



KING OF THE BENIGHTED

KING OF THE BENIGHTED (Figure 1) a novella by the noted writer and literary critic Hushang Golshiri (see [GOLŠIRI](#), [Hušang](#), 1938-2000), first appeared in an English translation by Abbas Milani (Washington D. C., 1990), with the pseudonym Manuchehr Irani listed as its author. *Āh-e siâh-puđân*, the novella's Persian title, was published in Sweden in 2001. The book has also been translated into the German by Zana Nimadi as *Der König der Schwarzgewandeten* (Frankfurt, 1998) and into the French by Christophe Balaÿ as *Le Roi des Noir-Vêtus* (Paris, 2002).

As Milani describes in his afterword to the English translation, Golshiri incrementally sent handwritten pages of the manuscript to Milani in California in the guise of personal letters, “to avoid the ever-watchful gaze of the Islamic censors” (Milani, 1990, p. 91). Golshiri requested that the text be translated into English under anonymous authorship. Milani chose to publish the translation under the pen name Manuchehr Irani, a generic pseudonym shared at that time by several different Iranian writers publishing their work abroad (Milani 1990, pp. 92, 98). Following Golshiri's death in 2000, Baran Publishing House in Sweden released the novella in its original Persian, relinquishing the pseudonym and citing its authorship as “ascribed to Hushang Golshiri” (mansub be Hušang-e Golširi). Subsequent English and German language printings of the book, however, have retained the Manuchehr Irani pseudonym.

On the surface, *King of the Benighted* has a minimal plot. The novella opens in winter in the early years of the Islamic Republic, as a nameless poet goes



about his morning routine. He remembers that he has to buy a black shirt for the funeral of his friend, a former confederate in a dissident political group in the Pahlavi era. This thought, coupled by his having seen a bridal chamber (see [HEJLA](#)) in the street in commemoration of the death of a young martyr of the Iran-Iraq war (see [IRAQ vii. IRAN-IRAQ WAR](#)), triggers a “craving” for Nezami of Ganja’s “Black Dome” tale from the [HAFT PEYKAR](#) (The Seven Beauties/Portraits) of the late twelfth century.

The “Black Dome” tale is never relayed in its entirety within the novella itself, and Milani’s translation indeed includes a summary of it as a prologue. Part of “the most erotic of Nizami’s works” (Chelkowski, p. 7), the “Black Dome” is a fairy tale of unfulfilled desire. It tells of a king who journeys high above the heavens to a mythical paradise, where he meets the Fairy Queen. The king is filled with intense desire for the Queen, but she promises him her embrace at a later designated time. Night after night, he is allowed to enjoy the favors of the Queen’s maidens, but craving for the Queen in a paroxysm of lust, he seizes her in his arms, only to find himself instantly thrown back down to Earth, alone. In mourning for his failed union, he dons black garments, and is known as the King of the Benighted thereafter (Nezami, pp. 129-31).

As the poet protagonist reads the beginning of the “Black Dome” tale, police break into his home, seize him, and confiscate his books. The poet has been arrested for a book of his poems published abroad, titled *The Demonic Decade* (‘Ašara-ye maš’uma). When asked under interrogation for his religion, the poet replies, “I am a poet” (*King of the Benighted*, p. 56).

The story then moves, almost cyclically, through a series of scenes: flashbacks to the poet’s past intertwined with episodes of torture and solitary confinement; his thoughts about classical literature and its major figures; and his speaking to and overhearing his cellmates. The poet is sent to solitary confinement after Sarmad, a young militant dissident, squeals to the prison guards about the erotic content of the “Black Dome” tale, whose beginning the poet has recited to new cellmates wearing black shirts. Later, Sarmad confesses to the poet to becoming a “repenter” (tavvāb) and, possibly, even to executing his fifteen-year old fiancée as proof to the prison guards of the genuineness of his repentance.

The poet is released from prison at the end of the novella. The line between past and present, memory and desire, dream and reality become so permeable that the reader cannot conclusively discern whether the time lapsed in the



narrative has been only a few hours, a year, or even a millennium (Milani, 2004, p. 133). In an ironic collapse of time, imagery, and allusion, the novella concludes as the poet greets his weeping, black-clad, daughters, only to learn that his once-raven hair has turned completely white.

A work of many subtle ironies and layers of meaning (Milani, 2004, p. 131), *King of the Benighted* provides unflinching descriptions of prison life, torture, and execution. Moreover, the conspicuous use of “intertextuality” with the “Black Dome” tale permits the reader to detect “how much the inside of the text is indebted to the outside” (Kristeva, p. 446). Indeed, the content of the “Black Dome,” as well as the reading and recital of it, can be read as Golshiri’s essential allegory of revolution and literature. Its direct eroticism suggests the public’s fetishizing its twin “demons” of monarchy and religion: a mortal monarch seizing a fairy queen in a fit of lust is akin to the citizens of Iran restively disburdening their constituent power to another autarch, a “mythical leader” (Foucault, p. 220), at the moment of revolution.

At the same time, the novella is especially critical of the notion of a committed literature that claims to display sociopolitical reality authentically or seeks to affect it by bringing about some defined sense of social justice. With Golshiri’s “particularly meticulous” (Dabashi, p. 148) aesthetic system of literary allusion, the work instead urges toward a private, personal interpretation of literature: it ultimately “beacons Iranian writers and poets to a new reading of their literary heritage,” (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 358) in which, as the poet remarks about the “Black Dome” tale, “[w]hat counts is the interpretation. It has to be an inner experience, everyone must go through it” (*The King of the Benighted*, p. 33).

Throughout the novella, Golshiri deconstructs the notion of storytelling as an act of survival and self-legitimization— a construal enshrined in Near Eastern culture in everything from *The Thousand and One Nights* to the “black-robed” commemorative rituals of Iranian Shi’ism. The poet’s reciting of the “Black Dome” tale begins as a survival mechanism, a necessary diversion by a professional poet for his fellow inmates, but it ultimately leads to further torture. Sarmad (lit. “everlasting”) “tells” on the poet, on members of his political group, his brother, and his fiancée. However, unlike the case of *The Thousand and One Nights’* Scheherazade, the efficacy of Sarmad’s telling is wholly uncertain by the end, and he may very well be executed the day the poet is released.



This ambivalent view toward storytelling is central to Golshiri's own process of self-recognition in his fiction. As much as he detests "facile propaganda," his dedication, like his protagonist's, "to defend the freedom of expression in Persia," indicates a profoundly democratic will (Mir'ābedini, p. 116). Golshiri's sending of the pages of the manuscript to Milani in the United States can be also interpreted as another act of survival. Like the King of the Benighted, he could not stop himself. And like his poet, he considers literature an independent, vital force (Golširi, p. 335).

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