

## A Psychoanalytic Approach to Hooshang Golshiri's "My Little Chapel"

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### Abstract

Hooshang Golshiri's "My little Chapel" relates the story of a character who finds himself in possession of a toe-like protrusion from the beginning of his life, an abnormality which brings him into a never-ending conflict with his surroundings. The obsessional attachment of the narrator with his sixth-toe, however, poses significant questions regarding the nature of his symptomatic dependence on this apparently useless piece of flesh. Through a psychoanalytical reading of the story, the present article is an attempt to shed light on the psychological intricacies of this problematic relation. Drawing on the teachings of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek, it argues that the only solution to this enigma is to consider the toe as a materialization of the pure nothingness and lack which, from a psychoanalytical point of view, marks the very core of the subject in the symbolic universe and becomes the only venue for the safe flowing of jouissance. Through its inert presence, the toe embodies the Lacanian objet a as the most precious, albeit illusory, thing in the psychic life of the human beings, the removal, or the disclosure, of which could lead to irreparable consequences.

**Keywords:** objet a, jouissance, lack, desire, My Little Chapel.

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## Introduction

The relation between literature and the human psyche has been a constant theme throughout the cultural history of human civilization. In fact, it could be claimed that the ontogenesis of literature could be traced back into the psychic realm of individual authors who have, in one way or another, tried to pen down the dictates of their psychological muses, and find answers to the questions which haunted their mind and soul. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this emphasis upon the psychological nature of literature found new expression in the works of the Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), whose teachings on the human unconscious and its influence upon the artistic creation brought about an unprecedented transformation in the course of literary production. This transformation occurred, of course, in both the formal and the conceptual aspects of the creative writing, as a number of writers embraced the unconscious structure and symbolism of the dream world, while others tried to come to terms with the somehow disquieting discoveries of psychoanalysis and map out the contours of their unconscious mind throughout the pages of their imaginative works. In a sense, with the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis, the realm of literature became separated from its past in an almost irreparable way.

In Iran, one of the most famous authors who tried his hand at psychological writing was Hooshang Golshiri (1938-2000). Mostly remembered for his use of the stream of consciousness technique in his masterpiece *Prince Ehtejab*, Golshiri experimented with the human unconscious to such an extent that the psychological color is present in almost all of his works, novels and short stories alike. Regardless of his literary excellence, however, with the exception of *Prince Ehtejab*, few of Golshiri's works have received the critical analysis they deserve. His short story, "My Little Chapel", is undoubtedly one of the most psychologically informed works of fiction in the canon of the Persian literature. In order to unravel the

analytical intricacies and psychological niceties of this work, the present article draws on the works of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), and the Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist, Slavoj Žižek (1949- ). The story, I believe, is rooted in the deepest psychological grounds to such an extent that it is only through a Lacanian reading that we can shed light on its otherwise dark conceptual corners.

### **Literature Review**

Apart from his masterpiece *Prince Ehtejab*, Golshiri's works have not received the due critical reading from the vantage of psychoanalysis, although the majority of his short stories revolve, in one way or another, around the psychological world of their characters. In searching the current literature, I did not come upon any psychoanalytical reading of the short story "My Little Chapel", nor upon any other study which brought to light the deep psychological layers of the story. The only critical works regarding this short story, which I found during my research, are It is hoped that the present study will help to bring more of Golshiri's short stories to the attention of scholars and critics of the Persian literature.

### **Methodology**

In carrying out this study, I have drawn upon the psychoanalytical concepts of Jacques Lacan as understood and interpreted by Slavoj Žižek. Significant analytical terms such as lack, desire, *jouissance* and fantasy are employed in the attempt to unravel the textual ties and knots which otherwise remain curiously resistant to the interpretative process. In doing this, I have first tried to read the narrator's obsessional attachment to his sixth toe as a symbolic representation of his enchantment with his ontological lack as the only way of keeping the space of his desire open and procure for himself at least the minimum of independence from the Other's influence. Next, I have traced the subject's relation with his *jouissance* which is concentrated

in the little piece of flesh, thereby making it the most important part of his selfhood. Finally, the role of the sixth toe is analyzed in mapping out his relation with his surroundings, which leads to an ultimate torsion even from his dream girl in the attempt to protect his subjectivity which, from a Lacanian perspective, could nowhere be perceived other than in his little chapel, that is, in his little toe.

### **Discussion**

“I never thought of it, when I was a little boy. I knew it was there, but it was not important, because it never bothered me. When I took off my socks, I only had to tilt my left foot a little, just like now, to see it was still there. It cannot be said that I have six toes. It is only a tiny red piece of meat without a nail, right beside the little toe of my left foot” (Golshiri, 1985: 5). These are the opening words of Golshiri’s “My Little Chapel.” As we read them for the first time, it hardly seems anything but a conventional beginning of a short story about the hardships of a misfit, who is always under the pressure of not being accepted as an ordinary person in the community where he lives for the sake of being different and, somehow, abnormal. Such a person, it could be argued, finds himself in a situation which fosters an acute sense of self-inferiority due to his being different from his peers, especially when we take into consideration his being hailed by them as “six-toed” and his mother’s constant cautionary indictment of not showing “it” to any strangers. In fact, one of the main reasons behind the subjective malfunctioning of individuals in the social sphere is their diversion from what is taken to be the normal and natural human condition, from an exact definition of what it means to be, biologically speaking, a human being. As it is later pointed out by the narrator himself, for “normal” people, human beings “have the eternal features of the images in encyclopedias. Head, neck, torso and leg. Two legs. The left foot has five toes” (Golshiri, 1985: 15). Those who differ from this “essentially” human form are more or less treated as the “non-human”, like the Foucauldian leper/mad, confined to “the margins of

the community” (Foucault, 1988: 3). The narrator, it is supposed, should therefore be weary of this prejudicial segregation from the body of the society and in search of an immediate solution to his biological anomaly. As we read on, we get more and more closer to the proof of this supposition: “Do you think I have never – even once – thought of getting rid of it? But nowadays, whenever I remember, my right hand begins to tremble. It was in that same neighborhood. To be honest, if my mother had not arrived, I would have definitely cut it off” (Golshiri, 1985: 9).

All this seems to be true, and the reader’s expectation appears to be in line with the logically oriented turn of events. But these suppositions and expectations melt into thin air as we move further on through the narrative: “Now everything has changed. It is now for me a private thing, something which I am only aware of... It is only I who know it exists, that there is something which distinguishes me from the others” (Golshiri, 1985: 9-10). The narrative has taken an unfamiliar course as, instead of being an attempt of social re-containment, it capitalizes on the anomaly and celebrates the marginal existence. The additional protuberance turns out to be a mark of distinction, a “thing” which provides the narrator with an anchor in the otherwise endless expanse of the social non-existence of identity. It is as if he has found in the insignificant piece of meat an escape from the ontological nothingness constitutive of the symbolic sphere. From this moment onward, the narrative revolves around the close link which binds the narrator to this “sixth toe” and the way it defines and re-defines his relation to his surroundings. The question, therefore, is raised as to the nature of the narrator’s stance towards his additional toe. What is the reason behind this symptomatic attachment to something which uncertainly has the least functionality, biologically speaking, in his life? Why is he obsessed with it to such an extent that he is ready to sacrifice everyone and everything just to keep it in his possession? No doubt, we will be frustrated if we read this attachment as the desperate recourse of a socially miserable person to the cause of his failure, because it is always possible for him to get rid of that

cause with a simple surgery. Therefore, we need to read behind the materiality of this “thing” and shed light on its psychological importance if we are to account for this problematic obsession with an apparently useless object.

To begin with, we should focus on the narrator’s own description of his relation with the toe: “I am always anxious, I have always been. It has happened time and again that I have woken up and thought that I have lost something, that it is no longer there, something which I do not initially realize what it is. However, it is enough for me to stretch my hand and, without turning on the light, see that it is there, just as little and perhaps as red and without nail” (Golshiri, 1985: 10). The reason behind this anxiety of having lost something, without knowing what, raises a significant problem. It is usually the case that we believe we feel anxious when we think we might lose something which is of considerable value to us. It seems also anxiety provoking to expect to be deprived of something the absence of which, we believe, will introduce a lack into our existence. But, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the ontogenesis of anxiety is quite different from the commonsensical conception. In his discussion of the concept of anxiety with reference to the life of the child, Lacan says: “What is most anxiety producing for the child is when the relationship through which it comes to be – on the basis of lack, which makes it desire – is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when its mother is constantly on its back” (Fink, 1993: 103). According to Lacan, the child can separate itself from the Other, and consequently come to be as a subject, when a lack is introduced into its life through the intrusion of an element which establishes a gap between it and its mother. This third element, which Lacan calls the name of the father or the phallus, brings the promise of at least a minimal independence for the subject by protecting it from being engulfed and devoured by the maternal desire (Fink, 1993: 56). Consequently, as lack is installed in the life of the subject, desire for a lost “thing” comes into being, a desire which pushes the subject forward into a possible future fulfillment, thereby procuring a minimal freedom of choice for the subject. In this

way, lack turns into a liberating force, creating a space where the subject can choose what they deem to be the ultimate object of their desire.

Now, anxiety comes into view as soon as the subject becomes aware that this gap is on the verge of being bridged. That is to say, when the subject feels the over-proximity of an object which promises the *actual* fulfillment of desire and the closing up the void of the lack, anxiety is the unconscious response, since such a prospect of fulfillment means that the subject as a desiring (and therefore independent) being will cease to be. Without lack, there will be no desire, and without desire, there will be no subject. The narrator wakes up due to anxiety whenever he feels (or dreams) that something is no longer there, and if we analyze this experience from the vantage of the mentioned Lacanian insight, what could that “something” be if not “lack” itself? In other words, what the additional toe (if it could be called a toe) signifies in the psychological economy of the narrator is lack in its liberating and redemptive aspect; it is a material embodiment of the lack which always reminds him of his subjectivity, of his being separated from the suffocating presence of the Other. This object which embodies pure lack and, therefore, causes the subject’s desire is referred to by Lacan as *agalma* or *objet a* (Fink, 1993: 59).

What gives more weight to the argument that the protruding mass of flesh on the narrator’s foot is a symbolic representation of *objet a* is its physical deformity or, more precisely, its formlessness. It is repeatedly mentioned that it is not similar to anything, not even to a toe:

I put two fingers under it and raised it. It was a red piece of meat without a nail. It was smaller than all the little toes in the world, like twin potatoes or cucumbers. You have seen them, haven’t you? Sometimes there is a little potato or cucumber attached to them. But there is the difference that they are also potato and cucumber... Mine, however, was but a piece of meat, without a nail.

For that reason, I thought I should not be called 'six-toed Hassan'. (Golshiri, 1985: 8-9)

The anomalous nature of this protrusion extends even to the realm of natural phenomena. There is nothing, nor can there be anything, like it. That is why it is unique, something which in its very materiality embodies nothingness and lack. In this, it becomes more and more similar to the Lacanian object of desire:

The paradox of this object - of *objet petit a* - is that, although imaginary, it occupies the place of the Real - that is, it is a non-specularizable object. an object that has no specular image and which, as such, precludes any relationship of empathy, of sympathetic recognition... That is to say, *a* stands precisely for an 'impossible' object that gives body to what can never become a positive object. (Žižek, 1994: 50)

The fact that it can never incite others' sympathy is evident in the way they behave towards the narrator. From the limpid boy's humiliating "sneer" at the beginning to the dream girl's repulsion at the end, it is always something which exposes its owner to the senseless and accusing gaze of the Other. With the exception of his parents, the sole response he receives from the others is to get rid of it, to cut it away, if not for his own sake, at least for the sake of those who care about him. It is as if that little deformity has turned into an obstacle impeding his proper connection and communication with his surroundings. Musing on the nature of the "thing" and all that it stands for, the narrator reveals his understanding of this problem: "When it is possible to sit down and think about all of these issues, about all the things which are in darkness, in the shadow, or for example to all the barred doors and dark corners of old rooms which smell of dampness, it will no longer be possible to tell anyone, even to the most beautiful girl in the world, I love you" (Golshiri, 1985: 13). Now, what is the



nature of these things in the dark? Why do they impede the subject from expressing his love even to the ideal girl? If we take for granted the symbolic equivalence of the imagery with the unconscious, the only way to answer these questions is through the notion of lack. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, lack is primordial: it is ontological and therefore can never be filled with any object whatsoever. Throughout their life, the subjects move from one object to another in search of that ultimate *objet* that would put an end to the never-ending quest; however, the whole schema of the possibility of such a fulfilment is an illusion. This, of course, is a forbidden knowledge which has to be repressed if the subjects are to live a normal life. “What we discover in the deepest kernel of our personality,” Žižek maintains, “is a fundamental, constitutive, primordial *lie*, the *proton pseudos*, the phantasmic construction by means of which we endeavour to conceal the inconsistency of the symbolic order in which we dwell” (1996: 1) If the subject comes to this understanding that whatever the effort the lack will never be fulfilled, the entire fabric of the symbolic order will fall to the ground. The social existence, thus, necessitates and is based on the lie that one day the ultimate object will be found, somewhere.

One of the logical ramifications of the necessary lie entails the sublimation of an ordinary object to the status of the impossible *Thing*: “According to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire. The sublime object is ‘an object elevated to the level of *das Ding*’” (Žižek, 2008: 221). In this structural substitution, which again is based on an illusion, the subject presupposes the possibility of filling in the void which marks their being. For this purpose, they choose an object and idealize it, to the extent that it becomes the most important thing in their life. Such a fixation on an object is perhaps the most basic definition of love from an analytical point of view. When in love, the lover sublimates the beloved in the attempt to keep in sight the prospect of a final unity to the effect of putting an end to the cycle of lack and desire. In Žižek’s words, “Love is based upon the illusion

that [the] encounter of the two lacks can succeed and beget a new harmony" (1992: 58). This harmony, of course, will never occur since it is nothing but an illusion, albeit a necessary one. In order to keep this illusion alive, the subject has to maintain a meaningful distance towards the beloved, because as soon as the lover gets hold of the beloved, the latter loses all charm and turns once more into the initially ordinary object. Through this idealizing gesture, the beloved is pushed beyond the limits of possibility, as it can never be attainable if the world of the subject is to remain coherent. In other words, the very supposition of an ultimate object of desire functions as an efficient means of neutralizing the ontological lack by means of positing a logical moment when the lack is fulfilled through embracing the beloved. The paradox, however, is that it is only through constantly pushing this moment into the future that this neutralization becomes possible in the first place.

Through its never-ending signification of the lack, the little piece of flesh renders the functioning of the sublime object impossible. Whenever the narrator sees or feels it, he is reminded of the impossibility of an ultimate appeasement of desire. As long as it is there, no object, not even the most sublime and beautiful one, can rise up to the level of *das Ding*, since its very presence means that there is a lack which can never be effaced. However, what is of utmost significance here is that through this same gesture of de-sublimation, a space is opened in which the narrator can give vent to his desires without becoming fixated on a specific object. In other words, the main paradox of *objet a* is that although it objectifies the constitutive lack and therefore can never in essence coincide with any specific object (thereby reducing the possibility of love to the zero level), it still succeeds in externalizing the lack so that the symbolic system and the world of the subject are saved from falling to the ground:

I merely look and build things for my self, whatever I desire. I think everything has no doubt something less or more to it which is more important than the thing

itself, more interesting than the thing itself, which if seen, if all could see it, it could no longer be said to be more. And the moment it is taken as a part of that thing, as a part of its construct, it is then something naked and bare under the light of the sun. Like a room which only has four walls and a roof, without a niche, without a shelf, that is to say, the most lonesome and pathetic room that could ever be imagined. (Golshiri, 1985: 14)

Onto the screen of fantasy, which comes into being as the immediate effect of lack, the narrator projects everything he desires. No doubt, if this lack is no longer, the fantasy screen will be no more as well. The narrator's words regarding the element which exceeds the object is problematic to the extent of becoming a philosophical riddle. How can something be a part of an object and not a part of it at the same time? It is only if we understand the symbolic nature of the little piece of flesh as that which signifies pure nothingness and lack that we can solve this dilemma. Through its very inert materiality, it reminds us of the failure of the symbolic order in providing a complete and harmonious totality. Indeed, it gives body to the failed attempt of compensating for the bliss which the child supposedly experienced prior to the moment of castration, that is to say, of providing the subject with its lost *jouissance*. And yet, this lost *jouissance* is itself an illusory construct of the symbolic order: "There is no 'zero level' substantial *jouissance*, with regard to which *objets a* render the proliferation of excesses: *jouissance* 'as such' is an excess" (Žižek, 2001: 22). In other words, the very being of *jouissance* is due to the lack which the subject experiences in their symbolic existence. When we feel that something is lacking in our lives, we necessarily posit a moment, albeit mythical, when we believe we must have felt otherwise, a moment of pure enjoyment free from the taints of any lack and loss. And it is the function of the objects of desire to embody this non-existent *jouissance* and render possible (although illusorily) its attainability:

The proliferation of *objets a* generates the surplus-enjoyment which fills in the lack of *jouissance*, and although these *objets a* never provide 'the thing itself', although they are semblances which always fall short of the full *jouissance*, they are nonetheless experienced as excessive, as the *surplus*-enjoyment - in short, in them, the 'not enough', the falling short, *coincides with the excess*. (Žižek, 2001: 22)

The narrator's sixth-toe, therefore, is the materialization of that which is in him more than himself, of that most precious element which, once taken from him, will turn him into nothing better than an excremental object. Through it, he is able to direct and control the infusion of his *jouissance*. However, in its inert presence, it marks the impossibility of a final settlement and satisfaction of desire. The tragedy of subjectivity for the narrator lies in the fact that he cannot escape the deadlock of his *jouissance*, since the trajectory of lack and desire for him is in itself impossible: looking at it, he realizes that nothing can fill the void of his being, and yet the presence of the lack (materialized in it) gives rise to a desire for an ultimate fulfillment. What is most tragic, though, is that there is no way out of this vicious cycle, that is to say, whatever he does, he is doomed to this circular logic forever: "The trouble with *jouissance* is not that it is unattainable, that it always eludes our grasp, but, rather, that *one can never get rid of it*, that its stain drags along for ever - therein resides the point of Lacan's concept of surplus-enjoyment: the very renunciation of *jouissance* brings about a remainder/surplus of *jouissance*" (Žižek, 2007: 93). In this way, it becomes possible to see the futility of the narrator's childhood attempt at removing the little piece of flesh. It does not materialize a positive concept, rather, it is the objectification of pure negativity, a lasting memento of the narrator's castration, a piece of the real eternally attached to him, like a piece of gum "stuck to the sole of [the] shoe" (Lacan, 2005: 17), reminding him that no matter what he does, no matter how hard he

tries, he will never be able to experience a lost pleasure, but only a secondary *jouissance* which will never be enough to quench his desire once and for all.

Yet, this surplus *jouissance*, which is the only outlet of enjoyment possible for the subject, should be cherished unconditionally, because it is the only aspect of *jouissance* which the subject can bear. Since *jouissance* is the reminder that the symbolic order into which the subject is introduced through castration is lacking and non-existing, it is treated with utmost repulsion on behalf of the Other and its agent, the superego: “Insofar as the Other of the symbolic Law prohibits *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is to feign that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, i.e. to conceal from the Other’s gaze its possession by way of staging the spectacle of the desperate search for it” (Žižek, 2001: 72). Throughout the story, we are repeatedly informed by the narrator that all his life he has tried to conceal the existence of the surplus “toe”, first at the behest of his mother and later on through his own personal conviction that it should never be seen by anyone, even by his most intimate acquaintances:

We are all like that. When something becomes evident for us, when we see it under the sunlight, it ends. Even if we love it, it will be due to sympathy... There are things which only belong to us, and only concern us... something which is yours only and no one knows anything about it, and if you want and do not be foolish, it will always be for you and will remain with you forever. (Golshiri, 1985: 14)

As long as it remains unseen, it will procure pleasure for him, and as long as he posits the existence of such an unknown surplus in others, they will occupy a privileged position in his fantasy. The two instances in the story where the narrator betrays such an emotional attachment are his childhood encounter with the little boy with the broken leg and the adulthood intimacy with the prostitute. In the first of these

instances, the perception of the boy's ankle hidden behind plaster functions as the cause of his desire due to its being unknown and unknowable for him. At this moment, his own desire being triggered, he reveals his hidden "toe" in an exhibitionistic act of self-approval, in order to prove himself before the eyes of the Other as that which deserves to be desired. Of course, the outcome of this foolish act of disclosure was being sneered at by the little boy, and it took a long time for him to recover from the detrimental impact of this exposure: "Now everything has changed. It is now for me a private thing, something which I am only aware of. Mother and father died ten or twelve years ago. The kid in the neighborhood must have forgotten it, or may have forgotten me. It is only I who know it exists, that there is something which distinguishes me from the others" (Golshiri, 1985: 8). It is only through this supposition that the Other has forgotten its existence that the narrator can once again invest it with libido and derive pleasure from it. From now on, the same mistake cannot be committed once again. No matter what, its existence should be kept a secret and it should never be seen under the light of the sun again. This, moreover, can be achieved only through a conscious abstention from going beyond the veils hiding other people's hidden treasure. In his encounter with the prostitute, who abstains from taking off her socks, he limits himself to asking a question and no longer lets his desire for disclosure prevail. However, the very act of asking the question becomes symptomatic and gives rise to an outburst of emotions and tears on behalf of the prostitute: "I asked: what is wrong with your other foot? She said: "What do you mean?" "Nothing," I said. "No, go on." "Believe me I said it without purpose." "No, say it, you think it is a stain or something? Burnt, eh? A burning scar as big as the palm of my hand, crimson red, eh? Red flesh, eh?" (Golshiri, 1985: 11). Of course, the reason behind this unexpected reaction lies in the logic of asking questions:

[T]here is something obscene in the very act of asking a question, without regard to its content. It is the form

of the question as such which is obscene: the question lays open, exposes, denudes its addressee, it invades his sphere of intimacy; this is why the basic, elementary reaction to a question is shame on the bodily level... The basic indecency of the question consists in its drive to put into words what should be left unspoken... It aims at a point at which the answer is not possible, where the word is lacking, where the subject is exposed in his impotence. (Zizek, 2008: 202-203)

In short, it is directed at the subject's *jouissance*, an obscene, perhaps unconscious, attempt to deprive the other from the only source of enjoyment at their disposal, a sadistic urge to bring it out into the light and turn it into an ordinary excremental object. Here, the narrator, spurned by the same exhibitionist desire which happened in his childhood, is once again on the verge of revealing his "toe," but this time he manages to resist the temptation:

When she began to cry, I thought I should show it to her. Even my hand moved towards my socks. But she was a stranger, the black lines over the eyes, the long certainly artificial eyelashes, and specially the tears that furrowed her make-up covered cheeks, yelled at me that she was a stranger... When someone is wearing a scarf around his neck, or wearing gloves, for instance...I think there should be something behind them. What about the clothes, what all people wear? They are justified. I also have the right to keep it for myself and not letting anyone know or see it. (Golshiri, 1985: 11-12)

This self-restraint turns out to be rewarding for the narrator. As soon as he abstains from tearing apart the veils covering the other's *agalma*, the other occupies the place of the *objet a* and provides his fantasy

scenario with new material. This is repeated later on in his thwarted love adventure with the ideal girl: “At that moment, I desired that prostitute with black socks on her feet pulled down to the ankle more than any other woman in the world. And in her (I mean this girl) there was something of which I was not aware, which I could not get hold of, but I knew it existed. For this reason, I asked for her hand” (Golshiri, 1985: 14). For the reason that there was something in the girl which resisted understanding, the narrator decides to marry her. The question is raised as to the wherefore of such a decision based on a premise which, from a commonsensical point of view, should act more as an obstacle rather than an inciting element for a marriage proposal. The answer, of course, leads us once again to the Lacanian notion of the *objet a*, of that “hidden treasure, that which is ‘in us more than ourselves,’ that elusive, unattainable X that confers upon all our deeds an aura of magic, although it cannot be pinned down to any of our positive qualities” (Žižek, 1991: 77). There is something unknown about the girl feeling the presence of which makes possible the metonymic movement of the narrator’s desire, and this unknown element, which cannot be pinned down to any specific object, is nothing but her lacking nature, nothing but her sheer and pure desirousness. Sensing the lack in her provides the narrator with a fantasy screen onto which he can play out as many scenarios of fulfillment and satisfaction as he desires. It should be noted that this staging becomes possible only when the girl’s lack is posited as non-ontological, as a non-essential loss which could be filled under specific conditions by the narrator in his fantasy. If this lack is encountered in its true essence, that is, in its radical resistance to being fulfilled, the entire fantasy universe of the narrator would fall down and the girl would lose all her charm and desirableness. For this reason, he never asks to know that which he thinks should remain outside of his knowledge about the girl, in the same manner that he does not want anyone to find out the reality of his *agalma*, of his secret and private “object” which distinguishes him from the others and makes him desirable.



Regardless of his attempt to keep the piece of flesh a secret to himself, however, one morning, upon waking from sleep, he finds out that the girl has become aware of its existence. He appeals to a quasi-logical argument in order to justify it, although it ends in a fatal blow to his relation with the girl:

I said: ‘Look my dear, can you tell me why do you like a cloud?’ She answered: ‘well, because it is beautiful, for example, it always changes its shape.’ ‘No, that is not very precise,’ I said and I wanted to cry out: because they have a sixth toe. She asked: ‘so, why are you silent?’ I replied: ‘because they have something additional, something which the moment you think that the cloud is complete, that its final shape is this or that, makes you realize that it is not so, that its shape would change any moment.’ ‘Well, I said the same thing.’ ‘I know, but as I said, it was not exactly it. See, consider yourself, if everything about you had become known to me from the very first night, you would no longer be interesting to me.’ She said: ‘you mean this, this is...’ She talked about it in a humiliating way. She did not understand. And I think it is in paintings, it is in stories, it is in everything as well. People, some of them, might have it under their skin, they should have it. (Golshiri, 1985: 15)

The ultimate desire of the narrator is, therefore, to escape being reduced to already known and determinate forms and shapes, to remain unpredictable for the Other so that he could always remain interesting and desirable. What always reminded him of his difference and gave him a ground for supposing his uniqueness had been the little toe-like protuberance on the extremity of his left foot, a remainder of the real which had reminded him of his lack and desirousness and provided him with *jouissance*. As soon as it became revealed to the

girl, he was no longer in the position to be desired: “She had seen it. For that reason, it was over. I was over for her” (Golshiri, 1985: 15). Of course, there was still a chance for him to win his dream girl, only if he consented to get rid of the toe: “We broke up. She was afraid. Maybe she was justified. She said: ‘what about our children? You must undergo a surgery. It is not that important’” (Golshiri, 1985: 16). But he did not accept and decided to end the relationship, and we should ask ourselves, why? The answer lies in the Lacanian notion of the symptom.

Symptom, for Lacan, found a universal and general signification during the last stage of his teaching. Confronted with the enigma of the persistence of the symptom even after its meaning is deciphered, Lacan found the solution in its being intricately tied to *jouissance*: “The symptom is not only a cyphered message, it is at the same time a way for the subject to organize his enjoyment... that is why [the subject] ‘loves his symptom more than himself’” (Žižek, 2008: 80). As long as *jouissance* is possible only through the symptom, as long as it is “a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment” (Žižek, 2008: 81), there is no question of getting rid of it without paying a heavy price and bearing its detrimental consequences. Symptom should no longer be taken as a surplus to the human condition; rather, it is constitutive of the very essence of humanity. It is “the way we—the subjects—“avoid madness,” the way we “choose something...instead of nothing...through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world” (Žižek, 2008: 81). When the dialectical movement of lack and desire comes to a stop, when desire “as a defence, a prohibition against going beyond a certain limit in *jouissance*” (Žižek, 2001: 77) no longer works, the entire world of the subject will come to an end: “when we are dealing with an individual's symptom at its strongest, the entire consistency of a person's self-experience is, in an unacknowledged way, held together by this 'symptomal torsion', by some idiosyncratic pathological tic, so that when we untie this knot, the person's universe literally falls apart”

(Žižek, 2000: 85). There is no alternative here: either enjoy your symptom or abide in the desert of psychosis.

It is now clear why the narrator does not accept the girl's advice and prefers to keep his sixth toe. If anything, it is his symptom, that is, it is his only way to escape the onslaught of unbridled *jouissance* and retain his sanity. From the girl's point of view, it is nothing but a useless and worthless piece of surplus flesh which has to be removed right away; however, for the narrator, it is no longer an ordinary and simple thing or object, but rather the most important element of his being which keeps his otherwise chaotic world in harmony and piece. Through this act of "castration," the narrator will not lose a little toe, but literally his entire social and symbolic existence. In a sense, we could argue that the toe is no longer a part of the narrator *qua* subject; on the contrary, it is nothing but the narrator himself, the removal of which will shatter his subjectivity into nothingness:

For Lacan, the subject and the object—cause of its desire are strictly correlative: there is a subject only in so far as there is some material stain/leftover that *resists* subjectivization, a surplus in which, precisely, the subject *cannot* recognize itself. In other words, the paradox of the subject is that it exists only through its own radical impossibility, through a 'bone in the throat' that forever prevents it (the subject) from achieving its full ontological identity. (Žižek, 2000: 28)

This Lacanian insight summarizes the tragic plight of the narrator of Golshiri's "My Little Chapel." Throughout his life, he has always been plagued by the presence of a piece of flesh which has hindered him from leading a life free from anxiety and psychological disturbance. He has never been able to define himself and determine his identity free from the presence of that red and nail-less protrusion. However, if he exists and has a tale to narrate, it is only through this

object. If he is deprived of it, he will no longer be unique and will be no more than a dummy filled with straw:

Children, always, children. But what about me? What about my evenings, all the evenings filled with melancholy and gloom when darkness engulfs not only the whole world but the entire humanity as well? Under the light, everything is itself, distinct from anything else. But when it is dark, or shadowy, nothing is itself anymore, the lines and forms blinking and fading into nothingness. (Golshiri, 1985: 16)

### **Conclusion**

The light that gives an ontological ground to the life of the narrator, that ultimate guarantor of his identity and subjectivity, is the little toe-like flesh, without which he will cease to be. It is the most precious thing in his life and the very backbone of his identity. “If I were religious, I would certainly build a little chapel for myself, like the little chapels of the royalty: an inlaid door and a calico in a little room with a little minaret and a carved altar” (Golshiri, 1985: 14). The little toe becomes, then, the little chapel of the narrator’s dream, *qua* a fantasy space where the most private and priceless aspects of his being are brought into play. But, like everything which is private, this secret object should remain concealed, otherwise it will lose its charm. The story ends with a paradoxical feeling of simultaneous happiness and sadness: “Now I am happy. But I am sad because there is someone who knows, someone who knows that I have an additional toe, someone who has seen me completely naked. And this is way too saddening” (Golshiri, 1985: 16). What it proves to us is that the narrator has most probably been saved from a complete collapse of his world, since he still is in possession of his *agalma* at the cost of losing his ideal girl. However, the very knowledge that someone is now aware of his secret has dimmed his being to a considerable extent. For

the second time in his life, he has revealed the toe to an-other, but this time the consequences will definitely be more lasting. Someone has stealthily found her way into his little private chapel and it will take time before he can feel the same old privacy once again.

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