A Comparative Study on the Construction of Masculinity in *Mountain Called Me* (Iran 1992) and *Flour Babies* (UK 1992)

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INTRODUCTION

To investigate masculinity in young adult literature is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity, because neither masculinity nor adolescence "rely on any notion of a fixed cycle of development" (Connell24). Connell and Messerschmidt define masculinity not as a unique predefined path of gender identity, but as a miscellaneous set of features "accomplished in social action" which "can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (836). In a similarly elusive way, adolescence is said to be an indeterminate stage of rapid changes, highly influenced by social elements (Connell 12). But in what terms do social forces impact construction of masculinity in individuals? Is it the procedure of masculinization, perception of masculinity/ femininity or the mentality of individuals that differs from one society to another? What can be learned about the concept of masculinity by looking at the production of masculinity between cultures?

The present study focuses on two young adult novels from two very different cultures, Bayrami's *Mountain Called Me* (Iran 1992) and Fine's *Flour Babies* (UK 1992),and seeks to compare and contrast the impact of social forces on the masculinization process of their protagonists, Jalal and Simon. To give a brief plot summary, *Mountain Called Me* starts with Jalal, a 14-year-old country boy, who volunteers to fetch Hakim from the neighboring village to save his inert father. In spite of Jalal's attempts, his father's health deteriorates. One day, on his deathbed, his father warns Jalal about his own death, and asks him to "sustain the family and stand upright" in front of the mountain of problems (*Mountain Called Me* 34).* Once his father dies, however, Jalal feels confused about what he should do until his aunt, Narges, reminds him of his father's will and encourages Jalal and his mother to remain independent from others. Jalal's mother follows the aunt's advice, and does not allow Jalal to help her doing the errands because she believes that Jalal's mistakes may cause the mother bigger troubles. Disappointed by his own mother, in an attempt to regain his self-confidence over his own masculine abilities, Jalal sets out with his uncle, Es'haghon a trip to hunt partridge. But an avalanche wipes out his uncle Es'hagh, and Jalal heroically saves him from death. Though they fail to hunt any birds, this accident impresses Jalal's mother so deeply that she finally asks Jalal to help her in the daily tasks of their house. Thus Jalal manages to achieve his desired adult masculinity in his early teens.

Flour Babies, on the other hand, is the story of a wicked boy called Simon whose father ended his out-of-marriage relationship with his mother when Simon was just 6 weeks old. Without having even a photo of his father, Simon makes up an imaginary picture of him and his undefeatable power. One day, for a school project, Simon and his classmates are assigned to take care of a six-pound bag of flour for three weeks, as if it is a real baby. While the assignment sounds like "girls' things" to the boys, Simon insists on performing it, believing wrongly that at the end of the project, they will be allowed to explode the bags of flour inside their own classroom, and enjoy the "Great Explosion." Gradually, however, the project changes Simon's attitude, opening his eyes to the great effort his mother had put into raising him, resulting in Simon developing negative views about his father for his irresponsibility in quitting parenthood.

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By the end of the story, although Simon fails to take good care of his own flour baby, he is assured by his teacher that he will "make a better father than most" of his classmates (*Flour Babies* 156). Hearing this assures Simon about his own potentiality for achieving masculinity. He, therefore, puts aside his beloved flour baby and decides to realize this potential in his adulthood, believing that there will be enough time to act like a father when he gets older.

The underlying common theme between these two youth novels is the excessive attention the protagonists pay to maleness and their own potential for achieving adult masculinity. Another common theme is the absence of the father figure in the masculinization process of Jalal and Simon. Although the thematic similarity prepares a common starting point for conducting the present research, the most significant reason that exists behind conducting this study, is the sharp contrast that persists in the socio-cultural backgrounds within which the novels are written. This study draws from R. W. Connell's idea about interdependence between young adult masculinity and social elements and thereby exemplifying the impact of social forces on the construction of gender identities.

Using Connell's idea of masculinity as a social product, the present analysis will start with the general social history of Iran and England in the years before the 1990s, and the impact these social changes generally have on the gender norms of each country. Then, I will compare and contrast the masculinization processes of Jalal and Simon in relation to the gender policies of each society, and will then conclude by further elaborations on the gender regimes of Iran and England, showing how the policies impact the mentality and the masculinization of the characters.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although the novels under study are written in the 1990s, it should be acknowledged that the root of contrast between gender policies of Iran and the UK in the 1990s, goes back mainly to the distinctions between the events that happened in these two countries from about the 1970s. For England, the 1970s was the time of innovations brought by postmodernism, post-structuralism and LGBT social movements, which turned gender into a field for plurality and experimentalism. The challenge created in heterosexual patriarchal order was proceeding toward an ever-increasing crisis in masculinity and a general battle against patriarchal conventions of heteronormativity. Therefore, long before the time in which the novels of the present study were written, British women have managed to obtain an almost modest share of social positions for themselves.

Compared to the great accomplishment of the women of the UK, gender policies of Iran in the 1970s went through a slight and superficial change. By the emergence of "an educated class with liberal or socialist values" and in line with globalization and the westernization projects of Reza Shah (Moghadam 146), steps were taken for the reduction of discrimination against women, and finally Iranian women could enter the "public sphere, which for so long had been the province of men" (142). The change was, however, mainly limited to middle class women, and the consequent emancipation was not comparable with that of Western women.

The innovation Iran and England were going to achieve in their own gender policies, however, was pushed into an almost opposing direction by the political challenges both countries experienced in 1979. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher became the prime minister, and preserved the position up to 1990. The conservative government system of Thatcher turned the 1980s into the era of "retrograde sexual conservatism," as long as she "denounced feminism and

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homosexuality" (Horton et al. 40). She glorified instead "patriarchal heteronormative" ideas (Nick Bentley qtd. in Holmes 152), and consequently, acted as an impediment to the flourishing freedom of the postmodernist movements in the UK.

In Iran, the movements of "secular modernity, feminism, and globalization" were stopped because of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and thus resumed the patriarchal system of domination in the country (Moghadam 141). The discourse of gharbzadegi (the rejection of the westernization projects by the new Islamic regime), compulsory hijab (veiling), and the Muslim family law and penal code that were adopted after the 1979 revolution, placed women and girls in a vulnerable position within the family, in public spaces and before the law" (142). In the early 1980s, Islamists regarded the modern woman as "a threat to their own manhood" (142), and projected the image of "selfless Fatima – daughter of Muhammad – as the most appropriate model for the new Iranian womanhood" (142). Masculinity, on the other hand, was modeled based on the image of an undefeatable wise warrior who acted in complete independence from women.

Gradually, however, the restrictions imposed on gender policies in both Iran and the UK loosened to some extent. While the Islamic revolution had forced Iran toward following extremist patriarchal models of masculinity, as Chavoshian states, by the early 1990s, the model of masculinity began to deviate from the hegemonic one; the conformity of men to patriarchal norms and conditions decreased, and maleness became consistent with more realistic features. According to Chavoshian, in this era the most predominant model of Iranian masculinity represents man as more emotional than wise (75); he practiced religion but abandoned his prejudiced perspective, which at times caused trouble. To solve his problems, for instance, the typical masculine Iranian figure of the early 1990s adopted the habit of consulting with others, including women and children (76). As a result, at the same time that some were keeping to the Islamic patriarchal patterns, toward the mid 1990s, the gender ideologies of Iran became less strict.

In the UK, Anti-Thatcherite movements started in the mid 1980s. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler developed complex theories about "regulative discourses, disciplinary regimes, and gender and sexual 'performativity'" (Horton et al. 40). Gender was viewed as a "series of stylized acts and behaviors," that were "repeated until they give the illusion of authenticity" (Butler qtd. in Pinsent 110). Although the long-lasting influence of Thatcher years attempted to "exclude visible minorities" in the UK of 1990s (Holmes 152), the anti-Thatcherite activities alleviated the situation and gave a chance to writers to rearticulate gender hierarchy (Sinha 262).

MANIFESTATIONS OF GENDER IDEOLOGIES

By the early 1990s, the time at which Fine and Bayrami wrote their *Flour Baby* and *Mountain Called Me*, gender ideologies had relatively softened in both England and Iran, but the contrast between the sexual ideologies of Iran and Britain still persisted. In Britain, due to the great reduction in the social and economic power of men, the crisis of masculinity was at the highest level. Although by the early 1990s, the possibility of dread and failure had increased among Iranian men's features in media and literature of the country, Iranian men were still in patriarchal power. Unlike British women, Iranian women were still governed by men and they were required to act under men's supervision (Chavoshian 75). A reflection of these distinctions in the gender ideologies of Iran and England can be observed in the general background and masculinization process of protagonists in *Mountain Called Me* and *Flour Babies*.

MOUNTAIN CALLED ME

Background, Gender Roles, and Family Structure

Like Iran of the early 1990s, Jalal's society is highly patriarchal. In the village he lives in, and the village to which he travels to fetch Hakim, there is a clear distinction between men and women, and the traits and the roles associated with each. Women are mainly displayed as caretakers, and they usually hide themselves from the gaze of men (*Mountain Called Me* 9). Unlike the women, the male characters play an active role in village social life. They run the errands and commute to the city for different reasons (53, 59). Jalal's mother is so dependent on masculine figures that when her husband dies she feels that "the supporting pillar" of their house is ruined (66).

The patriarchal subordination is so internalized in women of Iran that once they find the opportunity to defy the heteronormative restrictions, they decline to take the chance. After the death of her husband, in spite of her success in running the manly errands skillfully, Jalal's mother feels she can never have independence from men. Though she never states it directly, Jalal's mother needs him to learn masculine duties as soon as possible and shoulder part of the work load. She knows she should hand the responsibility of her husband's tasks to a masculine figure, but she refuses to trust Jalal until he proves his own full efficiency for the position.

In line with the dominant heteronormative ideologies of the time in Iran, Bayrami's novel is not open to unconventionality neither in gender roles, nor in family structure. Traces of heteronormative restrictions can be even observed in the reason Bayrami's*Mountain Called Me* provides for the absence of the father figure. As the initial chapters of the novel reveals, Jalal's hardworking father dies out of an almost prolonged illness. Since in the conservative society of the novel, out-of-wedlock relationships are considered as adultery, and since children born as a result of such a relationship, are called illegitimate, the reason for the absence of Jalal's father cannot be other than his death.

Jalal's Masculinization Process

The Father's Role

Brought up in a strictly traditional society, Jalal practices heterosexuality and tries to "learn" it, as in Connell's terms, by imitating his own father, however absent the father is in most of the chapters of the novel. Jalal is so impressed by the model of masculinity in his own father that he cannot accept any weakness in the strength or mindset of him. The image of father is so impeccable in his opinion that when his hardworking father gets ill and feeble, Jalal tries to keep away from him. He remembers the days his father was working from "dawn to dark" (*Mountain Called Me* 40), and feels "annoyed" (60) to see him in his deathbed, losing the battle against death. His disbelief in the powerlessness of his father is to the extent that he refuses to attend the funeral when his father dies.

Based on what Jalal remembers from his father, he has learned that one can be considered as a "man" only on the condition that he "tolerates every difficulty" (43). Jalal, therefore, tries to improve his own maleness by taking full responsibility for difficult masculine tasks. The intense premature interest of Jalal in being accepted as a masculine adult can be observed from the very beginning pages of *Mountain Called Me* when Jalal goes to the

neighboring village to fetch Hakim for his inert father, and in the dramatic courage he displays in their flight from the herd of wolves.

Although Hakim cannot treat his father, the journey helps Jalal to take a huge step toward the acquisition of the adulthood he desired. His father takes Jalal's success in fetching Hakim as an obvious evidence of his entry into adult maleness. The eyes of his sick father "glitter" as he says: "Thanks goodness... you are turning gradually into a man. Now, if I die, I'll have no worries" (42). His father has such a high opinion of Jalal's manhood that in continuation of his words, he asks Jalal to promise that after his death he will "stand still and keep the family up" (42). A few days after encouraging Jalal into acting as a father substitute, his father dies an early death and leaves Jalal with a heteronormative masculine duty to take care of his mother and his younger sister in his absence.

The Task

After the death of the father figure, the rest of Bayrami's novel mainly focuses on how Jalal attempts to fulfill the assigned masculine duty. In opposition with the temporary and unreal nature of Simon's assignment, there is a sense of obligation in Jalal's duty as long as his success in performing the task can save the honor of his family in front of others. His failure in handling the assigned duty will cost their dependence on others and it will dishonor his family as Narges states (*Mountain Called Me* 66). The task Jalal has to shoulder is so decisive and huge that after the death of his father, he feels he is not ready to accept it. Once his father dies, Jalal sits outside their own house "trembling" (31), looking at the funeral goers. The necessity of acting as a father substitute makes Jalal feel that the "mountain of problems is about to break his back" (65). Yet, to achieve masculinity, Jalal has to find a solution for the problem.

The Mother's Role

To overcome the challenge the task creates in the masculinization process of Jalal, he starts by imitating his own mother. Although he considers men's abilities to be higher than women's, he thinks that the imitation and cooperation with his mother will make the situation more manageable for him. To handle tasks as his father used to do, Jalal "looks carefully" at how quickly and skillfully his mother carries them out (*Mountain Called Me* 80). He, at the same time, considers what she does as his own right. He looks at his mother with the eye of a "creditor" (82) as if she owes Jalal the position and the share of duties that his father had assigned Jalal to perform. Based on the promising words his father had told at the time Jalal fetched Hakim, the boy knows that sooner or later he'll win the position back, and perfect it.

Although, at first, Jalal thinks it to be easy and achievable to imitate his own mother, he almost fails in acting like her. He makes several mistakes in imitating his mother, and he is severely reproached by her every time he does something wrong. In his mother's opinion, Jalal is "just a cause of trouble" (77). Acting in competition with his mother, Jalal feels like a loser. Unlike his father, who believed that he could give the management of his family to Jalal, his Mother makes him doubt his own capabilities, repeating that "You cannot make it" (81); every time Jalal talks about stepping into his mother's shoes or about taking her "place" in performing duties, she disagrees and gets angry at him. Jalal, as a result, gets disappointed. He longs for a day in which his mother "may smile" at him in appreciation of the effort he had put in helping her (85).

Anxiety of Masculinity

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Because of his inability to compete successfully withhis own mother, Jalal goes through the anxiety of masculinity; he fears that the humiliating situation may degrade him from achieving the manliness he desires. What scares him is that in sharp contrast with the confidence his father used to inspire in him, his mother's words about Jalal's inefficiency prove to be true. Whatever he does in imitation of adults, leads to a bigger difficulty. Once he tries to imitate his mother in cutting the grass, he cuts his own hand (*Mountain Called Me* 86). The time he plows snow, like their neighboring men, he gets a heavy cold (73). Jalal is confused by the contradiction between his father's and his mother's words.

The anxiety of masculinity in Jalal's story is very severe because as Connell states in societies in which "dominant gender ideology insists on the absolute difference of masculinity from femininity," adolescent boys go through a high level of anxiety, and they have to deal with greater "developmental dilemma" (13). Since Iran of the early 1990s insists more on the necessity of the preservation of gender distinctions, the anxiety of achieving an acceptable masculinity is extremely serious for Jalal. The challenge his father's death has created in the patriarchal hierarchy of their house, and his ongoing struggle over authority, makes Jalal impatient with the situation. To be in an inferior rank, compared to his mother's, is intolerable for Jalal because to his understanding, inadequacy and failure cannot, in his society, come together with manliness.

Behavioral Defeminization

Jalal tries to overcome his own anxiety by what Zucker et al. calls "behavioral defeminization," i.e. by decreasing the "likelihood of typical female behavior" in himself (137), or "exaggerate[ing] the enactment of masculinity" as Connell states (13). In an attempt to restore the masculinity his father used to encourage in him, Jalal decides to "side with" his paternal uncle Es'Hagh (*Mountain Called Me* 93) and attempts to join him in his journey for hunting partridges. Although his mother predicts that the journey will end up in another "blunder" on the side of Jalal (95), it is important for Jalal to undertake it because as his mother says "only men can go hunting" (94). By siding with Es'Hagh he intends to get rid of the inferiority he feels in losing the competition against his mother. The journey is of such a considerable value that even when Es'Hagh does not accept his company, Jalal keeps following him secretly. At the beginning of his journey, when Jalal starts to trace his uncle's footsteps on the snow, Jalal is lost in the thought of a day in which he may rub shoulders with his uncle, and stand shoulder to shoulder with him (99). By going on this journey, Jalal intends to strengthen his relationship with men.

Possibility of Deficiency in Men

What helps Jalal further overcome the anxiety of masculinity, is the possibility of contradictions in men's behavior. Toward the end of Bayrami's novel, Jalal understands that all of the features associated with the traditional hegemonic masculinity cannot be found in any one man. Once he joins Uncle Es'Hagh for hunting partridges, to his disappointment, Jalal learns that his uncle is, like Jalal himself, worried about being degraded into a "simpleton" (*Mountain Called Me* 102) and that Es'Hagh himself had headed for the journey to overcome the same anxiety of masculinity. Contrary to Jalal's expectation of his unbending uncle, during the hunting journey, Es'Hagh is accidentally wiped out by an avalanche, and it is Jalal who rescues him. To witness his uncle's shameful failure (114) (of getting caught in an avalanche) is so unpleasant that Jalal refuses to talk about the incident when he returns home. Perhaps he believes that talking about another man's failure would aggravate his own humiliation in the

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competition with his mother. This time his mother admires Jalal for saving Uncle Es'Hagh – regardless of the failure they had faced in hunting partridges – and Jalal comes to understand that mistakes are not unpardonable in masculinity.

Interdependence of Masculinity on Femininity

What alleviates his anguish more is the knowledge Jalal gains about the dependence of masculinity on femininity. Although Jalal initially intended to achieve adult masculinity by copying what his father had done, the change of situation forces him into cooperation with women. After the death of his father, when the fear of facing the mountain of problems "gnaws" at Jalal, and when he feels that "something is taking away [his] whole strength" (*Mountain Called Me* 64), it is the advice of Aunt Narges that "ignites a spark of light" in Jalal's heart, and "entices" him to resist (65). Without the advice of Narges, without Jalal's imitation of his mother and competing with her, Jalal would have never "taken action" on the task his father had inducted him (66).

FLOUR BABIES

Background, Gender Roles, and Family Structure

In Simon's society, unlike Jalal's, tasks are not necessarily assigned to the people of a specific gender, and the protagonist's mother does not seem to experience the anxieties Jalal's mother had for performing paternal tasks of parenting. Unlike Jalal who had witnessed the complaints of his own mother about the absence of his father, Simon has "never heard [his mom] wishing his father back again" (*Flour Babies* 59). She has excelled her husband in parenting, and has managed to run the errands by herself, without expecting her son to shoulder them before the proper time arrives.

As in Bayrami's novel, family plays an important role in masculinization of the protagonist in *Flour Babies*. But the definition of family in Fine's novel is different from what Jalal's story presents. Opposite to Jalal's country, Iran, in which heterosexual family structure is highly insisted on, in Simon's Britain "more than one-third of all births" have "occurred outside marriage" (Thane par. 25). According to Thane's investigation on the rate of marriage and cohabitation, the problem of the "absent fathers" was "especially" rampant in "the early 90s," the time in which Fine was writing *Flour Baby*. In the society where Simon and his family live, as Mr. Cassidy says, "Some parents swapped spouses around like new computer games, or football cards" (*Flour Babies* 115). Simon's mother and father did not have a "real formal wedding or anything" (40). Unlike Jalal, Simon is born out of wedlock, and this indicates that there are possibilities of unconventionality in the context of Fine's novel.

Simon's Masculinization Process

The Father's Role

Taking into account Connell's insistence on the interrelationship between masculinity and social contexts, considering the contrast in the general background of *Mountain Called Me* and *Flour Babies*, and the correspondence of this contrast with the social situation of England and Iran in the early 1990s, one may expect to see a clear-cut distinction between Jalal and

Simon'smasculinization process. Similarities, however, outnumber the differences. Like Jalal, Simon starts to learn masculinity by imitating his own absent fathers.

Before the start of the flour baby project, Simon, like Jalal, used to have a high opinion of his own father and his manners. To find about why his father had left, Simon used to look for a flaw either in himself (as a six-week-old baby) or in his own mother to convince himself of the rightfulness of his father in leaving them behind. Prior to Simon's getting interested in the flour baby project, like Jalal, he holds such a sexist perspective that he never blames his father for leaving his mother. As in Bayrami's novel, he initially thinks of the division between gender identities based on the pre-determined biological sex of individuals, and he considers rearing children as a "girl's thing" in which males were not to get involved (*Flour Babies* 9). It is based on this biological perception of gender that Simon cannot initially find any flaw in his father's character.

In a traditionally patriarchal way, Simon believes that not only women but also their tasks are of a lower value. The reason that he primarily insists on choosing to participate in the Flour Baby project is not his interest in feminine tasks, but his misconceptions about the joy they would have at the end of the project by "The Great Explosion" (50) in imitation of his irresponsible father. When he is asked about any his experiences he has of cooking as a boy, he says: "We [boys] could have starved … We could have keeled over and died before we got around to actual cooking" (29). Like Jalal, Simon thinks in terms of the heterosexual male/ female dichotomy.

Because of his elevated opinion about his own father, Simon, like Jalal, initially believes that imitating the behavior and the traits of his father will safely take him into adult maleness. Without having even a photograph of his father (40), Simon used to have daydreams about his father's physical appearance and behavior. He thinks of his father as a powerful man with "strong arms" into which he would one day throw himself (60). Based on the brief talks others sometimes have regarding his father, Simon develops a variety of ideas about his father's typical behavioral features and applies these ideas into his own daily life.

Having heard about his father's "tantrum" in a shoe store (41) and his easy departure from Simon and his mother, Simon – before the start of the Flour Baby project – comes to the conclusion that manliness is equal with doing evil, being irresponsible, and showing disregard for women. In the same way as his unreliable father, Simon plans to "boot into the creek" (86) the flour baby that he will be responsible for. He encourages his classmates into voting for the project in order to plot against their teacher, Mr. Cassidy, and to "[l]et the chaos reign" (31). In contrast to Jalal, Simon has learned irresponsibility and evil from his father, and this indicates that in Simon's society, like in Jalal's, there are possibilities of deviation from the traditional models of masculinity.

The Task

In the same way that Bayrami devotes the main part of his novel to how Jalal fulfills his assigned task, Fine's novel is also mostly focused on the ways that Simon performs his assignment. Yet, from a heteronormative perspective, the type of Simon's assignment is different from Jalal's. In contrast to Jalal's masculine duty, Simon is expected to fulfill afeminine task. For the school science fair there are a number of exciting projects to choose from. But for those like Simon who did not passPhysics, Chemistry and Biology, their only option for the science project is the flour baby. Simon and his classmates in Room 8 are

supposed to take care of a bag of flour, for 3 weeks, to fulfill their part in the annual school science fair.

However feminine the task may sound to the Room 8 boys, as Simon's classmate, George, later states, the project aims to let the boys learn about themselves and how they feel "about the job of being a parent" (*Flour Babies* 92). In spite of its unmanly nature, it seems that the task does work in the life of Fine's boys. Contrary to the difficulties Jalal has to go through in fulfilling his duties and saving the honor of his own family, Simon's assignment is so girlish and humiliating that, initially, he puts all his effort into hiding the bag of flour from his teammates (*Flour Babies* 46-9). He later convinces himself, however, into obeying the rules of the project so that by the end of the third week, he can enjoy the "Great Explosion".

The Mother's Role

In order to be included among the students who enjoy the Great Explosion and those who participate in Science Fair for their school, Simon has to pass through three weeks of nurturing his own flour baby in spite of having no initial interest in doing so. Similar to Jalal, Simon looks for a role model to help make the challenge manageable for him. Since his mother is experienced enough in parenting (*Flour Babies* 64), and because the assignment is considered to be feminine in nature, Simon thinks that it would be to his own advantage to follow his own mother and to learn from her about how to take care of his flour baby.

As in Jalal's case, however, the imitation leads to a failure. Simon finds that he cannot compete with his mother in taking care of his flour baby. In contrast to the encouraging feedback Simon receives from Dr. Devoy for how well he proceeds in the flour baby project (*Flour Babies* 66), Simon feels like a looser and confesses to Wayne that: "I'm not the type, you see. I thought I was, at first. But it turned out I was wrong. Some people are good at looking after things. Some people aren't. I guess I'm out of the second box" (129). The flour baby Simon finally hands to his teacher, at the end of the project, is in a "disgusting" and the "most disgraceful" state (147). Although the idea of imitating his mother had initially made the task look easy and manageable, the dirt on his flour baby on the last days shows that Simon has, in fact, failed to take proper care of his bag of flour.

Anxiety of Masculinity

In the same way with Jalal who suffers from the anxiety of masculinity because of his inability to competently compete with his mother, Simon becomes suspicious of his own masculine potential as he fails to properly nurture his flour baby. The Room 8 boys' opinion is that taking care of the flour baby turns them into "soft targets" for the other students (152) because it contradicts the dignity conventionally associated with maleness. Yet, the threat Simon feels against his own gender identity is not as great as Jalal's. In Simon's story, before the humiliation caused by the reversal of hierarchies at home or school, Simon and his classmates in Room 8 had observed girls doing better than males in science (9) and they do know about the possibility of deficiencies in males.

Behavioral Defeminization

In reaction to the anxiety of masculinity, Simon, like Jalal, makes use of defeminization approaches to restore for himself the threatened sense of maleness. But he does not continue it for long. For Simon whose father has been absent since he was an infant, it is no big surprise to

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see his mother in charge of household management. Unlike Jalal, who sticks to his attempt to betotally independent from women, Simon holds such a hope only in the beginning of the novel, mainly by improving his own skills in sports. He is "proud" of his own "soccer practices" (*Flour Babies* 41), and considers his sports skill a mark of distinction between himself and his mother, who seems to have "never been in a locker room" (42). Towards the middle of the novel, however, he changes his mind about the distinction between himself and females, and gradually becomes interested in taking care of his flour baby to the extent that his friends begin to call him "Old Mrs. Martin or Mother Sime" (35). In Simon's society, as in postmodern England, gender norms are already disturbed, and the boundary between masculinity and femininity is blurred.

Possibility of Deficiency in Men

The anxiety Simon gets when he fails to act out his task properly, is soothed as he becomes aware, like Jalal, about the acceptability of faults. By the start of the flour baby project, Simon learns that the ideal masculinity he used to associate with his absent father is just an illusion. The 3-week Flour Baby project, during which Simon had been "discussing his life with the flour baby," opens his eyes toward his father's inability to parent (*Flour Babies* 174). "He couldn't handle it either, that's obvious" Simon says about his own father (129). Unlike Jalal, who witnesses the possibility of weakness in his own father, and yet sticks to him and to the patriarchal model of his society in his masculinization process, Simon challenges the model as soon as he discovers the drawbacks of it.

In spite of his initial dreams about the return of his father, by the end of the story Simon decides not to even "count" on his father at all (173). In his flour baby diary, on the 4th day, he writes: "Until I was forced to lug this stupid flour baby around with me everywhere I go, I never thought about my dad having to take care of me" (74). The Flour Baby project makes Simon aware of the mistake in his own father's masculinity and this awareness of weakness in his father convinces Simon of his own potential for becoming a good father in the future, although he did not take good care of his bag of flour.

Interdependence of masculinity on femininity

In the same way that learning about the dependence of maleness on femaleness relieved s Jalal's anxiety, in Fine's novel, also, the protagonist calms down by understanding the mutual dependence between masculinity and femininity. As the story develops, the success of Room 8 boys' in the girlish Flour Baby project turns into a criterion for their maturity in masculinity. Simon gradually comes to the opinion that those of his classmates who, like Delaney, boot their flour babies, are "immature" (*Flour Babies* 108). The girlish ability to treat children properly, has an effect even in soccer, the field Simon used to consider as merely masculine. Simon learns from his own coach that in order to perfect soccer, he should not "hammer" the ball; instead, he should "treat it gently as a baby!" (54). As in Jalal's story, Simon's initial attempt to merely depend on the model of his own (imagined) father comes to no worthwhile end.

GENDER POLICIES OF THE 1990s

Considering Connell's insistence on the relationship between formation of masculinity and gender ideologies of each society, it would be very simplistic to think that theabove-mentioned similarities in Jalal and Simon's masculinization process have their roots in the resemblance of the social and sexual orientation of Iran and England in the early 1990s. In contrast to what Connell calls as "too simple social studies" (852), it would be more logical to

have a look at the general trend of young adult literature in each country, to pay attention to the mutual influence social forces in each country have on gender policies, and to take into account the personal perspective of Bayrami and Fine toward the dominant gender ideologies of their own times.

The early 1990s was a time for the reconsideration of gender policies in England. According to Sinfield (xxi):

> When Margaret Thatcher lost the leadership of her party, in 1990, it was tempting to suppose that cultural workers would pick up where they have left off when she came into office in 1979. 'It was to many of us in the arts as if the curse had been lifted' Howard Brenton wrote. 'Perhaps now, we can all get back to normal' said Roland Rees, director of Foco Novo theater company. But of course there is no going back. Anyway, where were we before wasn't good enough.

Because of the development of homophobia, British society of the 1990s was divided between two main trends of masculinity: conservatives and non-conservatives. The conservative group consisted of a large number of writers, including Fine who preferred to "transfigure everyday realities" and to "defy the visible" (Pavel 530). Fine, like her peers, reproached "social realist" young adult works of her own time, because she believed that frankness about gender issues "could facilitate unwanted and dangerous sexual learning" (qtd. in Mellor 444). While examples of gay masculinity was being observed in British schools (Connell 17), and at the same time that young adult novels were being published on gay masculinity – for example, *Dance on My Grave* of 1982 – Fine limited the protagonist of her award winning *Flour Babies* to a heteronormative life style, as in her other works, *Madame Doubtfire* (1987) and *Goggle-Eyes* (1989).

Although LGBT identities are sometimes not welcomed in the UK, their mere presence in Britain of the 1990s inevitably challenged gender stereotypes and created a chance for revision in patriarchal assumptions about sexuality. As a result, maleness in Britain, in the last decade of the 20th century, has evolved into "a softer, more sensitive identity" (Abate 18). Traces of this flexibility are observed in Fine's *Flour Babies*. By assigning Simon to an assimilated version of the task his own father escaped, Simon is drawn into experiencing an innovative situation within which he becomes aware of the drawbacks of his father's model of masculinity, and therefore accepts and makes revisions to his beliefs about the duties of a father, and by default, masculinity.

In contrast with the conservative escape the majority of British writers were making from expressing the social realities of their time, in line with the localization projects of the Islamic Iranian regime, young adult novelists of Iran, in the early 1990s, were determined to create high-quality realistic works. The interest in realistic style had its roots in the anti-imperialist models proposed by two great young adult writers, SamadBehrangi and Jalal Ale Ahmad (Abbasi 122).They gave advice for their young readers about raising social and moral awareness. Until the revolution of 1979, England exploited Iran in different ways to keep the country politically and economically dependent on the UK.

Before the Islamic revolution, Iran was being ruled by an agent of Britain, Reza Shah, who was installed to the throne by the help of General Edmund Ironside, the senior officer of British Army (Ansari 26). At that time, one fifth of the books published for Iranian children and young adults were translations of English works, including *Treasure Island, Alice's Adventures*

in Wonderland, The Chronicles of Narnia, etc. The abundance of the elements of magic and fantasy in these books influenced their young readers to deviate from social facts, they also created "a model of both unconstrained masculine individualism and extreme debasement" (64). To counter this influx of imperialistic fantasy fiction, Iran favored realism after the 1979 revolution. In his article ,"Children and Literature" Behrangi advises young adult writers as follows:

> The young should put aside the false illusion about the omnipotence of their own fathers. That their fathers are a group of miserable people struggling in the present horrible society should be disclosed to them. We should open their eyes to the true story of their fathers and their inabilities. We should reveal the social problems, and let them know that there is no need for beating women up to display masculinity.

But all of the changes made toward realistic representation of masculinity were in Iran to be done within the framework of heterosexuality because,in addition to the establishment of the Islamic government of the time, in the early 1990s the 8-year war with neighboring Iraq had recently ended and "Islamic hypermasculinity" (Gerami 257) was the ruling ideology. Connell defines war as a "coercive" force in the development of heteronormativity as it destroys "much of the prior framework of social authority" by shooting and killing "men and teenage boys," (18) and thereby functioning as a disempowerment, which in turn creates a need for a renewed emphasis on masculinity. The switch to more realistic works about masculinity could, therefore, sooth the problem created by war to some extent.

Traces of Connell's coercive hypermasculinity can be easily found in Bayrami's novel. Although Jalal acquires maleness in relationship with the females, he manages to prove his own superiority at the end of the novel. Through saving Uncle Es'Hagh from the avalanche, Jalal finally gains the appreciation he expected from his mother, and wins the privileged position back from her. In the same way with the model of masculinity of the early 1990s, Jalal practices the tasks of his father again and again to the extent that he manages to convince others of his own efficiency for taking full responsibility for those tasks.... In Jalal's story, nevertheless, the competition between the mother and son comes to an end when, in the hierarchical structure of Jalal's family, the autonomy of the male figure is restored.

Because of the challenges made in the gender stereotypes of the UK in the 1990s, however, it is not possible to find an autonomous masculinity in Fine's novel. By the end of the story, Simon gives up the rivalry and reverses the hierarchy of men over women by creating a heroine out of his mother. Talking about the torture of having a baby, Simon says: "it made being a teacher look like party time. No wonder his father hadn't been able to stick it. ... And look at his mother! Her score was up in the hundreds of thousands already! She must be a real heroine. She must be a saint" (*Flour Babies* 171). In contrast with Jalal's story, masculinity and maleness can no longer preserve their initial superiority by the end of Simon's novel.

In spite of the difference the novels have in the position they assume for women, both stories associate acquisition of adult masculinity with fatherhood and thus, they both pursue heterosexual purposes (Connell 17). Yet, based on the gender policies of each country, each of the protagonists holds a different opinion about the proper time for shouldering masculine responsibility. By comparing the flour baby project with the

actual tasks of adults, Simon comes to the conclusion that to do parental duties, like a trap, ends in "Twenty-four hour shifts. Every day. For nearly twenty years. No breaks. No holidays" (*Flour Babies* 170); unlike Jalal's interest in the tasks related to adult masculinity, Simon knows about the problem of pre-mature masculinization in his own father (77) and quits the responsibility as it is too early for him: "When the right moment came, there would be all the time in the world to be good father. But not now. Not while he was so young" (*Flour Babies* 175). Unlike Jalal who eagerly steps into his father's shoes at the end of the story, Simon decides not to repeat the mistake his father had made.

In Jalal's society, however, gender roles are so "narrow and oppressive" that in case of any role violation, individuals are required to immediately take action for the preservation of the traditional, the man-on-top heteronormative frameworks (Yaghoob 5). Because Bayrami sets his novel in a farfetched village, there seems to be more insistence on the preservation of traditions in Jalal's society. When his father died and his mother reversed the patriarchal hierarchy (by taking on all parental responsibilities), Jalal was forced into practicing his father's acts over and over, to put things right. Jalal's scenario of coming-of-age is an example of "compulsory sexuality" as Quint would call it (41). Unlike Fine's innovative approach to practicing adulthood with a six pound bag of flour, Jalal has to rehearse it through hard tasks that are "already defined as masculine" (41), such as escaping from a pack of wolves, perfecting grass cutting skills, or by hunting partridge.

Although both novels highlight heteronormativity, gender roles are more flexible in Simon's heteronormative lifestyle. Though he has failed to surpass his mother, as Mr. Cassidy says, Simon will "make a better father than most" of his classmates (*Flour Babies* 156). In contrast to Simon's society that does not restrict him to a single pathway toward adulthood, Jalal has to go through what Butler calls "heterosexual coherence" (qtd. in Quint 42), which prepares Jalal for taking on the already-defined gender roles in his society. Unlike Simon, for whom horizons of self-construction are "wider than he could imagine" (Flour Babies 175), Jalal has to stick to his father's lifestyle in framing his own identity. In opposition with Simon, who at the end of the novel, feels to be "free, free, free" from all responsibilities (174), Jalal is obliged to take on the role of a masculine adult in his adolescence.

CONCLUSION

All in all, as Connell states, social elements play a significant role not only in the procedure of the construction of masculinity in *Flour Babies* and *Mountain Called Me*, but also in the perception the characters develop, toward the end of the novel, about masculinity/ femininity and the consequent mentality they choose to hold about gender roles. Social dynamics are so complicated and influential on the interactions between male and female gender identities that one may find opposing reasons behind the similarities that pop up here and there in the novels. There are contrasting logics behind the resemblance Jalal and Simon seem to have in their experiencing the anxiety of masculinity. While Bayrami tries to raise awareness in his readers and to open up the conventional models of hegemonic masculinity to display the constructed nature of gender identities, Fine attempts to convince her readers to preserve heterosexual conventions in the face of ever developing LGBT identities. Instead of introducing her

readers to the innovative gender identities of her time, Fine tries to display the possibility of revision and improvement in the heteronormative lifestyle.

* Excerpts given from *Mountain Called Me and Persian secondary sources* are my own translations.

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