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Iranian Homosexuals; Social Identity Formation and Question of Femininity

A Dissertation

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Abstract

Homosexuality and homosexual subjects have been oppressed during the sociocultural transformations of contemporary Iran whilst femiphobic attitudes have been central to this marginalization. Notwithstanding the profound distortion of the concepts of femininity and masculinity in the course of the modernization and islamization of the country, defeminization of the public space and prioritization of the masculinity in gender discourses have been crucial to all social transitions that intend to feed their desired social-ideal identity. Iranian homosexuals, who are condemned both for their sexuality and nonconformist gender effeminacy, have recently formed fictive kinships and backstage friendship groups in order to negotiate and attain a new social identity. In this paper I will examine the basic reasons behind the rejection of homosexuality in Iran and the ventures of the Iranian gays into cyberspace and back to society, while struggling to construct a new feminine-admissive social identity. The final part of this study is devoted to the discussion of the seat of femininity, particularly effeminacy, among Iranians. The paper concludes with demonstrating the incomplete social identity formation of gays, but also envisages a rising divergence in Iranian youths' gender behaviors which grants the likelihood of negotiating the newly developed social identity to homosexuals.

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“In these downbeat times, we need as much hope and courage as we do vision and analysis; we must accent the best of each other even as we point out the vicious effects of our racial divide and pernicious consequences of our maldistribution of wealth and power. We simply cannot enter the twenty-first century at each other's throats, even as we acknowledge the weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia, and ecological abuse on our necks. We are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation--and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately. Do we have the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge? Time will tell. None of us alone can save the nation or world. But each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so.”

Cornel West, *Race Matters*

It is customary and of good manners to say “thank you”, however, I am writing this piece because I want to genuinely appreciate my Parents and my dearest friend, Ana.

The whole path started with the unconditional love and endorsement I received from my mother, a pure heart filled with passion. The reason I could step forward was my dad who has been supporting me, all my life, and I have realized it very recently though.

My highest gratitude here goes to my friend, Ana, who simply understands me, divines me and helps me to rise above.

To my sister...

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Chapter I

Introduction

Iranian society and its cultural traits have remarkably changed over the last century, mainly during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century when the country went through a modernizing process and after the Islamic Revolution based on Shi'a ideology where gender and sexuality issues were central to both movements. While homoeroticism has been removed from public space and gender roles have been reintensifying repeatedly, gays, whose identity is interwoven with the culturally denied homosexuality and femiphobic mannerism of the people, have been struggling to negotiate their social identity within backstage groups of private spaces. Although there are several scholarly works written on sexuality and gender in Iran (Amin, 2002; Moallem, 2005; Sadeghi, 2008; Afary, 2009; Shaditalab, 2006), the field lacks a focused study on identity formation among homosexuals in Iran. Taking identity as a sum of different attributions and categories (Jenkins, 2010), this paper is primarily concerned with the feminine aspect of social identity among Iranian homosexuals. Here femininity is not a fixed social concept, but one which is constantly under construction and negotiation between subjects. Therefore this study will also examine the position of femininity and effeminacy among Iranians since these factors are decisive in sociocultural rejection of homosexual subjects who at times display culturally perceived feminine behaviors.

The question of identity formation in relation to the femininity and other cultural attributes (Friedman, 1997) indicates that identity is built in constant negotiation with and within social, cultural, historical and political discourses through positioning and repositioning the subjects. The notion of negotiation invites us to consider the process of identity formation and the power relations involved in and resulted from such negotiations.

The idea that identity formation is an ongoing process implies the incompleteness of the process and its product. Therefore, identity becomes the problematic and unaccomplished product of the cultural practices and negotiations (Hall, 1990). It becomes the 'becoming' itself; it shifts in different contexts and representations as the subject takes positions or is positioned by the discursive practices. This very relation between the subject and the discourses of culture and history problematizes the identity construction and identification (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). From a discursive approach, the relations involved in identity formation construct and constitute social identities through "power" in form of oppression and resistance (Hall, 2001). In the case of making sexual identity it has been discussed that there are complicated links between sexuality,

religion, cultural values and institutionalized practices (Madureira, 2007; Jaspal&Cinnirella, 2012; Annes & Redlin, 2012) which produce various constructs of sexuality, masculinity, femininity and gendered social structures.

Discourse of sexuality in Iran is mainly produced by religious and governmental heterosexual discourses while this should not depict the youths as the mere victims. Heteronormativity of Iranian culture contains heterosexism where female subject and its characteristics are depreciated in comparison with the male subject. In such gender structure, men and women are expected to perform and represent certain identities which are constructed through definitions of masculinity and femininity. While masculine and feminine behaviors are constricted in this symbolic system of identity, homosexual subject who performs a different gender role and demonstrates abnormal identity attributes will endanger the whole structure. Here, homophobia is produced to circumvent such threat. Thus, heterosexism and homophobia operate simultaneously in order to mark certain forms of sexual expression as appropriate and those who do not conform to such heteronormative standards as inappropriate (Fine, 2011). Through entrenching heterosexual cultural values and inducing psychological cognates and affects¹ such heterosexual and femiphobic discourses will reproduce sets of identities and preclude others. Since homosexuality, homosexual identity and homophobia are not recognized in any discourse in Iran², here I am about to dissect the role of femiphobic attitudes in social identity formation among Iranian gays in the heterosexual context of Iran.

In what follows, after a detailed discussion of the methodologies, the overarching theme through chapters will be the rejection of homosexuality based on femiphobic attitudes among Iranians and the struggle of the homosexual subjects to sublimate such phobias and shape a new identity. In the first chapter –I am aware that the reader might find this section excessively theoretical, but it was crucial for me to tackle with a few theories and theorists as a preparatory exercise since this piece of work is an initiative for a larger upcoming project- I will try to explain the basic reasons behind the rejection of homosexuality in modern Iran. Relying on psychoanalytical scholarship, namely that of Lacanians and post-structuralists, the chapter will probe the subject and subjectification process in order to locate the very creeds behind heterosexism and homophobia within the sociocultural symbolic structures. Thereafter, I have also looked at the homosexual

¹ For further discussion on social and psychological foundations of heterosexism and homophobia see Madureira, 2007.

² This means that homosexuality for Iranians is exclusively linked to the sexual act not the same-sex emotions and desires. Consequently, homophobia in its western concept, in absence of homosexual subject, is about and directed toward the same-sex intercourse only.

subjectification process from a historical aspect, but have exclusively focused on Iranian context and hope that this will give the reader an insight into how colonial religious and medical discourses enmeshed with historical events have created a longstanding homophobic tradition in Iran.

Second chapter will sketch the way in which gay men moved from living in and acceptance of traditional sociocultural symbolic realities toward redefining such realities by seeking refuge to the newly fashioned cyberspace. Here the goal is to clarify the role of social media and online chatrooms, specifically Yahoo Chat in case of Iranian gays, in the process of finding and shaping a semi-safe space for the subjects who are constantly under (in)direct surveillance in both public and private spaces and places. Including many quotations from my young interviewees I will follow their experiences on simultaneously consuming and producing online gay spaces through using chatrooms and writing weblogs which in consequence has led to replication of such semi-safe spaces within public spaces such as parks and cafes and also in private spaces such as homes and gardens.

Third chapter is composed about the gay fictive kinships. After developing connections and cyber-relationships during the 2000s, Iranian gays have managed to bring their relationships and gatherings into the real world and this has been epitomized in the short-lived phenomenon of the gay families where individuals used to gather around, usually at homes, and interact with each other based on the arbitrary and fake names. These names were taken from the heterosexual relations while the masculine roles for the individuals were almost absent and everyone was called with a female name such as mom or aunt. This feminine private space provided many Iranian gays to break away from the heterosexist social structures, avow the femininity and progress through the process of shaping a more solid and guilt-free identity.

The final section is devoted to analysis of the problematic instigations of femiphobic attitudes of Iranians which hinder homosexuals in their efforts to internalize their newly developed meanings and to adopt new identity categories. In the previous chapters the fortunate process of identity formation is discussed, however, it is of high importance not to forget that Iranian sociocultural structure is still deeply heterosexist and homophobic when it comes to the negotiations around sexualities and this, as we will see, is due to the long historico-cultural transformations which have had different impacts upon male and female subjects in their interactions with a potential homosexual subject. Considering the hegemonic masculinities as a cultural “fashion”, I will clarify how such cultural canalizations function to underwrite the present homophobic attitudes through implementing senses of shame and guilt in both heterosexual and homosexual subjects.

This work will conclude by putting the homosexuals' identity negotiations within the larger framework of the Iranian sexual revolution staged by the younger generation as a backlash against the previous sociocultural transformations and surveillant structures. There I will emphasise, according to my findings, withstanding the facts that sexual freedoms and modifications claimed by the Iranian youths, in addition to the appearance of the metrosexuals in the public space, have provided the Iranian gays with a relatively less femiphobic atmosphere, their presence in the public and private space is still to be devoid any overt display of homosexual orientations.

Chapter II

Methodology

For the anthropologist whose goal is to present an objective description of specific sociocultural activities in order to provide the readers, and himself at some points, with the opportunities to understand those activities and therefore their cultural contexts, ethnography has been the best friend. Ethnography is here to give us a meticulous in depth “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the everyday activities, but also to go further than being a mere reportage and delve into the culturally constructed “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973) through standing within the webs, being or becoming the insider and delineating on how people in that particular context “see their world” (Hammersley, 1992). Traditionally, anthropologist would take the hassle of going to a remote and unknown land – I envy those who have the chance of taking off and exploring the unknown, if this includes the unknown that we all have inside ourselves - to study and observe the small rural regions and their exotic people who had settled there (e.g. Malinowski, 1987; Radcliffe-Brown, 2012). Staying in the field setting for some months and observing the people used to be the classic way of conducting the ethnography. But recently there have been shifts within the discipline and among the anthropologists - be it due to financial problems or our indolence to risk our safety zones or simply because we are not allowed to travel - where some new forms of ethnography such as auto-ethnography, meta-ethnography and online ethnography have become popular and widely used. Although it can expose the researcher and the participants to various forms of risks, ethnography has become the prominent methodology for a qualitative research in social sciences.

The data that is collected through ethnography should be analysed unbiasedly and inductively to identify the major themes and connections between them in order to attain the goal of having a thick description through generating tentative theoretical explanations of the accumulated data. Here the anthropologist, or any reader of his supposedly well-structured ethnography as the final product, should pay close attention to space, actors, activity, acts, time and feelings as key factors in understanding the chain of the created/ing meanings.

In the following part I will clarify, albeit statically, the details of my ethnography which I did for the present research on Iranian gays while based on the literature on both the Iranian and the western discourses of sexual Identity I aimed to answer the following interrogations:

1- Who has been/is identified as gay in Iranian culture, if such category exists there in the first place?

2- Are Iranian gays involved in any form of identity construction and negotiation?

It might be of surprise to you, my reader, why I didn't look at the present situation and conditions of the homosexuals, both gays and lesbians, within the current Iranian religious, political, medical or economic discourses to reveal if they are in danger, have hierarchically or equal relations, have any connection to transsexuals or have any club to go to among many other questions that you have in mind. Basically, the answers to some of these questions were obvious facts and needless of any discussion to me until I was asked, for example, where (what kind of bar or club) do gays go to party for the weekends? It was when I started talking to my friends here in Leuven, each from different countries, that I realized those phenomena that I see as facts, as an Iranian, are to be studied, explained and clarified if possible. While this amuses me, nevertheless I am not able to offer answers to such questions since I had to choose and limit the topic of the study to the level of a master's thesis and manage it within the limited time that I had to do the ethnography. Besides, "I" personally had some interests and priorities that I will try to explain later on.

Field: I conducted this research inside Iran³. From among the cities that are highly populated and have become student cities with industrialized economies, all of which allow for more independent lifestyle for the youths and thus more engagement in sexual conducts (D'emilio, 1998) I have selected to work in Tehran⁴ since it is home to diverse groups of people from all

³ Iran is a Middle-Eastern country neighboring Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The country has been ruled by a theocratic regime since 1979 while Shia Islam has been the (un)official religion of the nation for centuries. "Iranian culture has been patriarchal with the father or the husband at the head of the family and household... Since the revolution, patriarchy has been promoted and strengthened by reverting to ancient Islamic codes and with enforced patriarchal practices, such as controlling female appearance and mobility." (Price, 2006)

⁴ Tehran is located in the north-centre of Iran and, as the capital city, is the most populated city with a population of 13,828,365 in its greater metropolitan area. Since the time the city was selected as the capital of the country in 1795 it has been the destination of mass migration from all over the country due to the fact that most of financial and industrial organizations are centred in Tehran. There are few other cities with similar characteristics in Iran including Isfahan, Mashhad and Shiraz.

over the country and is well known for producing and exporting the sexual culture to other regions.

As homosexuality is illegal in the country, there was no (un)official organization or network to which I could refer as a source of information. Therefore all participants were contacted directly and in person by me. This may turn out to be a time consuming task but at the same time guarantees the heterogeneity and validity of the collected data. I used snowball sampling to extend the network of participants and develop the basic sampling frame.

I chose my participants from middle-class stratum of people because they can express a moderate representation of the current religious and sociopolitical views in Iran since due to long term political transformation in the modern history of the nation a new middle class has been formed which is the prota/antagonist representative of the mainstream and dominant discourses. Further, this class has been the main target of the state ideology and also the international gay “liberation” discourses which highlight the universality of romance among gays. It is worthy of emphasizing that the participant were 15 men who exclusively identify themselves as gay and homosexual, regardless of having active sex life. In addition to gay participants, I inevitably talked to 6 straight subjects to grasp their understanding of behaviors different from heterosexuality. The youngest participant was 19 at the time of the fieldwork and the oldest was about 30. Therefore upon reading and analyzing their experiences one must keep in mind that we are before a generation with its specific characteristics, while the younger or older generations would certainly bring in different sets of experiences as the Iranian society has been undergoing a rapid social transformation during the recent decades.

Almost all of the ethnographic data for this research was collected during individual and group talks occurring in cafes, the interviewee’s or my house. These activities were all in Persian which is the official language of the country. I have tried to provide proper translations in writing this work while keeping a few words untranslated since there was either no equal term for them in English or, as I personally think, it is important to maintain some parts of the data in the original language in order to have a linguistic reference which enable us for future comparative works.

Data Collection: Ethnography

Participant observation: The primary method of data collection was participant observation and was mainly concerned with the gay subjects. My main task was to make a systematic record of day-to-day interactions, observations, and informal conversations by writing field notes on a daily basis. The goal of ethnography here was to observe and document the actual behavior of the

participants and search for patterns and the possible needs underlying those patterns, rather than relying on the participant to consciously recall them.

Free listing: Based on the question(s) that I had in mind and prepared ask, this technique was used to help me to define homosexuality and homosexual characteristics from the view of Iranian gay and straight subjects. This helped me assess the coherency and consistency of the identity characteristics. To improve external validity, informants were selected deliberately to maximize heterogeneity with respect to religious and socioeconomic background. This will provide the background data for constructing questions for semistructured and structured interviews. (mention this in features of Hamjensgara as emotional, and the names of the movies found)

Unstructured and semistructured interviewing: The initial phase of interviewing was focused on unstructured and semistructured interviews with both gay and straight subjects to roughly locate the positionality of the gay subjects and examine their inclinations toward any discourse of sexuality, the process of shaping identity and participating in any communal activity. I encouraged informants to express themselves in their own terms and to determine the pace of the interviews. Open-ended interviews were partially transcribed and coded according to the grounded theory method. The strength of this method was that it provided a rigorous procedure for identifying themes in the text and for developing theoretical models of the relationships among themes. It was thus well suited to the explorative goals of my interviews.

Concept Interviews: I asked a sample of participants, different from the free-listing sample, to write short statements that describe their own experience and stance toward the sexual position that they are taking or is imposed upon them. Participants were free to write down positive or negative statements. The data from concept interviews was also a help to form questions for structured interviews.

Structured interviewing: To complement earlier phases of exploratory interviewing, a sample of informants was recruited for structured interviews. This was to probe into new clues, to open up new dimensions of the problem, or to secure accurate accounts that were based on the personal experiences of the subjects (Holstein, 2001). Interviews were conducted in the context, meaning that I tried to look at the behavior of interest upon occurrence to get a clear understanding and an inventory of activities in which the participant was engaged in when going through a process. “Contextual Interviewing” is a strong and victor form of interviewing since it allowed me to see the person’s environment and get genuine manifestations of the behaviors. The sample consisted of 7 informants who were purposefully selected to maximize heterogeneity according to the sampling strategy noted above. Structured interviews were tape recorded with permission of each informant.

Life Histories: Life histories were collected from only 3 of the informants. Life histories allowed me to consider the changes that had occurred over time. Therefore I could examine their experiences with (multiple) discourses of sexuality while again relying on grounded theory method to develop theoretical models in further analyses of my findings.

Ethics:

It is important to point out that homosexuality is illegal in Iran and homosexuals are among vulnerable groups. Therefore the goal of the research was doing “good” to this group not “harm”. Following the ethical codes of AAA and BSA for planning, conducting and analysis, the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data was guaranteed along with their right to discontinue participation at any time. Except the situations where I did the (semi)structured interviews, the *topic* of the fieldwork was not explicitly disclosed, but all participants were (in)directly informed that my presence had a “researcher” element to it. Practically, this semi-covert ethnography (Calvey, 2008), where honesty was central to it, was to safeguard the safety of both participants and researcher and avoid any changes in participants’ behaviours. In addition to officially declaring being on vacation as the reason for going back to Iran, I limited the participant observation to a period of about 45 days and continued the interviews via Skype in order to avoid any unpredicted risks. All (digital) data including notes and voice-recordings were saved in secured place and server during and after the fieldwork.

Who am I?

All anthropologists are positioned within their field by age, nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, scientific predispositions, etc. The modality of this positionality of the ethnographer is part of the data and is divulged or concealed through the way he collects the data, takes field notes and publishes (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Over the past few decades with the rise of the post-modern trends in almost all fields of social sciences such interests have also grown within and among anthropologists to consider their personal histories, motivations and their ethnographic fieldwork stories (Hoey, 2007). Personal and professional background put into its context will guide the individual to opt for specific methodologies and theoretical frameworks and I am about to write on these grounds as I regard them as fundamental factors in understanding the approaches taken by the scholars.

As a young Iranian man I selected to work on this project since it focuses on a particular group of people who are being talked about without being given a voice to talk or the chance to represent themselves. It is true that I did my fieldwork in my home town and it was expected to be a “doing ethnography at home”, but there was certainly another aspect of this going-back-home project. My interaction with people, no matter the participants of the research or my relatives and friends was checked by my identity as “local”, but it had also the “outsider-ed” aspect to it since I was seen as the person who has been away from home for a long time, been to the desired “West”. Therefore, although I was understood as local and not foreigner, I could see that at some points I was reminded of my “western experience” both with positive and negative comments (Simić, 2010).

In order to reduce the influence of my “outsider” identity I relied on using the network of my close friends. They introduced me to other potential participants while I was also trying to introduce my other friends to this new participants to connect them to each other within the already established network of friends and participants (Simić, 2010). I found this situation similar to that of the “foreign” anthropologist who has to constantly form new networks to do his fieldwork (Kaufmann & Rabodoarimiadana, 2003). It was also a challenge for me to manage shifts from insider to outsider or vice versa while working with the participants.

As a male researcher among male participants –except 3 straight female subjects- I was not faced with the issues that may occur to a cross gender research. Researcher’s gender in Iranian patriarchal social context is decisive during the course of doing fieldwork due to the dominant gender segregation which is safeguarded by both government agents and individual citizens who are the continuation of such patriarchy. I should be pointed out here that this has resulted in some cultural characteristics that oblige individuals to be unwilling and uncomfortable to discuss certain topics, including sex and sexuality, with members of the opposite sex. One should be mindful that this might have influenced the responses of my female participants.

I mentioned earlier that participants of this study come from the middle class families as I do. Because of the recent political and economic turbulences in Iran, the class system has become crucial in the interactions among the citizens as the gap between the classes is widening and so do the social distances between individuals. Therefore being identified as the member of the same class stratum availed the whole process of the fieldwork. My own unwillingness in dealing with the upper and lower classes also played a role in selecting such context.

I described all the above factors as I assumed those were the critical aspects of my positionality in the field, in the “context”. By context I do not merely mean the places and locations where I observed the behaviors, talked to participants, took part in activities or (neutrally) involved in

discussion, but also the researcher-informant relationships and my very personal reactions to what I was asked about or what I had observed. Therefore, in writing this paper I do not claim for nor desire an objective approach since detaching one's "self" from the research will result in a decontextualized form of reading the field while many findings and insights will be excluded (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Further, writing explicitly about our "self" and (dis)connecting it to participants and the context reveals that the researcher or the interlocutors are not the "emblematic" or "representative" subjects, but individuals who are positioned within time, social context, place, etc.

Chapter III

Social structure; rejection of homosexual subjects

My entrance into the field was driven by a desire to find answers to many of my questions about homosexuality or '*hamjensgarayi*'⁵ in Iran. I wanted to discover how homosexuals survive their everyday interactions in a country where their sexuality is simultaneously a religious sin, a legal crime and a cultural immorality. The question of homosexuals' social identity formation and its management under constant surveillance in public and private space, amid discursive clashes over sexuality among government, social traditions and the youth (Sadeghi, 2008) was of utmost importance to me. This urged me to look for group gatherings where identities are negotiated and internalized since my goal was to analyze feminine homosexual manners of individuals in social interactions while individuals are performing within a particular social context to convey and form aspects of their identity (Boyd, 2001). Although this negotiation mostly happens at the unconscious level, we will see how Iranian homosexuals, as a result of self-monitoring (Grotevant, 1987) and social repression, while also embarrassed by their femininity, consciously change the context and reshape the social interactions on the way toward identity formation.

I had already made some gay friends with the help of bloggers and net activists who became my first participants and helped me find new interlocutors. Subsequently, I found out that meeting a new person could bring four or five other people into circle of participants since there is a way of living in gay friendship groups that is called by the very English term, '*life*'. Each *life* includes limited number of close friends who spend most of their time together in public spaces such as parks and cafes or in the private space of home. There are two groups of gays in these *lives* according to my experience as a temporary member of one of them. One group is comprised of those who had recently joined the *gay life*, *bachehaye-jadid* (new comers), and the other group

⁵ In Persian language, in its modern form, there are two main words to address the homosexuals. One is "Hamjensbaz" which is more traditional and used widely by the non-homosexuals as a derogatory term of address since it insists on the practice of having same-sex intercourse. Second term is "Hamjensgara" which, supposedly, has been coined by homosexuals few years before Islamic Revolution and has been widely used by them since then. This second term gives more attention to the same-sex sexual orientation and thus brings a homosexual subject into being while the homosexual subject is absent in "Hamjensbaz". In addition to this reason, I am using Hamjensgara to refer to my participants as they refer to themselves in such way and find Hamjensbaz or other terms as plain insult.

are those who have had a long presences in *gay lifes* and most of them have a shared experience of membership in a gay *khanevadeh* (family or kinship). Gay kinships no longer exist among gays and have become part of Iranian gays' history. Most of the *gay lifes* are branches of those big families whose members have dispersed due to different reasons.

Attending friend gatherings one would see the strong sense of inclusion and support among group members while a sense of differentiation from other groups is traceable in terms of addressing, e.g. *bacheyah-e ma* (our fellow friends) or *life-e una* (their life).

Here I must emphasize that due to proliferation of gay groups and the increase in intra-group interactions this exclusivity is gradually disappearing, resulting in the recruitment of more and more members in supportive groups. In response to my question about the necessity of having those group gatherings in public and private spaces that are prone to uncontrolled assault of *basij* (Islamist militia), there were indications to feelings of shame and guilt and experiences that threatened not only their desires, but their sense of being by uncoupling them from their sources of comfort- their blood families. One important outcome of feeling guilty and ashamed is to leave to scene and hide in order to avoid the public disfavor and keep the ego protected against super-ego's dictates (Tangney et al., 1992). This is what Iranian gays have been doing by distancing their families and friends as they face the disapproval of certain behaviors which revolve around definitions of femininity and masculinity. *Reza* who studies photography at Tehran University once told me:

'I don't know, I'm not sure when was the time that I felt the desire for other boys, but I am sure that at the same time I knew I shouldn't have that feeling. It is something periodic, comes and is gone after a very short time as you don't take it serious or suppress it or... then there is a time that it becomes a constant part of your obsessions. I was ashamed of myself. This made me look for a place that doesn't give me anxiety for something that I can't change.'

Farid, 27 and student of Persian literature also described similar experiences:

'When I feel worried about anything I try to find someone to talk to, my mom or a friend. When I got the feeling that I have undeniable desire for other boys I didn't know where to go, although none of them had directly talked about such issue, I knew that I can't go to them even though I had done nothing wrong. But I was lucky enough to find my friends and discuss all my problems with them.'

Not only my homosexual participants were aware of their need to find a place to take refuge in, one heterosexual subject whom I met in a café was also surprisingly supportive of providing a space for interactions among gays. He was a married man of 49 years old with a high school degree, never been abroad and owner of one of the cafes where homosexuals have recently been

gathering while most of the café's client have slight knowledge of their sexuality without any conflicts so far. When I asked Amu (uncle) Hossein about the reason behind allowing gays to enjoy the café as a *Patogh* (hangout), he said:

"Many people come here, after a time some of them feel comfortable here and then come more often. They are mostly university students or artists, poets or so. People come to know each other through their interactions here. Each one of my clients are unique in their rights, but they share something, they come here to spend some time away from the intensity of city life, to spend some time with friends and spit out their thoughts. I know gays come here too, many of them, but here we do not label people with what they do, study or think! Those who you call gay don't come here as mere gays, but as people who want to have some quality time with those who understand them no matter what the topic of discussion is." (As a side note I should add here, unfortunately I couldn't talk more with him, but from this quote and few other words that he told me I could interpret that a homosexual is welcomed in the café same as other clients as long he doesn't represent himself as an individual whose identity and presence is solely and conspicuously recognized based on his sexuality. However, as far as I could observe, for most of my homosexual participants their sexuality was the merging point that drew them together in the group gatherings.)

All gays, whom I met, had negative memories of rejection and shame that stemmed from the Iranian social context which imposes and requires heterosexuality. Sooner or later, in order to evade such feelings they tried to find a solution and help with recourse to a phenomenon, namely the Internet and blogging in next years, which was new in Iran during early 2000s and had yet to find its place among Iranian youth.

Before proceeding to how such transition from seeking refuge in the real world to cyberspace took place, I must explain the reasons of homosexual subjects' rejection by their families and society in general and among Iranians in particular. Since identities are constructed within discourses and emerge as result of specific power negotiations that produce differences and exclusions (Foucault, 1979), here it is important to analyze them as produced in specific institutional and historical discursive practices.

Iran is a country with a rigidly patriarchal culture (Khosravi, 2009). Masculinity is the dominant discourse that defines and controls all interactions, empowering men as phallic owners over any non-masculine figure in both public and private spaces. All men by their late twenties are supposed to marry a girl in order to uphold the traditions and continue discursive reproduction of social structures through procreation. Iranian culture defines nuclear family as an institution including at least one man and one woman who are related to each other through marriage. There

can also be other members who are related to a family through consanguineous ties (Behnam, 1977). This definition is also compatible with western concepts of nuclear family defined by sociologist such as Giddens (2006) and Cohen (1989).

Insistence on presence of man/father and woman/mother in all readings of family reminds us of the dualistic approach to study social institutions employed by structuralists (Butler, 2002), namely Levi-Strauss's presumption of the dualistic structure of man-woman as vital for an institution to be recognized as family. Similar claims are also addressed by Lacanians (Dor 1998; Héri-tier, 1995) who raise the duality of mother-father morphology as culturally natural for its symbolic order on the one hand and essential for identity formation of the subject on the other hand. Analyzing the subject formation through Lacanian readings we see that language is a constitutive factor in creation of the subject which is split exactly because of the nature of the language that functions based on *Diffe'rance*, on oppositions. The child has to leave the Real order, where opposition and inconsistency are absent, to enter the Imaginary order and that of the Symbolic. The child is initially brought in through the mirror image in the Imaginary Order, but in order to become a subject, it needs entrance into the Symbolic Order (Žižek, 1991). Therefore, it is claimed that a subject is constituted as soon as the child develops the ability of recognizing symbolic order and language system.

This heterosexual symbolic order engenders the subjects and assigns them to positions that have been defined through fallacious concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. Thus, by taking culture as a whole that requires reproduction of heterosexual subjects in order to perpetuate, and Oedipus drama as a precondition of language and cultural intelligibility, Lacanians assert that while the child becomes able to distinguish linguistic and cultural signs, he will adopt his gender role by interacting with parents who are already positioned as prohibited sexual objects (Butler, 2002). Since entrance into the Symbolic Order the child, who is alienated from itself and the Other, gains a certain degree of positionality, but at the same time it is subjected to the law, to language and consequently the Symbolic Order is 'imposed' upon the child (Žižek, 1991).

Accordingly the boy will become a boy to the extent that he credits the inaccessibility of mother figure and the need for a woman to substitute for her and then he moves toward identification with his father figure. Subsequently the girl will become a girl to the extent that she recognizes the inaccessibility of mother, but tries to compensate this loss through identification with her, and then she comes to know that she cannot have her father and has to substitute a man for him (Culler, 2003). This will in turn foreclose any possibility of assuming gender role or sexuality out

of heterosexual definitions since it's the only way of constituting the subject into society even if mother or father is not present (Zakin, 2011).

Hence, homosexuality and homosexual subjects who do not fit in such heteronormative and homophobic classificatory system (Woodward, 2001) due to their gender role "abnormality" are rejected altogether. Although this heterosexist discourse is presently the dominant discourse in the region and a stronghold for the states, some recent theorists have challenged it by questioning the cultural constructions of sex, gender and oedipal stage.

Various scholars (Butler, 1993; Riley, 1988; McNay, 2000) have suggested post-structural analyses that regard the traditional sexual binary as a semiotic structure formed in order to solidify and ensure masculinity, heterosexuality and the wider structure of patriarchy. Such constructions function to normalize the dominant (hetero)sexualities while, conversely, "pathologizing the domain of abject beings" (Butler, 1993). Thus, put more broadly, "classifications of sex, sexual orientation fix bodies, subjectivities and identities in socially constructed categories, which, in turn, form the basis of stratification, social regulation and control" (Green, 2010).

A different reading of the Oedipus tragedy would reveal that the protagonist first kills his father and then marries his mother, both done out of ignorance. Taking this into consideration, it is suggested that the subject in pre-oedipal stage has homosexual desire, but he must renounce it in order to attain the heterosexual gender role during the oedipal stage. Therefore the subject must let the object of homosexual desire go in order to be able to identify with mother or father to accomplish the heterosexuality in the next stage, but at the same time this letting go does not mean a termination of the homosexual attachment since ego is formed through a *melancholic identification*⁶ with the homosexual object of desire (Clewell, 2004).

The subject gives up the object to the external world and internalizes it as a part of the ego at the same time, thus foreclosing any possibility of homosexuality and pushing toward gender identification (Clewell, 2004). While subjects must renounce their homosexual desire to be able to crave for objects of the opposite sex, "masculinity and femininity emerge at a cost of such ungrrieved loss" (Butler, 1997). Hence being a man means denying the femininity in order to be able to desire a feminine object, not a man and accordingly, being masculine is to sacrifice the desire for a man under the prohibition rules (Culler, 2003). Not following this gendering path, a homosexual subject, who fails the heterosexually active and penetrative masculinity and

⁶ Later on we will see that this melancholic identification plays central role in initiating and developing new identities among Iranian gays.

destabilizes heterosexual gender roles, becomes the target of “condemnation from creeds of heterosexuality that try to preclude the threats to its fragile constructions” (Weeks, 1991).

The above mentioned discourse⁷ of subject formation and rejection of specific subjects as a result of its inherent heterosexism has been disseminated in the Middle East, including Iran, during Colonisation (Massad, 2002). As a deduction, besides numerous sociopolitical episodes that were taking place, Iran’s history has seen a transformative period during which homosexuality and its representations were erased from the country’s public and private landscapes. Analyzing Persian classical works of art, Najmabadi (2005) argues that till the nineteenth century *Qajar* administration, gender and sexuality were not framed as a mere duality of male-female construction and other categories were also recognized among Iranians. For instance there are abundant allusions to *amrad* (beautiful male youth who is object of male desire and is also mentioned in *Quran* as *Gholam*) and *mukhanathun* or the effeminates (Rowson, 1991) in Persian classic poetry and paintings. Although homosexuality and homoeroticism were accepted and acknowledged, the project of modernity in Iran abolished them along with many other cultural traits in order to achieve a western model of development.

By the time Europeans arrived in Iran, they hastily misinterpreted and disgraced the male homosociality and female domesticity as homoeroticism, which was already cast down in Europe. Iranian modernists, who saw Europe as the superior world that was to be imitated, tried to eliminate any form of homoeroticism from the public space and social interactions. Since homosociality was blamed for presence of homosexuality, particularly among men, they planned to bring women into the public space by unveiling them and including them into the educational system (Kashani-sabet, 2005).

In addition to this, discourse on marriage was also changed from one with a procreative goal to one that is based on love and romance. Consequently, women, who had entered the public space and assumed an agency in marriage, required their male kin to desexualize their previous male homosociality and pushed the *amrad* back into the closet (Afary, 2009). Simultaneously, modernists, who also imagined Europe as a feminine charmer, transformed the concept of beauty from the male-related and *amrad* to unveiled women by depicting them as objects of desire in contemporary works of art and literature. Following this feminization of male objects of desire,

⁷ The combination of heterosexism and religion in the Middle East and Iran (specifically after Islamic Revolution) requires further research since both factors have been found to be conducive to homophobia (Siraj, 2009; Rayside & Wilcox, 2011; Flowers & Buston, 2001)

female passivity was fused with homosexuality and homosexuals⁸, rendering them inferior to the heterosexual dominant male. Henceforth, *amrad* and homosexuality were veiled, excluded from both the public space and literature, and defined as deplorable figures and practices.

Compatible with this structuralist construction of sexuality, Islamic Republic has reintensified such discourse by employing a Universalist religious discourse of sexuality while prioritizing family and collective values. Therefore gender and sexual identities are formed according to “hegemonic masculinities” that are built through historical and cultural discourses.

Such discursive practices have provided new definitions of sexuality and gender, but at the same time have removed the subject position of the homosexual subject. These new sets of sexual and gender ideologies regulate new cultural and symbolic representation systems for the emergent identities while marking the previously unmarked *amrad* as outsider. The western and religious representations of gender and sexual identity formation that are based on marking differences through dual oppositions have become deeply embedded in Iranian culture and have invoked more social inequalities (Woodward, 2011).

Before entering the field and starting the interviews in Iran with my participants I had read a few articles about my topic and I realized that as an educated Iranian I had no knowledge of the word *amrad* despite the fact that I had a fair knowledge of the Persian literature. With this in mind I asked all my participants the same question: Do you know anything about the term *amrad*? What does it mean? How do you feel about it?

Peyman, a civil engineering graduate student said:

“I’m not sure! I am even not sure about the way you are pronouncing it, shouldn’t it be amard?! Anyways, I guess it used be term to address the emasculated man probably. I haven’t used it before and haven’t heard anyone use it!”

Mehrdad, 20 and student of biology replied:

“Wasn’t this word used to call the male prostitutes in the old times Iran?! If such thing existed at all! I assume I have seen this word somewhere in a text, but I don’t see it as a typically meaningful word that I might ever use”

During the course of my fieldwork I faced many similar answers and none of my homosexual or heterosexual interviewees had a clear notion of who was/is *amrad*. Iranian elites’ homophobic project of modernization and Islamic Republic’s religious discourses have successfully associated the meaning of *amrad* as subject position with culturally inferior symbolic representations to the

⁸ Although we should not forget the masculine aspects of the gay identity, this historical discourse explains why in Iranian context homosexual and same-sex intercourse are perceived via concepts of femininity and passivity.

extent that this signified subject has been forgotten and buried. Up to this time homosexuals who have felt the necessity of forming new significations in the process of identity formation have only traced their historico-cultural precedents back to pre-revolution era and have neglected older symbols.⁹

⁹ After all this point, as a criticism, will be valid and legitimate only if the homosexual subjects see a gap in their process of identity formation that could be filled through some excavations and resurgence of historical agents.

Chapter IV

Avoid social structure; move to cyberspace¹⁰

As I mentioned earlier a sense of guilt and shame was prevalent among my participants during their adolescent years since desiring a male means being, or partially having, feminine characteristics which is a sign of failing gender roles and proof of an inability to attain the social ideal of a male. While the subject is experiencing an internal conflict between the ego's inclinations and the super-ego's oppressive dictates, he is constantly reminded of his masculinity and inappropriate behaviors by other individuals who are responsible agents for maintaining the cohesiveness of society and retaining the patriarchal surveillance of the government (Khosravi, 2009). Iranians who grow up in a rigidly patriarchal culture and have been living in socioeconomically unstable conditions tend to support what seems familiar to them, the culturally and religiously approved, and reject or condemn new concepts and lifestyles, the culturally and religiously disapproved. (Adamczyk, & Pitt, 2009).

'Age, time or place doesn't matter, at the moment that they (heterosexuals) see a behavior that is not appropriate for a boy; they scold it, taunt it and humiliate it. I have heard many times, especially from my own father calling me effeminate, sissy, mama's boy and... all of them are insulting and used to hurt me.' (Mahmood is currently applying for PhD programs in Canada)

"I can give many examples of times that I have been mocked. It never becomes unpainful. I think it happens to everyone, even I do it, I laugh at others when their behaviour is not socially accepted. This has become part of us, to remind each other of what to do, but for gays it is thousand times harder. We are different... specially boys and men are hyperbolically doing this... the mockery is everywhere so even when nobody is around and I do something that I am not supposed to, like dancing which is feminine in my case or moving my hands in certain way, I feel bad. I have learnt to watch myself and I know that most of my friends are the same as me!" (Omid, one of my main interviewees, is 27 and a shopkeeper in central Tehran)

Nakhoonet nashkane! (be careful not to break your nails), *alangoohat nashkane!* (be careful not to break your bracelet), *oof nashi!* (don't hurt yourself) are few of the slangs used by family members and friends to address boys when they show any weakness or effeminate behavior.

¹⁰ Iranian gays came to know the web tools during early 2000s. This accounts for a swell in making friends and forming groups. It is still an extant dynamic among gays along with the meetings organized in real world which bring in many gays who are not active in cyberspace. The general increase in using online services among Iranians is also influential in widespread use of web tools among Iranian gays.

Slang used by a stranger in the same situation would be far more derogatory and sexually explicit; *kooni* (faggot) is the most common term alluding to a weak, corrupt and sexually passive man. All of these regulatory terms, exclusively used by men, share the concept of considering the male subject fully or partially feminine and inferior to a masculine man and aim to recondition those erroneous behaviors.

Being the addressees of tyrannical reactions from the public and facing a conflict from within, homosexual subjects have become conscious of the rigid structure of society and limited patterns of its discourse and parole, in and through which they can't express themselves anymore. They see a discrepancy between what they desire and the ruthless control of the expression of this desire through domineering heterosexual discourse which designates a series of disparate objects to it according to the accepted cultural norms (Marddent, 2007). As long as the subject is unconscious of the fact that the superego is dictating its orders to his identity, he continues to suppress his desire to attain the social ideal, the masculine heterosexual (Salih, 2002), but when, during puberty, the subject becomes conscious of the discrepancy and his melancholic gender identification, he gradually starts to refute the orders, drive his feelings of guilt and anxiety outward by "killing off" the super-ego (Bhabha, cited in Culler, 2003) and providing the 'self' with a new context of experience. Thus feelings and questions that were ignored or repressed so far, find an outlet and this is the time that Iranian homosexuals primarily retreat to cyberspace as the alternative ordering to patriarchal structure of society.

During the early 2000s there were two social media services widely used by Iranian homosexuals: weblogs and chat rooms. When I inquired about their experiences of the early times of using the web as a medium of developing contacts *Nima*, who has been managing different weblogs for more than six years, told me:

'I remember about 10 years ago (around 2002); I was looking for answers to my questions about what I was experiencing. I read many English sites, but it was not a big help for me. Then I found some weblogs written in Farsi by Iranians. I was elated to know there are other people similar to me as what they were sharing in their weblogs was quite similar to my life...'

In response to the motive for writing weblogs, he continued:

'It was, and still is, one the best ways to release the anxiety. In the beginning I only used to read, but then decided to have my own weblog. I wanted to be there, among them... It gives you the real feeling of doing something, feeling of being active...'

I also read the (archives and) content of some weblogs to learn about what has been important to the writers and readers and how the online space has been consumed and simultaneously produced. It was visible that there were different temporal waves of blogging during which a

number of bloggers would start sharing and writing about different topics and then leave this activity. Some of them would become online-blog friends and at times post some texts about other bloggers using their weblog or profile name. This way some bloggers would eventually meet in a real world place about which I will write in the next chapter.

The topics published were also diverse and covered anything from translation of lyrics or sexual educations, particularly in older weblogs, to discussing some philosophical theories. There were also some points when almost all the community of bloggers were converged and immersed in a common topic, be it a political issue or mere reactions to some current news.

Since these weblogs are explicitly published as a gay-weblog, most of them are created on non-Iranian servers in order to keep their domains protected. I was told that in the beginning and early years when blogging became popular they initially had started using Iranian servers such as blogfa.com, but all of them were removed from the server after a while. Among the non-Iranian servers blogspot.com and wordpress.com were exclusively the hosting servers, but working on these sites has not been convenient either.

“You know that we have a very strong and vicious filtering system here. They filter out anything that includes some determined key words. This was the old style, I mean they used to filter a site or a blog by checking its content, but 3 years ago (around 2010) they first started filtering all our weblogs! It was easy for them! If someone finds one our weblogs then in a second you will find other weblogs too! Because we interlink any weblog that we read and know! But again after the political unrest of the presidential election they filtered both blogspot and wordpress altogether! Now everything is filtered no matter what you write about!” (Shahin, 29 is a language teacher in Tehran and has been my friend for some years now)

Saeed who has experienced blogging for a few months also added:

“That’s true what Shahin says! We had to repeatedly change our domains and make a new address; it was like moving from one home to another and knowing that you have to move soon. I, personally, gave up on blogging because of this! Because it is frustrating... [but] there will always be some people who are more insisting or some new and fresh people who want to experience it. I have my friends here now and it satisfies me to share my time and thoughts with them when I see them...”

In addition to weblogs, Yahoo chat rooms, which are currently closed down, were among the most popular ways of searching and communicating with other gays. I had used yahoo messenger during my high school years as it was the most popular tool among Iranian youths during those years, but after my interviews I could see that those chat rooms had played a crucial role in

bringing those homosexuals who had initially started using them as a medium of satisfying their sexual needs.

“I heard about Yahoo, or basically the internet, from my friends at high school. For most of them it was to have fun, to chat with girls when they couldn’t meet up in public places conveniently during those years. Some people were trying to talk to people from other countries, some were practically wasting their time there. But for me it was to fulfill my curiosities away from everyday suppressions, you know, I wanted to see and do the things that ...” (Masood, 25, architect)

Mahan who is 23 now, said he used to chat on-line almost every day; he has made friends and a family online:

‘I was 15 when I first found the LGBT room incidentally in Yahoo. The first few months I was just trying to see what is happening there, but then I joined the on-line talks, enjoyed my time there because I wasn’t worried to be girlish, I could be anyone I wanted. We looked at it as our world, a place where we could do things that are impossible in the real world.’

None of my interviewees could tell me about how such rooms for Iranian homosexuals had come into being at first place due to their age range, but it was readable from my data that these chat rooms had opened a space for LGBT people to virtually assemble and talk without the sense of being watched, being under surveillance. Online space for my homosexual participants meant a space immune from any hegemonic gender structure, masculinity or femininity although not totally devoid of such practices since all those who create virtual profiles (unconsciously) attach their real experiences of shame, complexes and prejudices to it. In the final stages of talking about blogs and chat rooms Bahman, graduate student human resource management, reminded me that:

“Internet gave us a degree of freedom. When I was chatting I was not worried about what would my mom, dad or friends think of me because no one knows who is behind the Yahoo profile, but still it is not limitless freedom! No! The sense of virtual freedom is different from real freedom, the feelings that I have when I sit with my friends here and I know I can be myself not a scant profile...”

In their everyday life, homosexual subjects have to painstakingly manage their settings (Goffman, 1956) and play their hetero-defined identities, but Yahoo chat rooms used to be the space in which social norms no longer dominated and there was no concern over falling out of character or being ‘girlish’. Weblogs, at a higher level, are the sites of literarily writing and practicing new social discourses and changing the social perceptions about being ‘active’. These “queer subjectivities” (Shakhsari, 2012), who are produced and reproduced through social media, use blogging to practice a new form of power exercise and compensate for their withheld social prestige.

Chapter V

Return to social structure; Gay kinships ¹¹

Weblogs and chat rooms are not only to satisfy sexual desires and make *doost-e interneti* (on-line friends), but to open the way to make friendships in a society where there is no gay scene in terms of bars, clubs or cafes¹². Blogs and the Internet, in general, are still one of the ways through which gays find each other, but due to the expansion of friendship networks in the ‘real world’, finding and meeting other gays via such networks has also become a common practice at the present time.

Usually, after a long time of knowing each other as on-line friends, gays set times to meet, either as (sex)friends or dates with a potential future. *Mahan* continued his comment on on-line dating: *‘Yahoo was our only way, MJ (Manjam) or FB (Facebook) have become popular very recently, mostly with the new generation. I used to sit behind my computer for hours, talk, share ideas and see what the other guy thinks, develop a sense of trust, although anyone could be a cop pretending to be gay so that they could get us, and then there was a date, start of friendship or more...’*

Mehdi, 29, also commented:

“If internet and yahoo was not there I am not sure if gays could ever find each other! But I am sure that it would take years to do so because here in Iran we don’t have communities to support us or even parties for gays! I can always go to parties or cafes to meet with other girls, you know what I mean, but I can not look for boys there! So I am happy that we had our LGBT rooms there by then and now we have each other here”

The transition from a societal structure to cyberspace, a transition from doubting the social reality to distancing from it, turns back to the same social structure while subjects have developed a sense of agency and consciousness to redefine their social identities. Although most of the initial and general friendship interactions occur in the public spaces of parks or cafes, more intimate relationships are actuated in the private spaces since the islamization of the public space in post

¹¹ Gay fictive families are out of gay scene by now and have given their place to more casual friendship groups in the city. In order to collect data about it, I had to rely on the memories of my interlocutors which fortunately are quite fresh since the families were around almost until 2011.

¹² Although it might be perceived that online communities stem from real world gatherings, in Iran this was the other way round since there is no public scene to gather, know other insiders and develop online-networks.

revolutionary Iran, as retaliation against the modernist project of the Pahlavi, has refuted any form of suggestive social interaction. Avoiding the oppressive state control and driven by fear of upsetting heterosexual conventional expectations, homosexual subjects moved their gatherings to *khoone khali* (empty house). In contrast to heterosexuals who have also moved back to the private space and enjoy the malleable supervision of families, homosexuals see themselves deprived of such a space. As *Ali*, a student in master of political sciences put it:

'That's true that we gather together, but how? My sister is always inviting her friends over, boys and girls, but I can't. I mean if I want to invite them while my parents or siblings are home, still we have to continue playing roles of macho hetero boys'

As many of them believed, even having a limited access to a private space devoid of out-groups and dissociated from the repressive system was a turning point for homosexuals to diffuse the experience of doubting and resisting social realities, affording an interruption in super-ego's dictates and a positive redefinition of identities in yet-to-be-formed fictive gay kinship.

'At first it was only simple gatherings and small parties, but then the relationships got closer and intimate. Sometimes I wanted time to stop; I wanted to live like that. I think everyone had that feeling; it was as if we, gays, were related to each other in a sense more than friendship. It started as humor, but turned out to be favored by almost everyone, our fictive family was my second family' (Arash, is 30 and used to be a 'mother' in his fictive family, now he has a partner whom he met in one family gathering)

Rejected from the heterosexual order, homosexual subjects created a family structure within the same structure as a form of a social organization and a new element of culture based on the consciousness of their differences and commonalities.

The melancholic identification that prevails homosexuals' lives from the moment of subjectification through cultural structures has an irrefutable outcome for their identity formation. I mentioned earlier that in order to attain the social ideal, the femininity and masculinity in the heterosexually bound structure the subject has to give up the object of homosexual love, but at the same time internalize it as a part of the ego. The heterosexual structure bans any possibility of mourning over such loss and so the subjects fulfill their gender roles. The question here is what if there is a space to mourn?

The feelings of guilt and shame that arise from being feminine or in other words, desiring a masculine object of love among gays are, as Freud (1917) put it, the defence mechanisms against admitting and mourning the loss of the beloved. However, once the subject becomes conscious of the damage and faces the guilt and mourns over the loss, he can utilize the symbols to defend the love. The gay families, secluded from the heterosexual social structure, are the space in which, in

presence of non-judgmental others, the consciousness raises and the subject is reborn (Sayers, 2010).

Interpreting homosexuality as a code of connecting self with other (Lewin, 1993), they symbolically constructed a fictive family to reinstitute their relationships, negotiate, reproduce and inform their experience of identity formation. This fictive kinship's structure was similar to its heterosexual variant and different from it at the same time.

There was an individual who fulfilled the role of the head of the family and other members were positioned in roles around him and in relation to other members. But the difference was the absence of any masculine term, thus absence of any masculine role, meaning that all homosexual subjects within this kinship group were addressed by terms that in the heterosexual order are limited to females. The head of the family was usually an aunt or a mother and the other members were addressed in the same manner. As far as I could inspect—terminologies, all feminine appellations were used while their cultural connotations were directly derived from heterosexual applications of those terms. For example in Iranian culture, *Havu* (husband's other wife) and *Jari* (husband's brother's wife) are usually interpreted as the unfriendly wives, thus *Havu* or *Jari* were used to address two members who could not get along well. *Madar* (mother) was for the guy who supported others, *Khale* (aunt, mother's sister) for the passionate members, *Amme* (aunt, father's sister) was used to call the person who kindly wanted to control and order, *Dokhtar* (daughter) for the young and innocent and *Khahar* (sister) for those who were constantly talking together and chattering.

'When I joined the family, there were many other people there. It was a big step for me to go from a patriarchal culture to a setting where instead of calling each other as 'guys' we shouted out "hey girl!" at first I was a bit defensive against such behaviors and it took me a long time to loosen up and give up watching myself and my behaviors. Spending time with them, I gained the courage to see myself and accept it.' (Omid told me this during a meeting in café in center of Tehran)

"When I was a little boy I was allowed to do what I wanted, I mean to play with girls or imitate them, although not too much! But when I grew up everything was different. Part of the fun that we had together in family gathering was to call each other sister, make fun about what women do and imitate their behaviours! It was not me, but those behaviours are part of me!"(Farid)

"The best part of the family, and also our friendships now, is that I could trust everyone and try to feel free. This is because I know that we are the same, at least we share some characteristics. This gives me a sense of safety, I feel like there are other people like me." (Arash)

Formed based on a mutual structure of consciousness, they were more focused on in-group activities, among which renaming subjects to feminine roles was conspicuous. Participation in group activities, including the subconscious negotiation of meanings and gender roles through repositioning subjects, helped them to adopt newly constructed self-meanings and group expectations related to their roles for later possible performances in a different context. Such symbolic repositioning of subjects disrupts the apparent stability of the classified world through manipulation of its morphological components or roles (Stets & Burke, 2000) and allows us to anticipate a moment to bring about change into the whole structure of society.

What follows the exclusive self-categorization within a gay family is an emphasis on differences and similarities in attitudes, beliefs and values, styles of speech and behavior through common evaluation of these variables in fictive families and gay friendship groups as “speech communities” who exercise their newly gained sense of power over the limits of dominant parole (Jodie, 2012). Conscious of the difference between a sign and what it signifies, they interpret the meanings differently in order to transfer and connect the signifier to the signified and lift the limits of signification.

When Iranian homosexuals found themselves in a society where there is discrepancy between their desire and cultural moralities, where their identity formation is left incomplete, where the signifiers are different from the signified, they made the fictive kinship as a chain of comparable signifiers to acquire new meanings through placing the ‘self’ in relation to a different ‘other’ with signifiers which provide a sense of similarity. By removing the masculine figure and its terminology from kinship relations, homosexuals avowed the denied femininity without the sense of terror of being berated to feminine or of failing the masculine roles. Through participation in the project of creating variation, they have become intersubjective beings who have moved toward identity completion by sharing intentionality, similar psychological status and diffused experiences (Sahlins, 2011). By creating specific subject positions through counter-discursive practices and relying on symbolic system of language (Woodward, 2001) they excluded the masculine and managed to stabilize the feminine aspect of their identity.

This avowal of femininity is also a recurring theme in recent friendship groups which have become widespread among gays owing to the chat-rooms and the bygone gay families that proved contacting other gays in the ‘real world’ is not a farfetched practice.

Chapter VI

Problem of effeminacy

Subjects in this emasculated “third space” have managed to question the formerly accepted denial of femininity in a masculine figure, redefine it and acknowledge it as an idiosyncrasy while going through a consciousness-promoting experience within their supportive group. In such a process, what follows is to evaluate this sense of self in the broader structure of society by interacting with out-group members and renegotiating the newly defined social roles and identities (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

Although fictive kinships and their succeeding friendship groups have apparently been successful in celebrating femininity, the integration of this peculiar identity aspect into social language and meta-discourse has confronted the opposition and rejection at different levels. It is refuted by sociocultural discourse, male and female agents and other homosexuals, all pivoted on the undisputed hostility toward femininity.

Looking at Iranians’ position *vis-à-vis* femininity of a male subject, hostility and condemnatory attitudes toward such manners and styles come to fore immediately. Iranian heterosexual agents not only reject effeminacy, but are constantly monitoring gender conducts to protect their sense of patriotism that is tied to a gendered personification of nation and homeland. The removal of the homosexual subject was not the only outcome of modernizing Iran. While notions of beauty and its representations were transformed from *amrad* to female subjects, other concepts including the Iranian nation and Iran as a homeland were also gendered (Najmabadi, 2005). The Iranian patriarchal nation was reconfigured in the form of a courageous male who fights for and dies to protect the homeland while at the same time his homeland was gendered as his feminine beloved, symbolizing a young woman.

Such discourse was reintensified during the years of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war by depicting men as masculine *rafiq* (compatriot) (Gerami, 2003) among leftists and *baradar-e razmandeh* (soldier brother) (Moallem, 2005) among Islamists group, both sharing the idea of guardianship over *vatan* (country) (Najmabadi, 2005) and *namus* (honor, mainly representing and referring to a female subject) (Sadeghi, 2008). Women, who were revealed by now as a part of the retaliation against Pahlavi’s depraved orientations, had also to integrate into leftists as asexualized compatriots by taking subject positions that were defined in relation to men and accepting their defeminizing dress codes and as modestly veiled *khahar* (sister) into Islamists,

both groups aiming to defeminize the public and private spaces and the interactions among individuals.

In such heterosexist social setting where identities are formed through political, religious and patriotic discourses, any feminine trait observed in a male subject, regardless of his sexuality, is an indication of failing the guardianship identity, which in turn makes him the target of social repulsion and marked as the different and outsider.

Apart from the cultural hostility against the femininity of the male, Iranian men and women have their own gender specific reasons to shun effeminacy. In order to grasp the main reasons behind the femiphobic attitudes of Iranian heterosexuals, I talked to some friends, both in group discussions and individual chats, about *mard-e latif* or *zanoone* (softie)¹³ who may not necessarily be gay. In group discussions both groups expressed strong feelings of disgust, while in more individual talks it expressed itself as a sense of danger and frustration for men and women accordingly.

Once I talked to my ex-classmates Morteza and Majid, who are working in educational centres now, about their impressions of feminine demeanors in men:

“I seriously don’t like it, man should be a man! Behave like a man! Have you seen these boys who imitate girls? It’s like nowadays it’s fashionable for them to be like that, then what’s their difference with girls? I don’t want to use the K word¹⁴, but their girlish behavior says nothing but that.”

Majid has lived in the Netherlands for four years and for him a soft man equals a gay. He used humiliating language to talk about “softies” as a way to show his dominant position while among friends. But later that day he said:

‘I have lived in Europe; I have come into contact with them. Now I don’t have problem with gays, but I prefer them not to be around me because I don’t feel safe. I don’t know why, but when they are around me I feel threatened... although I know those softies cannot do anything to me’

Although there was no implication of sexuality, for Iranian men lacking the hypermasculinity is equivalent to be homosexual or be sexually subordinated and inferior to the traditional masculine men. At the thought of proximity to a subject who is of the same sex, but sexually in a weaker position, Iranian masculinity finds itself endangered considering that amalgamation with sexually inferior subjects questions the gender hierarchy. This mingling of masculinity and perceived

¹³ I purposefully decided to refer to subject of discussion as *zanoone*, instead of using Persian equivalent of homosexual (*hamjensgara* or *hamjensbaz*) since Iranians are not directly exposed to the idea and there is no definition for such identity.

¹⁴ The reader should be reminded that, as has been mentioned earlier, the derogatory term to address the feminine subject in Farsi is *Kooni* (faggot).

femininity, renders the Iranian hypermasculine image of the dominant heterosexual man vulnerable and metaphorically prone to penetration, as in the case of women. There may be many other reasons behind such homophobic behavior, but this anxiety over losing the image of an impermeable body and a superior position in gender hierarchy seems sufficient to isolate the effeminacy and gays as a consequence.

While disgust at femininity among men is to disguise the fear, among Iranian women it is to mask the frustration with the subject who is culturally defined as protector and guardian of *namus*. *Mona* who identifies herself as neither traditional nor western, said:

'When it's time for me to marry, or even work with other men, I prefer a man who is able to manage and support family and social life. If a man is a softie, then how he can survive in this society? I really don't like men who don't use their potentials.'

In contrast to Iranian men, women did not add any sexual traits to a "softie", but still they took effeminacy as weakness. In addition to a general frustration at femininity, I noticed two main themes emerging time and again during my conversations with women. First, they had unconsciously accepted that there is a necessity to rely on men on all grounds and second, they categorized all men, regardless of how masculine or feminine they are, in the same superior group to themselves.

Marjan, my cousin and graphic designer, said:

"Honestly, if see such behavior I won't say anything in their face, but it's really not good for a boy to be feminine..." When I asked her why she does not try to say anything, whether positive or negative, she continued *"I don't mean that I'm passive and don't make any reactions! Among ourselves, the girls, we talk about boys and how everybody behaves, if we are close to someone we may make a joke or something, but at the end of the day he is who he is, the boy!"*

I mentioned earlier that during the process of modernization women gained access to education, but this was not emancipatory for females and femininity since the educational system, through the use of course books, magazines and periodicals continued the making of generations of women who are meant to be responsible for the family as a mother and appendage to men as a wife (Kashani-sabet, 2005). Even though this national movement claimed to pursue a secular approach, it cultivated similar sets of instructions represented by Shi'a Islam where a Muslim woman is supposed to identify with and follow *Fatimah*, the submissive daughter of *Muhammad*, and *Zeynab*, the supportive daughter of *Fatimah*, both of whom symbolize modesty and devotion to the family or mainly to the male kin.

Despite the fact that most of the third generation Iranian women neither identify with the image of a modernized woman nor with that of a religious one, they still continue to duplicate the same

patriotic pattern of womanhood due to their dependency on family values which are defined by men (Sadeghi, 2008). Unsurprisingly, since commencement of the modernization of Iran and after the Revolution there have been women who seek a way out of this masculine discourse to challenge its sexual hierarchy and claim their own agency, but even this attempt is dependent on masculine definitions since they do not have access to any well interpreted rendition of feminism adaptable to Iranian society. Therefore most of Iranian women who unconsciously perceive themselves afflicted with femininity are trying to evade such attributions, but are concurrently endeavoring to attain the masculine values.

Here it is important to see how hegemonizing sets of gender attributes within a heterosexist structure intrigues femiphobia and in consequence homophobia. If I may call the hegemonic masculinities that define other sexual subject positions as the 'fashion' of the society, then George Simmel's (1957) definition of fashion and shame would be helpful in recognizing the homophobic bases. For him, in order to avoid isolation and loss of pride people will conform to the norms and behaviors of their group in the society. In other words, people will conform to the fashion, follow the fashionable ones and distance from those who are different in order to avoid shame. Therefore as Lewis (1971) has claimed shame is seen as the physical and mental response to the threat of being disconnected from the majority.

This not only circumscribes gay identity formation, but also influences the behaviors of those who feel threatened by homosexuals or same-sex intercourse. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, gays feel that they have failed to act the social ideal and then feel the sense of guilt because of this failure (Tangney et al., 1992). Shame also plays a role by forcing them to hide their femininity from the heterosexist structure as it infuses the shame. On the other hand, for heterosexuals, who produce and follow the fashionable masculinities, any possibility of mixing with the different who is the inferior feminine means being exposed as the undesirable in the eyes of others. This is directly linked to instigating shame, but their response is different. Being posited in unequal power positions, gays choose to hide from the context, but the heterosexuals, who have to uphold the symbolic structure, demonstrate anger (Miller, 1996) in form of dispassion, evasion, blame, threat and in more aggressive forms as rage and bullying, all of which are observed in phobic manners.

Thus shame, which stems from the hegemonic cultural sexual values, has intricate association with femiphobic attitudes and homophobia in general in both homo and heterosexual subjects. Acknowledging this, the findings about shame and phobias will be helpful in dealing with hegemonic masculinities, heterosexism, femiphobia, homophobia and therefore identity formations (Allen & Oleson, 2008).

Chapter VII

Conclusion

The modernization of Iran aimed at bringing women into the public sphere, but failed to achieve its goal by forcing the governmental patriarchy into the public space and enlarging the gap between the private and public patriarchal roles of men. This was a major reason in the actuation of the Islamic Revolution to overthrow the Pahlavi and shape new hypermasculine and feminine-unfriendly political and religious discourses of identity formation.

Homosexuals and homosexual subjectivity, which are marginalized by both movements, have recently tried to gather in backstage communities and break with dominant traditions. Although Iranian gays have managed to participate in defining new meanings of 'self' in their private spaces, their newly developed social identity has not become salient due to the dominant heterosexist and homophobic discourses of arranging masculinities and femininities. These femiphobic attitudes are present not only in governmental and traditional discourses, but also among Iranian youths. Despite the fact that the young generation has engaged in sexual acts more freely than the past generation (Mahdavi, 2009) and gives claims for staging a sexual revolution, they are still experiencing male dominated sexual practices that subordinate feminine subjectivity of women and homosexuals (Sadeghi, 2008).

Regarding the aforementioned discussions and admitting the priority of masculinity among Iranian youth, one must consider the widening gap between their public expressions of gender identities and those imposed by the government and social traditions while the binary gender structures are in place. During recent years with progressive occupation of public space by young women and their pioneering role in exaggerated adoption of western fashions, young men have shaped and portrayed new masculinities in a form of a suave metrosexual who is extremely feminine compared to the previous *rafiq* or *baradar-e razmande* models. While in western countries homosexuals were the antecedents of modern metrosexuals (Simpson, 2005), the appearance of metrosexuals among Iranian men with their western styles of haircuts, clothing and feminine dispositions has the potential to provide the culture with new meanings of femininity that will function as new symbolic markers of identity formation. As identity is not a fixed entity, this may assist homosexuals negotiate and represent their identity in the public space while still remaining devoid of their sexuality.

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Appendix A

Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Chapter 2 - *Hadd* punishment for sodomy (*livat*)

Section 1 -Definition and reasons of *hadd* punishment for sodomy:

Article 108 –Sodomy (*livat*) is defined as sexual intercourse with a male, whether it takes place as penetration or *tafkhez* [rubbing penis between thighs].

Article 109 -Both the insertive and receptive parties of sodomy shall be sentenced to *hadd* punishment.

Article 110 -In the case of penetration, the *hadd* punishment for sodomy is the death penalty—the method for which is at the discretion of the judge.

Article 111 -Sodomy shall result in the death penalty provided that both the insertive and receptive parties are mature, sane and free.

Article 112 -If a mature man sodomizes a minor, the insertive party shall be sentenced to the death penalty; and the receptive party, if not coerced, shall receive up to seventy four lashes *asta'zir* punishment.

Article 113 -If a minor sodomises another minor, each shall receive up to seventy four lashes *asta'zir* punishment, unless, one of them was coerced to commit sodomy.

Section 2 -Procedure of proving sodomy in court

Article 114 –The *hadd* punishment for sodomy shall be determined when the accused confesses four times before the judge.

Article 115 –If the accused confesses less than four times, then it shall not result in *hadd* punishment, but he shall be sentenced to a *ta'zir* punishment.

Article 116 - Confession is valid provided that the confessor is mature, sane, free and intended [to make the confession].

Article 117 -The *hadd* punishment for sodomy shall be proved by the testimony of four just men who were eye-witnesses to the act.

Article 118 -Sodomy shall not be proved by the testimony of less than four just men and in this case [i.e. testimony of less than four just men] the witnesses shall be sentenced to *hadd* punishment for *qazf* [false accusation of sexual offences].

Article 119 -Testimony of women, whether alone or together with men, may not prove sodomy.

Article 120 -The judge can make his judgement according to his knowledge which is obtained through customary methods.

Article 121 -The *hadd* punishment for *tafkhez* [rubbing penis between thighs] committed by two men without penetration shall be one hundred lashes for each one.

Note -if the insertive party is a non-Muslim and the receptive party is a Muslim, the *hadd* punishment for the insertive party shall be the death penalty.

Article 122 -If *tafkhez* and the like is repeated three times and after each time the *hadd* punishment is executed, on the fourth occasion the *hadd* punishment shall be the death penalty.

Article 123 -If two men, who are not blood related, lay naked under the same cover without any necessity, each one shall be punished by up to 99 lashes as *ta'zir*.

Article 124 -If as a result of lust, a person kisses another person, he shall be punished by up to 60 lashes as *ta'zir*.

Article 125 -If a person who has committed sodomy or *tafkhez* and the like, repents prior to the testimony of witnesses, the *hadd* punishment shall be removed; but, if he repents after the testimony the *hadd* punishment shall not be removed.

Article 126 -If sodomy and *tafkhez* and the like are proved by the confession of the person, and he repents after confession, the judge may request his pardon from the Leader.

Chapter 3: *Musaheqeh* [sex between women]

Article 127 - *Musaheqeh* is sexual activity between women by their genitals.

Article 128 -The procedure for proving *musaheqeh* is the same as that for sodomy.

Article 129 -The *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh* is one hundred lashes for each party.

Article 130 -The *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh* shall be given to a person who is mature, sane, free and intended [to commit the crime].

Note -Regarding the *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh*, there is no difference between the active or passive parties or between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Article 131 -If *musaheqeh* is repeated three times and after each time the *hadd* punishment is implemented, the *hadd* punishment on the fourth occasion shall be the death penalty.

Article 132 -If the person that committed *musaheqeh* repents prior to the testimony of the witnesses the *hadd* punishment shall be removed; but, if the confession is made after the testimony, the *hadd* punishment shall not be removed.

Article 133 -If *musaheqeh* is proved by confession of the actor and she repents after the confession, the judge may request her pardon from the Leader.

Article 134 -If two women, who are not blood related, lay naked under the same cover without any necessity, they shall be punished by less than one hundred lashes as *ta'zir*. If their act is repeated and after each time the *ta'zir* punishment is executed, on the fourth occasion they shall receive one hundred lashes.

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