



2018

Review of Exiled for Love: The Journey of an Iranian Queer Activist

Kathleen Dixon
University of North Dakota

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/eng-fac>

Recommended Citation

Kathleen Dixon. "Review of Exiled for Love: The Journey of an Iranian Queer Activist" (2018). *English Faculty Publications*. 1.
<https://commons.und.edu/eng-fac/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

Exiled for love: The journey of an Iranian queer activist, by Arsham Parsi and Marc Colbourne, Halifax and Winnipeg, Roseway Publishing, 2015, 230 pp., \$20.95, ISBN 1552667014

Arsham Parsi, a gay Iranian who was forced to flee his country in 2005, has teamed up with Marc Colbourne to write a memoir of his early life in Iran, later in Turkey, and finally in Canada, where he sought refuge as a persecuted minority through UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Entitled *Exiled for Love: The Journey of an Iranian Queer Activist*, the book was a finalist for the 2016 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Memoir/Biography. As the last few pages of the book report, Parsi is also the founder of the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees that assists other Iranians who find themselves forced, like Parsi, to flee their homes.

It should not be a surprise that Parsi's organization is a necessary one, and yet, it contains an historical irony. As Dror Ze'evi makes clear in his book, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*, homosexuality – the male version, at least – has been not only allowable but even a favored sexuality in both Persia and the Arab world in times past. "Heterosexuality was a matter of necessity, perhaps, but not lauded. Love was more frequently conceived as a homosocial or homosexual pursuit than a heteroerotic one, and in the sexual scheme women were marginalized" (Ze'evi, 2006, p. 7). Fast-forward to 2007, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that homosexuality did not exist in Iran. *The New York Times* subsequently quoted a gay man named Reza who reportedly said, "You can have a secret gay life as long as you don't become an activist and start demanding rights" (Fathi, 2007, p. 11). The US gay journal, *The Advocate*, paints a severer picture. Seven years after Ahmadinejad made his stunning announcement – when Hassan Rouhani became president – the LGBT community had hopes for some establishment of rights. Instead, the grim anti-homosexual codes remain in place: "Iranian Islamic law differentiates between passive and active sodomy convictions. A convicted passive partner faces the death penalty, whereas an active partner, if unmarried, may receive 100 lashes. A married active partner faces execution" (Weinthal 2014, p. 22). *The Advocate* also reports that one need not be an activist to be discovered by the government, as the Revolutionary Brigade attempts to find private house parties that invite LGBT people seeking companionship.

Parsi's memoir provides a personalized account of one young man's discovering his sexuality under such woeful conditions. The book is an easy read. Those who haltingly speak English as a second (or third or fourth) language might be able to navigate its prose well enough, as might readers as young as middle school. But this is not to warn off educated adults, whether scholars or professionals. Few of us know what is happening within Iran up close. Reading highly abbreviated and selective reports (as the one I have just quoted from *The New York Times*) cannot give a full enough account; nor can United Nations statistics. Stories like Parsi's are important in helping us to truly understand what persecuted people must endure, and how it is to live as LGBT within the specificity of one's unique culture.

That said, there is a recognizably generic Proppian structure to *Exiled for Love*. It begins in mythic wholeness, with Parsi's childhood in a relatively privileged family. The history and geography mark an equally privileged status.

"The city of Shiraz is located in the southwest corner of Iran and is the capital of Fars province. I have always considered it one of the most beautiful cities in Iran, and the memory of its beauty has only grown since I have been forced to live in exile. Shiraz is the economic centre of the area and boasts a rich cultural history. It was in this city of poets and gardens that I was born and lived most of my life." (p. 5)

The peace and joy of childhood begins to be disturbed as Parsi moves into adolescence. The teen years are often difficult for youth to negotiate, but in Parsi's case it is doubly so, since he is surprised by his non-normative sexuality. He first responds to a fellow student who touches his leg beneath their shared desk at school. Parsi experiences several similarly sly encounters until, in his late teens, he develops a relationship of sorts with another young man who seems accepting of their sexuality, but who intends on following the mainstream path of heterosexual marriage – with secretive love on the side. Parsi chooses otherwise.

By early adulthood, he is both a confirmed and devoted homosexual. He has learned to be wary, but nonetheless makes connections with others like him on the internet. He seeks out and hosts parties where gays can meet and socialize. Generally these go well and remain private, but when one of his parties is infiltrated, Parsi escapes. One of his friends is not so lucky. The friend is interrogated and tortured. His friend's arrest stands as a warning to Parsi, who learns that his activism – organizing an online LGBT group as well as a Yahoo chat – has made him a special target of the repression.

Thus, Parsi's beautiful city and blissful childhood are no more. The book takes on the qualities of a thriller as he makes his escape from Iran to Turkey, where he hopes to obtain refugee status. Turkey is nominally more accepting of gays, but just barely. Parsi is able to make contact with other homosexuals seeking refugee status, and they hole up together in a ramshackle apartment in a neighborhood rife with violence against their kind. At one point, they are set upon and beaten badly. It takes over a year for Parsi to be able to achieve the UNCHR interview that he needs; in the meantime, the young men are essentially hiding out, with funds in ever shorter supply.

The book makes it clear why Parsi has helped to found an organization to assist Iranians who are suffering in Iran or in transition in Turkey. He is the Director of the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees. For a decade, it has provided LGBT individuals with the information and funds they may need to exist while they await the determination of their status. The website claims that 83% of the almost 1,500 assisted by the Railroad have been ultimately relocated to safe countries. Unfortunately, since the Trump travel ban, the United States is currently not one of them. The stories of several LGBT Iranians appear on the website, two of which report their subjects living in limbo due to the ban.

An interesting feature of Iranian culture with regard to LGBT bigotry is the government's unusual stance toward the transgender. *The New York Times* article explains that homosexuals may be forced into reassignment surgery, as though they were actually transsexuals. Iran views homosexuals as deviants but trans persons as ill; the latter can be accepted if they agree to the "cure" of sex-reassignment (Fathi, 2007, p. 11). The Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees website includes two stories of trans women and one of a lesbian who refused the surgery prescribed for her. It appears that even those who consider themselves trans and are willing to undergo surgery still may not be accepted. This Iranian "fix" is horrendous for homosexuals and possibly a Catch-22 for trans people.

In his adoptive city of Toronto, Arsham Parsi is feted as a courageous and philanthropic man. He recently received an award for "Excellence in Human Rights" conferred upon him by the Toronto Pride organization. He serves the global community more broadly as a member of the International Lesbian and Gay Association that meets regularly in Brussels. In his activist work, Parsi seems to have made some progress in the restoration of his childhood

idyll. The creation of the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees is a hopeful enterprise. According to the website (the address for which is not provided in the book): “We have witnessed significant changes among the Iranian society in the last ten years, which confirms that it is achievable.”

Afsaneh Najmabadi, an Iranian scholar of gender and sexuality, also offers history as an opening for hope. “In Persian, for instance, the use of the word *jins* (meaning kind, species, as well as grammatical gender) for sex has a very recent origin.” It “seems to have come into Persian from translated books on ‘how to make your marriage happy’ and child pop psychology, and then from the late 1950s with psychology and psychoanalysis becoming popular, this usage became common” (Najmabadi, 2006, p. 13). In other words, the values on gender and sexuality that seem to have hardened into rigid doctrine in Revolutionary Iran may trace their origins to the West. Perhaps at some point in the future, there might be hope for a more Persian point of view.

References

- Fathi, N. (September 30, 2007). Despite president’s denials, gays insist they exist, if quietly, in Iran. *New York Times*, 11.
- Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees. Retrieved December 29, 2017 from www.irqr.net
- Najmabadi, A. (2006). Beyond the Americas: Are gender and sexuality useful categories of analysis? *Journal of Women’s History*, 18(1), 11–21.
- Weinthal, B. (2014). No Persian Thaw. *Advocate*, 1072(April/May), 22–23.
- Ze’evi, D. (2006). *Producing desire: Changing sexual discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*. Berkeley: U of California P.

Kathleen Dixon

University of North Dakota

 kathleen.dixon@email.und.edu

© 2018 Kathleen Dixon

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2018.1482696>

