**Intimacies of Trans-embodiments in Iran: towards an ‘ethics of ambiguity’**

**Gohar Homayounpour**

**Abstract:**

*The intimacies of trans-embodiments within contemporary psychoanalysis have suffered from a binary approach towards the transsexual trajectory.*

*On one hand, psychoanalysts basing their work on a reductionist reading of Freud have applied a heteronormative discourse, of pathologizing and moralizing attitudes. On the other hand, in more recent years psychoanalytic literature has taken a turn towards a ‘transgenderity’ filled with a politically correct and at times superficial humanitarian discourse of sameness.*

*It is the author’s assertion that both of these approaches operate in the name of sameness and normalizing, a far cry from a subversive psychoanalytic discourse of difference.*

*This presentation will use some clinical material around trans-embodiments in Iran, as well as other narratives such as interviews and two documentaries, in an attempt to move towards a subversive psychoanalytic discourse of unfamiliarity and ambiguity, from the standpoint of geographies of transgenderity.*

**Introduction: Transgenderity in Iran**

While is important not to turn away from the significant work of activists and some psychoanalysts in recent years, we need to move towards a more refined and sophisticated understanding of trans-embodiments.

The particular situation of trans-embodiments within the specific geography of Iran will be used to demonstrate a point around this politics of difference. The specificity of the situation will highlight the more universal problem of contemporary psychoanalytic discourse regarding trans-embodiments.

In 1987, Maryam Khatoon Molkara was the first person to meet Ayatollah Khomeini to obtain a letter which acted as a Fatwa enabling sex reassignment surgeries if confirmed by a specialist doctor.

Ms Molkara, who had formerly been called Fereydoon, wrote a letter in 1975 to Ayatollah Khomeini who was then in exile in Najaf: he answered as follows. “You must observe all the rites specific to women.” Ms Molkara was finally able to meet Ayatollah Khomeini in 1987, after her request was studied by clerics and doctors. She obtained the Fatwa (a ruling on Islamic law given by a recognized authority): “Gender reassignment, if prescribed by a trusted doctor, is not against *Sharia* [the body of Islamic law].” (Trait, 2005).

Ever since this Fatwa, Iran’s Islamic government recognizes people with sexual-identity disorders and SRS is a choice approved by the government. Transgender people are also offered new birth certificates. Some are now even recommended by clerics for treatment, and the government helps to fund a portion of the costs of the operations. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there had been no particular policy regarding transsexual and transgender people. (McDowall, A. & Khan, S., 2004).

Official statistics indicate that between 15,000 and 20,000 transsexual people currently live in Iran; however, unofficial estimates place the *Trans* population of Iran at 150,000 (Trait, 2007).

There are two official associations with permission from the Ministry of Interior to work to support people with gender dysphoria. The *Special Committee for Gender Dysphoria* of the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences has evaluated 38 cases in the last three months, among which there were 20 male-to-female cases and 18 female-to-male. The objective of this institution is to identify, organize, protect and treat people with gender dysphoria.

This provides a very interesting background to the analysis of trans-embodiments. In a conservative country where the state is run through religious laws, we have what, at least on the surface, seems to be a liberal law.

They are two points that can be highlighted here. Firstly, the rising numbers, as can be observed in Figures 1 and 2 above: in Iran we have the largest number of ‘sex change’ operations of any other country except Thailand. Secondly, according to the statistics there are more male-to-female sex change operations than female-to-male. The causes of this phenomenon have been questioned by some, considering that as women in Iran, people might have to face many obstacles, will be forced to be veiled, and will become victims of prejudice in a society with established laws against women.

**I will skip the “Theoretical Framework: Understanding gender in and through psychoanalysis”, due to the lack of time but anybody who is interested could read the full paper both in English and Italian.**

Who is a real man? Who is a real woman? And why would holding that knowledge be a desirable outcome? What about at-times man, at-times woman, at-times everything in regards to this magical space of “in-between-ness”, in this space between hiding and revealing?

It seems that within today’s zeitgeist, in order for anything to be legitimate it has to be transparent, but transparency is the death of desire. We need to take back our secrets. This universal right of hiding and revealing, this Freudian game of Fort/Da (hide and seek; *cache-cache*) is being taken away from us in this corrupt culture of the primacy of transparency, where, supposedly, nothing is left to be revealed.

I know everything about you and you know everything about me, we are one and the same. If you claim to be a man, then be a man; get a penis, marry a woman and adopt a child; that is a photo I have a ready-made frame for in the closet of my mind. If you claim to be a woman, then get a vagina, live up to my very concrete definition of who a woman is. In order for you to be legitimate, I need to know what is it that you carry in your undergarments. I need to know and to see it: no secrets, no gender performative plays. *Be like others*.

Within this discourse there is no access to fantasy or symbolic communications, no possibilities of becomings, of secrets, of delightful uncertainties. This, then, is the death of desire, the death of the subject. We are told that societies and subjects must be transparent in order to be legitimate; this for psychoanalysis has to run contrary to anything that is creative and sublimatory, which has to be marginalized.

Is it not also true that within the discourse of transgenderity one also hears this limiting fantasy of transparency?

Now we move on to our three kinds of narrative:

**Narrative #1:** Extracts from a long-term report by a supervisee, regarding a psychoanalytically oriented group he runs for Trans people.

**Narrative #2:** Transcripts from two documentaries

**Narrative #3:** Various direct interviews

**Narrative #1 Extracts from a long-term report by a supervisee, regarding a psychoanalytically oriented group he runs for Trans people**

I have had a psychoanalytically-oriented therapist in supervision with me for many years: he started a group to which attendance was obligatory in order to gain permission for surgery, at the university where he works in a very religious city in Iran. Here are samples of what he reported to me:

The group began with almost 15 members. It was quite predictable that the group would start with negative transference and extra transference towards the therapy team and the judicial system.

In the first few sessions the discussions focused around explaining the reason why they were attending meetings that they considered as futile.

They said “We are only here to get justification for our surgery!”

After this first ‘denial and confusion’ phase the patients moved to the bargaining phase. For example they would say “Why don’t you give us the confirmation letters for our operations, please! And after that we promise to attend group therapy for ten years!”

A sort of concreteness and lack of symbolization was observable among all the members, along with a great deal of acting out in the sessions. Generally the therapist did not feel they were doing any group work. It was more similar to a number of individuals talking separately without listening to each other. However, their impulsivity and action-orientedness lessened, and was managed gradually, by simultaneously both containing and confronting it.

Gradually their actions were transformed into verbal communications, such as expressions of anger towards authorities, their families and even towards their peers.

Within the next phase of the group, conversations turned to the concepts of masculinity and femininity. There were very concrete and stereotyped imaginary pictures about these two concepts. The therapist tried to deconstruct sexual and gender clichés by challenging and interpreting them as they appeared within the group dynamics and in the transference.

 For example, they would say to him “…like you as a straight man” and the therapist would respond “Who knows?” Or when they mentioned some examples of gender-specific jobs, conducts or customs, he asked them if they all agreed with those fixed definitions.

It turned out that they had a large amount of information about their issues and their status as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people. Some of them complained that god had created them like this and often expressed anger with the therapist along the lines of “Why should I be here? I am not mentally ill and don’t need to be here!” But gradually they talked about their concerns and anxieties, such as their uncertainty about whether they are homosexual or transsexual. It should be noted that this concern was more common among F-to-M patients.

As the supervisor, I think that this becomes particularly problematic in a country like Iran, with a clear law against homosexuality which prescribes the death penalty as punishment.

Another source of serious anxiety among them was worry about the outcome of the surgery and whether the transgender operation would be successful (by that they meant a “great penis” or a “perfect vagina”) or the operation would result in a botched catastrophe. Whether, in other words, their genitals would be good, functional and potent enough, or if they would result in a scandal for them within their relationships. Although it is interesting to note that these kinds of issues were more frequent among male-to-female patients, as they worried about the constructed vagina and whether it would have enough space and elasticity for a deep penetration, or would result in a bad, synthetic impression of labia. Female-to-male patients also had such concerns about the size and especially about the erection of the transplanted penis. However, they said that they could already satisfy their partners without a penis as women are often sensitive to being touched affectionately. Even the female-to-male members said that as they had “feminine hearts and masculine minds” they could understand women’s feelings deeply, and were more empathic than straight men in relationships with them!

They also had one session with the presence of their partners that was reported to me thusly:

It was interesting that all the partners that showed up were females (partners of F-to-M members). Discussing their feelings about having a female-to-male partner, it seemed that they were OK with their choices and had accepted the partners as ‘real’ men. However, they complained about their partners’ lack of confidence in their sexual potency and identity as a real and original man, saying “They don’t consider themselves ‘real men’ as much as we do!” One said: “There are so many people with a penis but they are not real men, however my partner is a real man for me although he has no penis! Because primarily I communicate with his internal world, feelings and soul!”

There was a constant fear about not being accepted as a ‘real’ man or a ‘real’ woman. They negated and refused every sign of the opposite gender in an exaggerated way. One female-to-male patient once said “I don’t talk on my mobile in a taxi as my voice is not manly enough!” And he insisted on wearing only what were - according to him - clearly masculine colors.

As we will continue to see within the other narratives reported below, there is a clear sense of “gender certainty” with these individuals.

As the group progressed, the members became more symbolic and abstract in their discourses. In one of the recent sessions, one of the F-to-M members who had been highly resistant and had a strong defense against the group, and was very silent in the beginning, reported the following.

“You remember how I was in a hurry, and insistent on having the operation as soon as possible! But it is strange: now that everything is ready for the surgery I feel neutral, and I’m not as delighted as I expected myself to be. I have questions and concerns now regarding the surgery that I would like to explore. Maybe I will still do it, but I want more time to think about it.” “What are your concerns?” asked the therapist. He replied: “After a lot of arguments with my mother, she consented to my surgery, but these days when she looks at me I see a great regret in her eyes. I have three sisters, and you know like many other mothers she had always wished for a ‘real original boy’, not a fake, synthetic one! I feel guilty and worthless. All I will be, at most, will be a Pinocchio for her.”

When the therapist asked the group what their thoughts were on this matter, they all agreed with the member, and it was revealed that there were similar concerns among the rest.

Another female-to-male member said:

“Now, before the surgery, we are prominent and attractive tomboys among the other females, but after the surgery our rivals will be straight men who are often stronger, more handsome and have better situations at work and in life: so we will fade away among real men!”. And it was interesting that the same was true about M-to-F members, they also said “Now, in comparison with other men we are very cute and pretty ‘she-males’, but after the surgery, we will have to compete with ‘original’ females with more attractive and curved feminine bodies and soft feminine voices, and this makes it so difficult for us to get men’s attention, in competition with ‘original’ girls.”

All over the discourse we hear ‘real’ vs ‘fake’, ‘original’ vs ‘copy’, and discussion of ‘perfect’ vaginas and penises. In supervision the therapist told me one day “You know, after these groups I am really feeling castrated as a straight man. I do not live up to their ideals of what a man should be like. I always leave the groups feeling depressed and humiliated.” I thought these were interesting counter-transference feelings. My own associations take me to Kiarostami’s movie *Certified Copy*, and the metaphor of Pinocchio remains with me.

As the group progressed we did indeed see the opening of a mental space for ambiguity, with less concreteness and more ambivalence, more deconstruction, less certainty about getting the surgery: however this did not happen with every single member of the group. They were a few who, even though they were becoming much more able to mentalize their experience and symbolize their feelings, were still adamant about getting the surgery.

Of course, we are not suggesting that the creation of a space to talk should be with the intention of discouraging people from surgery. As the therapist reported to me “It does not matter if they get the surgery or not, but it is important that they think about why they want to do it and have a safe space to discuss and elaborate such a significant decision in their lives over a long period of time.”

**Narrative #2: Short Vignettes from two Documentaries**

Heydar, a female-to-male trans person, always felt different from other girls. While with his family, he wore men’s clothes and refused to wear a scarf. But Leila, who was a boy and a male-to-female trans person, has a different story: she grew up in a very traditional and patriarchal Azeri family. As a boy, she was very feminine and was always bullied at school. It was only after she got married that her family accepted her decision. Now, much later, Heydar and Leila are happily married. They have recently visited an orphanage in their area and hope to be recognized as eligible to adopt a child. Today their dreams are simple, and they don’t feel different as a married couple now that their families accept them (excerpt from a report by Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A., 2015).

In a documentary broadcast on the Islamic Republic’s national television station, a female-to-male trans person reports: “I remember when they bought a pair of earrings for me and how I was disgusted by them.”

Why such a strong, intense reaction to the other sex? Why be disgusted with earrings?

Another female-to-male subject states: “It is very important that people recognize the difference between a transsexual and a homosexual. Maybe we could consider transsexuality as a disorder, but it’s not the same with homosexuality. My transsexuality’s been approved by four sexologists. I just want to ask religious families to reduce and let go of their anxieties. There’s a Fatwa in support of sex reassignment surgery. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Yet another female-to-male transsexual says: “We have Imam Khomeini’s Fatwa. This is very important, at least for religious families. I informed my family, using Imam’s Fatwa. I told them that I’m acceptable in the eyes of my religion. I’m also legally accepted. So I can be accepted by my family and in society. We transsexuals are newborns. I'm just one year old, and I will find the right place for me, and will get better each day.” It seems that the support of family post-operation makes a significant difference in how things proceed. (IRIB, December 25th, 2015).

**Narrative #3: Short Vignettes from Various Interviews**

*Could you describe the procedure you took for the surgery?*

I went to a psychiatrist and passed five psychological exams. There were tests with answer sheets as well as pictures that I had to speak about. The questionnaires have a lie detector scale and you cannot lie. If you lie, they can catch you red-handed and sue you. Many people claim to be transsexuals to be exempted from military service, but they can’t pass the tests.

*Have you ever wanted to marry?*

I had four suitors but as I cannot bear children, it ended nowhere. But after my surgery I will be able to have kids [sic]. I should say that we’re very attractive to straight men and this attraction is becoming greater as time passes. But no man would stay in our lives. There are exceptions who are married, but they are exceptions. We need to culturally accept the marriage between straights and transsexuals. I consider transgenderity as the ‘better’ gender. It has the masculine attractions along with female delicacies. Transsexuality is a third sexuality.

*Does it not mean that trans people don’t have any particular identity?*

No. transsexuality is a third sexuality. We should be in a situation where our kids read in their schoolbooks that we have men, women, transsexuals and androgynous people. We’re not androgynous and hence you cannot say we don’t have any particular identity.

(*The Boy who Became a Woman After 23 Years!*, 2015; Taraneh Aram, 2016)

This is interesting. Note this statement: “transsexuality is a third sexuality” from the same woman who, two paragraphs earlier, has said that after her surgery, she can have a child.

There is a clear rejection of homosexuality, while transgenderity is authorized under the religious Fatwa. This produces a very particular situation in Iran. Transgenderity is legitimate but homosexuality gets the death penalty.

Another documentary, titled *Be Like Others,* deals with the topic of transsexuality and transsexual issues in Iran.

The father of Ali, a trans person, (Ali is in fact Anoush's boyfriend/husband-to-be) takes the following view:

“You just need to walk with him in the street to see what I mean. Almost everybody will turn around and say something. You can hear them saying: “he’s gay” or stuff like that. I really think things will be much easier after his surgery. Now that he walks around in a woman’s outfit, I can more easily get myself to think that he’s a girl. It facilitates my relationship with him. And he has legal rights as well in this country. They used to pick on him before. And I was under pressure from people around me. Things will be better after his operation.”

Then we meet Cleric Karaminia, a religious legislative authority on sex change operations, who preaches:

“We’re not talking about homosexuals here. They’re doing something immoral… something against the religion. But for the ones who suffer from TS conditions, Islam offers a cure.” The cleric also spoke at a conference in the city of Gorgan in the north of Iran where, among many others, Anoush and his mother were present.

Cleric Karaminia continues: “As Imam Khomeini noted, sex reassignment surgery is not *haraam* [religiously wrong]. As he said, every deed is possible, unless it is strictly spoken against in the Quran, or the Hadith announces it as a sin. Secondly, if changing one’s gender could be a sin because it modifies divine creation, then almost everything we do would be religiously wrong because we’re constantly making changes in divine creation.”

**Conclusion**:

**From a Politics of Transparency towards an Ethics of Ambiguity**

**In praise of Ambiguity, of Difference and of Inbetween-ness**

‘Greet yourself in your thousand other forms’ (Hafez)

At times I believe that within this new and trendy politically correct psychoanalytic discourse of transgenderity, we are still practicing a new variation of the same old limiting, heteronormative view of familiarity; naming and categorizing trans-embodiments within the same framework. A clear example of this becomes evident within Iranian Sharia law which prescribes that if you want to be with men, you must become a woman, so that you can be digested into a limited view of human gender and sexuality. Analysts can thus also escape from having to deal with anxieties of their own regarding the gender fluidity of every human being. But this politically correct discourse imprisons us within a boring and concrete way of being, and takes away any possibilities of *becomings* that are always in flux, always changing.

Let me clarify that I do not think it is the job of the analyst to tell someone to get sex reassignment surgery or not: this is a decision that the person should make for themselves. In this, it is similar to any other decision, but at the same time we cannot escape the fact that something drastic is being done to the body.

As with every significant decision that is brought up in analysis, time and space should be dedicated to the person, in an attempt to develop fantasies, symbolizations and dreams, freedom and transformations, sublimations and becomings away from the concreteness of having to choose one’s gender identifications according to one’s sexual organ.

In this specific case of trans-embodiments, a great number of questions remain: why has there been such a rise in surgeries? Why is there a high suicide rate in some countries after the surgery? Why do we categorize all transsexuals and transgender people under the same labels, (i.e ‘they are all psychotics’, or ‘none of them are psychotics’) when what we really need is to ‘open up the roof’, as Iranian poet Hafez advised us in the fourteenth century?

Should the fact that in the final analysis something drastic is being done to the body be elaborated and addressed, or should we hide our own anxieties regarding any sort of fluidity, unfamiliarity and difference under the facade of political correctness?

This is not psychoanalysis: psychoanalysis has never been about being politically correct, it is a subversive discourse and it must remain such. This does not mean that we should not acknowledge the fact that for years psychoanalytic theory has been imposing a heteronormative discourse upon trans-embodiments.

In this paper, I have attempted to show that some, though by no means all, contemporary psychoanalysts have been hiding their same old gender and sexual anxieties under this new politically correct discourse. It is still a heteronormative, binary discourse of sameness and naming, that of categorizing. I would go as far as saying that this is now even more dangerous than before, as there is no possibility of analyzing the issue.

Everybody is so ‘nice’: what can we say? This is the problem with a politically correct discourse. It is a closed loop, or an echo chamber.

I invite you to a carnival of masks. This is a community of subjects hospitable towards themselves, the other, and the other within themselves, in the name of a politics of unfamiliarity, of ambiguity, and of *becomings*. We need to be hospitable to this playground of monsters, of zombies: we need to awaken our spirits, our witches and sorcerers. And yes, for a while it will be scary. We will be dizzy. We will lose all our imaginary weapons: but I am convinced that this is the only way to do justice to our debt towards our desirous selves.

I encourage you to join me in this playground of monsters, in awakening the spirits of the underworld, of the unconscious, towards a discourse of desire narrated within and beyond one thousand and one tales.

This paper concludes with a poem by Hafez, our celebrated poet from Shiraz my fatherland, which I find speaks to this topic.

**All the Hemispheres**

Leave the familiar for a while

…Open up the Roof

…Change rooms in your mind for a day

…Greet Yourself

In your thousand other forms

As you mount the hidden tide and travel back home