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SHIRIN NESHAT: A CONTEMPORARY ORIENTALIST

by

MOJGAN KHOSRAVI

Under the Direction of Dr. Maria Gindhart

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographs by exploring key socio-political events that have shaped Iranian history since the reign of Cyrus the Great, ca. 600 B.C. Since Neshat's photographs have been largely intended for a Western audience, it is important to explore the concept of colonialism that has created East/West polarities and so greatly influenced our modern era. This paper intends to demonstrate that Neshat's images perpetuate Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which allocates the Oriental to an inferior position vis-à-vis his Occidental counterpart. For a Western audience, Neshat's consistent use of the Muslim veil, illegible Persian calligraphy, and guns symbolizes Islam's violence and degeneracy; additionally, these elements position the Muslim woman as a subaltern entity in an archaic society. As a result, the Iranian Muslim woman remains restricted by her social, cultural, and religious praxis, as well as by Neshat's formal and contextual depiction of her.

INDEX WORDS: Colonialism, Gender, Identity, Iran, Iranian history, Islam, Orientalism, Photography, Shirin Neshat

SHIRIN NESHAT: A CONTEMPORARY ORIENTALIST

by

MOJGAN KHOSRAVI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

SHIRIN NESHAT: A CONTEMPORARY ORIENTALIST

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May 2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Iranian Green Movement and all the young students who sacrificed their lives for freedom.

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INTRODUCTION

In Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* series (1993-97), images of veiled, tattooed, and armed Muslim women populate the black and white photographs. The Western audience encounters cropped images of women's body parts adorned with organic forms such as paisleys, and non-organic materials such as rifles and guns. In one image, a hand decorated with calligraphy and other designs rests on the lips of a female figure, whose face is visible only in part, the eyes eliminated by the frame. The tattoo-like calligraphy on the female figure's body contains an Islamic prayer and a poem by Forough Farrokhzad, a contemporary Iranian poet, and to a Western viewer, these two works appear to be the same. This level of ambiguity in turn compels the Westerner to categorize the female figure as an archaic Middle-Eastern woman restricted under Islamic laws. Unfamiliar with the distinction between the Arabic prayer and the contemporary Persian poem, the Western audience fails to distinguish the conflicting and oppositional forces in the image: the female Persian poet and the male Arab prophet.

In this thesis, I intend to argue that, by using visual elements such as the veil, the gun, and calligraphy, Shirin Neshat creates for the Western audience a simultaneously ambiguous and presupposed atmosphere. The viewers' assumptions stem from previous knowledge of the Oriental Muslim woman acquired through the news media and accordingly referenced by Neshat with the veil and the weapons. Thus the persistent and repetitive use of visual elements that perpetuate the stereotype of the Middle Eastern woman as violent and archaic situates Neshat within the discourse of Orientalism that continues to portray the Orientals as the inferior "Other." Meanwhile, the Persian calligraphy, which might serve to offer a counter-narrative, fails to do so due to its inscrutability by Western viewers.

In Chapter One, I will explore the concept of Orientalism by examining the practice of modern colonialism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, and the stereotypes that emerged from this practice. By addressing specific events in Iranian history up to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, I intend to explain how the Iranian national identity in the twenty-first century is deeply rooted in the past, as these historical events have shaped and influenced the nation for centuries, as well as the perspectives of contemporary Iranian artists who reside in the West, like Neshat, who cannot ignore their cultural identities. To support my argument, I will analyze one of Neshat's self-portraits that perpetuates female Muslim stereotypes and discuss her conscious choice in selecting visual elements to do this.

In Chapter Two, I have chosen two specific images from the *Women of Allah* series that help me discuss the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and its consequences for the lives of Iranian women; the compulsory veiling law in 1983 is one example of how Iran's return to Islamic laws placed significant limitations on Iranian women both in private and public domains. The chapter also examines the effects of political and religious changes within Iranian society after the 1979 revolution by exploring textual elements that Neshat's borrowed from a radical female poet. My analysis of both political events and Neshat's images demonstrates that the artist enforces the stereotype of the Islamic Iranian women as archaic.

In Chapter Three, I then argue that Neshat uses photography as a means of self-expression that is fraught with ambivalence, and that this is a state of mind characteristic of Iranian society, culture, and tradition. In my argument about the Iranian society's ambivalence, I analyze a specific poem by Farrokhzad. I have also chosen one of Neshat's self-portraits from the *Women of Allah* series to demonstrate how the artist uses the theme of separation both physically and metaphorically to place herself (an expatriate living in the West) in a superior

position vis-à-vis her female counterparts who live inside Iranian borders. Neshat achieves this superior position because she has brilliantly tethered the proscribed Iranian women to stereotypes and separated her Occidental/Oriental self from them.

Throughout my thesis, I have chosen to highlight images that are imbued with characteristics that perpetuate the myth and the stereotypes of Orientals as backwards and lacking civility and ethics. Although all the images of the *Women of Allah* series conform to the same theme of bound, restricted, silenced, archaic, and violent Muslim women, the five images that I use in my argument are the most relevant to the depiction of Islamic decay and violence. By analyzing such images I demonstrate that Neshat uses photography to convince her audience that they are indeed looking at a specific reality: that within each Iranian Muslim woman resides an entity ready for martyrdom in the name of *jihad*, yet remaining in a perpetual subaltern state of being. In this manner, Neshat denies her female figures agency by adhering to the practice of contemporary Orientalism and media cliché.

There is a limited amount of literature about Neshat, and most of it is divided into two opposing categories, that of perpetuator of archaic Middle Eastern stereotypes, and that of radical artist attempting to break boundaries and force the viewers beyond stereotypes. My thesis incorporates both categories of literature but has focused mainly on articles that emphasize the importance of using the gun and the veil in art and Neshat's part in using these elements that continue to perpetuate the Muslim women's negative image.

CHAPTER ONE

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

Edward

Said¹

By the 1990s, when Shirin Neshat, an Iranian expatriate artist, exhibited her series of black and white photographs entitled *Women of Allah* (1993-97), her Western audience was quite familiar with the representation of Middle Eastern women as militant provocateurs through mass media. Cropped by the frame, and veiled, voiceless, and restricted, Neshat's female figures represent a contemporary Orient. To Western viewers, the veil, the gun, and the violence are metonyms of an Islamic state. But does Neshat accurately represent the Oriental woman? Or like nineteenth-century French masters such as Ingres and Delacroix, does she instead conform to a concept and thus subvert representation? In analyzing the practice of colonialism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the emergence of Orientalism and its tenets, and Iranian history up to the 1979 revolution, one sees that the emergence of contemporary female Iranian artists such as Neshat is deeply rooted in the history of Iran and that their work is imbued with aspects of a culture that struggles against constant assaults by foreign forces.

Born in Iran in 1957, Neshat came to America in 1974 and was unable to return until 1990 due to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Her *Women of Allah* series was the artistic result of this visit to a country transformed by Islamic fundamentalism. Neshat's images are fraught with fear

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

and contempt of an Islamic religion propagating violence. Although Neshat claims that her *Women of Allah* series is not about her, she admits that “it has evolved around my personal interest in coming to terms with the ‘new’ Iran, to understand ideas behind Islamic fundamentalism, and to reconnect with my lost past.”² Since her artwork is mostly intended for a Western audience and because the majority of the photographs in her series are of Neshat herself, this reconnection struggles with a recent past imbued with the fundamentalism and violence that swept the country after the revolution.

In *Seeking Martyrdom* (Figure 1.1), Neshat takes center stage in a self-portrait that stands out because it is the only image in the series with any color. Clad in a black chador, Neshat’s silhouette occupies the majority of the pictorial space with a background of Persian calligraphy resembling graffiti on buildings. With her head slightly tilted forward, Neshat gazes fiercely at the viewer. Her red-painted hands gently hold a rifle in an unconventional clutch that recalls the hand movements of a harp player enthralled by the sounds of her musical instrument. The calligraphy compensates for Neshat’s silence by expressing her sorrows over the loss of martyrs who have left the earthly realm, while she remains on earth, regretful and ashamed. This image is fraught with ambiguity and contradiction: Neshat’s painted hands and movements appear almost melodic and stand in sharp contrast to the rest of the image, which is imbued with elements of war and violence. Although such feminine hands on a phallic rifle might be sensual, in the context of Neshat’s photograph they instead suggest war and bloodshed. The photograph enables Neshat to emulate the Iranian Muslim women who during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war became important elements of propaganda and the moral aids in support of the country’s resistance against foreign assault and continue to serve as such in commemorations of that war (Figure 1.2).

² Linda Bertucci, “Shirin Neshat: Eastern Values,” *Flash Art* 30, no. 197 (Nov-Dec 1997): 84-87.

To an Iranian audience, the image is representative of a dark period in the country's history, where, once again, Persian land became a battlefield for the conflict between the Arab aggressors and Persian resistance. Can posing as an Iranian Muslim militant enable an expatriate like Neshat to reconnect with her compatriots? Is this possible when she has never experienced first hand the terror, destruction, loss, struggle, fear, the unceasing sounds of artillery, the shrieks of mourners in cemeteries, the sight of amputated bodies flying after a bomb hits a civilian neighborhood, the smell of burning human flesh, the constant threat of enemy advance, and the fear that this advance might result in the same tragedies that ensued fourteen centuries ago in previous Arab invasions? I argue that it is impossible to reconnect with an aspect of life never lived and never experienced: therefore while Neshat's artistic endeavor has, indeed, created a new style in representation and content, she has instead enforced the concept of racial stereotype to a Western audience, one whose familiarity with racial stereotypes stems from the concept of Orientalism, created and developed by the Occidentals in their centuries-long exercise of territorial and cultural colonialism.

Colonialism as a concept pertains to the acquisition and further expansion of a foreign land and the establishment of a puppet-state regime that modifies the social structure and the economies of the occupied territories for the benefit of the colonizer. Military domination of the colonizer over the colonized allowed for the practice of colonialism, a practice that extends back as far as Egyptian, Greek, and Roman antiquity.

"The Age of Discovery," in modern colonialism, was marked by pioneering Spanish and Portuguese maritime travel to the Indies, where they were in search of alternate trade routes for the profitable exchange of commodities.³ Colonial European expansions were regularly achieved

³ David Arnold, *Lancaster Pamphlets* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11.

through military occupations as in the case of Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian Campaign of 1798-1801, which was prompted by France's need to protect its trade interests and to weaken Britain's access to India. Napoleon described his campaign as the vector of liberation from Mameluke domination and, as Grimaldo Grigsby points out, even members of the Institut de France were willing participants in this political propaganda. However, dispatched as part of a 167-member coalition, these distinguished individuals from the French learned society did little more than collect Egyptian cultural data, a far cry from Napoleon's promise to liberate Egyptians from tyranny.⁴

Edward Said argues that although Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign had a greater consequence on the "modern history of Orientalism," it was the scholarly works of Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron and Sir William Jones that introduced the Orient to Westerners.⁵ As Said explains, three things gave birth to the concept of Orientalism. First, in 1759, Anquetil translated the Avesta, a collection of sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. Secondly, in 1783, Jones traveled to India in the pursuit of acquiring more knowledge of the Orient and Orientals. Finally, in 1784, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was established.⁶ As Stuart Schaar explains, "The British in India and Napoleon in Egypt, recognizing the potential in employing Orientalists like Jones for their empire-building, linked the Orientalist intellectual tradition with outright political domination."⁷ In this stage of European colonialism, an improved knowledge of the colonized people served the colonizer by solidifying its political and physical dominance.

⁴ Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 65.

⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 76-77.

⁶ Ibid., 77-78.

⁷ Stuart Schaar, "Orientalism at the Service of Imperialism," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 182-193.

As Said explicates, immediately after the occupation of Egypt, Napoleon was adamant about the consistent and exact recordings of experimental missions by the members of Institut de France, which resulted in the compilation of twenty-three volumes under the title of *Description de L’Egypt*. According to Said, this compilation was intended to advocate the Westernization of the Orient as the sole, indisputable strategy in the restoration of the region’s former glory. The process, while said to be voluntary on Egypt’s part, in actuality propagated the annihilation of Oriental history. Encrypted in *Description de L’Egypt*, which served to “dignify all the knowledge collected during colonial occupation,” was total political dominance.⁸

This modern form of colonialism, therefore, was achieved through various methods: military invasion of a foreign land, political domination, and cultural assault on the occupied territory. Aggression became the consistent element of these three components of the colonizers’ method of action, and inequality defined the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The Western infiltration of Eastern lands, and what Said elucidates as a method of familiarization with the Orient in the pursuit of domination, gave birth to colonial discourse. In this discourse, the Westerners’ construction of the “Otherness” of the Orientals is concomitant with the general belief in their inherent difference.

The result of this sought-after knowledge of the Orientals was the construction of the polarities of West and East, civilized and barbarian, and the objectification of the Orient and the Orientals as “Other.” Orientalism as a discourse posits the West and the East in polarities whose characteristics are inherently divergent. These fabricated cultural, political, racial, linguistic, ethical, and religious differences ultimately allocate to the West the position of superiority, which the Orientals are unable to contest. The territorial intrusion and its subsequent cultural and

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 86.

political interference further separate the two worlds despite a physical proximity. The corporeal presence of the Westerner in the occupied territory reinforces the boundaries between the imaginary spaces of “ours” and “theirs.” Ironically, the geographical proximity between the East and the West strengthens the division and marginalizes the colonized in their own land. What Said calls an “arbitrary geographical distinction” is a permeable concept that pervades all facets of every encounter between the colonizer and the colonized.⁹

Homi Bhabha argues that “[t]he objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”¹⁰ What Bhabha calls the “stereotypical discourse” is the method strategically employed by the West in its “process of subjectification” of the East. At this stage of domination, representational control over the East relates to its corporeal and political authority, and it resonates through the construction of stereotypes.¹¹ Bhabha explains that “[t]he construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference-racial and sexual.”¹² The colonial subject, therefore, stands in contrast to the colonizer, whose authority over the discourse allocates to the colonizer the position of superiority. As Bhabha argues, the concept of racial and cultural hierarchy is then constructed through this differentiation and discrimination. We can, therefore, argue that the Western representational praxis of “Otherness” is contingent upon delineation of Western political and cultural hegemony.

According to Said, the concept of Orientalism allowed Europe to define its supremacy by comparing itself with the Orient and presenting the latter “as its contrasting image, idea,

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.

¹¹ Ibid., 95.

¹² Ibid., 96.

personality, experience.”¹³ One of the tropes of Orientalist discourse was its application of representational systems that Said calls “realism” in which a set of imaginary and pre-conceived ideas about the Islamic lands was presented to the Western audience as the truth. We can see this salient realism in art works such as Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* (Figure 1.3), which demonstrates the view of the Orient and its inhabitants persistent in the nineteenth century. Its photographic value, achieved by Ingres’s extraordinary application of paint with no apparent brushstrokes, enforces its intended realism. The reclining nude and her private surroundings symbolize the exotic realm of a Turkish harem, where the audience can take part in the sublimity of a sensuous and idyllic pleasure free of their societal, moral, and cultural constraints. The indolent realm of the Orient depicted with a high degree of realism stands in sharp contrast to the “civilized” world of European city dwellers. As Said asserts, “The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.”¹⁴ Therefore, the exoticism and the eroticism inherent in paintings such as *La Grande Odalisque* become part of the Oriental stereotype.

Although this “theatrical stage” assigned to Orientals has remained the same for the past two centuries, the appearance and identity of the subjects have evolved significantly but not improved. The female figures are no longer docile and eroticized nudes; nineteenth-century Odalisques become Muslim militants, armed and dangerous soldiers of God ready for martyrdom in the name of *jihad*. This representation of the Oriental has become the trope of contemporary

¹³ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

Orientalism, which Neshat's *Seeking Martyrdom* enforces. To a Western audience, a veiled woman with a rifle is symbolic of violence, which in Neshat's photograph has been emphasized by the color red alluding to carnage. Another significant element in the image is that the rifle rests on Neshat's forehead, a place where the Koran is placed after having been kissed by Muslims as a gesture of veneration and devotion to everything Allah advocates through the teachings of Mohammed, his chosen prophet. This action communicates an inclination toward aggression on the part of the Muslim woman, whose modern-day image greatly differs from Ingres's *Odalisque*. However dissimilar the two images might be, they both contain visual components that are essential characteristics of racial stereotype that persists through time with varying outward manifestations.

Bhabha has analyzed the concept of racial stereotype and its correlation with fetishism, the colonizer and the Freudian phallic stage in length. Freud's third stage of development, the phallic stage, occurs between the ages of 3 and 6, when a child becomes conscious of the pleasures brought by self-manipulation. According to Freud, it is also at this stage of development that boys and girls become aware of their anatomical differences and that the realization of having a penis compels the boys to develop a powerful and dominant personality, while the awareness of the lack of penis influences girls to develop a passive and obedient personality.¹⁵ Bhabha argues that the emergence of the stereotype in the colonial discourse is the result of a need for "a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered, to be spoken."¹⁶ It is within the colonial discourse that the East is feminized and fetishized by the West.

¹⁵ John W. Santrock, *Life-Span Development*, 7th ed. (USA: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1999), 35.

¹⁶ Idid., 107.

Zeynep Çelik refers to the concept of “gendering the subject” in her article on Le Corbusier, a Swiss painter, writer, architect, designer, and urban planner. Çelik explains that the sketch for the cover of Le Corbusier’s *Poésie sur Alger*, designed by the artist himself, illustrates the gendering of the subject -Algeria- through artistic depiction, a commonly utilized means of expression during the time of colonialization. Le Corbusier’s sketch shows Algeria as a unicorn/winged nude woman whose right wing rests in a Western man’s massive, free-floating hand. This usage of gendering is a metonym for colonized Algeria’s physical frailty in relation to the colonizer, the rendering of powerlessness through entrapment. Çelik asserts, in this instance, that Algeria’s territorial beauty can be reincarnated through Le Corbusier’s architectural intervention.¹⁷ Furthermore, the utilization of artistic analogy, in general, was not unprecedented in the French discourse on Algeria.

In the case of Iranian history, the identity and sovereignty of its people have always remained impervious to the ideology of “gendering the subject.” Iranians live with a firm belief in their cultural hegemony over their neighboring Arab states. The descendants of Cyrus and Zoroaster live on the remaining part of the once powerful Persian Empire ruled by the Achaemenian King. The migrating Aryans¹⁸ who settled in the center of the Iranian plateau planted the Achaemenian King’s seeds in Fars.¹⁹ The Persians transformed the arid land into a culturally and financially thriving domain under the spiritual guidance of Zoroaster and the judicious rule of Cyrus.

Zoroaster, born circa the sixth and eighteenth centuries B.C., was the first prophet and philosopher who introduced the concept of monotheism through Ahura Mazda, or God.

¹⁷ Zeynep Çelik, “Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism,” *Assemblage* 17 (1992): 58-77.

¹⁸ The term Aryans refers to Indo-Iranians, meaning the speakers of Indo-Iranian languages.

¹⁹ Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 15.

Zoroastrianism, representative of Persian ethical and moral codes, advanced the philosophy of the dualistic forces of good and evil/light and darkness. Ahura Mazda is the embodiment of goodness and light, while Ahriman, the equivalent of Satan, is the signifier of evil and darkness. Human beings of their own free will may choose between these dualistic forces, but it is through the teachings of Ahura Mazda that strong religious character prevails and continues to be pervasive in contemporary Iranian culture. As Sandra Mackey asserts: “Zoroaster gave Cyrus’s earthly realm a soul and Cyrus gave Zoroastrianism a body.”²⁰

To Iranians, Cyrus is symbolic of the just ruler. However, the apex of glory of the Persian Empire was reached under the astute and ambitious governance of Darius. His territorial expansions were celebrated on the splendid grounds of Takht-e Jamshid or Persepolis, Iran’s most venerated and cherished historical remains of the Achaemenid Empire. To Iranians, the ruins of Persepolis symbolize an era of splendor when cultural mores and traditions, such as Nowruz, were formed. Mackey sums it up this way, “For at Persepolis on No Ruz, the Persians knew who and what they were—a special people sitting at the center of the universe.”²¹ Via the legacy of Cyrus and Darius and the physical remains of such buildings as Takht-e Jamshid, Iranians long for a nostalgic past; a past embodying a pioneering culture that established a monotheistic system of belief, a governmental system that successfully ruled over a diversity of nations and religious thoughts, a social system that cultivated Zoroaster’s philosophy of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, and an artistic domain that manifested the highest degree of civilization.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 17.

²¹ Ibid., 27.

²² Ibid., 31.

The identity of modern-day Iranians is firmly rooted in the Achaemenian era. The country's strategic location and metaphoric role as a bridge connecting the Eastern hemisphere to its Western counterpart led to the country being the site of many wars and conflicts over the years. The Sassanids became the last of the Empire due to the assault on the Persian land by the Arabs in the seventh century. Mackey mentions that "[j]ustification for crossing into the territories of the Sassanians came from the Prophet himself, who had spoken of the riches of Persia that were destined to belong to the Arabs."²³

The Arabic political conquest of Persia did not result in a concurrent conversion of the Persian identity, its spiritual tradition and arts. An attempt to impose compulsory usage of the Arabic language failed, despite the threat of execution to anyone speaking Farsi in public. As evidence of the courageous resistance, one of Iran's most venerated tenth-century poets, Ferdowsi, wrote the book, *Shahnameh*, in Farsi, using as few Arabic-derivative words as possible. For Iranians, *Shahnameh* is symbolic of the nation's zeal to preserve an identity continuously threatened by foreign aggressors.

The determined refusal to be culturally absorbed by Arabic assailants was further evidenced by the Persians' continued dedication to the tenets of Zoroastrianism.²⁴ Mackey affirms this resistance of the Persian people to surrender deeply rooted traditions of social justice so basic to pre-Islamic Iran.²⁵ We can argue that it was the apparent similarities between Zoroastrianism and Shiism that allowed Iranians to acknowledge Islam, even though Iranians did it on their own terms in a manner particular to their nation's identity.

²³ Ibid., 46.

²⁴ Ibid., 85.

²⁵ Ibid., 106.

The conversion from Sunnism to Shiism in Iran happened during the Safavid by Shah Ismail I (1501-28), whose compulsory political directive was to impose a distinctive Persian identity apart from its neighboring Sunni Uzbeks and Ottomans. The import of the doctrine of Twelver Shiism along with countless Shiia *Ulema* (Islamic scholars) from Iraq and Lebanon was imposed upon the population by force.²⁶ Yet the objective of Shah Ismail, according to Mackey, to give the nation a unique identity from its Arab Muslim neighbors was accomplished. Iranians had the freedom to be Muslims within this identity.²⁷

The innate Iranian spirit of self-preservation and self-assertion has endured. August 19, 1953 marked the beginning of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's 26-year authoritarian rule, as well as the beginning of a latent colonialism under which the Pahlavi monarchy aspired to transform Iran into a modern, westernized state. In Iran, particularly during the nearly sixty years of Pahlavi rule, the forces of modernization represented a relentless drive toward Westernization and secularization with the full support of absentee, Western powers.²⁸

One of the consequences of this fast-paced modernization during Pahlavi's authoritarian rule was the public discontent that prompted the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Another outcome of this modernization was the legal reforms in the status of Iranian women, such as the 1936 Unveiling Act, the 1963 Suffrage Act, and the 1967 Family Protection Law.²⁹ As the results of such reforms, Iranian women were given a voice and a presence and were propelled into the political, cultural, and artistic arenas. For the first time since the invasion of Arabs and the

²⁶ Marvin Gittleman and Stuart Schaar, eds., *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 42.

²⁷ Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*, 85.

²⁸ Majid Tehrani, "Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm," *Iranian Studies* 13, no. ¼ (1980): 5-30.

²⁹ Shahla Haeri, "Women, Law, and Social Change in Iran," in *Women in Contemporary Muslim Societies*, ed. Jane Smith (Cranbury: Associated University Presses), 209-234.

establishment and implementation of restrictive Islamic laws, Iranian women were taking the first step toward equality of rights and had a glimpse of a promising future, one in which they would cease to exist as second-rate citizens. This short-lived period of constitutional and legal freedom for women came to a halt with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, whose Muslim clergy leaders zealously advocated an immediate establishment of restrictive Islamic laws to liberate the nation from decades of latent cultural colonialism and infringement by the West.

Neshat's *Seeking Martyrdom* reflects the new image of the Iranian woman that emerged as the result of the revolution. Veiled and armed, she loses her identity and place in a society run by the Muslim clergy, whose main focus, to this day, remains to tame and control the bodies and minds of Iranian women. She is forced into the private realm and obscurity but is frequently used to propagate an unceasing crusade against the infidels.



Figure 1.1 Shirin Neshat, *Seeking Martyrdom*, 1995

www.google.com/images (accessed April 14, 2011)



Figure 1.2 Jamshid Bairami, AFP photo of Iranian Women Soldiers, 1997

Zabel, Igore. "Women in Black." *Art Journal* 60.4 (Winter 2001): 18.

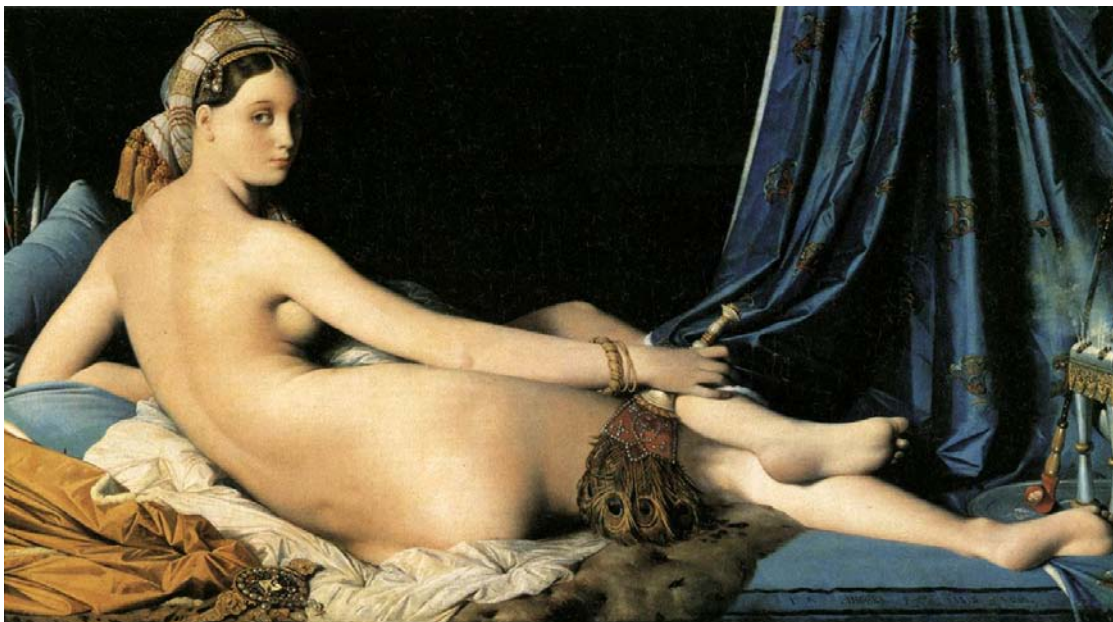


Figure 1.3 Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814

www.google.com/images (accessed April 14, 2011)

CHAPTER TWO

Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them.

The Koran³⁰

The media images of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that rapidly spread around the world prompted a drastic change in worldwide perceptions of Iran. Veils reappeared and the colorful ties and clothes disappeared, leaving an Iranian landscape of gray and black as symbolic of the austerity of an Islamic state. A decade after compulsory veiling, Neshat reflects upon the black veil as signifier. Her *Women of Allah* series, made after Neshat's visit to Iran in 1990, includes self-portraits of the artist, and all female subjects are clad in chador, hold guns and rifles, and feature bodies adorned with calligraphy in the Farsi language. Neshat's photographs of the Iranian women pertain to the emergence of a new era in Iranian history following the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, an era marked by an emphasis on the distinction between the self and other, and the cultural, sexual, and physical division brought by an Islamic government.

On January 16, 1979, after thirty-seven years of an oppressive reign, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the shah of Iran, left the country accompanied by his wife, the empress Farah. On February 1, 1979, a jubilant crowd welcomed the new Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shia leader who returned after sixteen years of exile. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established by national referendum on April 1, 1979, and Khomeini became Vilayat-e Faghih, or the supreme leader of a theocratic constitution. The massive demonstrations that preceded Khomeini's arrival had a "unique and striking feature" which was "the massive participation of

³⁰ The Koran, trans. N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books, 1956), 64.

women in the mobilization.”³¹ The public protests unified men and women in the common objective of democracy and freedom, they were, however, starkly separated by the veil. These veils also signaled a division between the “Self” and the “Other.” The period of public dissent marked the beginning of an era of these types of separations and polarities, where the new Islamic government became the institution in charge of, for example, safeguarding the honor of Iranian women by restricting them to the private realm. As Azar Tabari explains, “Veils and large scarves were always at hand to be offered to unveiled women who felt obliged to accept them in order to indicate their solidarity with the majority.”³² This matter, which appeared to be inconsequential at the time, later became the focal point of the first resistant stance against Khomeini’s Islamic Republic.³³

The concept of veiling in Iranian society affects multiple aspects of women’s lives, and thus extends beyond the physical realm to permeate familial, societal, and political spheres. As Farzaneh Milani construes, “The veil, in its traditional sense, not only polarizes but delineates boundaries. It consigns ‘power,’ ‘control,’ ‘visibility,’ and ‘mobility’ to one social category at the expense of the other.”³⁴ These socially constructed polarities divide the world of men and women and assign each of them specific behavioral patterns, beliefs, and praxis, and these fixed categories of identities operate as an axis whose apex has always been occupied by a male figure. Whether family as the smallest social organization or monarchy as the governing authority, Iranians have identified authority with male figures. Sandra Mackey explains that “[t]he authoritarian tradition of father, king, and cleric has shaped a whole culture into a pattern of

³¹ Azar Tabari, “The Enigma of Veiled Iranian Women,” *Feminist Review*, no. 5 (1980): 19-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 5.

dominance and subservience.”³⁵ This structural order, therefore, allocates to the woman the position of subordinate, who instead of leading is continually led by men in all aspects of her life and whose world is therefore limited to the domestic realm.

Compulsory veiling in 1983, directly ordered by Khomeini, was another action that conveyed the Iranian woman’s symbolic inferiority in a society where traditions require undisputed compliance of the subjects to the authority’s commands. As Milani asserts: “An older woman in Iran today has been veiled by tradition in her youth, forcefully unveiled by government edict in 1936, and obligatorily reveiled in 1983.”³⁶ As Milani explains, there is no evidence of when and how the practice of veiling became part of the Iranian tradition, and regardless of its source of origin, it still holds “an extraordinary appeal” for many Iranians.³⁷

Veiling is one of the aspects of post-1979 Iranian life that Neshat seems to address in her work. Neshat’s images of armed and veiled women appear to enforce the myth surrounding the Orient and the elements that separate the world of the Orientals from the one inhabited by their Occidental counterparts. This explicit referent is twofold: the Muslim woman and her Oriental origin. The female figure in her black veil thus becomes the signifier of the ‘Otherness’ of a culture perpetuated by the media cliché as the Middle Eastern fundamentalist. She is the ‘Other’ because of her appearance. In contrast to the Western woman, whose clothes hint at her status and personal taste, the supple material of the Muslim woman’s black veil indicates the rigidity of her world. The black cloth conceals her body and her movements, and perhaps, to Westerners, even weapons. The veiled Iranian woman symbolizes the concept of *jihad*, the holy war against the infidels. The Iranian woman therefore becomes the epitome of a culture that restricts her

³⁵ Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Souls of a Nation*, 93.

³⁶ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

physically but allows her freedom of action in pursuit of ideological aspirations. Neshat comments on the concept of freedom/restriction that surrounds the Iranian women's existence in *Speechless* (Figure 2.1), where the surface of the photograph is comprised of the partially visible face of a young woman populated with Persian calligraphy, black veil, and the barrels of a gun. The female figure in the image is the entity whose gender requires her to be shielded from the salacious male gaze by the protective character of the black veil, but can also be used to carry out religious and political missions. For the Muslim Iranian woman, the metallic gun barrels become ornamental, a referent, in *Speechless*. Resting between the female figure's cheekbone and the veil, where a woman's earring would playfully move, the gun thrusts out menacingly. The female warrior reminds the Western viewers, once again, that she is the bearer of a religious dogma, antagonistic and violent. The Iranian woman's religion, location, and actions situate her in opposition to her Western audience, whose secular everyday existence greatly differs from their Middle Eastern counterparts. Neshat's female protagonist becomes representative of the "East" on display for the denizens of the "West," by her outward appearance and action that allude to her difference. This visible difference is the outcome of social norms in practice in a culture that is both geographically and ethically distant, and whose persistence and continuance might reside in human beings' propensity to strive for distinction that results in the emergence of categories.

The construction of the categories of "East" and "West," similar to the socially produced gender categories of "male" and "female," assigns the authoritative status to one group and forces the other into a subaltern position. Since the production of categories is ultimately intended to provide information and to propagandize, its objectivity is highly debatable. As Irvin Cemil Schick explains, "Knowledge is not discovered but socially produced, and [...] therefore

[is] never neutral, reflecting instead ambient power relations.”³⁸ This power relation occurs at the national as well as the international level, and what is produced as knowledge in a given society about a foreign culture is certainly partial and prejudicial. The political protests that spread throughout Iran in 1978 preceding the revolution were internationally broadcast, and as Majid Tehranian explicates, “The worldwide media attention that Ayatollah Khomeini received subsequent to his expulsion from Iraq to Neuphle-Le-Chateau (outside of Paris) gave the revolutionaries the psychological boost they needed; it also gave the impression to the monarchists that the Western powers considered a popular Muslim fundamentalist regime a surer guarantee against communist penetration than a loyal but unpopular monarchy.”³⁹

Almost four decades of political oppression and totalitarian monarchy had compelled two visually distinct categories of women to march the streets of Tehran and other major cities of Iran. Holding banners and shouting slogans, both veiled and unveiled women joined together to voice their discontent about the Pahlavi’s regime. To wear the veil thus became symbolic of resistance to Western culture, propagated and imposed by the Pahlavi monarchs who failed to take into account deep-rooted traditions and cultural mores. As Milani argues, “A veilless woman became the personification of cultural imperialism.”⁴⁰ A return to strict religious principles of Islamic codes concerning women’s appearance, therefore, provided women a strong stance against any Western cultural invasion. The modernization of Iran became manifest mainly through Westernization, which gradually replaced traditional and native institutions with

³⁸ Irvin Cemil Schick, “Representing Middle Eastern Women: Feminism and Colonial Discourse,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 345-380.

³⁹ Majid Tehranian, “Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm,” *Iranian Studies* 13, no. ¼ (1980): 5-30.

⁴⁰ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 37.

political, economic, social, and educational organizations in Western replica.⁴¹ Conflict and inconsistency within the Iranian society were the result of this fast-paced modernization that had managed to establish a small group of individuals whose mission was to transform a traditional society into what Tehranian calls “the image of the most ‘advanced’ sectors of Western society.”⁴² The secularization and centralization of authority as modernization’s most prevalent characteristics effectively failed to replace indigenous bodies, such as “the village community, the tribes, the urban voluntary associations such as the guilds, the mosque, the *khanegah*, the *Zurkhaneh*.”⁴³ This hasty drive toward urbanization, secularization, and cultural homogenization was at the root of the intense feelings of discontent and contempt toward the Pahlavi regime, whose policies, the Iranians believed, were the cause of social inequalities, economic corruption, and political oppression. The clergy, the one sector that was the least affected by modernization and corruption, provided necessary leadership and ensured the achievement of the early stages of the revolution.⁴⁴ In the person of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian nation found the quintessential patriarch, a leader who fundamentally differed from the Pahlavi rulers. To Iranians, Khomeini became the new patriarch in charge of safeguarding a country imbued with a strong need for the separation of public and private.

Iranians strongly believe in the sanctity of the private family realm and fiercely guard and protect this very private domain to this day. In a Muslim society, walls architecturally establish a division between the private and the public realms, while a long black cloth envelops the Muslim woman’s body and separates it from the outside world. The veil, therefore, ensures the privacy of the Iranian Muslim woman and makes it impenetrable to anything foreign. As Milani elucidates,

⁴¹ Tehranian, “Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm,” 5-30.

⁴² Ibid., 7.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

“Veiling is perhaps one of the most symbolically significant structures of a complex cultural heritage that expresses, among other things, Iran’s prevailing attitude toward the self and the other.”⁴⁵ The separation of “the self and the other,” as Milani terms it, is one of the prevalent themes in Neshat’s artwork.

In Neshat’s *Speechless* (Figure 2.1), the division of self and other occurs on many levels, including physical, cultural, linguistic, formal, and sexual. The cropping of the photograph provides the first stage of separation, where the viewers’ world faces the photograph’s realm. The frame’s tactile material provides the image with physical separateness that the audience can never threaten by its presence. Within the image itself, four distinctive and incongruent elements occupy the limited space, and they combine within the framework to create a threatening message: the softness of the veil’s fabric, the rigidity of the gun’s metal, the fluidity of the black ink, and the young woman’s flesh appear to coexist amidst physical and material differences.

The next stage of division in Neshat’s piece happens when the Western audience encounters the Iranian woman’s image. At that moment, two separate and opposing cultures come in contact, and their physical proximity remains the only element of closeness. Although the cultural clash does not happen on the physical level, in the mind of the Western audience, the veiled Iranian woman is evocative of a culture in which women are marginalized. The veil becomes symbolic of backwardness while the gun signals a lack of civilization and ethics. The cropping of the photograph physically mutilates the female face and restricts her field of action. The cropping, the veil, the gun, and the calligraphy restrict the young woman.

The calligraphy in this image is of great significance: the calligraphy has been written on the surface of the photograph and not directly painted on the subject’s skin. This adds yet another

⁴⁵ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 23.

level of separation, imposition, and restriction to the female figure, just like she has been separated culturally. The written calligraphy invokes the Iranian woman's silence and her inability to have a voice. Because Neshat's residence in the West allows her the freedom of expression, she covers the entire visible surface of her female figure with her chosen words. This particular characteristic once again refers to the Westerner's superiority over the Oriental. However, Neshat's chosen words are in total compliance with the militancy of the veiled Iranian woman in that they are poetic words supporting Iranian martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. Persian calligraphy as an illegible element compels the Western audience to categorize it as Arabic, as the two languages share many formal similarities.

Even though the calligraphy remains illegible to a Western audience, the gun resting between the young woman's delicate skin and the black chador is a clear motif that signifies antagonism and violence. In this image the gun appears to float in space, since no visible hand seems to hold it. Is she the one aiming the gun toward the viewer, or is the black veil in fact camouflaging someone else's hand? Could the hand belong to a man? And, if so, is she there on her own terms or was she forced into this mission? The diagonal line of the woman's eye and the two consecutive barrels hint at imminent danger, with threatening stares imbued with determination and drive. The female figure in the photograph symbolizes the threatening forces of an Islamic dogma exported to the West by acts of terrorism. She is the foreign entity with opposing culture and mores. The Iranian woman's differences make her the "Other."

It is at the moment of viewing Neshat's image that the concept of "Otherness" takes shape in the Western viewers' mind. According to Homi Bhabha, "This image of human identity and, indeed, human identity as *image* [author's italics] – both familiar frames or mirrors of selfhood that speak from deep within Western culture – are inscribed in the sign of

resemblance.”⁴⁶ This human proclivity to identify only with individuals who carry the same physical, cultural, and religious traits is what Carl Jung calls the collective unconsciousness. According to Jung, the collective unconsciousness is the accumulation of individual consciousness that the psyche independently classifies, and that Frantz Fanon describes as “simply the repository of prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a particular group.”⁴⁷ This collective unconsciousness, therefore, has saturated the Westerner’s reservoir of personal experiences with centuries of belief in the fundamental differences that separate his world from that of the Oriental. To the Westerner, the veiled woman functions as a vector of meanings and Islamic ethos, but, as Zabel argues, she functions in the West “as a general sign for the Muslim world and its allegedly incomprehensible, irrational, uncertain, and threatening nature.”⁴⁸ Because the western audience has no direct experience with veiled Muslim women, his or her experiences are derived entirely from the media and thus of course dangerously stereotyped, and Neshat’s work acts to compound this.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 and the media frenzy that ensued could not compare to the intense public interest and reactions that images of American hostages in Tehran generated. On November 4, 1979, Islamic students took sixty-six Americans hostage after taking over the United States embassy in Tehran. For 444 days, until January 20, 1981 and almost immediately after U.S. President Ronald Reagan took office, the detentions and fates of the remaining fifty-two American hostages became the focus of the entire world, and especially the West. On newsstands, television, and in the movies, horrific images of blindfolded American detainees flooded the Western media.

⁴⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70.

⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 165.

⁴⁸ Zabel, “Women in Black,” 17.

The West, once in favor of the struggling Iranian nation against imperial autocracy, turned hostile toward what it deemed Islamic fanaticism. Slogans such as “Death to America” accompanied by burnings of the American flag were components of an anti-occident movement that dominated the Iranian nation with its zealous urge for purification in the name of Allah. This yearning for fundamental change was not restricted to the political realm; rather it extended to all aspects of Iranian life, which had already been forcefully altered by the last two monarchs during the past fifty years. The Pahlavis’ quest for the swift modernization of a country with long-standing traditions had resulted in widespread resentment and had failed due “as much to feelings of homelessness, depersonalization, and humiliation in most sectors of the population as to economic mismanagement, political repression, social injustice, cultural alienation, and moral corruption.”⁴⁹ The events that followed the Iranian Revolution, such as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), produced many Iranian Muslim women militants, whose legacies Neshat’s photographs help to immortalize. Neshat’s female figure in *Speechless* represents an Islamic revival that transformed the lives and the beliefs of strata of the Iranian society that, exasperated by Western cultural forays, reverted to Islam.

Similar to *Speechless*, Neshat’s *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (Figure 2.2) contains visual elements that are reminiscent of a period of Iranian history marked by war. Following Iraq’s attack on Iran on September 22, 1980, a plethora of media images of war along with photographs of women militants clad in black chadors were produced for both national and international viewers. In *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, a pair of small, delicate feet strongly hold a gun in an atypical embrace. The outline of the feet creates a heart-shaped form whose lightness is pierced by the darkness of the gun. The animate human membrane encases the cold metal extension of

⁴⁹ Majid Tehranian, “Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm,” 5-30.

the weapon. A black veil covers the naked legs, and worm-like calligraphy decorates the bottom of the figure's feet. The inscription delineates the entire surface of the feet and is framed vertically by flower designs to signal the beginning and the end of the poem or perhaps its limitations. The curving lines of the flowers echo the harmonious dance-like movement of the written words. The intricacy of the calligraphy and the flowers on the feet is contrasted with the intruding, non-organic, and phallic body of the gun. It appears as though the female elements in the image are alive and animated and surround and trap the cold, masculine, and threatening body of the gun. While the calligraphy faces the viewer, the weapon is positioned horizontally, aiming outside of the frame. In this composition the female elements confront the audience, while the masculine is forced away, suggesting that legibility might only be attained through femininity. The feet mimic the hands held together at the moment of prayer, when Muslims bind their hands in simulation of the Koran for daily worship. However, in this photograph, the female figure's feet replace the hands and poetic words from a female Iranian poet replaces the Koranic verses and direct the rifle toward something or someone outside the photograph. This scenario is multivalent, since it suggests an immediate danger posed by the pointing weapon, on one hand, and the possibility that the worshiper intertwines the Koranic verses with homicidal thoughts, in another. For the Western viewer both possibilities are imbued with violence and danger, and they refer to a culture that is both geographically and ethically distant.

The calligraphy is the poem, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, by Tahereh Saffarzadeh, a female poet.

O, you martyr
hold my hands
with your hands
cut from earthly means,
Hold my hands,
I am your poet,

with an inflicted body,
 I've come to be with you
 and on the promised day,
 we shall rise again.
 O Guard
 in the heart of night's cold
 you watch as if from outside
 the house of your own body
 with tired eyelids
 a night nurse
 so that the wounded city can rest
 from the plunder of death.
 Your wakefulness comes from earnest faith,
 your sincerity and Al-Asr.
 Stories of your martyrdom
 like martyrdom of the people
 remain unheard
 they have no voice, no image, no date,
 they are unannounced.
 O light of the eyes
 O good
 O my brother
 O watchful one
 as your bullets in the air
 break my sleep,
 as if by reflex, I pray for you,
 guardian of the liberating Revolution
 O lonely hero,
 watching against the nightly enemy
 let God safeguard you from calamity.⁵⁰

Neshat's choice of this particular poem is significant because of its composer's life history, political views, and the kind of militancy her poetry invokes. Saffarzadeh, a university-educated Iranian, was one of the first women to veil herself willingly after the revolution, an act that distanced her from the Western modernization that she equated with decay in all aspects of Iranian life. As Milani explains, Saffarzadeh found in Islam "an invigorating ideology of

⁵⁰ Tahereh Saffarzadeh cited in Arthur C. Danto and Marina Abramovic, *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 38-39.

freedom and equality,” and she used it as a “revolutionary banner to mobilize people.”⁵¹ Imbued with revolutionary zeal, Neshat’s image reverberates Saffarzadeh’s poetic oeuvre during the years following the revolution. In *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, the poet refers to the revolutionary guard and the martyr as “the light of the eyes,” a term used by Iranians when addressing a highly beloved and dear individual. The female poet becomes the voice of the deceased martyr and envisions a triumphant rebirth for the both of them on judgment day. There is a correlation between the martyr’s state of existence and the photograph, where the bottom of the feet enclosed by a blurry surrounding appears as if belonging to a lifeless body, therefore fusing with the martyr in the context of death brought about by political ideology.

Like *Speechless*, Neshat conveys in *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, an ambiguity about how and who is holding the weapon. The blurriness that surrounds the feet suggests uncertainty beyond what is visible. The ambiguity is deliberate. As Neshat explains, “From the beginning I made a decision that this work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject, and that my position was going to be no position.”⁵² Neshat’s neutrality is, however, highly debatable, since the birth of each image is the result of a concept or an idea, whose existence relies heavily on its creator: the artist. It is the artist’s original idea or concept that provide him or her with artistic intent, which takes shape through various forms, such as painting, photography, and sculpture.

I, therefore, argue that for the Western viewers the rhetorical character of Neshat’s photograph combined with the violence suggested by the weapon imply advocacy of an Islamic fundamentalist regime, where even the most literary female strata of the Iranian society join the leading clergy in a *jihad*-like battle against the infidels. In this scenario, the infidels or the non-

⁵¹ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 167.

⁵² Lina Bertucci, “Shirin Neshat: Eastern Values,” 84-87.

believers reveal themselves as Western ideologues disguised under the alluring promises of modernization and progress against which a nation rises, strengthened by the tenets of Islam. Neshat's *Speechless* and *Allegiance with Wakefulness* refer to a period of Iranian history during which a fundamental cultural shift from modernization and progress to a regressive movement backwards, toward an Islamic past, resulted in the emergence of a new image of the Iranian Muslim woman as inherently archaic and violent. The new militant Muslim women of Neshat's photographs, veiled and toting rifles, are a far cry from the Iranian women of the periods preceding the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This era of Pahlavi totalitarian reign, in spite of its failure in providing its denizens with political and ideological freedom, had succeeded in the enactment of social laws in favor of women, facilitating their entrance into the society as productive members. Neshat's female figures remain mute entities, residing in a perpetual state of isolation within a society governed by Islamic dogma that relentlessly strives to maintain a division between the male and female realms. To remain within the boundaries of Islamic tenets suggests archaic tendencies so prevalent in Neshat's images.



Figure 2.1 Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996

Danto, Arthur, and Marina Abromovic. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010. 37.

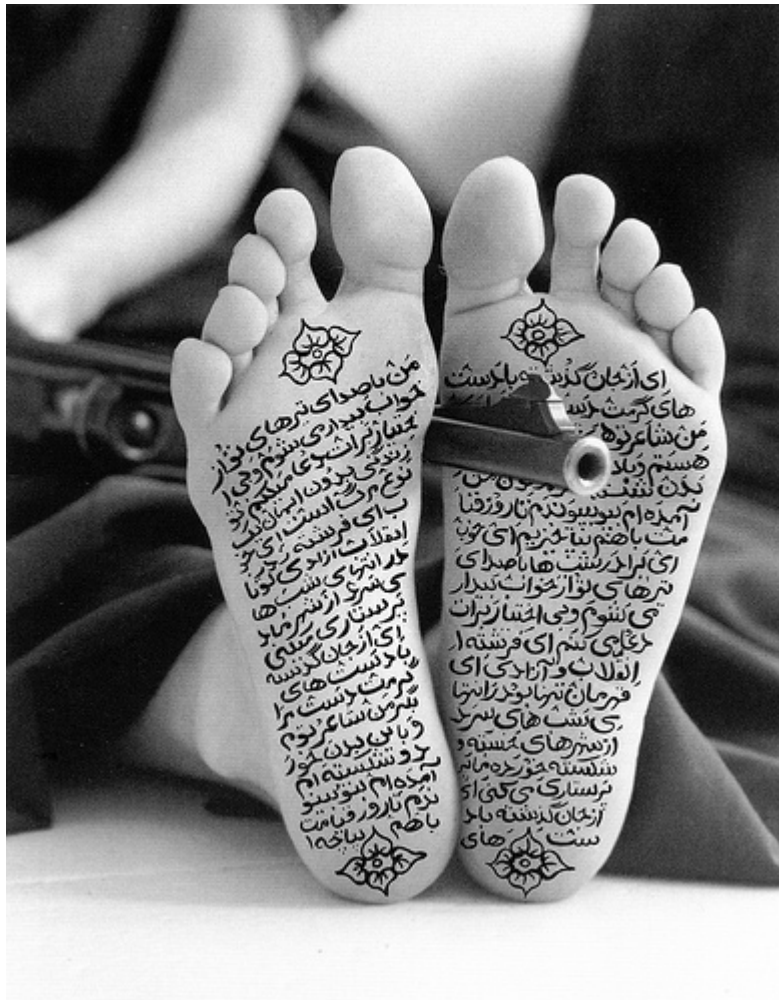


Figure 2.2 Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, 1994

Danto, Arthur, and Marina Abromovic. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010. 35.

CHAPTER THREE

The human imagination has its collective expression in civilization: it is the thing created. But this created thing contains within itself the process of its own creation, the system of production and reproduction by which it comes into being, sustains and perpetuates itself. It is civilization conceived in this way not as a stable and completed object to be externally assessed in its freestanding activity but as something that seems at once interior to that thing, the process residing within it that brings it about, and yet exterior to the thing, the vast artifact in which all other artifacts (pitchers, plates, cities, and systems, all objects collectively designated “civilization”) are made and modified.

Elaine Scarry⁵³

The invention of photography at the beginning of the nineteenth century provided explorers and colonizers with a necessary tool of documentation to be used for the purposes of representation. Realism was believed to be the inherent nature of this new visual imagery due to its technical capacity to record events more rapidly, and its immediacy in representation therefore distinguished it from preceding methods such as painting and drawing. Sarah Graham-Brown explains that even though the photography-as-truth claim has been widely debated, “There is still a lingering sense that a photograph has a documentary value different from, and perhaps superior to, other forms of representation.”⁵⁴ Armed with this powerful technical capacity, Shirin Neshat chooses specific compositional elements, such as the gun, the veil, the text, and the intense gaze, to convey messages to her audience. The selection of these four elements and Neshat’s choice of photography as a way of expression are important in that they allow the artist to communicate with her audience in a manner that is thought to be a reproduction of “reality.” I have chosen images from Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series that speak to what I see as a “reality” for the artist: ambivalence.

⁵³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 244.

⁵⁴ Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 1.

In *Untitled* (Figure 3.1), a hand decorated with calligraphy in Farsi gently rests on a woman's parted lips. The lips and the jaw are the only visible parts of the figure's body, surrounded by the darkness of the black veil. The tattooed-like, decorated hand at the center of the image occupies the largest portion of the photograph. The enlarged size of the hand with its bold calligraphy intercepts the viewer's gaze and acts as an obstacle. The cropping of the image mutilates the female figure's face and hand. The female figure ultimately possesses neither an identity nor a voice. We ask ourselves, are the written words on her hand the utterance of her thoughts? Or have they been inscribed on her skin by force? Does the hand belong to her, or is someone else attempting to silence her voice?

Neshat includes these visual elements - the veil, the text, and the cropping - intentionally: "I am interested in constructing images, carving monuments," she asserts.⁵⁵ In *Untitled*, she creates an unequal and multi-dimensional conflict of domination and subordination between the photographer and the subject, the audience and the image, and the Western audience and the Middle Eastern woman. Accordingly, Neshat veils, constricts, and mutilates the sphere of the female figure in *Untitled*. In this way, the artist embodies the dualistic character of the Iranian government, whose return to traditional Islamic laws physically, financially, and spiritually limit Iranian women, and the Westerner, whose representation of the Middle Eastern woman perpetuates the myths that have surrounded her for centuries.

In a traditional Muslim society the spheres of men and women are divided into "public" and "private" ones. While men participate in political, social, and economic activities outside the home, women are restricted to the private domain where their duties are reduced to childrearing

⁵⁵ Linda Bertucci, "Shirin Neshat: Eastern Values," 84-87.

and household responsibilities.⁵⁶ Walls guard the privacy of a Muslim home, and the veil protects the Muslim woman against unsolicited male gazes.

By cloaking her female figures in black chadors in *Women of Allah*, Neshat also segregates her female figures, an act that could be viewed as conforming to the Islamic laws imposed and enforced by the Iranian government. As Shahla Haeri explains, “Walls and veils are both physical symbols and reflections of the sex-segregated social structures of Muslim Iranian society.”⁵⁷

Neshat, however, appears to give a voice to her figure by the inclusion of calligraphy, which, in this image, is a poem by a feminist contemporary Iranian poet. The element of text here is significant because of its content as well as its size. The calligraphy on the figure’s fingers comprises a poem by Forough Farrokhzad (1935-67), one of Iran’s most renowned female poets. She was part of a new generation of female poets who for the first time in the history of Persian literature wrote about the self. Farrokhzad’s new style of writing autobiographical poetry was a voyage into a woman’s private realm by daring to lift the veil and go behind the walls. This unprecedented and revolutionary style of writing poetry was women writers’ application of literary capacities “otherwise frustrated by social and cultural restrictions,” Farzaneh Milani explains.⁵⁸ Iran’s mandatory unveiling in 1936 uncovered the Iranian woman’s body; subsequently female poets revealed their private thoughts, emotions, and desires through words. In a country where the private domain is fiercely protected, female poets such as Farrokhzad revealed the most suppressed longings and dared to make the transition from private to public in the most provocative literary manner.

⁵⁶ Shahla Haeri, “Women, Law, and Social Change in Iran,” in *Women in Contemporary Muslim Societies*, ed. Jane Smith (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1980), 209-234.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁸ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 15.

This novel creative journey toward self-discovery was not without resistance from the society's Muslim fundamentalists, who saw women's emancipation and integration into the public realm as a threat to tradition. Women's physical unveiling in particular prompted fury and antagonism on the part of the clergy, who believed that a departure from cultural convention meant a deviation from Islamic principles.⁵⁹ Cultural traditions meant a society with clear distinctions between male and female, private and public, and acceptable and prohibited. The Iranian woman's emancipation destabilized social boundaries and created a state of mind that oscillated between a longing for modernity and change and the need to preserve centuries-long traditions. As Milani explains, Farrokhzad's literary oeuvre is representative of Iranian society's ambivalence toward continuity and change,⁶⁰ and this ambivalence is also apparent in Neshat's work.

The Persian calligraphy on the figure in *Untitled* is the first few lines from Farrokhzad's "I Feel Sorry for the Garden," from her fourth volume of poetry entitled *Another Birth*, published in 1963:

No one is thinking about the flowers,
no one is thinking about the fish,
no one wants
to believe that the garden is dying,
that the garden's heart has swollen under the sun,
that the garden is slowly being drained of green memories.⁶¹

Farrokhzad uses fish, flowers, and "green memories" metaphorically to epitomize the country's cultural and political oppression. She likens Iranian society to a dying garden, where the elements that comprise its body are decaying as the result of neglect. As the sun takes water out of soil and turns it into an arid land, the country is being drained of its life source, its cultural and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁶¹ Forough Farrokhzad cited in Danto and Abramovic, *Shirin Neshat*, 42.

traditional foundation. The Father is angry and curses the fish and the flower and does not care about the garden's survival, since he too is awaiting death. He sits in his room all day and reads the *Shahnameh*, by Ferdowsi, the poet who saved the Farsi language by composing the book after the Arabian invasion of Persia. Convinced she is a sinner, the mother prays all day long and awaits the advent of a savior. The brother sees the destruction of the garden as its ultimate healing.

In a traditional Iranian house with its garden and a small pond live a family whose members have differing ideals that create distance in spite of physical proximity. There is an undercurrent of chaos amid the serene setting of the house and its courtyard. In this poem, Farrokhzad metaphorically narrates the state of the Iranian society, where the slow fissure that is splitting its body stems from the heterogeneous aspect of its culture. It is a tale of cultural tradition encroached by foreign ideals. By referring to each individual character's behavior in a family setting, Farrokhzad evokes the division of gender roles and beliefs within the Iranian society. The father takes refuge in the memories of a glorious past, while the mother resorts to religious prayer. The brother is a philosophy lover and embraces Marxist ideals; the sister lives a superfluous, materialistic life evocative of capitalism, and the poet appears to be the only person who understands the soul of the garden and cares about its survival. Farrokhzad becomes the emerging voice of a culture imbued with ambiguity and doubt and a lack of direction. Each character within the poem represents the conflicting elements of religion, westernization, communism, and tradition that constitute the Iranian nation's body and is, ultimately, responsible for its confusion and uncertainty.

The absence of congruity in Farrokhzad's poem recurs in Neshat's photograph. Neshat covers the entire surface of the woman's fingers with Farrokhzad's poem, written in an upward

movement toward the figure's parted lips. The same poem is written in a circular form on the back of the hand in a spiral movement evocative of the destructive force of tornadoes. Although Farrokhzad's poem occupies the largest area of the female figure's hand, the Islamic prayer placed at the center of the spiral form remains the largest and boldest calligraphy. This is a singular Islamic prayer used by Shiite Muslims as a call to the holiness, Abbass, one of prophet Ali's sons, whose physical beauty and virtues are greatly admired and praised. This particular prayer is uttered in instances of sudden fear and helplessness, where the interference of a metaphysical or supernatural force is required for prevention.

There is a clear correlation between the content of Farrokhzad's poem and Neshat's image in that both refer to ambivalence. In this photograph the female figure becomes Farrokhzad pitying the garden. She stands in silence pondering the garden's fate. Like Farrokhzad, the woman in the photograph is limited and bound by its culture and uses metaphorical poetry as the expressive device for her innermost reflections and apprehensions. Since the artist has added the calligraphy to the surface of the photograph, is this prayer Neshat's call for help? Or does the Iranian woman's situation within the borders require assistance? Does Neshat, like Farrokhzad's mother, resort to prayer for the appearance of a redeemer? And if so, what is her position in this context?

The juxtaposition of text and photograph compels a more in-depth reading of the image. Because of two coexisting visual elements within the physical frame, the viewer needs to comprehend each individual element both separately and in conjunction, since their significance might be contradictory at times. In the case of Neshat's photographs, on the one hand words are illegible to their occidental viewers and ambiguous to their Iranian audience due to the context in which they have been used. Contrary to an Occidental female artist like Barbara Kruger, whose

photographs, such as *Your Body is a Battleground* (Figure 3.2) are populated with personal pronouns in bold and large sizes, Neshat's poems are inscribed in calligraphy whose forms are reminiscent of dance-like movements. Laura Mulvey argues that Kruger adds text that cuts across the picture plane to found and enlarged photographs, creating messages that are sometimes "a silent cry of personal pain" and sometimes "a slogan of political anger."⁶² Although both artists use textual elements as rhetoric, the metaphorical nature of Persian poetry in Neshat's work distinguishes her photographs from those of her Western counterpart. Kruger, free from restraints, can communicate her beliefs in a concrete and direct manner. Neshat's residence in the West provides her with the same autonomy in artistic expression, yet she chooses to create a body of work that positions her at the heart of a society in an attempt to penetrate its psyche. Although Neshat's calligraphy is legible to its Iranian audience because it is a very well known and cherished poem, the disjunction between the image, the Persian poem, and the Arabic prayer creates a level of ambiguity that requires a more exhaustive analysis of the photograph on the part of its Persian viewers. In this endeavor, both artist and audience embark on a journey of self-discovery, which is not solely about the personal self but might also lead to a greater understanding of the complexities of Iranian culture. The Iranian audience of Neshat's photograph thus oscillates between Persian past and Islamic tenets, two opposing polarities that Iranians struggle to include into their daily lives, but that ultimately fails in cohesiveness.

Neshat's *Untitled* is a confluence of Iranian feminism embodied by Farrokhzad's poem and the lingering ambivalence toward Islam. Neshat's reconnection with her past is suggestive of the Iranian nation's longing to reconnect with its Persian history. The concept of displacement and the loss of identity in Neshat's work are multivalent: the Iranian woman's identity within a

⁶² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 132.

patriarchal and Islamic society, her pre-Revolution past, and her pre-Islamic history. According to Carly Butler, the use of the voice of female Iranian poets in Neshat's photographs is the artist's examination "of the specificity of women's experience in Iran — an exploration of displacement, but of displacement within one's own country."⁶³ In this context the Iranian woman's dislocation has the dual elements of gender and nationality. Her Iranian identity and gender have been continuously assaulted by Islamic doctrines. The juxtaposition of the black veil, the female Persian poet, and the Islamic prayer in Neshat's photographs are tropes of ambivalence toward a religion that most Iranians view both as symbolic of the Arabs' assault on the Persian land and culture and an ideology whose tenets can be utilized in fighting Western imperialism.

With the advent of modern colonialism in Iran in the form of cultural penetration and a massive drive toward modernization, Islam became the only alternative that Iranians could use to resist the invading forces of westernization. In the tenets of Shiism, Iranians found a means to end an increasing sense of homelessness within one's land and a drive toward the reestablishment of cultural identity, which had been threatened by rapid modernization. Iranian cultural identity, similar to its Islamic philosophy of Shiism, branched out of the Islamic dogma, is unique because of its complex structure composed by the conflicting forces of a historical past entangled with the exigencies of progress and evolution. Thus the binary of oppositions within the Iranian culture is manifest in Neshat's photograph *Untitled*. The contemporary Iranian poet is juxtaposed with Arab holiness, the female encounters the male, Persian faces Arab, and contemporary meets archaic in an effort to illustrate the inherent discrepancies of Iranian culture. However, in Western eyes, these elements suggest adherence to oppression, aggression, and

⁶³ Carly Butler, "Ambivalence and Iranian Identity: The Work of Shirin Neshat," *Eastern Art Report* 4, no. 5 (2002): 40-48.

decay. In this context, Neshat enforces the notion of the Middle Eastern woman's "Otherness" by applying the same visual devices, such as the veil, the gun, and violence, often used by contemporary media outlets to portray Islamic societies.

In *Untitled* (Figure 3.3), Neshat herself, clad in a black chador, aims her rifle at the viewer. Unlike her other images where weapons are not directed at the audience, the blurry outlines of the rifle's barrel suggest its close proximity to the viewer. The black veil covers Neshat's entire silhouette and leaves only the upper part of her face visible. Intrepid, she looks straight at the viewer and exhibits a great degree of determination in the execution of her mission. Frozen in time and space, Neshat's pose is reminiscent of the events that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution: the backward movement toward archaic religious beliefs, the hostage-taking, the mandatory veiling, the subordination of women at the hands of the clergy, the swift emergence of religious fundamentalism, and society's compliance with all its rules and ideology. In this photograph, Neshat's outward appearance signals her origin and reveals her convictions: a Muslim Middle Eastern woman imbued with fundamentalism who will not hesitate to kill the infidels, who in the case of Neshat's photographs are comprised of Western audience. The content of *Untitled* is no longer a novelty for its Occidental viewers, since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 has transformed the country's image around the world.

For the past three decades, a multitude of images of Iran and the ongoing political upheaval within Iranian society have permeated Western societies and saturated their perceptions. The gun and the veil, war and violence have become metonyms for the Iranian society's state of mind and the Iranians' way of life. A society infested by fanaticism and averse toward change and progress confirms tenets of the Western discussion about Orientalism. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, Said argues that the Orientalist discourse is not an

objective view of the Orient and its inhabitants but rather the product of Westerners' perception of Muslim societies as inferior and degenerate. Whether as the result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorations in the Middle East and North Africa, or twentieth-century media images, the Westerner's failure to encounter individuals in his or her own image prompts him or her to create the category of "Other" when referring to people of differing races.

Since Neshat's photographs have almost exclusively targeted a Western audience, the aspect of the "Otherness" of the Iranian Muslim woman becomes amplified. By depicting the Muslim women covered by the veil and toting a rifle, Neshat succeeds at distinguishing her figures from Occidental women, whose appearance vastly differs from the Orientals' and whose religious beliefs have not trapped her into a web of dogmatism and backwardness. In this manner, Neshat also distinguishes herself from other artists with similar topics of interest. By focusing on the shocking aspects of the Muslim women's "Otherness," Neshat bestows her photographs with uniqueness that guarantees to bring her work attention and, subsequently, fame.

The cultural and physical distinction between the observer and the observed creates a setting in which elements that distinguish the Oriental woman from her Occidental audience automatically consign her the inferior position vis-à-vis her Western viewers. As Irvin Cemil Schick explains, social conventions create "languages" that facilitate the reading of certain photographs.⁶⁴ The consistency in the use of the language of the discourse of Orientalism in the twenty-first century is rooted in the first European expeditions toward foreign territories, where, according to Marina De Chiara, "all was to be 'discovered.'"⁶⁵ De Chiara explains that European

⁶⁴ Schick, "Representing Middle Eastern Women: Feminism and Colonial Discourse," 345-380.

⁶⁵ Marina De Chiara, "A Tribe Called Europe," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 228-233.

travelers' concept of superiority was in their view of a land and its inhabitants, whose unexplored nature classified them as idle and primitive entities needing discovery and prevention from the "cosmopolitan" voyager.⁶⁶ De Chiara adds, "Westernization, destined to extend over the entire planet, is thus born from the fundamental imposition of images incurred in the conquest of territory. Space and power are revealed as the primary co-ordinate in the affirmation of a Eurocentric vision."⁶⁷

In examining Neshat's photographs, the concept of differentiation is multivalent and occurs both at the psychological and physical levels. The woman in the image, the Muslim protagonist armed with a deadly weapon, is not the mirror image of the Westerner dwelling in a modern and advanced society. Instead she represents all the characteristics of an archaic society imbued with fundamentalism and violence. The gun and the veil become the signifiers of depravity and the lack of civility on the part of the Iranian Muslim woman. Yet this Iranian woman, ironically, is an expatriate residing in the West. Neshat acknowledges that her *Women of Allah Series* was produced with a desire to reconnect with her past; her audience might wonder to which period in her past does the self-portrait allude? Is the image evocative of a pre-Revolution past or does it refer to the period of Persian history before Islam? Does striking the pose of a female Muslim fundamentalist satisfy and enlighten her? Bhabha can shed some light on this activity: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 231.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁶⁸ Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," in *Colonial Discourse And Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 112- 123.

In the photograph, Neshat merges her contemporary “self” reminiscent of her pre-Revolution past with the Iranian woman residing within Iran clad in a black chador and instilled with revolutionary ideals. Although Neshat’s image is frozen in time and space, her use of self-portraiture suggests a perpetual oscillating movement between the past and present. Neshat’s presence in the West, which her Western audience is well aware of, allocates her the position of authority over her Oriental “self.” However, as Bhabha suggests, “to be different from those that are different makes you the same [and ...] the Unconscious speaks of the form of Otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement.”⁶⁹ According to Bhabha, this desire for distinction is from the part of the colonizer toward the colonized and the outcome of that longing is the disconcerting space between the “Colonist Self” and the “Colonized Other,” which creates the “figure of colonial otherness.”⁷⁰ In this context, Neshat’s self-portrait becomes her “colonized Other,” tethered by Islam and fundamentalism. Neshat tries to create a setting that provides her the disavowal of her other “self” by negation. She strives to break free from her “Otherness” embodied by ideology, fanaticism, and violence, and struggles to find agency. However, Neshat’s endeavor for agency only perpetuates prevalent biases against Muslim women.

In interviews conducted globally by Meena Sharify-Funk, the majority of Muslim women expressed their concerns about being identified as the personification of someone else’s “Other.”⁷¹ This “Otherness,” Sharify-Funk explains, is the popular stereotype connected “to a number of dichotomies: secular vs. Islamic, traditional vs. modern, Oriental vs. Occidental.” She adds that, regardless of any professional, ideological, or activist endeavor, a Muslim woman can

⁶⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁷¹ The information in this paragraph is from Meena Sharify-Funk, *Encountering the Transitional: Women, Islam and the Politics of Interpretation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 133-160.

never avoid the continuing question about “the veil, religious norms, nationalism, imperialism, globalization, and economic ideology (especially between socialism and capitalism).” Sharify-Funk goes on to explain that, because of women’s total exclusion from Islamic tenets, any attempt by Muslim women to exercise their rights in the public domain prompts an automatic translation of their deviation from Islamic social standards. In the Westerner’s consciousness, the Muslim woman remains an entity without agency, and as Sharify-Funk argues, “Muslim women activists – including those who presented themselves in secular terms – often underscored strong discomfort with Western images of Muslim women.” The Muslim woman represents a docile subject tethered by Islamic praxis and acquiescent toward polygamy, unequal inheritance, veiling, and oppression.

It is this prevailing image in the Westerner’s mind that emerges at the moment of encounter with Neshat’s image. However, this time she is subjugated by the Islamic ethos of violence in practice in the Middle East. To the Westerner, the Muslim woman’s inclination toward obedience could also indicate her propensity toward carrying out any act of violence if necessary. Her dogmatism provides an ideal situation, where she can be manipulated through her religious belief to become a soldier of God. With the abundance of media images that have inundated the West after the 1979 Revolution, and the September 11th attacks in the U.S., can the Western audience of Neshat’s photographs eradicate both past and present violent images from their consciousness? Can Western female viewers of Neshat’s veiled and muted women refrain from thoughts of liberating the Muslim woman from her ideological, political, cultural, and traditional bondage? I argue that the category of first/third world allocates to the Muslim Iranian woman the position of inferiority in relation to her secular Western counterpart. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains that in the concept of the first/third world, women as a group or class are

inevitably described as: “religious (read ‘not progressive’), family oriented (read ‘traditional’), legal minors (read ‘they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights’), illiterate (read ‘ignorant’), domestic (read ‘backward’) and sometimes revolutionary (read ‘their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they must fight!’). This is how the ‘third-world difference’ is produced.”⁷² Neshat’s *Women of Allah* belong to the category that Talpade Mohanty calls “third-world women,” in that they are Muslim, traditional, illiterate, revolutionary. All these elements have been emphasized in Neshat’s photographs, which enforce the notion of authority that she allocates to herself as an expatriate.

Neshat’s application of self-portraiture in her *Women of Allah* series implies her authority in bestowing subjectivity to her “present” self by subjugation of her “past” self, privileging the Western dweller in allocating the Eastern woman the marginal position. Ernst Van Alphen describes portraiture as a pictorial genre that revels in the concept of the distinctiveness of the person and his achievements and as such is significant in the bourgeois Western culture.⁷³ Van Alphen suggests that the originality of the portrait is in its ability to reveal the “uniqueness” of the portrayed and the portrayer.⁷⁴ In this context, Van Alphen asserts, the portrayer confers subjectivity to the portrayed, allowing the individual to possess agency because of her distinctiveness and not as the result of her social connections.⁷⁵ In a photographic portrait, the bestowal of agency upon the portrayed transpires through the revelation of her inner essence by the photographer. However, as Van Alphen argues, in an artistic portrait, the photographer needs

⁷² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 196-220.

⁷³ Ernst Van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

to craft an outer appearance that is complementary to its interiority. Distinctiveness, therefore, is achieved through the construction of an exterior form that becomes the signifier of the “self.” In this setting, the photographer is both the signifier and the signified. She is the authoritative entity that gives life to the sitter, constructs her image, and grants her agency. In an artistic self-portrait that relies upon the construction of the “self,” the medium of photography as an exact mimetic depiction becomes debatable.

Avant-garde artists such as Cindy Sherman have addressed this particular characteristic of self-portrait photography. In the *Untitled Film Stills* series (Figure 3.4), Sherman addresses the socially constructed concept of femininity used by the mass media by portraying herself as heroines of 1950s Hollywood film noirs. However, as Van Alphen explains, not one of her photographs refers to an existing film, making her work a replica without an initial source.⁷⁶ The lack of referent in Sherman’s work brings the focus to the concept of the image as the producer of the subject’s identity. Whereas Sherman’s photographs allude to a Hollywood genre that is solely imaginative, Neshat’s images are reminiscent of historical circumstances that have brought fundamental changes to the Iranian society.

In Neshat’s self-portraits, the artist alludes to a reality that is tangible to both Occidental and Oriental audiences. The gun, the veil, and the violence are all components of historical events that have shaped Iran’s fate. Photographer Neshat constructs an image for her portrayed “self” as a replica of the Muslim Iranian militant imbued with ideas of *jihad*. She depicts herself vertically, which according to Van Alphen is the format that conveys the authority of the portrayed individual.⁷⁷ Neshat’s differentiation of her portrayer “self” with the portrayed “self,” which alludes to the Oriental “Other,” locates the artist within the norms of Western humanistic

⁷⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 43.

discourse. According to Talpade Mohanty, Western humanism is inherently ethnocentric, validating the centrality of men in a discourse void of women.⁷⁸ As a photographer and the creator of the image, Neshat becomes the center/male/western, establishing the marginal location of the woman/Muslim/other. This binary is interdependent, since without the concept of the supremacy of the Western dweller in the “first-world,” the images of the Oriental Muslim woman residing in the “third-world” cease to exist. One allows the existence and the perpetuation of the other. However, as Talpade Mohanty asserts, “It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the center.”⁷⁹ I, therefore, argue that Neshat’s centrality as an artist is contingent upon the perpetuation of the discourse of Orientalism, where Western cultural hegemony continuously represents the Orient as inferior, violent, lacking civilization, and hostile toward change and progress. The images of veiled women, tethered by the ideology of Islam and antagonistic toward liberation and change, all helped shape Neshat as an artist. In this scenario, she becomes the created, and not the creator. Neshat grants herself agency by denying the Iranian woman emancipation from stereotypes. She becomes the producer of commodity for her Western audience by perpetuating the “language” of Orientalism. In other words, Neshat is the contemporary Ingres and Delacroix armed with camera lenses ready to capture the “true nature” of her subjects. However, like both masters, she fails to reveal a reality and alludes to a pre-conceived notion about the Iranian Muslim woman.

As a photographer, Neshat controls the photographic components such as the setting of and the inclusion of figures in her images. Similar to a painter, Neshat remains the sole organizer of the image’s composition and content. As Graham-Brown explains, the power relation between

⁷⁸ Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 196- 220.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 215.

the artist and her subjects, the compositional devices, the artist's beliefs and principles, and the audience for whom the art object has been produced are all important aspects that should be considered when looking at artwork.⁸⁰ In the case of Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographs, the Iranian expatriate artist chooses specific pictorial elements that to her Western audience are metonyms of violence, fundamentalism, backwardness, and a lack of civility on the part of the Iranian Muslim women. The gun, the veil, and calligraphy join forces to portray a lingering stereotype that has surrounded twentieth-century Muslim women. Neshat becomes the perpetuator of a myth, in which the Iranian woman, tethered and acquiescent, only emerges from her domesticity to carry out *jihad*-like missions against the infidels. Neshat's choice of subject matter and pictorial elements appear to be a conscious decision that lacks accuracy but guarantees distinctiveness, a much-needed factor for the attainment of fame and fortune.

⁸⁰ Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 3.



Figure 3.1 Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, 1996

Danto, Arthur, and Marina Abromovic. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010. 23.



Figure 3.2 Barbara Kruger, *Your Body is a Battleground*, 1989

www.google.com/images (accessed April 14, 2011)



Figure 3.3 Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, 1994

Danto, Arthur, and Marina Abromovic. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010. 34.



Figure 3.4 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1981

www.google.com/images (accessed April 14, 2011)

CONCLUSION

The patriarchal systems of domination that have refused women access to power and allocated to them a subordinate position have historically excluded them from history. As a reflection of social and cultural praxis, art has continuously played a part in the objectification of women. Within richly decorated frames, women have been portrayed as the subjects of desire for the male gaze. They have been sexual, docile, and acquiescent entities existing mainly to satiate the voyeuristic impulses of male viewers. These female figures, usually set in a private, segregated realm, depicted the ideal woman as a still and silent beauty. The Western discourse of Orientalism and Orientalist art portrayed the Eastern woman as a serene and physically separated beauty; and her nudity amidst an ornate and fantastical interior furthered her objectification. So for centuries the Oriental woman remained segregated within her borders as well as outside them, laws socially constricted her while walls physically limited her.

With the advent of the new colonialism, which replaced the colonizers' physical presence with cultural invasion, the image of the colonized underwent an outward transformation but retained its fundamental basic structures. Paintings, then photographic images, continued the perpetuation of this Oriental stereotype. Veiled Muslim women in the twentieth century replaced the nude Odalisques of the nineteenth century. Photographic images of veiled Oriental women replaced paintings of harem dwellers. While these two sets of images appear to differ fundamentally in content, they remain contextually similar in that the female figures in both signify the discourse of Orientalism.

The concept of Orientalism, according to Edward Said, bestows the Western Orientalist with the authority to speak for the Orient. In this context, the Oriental, unable to speak for herself, finds the power of expression through the Occidental Orientalist. Hence, the Orientalist historian, painter, and photographer all depict Orientals through Westerners' eyes and for the Western audience. Stereotypes flourish in Orientalist art, where they continuously refer to the "otherness" of the Oriental through her physical appearance and social surroundings.

Shirin Neshat's photographs of veiled Muslim Iranian women situate the artist with her western Orientalist counterparts in perpetuating the twentieth-century media stereotype of the Oriental woman. Neshat freezes her female figures in time and space by enveloping them in black veils and placing them in bleak surroundings without specific referents. Neshat depicts the Iranian woman as the victim of her own ignorance who revels in the ethos of Islam despite the other possibilities of her culturally rich past.

The women in Neshat's *Women of Allah* series are truly the female followers of an Arabic God who appear to shun their Persian pasts. One of the figures, that of the female poet, lives in the shadow of this Arabic holiness, the beautiful silhouette of the Iranian woman obscured by the black chador. She is cropped, mutilated, silenced, segregated, and objectified. Neshat's figures are incapable of acquiring agency even by operating a menacing weapon because they seek it in the tenets of the assailant Islam and not in the democratic principles of Cyrus the Great.

Neshat's *Women of Allah* might refer to a brief period in history after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when the philosophy of Islam was believed to be the only authority

that could withstand the pervasive forces of western imperialism; however, it fails to illustrate the Iranian woman's unremitting struggle for freedom and social equality.

In colonizing her female characters, Neshat colonizes herself, and her residence in the West does not assign her the central position from which the marginal Iranian women within the borders develop. The artist's stance is complex: she is the colonized colonizer empowering the ethos of the invader by repressing a cultural past. In this endeavor, Neshat becomes a contemporary Orientalist convinced that she has the ability to speak for the Oriental, and yet her "language" is fraught with biases and greatly lacks objectivity.

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