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Review Article

Khosrow and Shirin: A Legendary Persian Love Poem with Two Suicides and Two Homicides: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Among different branches of the arts, poetry and especially love poems have a special place in shaping thoughts, attitudes and behavior of people about suicide. Khosrow and Shirin is a legendary Persian love poem written by the renowned Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), which ends with two suicides and two homicides. This article discusses how exposure to the story might influence suicidal behavior.

Keywords
Love poem, Suicide Behavior, Persian Culture

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Introduction

Art influences suicidal behavior in all cultures. Among different branches of the arts, poetry and especially love poems have a special place in shaping thoughts, attitudes, and behavior of the people about suicide [1-4]. Khosrow and Shirin is a legendary Persian love poem, which ends with two suicides and two homicides. This elaborate love story was written by the renowned Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) [5]. There were different versions of the story before the one put forward by Ganjavi. However, his version is the most popular and received most critical acclaim.

Within this story, he narrates the imaginary description of the love between the Armenian princess Shirin and the Sasanian king Khosrow II. The culmination of the story happens in Kermanshah province, western Iran, which is mostly inhabited by Kurds [5]. This part of Iran has high rates of suicide, especially among young people [6-9]. It is believed that Ganjavi's mother was Kurd and told him the then version of the story when he was a child [5]. This article explains the plot of the story and discusses how exposure to the story might influence suicidal behavior.

Plot

This love story is full of twists and turns before Khosrow and Shirin marry. In order to save his kingdom from internal conflicts, Khosrow initially marries Mariam, the daughter of the Caesar in Constantinople. Khosrow promises Caesar he will not marry anyone else whilst Mariam is alive. However, Khosrow is already secretly in love with Shirin. Meantime, Shirin lives in a castle near Behistun Mountain, Kermanshah. She meets Farhad, a sculptor doing some carving in her castle, who instantly falls in love with her [5].

Farhad's love is so colossal and sacred that Khosrow becomes aware of it. Khosrow plots a trick for his love-rival asking him to carve a pathway in Behistun Mountain for Shirin and in return he will let Farhad marry Shirin. Khosrow believes that the task is impossible and as a result he might get rid of Farhad. However, Farhad's perseverance leads to everybody in the land talking about his faithful love and huge progress that he made to carve the pathway [5].

Shirin decides to visit Farhad to see how his task is progressing. On the way back, Shirin's horse falls down the slope of the rock. Farhad arrives and skillfully saves Shirin from death. He puts Shirin and her injured horse on his shoulder and takes them to the castle. He then returns back to finish his task without delay. Khosrow hears that Farhad has completed the path and saved Shirin's life. He sends a messenger to Farhad to deceive him that Shirin has died after the accident [5].

After receiving the false news, Farhad jumps from the mountaintop fatally dying by suicide. Shortly after Farhad's suicide, Mariam also dies. Mariam dies due to natural causes in Ganjavi's version [5]. In older versions of the story, Shirin

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covertly poisons her [10]. Khosrow and Shirin can then be officially married. However, this is not the happy ending of the story.

Khosrow and Mariam's son, Shiroyeh, falls in love with Shirin at a young age. When Shiroyeh grows up he kills his father. He takes over his kingdom and asks Shirin to marry him. In response, Shirin asks for one week time to carry out the burial ceremony of Khosrow. During the burial ceremony, when Shirin is alone with the Khosrow's body, she kills herself with a dagger [5].

Discussion

Poetry, especially romantic poetry, has a long history with a long-lasting effect in Persian culture [2-4]. Depictions of the poems through painting and calligraphy intensify the effect by reinforcing the messages in the poem [4]. In case of Khosrow and Shirin, various portraits have been painted since Ganjavi wrote the story. A Google image search using the names of "Khosrow and Shirin" and/or "Farhad and Shirin" retrieves dozens of elegant paintings.

There are two paintings of particular importance. Firstly, a painting by the renowned contemporary Iranian painter Farshchian, which depicting how Farhad carries Shirin and her injured horse back to the castle after the accident (Figure 1). Secondly, a painting by renowned Iranian 16th Century painter Shaikh Zada, which portrays the marriage of Khosrow and Shirin. It also includes some stunning calligraphy. Both paintings are elegant using vivid color and a miniature style.



Figure 1. Painting of Farhad carrying Shirin and her injured horse by contemporary painter Farshchian



Figure 2. Painting of the marriage of Khosrow and Shirin by 16th Century painter Shaikh Zada

Apart from using paintings and calligraphy to elaborate this love story, new versions of the story have emerged in different parts of Iran. The story has gone beyond the boundaries of the then

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Persian Empire towards Indian sub-continent. New versions of the stories both inside and outside Iran have tended to change the name into "Shirin and Farhad". More recently different movies based on "Shirin and Farhad" version of the story have been produced [10].

Similarly, in Kermanshah province, western Iran, the sacred love and the self-sacrifice of Farhad towards Shirin is most remembered from the story. In a recent Persian article the character of Farhad has been analyzed based on Erik Forum's Love Theory. The authors have concluded that Farhad is a true lover who experiences many hardships but remains faithful until the end of his life [11].

As a result, Farhad has become a prominent personality in Persian mythology and Persian literature [12]. In newer versions of the story, especially among Kurdish people, the main hero of this story is Farhad. Khosrow is depicted as a negative character who intends to forcefully marry Shirin. In one narration, when Shirin became aware of Farhad's suicide, she rushes to the place where Farhad lies dead. When she heard about Khosrow's wicked plot, she declines to return to her palace and passes away on Farhad's feet [13].

Farhad's significant place in Persian and Kurdish mythology may lead people in the region to copy his behavior [14]. The Werther effect is a known phenomenon, which highlights that reporting a suicide especially in a celebrity figure with more details including the method chosen for suicide, might subsequently increase the number of suicides among the exposed populations. Whilst responsible reporting of such suicides might prevent such increase in suicidality among the exposed populations [15].

This might partially explain why there are higher rates of suicide among young men in the region. In a study that we carried out in Kermanshah province from March 2012 to March 2013, there were a total of 265 confirmed cases of suicide including 174 men (65.7%) and 91 women (34.3%). We found that the rate of suicide was 13.6 persons per 100,000 residents and the mean age of suicide was 31.3±14 years (Mean±SD). The most common method of suicide was hanging (50%) for men and self-burning (43%) for women [16]. These results are also confirmed in other studies performed within the region [7-9].

However, these results may also challenge the hypothesis of a copycat phenomenon as jumping from height is not a common method of suicide among young males in Kermanshah. Suicide by jumping is also not a method of choice for other parts of the country [17]. It seems that hanging might substitute jumping from a height. Therefore, more studies are needed to quantify the exact impact of Farhad's suicide on male suicide in Iran, especially in the western part of the country.

Conclusion

Khosrow and Shirin is a legendary Persian love poem with two suicides and two homicides. The

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most prominent feature taken from the story in Kurdish and Persian culture is the sacred love and the self-sacrifice of Farhad towards Shirin culminating in his suicide. People who are exposed to the story might imitate Farhad's behavior.

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