

Gay Life Stories

Jón Ingvar Kjaran

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Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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For my parents, Ingunn Jónsdóttir and Snorri Páll Kjaran

PREFACE

Writing a book has often been compared to a journey, from the initial idea to the publication of the book. For me, this book started with an actual journey to Iran in 2014—a journey that, back then, I did not know where it would take me in the end. I became fascinated with Iranian culture and the hospitality of its people, and met, for the first time, gay Iranians, who then became my friends and main informants during my subsequent fieldtrips. Until then, I had never met any gay- or lesbian-identifying Iranians and had only read about their situation in the Western media, which usually depicted them as sexually oppressed victims of the “Islamic-fascist” state, who were in need of being saved by the liberal democracies of the West. Hence, during my first trip there, I encountered a different world of gay life than the one depicted in the Western “gay” media: It was neither a world full of fear and oppression nor optimal in terms of gay livability. It was somehow a world or a place “in between,” being constantly made and remade by its occupants—some kind of heterotopia in a Foucauldian sense. It was a place/space that was somehow “other,” a world within a world, hidden and underneath mainstream society. It was a world with many more layers than immediately met the eye.

That was exactly my experience. To begin with, there were many aspects of gay life in Iran that did not straight away meet the eye of the researcher—the gay outsider coming from the West. I therefore had to “dig” deep into this world and meet different people, in different places/spaces, to get a glimpse of the many layers of the Iranian gay community, and to try to understand what it means to live as a gay subject in the Islamic Republic of Iran. I was guided from the beginning with the following question:

How are Iranian gay males constituted as subjects in the Islamic Republic of Iran and how do they negotiate and navigate their lives within the limits of their cultural and social context? I gradually found out that there is no one answer to that question and therefore I present in this book different stories and versions of gay life in Iran; stories told by my friends and informants, who all identify as gay or non-heterosexual. Their stories and embodied experiences form the basis of the book and through them we gain insight into the livability of gay-identifying/non-heterosexual men in Iran. That being said, I do not claim to be giving a representative account of being gay or non-heterosexual in Iran. Rather, the book should be seen as presenting different aspects among many, in terms of gay livability in contemporary Iran. The main focus is predominantly on gay-identifying men living in Tehran, the capital of Iran.

Four years later, and after several fieldtrips to Tehran, I come to an end of my journey and present in a book the stories I was trusted with, told by my informants and friends. In Chap. 1, I give an overview of the main arguments of the book and its objectives. I also introduce the field and context of the research, as well as discuss my positionality and the ethical issues of conducting ethnographic research “underground.” Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical foundations, where I particularly draw on, and discuss the work of, Foucault and other post-structural theorists. Chapter 3 is co-written with my colleague and friend Wayne Martino. In Chap. 3, we engage with important historical sources and accounts that speak to the historical contingencies of the emergence of same-sex desire and the category of “the homosexual” in Iran. We incorporate into this account the political and social history of Iran from the latter part of the twentieth century until the present. Chapter 4 addresses the power of the pink press and how the Iranian gay subject is constructed through different discourses outside of Iran. Here I raise important political questions of misrepresentation in the reporting of the current situation of sexual minorities in Iran. In Chap. 5, I turn to ethical relationality and draw on the embodied experience of gay-identifying Iranian men. I take up a particular Foucauldian analysis and work mainly with Foucault’s ideas on the technologies or practices of the self. Throughout the chapter, I present empirical examples of how gay Iranian men constitute themselves, and how they are constituted by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. By providing different accounts of gay existence in Iran, the aim of the chapter is to juxtapose the one-dimensional liberationist discourse presented in the West of the victimized Iranian gay male, discussed in

Chap. 4. Chapter 6 focuses on gay/queer activism among Iranian gay men, living inside of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It discusses what it means to be a gay activist, drawing attention to the socio-cultural context and particular historicity. It draws on interviews with gay-identifying Iranian males that could be seen/defined as activists, not only fighting for sexual rights but also political rights in general. Chapter 7 draws on Foucauldian analytical frameworks, as well as on Judith Butler's writings on abjection, and addresses the intersection of sexuality, gender, and bodies in terms of HIV/AIDS. It explores how the discourse on HIV/AIDS has evolved within Iran and how those bodies, who live outside of what can be considered culturally intelligible in terms of seropositivity, sexuality, and gender, are constructed. Chapter 8 provides empirical insights into how gay/queer Iranian men navigate their lives between different spaces—social, virtual, and physical—in order to accommodate their gay identity and sexual desires within the legal-social and Islamic frame of modern Iran. By employing Foucauldian analytic frameworks that attend to questions of heterotopic spatiality, and in conjunction with Massey's notion of power geometries and how space is produced, I illuminate the complexity of queer Iranian men's spatio-temporal modes of sociality in relation to sexual practices and being gay/queer. The final chapter, Chap. 9, synthesizes my main arguments and discusses how we can go beyond the binary thought of utopia/dystopia, when addressing interpretive questions of quality of life and livability for gay-identifying men in a transnational context such as Iran.

In terms of language, the interviews were conducted either in English or in Farsi (Persian) with the help of a translator, often one of my main informants. Together we transcribed the interviews in Farsi, which were then translated into English. For Persian words and names, I have adopted a modified version of the transliteration system of *Encyclopedia Iranica* (e.g., I use the vowels o and e in addition to a, i, and u). I have omitted all diacritical marks except hamzeh or ain. For the spelling of commonly known words in Arabic or Persian, I have reverted to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) word list.

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