

Cinema and a brief History of Queerness in Contemporary Iran

By Kamran Behrouz

The History of sex and gender in Iran is pretty peculiar: “*The distinction between the (acceptable) trans and the (deviant) homosexual has been enabled by biomedical, psychological, legal, and jurisprudential discourses that emerged between the 1940s and the 1970s in Iran, [which] resulted in the dominance of “physio-psycho-sexology” within the medical and health scientific community by the late 1960s.[...] This dominance proved critical in disaffiliating the trans from the intersex category and affiliating it with the homosexual and the transvestite. Physio-psycho-sexology also informed the emergent criminological discourse, such that sexual deviance was diagnosed as potentially criminal.*” Such associations forged dominant perceptions of homosexuality in Iran “[...] and haunts transwomen’s lives even after sex reassignment surgery”

“*The 1979 revolution, and in particular the cultural purification campaigns of the first few years after the revolution, ruptured the dynamic of acceptability and marginalization of what have already been considered as “vulgar” and “deviant” accorded by the larger society.*” (Afsaneh Najmabadi : 2014)¹

One of the crucial effects of this process after 1979 was: “*the way Islam as an overarching discourse of governance gained power in relation to the scientific discourses that had held sway previously.*”²

This transformation resulted in 40 years of censorship in terms of representation, alongside a lack of sufficient public education regarding sexuality and health under the new rigid legal-religious jurisprudential system that accepts trans people as ‘correction cases’ and considers homosexuals as fundamentally deviant. However as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues “[This] *has paradoxically created new social spaces. Instead of constructing an impassable border, the process has generated a porously marked, nebulous, and spacious domain populated by a variety of “not-normal” people.*”³

Simultaneously, studying all these varieties of so called “not-normal people”, became what in Western socio-political, philosophical and scientific discourses emerged as *queer theory* and embodied LGBT(NI)QA+ identities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, (Nonbinary and Intersex), Queer, Asexual, and so on...)

Today we are witnessing the emergence of these identities and their narratives within Iranian cinema which have been shaped over the last two decades and resulted in a fresh new wave of queer Iranian wo(men) filmmakers who are challenging the normative views: (Trans)national filmmakers such as Maryam Keshavarz (*circumstance, 2011*), Anahita Ghazvinizadeh (*They, 2017*), and also Desiree Akhavan who captured the sexual anxiety of Iranian diaspora perfectly in her witty comedy *appropriate behavior(2014)*.

¹Professing selves: Transsexuality and same sex desire in contemporary Iran, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Duke university press, Durham, 2014

² Professing selves: Transsexuality and same sex desire in contemporary Iran, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Duke university press, Durham, 2014, p.6

³ Professing selves: Transsexuality and same sex desire in contemporary Iran, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Duke university press, Durham, 2014, p.4