



(QUEER) IRANIAN FILM FESTIVAL ZURICH

For me personally, the most problematic part of writing about Anahita Ghazvinizadeh's movie is the question of how to translate the title *They* into Farsi. Over the last decades, in the English language, "They" has become an alternative pronoun to address non-binary people, those who does not identify themselves as either a man or a woman. However, Farsi is one of those peculiar languages which does not register gender (which means there is no he or she in Farsi). The 'literal' translation of they from English into Farsi is "anha/آنها" – which is merely the 'normal' plural. In addition there is the pronoun "ou/او" (singular), which is used for both men and women. At the same time, there are other problems in this language. For instance, in Farsi, both words sex and gender are covered by one word "Jensiat", similar to the Latin word "genus". "Sex" and "gender" as keywords in trans-Atlantic feminist theory have long involved problems of untranslatability in queer-feminist discourses within different languages.

In her outstanding movie, Anahita has found a very eloquent way to show the dichotomy of sex and gender by repeatedly using slow close-ups of flowers. Psychoanalytically, flowers might be considered as a representation of sexuality. It is no surprise that Slavoj Žižek —with his patriarchal mindset— considers flowers pejoratively, "something inferentially disgusting, basically they're like vaginas who are ready to swallow". Anahita, by focusing on the bold images of flowers, creates a profound parallel to the dichotomy of sex and gender which 'J'— the protagonist of this movie — is battling with. J (played by Rhys Fehrenbacher) is a child with so-called gender dysphoria, constantly repeats the following verse from a poem during the film: "I don't know my age, tell me how old I am." to remind us of their discomfort. J inherits a greenhouse by their parents; they need to take care of them while the parents are away. The relationship between J and the greenhouse filled with flowers stands as a metaphor for the sex that J has been assigned by birth. However, their gender is not really synchronized with their sex, as we realize during a conversation with their sister Lauren, when they talk about the exercise proposed by J's doctor: "Wake up every morning and write down who you are; girl, boy, boy, girl and blank (when you don't know)" This represents one of the most common issues that non-binary, intersex and trans people have to deal with, in the medical system perpetuated by the heteronormative structures of a society which often places these people, as it were, in the boxes of normativity. In other words, eventually every intersex, trans or non-binary person is expected to decide (or it will be decided for them due to their level of hormones) whether they want to become a man or a woman. However, this is not the case with many people dealing with gender dysphoria. In fact, many intersex or non-binary people do not consider themselves as either a man or a woman and they feel comfortable with their bodies, some of them do not even feel urge to go through *sex reassignment surgery*. There are several psychoanalytical scenes in this movie which reflect this issue: for example, the close up of the hole in the wall next to the poem written on a piece of paper, or the insecurity of J during the Kurdish dance with other boys and girls, and specifically, the scene, when J is wearing a floral pattern dress and helping other boys to fix their bike and their dress is marked by a black stain of oil. The stain serves as a symbol of the conflict imposed by normative gender roles.

The relation between the two protagonists of the movie, J and Araz (played by Koohyar Hosseini) shapes the overall narrative: one is an Iranian immigrant dealing with the notion of statelessness, planing to marry Lauren to solve his immigration status, the other, J, a gender-dysphoric child. These parallel stories represents two people who are not feeling at home in this world. They both deal with similar issues but in very different contexts, and we realized this during their conversation outside of a public bathroom. When Araz talks about his relationship with Lauren's former partner and waiting to end the conversation to use the men's bathroom, while asking J "how should I introduce you to my family? Do you want me to say you're Lauren's ... or Should I call you THEY?" And J replies: "you can tell them that I'm Lauren's brother"

As we know trans people continue to be discriminated against, for example when it comes to trans people being barred from using the restroom related to their preferred gender. The heavy weight of this scene, with the gendered bathroom signs in the background, echoes this daily battle of trans people.

Anahita's movie opens up a window for the audience, allowing them to see the world through the eyes of both J and Araz. In fact, the translation of they in Farsi as "anha" (plural) might not necessarily be a wrong decision after all, cause it is not only the story of J, but rather the story of both protagonists, neither of whom feels at home in this world. The verse of "Tell me what age I am" repeated by J, echoes the question of identity and gender and in the case of Araz it echoes as "tell me where do I belong? Where is my country? As Sara Ahmed said: "Perhaps gender becomes more work for those who feel less at home in their original assignments. We might, early on, not be at home in a body by not being at home in a sign." *They* is the story of people who belong to a minority – like Araz or J – who find themselves unable and unwilling to conform to the 'pre-fabricated,' normative boxes of hetero-patriarchal life. And we as an audience are privileged to walk in their uncomfortable shoes and, for a moment, experience what it is like to deal with gender dysphoria or displacement in an environment that offers little or no support, or in other words how it feels to not be at home in this world.