century, ridicules this kind of man with these words: “I have never seen a thirty-year-old boy (*amrad*) like you in my life. One sees such miracles nowadays; the apocalypse is approaching! If your hands are tied for a week, your beard will grow to your belly!” See Sa’dī 1381sh: 977.

<sup>14</sup> For the importance of a person’s role in sexual encounter in construction of masculinity in the traditional understanding, see Tolino 2020: 33–36.

perspective, and the authors often present them as real events from their own sexual lives. As mentioned before, it is not relevant for the present analysis whether we are dealing with fiction or actual experiences, because our focus here is not on the function of narratives as reports on objective events in the past, but on their “ways of worldmaking”,<sup>15</sup> in which they reveal their own socio-cultural context as well as the way they are contributing to the construction of identity.

The stories on this blog can be separated roughly into two categories regarding the discourses underlying the subjectivities in the narrations. On the one hand, there are stories in which traditional-local patterns of thought predominate, and on the other hand, there are stories in which modern identity constructions are prevalent. The stories of the first category are clearly more numerous. In order to answer the question of the reasons for this imbalance, various factors, such as the social background of the users of the website, should be analysed. The anonymity of the users makes it impossible to gather information on their social background. However, if one wanted to heuristically assess the social background of the authors based on the places, professions, and material and habitual dispositions and settings mentioned in the stories, one might conclude that many of the stories take place in villages, small towns and socio-economically marginalised neighbourhoods of large cities.

#### 4 “*Doing*” and “*becoming*” gay

The first category of stories is dominated by the traditional-local perception of sexual life. The following features of the stories support this observation: one often finds in these stories a categorical distinction between the active and the passive partner. Moreover, sexuality is perceived as a behavioural matter and, hence, sexual preferences are seen as acquired behaviours which have become a habit through repetition. Let us take a closer look.

In the stories which I assign to this category, the active and passive sexual partners in a sexual act seem to belong to essentially different categories. The stories do not give the impression that these groups are represented together as subgroups of an umbrella concept of *men loving men*. The active and passive partners have different backgrounds, biographies, motives and desires. While the image of the active partner remains quite blurred, these stories tell a lot about the physical and psychological characteristics of the passive partner. The worldview which underlies the vagueness of the portrait of the active partner and the detailed description of the passive person is the same traditional world view in which one

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15 Nünning 2013: 18.

sexual position was considered comprehensible and other sexual position required explanation.

Regardless of the perspective of the passive or active partner, the physical description of the passive partner of a sexual encounter is an integral part of most stories in this category. Passives are young or look youthful, have fair, hairless skin or are fully shaved, have big buttocks and little to no masculine features. As user called “Puriya” opens his story *The itching of the ass* as follows: “From the fifth grade on I realised that I belong to the beautiful boys of my neighbourhood. I often heard other men say: ‘What an ass he has’, ‘What beautiful eyes’, ‘He is white as cotton’, ‘He took after his mother’. I rarely left the house because I was constantly being groped by both peers and adults.”<sup>16</sup>

The anonymous writer of the story “Everybody knew that I am a pretty boy” describes himself:

I am 21 years old, but my appearance does not fit my age. I look much younger, and everyone thinks I am 16 years old. [...] I don’t want to praise myself now, but because of my appearance many boys have fallen in love with me and cry because of me and say they can’t live without me. Many of them also wanted to kidnap me or force me to get into their car and were only prevented from doing so because of [the protection] of my friends.<sup>17</sup>

Another storyteller, Farzād, writes about himself: “I am Farzād and twenty years old. I am 175 cm tall and weigh 72 kg. My skin is white and my body is hairless by nature. I am somewhat pretty. To keep my proportions, I go to the fitness club, but I don’t want to be muscular. But I have to say, I have an ass that makes everyone get an erection!”<sup>18</sup>

Saman describes “his sweet Sīnā” as “well shaped with very fair skin, pink lips and completely hairless.”<sup>19</sup>

After reading just a few stories of this type, a reader is able to anticipate who is going to penetrate whom in the story. The one whose physical features are described and praised is probably the penetratee of the story. Some of the protagonists regard their physical characteristics as the reason why they have attracted the sexual attention of other men in the first place. The physical description therefore functions as an explanation or justification for playing the passive role. The motives and the nature of the active men, on the other hand, are hardly the subject of the descriptions in the stories. These men are simply “men” and their need for the active role when they see a potential sexual object. For the question why they have chosen a male sexual partner at all, one finds – if at all – answers that explain this choice by

16 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/خارش-کون> (28.04.2019).

17 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/همه-میدونستن-بچه-خوشگلم> (01.05.2019).

18 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/عشق-استاد-جوان-به-شاگرد> (03.05.2019).

19 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/سینا-کونی-گوگولی-من> (03.05.2019).

referring to surplus of sexual energy, lack of self-control and limited access to the opposite sex. Aryan, who is not really proud of his same-sex sexual activities, addresses other men with the following words: “My friendly advice is, do not stay single! Get a girlfriend. I myself would not pursue such actions if I had a girlfriend. Most Iranians are bisexual. Since we do not have access to women in our country due to gender segregation, we involuntarily seek relief from the boys.”<sup>20</sup>

Shahin, who plays an active role in his sexual encounters, sees the reason for his involvement in same-sex sexual acts in his own mental weakness: “I felt nothing for boys, but since I did not have sex with a woman, I could not control myself.”<sup>21</sup> He could only save himself from the sexual relationship with his roommate once he began reading the Koran and praying regularly.

The distinction between the passive and active partner is also reflected in the terminology. In addition to the term *kūnī* (approximately “faggot” in English), which is used as a slur but also as self-description, the word *gay* (Eng. gay) is often used as a category that includes only the passive men. In the stories of this category, being gay usually means being passive. Under the category *gay* of *shahvani.com*, we find numerous stories that indicate in the title of the story that it is an account of a person “turning gay”. Reading the stories bearing such titles, one realises that in a considerable number of this type of story, being gay is equated with being passive.

The idea behind the notion of “turning gay” is a further feature of traditional-local discourse, namely the behaviouristic approach towards sexuality. Even though some authors admit that they had been interested in playing the passive role since they can remember, many authors evaluate their passive inclination as an acquired quality. This is the typical narrative: Being physically attractive to other men, they get into sexual situations where they play the passive role. The first-time penetration, though, was accompanied with pleasure, and this is how these men start finding pleasure in being penetrated, to which they get addicted. This is how they become gay, and the active partner is often introduced as the one who *made* them gay. Mohammad, for example, tells the story of his “turning into a faggot” through his cousin. He writes:

My name is Mohammad and I am 26 years old. The memory that I am telling now is part of my life and has led to my fate of becoming a “faggot” (*kūnī*) and now I am addicted to being “fucked”. After his cousin Sa’id talked him into anal penetration and then promised not to do it again, he himself longed for a repetition of the penetration because his “ass itched” and since then he has let himself be penetrated both at school and during military service because he “got used to it”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/گی-رو-تجربه-کردم/> (03.05.2019).

<sup>21</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/خاطرات-تلخ-دانشجویی/> (26.04.2019).

<sup>22</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/کونی-شدنم-توسط-پسر-خاله-م/>, (05.05.2019).

Hūshang's narrative, called "Turning passive over time", is a story in which the protagonist is a poor child from a village who, in return for material support from three men (his teacher, a hammam master and the older brother of a friend) and in the context of lasting relationships, lets himself get penetrated. He writes about his role: "I mean, it's hard when you become passive and then find pleasure in being passive. It is a part of my unhappy fate. [...] As I have already said: I like to get fucked and I really do enjoy being passive and I don't think for a second about being active."<sup>23</sup>

Becoming a "faggot" or gay could happen to anyone, because the pleasure of anal penetration is latently available in everybody and only needs to be discovered. The user FCjagh describes his development from an "ass-fucker of the neighbourhood" to a passive boy in the story "The [short] distance of an active man from turning passive". To lure the boys to his home, he always offered mutual sex, allowing the others only intercrural intercourse. But once he was penetrated by one of his sex partners who had a small penis and suddenly discovered how pleasurable the passive role can be: "I found out that the rectum, like the front part of the glans, feels something pleasurable, and being penetrated feels exactly like penetrating, but with some pain and a weird feeling."<sup>24</sup>

In addition to its function as a term referring to the passive partner, the word *gay* has another use in shahvani's stories which is substantially different from its original (modern) meaning as a form of being. The word *gay* is often conjugated with the verb "to do" (*gay kardan*) and means to have same-sex sexual experience. When the authors talk about their "first gay" or about their "gay with a cousin", they refer only to the sexual act. Hence *gay* doesn't only refer to what people *are*, but also to what they *do* and would no longer apply if the person stopped doing it. Even where the term *gay* is used to describe a person, this term can only refer to the insistence of same-sex sexual practices. Hesām, who at some point has stopped sleeping with other men, begins a memory from the past, as follows "I am Hesām, but I am not gay. This memory goes back to a time when I didn't have sex with the opposite sex and maybe counted as gay."<sup>25</sup>

To sum up, many of the components of the narratives on shahvani.com give evidence of the dominance of the traditional-local perceptions of human sexual existence and the absence of a modern understanding of sexuality in the authors' construction of identity. There are many indications in these stories which point to the dominance of traditional-local patterns of understanding of sexuality among the authors of these stories: these stories are characterised by a categorisation

<sup>23</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/مفعول-شدن-در-گذر-زمان> (05.05.2019).

<sup>24</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/فاصله-ی-یک-فاعل-تا-مفعول-شدن> (05.05.2019).

<sup>25</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/سکس-اتفاقی-و-عاشقانه> (05.05.2019).

based on the sexual role and the fundamental distinction between the penetrator and the penetrated. In these stories the active role is treated as self-evident, whereas the passive role as in need of justification and explanation. Moreover, the sexual preference is often perceived as a form of habit and addiction. One can claim that these stories would not have been told in this form if the authors had a modern idea of (homo)sexuality as a quality inherent and enduring in human beings. This local-traditional understanding of sexual behaviour faces the criticism of those users who have a modern understanding of sexuality, which is in some essential points in conflict with the traditional image of the human sexual being.

## 5 “You are faggots and not gays!”

As mentioned, the stories in which a homosexual disposition is considered an inherent characteristic and the explanation for sexual behaviour are clearly in the minority on shahvani.com. The term that is prominently used in this category of narrative and distinguishes them is the word *hamjensgarā* as an equivalent to homosexual and *hamjensgarā’ī* as an equivalent to homosexuality. These words became popular in the 1990s, as the first Iranian LGBT activists began to criticise the previously used term *hamjensbāz*. For these activists, the word *hamjensbāz* (literally: player with a same-sex person) did not express the amorous and emotional dimension of same-sex contact. Furthermore, the activists argued that the term *hamjensbāz* was associated in society with the local form of same-sex desire, which they rejected as asymmetrical, phallocentric and patriarchal. For these activists, *hamjensbāzī* was what was common in the traditional context: unequal relationships between men and younger men without emotional involvement, in which the main purpose was the sexual satisfaction of the active partner and where the passive partner was marked, stigmatised and degraded. As an alternative, the activists proposed the terms *hamjensgarā* (homosexual) and *hamjensgarā’ī* (homosexuality), which emphasise the emotional and psychological dimension of a same-sex relationship rather than sexual acts.<sup>26</sup>

This dichotomy between *hamjensbāzī* as a term describing the traditional forms of same-sex sexual contact and *hamjensgarā’ī* as a term referring to an inherent emotional inclination towards same-sex persons can still be observed

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<sup>26</sup> From the 1990s onwards, an activist scene emerged, mainly through the publication of online magazines such as *Maha* or *Cheragh*, which worked to raise awareness in this context. For the discussions of LGBT activists, see Afary 2009: 351–358; see also Korycki/Nasirzadeh 2016: 60–65.

today in the stories on shahvani.com. Komeyl the author of the story “The love between two *hamjensgarā*” writes:

It is very difficult in Iran to find love or a companion. In a country where being *hamjensgarā* [...] is equated with *hamjensbāzī* or with paedophilia or many other terms that do not express our deep inclinations. You must not equate us with paedophiles or faggots (*kūnī-hā*) in society.<sup>27</sup>

The conflict between the traditional lifestyle behind the term *hamjensbāzī* and the modern concept of *hamjensgarā’ī* is at best illustrated in the commentary sections of the stories introduced in the previous part, where the modern minded users criticise the traditional patterns of thought and behaviour of these stories.

An author, who describes himself as *hamjensbāz* and tells the story of his sexual encounter with a “pretty sixteen- or seventeen-year-old, blond, fair-skinned boy”, receives the following comment from the user Shadi.rhnm2: “Fortunately, you are aware that you are a *hamjensbāz*. [...] Sexual contact with a person of the same sex is neither an indication of love nor an indication of being a *hamjensgarā*.”<sup>28</sup>

The user hi\_by comments on the story “The beginning of my turning gay with the help of Ayyūb”, in which the narrator Sīyā, a “tall and hairy” boy, who “you can’t tell that he is passive”, reports on his first same-sex sexual contact with these words:

Why do you pollute the word gay? That what you are is called being ‘faggot’ (*kūnī*)! Gay is an emotional and sexual relationship between two men, in which the two have a reciprocal sexual relationship with each other. If one is only passive and the other is only active, it is called being ‘faggot’ (*kūnī*). If both are active and passive, it is called being gay. Please do not associate gay with such nonsense and bring it in disrepute. Please do not associate being gay with being ‘faggot’ (*kūnī*).<sup>29</sup>

Also, the assumption that physical attributes play a role in the adoption of the passive role and “turning gay” is criticised by the modernist-thinking users. In response to a narrative in which the author considers his physical attributes as the reason for his passive role, the user sexplication writes: “I never had a well-shaped behind and had a moustache from the age of fourteen. Thank God I was never abused as a child like most boys and girls and at the end of the day I still turned out to be gay.”<sup>30</sup>

27 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/عشق-دو-همجنسگرا/> (09.05.2019).

28 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/عشق-به-جنس-موافق/> (10.05.2019).

29 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/اولین-گی-شدنم-با-کمک-ایوب/> (09.05.2019).

30 <https://shahvani.com/dastan/دلیل-گی-شدن-من/> (26.04.2019).

In this commentary, the commentator also rejects the assumption that sexual abuse and first-time penetration could be the cause of same-sex sexual preference. In a similar fashion, the local-traditional notion that same-sex sexual activity is explained as a consequence of the surplus of sexual energy and lack of access to people of the opposite sex is criticised. We read in a commentary:

That you think you ended up having sex with the boys because you had no access to girls is your business. But the majority of those who are inclined to boys are not like that. Neither I nor my family are Muslims and I have always had girls in my life as classmates, friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, I have never felt a sexual attraction to the opposite sex. All the gay people I know are like that too.<sup>31</sup>

One could argue that the homoerotic stories of shahvani.com are the arena of a competition for the authority over interpretation of same-sex desire and constructing subjectivities between traditional-local patterns of understanding of and the modern discourse on sexuality. On the one hand, there is the traditional world, in which same-sex desire is not seen as a category of its own, since in this worldview, the role played in sexual encounters is considered more important than the gender of the sexual partner. Furthermore, in the traditional-local approach, sexual behaviour is treated as an initial point for identity formation, and sexual preferences are seen as a consequence of life circumstances and sexual experiences. On the other hand, there is the modern discourse of sexuality in which sexual orientation is considered an innate characteristic of humans and, in contrast to the traditional-local approach, emphasises the emotional-psychological component of same-sex inclination. It remains to be seen whether one of these discourses will prevail in the long run in authority over the interpretation of same-sex desire.

## 6 Some final remarks

In his essay “How to Do History of Homosexuality”, David Halperin searches for concepts used to categorise same-sex male sexuality before the invention of the concept of “homosexuality”. Halperin’s intention is to deconstruct the concept of homosexuality, which directly forms and influences the contemporary approach to the topic of same-sex sexual desire and is – according to Halperin – an incoherent concept that has gathered several different historical notions in itself and claims to encompass all forms of same-sex desire. With this deconstructivist approach to the concept of homosexuality and with a focus on the history of same-sex male desire in European societies, Halperin identifies four categories or discourse traditions

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<sup>31</sup> <https://shahvani.com/dastan/گی-رو-تجربه-کردم/> (10.05.2019).

that, from our contemporary perspective, have fallen under the category of homosexuality. These discourse traditions are “effeminacy”, “pederasty or active sodomy”, “friendship and male love” and “passivity or inversion”. These, according to Halperin, existed independently in pre-modern European societies before the introduction of the concept of homosexuality and were absorbed by this new concept:

Each of these traditions has its own consistency, autonomy, destiny, particularity, and continuity over time, though each also undergoes various breaks or ruptures. Each has subsisted more or less independently of the others, although they have routinely interacted with one another, and they have helped to constitute one another through various exclusions. Their separate histories, as well as the history of interrelations, have been obscured *but not superseded* by the recent emergence of the discourses of (homo)sexuality. In fact what ‘homosexuality’ signifies today is an effect of this cumulative process of historical overlay and accretion.<sup>32</sup>

Hence, these categorisations have only been blended out by the concept of homosexuality, but not abolished:

[...] homosexuality absorbs and combines at least three distinct and previously uncorrelated concepts: 1) a psychiatric notion of perverted or pathological *orientation*, [...] which is an essentially psychological concept that applies to the inner life of the individual and does not necessarily presume same-sex sexual behavior; 2) a psychoanalytic notion of *same-sex object-choice* or desire, [...] which is a category of erotic intentionality and does not necessarily imply a permanent sexual orientation [...]; 3) a sociological notion of sexually deviant behavior, [...] which focuses on non-standard sexual practice and does not necessarily refer to erotic psychology or sexual orientation.<sup>33</sup>

One can ask whether the category of *hamjensgarā’ī*, as it is understood by the modern-thinking users of the website, is also a concept that functions as an umbrella term for the entire landscape of same-sex desire. Even if the modernist users’ criticism of the asymmetries that cause traditional-local patterns of behaviour and the potential for abuse of these patterns is justified, in combating local discourses they themselves follow a conformist approach in which same-sex desire has one legitimate expression, namely a relationship that is sexually characterised by its equality and reciprocity, and through this approach they suppress certain expressions of same-sex desire. In the modernist approach of *hamjensgarā’ī*, for example, “effeminate” men who also like to be passive during sex are partly not seen as part of the community, but as the actors of a problematic system and are even insulted, degraded and stigmatised as traitors. The modernist perspective

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<sup>32</sup> Halperin 2002: 109.

<sup>33</sup> Halperin 2002: 131.

blames passive men in Iranian society who define their role according to a heterosexual relationship and like to see themselves as the feminine passive partner for reinforcing the structures of a repressive patriarchal system through their behaviour and self-perception. As we saw, the term “faggot” (*kūnī*) is not only an insult on the part of the homophobic society, but also an insult in the speech of the modern-thinking (homophobia-fighting) actors. The “faggots” and their active partners, in the eyes of their modernist critics, are not homosexual-bisexual men with a questionable self-consciousness but fall essentially in the different category of *hamjensbāz*. To get labelled as *hamjensgarā*, an individual must be committed to a certain form of equality – defined mainly by the sexual role – in a same-sex emotional relationship.

This conformist attitude might be a result of the struggle for recognition in a social environment with a strong anti-homosexual resentment in order to make the most “normal” impression on the less tolerant society. There are some resemblances between the current Iranian understanding of LGBTQ and the approach of homophile organisations in the second half of the 20th century in Western societies, which took a conformist approach to gain the acceptance of homosexuality in their homophobic societies, while distancing themselves from socially less accepted subjects such as “effeminate” men.<sup>34</sup> The situation in Western societies changed in the context of the gay liberation movements of the 1970s. In these movements, it was the society (majority) that was expected to change its approach, and it was not the task of marginalised groups to adapt themselves to the oppressive society.<sup>35</sup> These movements therefore rejected conformist approaches and embraced the previously marginalised groups like effeminate men.<sup>36</sup> A conformist approach then became dominant again later in the 2000s, when issues such as gay marriage and parenthood were the main priorities and LGBT activists were less concerned with legal and social acceptance of other non-marriage-based lifestyles. It was, however, a consequence of the liberation movements that terms like *gay* and *homosexual* were adopted as umbrella terms for all expressions of same-sex desire and a fundament of subjective self-consciousness.

However, it is wrong to assume in a deterministic way that the course of events in Western societies will be repeated in Iranian society and that the modern

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<sup>34</sup> Rizzo 2006: 206–212.

<sup>35</sup> “It is not the homosexual who is perverse, but the situation in which he lives” is a popular statement in German and was the title of a film from the German director Rosa von Praunheim in the 1970s.

<sup>36</sup> For the liberation movements, see Tamagne 2011: 68–69; Rizzo 2006: 212–216; Eder 2002: 217–225.

perception of sexuality – sooner or later – will be the victorious discourse out of the conflict in the construction of the subjectivity of individuals with same-sex sexual inclination. The concept of sexuality evolved in societies that had undergone many other developments that made major changes in the approach of these societies to the world. These developments include the secularisation of the view of the world and the resulting weakness of religious-metaphysical discourse in favour of materialistic-scientific discourse. Without this shift, it wouldn't be possible for physicians and psychologists to successfully claim authority over defining the “rightness” and “wrongness” of sexual behaviour from priests and state prosecutors. It is the secularised perception of the human being that considers the “psychiatric style of reasoning”<sup>37</sup> – the essential requirement for success of the concept of sexuality – as a suitable means for understanding human behaviour. Not only changes in the mental mindset but also sociological and economic factors have contributed to the success of the concept of homosexuality in Western societies. A society where an individual's economic security depends on their family network and where the fulfilment of the reproductive function is central to the maintenance of the dominant order offers its members less space for lifestyles that conflict with that order. Where the lifelong pursuit of a homosexual lifestyle would face opposition from the immediate social environment, which has the appropriate means of exerting pressure and tries to prevent this behaviour through various sanctioning measures, it is less likely that an individual would insist on living out his or her inclination. Being rejected by the family and losing the support of the family could mean a serious social decline. The adoption of homosexual identity is therefore dependent on the sociological-economic circumstances under which a person lives. Similar to Western societies are the middle class and urban middle class of Iranian society, in which people with a homosexual identity become visible. This could be because these social classes have a more open attitude towards Western culture and have accordingly adopted the categories of these societies. However, it also plays a role that individuals from these social classes are, through their education and qualifications, economically more autonomous and hence more empowered to make self-determined decisions. The success of a modern understanding of sexual subjectivity in other social strata depends therefore on the question whether the concerned individuals could economically and socially afford the adoption of a modern approach towards their sexual subjectivity or if they will continue living out the traditional-local patterns of homoerotic culture, which is less challenging for the prevailing order.

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37 Davidson 1987: 23.

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