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Haring, Jenna

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Contemporary Visual Art and Iranian Feminism

Jenna Haring^[1]

Abstract

Iranian contemporary visual artist and filmmaker, Shirin Neshat gives us a unique lens into contradictions within Islamic feminism. She uses her situation as a culturally-hybrid individual to mediate the dichotomy construed between Eastern and Western cultures and male and female relationships. Special attention is paid to her use of art as a window into systemic socio-political and gender issues she observes from the vantage point of her “third space” locus. In her photographic and cinematic work, she creates provocative juxtapositions built on binaries to expose biases. Her work is equally political and personal. She uses it to critique societies and to construct her own cultural identity. As an actor in the supranational women’s rights movement, with the support of the Art World, she raises gender consciousness across cultures via her artistic provocation. Islamic feminism navigates the space within this chasm and Islamic feminist art is a visual articulation of its carefully construed ideology. An individual’s particular brand of Islamic feminism may be ascribed to a multicultural situation. This paper will explore the stereotypes established of Middle-Eastern women and Western women as a dehumanizing dichotomy, heightened by the way women are conflated with Islam as the problematic epitomization of an oppressed, mute “other.”

Keywords

Islamic feminism; multiculturalism; gender consciousness; cultural hybridity; cultural mediation

^[1]Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA, USA. Corresponding author: jennalee.haring@icloud.com.

1. Introduction

1.1 Plurality and Symbols of Iranian Feminism: Islamic, secular, and “unaffiliated”

The real lives of Iranian female artists have been defined by politics. Their psyche is inextricable from the political framework, and any work emergent from a telling-self reflects this intersection of political and personal.² Symbols reside at this intersection. Notably, the veil, the hijab, is a repository for all kinds of personal and political meanings. Each nation, each era, and each person views the veil in a different light. Moreover, the word “veil” is simplistic, it refers to a multitude of coverings all circumscribed by religious interpretations and affiliations, class status, age, personal notions of modesty, government authority, societal expectations, and cultural fashions. All of these factors have modulated unveiling and re-veiling in Iran and elsewhere. Projects of modernity all have different uses for the veil; the state uses it as an instrument for building new national identities based on articulation of gender roles. Alternative modernities feature in the aims of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, the Pahlavi era between 1925 and 1979, and in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. To legitimize a burgeoning state apparatus, each regime gets its grips in the life of the people. The apparatus of the state sanctions the acceptable gender roles, whether or not the subjects of the new law give their consent (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

Iranian women have both enthusiastically donned the veil and resigned themselves to wear it. Moreover, their interpretation of Iran’s Islamization leads them to adjudicate differently on which policies are problematic and the best way to exact change. One of the differences in how to bring change is whether it should be done within the Islamic framework or without. This within/without disagreement gives rise to the contested term Islamic feminism. Some women think secularism is the most effective recourse for their society. Yet secularism is a loaded term because it was coined by the West. And proponents of secularism see Islamic feminist attempts to modernize society without acquiescing to Westernization as futile because they view Islamic society as incorrigibly absolutist in its fundamentalism.

Islamic feminism has been debated by notable scholars in modern time. Valentine Moghadam in "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate" analyzes the Iranian debate around Islamic feminism insofar as it is composed of three intersecting histories (2002). The first is the origins, evolution, and gender dynamics of Islamic fundamentalism. Second, is the political evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and its creation of a gender regime. And the third discussion is the global differences and similarities in the women’s movement and their respective definitions of feminism. The Islamization of Iran under the IRI was an attempt to regain cultural authenticity out of the grasp of Western hegemony, but it was problematized by the

² telling-self is a term pulled from Homi Bhabha’s, *The Location of Culture* (1994). “The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy — it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.

The demand of identification— that is, to be for an Other— entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness”, 64.

history of Islamic fundamentalism. A synopsis of the political evolution around the IRI's gender regime sets the stage for Neshat.

During the westward-looking Pahlavi regime under Reza and Mohammad-Reza Shah, the modernizing campaign was reproved for molding their society after a glamorized West—losing cultural integrity. At this time, women were prohibited from wearing the veil. The backlash, a reclamation of the nation from a Western trajectory—took the form of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the IRI to power. The violent turn rode the mounting tide of national discontent at the domineering Western influence. Nationalism carried the momentum into the second revolution: the Islamic revolution. Ironically, secular identity found recourse in Shi'a Islam as a uniting force. Under Khomeini—leader of the Islamic Republican Party—nationalism was conflated with religiosity and the revolutions resulted in a theocratic republic. Khomeini, soon after, proclaimed himself Supreme Spiritual Leader of Iran, Head of State for Life, and Leader of the Revolution. Ideologues for the Islamic Republic—i.e., Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati—championed an Islamic modernism that endorsed women's rights, but in a problematic and segregative way (Moghadam, 2002.: 1139).

As part of this second cultural revolution, the hijab (modest dress) became a core tenet for the revitalization of Islamic society within the larger ideological campaign of denigrating the West (Ibid.: 1138). The role of women as progenitors of society circumscribed their access to the public sphere. In the trend towards heterosexual domestication, the Family Protection Acts of 1967 and 1975 were repealed. This law had restricted polygyny—as it required consent of the first

wife and appeal to the courts—abolished extrajudicial divorce and raised the marriage age to eighteen for women. After 1979, women could find themselves married as a minor and as one of multiple wives, with little recourse to divorce. Marital confines were tightened by employment bans. Women were disallowed as judges and even disadvantaged in their attainment of other high-level jobs.

In the years following the revolution, women gradually reclaimed their opportunities. The beleaguered generation pressed upon chinks in the IRI barricade against them. One, the sustained conflict in the Iraq war (1980-88) availed female employment in the absence of the mobilized men. For the working-class women who saddled the heftiest employment disadvantage, the factory jobs they acquired helped to negate the normative full-time motherhood ideal (Ibid.: 1139). And for the women in position to take on civil service jobs, the public sector became a platform, for their demands of greater opportunity, for Iranian women. The nation needed to be flexible to sustain itself in wartime; the women applied their pressure where society was already bending. Second, the original opposition to family planning under Khomeini halted under the realization that Iran's massive war debt and increasing unemployment could not support the thousands of imminent children should contraceptives still be prohibited under the IRI ideology. So the former "religious authority" reneged on itself and a widespread dispensation of contraceptives followed. As the eighties drew to a close, women were once again able to balance a job practicable with a smaller family.

As Iranian feminists strive for women's rights they encounter a bifurcation of options: whether or not feminism is harmonious and incongruent with Islam. As the movement takes action, they ask

themselves whether they can be within or must be without Islam. The Iranian left splinters into the “secular left” who ardently argue against the possibility for Islamic feminism within the circumscribed ideology implemented by the IRI. Those scholars and supporters on the secular left maintain that as long as the IRI is in place, Islamic feminism will be compromised (Ibid.: 1142). Although western social scientists often fall in line with this opinion that an Islamic state is itself antithetical to women’s rights, the “home team” of Iranian feminists are not convinced that they must eschew Islam to make progress. Strides have been made in the last decades— within the IRI— that opportune continued advancement for women. Civil appointments for women have been made (Ibid.: 1141). Some social scientists explore possibilities within Islam as well—from afar. Three prominent examples are: US-educated professor of women’s studies in New York Afsaneh Najmabadi, professor of women’s studies in California Nayereh Tohidi, and Cambridge-educated social anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini. These women all have ties to the women’s press in Iran and Mir-Hosseini has worked through the arts as well.³ She regularly brings her expertise on Islamic family law, women in the Muslim world, and Iranian affairs to publicly broadcast radio.⁴ Tohidi and Najmabadi both participated in the left-wing anti-Shah movement in the 70s and 80s and in the anti-fundamentalist movements in the decade following (Ibid.: 1142).

“Islamic feminism” is an irresponsible overuse of the term. Socially active Islamic women are labeled as Islamic

feminists—the popularized blanket label for reformist activities in the Middle East—even though their activities may be irrelevant to the aim of feminism. And if Islamic feminism naively associates its actors with believing women only, it denigrates the religious, political, and ideological differences among Iranian women and ignore the efforts of the leftists who work towards secularism (Moghissi, 1997). This critique is apt, but may be dispelled by proper acknowledgement of the pluralism within the movement. Neshat certainly belongs on the left but she doesn’t deliberate clearly on the degree to which she thinks Iranian women may effectively collaborate within an Islamic framework. Neshat clarifies her position in an interview with Michael Workman of the Chicago Tribune:

“People always ask me, ‘Are you a feminist?’ And I say, just because I focus on the subject of women, and I’m interested in the subject of women’s struggles, does that make me a feminist? . . . I think our choices of subject matters have a way of breaking into our points of view on politics, religion—and are vastly different from men. But to just reduce them to these questions of gender, no I would hope we wouldn’t. We usually don’t discuss a man’s perspective as a masculine perspective, we just say it’s a point of view. I think while my work really deals with the subject of characters that may be gender related, it’s from the point of view of a woman and

³ With filmmaker Kim Longinotto, she co produced the award-winning Iranian documentary films *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) and *Runaway* (2000). These films are set in Tehran and expose the injustices of the Family Court system and the occurrence of runaway girls.

⁴ Notably, the BBC World Service “Heart and Soul” series with Krista Tippett.

often the story of a woman. But I think it talks about broader issues that happen to be in the experience of a woman” (2017).

We should acknowledge the lopsided attribution of “feminist art” when “masculine art” is never an identifier, just as when essentialism happens in race-identification and we hail “African-American artists” and not “Caucasian artists.” The historically dominant group is free from additional labeling, they are the default. Addressing Neshat as a feminist artist is done in wry awareness that content portraying women’s struggle is being lumped into a facile categorization. Yet, it is still helpful because Neshat articulates by visual means the beleaguered lot of Iranian women and celebrates their camaraderie.

Deep to the categorizations and differences, Iranian feminists, secular feminists, and Shirin Neshat are banded together with a shared concern for women’s experience. The improvement of women’s status and the modernization of Islamic family law is a key concern for both secular and Islamic feminists. They both raise the “women question” from a socioeconomic and political standpoint. Though advocates of secular Islam hold that Islamic feminism will forever be limited in its scope, constrained by the patriarchal tenets of Islam, there is considerable evidence of positive change. Mir-Hosseini’s fieldwork interviews with major clerics concludes with the observation that news schools of jurisprudence have cropped up in response to the demand for deliberation on the “woman question” and that the gender debates have nurtured a new gender consciousness (Mir-Hosseini, 1998: 279). Islamic feminists combine their Quranic reinterpretations through the right to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) with universal human rights standards. Iran’s feminists are

not so different from liberal feminists in the West; both work within their respective political systems to improve women’s positions through the discursive scaffolding of liberal capitalism (Moghadam, 2002: 1159). Islamic feminism is religiopolitical. Perhaps Iranian feminism could be a substitutionary term. It would be more particular to the country and encompass secular actors in an Islamic society. Without condescending to the debate, at least it may be said that the camaraderie among Iranian women, with patience and persistence through oppression, is the hallmark of Iranian feminism.

1.2 Mapping of Women’s Bodies

Understanding the work of Shirin Neshat attends to the way societies across time have mapped themselves on the bodies of women. Women’s bodies have been the foundations for socially-constructed tales. Governments historically enforce their legitimacy by using women as symbols to rally their national cause. Iran has been an exemplar. Zohreh Sullivan gives the example of the anti-monarchical opposition leader, Ali Shariati, who employed the figure of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, for the revolutionary cause in the 1970s (1998). Fatima—her “person” recycled 1400 years later—became a model for how women could enter modernity and yet retain their Islamic identity, eschewing Western influences. This concept of modernized Muslim womanhood was weary of being “traditional” but was also separating itself from the “westoxicated” woman of the Pahlavi era (1925-1979). Fatima became the figure of the “third option” moving forward. As legitimate as the need for a secularized Islamic womanhood, a female figure was the prerequisite canvas upon which to compose an ideological picture (Sullivan, 1998: 217).

The tradition of inscribing political meaning on the bodies of women is a common practice in art history. Just look to Ruben's *Allegory of the Outbreak of War* (1638) where fragile national security was depicted by the naked, fleshy Venus futilely holding off the war-god Mars from rampaging onward and leaving her vulnerable. Art has primed viewers to see female representations as a thoroughfare for symbolic meaning. Continuing this legacy of art history and coming out of a particularly vigorous national campaign built on representations of women, contemporary Iranian artists integrate the practice in their art. Though political identity is peculiarly inflected with gender, artists can work the gender angle to constructive ends.

2. Discussion

2.1 Overview of Neshat's Oeuvre

The West is often implicated in contemporary gender politics. Modern femininity for Iranian women is wrought by the West as embraced, resisted, contrasted, and translated (Abu-Lughod, 1998). This contradistinction is established by playing with binaries: West and East, male and female, progress and regress. In order to deliberate on Neshat's stance we need to better understand how her portrayal of women within these polarities is even relevant to a political message.

Female figures have been central to Shirin Neshat's work. So have four operational words, the backbone of Neshat's practice: poetry, politics, paradoxical, and personal (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2012). An overview of her works showed that these aspects remain consistent despite shifts in medium. Some works are more overtly political and explore the concerns of

particular cultures, others are personal and investigate the existential questions shared universally. A sampling of her works evidences this.

Neshat's early medium was photography. Her first return to Iran since her 1975 departure propelled her first mature body of work: the *Women of Allah* series (1993-97). The black and white photographs feature chador-clad women, overlaid by hand-letter Persian calligraphy, holding the gaze of viewers down the barrel of a gun. Women's roles within a militarized Iran steeped in Islamic fundamental are investigated. Her seminal work identifies woman's body and the constructs enrobing it as the battleground in the struggle to reclaim self-ownership for women. It foretells the theme of womanly subversion, echoed in the life of the artist herself.

1998 marked her venture into video with *Turbulent*. The two-channel video and audio installation shows a male singer (Shoja Hazari) performing a classical Persian song. After he finishes to a round of applause, the second video channel starts. The two channels continue concurrently, the vehicle for the contrasting motif of male-female. A woman begins singing in a startlingly powerful, guttural song. It feels at once pleading and strong. The video has a historical premise: the 1979 law enacted by the burgeoning Islamic Republic of Iran banning women from singing publicly. The issue of the absence of women in musical Iran serves as a gateway premise for deeper issues. The guttural quality is culture-less, wordless. The intonation resounds universally. The sung plea is commensurate with the struggle for expression for women everywhere.

Rapture (1999) is a video that choreographs a group of women in nature versus a group of men in a fortress.⁵ There is

⁵ The film was shot in Morocco since Neshat was exiled from Iran in 1995.

no single protagonist, only generalized groups. This work is a clear instance of conflating women as untamed beings and men as civilized ones. The 2011 Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA) exhibition's preface describes the film installation: it "shows elegiac and meditative scenes of the two groups. As the women traverse landscapes of sand and stone, the men navigate the stone architecture of an ancient city. As the women cry out—whether in celebration or anger, it's unclear—the men unroll Persian prayer rugs and quarrel. In the final scene, the women gather on a beach, where they maneuver a small boat into the crashing waves" (Neshat, 2011). This is the beginning of her recurring theme of women's escape.

Both Neshat's 1999 video *Soliloquy* and 2000 video *Fervor*, continue to dramatically play up the societal binaries. *Soliloquy* features the artist herself, veiled and ambling through both a modern Western urban-scape and an Eastern city. The footage of a figure moving through the contrasting cultures plays concurrently in the double screen video projection. As the figure halts on one screen she resumes walking in the other. Even when one figure "takes over" action, they both exist in a liminal state. The figure wanders into worship centers and the soundtracks of Christian hymn and Islamic prayer fuse. A group of female figures sprint both Western and Eastern settings, neither are they bound by the hemispheric disjunction, as if the two monitors were in fact one all along. The video depicts the "in between" state of occupying two cultures at once and the wish in merging the difference. *Fervor*, another double screen projection, strategically places figures in settings. Instead of one figure in two cultures, this duality is the men and women in their separate spheres within Iranian society. The monitor screens serve as one partition, the other, the screen in the

mosque between the sexes. The figures are not subjects so much as moving statues, bodies that convey ideological constructs of gender roles.

Tooba was shot in Mexico in 2002. The colored film centers around a tree. The film unearths the allegory of Tooba, the name of the only feminine tree in the Qur'an, the sacred tree of paradise. Mirroring the anxieties after 9/11 and the need for security and refuge, the symbol of Edenic orchard signifies peace interwoven with femininity.

In 2009, with co-director Shoja Azari, Neshat produced her first feature film *Women Without Men*. A film adaptation from Shahrnush Parsipur's 1989 magic realist novel about the intersecting lives of four women during the political upheaval of the 1953 American-led and British-backed coup d'état in Iran. This coup ousted democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh who at the time was nationalizing the British dominated oil industry and reinstalled a shah. Neshat upped the political angle to make it equal with the poetic portrait of the four women with stories of gender-based oppression: silenced political voice, rape, forced prostitution, suppressed personal fulfillment. Wound together in highly stylized cinema, these women are seekers of a "way out" of their burdens. They find sanctuary together in an orchard—the symbol of the female space—until it is penetrated by the pro-monarchist soldiers. The men are the gender-other but also represent the demise of social and political freedom, an end that has repercussions felt by women (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2012). Political insinuation is also felt by the delicate jab at the phenomena of Orientalism. The look of the bathhouse for the heartbreaking scene of the skeletal Zarin desperately scrubbing off the nearly-tangible emotional filth she feels derived inspiration from Edward Said's

cover on Orientalism (Ibid). The fantasy of a tiled atrium for congregations of “exotic” females was made brutally raw, the sensuality of an oriental vision revealed itself to be a malnourished mentality. Without acknowledging the individual story of Zarin, the scene would appear to condone this colonialist sensibility.

In her three-channel video installation, *Book of Kings*, from 2012, accompanying black and white photographs of Arab and Iranian individuals in positions of allegiance and defiance, Neshat draws upon themes of justice. The video specifically forefronts the struggle of the artist against the constraints of authoritarian rule. Watching the video, a viewer’s moral judgment fluxes and allegiances oscillate between identifying with the victim and being complicit to the perpetrator. The mute figures stand in for the unspoken consensus that backs power. Neshat has revealed that a similar interrogation met her upon return to Iran. Freedom of artistic speech is a value she has had threatened and fights for in her work.

Silence ties her work together. The confrontational Iranian faces in *Book of Kings* feel resoundingly silent because their postures “speak” loudly. In film, the absence of sound is unnerving. The character Zarin does not speak ever in *Women Without Men*. But her life and her death were cries for help. The kind of silence of her prostitute, of her Iranian youth, of her gun-toting chador-clad women is not feeble. Silence establishes a connection between viewers that words cannot achieve. Linguist differences only create chasms. Visual witness to the tribulation experienced by another can be achieved by eyes alone.

2.2 Neshat as Women’s Rights Actor: Women’s Rights Movement Beyond the Echo of Colonialism

Feminism in Iran is burdened by weariness of modernizing society in a Western mold. Abdullah An-Na’im, one Sudanese Islamic scholar at Emory University, is a specialist in Islamic and human rights in a cross-cultural perspective, resists equating modernization with Westernization (2002). The Western world has canonized much of the international development “speak” in the wake of colonialism, sometimes posturing as protector of human rights. To think that one hemisphere stewards the sacrosanctity of humanity is simplistic and dangerous. Yet, it is appropriate to acknowledge the reality of the constructs. He says, “The very idea of the nation-state is an exclusively Western invention, a product of 17th and 18th century European political developments. Nobody questions it in any part of the world. In the Arab world, leaders enjoy and abuse the powers of the state. Why is it that when you bring in the other side of the formula—the protection of human rights—that we hear protests about Westernization? We all are implicated fundamentally in a modern world whether we like it or not” (An-Na’im, 2000: 21).

Because the Western world and its conflicts have given rise to international developmental organizations (i.e. United Nations and European Union) in the aftermath of World War I, they have been conflated with modernization. They have been arbiters of development status, deliverers of human rights sanctions, installers of democracy, and “Big Brother” to the world. The vocabulary of international development is far from neutral—in fact, it sometimes sounds eerily similar to colonialism—but the Western world has been conflated with a modern world and they are not mutually inclusive. Projects of modernity may transpose to other cultures and societies without threatening cultural authenticity. Cultures are dynamic and may

authentically change. Sometimes change is perceived as inauthentic, like the Pahlavi era projects of “westoxicated” modernity. But no culture is essentially “backwards” or “misogynistic” or “developing,” these are all simply temporal or relative characteristics and no national identity is circumscribed by these.⁶ An-Na’im emphasizes the supranational solidarities that dissolve global power divides (2002). He points to the women’s movement as an exemplary alliance traversing economic, cultural, and political divides. He grants that though “some people see human rights in terms of an historical struggle against Western hegemony, exploitation, and domination” working towards human rights is a more morally imperative path. Risking alignment with “westernization” as they perceive it is a secondary concern. Human rights serve as a paradigm for indiscriminately combatting injustice and hegemony globally; remediation of assaults on human rights are not geopolitically confined (An-Na’im, 2000: 21).

The human rights campaign enlists political actors. The actors are pulled from all cross-sections of the globe to effectively implement change. Sarah Henderson argues in *Women and Politics in a Global World* that domestic women’s movements are weakened in their efficacy by their government and instead find strength in international ties to other domestic women’s movements or to supranational supporters such as the United Nations and European Union. This acting relationship may be designated as inter-mestic and it accounts for the fluidity between geopolitical groups (2014). She writes, “international norms and

networks can create change even when national governments are not responsive to local activists; the international arena is sometimes the only means by which domestic actors can gain attention for their issues when government interest is lacking or weak. This is known as the ‘boomerang effect’: local activists team up with international networks, which in turn place pressure on domestic governments to respond to their own constituents” (Ibid.: 246). The vocabulary of human development actors applies to Shirin Neshat’s relationship with the Art World: to provoke international awareness of the plight of Iranian women. In the constellation of actors, the Art World has a “domestic lobby” in America and but also is a pseudo international non-governmental organization (INGO). The Biennales and Basels of the Art World are surrogates for United Nations conferences; in their respective methods, they both review and adjudicate on issues, influencing civil society. In 2017, Iran had its largest ever pavilion at the 57th International Art Exhibition, la Biennale di Venezia, showcases 40 artists whose works connects to festival director Okwui Ewenzor’s desire to articulate and heal the ruptures of history (Morris, 2015). The opportunity to engage with viewers from all over the world is tremendous. Islamic leadership would likely prove less intractable if Neshat and other Iranian artists leveraged the international art community’s influence.

British-Lebanese, Oxford historian, Albert Hourani has expressed dismay at a West blind to the agency of the Middle East in generating its own self:

⁶ Though secular Iranian feminists would argue that scripture is static and Qur’anic precepts are limited in their acquiescence to demands for women’s right. This is a pessimistic estimation of the scope of change achievable and of the ability of actors within the society to influence religious interpretation.

Religion has historically proven to be dynamic. Scriptures may be static, but religion is the construction of people and their unfixed interpretations of the “fixed” truth.

“the voices of the Middle East are telling us that they do not recognize themselves in the image we have formed of them . . . Western [aid organizations] look on the world they study as passive and lifeless, incapable of creating a self-image which will compel them to change the image which they have inherited” (1991).

Neshat has succeeded in compelling the Art World—her chosen Western “aid organization”—to displace their inherited image of the mute Muslim women in light of the paradoxical, political, poetic, and personal image she presents. And so, Neshat is part of the explanation for the rise of the international women’s movement.

2.3 *Neshat as a Feminist*

Rather than identifying Neshat’s strain of Islamic feminism or secular feminism, it is more helpful to discuss why she is an enigma. Neshat barricades herself from categorization in the debate around Islamic feminism by cloaking her artwork in ambiguities. Power resides in this privacy. The personal outworking of her convictions (i.e. women should be vocal, active, and come to the aid of each other) remain vague insofar as she does not offer solutions. Her art is not a revisionist commentary on Islamic family law, she does not make any explicit reinterpretations of the Qur’an as Islamic feminists do in their practice of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, religious interpretation), and she does not present an image of an Islamic society integrated or “solved.” In fact, her portrayal of women’s experiences often involves escape. And death is sometimes that vehicle. But she does make visible the “question of women,” thereby contributing to the increased gender consciousness.

Neshat also discerns a rebellious streak within herself. Her brand of feminism is informed by this. There is a paradox here:

camaraderie and insurrection. Her subversive art depicts an *esprit de corps* in line with extreme gendered roles (i.e. in Rapture, woman aligned with nature, man with industrial/military might). In many ways, she depicts the IRI’s ideological campaign for sex segregation. Yet, like the feminists following the Revolution, she works within the system. If women’s communality is prescribed by the government, the savvy members of the women’s movement will leverage it for gain. This is the homosocialization version of feminism and the most apt categorization for Neshat. In a 2009 interview with FLYP Media, Neshat seems to espouse this brand of feminism, one built on strength of expression and action: “women in Iran are very active and vocal, they don’t believe that they have to be masculine to be vocal. They keep their femininity, in fact, they’re not afraid of showing the idea of beauty. . . this generation is showing us a new idea of feminism” (FLYP Media, 2009). Her early *Women of Allah* display confrontational might. “Because the Islamist veiled and armed woman warrior model is focused on complementarity instead of equality, it envisions the realms of men and women as separate but imbued with their own power structures in which women can rise to leadership” (Zakaria, 2015). Legitimacy for this conception of gender relations is endorsed by the Islamic feminists who stress the right of *ijtihad* to reinterpret Islamic edicts (Moghadam, 2002: 1144).

Homosocialization—the desire to enjoy the companionship and collective productivity of one’s own sex—is arguably the main motif in Neshat’s work and one that mitigates the divides of race, religion, and nationality. By focusing on universality, she punctures the boundaries constructed by Otherness delusions. Denson elaborates: “By the year 2000, it was clear that Neshat was providing the West’s first compelling

and indigenous look at hijab in art since the painting of Persian miniatures. As her work after 1998 grew increasingly nuanced and expansive in the social issues it chronicled, Neshat's art also could be seen tracing the divide not just between men and women, but the divides separating Islam from the West, Sharia law from feminism, even Iranian feminism from Western feminism . . . Western viewers, curators, critics, and collectors responded as they rarely do to such highly politicized art. At first it may have been because Neshat's work appeared to confirm the imagery we gleaned from the media of women under hijab. But on closer examination the work turned out to be revelatory of an entire invisible history of women's homosocialization under Iranian Islam specifically and, judging from the reports of various Islamic feminists reaching the West, indicative of women of Islam in general. In the largest sense, Neshat provides Westerners a rare glimpse at the complexities of women's homosocialization as it played out in pre-modern cultures and which for centuries remained obscured by the art historical depictions of women's enclaves made by male Islamic artist" (2010).

2.4 Neshat as a Cultural Translator: At the Third-Space Locus

Harvard professor Homi Bhabha, a specialist in post-colonial studies and literary theory, elaborates his theory of cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). He claims that culture-creation is most effective where it is most errant and ambivalent. The liminality of culturally hybrid actors prompts social change. "Actors" are the popular term in the social science vocabulary. However, the word "actors" to designate the doers of social change is even cozier with Bhabha's rhetoric of performative, cultural engagement.

Swinging from the jargon of policy and program to performance and telling, Bhabha's scholarship is especially serviceable for understanding Neshat.

Neshat is what Bhabha describes as a "third space" individual (Ibid). Neshat emphasizes the transitional nature of her artwork; progressing out of the mediums of photography, into videography, moving into the realm of cinema and then theater, live performance, all interspersed with returns to her original medium of stark black and white photography. Now, she is even working with a ballet troupe. The transitioning art forms tell of the liminal social identity felt by the artist. Neshat's oeuvre parallels her cultural nomadism and her desire for connecting harmoniously with her country of origin. Yet, this self-identified restlessness coincides with rebellions against all that she constructs in her life. She thrives in the conception of a struggle and needs new beginnings (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2012). To her, the opposite of a struggle looks like stagnation. And stagnation hinders creativity. The headlong push forward is checked by the grounding she seeks in Iran. For a person who professes to rebel against constructs, her Iranian identity is a psychological identity construct she has not dissolved. Barraged perhaps, but it still remains a keystone feature in her life. The *Women of Allah* series marks the beginning of recurring psychological returns to Iran. She acknowledges the claims leveled against her of being for or against the Islamic revolution. But she insists on the personal narrative—neither promotional nor contrary to the Islamic revolution. She says, "[T]his work was an almost nostalgic, romantic point of view of an Iranian who desperately wanted to make a bonding with her lost countries" (Ibid).

Artists and academics and politicians all compose Iran's telling-self. And

conventions of hijab and other outward appearances are ways of fashioning their national identity. Normative gender roles prescribed by the state are part of this telling-self and then it becomes the individual citizen's prerogative to retell themselves in an act of differentiation from the dominant narrative. Sometimes individuals have to differentiate their telling-self from narratives falsely ascribed to their personal geopolitical identity. Such is the case with Shirin Neshat. She rebels against Iranian laws leveled at women which suffocate self-expression, instead self-telling as a vocal and active female. And she rebels against the Western presumption that her fellow Iranian women complacently live under patriarchal oppression. Her self-telling is part of her cultural differentiation, a space occupied only by active positioning.

This differentiation from Iran necessitates a degree of alienation. Beyond her actual ban from Iran, a physical barrier, her psychological barrier allows her to be on the outside and objectify the cultural meaning of Iran. This is a translating activity that requires a secondariness of the actor in relation to the object (for instance, the hejab). Her visual translation methodology is akin to linguistic translation. It is both active and productive.

Neshat edifies and exposes her Iran, she depicts women both as oppressed and empowered. Seemingly contradictory, this is a duality echoed in the shifting stance of Nayerreh Tohidi (1997). An Iranian expatriate author and lecturer, her early writing was oppositional to the IRI's gender policy but, in the 1990s, she adjusted her focus to the empowerment of women. She became a believer in reform via negotiating within Islamic society, finding a "path of compromise and creative synthesis" (Ibid.: 106). Neshat fluctuates between themes of

oppression and homo-social strength among women, even combining the themes. In *Women Without Men*, the four women are all looking from escape from their burdened place in Tehran society, yet there is a moving camaraderie between them. The message seems to be a pessimistic look at male-dominated society as a whole but an enthusiastic endorsement for the strength in female enclaves.

Valentine Moghadam is a third space individual as well (2002). She is a Middle Eastern woman writing in a Western context. Just as Neshat creates art for an insular Western viewing public, Moghadam publishes in North American and European readership circles. This is a trying space in which they articulate Middle Eastern background, find resonance within Western discourse, and avoid the trap of ethnocentric thinking on either side. Of mediating between two cultures, Moghadam writes, "We approached the problem of Islamic fundamentalism from a political position (whether socialist, feminist, or liberal), but we also sought to distance ourselves from Eurocentric and orientalist approaches. It was very important to refute orientalist charges that Islamic fundamentalism was the inevitable political expression of the Muslim world and to counter cultural relativist arguments that criticism of gender practices in non-Western cultures was inappropriate and an imposition of Western values" (Ibid.: 1153).

Their Middle Eastern heritage allows them valuable insight. Moghadam's academic discipline begs her to analyze institutions and processes. Neshat's artistic discipline prompts her to do the same. With their disciplinary tool box, they produce written or visual commentaries often by means of comparison to Western societies.⁷ When these comparisons unearth

⁷ Moghadam has drawn parallels between Islamic fundamentalism at the end of the twentieth century

and American Protestant fundamentalism in the early twentieth century.

congruences, the works facilitate reciprocal understanding for the viewing and reading audiences.

Neshat's mode of disturbing assumptions between the East and West is an open-ended probing. In a 1999 interview with art critic Arthur Danto, she stated, "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. I then put myself in a place of only asking questions but never answering them" (Neshat, 2011). While this almost seems overruled by her thoughtful lectures discussing her career and interviews where she opines on current affairs, it speaks to the value she places on being a vocal political interrogator. Questioning her audience avails further interpretative actions. The ambivalence of her position gives rise to a multiplicity of reactions. This proliferation is reinforced by Bhabha's hopeful outlook on the hybrid "third space" in which enables further positions to emerge from within it (Bhabha, 1991).

3. Conclusion

Neshat's position-less-ness produces a divergence in critical reception. She has been scrutinized in many modes of discourse, from scholarly art circles to news outlets like Huffington Post and Al Jazeera, to culture theorists and sociologists. Claims range from bemoaning Neshat as an unwitting pawn in a colonialist scheme to applause for her cultural self-definition. The critical harangue finds Neshat harmful in perpetuating stereotypes of the Oriental woman.⁸ These observations are not unfounded but they are superficial. Those

who call Neshat a traitor to Iran have a narrow scope, seeing only the poles of colonialism's Orient-Occident axis. Those who only see these poles do not realize that the space between opportune creative-navigation, allowing locations of *somewhat*-Western and *somewhat*-Iranian. That's the shaky plurality of self, especially a hybrid-person self. Neshat employs seemingly problematic binaries—East and West, female and male—but she does this in order to acknowledge and then move past them. Her use of symbols of the Muslim world—chadors and calligraphy—is loaded. Her critique of censorship in Iran (i.e. *The Last Word*) and segregation and diminishment of women in Islamic culture suggest an alliance with the Western colonialist agenda, judging a culture as "backwards." But she is not disavowing herself of Iran by critiquing it. If anything, she finds cultural authenticity through her rigorous analysis.

Acknowledging problems can be done from within the culture. And proper refutation of the problematic binaries requires vetting them out.

The Art World has more consistent acclaim for Neshat because they deal in paradoxes and endorse provocation. Their support has garnered recognition and awards for Neshat. She has been granted numerous solo exhibitions, lectured at premiere universities, and juried at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival in 2013. She won the International Award of the XLVIII Venice Biennale for *Turbulent and Rapture*. In 2009, she was honored with the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival. In 2010, Neshat was lauded "Artist of the Decade" by Huffington Post critic G. Roger Denson, who said "the impact of her work far transcends the realms of art in

⁸ For more on views holding that Neshat has succumbed to the Western hegemony's power plays, see Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror." *Anthropological*

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reflecting the most vital and far-reaching struggle to assert human rights” (2010). She attributes this transcendence to the universal, timeless phenomenon of homosocialization.

She has paved a third path in the discourse of Islamic feminism and in the Art World by her creation of a hybrid cultural identity for herself. While there is a persistence of unsettling gender roles that are not necessarily cast in a bad light, this can be chalked up to the messiness of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism harmonizes contradictions. For this, the praise-bestowing critics do not think Neshat’s is an accomplice to orientalism or colonialism. Rather, the questions she poses about complicity and community from her interstitial perspective enlarge the multiculturalist cause. The interweaving of these questions with the “women question” empower the women’s movements. Neshat’s

questions are personal and they are conveyed to the viewer via unsettling binaries within political landscapes through poetic narratives. Her action in the human rights agenda is subtly powerful: her artwork has people reassessing their perspective.

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