

I F J P c o n f e r e n c e k e y n o t e

Queer Questions

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Abstract

As rights claims on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity occupy an increasingly prominent place in international politics, it seems clear that the long-running Woman Question has been supplemented by a set of variously articulated “queer questions.” Drawing on postcolonial, feminist and queer theory, and readings of queer literary and cinematic texts from India and Iran, this article explores moments of resonance, intersection and tension between the Woman Question and queer questions. It argues, first, that contemporary queer questions echo the preoccupations of the Woman Question even as they are uncannily prefigured by it; second, that these questions have been mutually disruptive of one another, so that queer questions are not simply a rerun of the Woman Question; and third, that differences between these questions are problematically flattened out in projections of shared futurity articulated in the abstract universality of “human rights.” Navigating the shared pasts, fraught presents and imagined futures of Woman and queer questions, the article brings queer critiques of temporality to bear on the concerns of postcolonial queer activism. It elucidates opportunities and challenges for alliance between the subjectivities interpellated by these various questions. In addition, it asks how the proliferation of new subjectivities under the sign of “queer” troubles notions of universal human rights.

Keywords

woman question, homosexual question, feminism, queer, trans*, postcolonial, universalism, temporality, nostalgia, futurity

INTRODUCTION

the “Woman Question” is now being supplemented with the “Homosexual Question.” That is, in the colonial period, the question of “how do you treat your women?” as a determining factor of a nation’s capacity for sovereignty has now been appended with the barometer of “how well do you treat your homosexuals?” (Puar 2011, 139)

We might imagine the chapters of a people’s history of the world to be named after those querulous constituencies that have troubled international politics: the Jewish Question, the Woman Question, the Question of Palestine and a host of lower-case questions that have struggled to make it onto the international agenda. Perhaps a more fundamental consideration for such an endeavor would be the relationship *between* these various questions. How might the addition of new chapters to successive editions of this imaginary text revise our understanding of the earlier ones? How might they trouble in new ways the foundational premises of such a text? Understood in its Derridean sense as implying both accretion and substitution, the term “supplemented” in Jasbir Puar’s observation above suggests that the “Homosexual Question” is not only adding its weight to the long-running Woman Question, but also transforming it. In this article I explore the intertwined trajectories of these questions, bringing to light moments of resonance, intersection and tension between them.

This article offers a temporal reading of the relationship between the Woman Question and the cluster of queer questions in which the Homosexual Question finds its place. The “now” in Puar’s observation that “the ‘Woman Question’ is now being supplemented with the ‘Homosexual Question’” invites comparison between a then and a now, between the mid-nineteenth-century Victorian world in which the Woman Question was first posed, and the contemporary moment in which “LGBT rights” have become a marker of modernity (Hoad 2000; Binnie 2004, 68–76). Sexual minority activism today is suffused with temporal tropes. A widely circulated recent video on LGBT rights produced by the NGO ARC International (2013), citing a speech by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, is titled “The Time Has Come.” Campaigns for same-sex marriage in the USA urge us to “be on the right side of history” (about which more later), and in Australia declare simply “It’s Time” (Johanson 2011). These messages attest to the force of the “now,” perhaps signaling the achievement of a norm “tipping point” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) marking the onset of a temporal phase of wider acceptance of LGBT rights and conjuring up visions of progress. In contrast to the conventional imagining of progress as forward movement, Walter Benjamin (1940) imagines progress in the figure of the Angel of History, blown by a storm from Paradise with his face turned toward the past and his back to the future. I argue in the first part of this article that contemporary queer questions, rather like Benjamin’s Angel, are haunted by the “past” of the Woman

Question, even as they are uncannily prefigured by it. Breaking with this story of continuity, the second part of the article explores how queer questions have disrupted the Woman Question and themselves been disrupted by it. My claim here is that resemblances notwithstanding, queer questions are not simply a rerun of the Woman Question. Dissonances between these questions tend to be flattened out in projections of shared futurity, in which incommensurability is subsumed into the abstract universality of “human rights.” The third part of the article investigates what is at stake in such projections of futurity and asks how the ceaseless proliferation of “queer questions” might trouble the universal categories into which they are subsumed.

Temporality has been a central concern for queer and postcolonial theory. If queer, by definition, sets itself against the normal (Warner 1993), it is not surprising that it has been critical of “chrononormativity,” understood as the myriad ways in which time functions as an apparatus of regulation (Freeman 2010). Lee Edelman (2004) has drawn attention to the disciplining effects of tropes of futurity that curtail liberty in the present through the guise of offering a new politics in an endlessly deferred future. Edelman’s withering reading of the song from the musical *Annie* – “Tomorrow” is “*always/A day/Away*” (30) – sounds rather like Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000, 65) critique of the deferred promise of liberalism, which leaves the postcolonial world perpetually stranded in what he calls the “waiting room” of history. Building on this resonance between queer and postcolonial critiques of temporality, this article explores the intertwined trajectories of Woman and queer questions through readings of texts from India and Iran. I focus more on India, while drawing on Iranian texts as a point of comparison for reasons that warrant explanation.

Ever since Homi Bhabha (1994) alerted us to the proclivity of colonial discourse to split the native subject into a good, authorized agent of mimicry and a bad, subversive repository of menace, we have become aware of numerous manifestations of this phenomenon – “good Muslim, bad Muslim” (Mamdani 2005), “good queer, bad queer” (Puar 2007), to cite only two. This splitting is visible at a geopolitical level in the division of the old Third World into camps of the “rising” and the “rogue.” Such splitting also marks the discourse regarding LGBT rights in the “global South,” in which locations of hope (India, South Africa, Brazil) are frequently contrasted with locations of phobia (Iran, Uganda, Jamaica). It may seem odd to place India in the former category in light of the devastatingly retrograde judgment handed down by its Supreme Court in December 2013 (*Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation*) affirming the constitutionality of the country’s anti-sodomy provision (section 377 of the Indian Penal Code). Yet the real story here lies not so much in the text of that judgment as in the overwhelmingly critical reactions to it from Indian elites – reactions that are already being cited as confirmation of India’s modernity, contrasted with the country it once was and the countries with which it once kept company.

In the face of this splitting, not only of “West” from “non-West” in the familiar tropes of Orientalism (Said 1978), but also of “good” from “bad” Third

World, what role is there for a queer critique? In juxtaposing queer texts from India and Iran, I do not seek to invert hierarchies of good and bad, hope and abjection, modernity and backwardness. Rather, following Judith Halberstam's (2011) deconstruction of success and failure, I aim to subvert those categories by mining these locations for the radical potential that we should assume exists everywhere oppression is felt. This juxtaposition opens up possibilities for coeval engagement between "peripheries" (Godrej 2011, 14) – peripheries that, we should not forget, communicated directly with one another over long periods of their histories – without translation into the knowledge categories of the "core" of the world system. How, in other words, might queer Iranian texts speak to Indian (and other) dilemmas, and vice versa? There are no straightforward answers to these questions and this article promises none, but I hope that the very posing of the questions might be seen as an invitation and contribution to new conversations.

My exploration of the trajectories of Woman and queer questions from these postcolonial vantage points proceeds through a reading of literary and cinematic texts. In working with such texts I follow Neville Hoad (2007, 22), who argues that imaginative fiction is a useful site for the interrogation of sex, race and decolonization because it allows the horizons of the imaginable to become visible. Moreover, being works that are definitionally public and intended to be read, engaging with such texts enables less invasive forms of entry into worlds that are not one's own. Literary and cinematic texts have something in common with activist discourse: both are concerned with the limits of the imaginable, which may be quite distinct from the lived experiences of queer bodies. I read these texts less as representations of particular lifeworlds than as sites for interrogation of the vexed relationship between the subjectivities interpellated by Woman and queer questions. In doing so, I push against a tendency, identified by political theorist Leigh Jenco (2011), in which western literary and cinematic texts are able to circulate as "theory" (as they do in Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010), while non-western texts become domesticated as props for ethnography, emptied of any potential to speak to wider contexts.

I use imaginative texts to interrogate key tropes of Indian and global queer and feminist public cultures. I understand "public culture" to be a more expansive category than "activism," even if powerfully shaped by the latter. Activist discourses are selectively appropriated, ignored, subverted and re-signified by a range of other actors, both elite and subaltern, so that the eventual hegemony of particular tropes in public culture cannot be attributed purely to activist intentionality. This is not to let activists off the hook, but rather to insist that attributions of credit or blame to "activism" require a more careful tracing – beyond the scope of this article – of the processes by which activist intentionality is refracted through the structures and institutions of civil and political society. In a methodological sense, this article might be read as an illustration of the ways in which imaginative texts can help to interrogate the imaginative limits of hegemonic public cultures.

There are unmistakable continuities between the contemporary international politics of sexual minorities and prior debates over the Woman Question. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988, 297) reading of colonial feminism as "white men saving brown women from brown men" is echoed in contemporary instances of "white homosexuals saving brown homosexuals from brown homophobes" (Rao 2010, ch. 6). In this formulation, sexual liberation becomes the means by which imperialism represents itself as the establisher of the good society, championing women and queers as objects of protection from their "racial" and national kind. By the same token, marginal metropolitan groups sometimes seek full citizenship at home through participation in imperialism abroad. When right-wing US gay activists support the "war on terror" (Puar 2006; Long 2009), they echo the politics of those Victorian and Edwardian suffragists who sought political advancement in the metropolis by heeding an imperial calling as missionaries, teachers, social reformers, ethnologists and housewives in the colonies (Grewal 1996).

My interest is not so much in the metropolis as in peripheral debates over the Woman Question – in other words, the perspectives of the brown man (and ostensibly silent brown woman) in Spivak's triangular formulation, which Partha Chatterjee (1993, 119–127) has usefully unpacked. Typically, the male anticolonial nationalist posited an essential distinction between West and East marked by western supremacy in a material realm of science, commerce and statecraft, and eastern primacy in a spiritual realm of religion, art and "culture." The anticolonial project, in this view, entailed mimicry of western material advancement, but rejection of western spiritual influence. The split consciousness of anticolonial nationalism was deeply gendered, with men entrusted with the task of material mimicry in the outside world, and women responsible for reproducing indigenous culture within the home. In this dichotomous rendering of world and home, gender and sexuality were claimed as matters of the home, making their reform the prerogative of anticolonial nationalists rather than the colonial state. Bearing in mind that the filters through which anticolonial nationalists engaged with colonial modernity continue to structure their relations with postcolonial international society, we can begin to make sense of contemporary resistance to LGBT rights in the non-western world. Yesterday's anticolonial nationalists having become today's postcolonial elites, remain enthusiastic "mimic men" (Naipaul 1967) in the domain of the material, while deploying the hard-won institution of sovereignty to shield the cultural from new forms of international governmentality that remain haunted by the memory of colonial intervention in the Woman Question.

The hegemonic anticolonial resolution of the Woman Question was subject to critique in its own time. We can read Rabindranath Tagore's ([1915] 2005) novel *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* as one such critique. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, which was

provoked by the colonial government's partitioning of the province in 1905 into a Hindu-majority west and a Muslim-majority east and was an important precursor of the Gandhian independence movement (Sarkar 1973). The novel depicts a number of important debates among Swadeshi activists, personifying a chauvinistic nationalism in the character of Sandip, and a cosmopolitan anti-imperialism in the wealthy but progressive *zamindar* (landowner) Nikhilesh. Utilizing a homology between sex and politics that Ashis Nandy (1983) has shown to be a defining feature of colonial discourse, *The Home and the World* fuses the question of national self-determination with that of women's emancipation. Far more than a discussion of Swadeshi tactics, the novel is also the story of the social and sexual awakening of Bimala, Nikhilesh's wife, and a study in contrasting forms of Bengali masculinity personified by the male protagonists (Sinha 1995).

One of the most significant movements in the narrative occurs when Bimala crosses the threshold of the *zenana* (women's space) into the outer apartments of the household, leading Sandip to remark (not disapprovingly) that Nikhilesh's sitting room had become "amphibious – half women's apartment, half men's" (Tagore 2005, 52). Antoinette Burton (2003, 66) reminds us that by the early twentieth century, the *zenana* had become saturated with ideological significance as a site of contestation between Indian nationalists, British colonial officials and feminist reformers, in the way that *sati* (the practice of widow-burning) had been a century earlier. The pivotal importance for the narrative of Bimala's exit from the *zenana* makes this, quite literally, a novel about "coming out." In insisting on the centrality of the closet to a number of key dichotomies in public culture, Eve Sedgwick (2008, 72) was careful to limit the scope of her claim to "twentieth-century Western culture." Yet the imperial extension of that culture (albeit into specific class segments in the periphery) meant that the "epistemology of the closet" found expression in debates over *zenanas*, harems, veiling and so forth. The Woman Question was, in this astonishingly literal sense, always already queer.

Bimala's "coming out" is not a controversial move in the novel. It is encouraged, even compelled, by Nikhilesh, who hires a British governess, Miss Gilby, to tutor Bimala in the ways of the world. Clumsy and paternalistic as these efforts are, Nikhilesh believes Bimala's education to be necessary for the transformation of their stilted arranged marriage into one of true companionship. In an essay exploring the spatial dynamics of the novel, Supriya Chaudhuri (2003) asks what the categories *bahir*/outside/world signify, given that Bimala does not leave the house at all, and concludes that they refer to the intrusion of disruptive elements into the home in the form of objects (clothes, gramophones) and persons (Miss Gilby, Sandip). Indeed the most unsettling consequence of Bimala's emancipation arises from her freedom to meet other men, for it is here that Nikhilesh's planned emancipation goes disastrously wrong. Far from cultivating in Bimala a new appreciation for her modern marriage, it arouses her interest in Sandip, who appears charged with a sexual and political virility that she finds lacking in Nikhilesh.

Sandip welcomes Bimala's attention, but instrumentalizes her for personal and political ends. Bimala regrets her betrayal of Nikhilesh, but too late to salvage her relationship with him. Although her expression of grief and remorse can be read as a return to Nikhilesh, the novel as a whole is structured around an opposition between the unattractive polarities of a paternalistic Nikhilesh and an opportunistic Sandip – between two forced “outings” – leaving Bimala alone, at the end, to reconsider her sexual and political self-determination. The homology between politics and sex running through the novel seems to suggest a disintegration of the boundaries between world/home, outer/inner, male/female that were so central to the hegemonic anticolonial resolution of the Woman Question – a disintegration that Tagore diagnoses as the very condition of modernity.

There is no performative coming out moment in Neel Mukherjee's novel *Past Continuous* (2009). Explicit acknowledgments of sexual identity in this story are fleeting, oblique, half-hearted. Yet coming out operates here additionally on the level of migration from India to England. Orphaned at 21, Ritwik Ghosh escapes a life of poverty, and what he belatedly recognizes as abuse, on the wings of a scholarship that takes him to read English at Oxford. Haunted by memories of the cruelty of his childhood in Calcutta, to which he has no reason to return, Ritwik finds himself overstaying his official welcome in the UK. Neither economic migrant nor refugee, he slips into a life of precarity, keeping afloat only through a combination of backbreaking illegal work, the kindness of ominous strangers and a rent-free living arrangement in return for taking care of the decrepit and senile Anne Cameron. In this otherwise bleak life – “a creature with a past but no future, only a teased out mirage of a present” (Mukherjee 2009, 307–308) – pleasure, such as it is, comes from sex and writing. Ritwik becomes hooked on the dangerous gratifications of cottaging, spending long hours cruising for cock between fleeting encounters with intimacy.

Meanwhile, he is also writing a novel structured around a character in Tagore's *Ghare Baire* – the British governess Miss Gilby, whose life as the spinster sister of a District Collector offering her services as a companion and tutor to women of zamindari households forms the premise of this novel-within-the-novel. The focus on the minor character recalls the relationship between *Jane Eyre* (Brontë [1847] 2007) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys [1966] 2000), but with crucial differences. Bearing in mind Spivak's (1999, 127) reading of Bertha Mason, the mad Creole first wife of Mr Rochester, as having “to set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction,” Jean Rhys's novel is an oppositional postcolonial intervention seeking to tell the backstory of the sacrificed “native” woman. Ritwik's novel pursues a marginal metropolitan character who sympathizes with the natives, calling to mind Leela Gandhi's (2006) account of fin-de-siècle “affective communities” that brought together subcultures of dissent from both sides of the imperial divide in struggles against imperialism. Miss Gilby is no radical, but her tentative overtures of friendship with the natives are enough to set her at odds

with polite Anglo-Indian society. Ostracized for her “‘dangerous,’ ‘unwomanly,’ ‘unladylike,’ ‘monstrous,’ ‘unruly,’ ‘unpatriotic,’ ‘traitorous,’ ‘unnatural’” (Mukherjee 2009, 37) ways, Miss Gilby – who also has a penchant for intense female friendships, first with the politically like-minded Violet Cameron and then with ornithologist Ruth Fairweather – is something of a queer dissident.

Past Continuous pays homage to Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* in a more profound sense by mirroring its spatial normativity. If Tagore imagines both Sandip and Nihilesh as unattractive futures for Bimala, Mukherjee depicts both India and England, “home” and “world,” as brutal and devastating places for Ritwik. This reading of space powerfully critiques two central tropes of queer public culture in India, both of which have been evident in the campaign to decriminalize sodomy. The first of these is the claim that homophobia is a colonial import, evidenced by the Victorian British provenance of the anti-sodomy law (Gupta 2008). Typically offered as a retort to conservative readings of homosexuality as western decadence, and while accurate as an account of the origins of the law, such a response fails to explain the embrace and re-signification of the law by postcolonial conservatives, and moreover plays into a nativist politics of authenticity in which that which is “imported” has no place in the postcolonial nation. It also (perhaps unwittingly) lends itself to halcyon visions of the precolonial past as a time of tolerance for gender non-normativity, obscuring the imperative of compulsory heterosexual reproduction that typically limited such “tolerance.” The second, quite opposite, trope is that of the need for decriminalization as evidence of India’s modernity, exemplified in the reactions of dismay that greeted the 2013 Supreme Court judgment as taking India “back to 1860” (NDTV 2013) and as placing it “in the company of countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia” (Bhatia 2013), the horror of which is supposed to be self-evident. Modernity, in turn, is interpreted as becoming like the West. A 2006 activist publication with which the iconic queer Indian novelist Vikram Seth was closely associated (“Open Letters” 2006), presented readers with a map of the world in which countries that criminalized sodomy (in effect, the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia) were marked out from those that did not, and asked rhetorically: “To which world must India belong?” The question relies for its persuasiveness on what it knows to be the predisposition of an elite Indian audience, desperate to break away from the Third World to take its rightful place at the table of the powerful. The irony of deploying both tropes in combination – blaming the colonial West for its imposition of the sodomy law and urging its repeal through an imitation of the post-colonial post-Wolfenden West – is either lost or slyly concealed in an attempt to appeal simultaneously to what are thought to be the divergent preferences of cultural nationalists and neoliberal modernizers.

Mukherjee’s devastating portrayal of home *and* world as extinguishing the queer life that Ritwik desires, rejects both a nostalgic vision of the nation and an understanding of freedom as westernization-at-home or emigration-to-West.

In a temporal sense, neither past nor present offer refuge for Ritwik's life-with-no-future. Haunted by his dead mother, Ritwik cannot seem to forget the history he wants to escape. As Anne Cameron reveals glimpses of a life spent in India in the fits of clarity that punctuate her dementia, it becomes clear to Ritwik that he is living with the daughter-in-law of the ostensibly fictional Violet in his story. Collapsing distinctions between past and present, fiction and fact, the novel forces the reader to abandon any allegiance to chrononormativity, offering a searing portrait of what we might call, following Gayatri Gopinath (2005), an impossible queer life.

PRESENT TENSE

The story I have been telling has largely been one of continuity. But queer questions are also discontinuous with those concerning heterosexual cisgendered women, who are typically the only subjects interpellated by hegemonic framings of the Woman Question. For one thing, no one responds to the posing of the Woman Question in the way Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and others respond to the Homosexual Question (Global Research 2007), by saying "we have no women here." A more typical response is "*our* women are not like *yours*," acknowledging the cultural construction of gender. Yet the perceived biological residue of sex in the category "woman" – notwithstanding its problematization (Butler 1999) – gives it a putative universality that queers are thought to lack. The perceived novelty and cultural specificity of the subjectivities gathered under the sign of queer lends to much queerphobia an ontological incredulity – *about whom are you speaking?* – that has no counterpart in misogyny.

Having said this, one consequence of the proliferation of new gender and sexual subjectivities has been a profound troubling of the meaning of "woman" (and "man"). Trans* and intersex questions have introduced into feminist certainties the same ontological incredulity: *about whom are you speaking?* It is here that we can begin to see how queer questions "supplement" the Woman Question in the second Derridean sense of that word: supplement as substitution. This is *not* to imply that the concerns interpellated by the Woman Question have passed; rather they can no longer be articulated in the same way in light of these other questions. In this section, I am interested in two kinds of tensions that mark the contemporary moment: first, contests over the meaning of "woman" between feminist and queer (especially trans*) activists, and second, tensions internal to the sign "queer." To illustrate these tensions, I take note of ongoing debates between queer and feminist activists in India, before offering a reading of two recent Iranian films that I hope will not only illuminate the specificity of the Iranian context but also speak to the ways in which these tensions are affectively experienced and negotiated in other locales. My account of these tensions is intended to suggest that "queer questions" are not simply a rerun of the enduring Woman Question. Rather, both sets of questions have had mutually disruptive effects.

These effects have manifested themselves differently in different places. In the West, a certain strand of radical feminism has tended to view transsexuals either as victims of a “false consciousness” that seeks escape from patriarchy by joining it, or as agents of that patriarchy seeking to infiltrate feminist space (Raymond 1979; Burchill 2013). Trans* critics have hit back at such feminism for its gender essentialism (Stone [1987] 2006). Feminist–queer tensions have been visible in India in a long-running debate over the advisability of a gender-neutral rape law. Here, queer activists have demanded that the law recognize that people of all genders can experience rape (Narain 2012). Opposing gender neutrality, feminists have sought to preserve the law’s recognition of rape as a form of oppression uniquely experienced by women and argue that a gender-neutral law might empower men to use the law as a weapon against already vulnerable women (Agnes 2002). The feminist response has the consequence, among other things, of denying the self-identification of male-to-female trans* persons (including many *hijras*) as women (Reddy 2005).

Differences over the relative priority accorded to various kinds of law reform have also laid bare fractures *within* the queer movement in India. Critics have suggested that the movement’s focus on the anti-sodomy law (section 377) reflects phallogocentric elite gay male priorities that are not shared by lesbians, for whom issues such as compulsory marriage are far more pressing (Dave 2012, 171). Here, then, is an illustration of how being “woman” fractures “queer” solidarities. Others have argued that the class position of *hijras* and *kothis* (working class, sexually passive, effeminate men) makes them far more likely targets of state violence, extortion and custodial rape in public spaces rather than in the private realm that elite activists seek to protect (Tellis 2012).

Importantly, power hierarchies among queer subjectivities are not the same everywhere. Thus, in radical contrast to the relatively abject positioning of the figure of the transgendered/*hijra* subject in western and Indian queer public cultures, transsexuals in Iran enjoy a position of juridical (even if not social) privilege relative to homosexuals, thanks to the legalization of gender-reassignment in that country since 1985. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008) has described how this differentiated legal regime has produced a complicated set of relations among queer subjectivities that has few parallels elsewhere. Even as transsexuals attempt to dissociate themselves from homosexuals so as to avoid the stigma that attaches to them, homosexuals have attempted to use the legal regime governing transsexuality to their advantage by attempting to “pass” as transsexuals, obtaining official certification of gender reassignment but forgoing transition through indefinite extensions of the compulsory psychotherapy that is a prerequisite for anyone undergoing (genuine) transition.

Two recent Iranian films offer interesting points of entry into the fractured signs of “woman” and “queer” that I have been discussing in this section. I offer the first as a sort of antidote to the troubled relations between the feminist and the queer that are a hallmark of our times in many places. The second, viewed in combination with the first, brings into relief the contrasting life prospects of different queer subjectivities in the same time and place.

Facing Mirrors (dir. Azarbayjani 2011) has been described as the first Iranian film to feature a transgendered protagonist. Edi, born Adineh, is a pre-op transsexual man from an upper-middle-class family, trying to go to Germany for a sex-change operation. Edi's authoritarian father, in denial about his son's gender identity, attempts to disrupt Edi's plans by arranging for him to marry a man. In the course of running away from his father, Edi gets into a taxi driven by Rana, a devout lower-middle-class woman who is struggling to raise a son while paying off the debts that have landed her husband in jail. To make ends meet, she drives a cab in Tehran without the knowledge of her husband. In a moment of gender confusion, Rana, who typically only drives female passengers, agrees to take Edi to a neighboring town. Horrified when she discovers Edi's gender identity, Rana nonetheless agrees to drive him to his destination.

Much of what follows is a road movie in which the physical distance traveled by the characters becomes a metaphor for their affective journey, in the course of which a relationship founded on misrecognition is transformed into one of mutual dependence and caring. In part, this transformation is driven by sheer need: Rana needs the money; Edi needs to get away from his family and then needs a place of refuge while the passport with his new gender identity is processed. In part, the transformation is driven by a gradual, subtle and unstated process of analogical recognition in which each finds a kindred spirit in the other's transgression of gender norms for reasons stemming from an amalgam of compulsion and choice. But the transformation is also affective: when Rana has an accident, Edi ensures that she receives medical treatment; later, Rana shelters Edi long after the contract of conveyance has been fulfilled. Watching her little son play football with Edi, Rana accepts Edi's gender identity through the eyes of her child, grateful for the presence of a male role model in his life. I want to suggest that this narrative's deceptively simple interweaving of mutual interest, recognition and affect offers a parable of the impulses that might animate a coming together in difference of feminist and queer.

Facing Mirrors makes little mention of the Iranian state. The state's processing of Edi's passport is relatively frictionless, with the narrative suspense here pivoting on whether he will be able to collect it without being intercepted by his father. Edi's flight to Germany is represented as escape from his tyrannical father and performed with much nostalgia for the nation left behind. Moreover, by placing the voice of conservative Shi'ism in the person of a devout subject (Rana) who must negotiate with her beliefs in her own everyday existential struggle, *Facing Mirrors* anticipates and enters into dialogue with potential religious objections to both Rana's and Edi's life choices.

State and religion are treated very differently in the contemporaneous Iranian film *Circumstance* (dir. Keshavarz 2011), which centers on the relationship between two young women – Shireen and Atafeh – whose schoolgirl friendship blossoms into a sensuous love affair. Atafeh's brother Mehran has just returned home from a drug rehabilitation clinic. Weary

and defeated, he finds solace in religion. His growing piety contrasts starkly with the hedonistic lifestyle of the two women, which features the music, parties and clubs patronized by Tehran's westernized elites but also, in this case, illicit love. Mehran has a romantic interest of his own in Shireen. When the women find themselves in trouble with the law, Mehran leverages his relationship with an official in the morality police (whom he might himself have tipped off in the first place) to obtain Shireen's release without charge. Beholden to Mehran and pressured by her family to get married, Shireen reluctantly agrees to marry him, believing this to be the only way she can continue to see Atafeh. But Atafeh is overcome by sadness. In a tense exchange that gives the film its title, Atafeh remarks to her gentle and indulgent father: "you all created this world for us with that revolution of yours. Now we're forced to live under these circumstances." Suffocated by the religiosity of her brother and unable to tear the unhappy Shireen away from him, Atafeh leaves home alone – the epitome of yet another impossible queer life.

In contrast to its unobtrusiveness in *Facing Mirrors*, the theocratic state is inescapable in *Circumstance*, where it seeps insidiously into the plot through the transformation of Mehran from delinquent youth to austere zealot. The film's portrayal of Islam as always disapproving of pleasure, in contrast to the liberal permissiveness of the secular Hakimi family milieu (prior to Mehran's metamorphosis), is somewhat one-dimensional. In happier moments, Shireen and Atafeh fantasize about escaping to Dubai – an interesting choice of destination for lesbian refuge. Yet the visualization of this fantasy in a dream sequence that depicts the protagonists as ultra-femme lesbians cavorting in haute couture in a swish club before strolling past an infinity pool to make love in a glass-walled room overlooking an expanse of water, leaves no doubt that this is not the Dubai of sweaty, migrant guest workers, but a vision of capitalism as liberation from "circumstance."

"Home" is a difficult place in both these films in contrast to "world," which is represented as a space of freedom. Yet importantly, in *Facing Mirrors*, the difficulties of "home" are located in family rather than nation; in *Circumstance*, family is initially a refuge from the claustrophobia of nation and religion until it becomes infiltrated by the latter. Undoubtedly, the contrasting locations of the protagonists of these films in relation to state, religion and capitalism reflect differences in the positionalities and sensibilities of the filmmakers themselves, one of whom (Azarbayjani) works in Iran, and the other (Keshavarz) in the US Iranian diaspora which has long had an embattled relationship with post-revolutionary Iran. Yet the differences also attest to the distinct life prospects of different queer subjectivities even within a single politico-legal regime. Even as it negotiates its difficult relationship with feminism, a queer politics simply cannot overlook the reality that all queers are not the same.

While feminist and queer have not always been fellow travelers, *Facing Mirrors* can nonetheless be read as a parable of the impulses that might enable a coming together in difference of queer and feminist. What makes the film persuasive is its representation of the working through of those differences: the affective journey is bumpy and suffers frequent interruption. Even as her acceptance of Edi grows, Rana is distraught when her son dresses up, for fun, in the “wrong” clothes. And uplifting as the bond between the two characters is, the film ends on a note of loss for both: for Edi, there is pain in leaving home notwithstanding the traumas that occasioned departure, and uncertainty in not knowing whether he will ever find the romantic love that he knows Rana to have enjoyed; Rana sees her husband’s trust in her waver as he begins to wonder what she has been doing in his absence. Agency and emancipation in this film are achieved at considerable cost.

We know from the work of critical theorists of various persuasions that putatively progressive movements have been slow to recognize difference, much less work through it (Mohanty 1986; Butler 1999). The imperative of solidarity has often flattened out difference through the construction of false universals. Such universals are constructed in part through the projection of shared futures, at the telos of which distinct subjectivities will be rendered obsolete. Crucially, the hegemonic vocabulary of human rights is offered as the mechanism that will take us from here to there. In this final section, I turn to the futures of Woman and queer questions in international politics. Who shapes imaginations of futurity, how and why? And how might the apparently ceaseless proliferation of new queer subjectivities trouble the abstract universal categories in terms of which such futurity is articulated?

In addressing the first set of questions I am drawn to hegemonic articulations of futurity, although it should be obvious – indeed one must hope – that these are not the only imaginable futures. Few such articulations have been more influential than Hillary Clinton’s affirmation of women’s rights as human rights at the Beijing World Conference on Women (Clinton 1995), and her analogous affirmation of gay rights as human rights sixteen years later (Clinton 2011). Reading these speeches together, I am struck by the temporal anxiety that pervades the latter. First Lady Clinton speaking of women’s rights (while dressed in pink), is able to look back on seventy-five years of women’s suffrage in the USA as a moral example to the world. Secretary of State Clinton speaking of gay rights (while dressed in blue), must acknowledge that her country’s record is far from perfect, noting that until 2003 sodomy was “still” a crime in parts of the USA. The geopolitical context of the two speeches is very different: contrast the unipolar moment of the Clinton presidential years with the post-Iraq fragility of US hegemony in a world of rising powers. Moreover, the intensification of globalization as a process of space–time compression means that the

rest of the world has (and often needs) less time to catch up with every shift in the goalposts of modernity – a state of affairs that requires Clinton to acknowledge the Delhi High Court’s 2009 decriminalization of sodomy as being part of the same temporal moment as the US Supreme Court’s 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (539 U.S. 558 (2003)).

It would be hasty to conclude that this temporal telescoping has taken the postcolonial world out of that “waiting room” of history that Chakrabarty (2000, 65) complains of. Toward the end of her speech on gay rights, Clinton cites a temporal trope that people in the USA apparently invoke to urge others to support human rights: “Be on the right side of history.” The phrase seems to assert the speaker’s clairvoyance in being able to see all the way to the end of history, secure in the knowledge that things will turn out their way, obviating the need to make a substantively persuasive argument. A proleptic declaration of triumphalism, it invites the audience to join what will turn out to be the winning side, the side which gets to write History. It remains to be seen whether India will exit the “waiting room,” but whether or not it does, the room itself endures as a space to house those too stubborn, deluded or backward to see that they are on the wrong side of history (cue, Iran).

As to how the right side might look, Clinton (2011) offers what purports to be a transhistorical normative standard of guidance: “those who advocate for expanding the circle of human rights were and are on the right side of history, and history honors them. Those who tried to constrict human rights were wrong, and history reflects that as well.” Knowing, as we do, the inadequacies of putatively universal categories such as “human rights” – an inadequacy that has necessitated incessant interruption by the Woman Question, queer questions and undoubtedly many more questions whose interrogations we cannot anticipate – to what extent should we continue to invest our hopes in such categories?

Judith Butler has offered a qualified defense of universalism, suggesting that subjects excluded by conventional understandings of the universal can nonetheless seize its language and set into motion a “performative contradiction” by claiming to be covered by the universal, exposing the contradictory character of conventional formulations of the universal and thereby forcing those formulations to become more expansive and inclusive (Butler 1997, 89). This image of the expanding universal can look uncomfortably similar to liberal fantasies about “expanding the circle of human rights.” Yet, crucially, Butler (1997, 90) argues that the universal can never fully be articulated, explaining that this is in fact its redeeming feature:

To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the “not yet” is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains “unrealized” by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its *existing* formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no

entitlement to occupy the place of the “who,” but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them. The excluded, in this sense, constitute the contingent limit of universalization. And the “universal,” far from being commensurate with its conventional formulation, emerges as a postulated and open-ended *ideal* that has not been adequately encoded by any given set of legal conventions.

What distinguishes this formulation of the universal from liberal appeals to the notion is its attention to the “not yet,” the “unrealized,” “those who are not covered,” the unentitled and excluded, whose demands are seen to constitute the universal. When “woman” and “queer” become recognized as “human,” far from celebrating these (or any other) inclusions as the attainment of some final frontier for civil rights, a Butlerian understanding obliges us to look to the “not yet” for the meaning of the universal. The universal resides in its always unfinished work.

Edelman (2004, 114) has expressed difficulty with Butler’s account of the promise of the universal, arguing that the rearticulation of purportedly universal signifiers, such as “human,” “supplements *without* effacing the prior uses to which it was put” (emphasis in original), with the result that “no historical category of abjection is ever simply obsolete. It abides, instead, in its latency, affecting subsequent significations, always available, always waiting, to be mobilized again.” The notion of supplementing without effacing calls to mind Wendy Brown’s (2006, 28) account of liberal regimes of tolerance as incorporating *but also* holding at bay the presence of the threatening Other within.

These more pessimistic accounts of the process by which the universal expands to accommodate the previously excluded are perceptive in their recognition of the enduring abjection of the now formally included and the ever-present danger of the remobilization of that abjection. Yet, vital as it is to continue to struggle against abjection, there is also a value in carrying its traces, in *not* seeking the complete effacement that Edelman desires. For it is only the memory – and, dare I say it, the continuing even if attenuated experience – of that abjection that can keep those of us now ambivalently admitted into the charmed circle of human rights, in touch with the “not yet,” the “unrealized,” the unentitled and excluded, for reasons other than a smug paternalism. Perhaps a heterotemporality in which we could find a way to remain continuous with our past abjection without being traumatized by it might keep us from descent into a triumphalist futurity.

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