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Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetic Play in Diasporic Iranian Visual Literature: Neshat, Satrapi, Bashi, Soltani

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Does the study of aesthetics create response-ability or have tangible effects in the real world? Does the ambivalent form of word/images created by diaspora artists change our gaze toward the Other and the landscape of the possible? In the age of a global march against abstract terror which seems to be only reinforcing terrorism, the sign “Muslim-woman” along with the concept of democracy have become rallying cries for novel civilizing-missions. Leaving aside the failed efforts of *littérature engagée*, I resonate with Jacques Rancière that the study of aesthetics is intertwined with that of politics. Gayatri Spivak, too, asserts that an education in humanities creates an ethical bond which aids in training the imagination to trace the complicity of the self in the plight of Others. Emmanuel Levinas sees ethics as a call for responsibility in which the vulnerable face of the Other is the condition of discourse. The exposure to the Other’s naked face incites an urge for violence which is immediately hampered by a call for ethical responsibility. Despite the surge in the publication of Iranian memoirs, their visual production’s contribution to countering the war-machine against abstract Terror and their role in ushering Democracy (through dissensus and ethical engagement with the enemy) remain unstudied. I argue that by fostering “aestextasy,” Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, Parsua Bashi and to a lesser extent Amir Soltani are able to bring the face of the Other to intimate proximities, create an ethical bond with radical alterity, and in so doing puncture the lethal cycle of xenophobia which purges the self by blaming one evil, external, enemy. The practice of reading for interlocking knots of ethics, aesthetics and politics, or what I call aestextasy, forms a constellation of

perception in which—as Judith Butler argues—the pleasure/pain of one body is interlinked to the wellbeing of all else in the life-chain of this precarious world. It refers to an aesthetic/perceptual awakening to being in the world and simultaneously feeling empathically connected to Others in an ethical life-circle. These authors effect a displacement of the exhausted affect of indignation in order to move across invisible borders of proximity/distance, self/Other, and outside/inside to envision a Democracy to come.

Keywords: Iranian diaspora visual literature, graphic novels, Muslim women in art; photography, Jacques Rancière, Marjane Satrapi, Shirin Neshat, Parsua Bashi, Amir Soltani, , aesthetics, ethics, politics.

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Preface

Human beings are as limbs to one whole body

Created from the same precious essence

Should one organ be troubled by pain,

Others would suffer severe strain.

Thou, careless of people's suffering,

deserve not the name, "human being"—Sa'di 13th Century AD

The stock images of violence depicted in war movies have failed to capture and engage the collective imagination of the Western audience (Blackmore “Eyeless in America”). The news media’s dehumanizing bombardment of the public with generic, decontextualized violence, has desensitized the audience regarding the pain of Others. The confluence of poetry, politics and the visual arts can re-channel this “compassion fatigue” toward genuine curiosity about, and attention to, radical alterity. Whether aesthetics, politics, and ethics can instigate the creation of an aesthetic community, *a sensus communus*, has been tested in the works of several artists/authors who engage with the question otherness in the context of Iran’s century old struggle for democracy. From the constitution Revolution of 1905 to the Islamic Revolution of 1979; from the internationally aided invasion of Saddam Hussein in 1980s to the Green Revolution of 2009, the struggle below the hearts and homes of the people, the women, and the abject, have been envisaged best in the works of Iranian artists. As such, Neshat’s photographic collections (such as *Women of Allah*), videographic installations (such as “Mahdokht”) and feature film: *Women Without Men* (based on a novel by Shahrnush Parsipur; inspired by

Forough Farrokhzad's poetry and her documentary film) are specifically in focus. Although Neshat utilizes orientalized Middle Eastern local colours, but it is through "political free play" that her visual productions create a third space that break with the simple didactic mimetic/representational regimes and herald a multivalent and playful aesthetic configuration. I also discuss the pitfalls in some of her productions where a forced narrative is superimposed over some of her visual production. Before that, three graphic novels *Persepolis I&II*, *Nylon Road* and *Zahra's Paradise* will be brought to the critical gaze, especially their treatment of the ultimate villain. Delimiting the potency of the cartooning technology in fostering empathy, I will turn to the works' ethical pallet. I will specifically look at the systematic manner in which these artists locate and visualize their enemies. Locating the enemy outside, with no complicity of the self in its creation is a sure sign of purging and scapegoating in the literature produced by the Iranian diaspora in particular. The Persianite concept of *Adab* is among the millennia old predecessors to my neology. *Adab/iat* refers both to aesthetic literariness, and to proper ethical conduct that is politically situated.

This research marks a process of weaving together and tearing apart several apparently disparate threads into Borromian knot-chains of aesthetics, politics, and ethics. Using the triple lens of aesthetic, politics, and ethics in analyzing these works of art allows me to visualize the fissures in the fabric of our torn democracy; not to cover the blind spots and the dead tangles, but to bring their bogus texture to touch. I will firstly delineate the specific definition of my key concepts: liberal Democracy's entanglement with Terror and the break, litigation, and dissensus that

real art can create. A strategic definition of democracy based on the power of dissensus or disagreement as suggested by Jacques Rancière is crucial in viewing aesthetic and politics multi-focally. Aesthetic-break can realize a third space where hierarchies of domination and subjugation are toppled, melted, subverted.

However, in order to appreciate the *re-partage* that the aesthetic break introduces, an “empathic unsettlement” is required.¹ The “affective dimension of inquiry” as Dominick LaCapra contends, “complements and supplements empirical research” (*Writing History* 78). Then I will look at the tropes in specific works of

literature/art that can create the aestextatic flutter in the audience. As such, the Kantian concept of Free Play, cracks the shells of self-immunity that provide fake security through isolation. Borrowing from the medical lexicon, Derrida refers to *auto-immunity* as the process whereby the body attacks its own cells for its own survival. Extreme securitarian regimes likewise, start attacking their “Self/s”: activists, and civic liberties in an attempt to curtail the evil, external enemy.

Artistic productions with a fair approach to the demonized enemies, challenge the axiomatic binary between the comfortable proximity of all that belong to Self and the ominous alienness of the Other. A critic treading on such delicate ropes should heed the polarities of appropriation, incorporation, and projection. Aesthetic revolt

¹ Dominique LaCapra expounds that: “Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is . . . a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis . . . It places in jeopardy fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence by prematurely (re)turning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios” (78 *Writing History Writing Trauma*).

happens ethically, where regimes of art challenge regimes of policing. The moment of possibilities looms when a work of art engages in free aesthetic play, dares to say no, subverts and displaces established hierarchies, creates dissensual litigation, and thus aids in midwifing a democracy-to-come.

Ushering Democracy Via Aesthetic Play

“Fascism will come to America in the name of national security.”

—Sen. Huey Long

The way Democracy today is taken up by politicians as an excuse for territorial hegemony, occupation or toppling of governments bears uncanny traces to the ancient *mission civilisatrice*. I argue that art and literature have the potential to beckon Democracy-to-come by providing a different, relatable, human portrait of the Other that breaks with the policed consensus regarding the “evilness” of the Enemy. These works do more than raise awareness about distant people, lands, cultures. Raising awareness can be the role of an ideal news media. These works touch the common tissue of our shared life force, bring to audibility and visibility what has been foreclosed from the common political sphere, playfully mount walls of dichotomies and fracture their superficial cement ceilings. My aim in the following pages is to bring to attention the seminal role of literature and the visual arts in fostering the democratic process. These texts trace the aesthetics of the different, the inappropriate, the marginal in an empathic and ethical way. While there has recently been a surge in the publication and analysis of “Muslim/Iranian women exilic text,” no critic has approached them from the

perspective of their contribution to ushering Democracy and countering the war machine against abstract Terror. To usher Democracy and counter Terror, these texts have been embroidered with the Borromian knots of politics, aesthetics and ethics. It is with such an understanding and ethical treatment of the enemy that we are invited to take that uncanny, de/familiarizing second look at Otherness. The Humanities are the *site par excellence* for “midwifing”—in the Socratic sense—of the democracy to come. It is necessary to unpack my reading of Democracy and its relation to literature of the Other in order to deface the globalization’s march against itself called the war on Terror. The discourse on pop terror relies on a moral binary that considers “us” (the globalizing powers) as good and the enemy (the generic Muslim Other) as “Evil.” The methods of the war against terror are not terribly dissimilar to the mediaeval exorcism of Evil:

Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing to be Good since, by seizing for itself a global monopoly of power, it gives rise, by that very act, to a blowback of a proportionate violence.

(Baudillard *Terrorism* 11)

While academic critics are quick to —rightly—point to the shortcomings of the enlightenment in placing the individual subject at the center of the universe, they are reluctant to see the medieval frames of mind of the current war-makers with their stark moral palette. The battles of the globalization of capital have synecdochically carried over to the arena of world relationship between superpowers and the rest, and tinted with self-serving morality. For Baudillard, terrorism is the globe fighting globalization:

It is what haunts every world order, all hegemonic domination—if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam, *for it is the world, the globe itself, which resists globalization.*

(Baudillard *Terrorism* 10)

While I find Baudillard's shocking categorization of terrorism as a global resistance to globalization fascinating, yet my critical gaze refuses to accept the term terrorism as a generic title. Without undermining Baudillard's theoretical discussions in abstraction, I prefer to avoid generalities and look at case specific scenarios regarding representation of alterity in the visual and verbal media. In order to understand Terrorism, I want to start with its Other: the blanket Western Democracy, as an *a priori* perfect concept. Democracy can be exported to whoever does not share our supremacy and our leadership. Once the antinomies at the crux of the democratic are delineated, the task of the literati in dis-aligning themselves from real terror, by seizing their democratic powers becomes apparent.

With no resistance on the part of the humanist intellectuals, I argue that the liberal democracy of today can easily become a discursive displacement of fascism, with totalitarian ambitions. Broaching that our democracy may become a discursive displacement of fascism with totalitarian ambitions is not isomorphic with claiming that we are living in utter fascism or urging to dispense with democracy all together. Quite the contrary, through a survey of the morphs of the cultural significance of the term across the ages, I argue for an intervention and a re-reading of the double bound term from a fresh, empowering perspective. I will delineate here the intrinsic paradoxes at the heart of the neoliberal concept of

democracy that can easily derail it into radicalism. First, I will outline the dangers that taking democracy as *a priori* and effortlessly beneficial will pose. Democracy is *a venir*—to come—and thus poses a persistence friction. The breaches of the constitution wrought by the few oligarchs in power who are un-answerable to the public or the law can only lead toward extremism. By becoming silent accomplices, democratic countries have performed genocides in the past. Foucault too, although he concedes that Fascism and Stalinism were “responses to a precise and very specific situation,” sees these instances of monstrosity as “clearly the heritage of liberal Western societies”:

it cannot be denied that, in many respects, fascism and Stalinism simply extended a whole series of mechanism that already existed in the social and political systems of the West . . . [e.g.] the organization of great parties, the development of political apparatuses, and the existence of techniques of repression such as labor camps.”(qtd in *Society must be Defended* 276)

Apparatuses of mass disciplinary punishment and suppression of dissent are ingrained in the “social and political heritage” of western liberal societies and all that Stalinism and fascism had to do “was to stoop down and pick it up”(Foucault 276).

Has the internationally backed American drone empire stooped so low to conquer? On the other hand, the anesthetization of citizens confronted by their perpetual responsibility to bring democracy into play, evading the citizenry duty of taking turns (tour à tour) to “govern and be governed” aids the engrossment of the militarized, auto-securitarian regime in opting for unilateral consensus as opposed to litigious

dissensus. Only through disagreement, will “the political” immerge (Rancière); I argue that dissensus prefigures an acknowledgment of the Other, and calls for an ethical engagement with it, despite the dangers that such an embrace might entail. The political unfolds as “a(n increasingly more dangerous) cry of parrhesia (the courage to voice the truth against the displeasure of others). Quiet, consensual regimes are the ground par excellence for the breeding of fear-politics, or rather, policing. Literature that encompasses aesthetics, politics and ethics flares that dissensus. As Rancière reminds us time and again, democracy is not a “static universal mode of representational government”; the very idea of a representative democracy would have sounded paradoxical to Athenian ears. According to Aristotle what distinguishes a citizen from an animal is speech; the former constructs an argument to advance his cause while the latter —an instrumentum semi-vocale —moans with grief when plagued by dis-ease. He believes that the political is distinguished at the edge of the distinction between an animal cry and a human voice in unrest. It is these tales of suffering and emancipation that can invite a loving gaze at Others. “Ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship” (Introduction to *The Spivak Reader*).

Paradox of Freedom and Security

In the *Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault delineates an essential paradox at the crux of what he establishes to be Liberalism: it “entails at its heart a productive/ destructive relationship [with] freedom,” in which the individual interest is offset and regulated by the boundaries of collective security based on the economy of power that the government establishes (64). This balance between the

individual freedom monitored by the police state and the sovereignty of the nation as a whole (in conjunction with other equal or greater world powers) can very well be disturbed through what I recognize as a securitarian, consensual state ruled by fear of abstract Terror; what Derrida defines as *auto-immunity* as an intrinsic organ of democracy. As an example, George W. Bush's CIA director referred to this sensitive security-freedom balance right after the scandalous findings of Edward Snowden, calling him "the most costly leaker of American secrets in the history of the Republic" in CNN. He believed that "The appropriate balance between liberty and security has bedeviled free peoples, including Americans, for centuries"(Hayden, CNN). For the former National Security Agency director speaking up about the breaches of constitutional law is a matter of personal "moral judgment," which must be discarded for the sake of consensus with the regime. However, in *The Courage of Truth* Foucault nominates "*parrhesia* (truth-telling, the right to express one's opinion, and the courage to go against the opinions of others)" as one of the fundamental prerequisites of a democracy but one which—even at the time of Plato—was becoming increasingly "impossible, or at any rate dangerous," both for the courageous individual who stood up against the system and for the *Polis* itself.

Foucault refers to the threats faced by Socrates as he challenged the Athenians to listen to him despite the bitterness that his illuminations invoked. The U.S. government revokes Edward Snowden's right to citizenship, sentencing him to the limbo of a national transit, for his audacity to expose the sabotage of the American constitutional law to the world community. The Obama administration

openly lobbied (bullied) other nations into refusing him asylum. Hannah Arendt reminds us that the bare human being has no rights outside citizenry. Annulling the passport of a whistleblower who practices *parrhesia*, the fundamental prerequisite of a democracy, in the rights-discourse, is a metonymy for depriving him of his inalienable human rights; a civic murder:

Either democracy makes room for *parrhesia*, in which case it can only be a freedom which is dangerous for the city, or *parrhesia* [as] a courageous attitude which consists in taking to tell the truth . . . has no place in democracy. (Foucault *Society* 38)¹

General Hayden compares Snowden to the “spies²” who had given the American atomic bomb information to the Soviet Union during the cold war. The ironic comparison is, however, apt as the paranoia toward the “Islamist Terror” bears uncanny traces to that of the Red Scare with its fear of the atomic bomb. For the likes of Hayden, the civic death of a whistleblower is justified for the transcendental good of National Security: the “democratic state” murders a part of

¹ In David Keyt’s reading, for Aristotle, *Dēmokratía* is a misguided and deviant constitution, based on a faulty conception of freedom and equality (Politics III.9.1280a7–25; V.1.1301a25–b1, 9.1310a25–36); and that laws that accord with deviant constitutions are not just (11.1282b6–13). Reading Aristotle, Keyt concludes that “Democrats, in obeying Athenian laws, will do many things that are—from the perspective of the ideal city, the only city that is just by nature—not just”(236).

² Calling Snowden a “spy” is ironic since it was Snowden who revealed the widespread “spying” of U.S. government on—not just American residence—but people all over the world.

its own body in order to ensure its own survival; yet I would argue that such a suicidal state cannot carry the prefix of “democratic” any more.

Perils of Dissensus

In *The End of America*, Naomi Wolf, docketed ten steps that can lead any democratic government toward what she calls a “fascist shift.” After a historical survey of the fascist states of the previous centuries, she lists a blue print that modern dictators followed on route to total hegemony. The uncanniness of these ten steps, even after nine years of the book’s publication in 2007 under the Bush administration, still manages to alarm me about our taken-for-granted democracy. According to Wolf, all fascist nations followed these steps on route to total hegemony:

1. Constructing a terrifying internal and external enemy
2. Establishing secret prisons where torture takes place; a gulag
3. Organizing a “thug caste” or para-military force above law, security contractors, private armies to deal with emergency at home and abroad
4. Setting up internal surveillance systems
5. Harassing citizens' groups
6. Engaging in arbitrary detention/release
7. Targeting key individuals
8. Controlling the Press
9. Equating dissent to Treason
10. Suspending the rule of law

She concludes that the U.S. government—which according to her was once a beacon of liberty—is rolling toward a fascist slope. I find her comparative historical research fascinating. Due to changes to the way that power disseminates in modern societies since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, I believe that decapitating a single king/government will not necessitate a political movement or a grassroots subversion. Democracy is ushered by active participation of citizens in government *tour a tour*, by speaking up auto-critically, without being crippled through self-immunity. Democracy will be wrought through dissensus, by citizens who dare to speak up loudly and clearly against injustice (*Parrhesia*), creating a break in the policed consensus. The works of art produced by the Iranian diaspora bring the unknown face of the Other to intimate proximities and aid in fostering a bond between “us” and “them.” This ethical relationship through an act of dis-attachment from the chorus of consensual images seen in popular media, is a strong indicator of the power of aesthetics in affecting change in the world of perception.

Pervertible Power

Despite the jubilee surrounding the sacredness, uniqueness and thus, export-ability of democracy, many Western policies show an aversion regarding the opinion of the “masses” about critical concerns such as the continuation of an illegal war. The lack of public space given to the opinion of the people, and the adhesion to the expert opinion of a select group of speakers is a sign of an oligarchy that is deeply anxious about the readiness of people to lead. The fear that Democracy is an unleashing of a beast of public opinion that should be tamed

through a state that is pseudo-democratic is nothing new. However, I believe that Democracy proper is not the nexus of unleashing the individualistic desires and unstrapping the spiralling wheel of the market, culminating in the fissure of the social bond; Rancière evokes that it is only by mistaking policing as politics that the irreducible dissensus, difference and heterogeneity at the heart of community (the very “stuff of politics”) are reduced to universal, homogeneous consensus (in a fascist turn):

Policing is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party’s share or lack of it. Policing is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.

(Disagreement, 29)

Contrary to the fears of the oligarch, democracy is not the catastrophic unlash of the masses’ desires:

The democratic process is the process of a perpetual bringing [the count of the uncounted] into play, of invention of forms of subjectivation, and of cases of verification that counteract the perpetual privatization of public life. Democracy really means . . . the impurity of politics, the challenging of governments’ claims to embody the sole principle of public life and in so doing be able to

circumscribe the . . . extension of public life. If there is a ‘limitlessness’ specific to democracy, then that’s exactly where it lies: not in the exponential multiplication of needs or of desires emanating from individuals, but in the movement that ceaselessly displaces the limits of the public and the private, of the political and the social. It is this displacement inherent to politics itself that so-called republican ideology refuses to accept . . . [asserting] a strict delimitation of spheres between the political and the social [that] regards the republic as identical to the rule of law. (*Hatred of Democracy* 62-3)

It is only through a half-hearted benevolence of the critics of the policed/securitarian government that democracy—as the count of the uncounted—is being hampered and denounced by the few oligarchs in power. Inherent in the “intellectual/artist/critic”—hybrid’s approach to “representative regimes of communication” is an [un]conscious elitism that presupposes the ignorance of the population who are unable to recognize the current social challenges. Speaking in terms of regimes of representation, such a take corresponds to a mimetic regime that aims at teaching the ignoramus, or art-preach (albeit with a post-modern fear of a message).

The Platonic exclusion of the “little bald tinker,” and those with “disfigured bodies” and “battered and mutilated souls” who “betake themselves to philosophy” in the *Republic* VI is putatively based on the interdiction intrinsic to the reality of their profession; these labourers have no leisure time away from their vocation to

contemplate matters of the state as it pertains to the community. According to Rancière, the dispositifs that make the subjects with lack of time, space and leisure to participate in matters common to mankind still function to police the visible, sayable and audible in the sensory common to humankind today. Inspired by the maverick nineteenth century principle of equality of intelligence introduced by Joseph Jacotot, Rancière came to believe that “one ignoramus can teach another what he himself did not know” (*Emancipated Spectator* 1). Hatred and fear of *parrhesia* in democracies is based on the (lack of) what Foucault calls an ethical differentiation in democracies; the fact that the “masses” are dubbed as a homogeneous slum of ignoramus and the ruling political elite are the ones entitled occupy the seat of authority, visibility and audibility. Art has emancipatory potentials to intervene in space-timing, hierarchies, and partitioning of the grievable and the visible. Here, I will look at how through free play an artist dismantled the space allocated to the Other.

For me, these uncanonical, apparently indecorous, marginal works of art playfully ignore and surpass the policed mental preconditioning and incite an *aestextasy* that reminds humans of what is shared in humanity of the invisible, inaudible Other. Nations that build literal, figurative, and metaphoric security walls instead of connection bridges foreclose the possibility of the humanity of the generic enemy. *Aestextasy* creates visceral bonds that displace and subvert notions of self and other, inside and outside, proximity and distance. It creates joints of connection between the pleasure-pain of one body to that of the world community via a new politics of susceptibility to the shared sensory landscape of

life. Aesthetics is etymologically related to “sense perception.” Aesthetic regimes of Art are, as Rancière has argued, political tools in subverting hierarchies of domination. Aesthetics—as that which is derived from sensory perception—perceives the other (the one outside or beside oneself) and thus forms a point of contact from which egoism transforms into bonding with alterity; connecting individual bubbles with the sensory experience of a common life force:

Politics begins when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of world and reproduction, and prevented from doing anything else, take the time that they have not in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible, visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the ‘common’ of the community. Politics creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual ‘commonsense.’ (Dissensus 139)

This research is materially rooted in a certain moment when the individual work of art connects itself to the common song of humanity in the face of war and extinction. Each chosen work reflects on at least two traumatic moments related to the world’s present history. These are the turbulent recent history of Iran in view of the current generic war on Terror. Each moment feeds onto various other historical sparks and reflects back to the present moment as a witness. The two main images that doubly wound my selected works are: The Islamic Revolution of Iran and The War on Middle East in the name of Islamic Terror. The concrete war on abstract Terror in the aftermath of the fall of World Trade Center, intensified

an already deep rooted wave of generic Islamophobia. Satrapi, Neshat, Bashi and a plethora of other Iranian artists felt a compulsion to “recount” whether in verbally or visually the tales of nuances, of singularities of each experience and the material affects of terror. These works have been specifically more successful in generating an ethical connectivity by remembering the shared thread of humanity, all the while keeping their uniqueness and differences through aesthetics play. When the world’s deadliest iron fist is mobilized to break the fluid concept/metaphor of “Muslim Terrorist,” the outcome could be a backlash of more terror, a rechanneling previously immobile forces.¹ The awkward battle between an iron fist and liquid concepts points to the vital significance of such enigmatic discursive displacements: our Democracy battling their Terrorism. If civilians mainly including women and children are being murdered by fire from the skies based on a lethal dichotomy between us versus them, is it not time to probe the fictitious fabric of that binary further? If wars are supported with appeal to signs, metonymy and metalepsis, it is a humanitarian duty of the scholars of humanity to deconstruct and reconstruct that worldview. Changing mindsets will not bring a revolution, according to Spivak, but, “without this revolutionary change of mind, revolutionary ‘programs’ will fall” into the same metaphysical bind of idealized and repeatable intention and context” (Spivak, *Reader* 88).

I will scan texts that have the transformative powers to re-arrange desires toward a democracy to come, texts that dare to envisage a different face to Western audience. With the grace of their aestextasy, this selection of works, reminds

¹ These words were written almost a year before the rise of ISIS in Syria, which gained weapons and funds through Western interference in plotting for regime change in the region.

humanity of the common fabric of life and the palpable danger of unknotting it. I will specifically look at the tropes and figures that enable these texts to articulate their aesthetics politically and ethically.

Part I—Introduction¹

In the age of war against abstract Terror, masterwords such as Democracy can become metaleptic² alibies for neo-capitalistic crusades across the globe. Unlike classical warfare, the frontiers are inhuman/e on one side and invisible on the other. The excessive brutality of “un-manned” aerial vehicles³ is in striking contrast with the scarcity of scholarship/public awareness regarding the bombed generic Others. The

¹ This Introduction was originally written before the rise of ISIS. It is interesting to note that the unethical treatment of the enemy, even in the realm of aesthetics (which is closely tied to that of politics), can have such disastrous effects in our shared experience of the sensible world.

²In *Map of Misreading*, Harold Bloom calls metalepsis a “metonymy of a metonym.” In my reading since the word Democracy comes to us already abused, and is then doubly misread, I selected the trope of metalepsis to describe the process.

³ Generic glance of unmanned drones targets enemies based on superficial categories such as the location of their SIM cards. The death-bird, as I would like to call the machine, could be an extension or a metonymy of our perception toward the Other. As a metonymy, they are always chopped, but contain traces of the original. In order to stop the drones’ Medusa gaze, we are to change our perception of the Other and learn to risk the extension of an arm or a shoulder.

It was recently revealed that the NSA often identifies and bombs “terrorists” based on the location of their cellphones. The agency does not confirm the identity of the target using human intelligence and relies on controversial metadata analysis and cell-phone tracking technologies that can lead to the death of many unidentified civilians. The CIA or the U.S. military then orders a drone strike based on the target’s location. More often than not, the phone is in the hand of a friend, a spouse or a child rather than the suspect. A former drone operator who speaks on conditions of anonymity has leaked the fact that many insurgents deliberately change their sim cards to confuse the US military: “It’s really like we’re targeting a cell phone. We’re not going after people—we’re going after their phones, in the hopes that the person on the other end of that missile is the bad guy” (The Intercept, Feb 2014 article retrieved from:

<https://firstlook.org/theintercept/article/2014/02/10/the-nsas-secret-role/>)

enemy as the Other has been foreclosed from the fields of sight and sensibility. The suspects are expelled even from the borders of the nation—as in Guantanamo Bay—outside the rule of law, and treated with extra-judicial measures: kangaroo courts pass verdicts of indefinite detention for subjects outside the condition of being called human. This is while the news media is advised against publishing headlines of civilian casualties in front pages. Even the photographs of war are state controlled through embedded photojournalists. Jacques Lacan professes: that which is foreclosed from the Symbolic Order will come back haunting the Real: the lack of scholarship on our Democracies' paranoia toward abstract Terror is offset by its prevalence in contemporary political violence. It is with the Humanities reflections on these mechanisms of foreclosure, invisibility and Othering that this research engages; all while thinking of aesthetic alternatives. Freud famously defines foreclosure as a process whereby part of the unpleasant reality is erased as if it has never existed:

Here, the ego rejects the incompatible idea together with its affect and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all. But from the moment at which this has been successfully done the subject is in a psychosis, which can only be classified as “hallucinatory confusion”.

(Freud “Neuro Psychosis of Defense” 58)

By delving into the question of Iranian/Muslim Women's agency and struggle for democracy as portrayed in the diasporic visual productions, this “hallucinatory confusion” of Islam with sheer Terror is untangled. How should humanities, as an academic discipline, displace and subvert these self-evident facts or epistemes that contribute to the implementation of a paranoid defense mechanism? I argue that the

daring authors including artists, graphic novelist, filmmakers, and memoir writers have the ability to confuse and complicate set binaries. Their portrayal of the Other not as enemy, but as someone relatable, perfectible, human, creates a dissensus in the hegemonic discourse circulating against those “unlike us.” Through this tear in the general imagination, bonds of interrelation and connection are slowly and painstakingly woven, and this is how democracy looms: through litigation, dissensus and *Parrhesia* (what Foucault calls daring, truthful, yet dangerous critique), and not through silent complicity and consensus. Aesthetics and politics intertwine in the fabrication of our democracy’s Other: the semi mythical figure of the Muslim Terrorist. At our nations’ checkpoints the fade-outs of our democracy are demarcated by bio-securitarian costumes; the gates gradually extend outward and inward to define the contours of our psychological relationship with the Enemy.

The cultural critic’s challenge is twofold in representing the Other. Like Georges Didi-Huberman’s rope walker she must be wary at every step not to fall prey to the lethal bi-polarities in engaging (with) the Other:

- I. Appropriation/ incorporation: by selfing the Other, appropriating its¹ voice, or exhibiting a “patronizing sympathy” toward it or incorporating traits or symptoms of the victim in the self (LaCapra *Writing History* 38)

¹ I used the pronoun “it” for the Other to highlight the dehumanization intrinsic in Othering as outlined by Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. For Lacan the Other as the ultimate alterity does not exist.

II. Foreclosure¹: where the Other is entirely expunged from the domain of that which is homogeneously human

Although we live in times of compassion-fatigue, media desensitization, and parochialism—as a student of humanities, I am passionate about, and do not shy away from, the potential of literature to literally change the world. I believe that it is through an ethical awakening of humanities to the politics of its aesthetics, that problematic hierarchies are dismantled. In order to rekindle a fresh vision of a world of perception, Humanities—not as an isolated, precarious discipline, but Humanities as a way of life—has to step in and realize that there is no politics without ethics and no aesthetics without both. This is not about “committed art” standing in a self-defeating posture opposite slogansists of *l’art pour l’art*. This is Humanities remembering the sensory being in the world that can envision a different space/timing in order to alter hegemonic world-views; this is about “uncoercively rearranging desires” (Spivak *Aesthetic Education* 375). Art that reaches-out can bring to visibility, raise awareness, and rearrange the lethal desires of domination.

I argue that the discourse around terror fueled by Neoliberal capitalist crusaders can be interrupted via what I have dubbed aesthetic-ecstasy. In a verbal twist, the word “*aestextasy*”² connects the three concepts of aesthetics, ethics and politics all knotted around the text. As in a Borromean knot, removing one ring will

¹ In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak contends that the figure of the subaltern has been foreclosed from the discourse of enlightenment, especially for the subject formation in the oeuvre of Kant, Hegel & Marx, “the last Three Wise Men of the Continental (European) tradition” (111).

² Pronounced “eS-tex-tacy.”

disassemble the whole chain. *Aestextasy* intervenes in the pop-terror discourse in order to create a fresh perspective whence the dangerous Other can be identified as human, as a kin, an extension of the self. It necessitates the formation of that ethical bond without which humanity and life on earth will inevitably perish. Ecstasy or the state of being “besides oneself,” “outside the body” with pleasure or pain links excessive sensation with the question of the Other, the one outside or beside the self. Judith Butler invokes that the quality of being besides oneself indexes the essential interdependence of human kind:

To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief. I think that if I can still address a “we,” or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage. (Butler *Precarious Life* 24)

For Butler, disparate bodies are connected via the condition of ec-stasis. Not only connected, bodies are inter-dependent and rely on one another for safety. I would stress that this bodily interdependence is inseparable from the question of ethics and aesthetics. My reading of *Aestextasy* calls for an art that recognizes the relatability of self with the Other, and precarity of the feeble pulse of life in the world; a web of live throbs that can easily fade away with the press of a red button. *Aestextasy* is a constant reminder of the ethical and the visceral interconnectedness of beings in the world endowed with a sensory constellation. The condition of fluttering simultaneously

between the Self and the Other; being oneself and beside oneself with pleasure or pain, of transcending the self, of perception of the Other as a self—but without the greed of domination—is in a sharp contrast with a solitaire aesthetics that commences and terminates in the Self. I argue that it is impossible for true aesthetics to remain isolated, self-absorbed, completely out of tune with the cycles of politics.

Such egoistic aesthetics leads to formation of partition walls and nuclear weapons to guard them. *Aestextasy* is a prerequisite for the evolution of humanity from this despicable disposition of Othering, pesticization and exploitation that lead to completely “ordinary” modern men to turn into bureaucratic war machines. Such “ordinary men” turned bureaucratic war machines have led the Socialist Worker’s Party at Shoah, or the Belgian *philanthropic* Association in the Congo *Free State*, or The *People’s Commissariat* at Gulag. With the bloody sectarian civil war in Iraq, the name Mission Iraqi *Freedom* bears uncanny echoes of other benevolent military occupations. Civil wars are rampaging throughout the Middle East, self-effacing, cancer-like. What is the literati’s call and contribution in this inhuman re-worlding? Who are our intellectuals and are they responsible for raising awareness, bringing the invisible victims to our fields of vision and hearing? Some academic institutions’ professed neutrality, consensual recycling, or detached melancholia for lost origins did not stop any of the aforementioned genocides; they are not going to intervene now. It is thus that a professor of the American *Constitutional Law* and a Nobel *peace* prize Laureate—Dr. Barack Hussein Obama—becomes the patron of two illegal wars and funds military intervention in more than 50 countries worldwide. This is beside his breaches of constitutional law at home, by spying on the population, hampering

freedom of speech, impeding demonstration, cracking down on dissent, abuse of whistle blowers, and illegal detentions. And Obama is considered among the better leaders of the United States.

There are however artists, authors, or human beings who have built bridges over cultural estrangement via elements common to humankind: tales of theory suffering, exile and reorientation. As Miko Peled points out that: “truth lives in personal story not national narrative.” These artists are beacons of change from within, who break the happy consensus of war machines by offering a different glimpse into the life of the Other. In offering differences, they remind their audience of the similarities between the experience of pleasure-pain of Others and the self. In Rancièrian terms: they re-distributed the sensible common in the world to create a new community:

The first possible meaning of the notion of a ‘factory of the sensible’ is the formation of a shared sensible world, a common habitat, by the weaving together of a plurality of human activities. However, the idea of a ‘distribution of the sensible’ implies something more. A ‘common’ world is never simply an *ethos*, a shared abode, that results from the sedimentation of a certain number of intertwined acts. It is always a polemical distribution of modes of being and ‘occupations’ in a space of possibilities. (Rancièr *Politics of Aesthetics* 39)

I argue that the democratic process is made possible through such ‘occupations’ of the common imagination; through the dangerous endeavor that these artists undertake in hosting different voices and distant figures in the secluded shared

space. As Foucault reminds us, there is no democracy without *Parrhesia*, daring truthful talk that can put both the speaker and the audience in danger. Yet speaking truth to power is becoming increasingly more dangerous.

Shunning atomization, compartmentalization, and rigid binaries, I have picked texts that meet in the beyond: beyond literature, art, and politics, beyond the visual or verbal. This interdisciplinary approach is part and parcel of the emancipatory reworlding that I continually stress. Each chapter scans an apparently disparate media of communication such as the graphic technology, the diasporic memoir or photo-poetry. These works of art utilize a political aesthetics in order to ethically make sense of the trauma of war, revolution, and xenophobia in their different styles. However, the aestextasy that they invoke, has the power to move humanity one step closer to a dissensual democracy as opposed to mediaeval consensual wars of terror.

I will start with three graphic novels and then move to the oeuvre of Shirin Neshat.

Chapter Sketches

This dissertation is divided into three parts. The first one is introduction and theoretical conceptualization. The second includes graphic narratives produced by the Iranian diaspora. And the third and final part concerns the oeuvre of Shirin Neshat: her photographic collection and feature film.

Part II Overview: Diasporic Iranian Visual Literature in the form of Graphic Narratives

Comics seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes

of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures.

– Edward Said, Preface to Jew Sacco's *Palestine*

Political in their toppling of text-image hierarchies and subversive for their indecorousness in dealing with traumatic topics through a putative “juvenile” genre, graphic narratives take a fresh look at old wounds to imagine new possibilities of encounter the Other's face. The three works of graphic narrative: *Persepolis* books by Marjane Satrapi, *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi and *Zahra's Paradise* by Amir Soltani and Khalil will be read closely in this part.

Ch. 1 *Persepolis* books by Marjane Satrapi

Exploring the relatable and versatile medium of graphic narratives, Satrapi affects a rupture in the corpus of Iranian diaspora writings after the revolution. The tear, opens up space for an uncanny intimacy with the trauma of distant others. This fissure is delivered by a triple focus: her attention to the playfulness of the medium in shuttling between cement binaries (tradition/modernity, Islamic/Western, Public/Private, etc), her commitment to presenting an ethically balanced narrative about one of the most contested parts of Iranian history, and her utilization of subjugated knowledges below the hearts and homes of the people (about forgotten struggles and unclassified sciences of intergeneration love and bonding). She starts with simplified dichotomies such as religion versus science, modernity versus fundamentalism, freedom versus the veil and then complicates and confuses these easy binaries in the second part of her book, as she grows. It is aesthetic play that adds a third dimension to *Persepolis'* formal categorizations. Delivered in the “simplified yet

amplified” black and white comics, the relatable face of the child avatar transfixes the audience to the trauma of the Other, brings distant traumas to intimate proximities, upsetting the “us versus them” binary.

Many critics have alluded to *Persepolis*' treatment of both the public and the private dilemmas of the cartoon avatar and her country. Satrapi skilfully blends together the personal with the political, the private with the public, and the juvenile with the mature. The collection flows between the lowbrow & philosophical, the intimate & obscure, the traumatic & humorous in her artistic work. All the while she keeps a third eye fixated on the ethical balance of the book. The historical struggle of a nation at its pivotal moments of political revolution and foreign invasion is dotted with a personal affective dimension. *Persepolis* destabilizes formal and generic docketing: the graphic novel, a children's book, a political witness account, and a private coming of age story. The arc of “aesthetics, politics and ethics” is built by the interlocking of personal, local knowledges, and historical trajectories. The un/reliable child narrator and the voice of the adult speaker have a keen auto-critical filter that prevents them from judging according to stereotypes and hierarchal dichotomies.

Satrapi does not recirculate an image of Iran ripe for invasion or a West overflowing with freedom and democracy. Judgment is suspended, multiple speakers claim their histories, and the reader is left with meaningful fragments to sift through according to her own political, aesthetic, and ethical palette. Even violence is not just seen in the institution of the government. During the turbulent days of revolution and war, violence is witnessed in children's games and the domestic sphere as well, highlighting the effects of the political on the personal lives of people. For Satrapi,

extremism is not endemic to post-revolutionary Iranian politics only. She offsets Iran's political unrest with the experience of religious bigotry in the Austrian boarding school, the rise of the new extreme right with their explicit racist inclinations and xenophobia in Europe and finally her experience of alienation and utter helplessness as a young émigré.

Satrapi weaves the knowledge of the people from below with the history of masked and buried political struggles in a new medium. I see in *Persepolis* a genealogy of Foucauldian Subjugated knowledges. These are personal, local histories, the systematic *savoir-faire* of the people that are “masked in formal systematization”: The knowledges from below the hearts and homes of the people that are disqualified as non-conceptual or insufficiently elaborated. They prefigure a range of affective resilience that drives the intimately political story forward. These include the wisdom of the grandmother that transcends religious or secular dichotomies. These experiences from the “hearts and homes” although below the level of conceptualization, create moments of empathic connection, de-familiarization and intimacy. A significant dimension of *Persepolis* that has gained little critical attention is the *histoire* of repressed battles. Marji's uncle Anoosh, as well as family friends, Siamak and Mohsen, could be among those fighters for freedom who have been victimized under both regimes of the Shah and the Islamic Republic. Their efforts have been foreclosed from the official collective memory, yet *Persepolis* writes them back into the disputed narrative. The war martyrs and the wounded are also celebrated for their sacrifices in *Persepolis*. These stories from inside Iran are less known in the West. Whether below the level of scientificity or disqualified as non-consequential, the graphic witness

account revives these subjugated knowledges and in so doing, creates an affective, intimate fracture in the dominant, universal narrative of war, revolution and exile.

Ch. 2 *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi

Composed in the tradition of *Persepolis*, *Nylon Road* is a self-reflective, confessional “auto-graphics” (Whitlock “Autographics, The Seeing ‘I’”). Ethical engagement with “self” is the focus of *Nylon Road* to an extent that the threads of aesthetics and politics are loosened due to overpowering attention to ethical correctness. It recounts the experience of a new immigrant in Switzerland who is ambushed by her previous “self”s. The former left-leaning political activist is now living a luxurious life in Zurich but her past haunts her and drags her into dialectical discussions on her subjectivity between two ideoscapes. Subjecthood is negotiated and constituted in the flux of time and space. The entire book is an ethical auto-critique, or an episodic self-questioning. As mentioned in the introduction, without self-criticism, the enemy is externalized, monsterized and made into a justifiable target of attack. Identifying the complicity of the self in the problematic relationship with the Other is the crucial step in engaging in a human relationship with enemies and a sure way toward fostering a human bond. However, this self-focus is the axis upon which the entire book revolves. Parsua Bashi believes that the youth recruited by fashion-cults, religious institutes, or political guerrillas are comparable in that they all suspend their judgment for a transcendental alterity. She introduces ethics as a technology for self-regulation.

Nevertheless, this battle over the creation of homogeneous uncomplicated self is doomed for failure. She sees the female body fraught by the restrictions of class,

gender, politics, fashion, and religion. By offering a persistent, ethical, “dredging operation” she reminds us that the critics are not free from what they criticize (Spivak *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 1). However, her publishers have imposed a paratext onto the book-cover that works against all that Bashi has fought to prove. The industry capitalizes on memoirs that “pierce through the veil” to offer a glimpse of the forbidden harem to Western consumers (Naghibi *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*). It is in this lieu that “shi’ite law” and Iran appear on the dust cover without the author’s consent or any reference to the text. The paratext aside, I find her treatment of the radically othered quite enlightening. Her dialectic ethics fills an important gap in the writings of the Iranian diaspora, one that is especially missing in *Zahra’s Paradise*.

Ch. 3 *Zahra’s Paradise* by Amir Soltani and Khalil

Zahra’s Paradise is unique in many respects compared to the other two graphic narratives as it brings up important debates about armchair activism, citizen journalism, online-witnessing, social networking, authenticity in docu-fiction, and appropriation of distant traumas. Its writing style is more poetic, with an acute attention to mythical, symbolic names and religious icons. Aesthetics would be the driving force of the book. Unlike the previous two works, its images have been drawn by a professional cartoonist, and not by the author himself. It relates to current world events: the latest Iranian popular uprising in 2009 in reaction to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s re-election to presidency. This is while *Persepolis* and *Nylon Road* are mainly concerned with living through the panic of 1979 revolution as a youth and experiencing its excruciating aftermath. The criticism that *Zahra’s Paradise* puts forth concerns the current day Iran. It is also the only graphic narrative whose author

has not lived in the country at the time that events were unfolding in the story.

However, I found serious ethical dilemmas in this graphic narrative which other critics happily overlook. *Zahra's Paradise* is based on the unidentified works of "citizen journalists," circulated online on social media channels of Facebook and twitter.

Whether the anonymous transmission of authentic and fabricated news in the social media can be the basis of "docu-fiction" will be dealt with in depth in that chapter.

Overall, I do not deny the emancipatory potential of "witness images" circulated through citizen journalists. I believe that technology, if approached from an ethical and humanist window has the potential for becoming a vessel for democracy. It is after all news created by the people for the people. However, I find it problematic to set unverified and decontextualized images received through the internet as the basis of a book, which makes claims of authenticity and human rights. *Zahra's Paradise* is written in the style of a memoir but it is not a memoir. It is annexed by an American and European funded Human rights watch group with Azar Nafisi on its board of directors. To substantiate the human rightists intention of the author there appears at the end of the book Omid projects: 16000 names of victims who have been allegedly executed by Iran after the revolution. The boundaries between fact and fiction in witness accounts have been blurred already, but to compose a docu-fiction from a distance, based on the internet is absurd to say the least. Those who interview the author, treat him as a witness and the book as nonfiction. Amnesty International has recently interviewed Amir, asking him about the condition of Iran's judiciary system, as if he has experienced it! This question of online-witnessing from the safe distant of the internet sifting through fact or fiction will be dealt with in this chapter. I argue that

though the internet communicates information quickly, and has the potential to deliver democracy, it does not necessitate deep understanding and contextualization of world events. Most of the witness images are partial if not biased. Their distribution online is monitored by gatewatchers many of whom observe business models for their apparently open platforms. Questions of authenticity aside, I find the appropriation by Amir of the story of a grieving mother who has lost her son in the uprising very problematic. Specifically that this mother is very active online, and ethics would require her permission in the marketing of her plight. Another case of appropriation is the face of a prison official drawn into the comic book with lifelike details. Although the exact position and responsibility of the man is unclear, his face has been abducted to represent the sexualized, monstrous bearded Muslim villain of the book. There are also Islamophobic as well as homophobic references in *Zahra's Paradise* that have remained unnoticed. While lagging on the ethical scale, the aesthetics of the book provide for a pleasant read, an aesthetic that has its own political regimes of foreclosure and suppression.

Part III Overview: Diasporic Iranian Visual Literature Manifested in the oeuvre of Shirin Neshat: Photo-Poetry and Poetic-Film

Ch. 4 Neshat Photo Collections—*Women of Allah*

Neshat's art reaches a poignant, poetic minimalism that functions through allusions, elision, and collage. The magic of her art is in an explosion of affective sensorium which the lull of the quiet image cannot hide. Each plane of imagery forks into many possible fluid, interpretive dimensions. She puts in juxtaposed visibility the realm of the poetic with the visual. As a multifaceted artist, she has an access to

“hermetically sealed culture” (Dabashi “Moonless” 3) of Persia and the artistry to bring that to visibility in the globalizing market of art.

Neshat composed the *Women of Allah* collection upon her return from Iran, after decades of living and studying in the US. She claims that her gaze is curious, not judgmental. She stands in awe of these women who risk their lives to defend their homeland. In the context of the 8-year-war, Neshat is incapable of understanding what propels these women to kill or be killed in order to defend their country. Her sudden artistic outpour after a decade of productive silence was this urge to re-connect with her left behind, or lost culture. Strangely, it is only through a break from the didactic-mimetic regimes of narrative and leaping to the uncharted territories of the poetico-aesthetics that she haply morphs into the painter of a new polychromic constellation. In her 1995 collection she depicts (mostly) herself clad in her signature black chador, guns at hand (or held by feet, placed behind the ear, etc.) and literarily inscribed with untranslated Persian scriptures. She is unable to translate their beauty, their *adabiat*, their poetry, their tradition except through portraits. Her portraits stand in a Levinasian face-to-face encounter that urge violence, but then stops at point blank for an imperative to acknowledge the nakedness and vulnerability of the Other’s mystery. Those clothes, that gaze, those arms, bespeak of centuries old battles against injustice fought by women, and remembered through their stories, their poems, their bodies. It is this genuine curiosity and withholding of quick-fix answers that emancipates the work from mere propaganda about angry Muslim terrorists. She says: “I put myself in a place of asking questions but never answering them” (Rondeau). Neshat’s oeuvre is dynamic and defies docketing.

Her signature is made unique, via her attention to the poetics of the mundane that help “give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde *Sister Outsider* 36).

Neshat draws a parallel that playfully parcels out a different agency for her veiled figures. Veiled women carrying guns in conventionally male arenas, “contrast sharply with any traditional or simple definition of womanhood” (Milani *Stories* 5).

This woman is not “the secluded and segregated other/wife:

Herein lies the paradoxical nature of this neo-traditionalism regarding women: veiled but not excluded from a traditionally male domain; silent and obedient yet outspoken and articulate.” (Milani *Stories* 5)

I argue that Forough affected the accent, color, and atmosphere of the artistic production of both Neshat and Parsipur. Inscribing the body of her subjects with Forough’s poetry with Islamic calligraphy, sacrileges the poetry and the body of the Muslim woman. Farrokhzad (1935-67) is the most prominent 20th century Iranian poet. She is also the most iconic female poet of Iran’s millennia old (male dominated) poetic tradition. Poetry is not just a literary form reserved for the elite or the *avant garde* in Iran. It is arguably the most constitutive part of an Iranian sense of identity. Poetry is a way of life, a survival instinct which makes it possible to bear life’s fair share of hardship and yet dream of transcendental beauty. In Rancièrian terms, it is a reconfiguration of the space of sensible. Poetry creates a shared community of aesthetics in Iran, that help the artists to escape the sensors and resist hegemony. The young and the old, the educated and the illiterate, across the social divide, each have a reservoir of memorized verse used on a regular basis to make sense of the situation at hand. In the words of Dabashi:

Persian poetry is the pulse of Iranian culture, the rhyme and rhythm of its collective memory . . . they remember their past as the poetic resonance of their present, in fact, of their presence in history. (Dabashi *A People Interrupted* 13)

Through her “political free play,” her visual productions create a third space that break with the simple policed representational regimes and herald a multivalent and playful aesthetic configuration.

Ch. 5 Neshat Feature Film *Women Without Men* based on Parsipur’s Eponymous Novel

Neshat’s cinematic palette is coloured by several trans-national influences. I argue that the most prominent of Neshat’s muses is Forough, Iran’s beloved, *avant-garde* poet, film maker, theatre actress, and translator. More than half of Neshat’s artistic career has been devoted to translating Shahrnush Parsipur’s novel characters into cinematic personages and a feature film. The most intimate motif prevalent in the three women’s texts is the possibilities that space-politics allocates to the female characters and their embodied resilience, resistance and revolt. Neshat maneuvers smoothly between the feminine and intimate as well as the political and public. She self-consciously resists demonizing her alleged enemies. Instead, she chooses to ask questions instead of answering them. The film was released in 2009 right after Iran’s Green Movement with its march of millions in the streets. *Women Without Men* refers to the lives of four women who find shelter in a magical garden that mirrors the psyche of its inhabitants as well as the political atmosphere of the country during the coup of 1953. With the rise of democracy and the nationalization of Iran’s oil industry,

the garden flourishes and blooms the desserts around it. After the coup of Mossadegh, the garden starts to hover and fall. These women have been the subject of numerous videographic installations for Neshat. A prominent concept that aids in such acrobatic movements between aesthetic, politics and ethics is that of aesthetic free play.

Free Aesthetic Play, the Cornerstone of Aesthetic Revolt

The connection in my proposed Borromean knot are made through the concept of free aesthetic play. Rancière's reading of free play is founded on those of Immanuel Kant and Fredrich Schiller. For Rancière, free play generates a new "art of living," a new form of "life in common" because it "defines that which comes within the province of art through its adherence to a sensorium different to that of domination" (*Aesthetics and its Discontent* 30). In my understanding of his concept of free play, the lack of volition when standing in the presence of art, the circle of "inactive activity" of the faculties, the suspension of desire to dominate the "idle work," all educate the human sensorium in a new promising aesthetic regime, a new humanity. Free play has the power to disarm the audience, and foment a new sensorium of Being: a novel Aisthēsis or an aestextasy. This subversion, suspension, and disarming are the very stuff of a system of aestextasy that I have so far devised.

Kant bases the foundation of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* on the human cognitive ability to perform a twofold suspension of the faculties of imagination and of reason—via free play. For Kant, free play consists in a relationship of the faculties that is a "requisite for cognition in general" (218). This suspension of the faculties of imagination and understanding can "suspend the power of form over matter, of intelligence over sensibility" (Rancière *Aesthetics and its Discontent* 31). A few

decades later, Schiller elevates the concept of free play so far as to call man as fully human, only when he plays: “For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays” (Schiller 22). Schiller “anthropomorphizes” the Kantian propositions of free play in the context of the French Revolution. For him “The power of form over matter is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature” (*Aesthetics and its Discontent* 31). Free play by suspending the domination of the faculties over one another, reaches out to social classes and heralds change to the vision of the community:

If aesthetic play and appearance found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities. (Rancière *Aesthetics and its Discontent* 31)

I will return to this understanding of Free Play as I am discussing the select works of art.

Introduction to Post 9/11 Iranian "Memoir Boom"

The surge of Iranian diasporic memoirs that glance back at the experience of 1979 Revolution and the ensuing invasion by Saddam Hussein in 1980¹—in the wake of 9/11—is a curious phenomenon. In “The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs” Gillian Whitlock exclaims that memoirs of Iranian diaspora are pushing Chinese “scar-literature” off the shelves at book stores, apparently because the Iranian memoirs are speaking to the present moment’s traumas in a more direct way (9). What has triggered the “memoir boom” after more than two decades of relative silence by Iranians living semi-comfortably in the West?² While the U.S. is trying hard to sell the image of a violent, sexualized Islam that picks and preys on women, there are a few groups in the Iranian diaspora who can perform the role of victims of the Islamic government and in/directly advocate regime change. These groups include but are not limited to bourgeois Iranians whose only preoccupation with the regime is its public restrictions on women’s attire as well as bans on alcohol consumption, or the active members of

¹ A non-exhaustive list could include:

Nesta Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and Nightingale; Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East* (2002),

Firoozeh Dumas *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (2003),

Mariane Satrapi, *Persepolis: Story of a Childhood* (trans; 2003),

Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003),

Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* (2003),

Mariane Satrapi *Persepolis 2: Story of a Return* (trans; 2004),

Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004),

Farah Pahlavi, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah —A memoir* (2004),

Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005),

Mariane Satrapi, *Embroideries* (trans; 2005)

Afschineh Latifi, *Even After All This Time: a Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005)

Parsua Bashi, *Nylon Road; A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran* (2009).

² This is a question asked by Gillian Whitlock, Nima Naghibi, Julie Rak as well as other memoir critics. What specifically interests me is the boom in the publication of visual memoirs of Iranian diasporic subjects in the context of war against the so called Muslim terror.

armed guerrillas who solely think of overthrowing the government with no clear plan for an alternative. However, there are exceptions in the “fix,” such as economic immigrants and students.

The stakes are high in the circulation of witness accounts regarding the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock takes a contrapuntal glance at the popular genre. On the one hand, some autobiographies are “soft weapons” in the New World Order, while others can create a space for human rights and a shared community:

We need to ask old questions about these autobiographical acts, which are implicated variously in contemporary culture wars, liberation movements, and armed conflict. Which bodies are breathed into life, and which lives are being brought into view by autobiography? . . . The stage for contemporary life narratives is framed by the war on terror that dramatically shapes their jurisdiction. This includes events such as the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the subsequent campaigns of armed intervention and insurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq . . . It also includes the renewal of fundamentalisms, the ideological shifts to patriotism and homelands, the renewed vigor of Orientalism and Occidentalism in the constructions of self and the other, and a pervasive strengthening of modes of state power that operate diffusely to regulate populations and reproduce subjects in relation to strategic policy. . . Life narratives are ‘soft weapons,’ but what follows is a series of essays on how the war on terror ripples in and through life narrative, a sign of contraction in the public sphere that is mediated in the private domain to political effect and emotional affect. (Whitlock *Soft Weapons* 9)

The war of the world’s superpowers drives publishers’ demand for native informants.¹

Taking advantage of paratext for marketing, some publishers induce stereotypes even without

¹ The concept of native informant as introduced by Gramsci and incorporated into the discourse of Gayatri Spivak will be elaborated further on. Suffice it to mention that those people who are considered as the experts merely by belonging to a minority group are native informants. They receive tokens by reiterating the discourse of power.

the consent of the author.¹ It is as if the only way to sell memoirs is by clinging onto to the “victimized Muslim woman” or the despotic Islamic Iran fantasy. However Whitlock does not forget that the genre is capable of relaying affect toward the other. It is with this potential of the less canonical genre of comic or visual memoirs to “be used to describe experiences of unbearable oppression and violence across a cultural divide” (*Soft Weapons* 55) that this monograph engages. The possibility of creating a shared community of humanity and a space for alternative viewpoints to freely occupy the public space is studied through three graphic memoirs in this chapter. To this end, their twin engagement with political concepts and aesthetic sensitivity is under close scrutiny, all the while keeping a third eye on their ethical engagement with their enemy Others. *Nylon Road* is the most self-critical and ethically balanced of the collection. It however loses sight of aesthetic appeal in presenting the intimate personal story of oscillation between East and West. *Zahra’s Paradise* on the other hand is the most aesthetically pleasing, and the only graphic narrative which has been designed by a professional graphist. However I find serious pitfalls regarding ethical balance and even political literacy about Iran in this narrative. The *Persepolis* books manage to keep an eye on each of the trio of aesthetics, politics, and ethics. The nuances will be unpacked in the following sections.

All the selected works for this dissertation have a visual as well as a literary element. It is important to clarify that the genre of autobiography or memoir,² in

¹ Julie Rack (2013) looks at the publishing industry’s investment in memoir boom. Parsua Bashi claims that her American publishers have not respected her wish to avoid “Iran” on the title or the back cover. Not only have they included Iran, they also criticise “Shi’ite law” in the dust cover; a concept that was nonexistent in the book in that context.

² Autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably in this dissertation, due to the way that (mostly) women have challenged the claims of objectivity and centrality of autobiographies with their ground-breaking memoirs.

themselves, are not the focus of this research. I am interested in how the authors use new media such as the comic form, photo poetry, or even *avant garde* film for finding a different space for engaging with age old questions regarding the connection of Muslim/Iranian women with the Other, the location of the enemy in diasporic Iranian artistic production, their self-positioning regarding the Iranian revolution and the current government, and their ethical engagement with alterity in order to create bonds of connection and community.

Many authors find that they have to observe severe auto-critical standards in order to keep their narratives from falling into the marketable yet perilous traps of victimization, exoticization, and demonization of a complex, rhizomatic governmental system.

Islamic Republic of Iran; a Heterogeneous Political Entity

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran carries in its short history several unforgivable violations of human rights¹, it is not a dictatorial fundamentalist theocracy, argues Serge Michel who has lived in Iran as *Le monde* correspondence and studied the system for years. The country witnesses wide presidential and parliamentary ballot turnouts on a regular basis. Calling it a fundamentalist dictatorship might be confusing it with Afghanistan under the 5-year-long rule of Taliban², Iran's number one enemy at the time. Iranians enjoy a certain political literacy and sophistication that is unique in the region. I would call Iran a fundamentalist dictatorship only if it becomes common practice to call the U.S. a

¹ The most notable is the imprisonment and massacre of hundreds, if not thousands, of left-leaning intellectuals in the 80s during the war with Iraq, under the pretext of national security.

² 1996-2001

fascist state. It is not that the leaders do not want to dictate; they do. In both countries, the opposition to consensus is working hard against turning the country toward totalitarianism. The Islam of the 9/11 terrorists and that advocated by the Iranian government are not isomorphic. No Iranian is associated with suicide bombings in the world, especially with those of 9/11. Those explosions and the ensuing war on terror in 2001 jolted the Iranian diaspora after decades of relative silence regarding their own national revolution and the 8-year war with Saddam's Iraq. Iran's revolution of 1979 has roots in the centuries of battle against imperialism, colonization, forced modernization and monarchial tyranny. For the majority of Iran's 2500 years of civilization, the population has been either invaded by foreign occupiers who sought to drain it of its resources,¹ or it has been ruled by fierce unrelenting leaders who had little attention to the well-being of the population. The country became literally dis-membered as large portion of land and water-rights were severed from it by foreign occupiers. Iran's first democratically elected prime minister was ousted via a CIA coup-d'état in 1953 which incited more mistrust against the West among religious elite. The oil theft continued under the Shah. With the advent of the current government, the efforts for nationalization of the oil industry were challenged

¹ The invading Greek army in 500 BC ravaged the country, burnt and looted the Persepolis palace, as well as libraries, schools, and Zoroastrian temples. The invading Arab army followed suit between 633-651 AD; the Mongol Invasion was among the bloodiest, which still lingers in popular imagination. Continual battles with the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union over the map of new Iran dis-membered much of the soil. The indirect colonization of Iran by the British who pumped free oil from the South and Russians which controlled the North of Iran left the country in famine during the Second World War.

by internal corruption and external sanctions¹. With the popular uprising that “chopped the hands of a monarch”² away from Iran’s resources, the dispossessed partisans who came to power had no training in democratic governance. They relied on favouritism, corruption, trial and error, and an iron fist to advance their causes. By that time, Iran had become internationally isolated.

Iranian Resistance

In order to combat the ruthless invaders, Iranians developed survival skills which are exemplified in the common proverbs: “to cut throat with soft cotton,” or to “to kill with silk.” Iranians welcomed the invaders with an extended bow, but wove their nooses behind their backs. They accepted the Islam of the Omar dynasty but turned it into a militant Shi’ism; an underground anti-mainstream reading of Islam which is based on *Ijtihad* (interpretation of original Islam in accordance with the mandates of the present moment by the *Mujtahed* or the Islamic scholars) as well as fighting against injustice primarily inspired by Imam Hussein’s revolt in Karbala. Like Derrida’s concept of *Democracy a-venir*, Shi’ites, battle for a justice to-come, through their last immortal imam Mahdi who is absent yet present. Shi’ites were a peripheral force that always worked against the tyrannical stream. Their rare accession to power once in the Safavid dynasty and again in 1979 marked a paradox that undid their complex philosophical identity. In the words of cultural theoretician Hamid Dabashi:

Precisely the same insurrectionary disposition that inaugurates Shi’ism into history constitutes its Achilles Heel. Shi’ism is predicated on a

Iran now manages to exports its own petroleum but imports gasoline in return

²“To chop off the hand of monarch” was a revolutionary cry in 1970s.

paradox: It fails upon success, just like the Sisyphus. Shi'ism is a religion of protest. It can never succeed. As soon as it succeeds politically, it negates itself metaphysically. Its material success is its moral failure . . . Shi'ism cannot be turned into an official ideology of repression without immediately negating its own very reason for being. The key operative concept constitutional to Shi'ism is that of *mazlumiyyat*, "having been wronged," or "having been tyrannized." . . . So far as Shi'ism is on the side of the oppressed it is in its full revolutionary blossoming. The instant that it becomes fully institutionalized into an apparatus of power it ipso facto mutates into a most brutal theocratic tyranny. All its revolutionary zeal now comes back to haunt and turn it into a monstrous negation of itself. (Dabashi *World* 59-60)

To think of the Islamic government of Iran as a homogeneous fundamentalist theocracy is a great fallacy sold by the Western media as well as sectors of the Iranian diaspora who fail to see that the majority of the population actually supported the Islamic leaders at the dawn of the revolution. The support however has witnessed an increasing decline from the start. Religion, even in name, has a strong influence in the political arena, but, Iran is not a theocracy. The function of state and religion cannot unite. Although the country has a supreme leader who lobbies behind the curtain of law—arguably the strongest man in the complex system of power—the president, and the members of the parliament gain their seats through votes. Although they have to uphold the mandates of the Islamic Republic, the political arena is witness to intense

political disputes that mark a thwarted yet live democracy. As Rancière reminds us time and again, democracy is not a static universal mode of representational government (it is not about voting only); the very idea of a representative democracy would have sounded paradoxical to Athenian ears. Democracy consists in the becoming politically conscious of the people, taking up the space for litigation, dissensus and disagreement. Even within the government, the reformist left and the conservative religious right as well as a plethora of in-between political agendas, in addition to the supra-political military mafia of *Sepah* (The Guardians of the Revolution) compete over drafting of Iranian foreign and domestic policies and the management of its oil wealth. Members of parliament, as well as those from the cabinet and the judiciary form different alliances with the advent of each presidential and parliamentary election. As discussed in the introduction, democracy is never a finished process. Derrida talks about the cyclical nature of revolution. Before the Revolution, the Islam of Iran was boldly colored by politics of anti-colonization. After the revolution, religion became so marginal that it seems nothing more than a performance, a means of struggle for power and riches. However, there are policy makers, parliamentary members and politicians who are still struggling to shatter the quiet consensus by standing up against injustice. To call the government a religious dictatorship is to overlook the long march of the Iranian population toward freedom from external and internal bondage. Despite their sometimes weak, sometimes cruel, sometimes opportunist leaders, Iranian people, including few members of the ruling elite have fought for justice and equality, overlooking which only leads the way to inhumane sanctions or foreign military intervention. Aestextasy demands a second

look at the painting of an “Absolute Evil” picture of one solid Iranian Regime, which ironically ascended power via the sacrifices of the people fighting internal and external hegemony. The breaches of human rights by the government against Kurdish or leftist activist at the beginning of the revolution as well as dissidents such as journalists, artists, and intellectuals throughout the years demands a trial so that the culprits in the government are brought to justice. However, this does not call for a foreign intervention through sanctions on all Iranian embargos, and an externally orchestrated regime change. The battle is not one between Islam as barbarian and the civilized West as the saviours. The battle is in the arena of politics; of control of wealth, public opinion and the nation’s borders. The most effective opposition to the Right Wing so called Islamist fundamentalist faction of the country has come from within the circle of power itself. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri the official successor to Khomeini severely criticized the killings of dissidents during wartime. For this reason, he was removed from his influential post and remained under house arrest until his death. However, even from his home, he still led a generation of critics of injustice. Many high ranking government officials became dissidents after the reign of Khatami. These include Ali Akbar Ganji, Mohsen Sazegara, Ibrahim Nabavi, and Ali Abtahi (Rahimi and Gheythanhi 50). In 2009, the oppositional presidential candidate Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Islamic cleric Mehdi Karroubi were both put under house arrest for openly criticizing the rigged re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. They also called for reform and curbing of corruption. This is not to say that every dissident of the regime is imprisoned. The dissatisfaction is widespread, especially among those in power. Ever since the dawn of the Islamic republic in 1979, critics, dissidents and

reformers are fighting a battle against hegemony, and that is what democracy mandates: creating space for litigation, for alternative voices of dissensus to be audible. No matter the restrictions imposed by the Iranian government, Iranians within and without the country have won battles against dictatorship in the past through very intricate aesthetics and political battles. War and revolution as violent fissures in the fabric of society, bring radicals to power.

The 9/11 hijackers and a host of other Western terrorists came from second generation, relatively assimilated immigrants who had little knowledge of the Islam or the Qur'an for that matter, argues Doug Saunders. "All of them are integrated, Westernized and educated," Oliver Roy is quoted here on terrorists grown in the West:

They do not have any particular social background that would explain their political radicalization because of poverty or exclusion. Most of all, almost all of them become 'born again' in the West. . . The source of radicalization is the West and not the jihad or the conflicts in the Middle East. None became a radical after attending religious studies completed in a Muslim-majority country. Finally, for almost each of them, the time between their return to religion and their transit to political radicalization has been very short, which shows that they are as much, if not more so, interested in politics as in religion. (qtd in Saunders 110)

As irrelevant as the two events appear (Iranian Revolution of 79 and the crash of WTC), 9/11 incited a blind fury against anything Islamic/Middle Eastern. The diaspora coming from wealthy, avant-garde, non-traditional families clung onto the

sole common denominator between the cause for their displacement from Iran and the cause for their subjugation in the West: Islam!

Romanticizing All Diasporic Narratives as “Exile” Literature

Even astute critics of memoirs sometime fail to distinguish between voluntary émigrés literatures with “exile” memoir who carry a sense of isolation due to “banishment” (Said “Reflections on Exile”). I would prefer the title, “*Ghorbat*” literature, with its strong poetical and milder political connotations. *Ghorbat* refers to the state of being outside one’s home, longing to return. But it does not connote that one has been forcefully removed from there, with a threat to their lives. It also lacks the political implications that exile carries. Professor Gillian Whitlock, with a valuable scholarship in the area of life narratives in the context of post-colonialism, subtitles her article on Iranian life writing narrative as: “The Generic Fix of Iranian *Exilic* Memoirs” (emphasis mine). Without discrediting the breadth of her research, she considers all writings of Iranian diaspora as Exile memoirs, disregarding the volunteer nature of some of their departure from Iran. In an interview with BBC, Azar Nafisi is quoted as saying: “I lived in Iran until I was 13, and then my parents sent me to England —to Lancaster —to finish my studies. That was when I first tasted the pangs of *exile*. I finally returned to Iran in 1979 . . . and stayed for 18 years in the Islamic republic” (2004) [emphasis mine]. Here the acclaimed author considers the experience of an international student living in Britain as throbbing with “pangs of exile.” Such an educational trip to England is of course a luxury, afforded only to a few at the time. In her case, her father, the Mayor of Tehran before the revolution, funded the trip. She immediately concedes that she was able to live in Iran for 18 years after the 1979

Revolution. By calling authors who floated freely between Iran and abroad “exiles,” we are doing an injustice to the true exiles who have no possibility of returning to their homeland due to their specific occupation of public attention. The Jewish population fleeing fascism in the second world war would be considered exiles, the Armenian fleeing genocide are exiles, as are the Palestinian refugees living in impoverished camps, or across the Arab world, dispossessed and having no home to which they can return. Nevertheless, rich Iranians who left the country fearing Saddam’s invasion or the imposition of the veil cannot be called exiles just because they are Iranian immigrants. The title gives them an aura of rebelliousness and intellectuality but vilifies an already vilified government. They can always return to their homeland without facing legal constraints.¹ Using the word exile for all immigrants who fled poor economic conditions during war, or feared the onset of a revolution, pedestals a certain crust of well-to do Iranians to the position of native informants. By untagging the title of “exile” from their literature, I do not propose to humiliate or ridicule their plight. I caution against romanticizing all immigrant literature as exile narratives. Edward Said distinguishes between exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigrés: “Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider” (“Reflections on Exile” 181). Refugees, however, are a creation of the 20th century state according to Said: “The word refugee has become a political one, suggesting

¹ This is of course before gaining popular recognition as opposition leaders against the Iranian government. Satrapi travelled regularly to Iran even after the publication of her books. However, the movie caught the attention of Iranian authorities. She then decided not to return. Bashi who has published two books about Iran in Switzerland has returned to Iran permanently. As long as the book does not create an anti-Islamic Republic buzz in the world, the authors have managed to freely come and go.

large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality” (Said 181). “Expatriates” voluntarily choose to live in another country, “usually for personal or social reasons.” According to Said “expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions” (181). For him émigrés “enjoy an ambiguous status” (181). Anyone who decides to live in another country with the possibility of choice is an émigré. As life narratives contribute toward the sense of identity, imbuing it with romantic concepts of intellectual rebellion causes many authors to opt for exile instead of émigré status. This is innocent in itself, had there not been an international war going on against vilified countries for regime change based on haunches of politicians.

Members of Iranian diaspora who left on the eve of the Revolution or during the war with Iraq mainly come from upper middle class, bourgeoisie families with little or no connection to religious traditions of the country. Even the word diaspora has been used strategically in this dissertation. What these literatures share is not exile but a sense of “*ghorbat*” "غربت" (estrangement with a sorrow that eats or gnaws at one) in living outside one’s homeland. This sense of estrangement can be internal as well. Imam Ali has described *Ghorbat* as “the loss of a beloved.” The word *Ghorbat* clearly alludes to the state of being outside one’s native land, whether poetically or physically, and yet it does not carry the politically exploitable tag of a banished exile. *Ghorbat* is a physical as well as a psychological state, while exile is both, in addition to having a strong political aftertaste. In Rumi’s *Mansavi* a lover seasoned by his

travels in *Ghorbat* is asked about his preference regarding his dwelling place. Instead of picking his homeland, he claims his favorite city is wherever his beloved resides:

گفت معشوقی به عاشق کای فتی

تو به غربت دیده ای بس شهرها

پس کدامین شهر از آنها خوشتر است

گفت آن شهری که در وی دلیر است¹ (Book 3 of *Masnavi*)

As opposed to a generalizing exile, *Ghorbat* literature would be an apt—though difficult—title to describe the writings of Iranian diaspora. Exile does have poetic connotations but its historio-political strings make it a distasteful choice for describing all the literature written outside Iran by Iranians, as it is currently in fashion. Exile connotes a grand political accomplishment that resulted in banishment, giving unmerited grace to otherwise tales of economic immigrants who wish to access a wider audience. As soon as the prime source of existential angst in a memoir is the author's inability to wear a miniskirts in public while drinking alcohol, it is a relatively sure sign that the memoir comes from a luxurious *bon-vivant* family who—commonly—does not concern itself with economic inequality or political independence. Such authors who insist on their condition of “exile” while reacting only to the loss of their class luxuries, generally recognizes emancipation as adoption of a Western liberal lifestyle. Obsessive and compulsive return to the veil and alcohol as the only main troubles with Iran are red-flags that the author is quite distant from

¹ My literal translation reads: A beloved asks her lover: “brave man, you have resided in different cities outside your homeland in *Ghorbat*, tell me in which one of those lands have you found joy?” and the lover replies “in the city that lives the beloved.” This adds a poetic dimension to the concept of home and complicates modern binaries. An English expression was suggested by Dr. Blackmore: home is where the heart is.

the agonies of impoverishment, foreign invasion, sky rocketing of inflation due to sanctions, unemployment, etc.¹ The detached immigrants' sole anxiety regarding Iran usually concerns women's imported notions of sexual liberation. This may be acceptable and innocent in itself and cause for due critical attention. However, once these émigrés, unconcerned about social equality and economic hegemony, occupy the position of native informants they sit on the thrones of experts to elaborate on the condition of women in Middle East. They are then consoled about anything ranging from the Israel-Palestinian conflict, to the prices of oil in the region. They channel their personal grudges against the Islamic Republic of Iran in international arenas. It is then that the sole problem of Iran becomes veiling of women! They disregard the long historical rally against colonization and globalization and their detached, alienated viewpoint is indispensable for Western warmongers who jump at every chance to invade the resource-rich, strategic region under the pretext of liberating the women: "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak "Subaltern" ii) It is here that the choice of a title becomes the marker of war strategy. For democracy to come, it is inevitable that the current Iranian government acknowledges its crimes, especially those in the heydays of the revolution and its own reign of terror. However, the emigrant authors, whether exiled, in a state of *Ghorbat*, or in a voluntary economical migration, have to observe autocritical ethics as well. Even in the less polemical writings of the political refugees, there is a foreclosure of the terrors and political assassinations performed by their own factions during the Revolutionary days.

¹ I do not endorse the forced veiling laws of Iran or its ban on alcohol consumption. However, I believe that there are worthier causes for rebelling against the government, including human rights, women's rights, and justice.

Confusion with Arabs

The Iranian émigré population after 9/11 were enraged at being lumped together with their archenemies the “Arabs” who have invaded Iran several times, the fear of which lingers fresh in the popular Iranian imagination. The Arabs are linguistically and culturally very different from Iranians. Many Iranians within or without the nation cling to these visible markers of difference to affirm their superior sense of identity. The immigrants left their beloved homeland originally to distance themselves from all signs of connection to such “backward” traditions, having no intention of losing their lives defending their country. To be bundled back with the “fanatics” was cause enough to reclaim their identities through their narratives as upper-middleclass Iranian elite, with a quite Westernized lifestyles.

For Whitlock the two decades of belatedness in mourning for war and revolution of Iran’s early 80s is *not* a function of the psychosomatics of the traumatized minds. This memoir boom is a response to the demands of the market as well as publishers: “The argument that at the end of the twentieth century gender, ethnicity, and consumer identity became entangled in transnational formations suggests some of the wider ideoscapes that surface in this memoir boom” (Whitlock “Generic Fix” 22). Although Whitlock is a firm believer that Memoirs personalize histories and historicise what is personal (7), at the same time, she does not shy away from looking at the commodification of the witness accounts: “Memoirs scarred by trauma and loss” can “trade as a lucrative commodity in global networks sustained by desires for exotic orientalism” (23).

Veil

I argue that in a country where social class, politics and religious beliefs go hand in hand, it is condescending to read unveiling as the obvious sign of modernization and elitism. The diasporas have symptomatically fixated on the veil while the Western readers are captivated by reading about narratives that pierce the veil (Naghibi "Revolution" 80). Whitlock prefers to call the veil one of "the most intractable symbols of cultural difference between Muslim societies and the West" ("Autobiographics" 974). For me the veil is a fetish object; it points toward the symptom not the cause of the unease. It is a synecdoche that stands in place of the "Muslim Societies" but in itself it is quite devoid of such significations. Fetishizing the veil to the level of a cultural demarcator risks overlooking the socio-political struggles of the nations over material resources for survival. Randa Farah who has studied closely the demands of the Palestinian refugee women for years believes that the Western fixation on the veil, is drawing the attention away from the true socio-political needs of the Muslim women:

There is an obsession with Arab women's bodies both in the 'East' and the 'West'. Debates, books and articles on the hijab or the veil, titled 'beneath, 'beyond' or 'behind' the veil, may be found in almost any library. Female genital mutilation, such as in some parts of the Sudan and Egypt, is another favourite topic in the West, including among others women's rights groups. Although these issues are important, the emphasis and lopsided attention these topics are given at the expense of the larger political, historical and cultural context and other dimensions of women's lives and struggles reproduces the Orientalist and

essentializing view of Arab women as victims of a ‘tradition’ (Islam and Muslim men), juxtaposed against the ‘modern.’ (Farah “To Veil or Not to Veil” 93)

Clothing becomes significant for people whose security and wealth are already satisfied. The veil vogue conceals the battle against oppression. It brings to focus, like a magician’s left hand, only the visible differences. I am very troubled by the continuous reading and misreading of the veil that look at it as a “symbol of cultural difference,” but does not take into consideration the struggles of the Middle Eastern nations for survival. The veil is documented to have aided the struggle. The veil has become the most significant “trivial” object of analysis in the discourse on the Middle East, and one that has overshadowed other more vital concepts. While Whitlock’s discussion of the veil in *Persepolis* is ahistorical, Whitlock’s analysis of the Afghan *Burqa* is much more nuanced and contextual. It might be because:

Afghan feminist activists do use the burqa strategically. Quite literally so—messages, weapons, and banned publications were transported beneath its folds during the Taliban regime. Feminist activists in Afghanistan were quick to adopt the burqa as a shroud of anonymity and disguise. For these reasons, the burqa is a complex symbol. It is a reminder of an oppressive regime, but it is also an icon of brave and successful resistance. (Whitlock 57)

While the Afghan activist see beyond the veil to its socio-political implications, members of the Iranian diaspora who have not suffered from the same fundamentalism as their Afghan neighbours, see the veil as the last obstacle on the way to total

westernization. However, the forced unveiling act of 1936 by Reza shah proved traumatic and catastrophic for women of Iran who were publicly stripped by soldiers. It defeated its purpose by bringing more physical segregation for women: they stayed indoors to avoid public humiliation. Only a few authors among the plethora of memoir writers have dared to weigh the possibility that veiling is not the ultimate symbol of Islamic fundamentalism.

Although starting with the veil, Marjane Satrapi moves well beyond it. It is with the aid of “free play” of the comic medium that Satrapi can create a space for dissensus in the writing of Iranian diaspora.

Part II Diasporic Iranian Visual Literature in the form of Graphic Narratives

Comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal—and if the highbrows are right, they're a form perfectly suited to our . . . collective attention deficit. Comics are also enjoying a renaissance and a newfound respectability right now. In fact, the fastest-growing section of your local bookstore these days is apt to be the one devoted to comics and so-called graphic novels.

—McGrath 2004

Charles McGrath's much quoted *New York Times Magazine* article goes on to mention that a slow pensive reading and looking practice is necessary for understanding a graphic narrative. To master the skill of looking carefully and reading along requires even more concentration than skimming a book quickly. I argue that graphic memoirs as a contemporary form of “sequential art” loom as one of the most appropriate media for re-imagining an Other that can be identified as human, as a kin. In our age of scopophilia and terror, many factors contribute to the recent widespread appeal of graphic memoirs for recounting traumatic historical moments from a refreshingly playful and subversive perspective. These include:

- The contingency of the visual and the verbal planes foster a “bi-ocularly”[double-vision] (Hirsch “Collateral Damage”) that constantly fluctuates the attention from the center to the margins, allowing for multiple readings, perspectives and speakers at once. This movement from the centres to the margins and back, breaks the hegemony enjoyed by words over images. Bi-ocularly does not give priority to either the word or

to the image, but sees both as contributing elements in the formation of the overall affective relay of the graphic narrative.

- Graphic Memoirs defamiliarize, estrange, and refamiliarize us with grave event through their cartoon avatars. The abstraction of the “faces” of these avatars allow for identification on an intimate, personal level. The more abstract the face, the easier the identification (McCloud).
- Their scattered “frames” parallel the fragmentary nature of human memory after an encounter with trauma or loss.
- Their contemplative “aporetic” (Naghibi “Estranging the Familiar”) pauses between the panels invite audience interpretation and demand an interactive personal “closures”(McCloud).
- Images have an inherent “excessive expressivity” to them (Hirsch 1211). Images leave a direct imprint on the “sense memory,” the “memory residing in the body” of survivors (Hirsch 1211).
- “Words can be put into the service of sense memory,” but “vision has a very different relationship to affective experience, experience which whilst it cannot be spoken as it is felt, may register visually. The eye can often function as a mute witness through which events register as “eidetic memory” images imprinted with sensation” (Jill Bennett qtd in Hirsch 1211-12).

With their direct affective dimension, images are potent vehicles for transmitting visceral sensations of pain or pleasure of others. Sequential images, in turn, form an interrupted “staccato” narrative that moves with the drive of the reader’s imagination.

Sequence of still frames and words interrupted by the aporetic silence of gutters can create a magical convergence for a unique sense of personal interpretation, identification and closure. Scattered frames need a participatory contemplative imagination to keep the narrative flow. The apparent cohesion between the word, the image and the silence cannot be forced upon the hybrid form, but is co-laborated between the reader and the graphic text. *Persepolis* utilizes these fecund pauses strategically, when narrating enigmatic private/historical events in which the audience's judgment is decisive. This unique, perplexing sense of closure invited by the comic form seems indispensable in personalizing distant dilemmas that may be irrelevant to our daily concerns. Satrapi gives a unique, relatable face to generic vague stock images of distant Others. The relatable faces along with quiet spaces for contemplation in the margins become the nexus of creating ethical bonds of connection through aesthetic and political means.

History of the Graphic Genre

“Sequential” art forms or the craft of telling a story through scattered images has had a mythical allure for humanity since the dawn of civilization. Scott McCloud defines comics broadly as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the reader” (20). In an attempt to move comics out of the isolated corner into which the superhero cult has moved, McCloud locates comics in the origin of art itself. Egyptian tomb paintings, Biblical narrative on church windows, or the 2500-year-old stone reliefs in *Persepolis* palace can all be considered as art forms that lay bare their narrative “spatially” with the aid of a series of related images.



Figure 1 Sequential relief images in the remnants of the Persepolis palace, the headquarters of the Achaemenes Empire 500 BC.





Figure 2 Ancient Egyptian sequential images narrate a story in sequential manners. Here the story of the harvest is recounted bottom to top. The larger figures are the more important characters.



Figure 3 Ghiberti's Bronze Doors on the Baptistery in Florence also narrates biblical stories in carved bronze panels.

The graphic medium's immediate accessibility, ease in communication as well as its mystery and beauty has made it a favorite for public dissemination of the discourse of power to the semi-literate population. The inherent vigor and violence in images make them a suitable vehicle in the service of the elite in power as well: the church, the state and the police. Although images have been used and abused by power, I argue that as property of the people, public sequential images can never be fully appropriated. The colorful tales of the holy scriptures, epic narratives of the Achaemenid conquest of Babylon or life achievements of great leaders told with the binding magic of the medium has produced immortal works of art that carry with them an aura of transcendence, power, or holiness. While, due to its accessibility to a wider population, it has been abused in the service of institutions of power and control in the past, recent comics also utilize its ancestral popularity to reach out to a wider reading public. In their recent manifestation beginning in the 19th century, comic books —as a modern form of sequential art —still carry that aura of transcendence that transports the audience from the mundane to the realm of the fantasy. Comic short-hand allowed for an outlet of escapism, erotica, superhero cult, utopic visions, depiction of violence, Othering and stereotyping that are prevalent in popular comics. Whether abused by institutions of power or utilized as an outlet of violent expression, the enchanting medium has the potential to produce aesthetically masterpieces that benefit from the interrupted contingency of letters and images, past and present simultaneously. Comics lend themselves well particularly to contested histories. They are fragmentary and shuttle between past, present, and future with a spatial ease unparalleled in other media.

The zenith of historical comics is unquestionably the two volumes of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale – My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *Here My Troubles Began*

(1991) by Art Spiegelman. *Maus* does not provide the Western readers with an unfamiliar denouement. What it does do is present a story of a (central) trauma of the twentieth century in a more subversive, playful and accessible format; one which, just like *Persepolis*, requires an active participatory reader/viewer with multiple focalities and points of reference. Readers who are comfortable with facing voids in the midst of a dual narrative and are imaginative enough to fill them with their own cross cultural translations. In portraying Jews as mice, Spiegelman uses the selfsame rhetoric of Nazis against Jews. It is commonly accepted that mice are vermin to be demolished as they spread diseases and steal from people's crops. However, through the work of identification in cartooning, Spiegelman converts and unsettles that dichotomy. Satrapi too, starts with infantile stereotypes and then skilfully subverts, reverts and displaces them. The Shoa as a grave untouchable event has rarely been handled lightly by its survivors. Adoption of a comic genre for the depiction of this tragedy points to a playful twist in its rendition. Not only does Spiegelman treat the serious event in an apparently indecorous medium, he also adopts a very autocritical stance regarding his link to this event: his father. His honesty regarding the fuzziness of his father's memory as well his father's acute survival skills in times of abundance give the book an ethically balanced, and a credible tint. Satrapi has always referred to *Maus* with reverence as a source of inspiration for her career in comics.

Comics and Chronology

A point of comparison between *Maus* and *Persepolis* is their adoption of a significant historic moment: the Shoah and the Iranian revolution with its ensuing war. Utilizing

comic techniques, the historical traumas regarding the Shoah or the Iran-Iraq war become fluid and meaningful on a personal level:

Comics can help constantly play with chronology and return to the past to re-explore old narratives by opening up new ones within them. The point here is that with comics, the characters are never finished developing, the story is never over, unlike other media, one of the defining characteristics of comics is that narrative structure is infinitely malleable, and earlier points of narrative may be reopened, added to or altered. (McCloud 24)

There are many characteristics which make comics an ideal medium for recounting tales of trauma: their ability to “play with chronology,” shuttle easily between multiple speakers or perspectives, provide personal identification with the avatars, and give space for personal translation of the panels. These are especially useful for personalizing contested histories. I believe that in order to re-read the highly contested histories that *Persepolis* narrates, Satrapi draws beautifully from what Foucault calls subjugated knowledges. These are systematic knowledges from below, in the hearts and homes of the people, as well as knowledges regarding repressed battles that have been foreclosed from the official collective memory of the nation. These knowledges map out the lines of confrontation in the national memory. They will eventually open space up for critique, dissensus, possible reconciliation, and the eventual share of the people in the power of the government: democracy.

Chapter 1 Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Once considered a marginal, low-brow art form, I invoke that comics' interstitial position in comparison to well-established canons of literature give it the strategic advantage enjoyed by Foucauldian "subjugated knowledges"; a genealogy that makes criticism of hierarchies of domination possible. Both facets within which Foucault contextualizes his concept of subjugated knowledges apply directly to *Persepolis*:

When I say, "subjugated knowledges," I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in formal systematizations ... Historical contents alone allow us to see the dividing lines in the confrontations and struggles that ... systematic organizations are designed to mask. Subjugated knowledges are, then, blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship. (Foucault *Society Must be Defended* 7)

The contested and concealed histories outlined in *Persepolis* map out the rift between the dominant discourse of the Islamic Republic and the unofficial yet highly popular account of diaspora circulated widely in their memoirs in the West. *Persepolis* does not see the root of the antagonism in the divide between the religious and secular factions competing for power. Her autocritical lens sees violence that exists at a quotidian level during the turbulent days of the revolution. Othering is widespread on a rhizomatic scale in Iran of 1979 and the war of 80s: torture games of children who gang up on an outcast, parental cruelty, or the xenophobia of Iranians living in secure

cities against the migrant from borderline provinces at wartime. Not only is the history a casualty of the warring factions, times of war beckons rising levels of aggression within society. *Persepolis* does not stop in Iran. Satrapi visualizes symptoms of soft aggressions in the West as well, dismantling the claim that immigrants reach utter freedom by travelling to West. Time and again, the trauma repeats itself in the West through: racism, political consensus, and atomization.

Here, I will start at the root of the conflict between the diaspora and the Iranian government. I will delineate a violent political regrouping between two pre-revolutionary allies that fought together against oppression of the Shah: Islamists and the leftists.

As a hybrid book that draws from history but does not rely solely on it, *Persepolis* brings up histories of forgotten dissidents who lost their lives fighting for Iranian democracy; personal narratives of freedom fighters who have been brutally suppressed by both secular and religious institutes of power: by those of the Shah's monarchy and also of the Islamic Republic. Wiped clean, or rather, "masked" from the official national discourse of both political systems, their untold stories resurface and haunt the writing of leftist Iranian diaspora. Mapping these buried histories will clarify the "dividing lines in confrontation and struggle" between the Islamic Republic and the left leaning diaspora and also between Iran and the West. *Persepolis* starts with a quick *tour* of Iran's revolutionary history over the past century, not through a historian's distant gaze, but via a relatively unreliable child narrator who acts as a vicarious witness to the sufferings of her friends and relatives. From this perspective, the historical narrative has been made intimate and its scars fresh through the comic

techniques. The most historically complex parts of the book unfold during Marji's early childhood. These are events relating to the Shah's atrocities, the revolution and the tortures suffered by her communist uncle Anoosh under both regimes. It is only after his execution that Marji loses the comfort provided by her imaginary friend "God," and leaves her childlike avatar behind. The end of Anoosh marks the termination of Marji's childhood. This deep tear in her moral constellation is painted in a panel in which she is floating aimlessly in space, with no firm ground to support her.

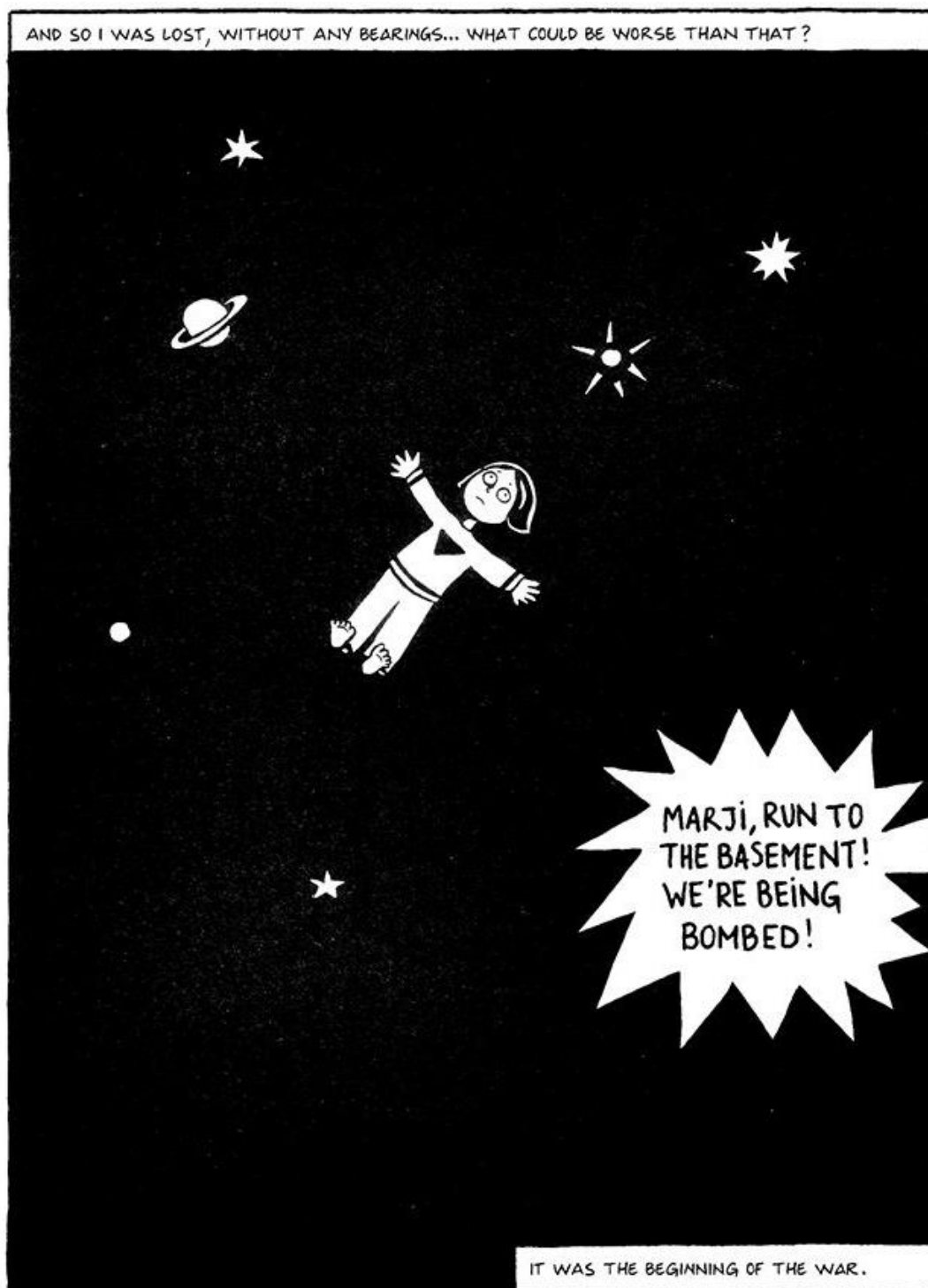


Figure 4 From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi © L' Association, used with Permission. Pg. 71.

After the loss of Anoosh, her avatar metamorphasizes into a more physically developed, less idealistic pre-adolescent. Presenting the most complex historical narratives through a comic child narrator opens space for doubt, double-checking, and dissensus; the very stuff of democracy.

Naghibi and O'Malley see the subversive qualities that the child narrator as well as the comic medium provides as a strategy dubbed "trivialization." Quoting from Dana Heller, they write:

The employment of a form—a mode, a genre, etc.—that is considered by the dominant culture to be unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant' . . . allows comics to 'camouflage' potentially subversive messages or ideas by conveying them in a medium generally considered unthreatening. (Naghibi and O'Malley 234)

Persepolis destabilizes the common fiction of accessibility, childhood simplicity and innocence. If anything, it would be a costly luxury to afford a childhood untainted by direct or second hand exposure to violence. The unreliable, child-narrator in *Persepolis*, along with simplified yet amplified black and white drawing style all create a playful space for questioning of the offered narratives and imagining differently.

One of the most palpable contrasts between the child and adult point of view on political matters is mapped out in the chapter named "The Sheep." As mentioned already, comics facilitates the oscillation between several speakers. Here the three perspectives offered are of the idealist Marxist uncle Anoosh who, in the dreamy days following the overthrow of the Shah, can fantasize about the "hegemony of the

proletariat.” Marji on the other hand repeats the propaganda of the Islamic Republic as broadcasted on TV: “people have voted Yes 99.99% to the Islamic Republic” (The official Yes votes were announced as an undisputed 98.2%. Ironically, it was the Soviet Union, which produced 99.99% votes in its one party government). It is the father who tries to consolidate the two viewpoints in vain. The father’s double-standards regarding his political philosophy and lifestyle is introduced earlier. He is outraged at his daughter’s lack of tact and sends her away crying. However, Marji’s (quickly dismissed) reporting proves prognostic. After the referendum, the interim Islamic government becomes the official government of Iran. At the time when everyone boasted of their scars in the battle against the Shah to gain popular recognition as well as governmental posts, Anoosh embodies a true idealist who eventually dies for his beliefs. Before the revolution, Anoosh has been active in the democratic liberation of province of Azerbaijani, but the city falls to the monarchial army. He has to escape by walking through snowy summits toward Moscow where he becomes a student, marries, and receives a doctorate in “Marxism-Leninism.” After his divorce from his Russian wife, he feels isolated and thus he attempts to cross back to his hometown, unrecognized. The Shah’s military however identify and arrest him. He spends almost a decade of his life in the Shah’s prisons. At the dawn of the 1979 revolution, all political prisoners are set free and Anoosh can finally reunite with his family members. The spring of freedom does not last long. As the gang-fights over the occupation of seats of government reach a bloody pinnacle in the anarchist heydays of the revolution, Anoosh is sent back to the prison where he is executed under allegations of being a Russian spy.



Figure 5 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission from L'Association. Pg. 60.

From Anoush's raised fists and optimistic demeanor, his idealism and blindness to what is going on around him is apparent. There lurks an elitism in his chants regarding the "half illiterate population" who, due to their ignorance, choose religion over Marx. The equation of the religious to the class of the illiterate ignorant who do not know how to govern, or what to vote for, was maybe the blind spot of the Marxists who ironically were supposed to fight for those so called "ignorant" masses. It was the sacrifices of those same people which brought the revolution to fruition. If the

majority are Muslim, they will choose what they believe in. I have discussed the way that the government abuses the power invested in it through the people. Even in hindsight, it is hard to judge the situation. It is Marji who warns the adults about state propaganda. She is dismissed immediately. It is interesting to note that Anoosh's convictions do not change even after he is cut off from his civic liberties and thrown into the Islamic Republic's prisons, awaiting execution. He still chants "the proletariat will rule," but this time without a raised fist or a confident gesture. His murder under the rubric of him being "a Russian spy" breaks Marji's long-standing relationship with "God" and leaves her "lost, without any bearings" (71). This is not the Marji who is caught between avant-gardism and religion as in the first chapter: the one who dreams of becoming a prophet, "forbidding" all injustice, and doing away with her own father's double standards regarding social classes.

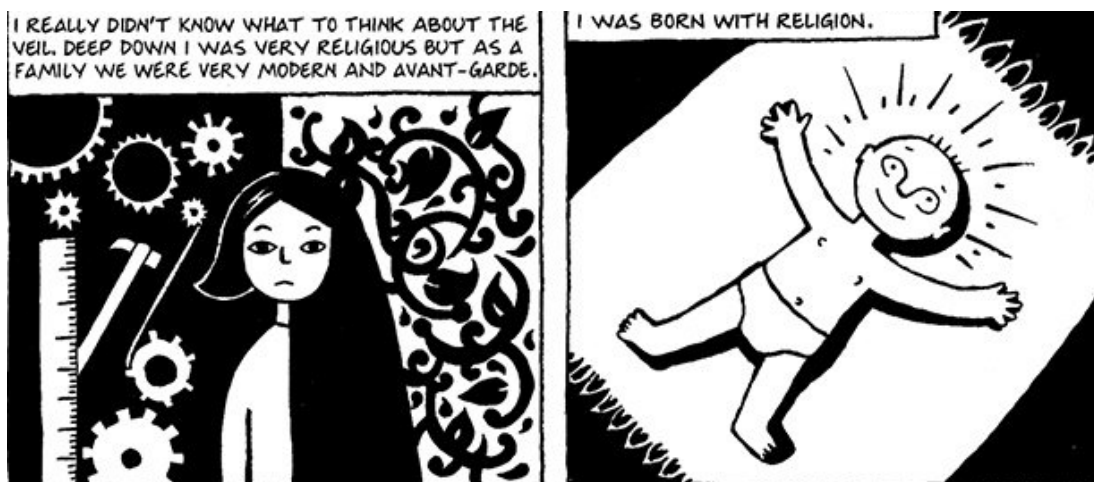


Figure 6 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission. Page 6.

Anoosh's death marks the end of all such dichotomies for Marji, and also marks the end of her childhood. A point of comparison with Satrapi's treatment of political prisoners is Shahla Tabebi's memoir *Ghosts of Revolution; Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*. Talebi recounts tales of extreme physical and psychological suffering of leftist revolutionary fighters, however, without succumbing to annihilating despair or hatred toward a generic externalized Enemy. She offers bright and sometimes blinding glimpses into the aesthetic and ecstatic resistance of prisoners under extreme hardship; one that celebrates human agency even under regimes of internal surveillance and punishment. In it, we learn about Shahla's incarceration in a span of a decade under the two regimes preceding and following the 1979 Iran revolution: that of the Shah of Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic. The narrator Shahla, recounts her tales of torture and aesthetic resistance from a first person perspective of an adult victim in her memoir. Marji on the other hand, is a cartoon avatar, who witnesses torture vicariously through the accounts of uncle Anoosh, her grandfather, and their friends Siamak and Mohsen, all left-leaning intellectuals under the Shah.

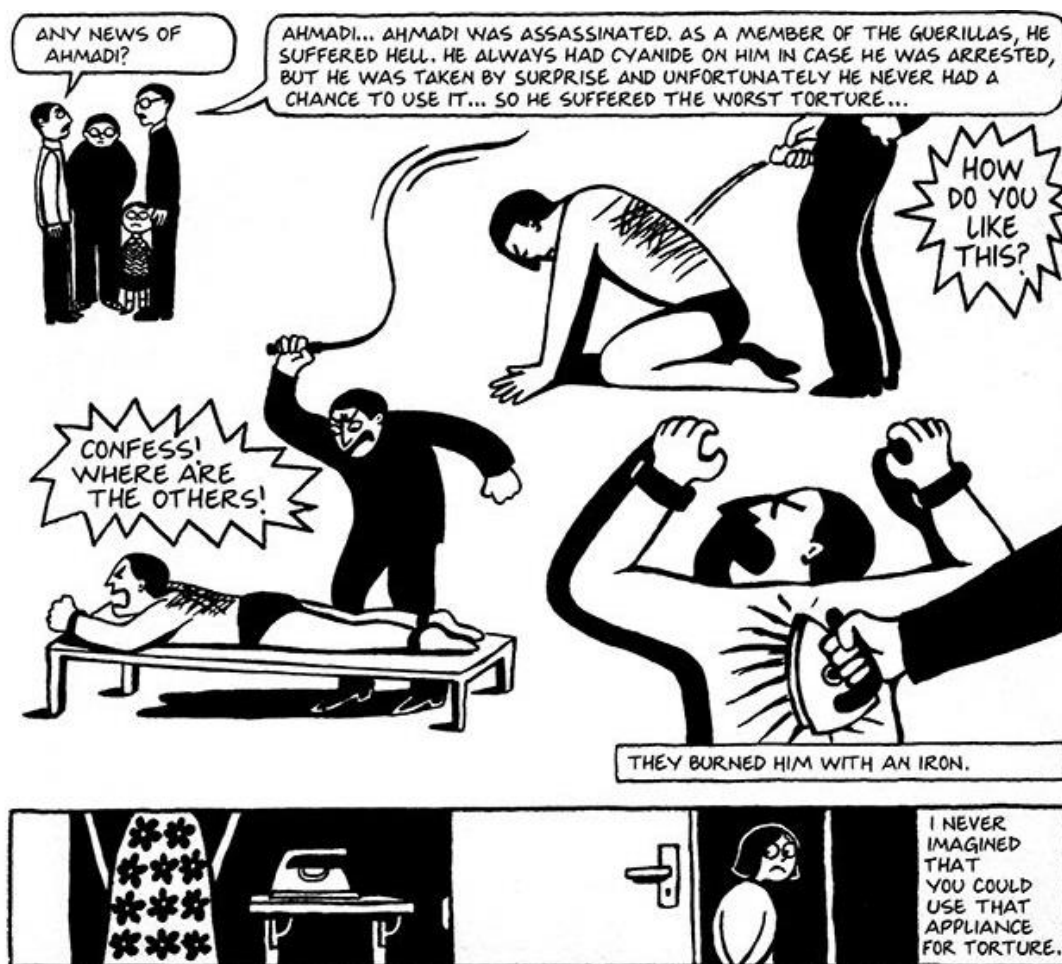


Figure 7 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, ©L' Association, used with permission. Pg 51.

Genealogy of Iran's Leftist Movement Resurfacing in *Persepolis*

Iran's leftist rebellion occupies a double-blind riddle in the country's "functional and systematic ensembles" (Foucault *Society Must be Defended* 7). Those who believe in the Islamic revolution of 1979 as a Shi'ite uprising, contend that it was founded on social democratic ideals that struggled to bring justice and equality to the deprived population. Both the left and the Shi'ite Islamists suffered torture and prosecution under Shah. They both called for an end to the internal and external oppression of the people during the monarchy, although some factions of the left had ties with the Soviet Union. Once the Shah fled the country, the two allies who previously shared a common enemy, became new archenemies. The left carried out targeted assassinations, bombings, and a guerrilla war against the Islamic Republic. The latter, which now enjoyed a hegemony, in retaliation, executed activists from the left, *en masse*. Despite its socialist roots, the Islamic Republic foreclosed the national histories of leftist rebellion from its official discourse. In its place, the government launched a great propaganda campaign to enlighten the population regarding the utter inhumanity of the previous regimes' torturers. Aided by the CIA who utilized the latest neuropsychological research on human pain tolerance, tortures in the intelligence ministry of SAVAK were infamous in extracting vital information regarding insurgencies. While the Islamic Republic valorizes certain religious prisoners of the Shah or the war as heroes or martyrs, it denounces the efforts of other combatants connected to competing factions from the left, or the military of the Shah who also fought against Saddam. In retaliation, the left formed a strong systematic opposition campaign against the Islamic Republic outside Iran. Their propaganda campaign

ranged from a call for regime change with the aid of West, push toward crippling sanctions, or sincere humanitarian activities. Only recently a more acceptable aesthetic technique of resistance became widespread: memoir writing and providing a public podium for witnesses and victims of the Islamic Republic.

Not only the left, but also many bourgeoisie diaspora narratives about Iran's contested history of the revolution are very elitist, detached from the population and traditions, and rely heavily on neo-orientalism. In certain diasporic renditions (now among the best sellers in North America), Iran fits within Western axiomatic of normativity. For these well-to-dos, the real Iran has no regard for Islam or traditional moralities. Those few families who lived comfortably during the shah reign almost unanimously refuse to accept the fact that the majority of the population were deeply traditional Muslims. Not only the people but the religious insurgency that aided the revolution and defended the country against eight years of international invasion by Iraq also disappears from their accounts. The Islamic Republic and the Diaspora, each by erasing the other's contribution (to the war against the Shah, Western imperialism, or Saddam) from visibility, risk providing a radicalized review of Iran's contested history. Monsterizing the Other, or making it disappear from master narratives are both unethical acts. They tear open the Borromean connection of aesthetics to politics through ethics. Foreclosure of the enemy from the field of visibility is a violent act, which leads toward fanaticism and the perpetuation of the circle of hatred.

“Ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship” (Introduction to *The Spivak Reader*). This engagement and relationship with the Other who has been excluded from visibility creates a response and a responsibility. Spivak's

notion of ethical responsibility is reminiscent of Bakhtin's "answerability." Here the act of response that completes the call between a speaker and a listener is not the only concern.

What signifies responsibility is the ethical stance that makes a discursive room for the Other to exist, to occupy a field of visibility and audibility. We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability... The object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides . . . The ideal relation to the Other, then, is an "embrace, an act of love. (*Spivak Reader* 269-70)

Satrapi and Talebi are careful regarding the treatment of their enemies. What Satrapi does, is more than retelling of forgotten tortured prisoners of Shah. She also turns her autocritical gaze toward "local" knowledges of "what people know" and how this informs the ethical pallet of politicians and governments in general. To continue with Foucault's elaboration on genealogy:

When I say "subjugated knowledges" I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity. And it is thanks to the reappearance of these knowledges from below. . . the knowledge of the delinquent, what I would call, if you like, what people know (and

this is by no means the same thing as common knowledge or common sense but, on the contrary, a particular knowledge—a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity. . .), it is the reappearance of what people know at a local level, of these disqualified knowledges, that made the critique possible. (Foucault 7-8)

Satrapi utilizes both manifestations of subjugated knowledges in her work of art. The historical content of *Persepolis*, whether masked, forgotten or marginalized gains an affective dimension through cartooning strategy that plays with presence and absence of contested narratives. The comics forms makes the “abstract” face of an imprisoned hero, “Anoosh” as relatable as that of our own kin; his plight identifiable as our own misfortune: “when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another but when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself” (McCloud 36). Comics tend to escape the radars of “policed” mental preconditioning and in so doing, become aesthetico-political media in re-imagining significant events. Of course they are slowly losing their powers to escape the radars as they are becoming mainstream in many countries such as France, Belgium, Italy and Spain. The comic techniques draws on the human ability to familiarize with abstract shapes by finding human “faces” on disparate objects in order to relate with them. *Persepolis*’ rugged history is interwoven with intimate personal stories. It marks the site where “masked and buried” historical narratives are interlaced with personal knowledges that though fall below the accepted levels of “scientificity,” it empowers a critique that cannot be homogeneous, unanimous and consumable for warmongers. Many narratives from the diaspora can be used as evidence for the hawks

in politics. But *Persepolis* cannot be read as a black and white tale. The universal, coming-of-age story of a little girl is contrapuntally depicted alongside the throbs in the social fabric of a nation at the crossroads of political unrest, religious fervour and globalization. Her adolescence is accompanied by the modernist tunes of war sirens with its marches for lost causes, air raids, and the pure experience of loss. Everything is understandable, but “not quite,” not right, leaving space for aesthetic uniqueness.

In “Estranging the Familiar” Naghibi and O’Malley pinpoint the fact that *Persepolis*, despite its apparent simplicity and accessibility, evades easy docketing and consumption. Although the general liberal humanity critique is one that tries to look beyond the minute political differences and focus on the wider experience of childhood rebellion and coming of age traumas, *Persepolis* offers moments of slippage and aporia that demand more complex historico-political lenses:

Persepolis is a disruptive text on many levels. It delivers, for example, comfortable liberal notions of our common humanity in its representation of the universal desire for personal freedom. At the same time, it demonstrates liberalism’s need for an abject or menacing other that is excluded from the common humanity by allowing the reader to reconfirm stereotypes of, for example, subjugated, veiled Muslim women and of post-revolutionary Iran as a threatening and alien place. However, *Persepolis* upsets the easy categories and distinctions that it appears to endorse: between the secular West and the threatening religious East; between the oppressed and liberated woman (i.e., veiled

and unveiled); between domestic and political/public. (Naghibi and O'Malley 245)

In “Out of the Family: Generations of Women in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” Nancy K. Miller draws attention to the relation between Marji, her mother, and grandmother. Marji’s relationship with her mother “is represented as one of sporadic struggle as well as underlying complicity, is supplemented by crucial encounters with the grandmother” (Miller 23). The wisdom of the grandmother transcends religious or secular dichotomies. It falls in the pond of love and ethics. Marji’s very last night in her homeland is spent in the arms of her grandmother: an original *heim*. The last advice of her grandmother is:

In life you’ll meet a lot of jerks. If they hurt you, tell yourself that it’s because they are stupid. That will help keep you from reacting to their cruelty. Because there is nothing worse than bitterness and vengeance... always keep your dignity and be true to yourself.

(*Persepolis* 150)

Although Nancy zooms in on the last phrase: “be true to yourself,” (in French: *intègre*), I believe that the first part, delivered in broken syntax is more telling of grandmother’s ethical demand on Marji: abstain from rash reactionary revolt. It also outlines the frame of reference of *Persepolis* as a whole. Despite stupidity of the governments or dogmatic people whether in Iran or Austria, Marji abstains from painting a black and white picture of the multifaceted human condition at the junctions of historical turning points. The aesthetic break that allows for a turning of the judgmental tables occurs with the “slippages” in common frames of references.

Although Marji is troubled by the Iranian laws regarding dress-code, public mourning of martyrs, aversion from signs of capitalism, etc... she shows gratitude toward the Muslim clergy in charge of the university entrance ideological exam. He is the only clergyman with a voice in the book, although he has no face, he is completely drawn in black except for his glasses and a line that shows his turban. The clergy is the enigma of a book that comments on the Islamic republic and may personify one of the many slippages in common stereotypes that Satrapi utilizes skillfully. Although the book is full of angry bearded revolutionary guards who are full of nonsense about a literal reading of Islam, the “one true religious man” saves Marji twice: once after she is honest regarding the fact that she does not pray and does not wear the veil in Austria. Another time he rescues her from expulsion after she vents her rational anger at the revolutionary guards’ propaganda in the university.



Figure 8 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, ©L'Association, used with permission. Pg. 130.

On both occasions he is a masked figure. The audience is not allowed a glimpse of his expressions. He is denied a relatable “face,” but his mystery makes Iran a more complicated place than a common stereotype as a country of oppressive mullahs. Not only does the mullah pass her on the ideological exam despite her lack of familiarity with Islam, he calls her the only applicant “who didn’t lie”(130). Marji’s reading of Islam is a personal reading that is based on honest self-interpretation. If she does not speak Arabic, she does not feel the need to pray in Arabic. She is content about talking with god in a familiar language. She even cites a Hadith from Prophet Muhammad to prove her point: “God is closer to us than our jugular veins” (130). Thus, if god is close, she does not feel the need for external performance of mainstream prayer to connect to an internal being. Her reasoning appeals to the clergy as honest. She demonstrates how a true believer is supposed to be. Despite the frankness with which she talks about her connection with God to the clergy, on the very opposite page Satrapi draws one of the most hypocritical acts of the whole book. In a chapter named “the makeup” she tells on a bystander to the revolutionary guards in order to save her own neck before meeting her boyfriend in the streets. She is afraid of her heavy makeup and indecent hair coverage, and thus decides to deter the attention to an innocent bystander. The police takes the confused man away, since she complains that he has “said something indecent to me!” (131). The spatial composition of the two pages that open together but are in sharp contrast with one another is Aporetic. Marji risks the future of her education by being honest to her beliefs. However, in order to meet her date on the streets and evade the revolutionary guards’ temporary burden, she lies and puts another man in danger of fines and possibly a good beating. Here Satrapi

distinguishes between true religion and a fake empire of the revolutionary guards that boast of religion yet repel people from any religious beliefs. Her “survival instincts” are unacceptable by her grandmother’s sense of ethics. She yells at Marji for the first time in a speech that is not even contained in a bubble; maybe it is not just addressed to Marji, but a wake-up call to the audience. It is after that chastising that Marji regains her rebellious spirit. She reasons with the propaganda machine at the university and disagrees with their rule of modest dress code. She once again relies on a personal interpretation of religion: “Now, I ask the question: is religion defending our physical integrity or is it just opposed to fashion?” (143). She is summoned by the same clergy who accepted her on ideology exam earlier. He is frank: “Miss Satrapi... always saying what you think... it’s good! You’re honest, but you are lost”(144) to which she replies “yes!” Not only does he not punish her, but he rewards her with producing the official dress-code of her department: “I’m going to give you a second chance. This time you’re not expelled. In exchange I am asking you to imagine the uniform adapted to the needs of the students in your college. Nothing extravagant, you understand” (144). She commits herself to design a fashion that will “please both the administration and the interested parties” (144). Iranian people win their rights from authorities like that: through battles that are heartfelt, rational and planned. *Persepolis* shows the agency of the people of Iran who suffer through their government’s lack of experience with ruling, their reliance on the force of obscure laws, but at the same time, it is the agency of the people that wins them their rights. Both sides compromise, but victory is always on the side of those who rebel against injustice. She designs a new acceptable fashion for the Department of Art and agrees that “Though subtle,

these differences meant a lot to us”(144). Afterwards, the approving love of grandmother returns: “It’s fear that makes us lose our conscience. It’s also what transforms us into cowards. You had guts! I’m proud of you!”(145). Just as a clergy can become the source of artistic inspiration that enables peaceful coexistence if not reconciliation, the so called “modern,” Westernized, emancipated Iranians can be the pillars of either traditionalism or oppression. *Persepolis* does not just look for an external enemy: the Islamic Republic. It delves honestly and deeply into the lives of Iranians and Austrians to touch the chords that vibrate with dissonance and discord. Satrapi does start with generalization and easy dichotomies that can categorize people according to types. But, her ethical glance moves her past her prejudices to enable a balanced relationship to crystalize via aesthetic and political means. While she calls the woman in chador a fundamentalist, a statement that, if not based on sanctioned (commonly acceptable) ignorance, is utterly mistaken to say the least. She then refutes and complicates the stereotype in several instances. Women who don the veil, smoke, go skiing and try to avoid any tie with the mandates of the Islamic Republic, gang up against Marji for having had multiple sexual partners. The man who was the epitome of an intellectual warrior against the Islamic Republic’s censor over the press is not a hero in domestic circles. He has no respect for his wife’s opinions and interrupts her constantly. University students too, who are generally believed to be open minded, regard Marji in a negative light after discovering her contraceptive pills.

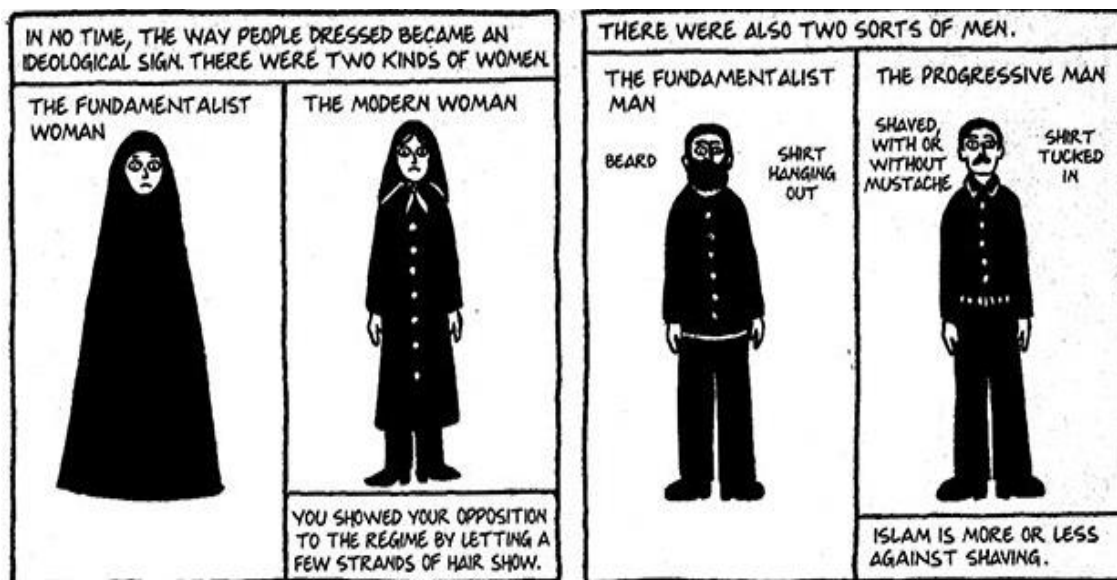


Figure 9 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission

So the very binary that she creates between the fundamentalist and modern woman based on their fashion, crumbles in the face of apparently modern looking people who hold rigidly to their convictions. As the colonialist Churchill has jokingly said, a fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject." Fanaticism happens at the level of convictions not clothes. A member of the clergy can negotiate an appropriate dress code for women with Marji, but *a la mode* Tehrani female skiers cannot accept Marji's sexual practices. In *Persepolis*, the location of malice is in a state of tension, in transit, between inside and outside. The enemy is channelled from a beast outside to an instinct inside, and vice versa. It is not just the regime that carries out execution and torture of the prisoners. With the fall of Shah, retribution commences. Although there is much cause for celebration in the "departure of evil," in an interesting panel, Satrapi manages to draw its long serpentine tail encircling the domestic space, almost grabbing the mother's face.

Although mom and dad have happily closed their eyes and feel relieved, evil seems to have its claws firmly set into the quotidian space. Marji is nonplussed, while evil looks unwilling to leave, glaring at them from the corner of its eye.



Figure 10 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission.



Figure 11 From *Persepolis; The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission. Pg. 45.

Is it the heated social debates that affect the children or is it a spontaneous call from inside the gang of friends? Marji and her friends plan to attack a child whose father has been allegedly collaborating with SAVAK's torturers. Marji organizes the gang

attack, equipping her friends with sharp nails held between their little fingers. Luckily Marji's mom taps into their vicious plan and manages to stop them by evoking empathy: "What would you say if I nailed your ears to the wall" to which Marji responds with "Wow, it would hurt a lot"(45). The moment of revelation is the moment of imagination of the Self in the same pain that was supposed to be inflicted onto the Other. Marji imagines herself hanging with her elongated ears pierced by two nails to the wall. It is then that her mother preaches: "it is not for you and me to do justice. I'd even say, we have to learn to forgive" (46). The imperative turns into a refrain for Marji, repeated in front of the mirror over and over again: "you have to forgive, you have to forgive"(46). However, as all else in *Persepolis*, forgiving is not easy when the personal scars cut deep. The selfsame mother who talked of forgiveness screams for vengeance after hearing about the torture of the family friends by Shah (figure 3 above): "all torturers should be massacred" (52). The double-standards confuse the child. Now instead of ganging up on an outsider, Marji comes up with torture methods for the "losers" of the clan: "The mustache-on-fire consists of pulling on the two sides of the upper lip," "the twisted arm," "The mouth filled with garbage" (53), Marji is depicted eating garbage, pulling her own upper lip, and twisting the arm of an agonized little boy with a vicious smile on her face. And when Marji accosts her mother regarding forgiveness, she conveniently turns to: "Bad people are dangerous but forgiving them is [dangerous] too. Don't worry there is justice on earth" (53). A similar episode regarding endemic violence among children rather than the regime happens in Talebi's *Ghosts*.

Comparison of Satrapi with Talebi's Autocritique Regarding the Location of the Enemy/Violence Within

Satrapi presents the conflicting childhood lessons on justice but leaves the reader to make sense of them according to their individual sense of ethics. I believe she is able to excite aestextasy through artistic “play” and the playfulness of her medium. Talebi however is writing a prison memoir, yet with a firm grasp on ethics. Her style is consciously self-critical: she tries to find the mistakes in herself first, before criticizing others. She never stops critiquing herself, questioning her own complicity in the cycle of pain, never purges herself of the responsibility of responsiveness. *Persepolis* does this in a less overt, more playful manner, in the gutters between the frames. Unlike most other victims of state cruelty, Talebi never blames all that went wrong with the revolution on the Islamic government. As Hannah Arendt reminds us: “it is the people’s support that lends power to the intuitions of a country and this support is but the continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with” (*On Violence* 41). She then adds: “even the tyrant, the One who rules against all, needs helpers in the business of violence, though their number may be rather restricted” (Arendt 41). *In Ghosts of Revolution; Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*, Talebi tells of the cruelty that exists not just in both regimes’ prisons, but a cruelty that is endemic all over the world from a micro to macro level, in different power relations. In her narrative, violence does not only shape the power dynamic between the prosecutor-prisoner, but that of teacher-pupil, parent-children, bullies-victims. As she is made to watch the lashing and kicking of her blindfolded husband by half a dozen torturers, she suddenly remembers her third grade teacher. The unkind man would ask

the student who gave the right answer to spit on, and beat the student who gave the wrong answer. As a smart student, she was put into that position constantly:

I am standing there in front of everyone wondering what to do while the teacher is staring at me with his wild eyes and the lash in his trembling hand. 'Go ahead, Shahla, tell him the answer . . . Don't have sympathy for this stupid jerk.' What should I do? Should I spit at him, or should I be beaten? What should I do?

(Talebi 98)[Italics in original]

By the direct refrain: “What should I do?” she involves the reader’s answer as a shaping element for her own text. It is as if the dilemma of the teacher is happening currently and the readers are implicit in the act of witnessing. Although it appears unlikely that the reader— probably in the imaginary West – will ever be put in that position of directly hurting someone or being hurt. Still, Hannah Arendt suggests the Western reader could be a quiet accomplice to the actions of their governments who hold modern lashes in their trembling hands. Arendt calls this indifferent witnessing of crime as “the negative unity” of the quiet majority, and considers it as a direct support of the injustice of a minority: “The merely onlooking majority, amused by the spectacle of a shouting match... is in fact already the latent ally of the [cruel] minority” (Arendt 41). As a sensitive soul with an auto-critical gaze, Shahla is bewildered by the thought of being a “latent ally of the cruel minority.” Despite being a victim of state cruelty herself for years, she never victimizes herself by pointing to one externalized enemy. Her gaze is balanced and auto-critical. She does not project the cause of all evil outside herself onto an Othered government. Her ability to be

empathically unsettled at the sight of injustice allows her to be in ec-statis: in and out of her body with the agony of others. Ec-statis is from the words “ex: out of” and “statis: state”. It literally means stepping outside your own body. This fluttering between the self and the other is brought about by her faculty of imagination as she can envision herself as the perpetrator and the victim at once. It is this quality of being inside and outside that forbids her from tracing the roots of some violence against her own self and relatives (refer to introduction for more elaboration of this term). In another instance, she remembers the “nicest kid in the neighbourhood” – the adorable, five-year-old Masoud – becoming the victim of a gang attack in which she herself is forced to participate. Seeing herself both as the victim and an accomplice she says:

I remember being simultaneously in the positions of Yousuf [Qura'nic Joseph] and his brother and detesting myself for that” . . .

We participated in Masoud’s beating to avoid our own pain, through some of us, if not all, cried, begged, screamed, and even tried to resist beating him. But Hussein’s fists and belt, which kept slashing over our bodies, were stronger than our tolerance and power of our resistance.

(102-3) [Italics in original]

This is not a unique example of children’s savagery, where the majority gang up against an innocent minority. Arendt describes Strength as a “property inherent” in a person, “belonging to its character” which invites hostility, and envy: “It is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against independence, the property of individual strength” (44). While authoritarian regimes oppose independent dissidents, this certain group of children, envied Masoud as the adult’s favourite child:

Since that day in the meadow when my hands became the hands of a criminal, when I participated in beating Masoud, I have been forced to watch many fathers beat their sons while the sons in turn beat their sisters and wives. I have seen these wives and sisters who hid their black-and-blue bodies from their neighbors and bragged about their men's masculinity bearing witness to the cruelty of children to one another and to animals. I have been horrified to realize how deeply rooted torture is in our daily experiences, collective consciousness, and historical memory. I have nevertheless been unable to figure out what makes people reflect on their experiences so differently. (Talebi 104-5)

Violence prevails in the grassroots of society, especially during war time, and returns like water from sky onto our rivers that feed us. Concerning the recycling of insidious cruelty from one familiar hand to the next, she uses the analogy of the river. The direction of the river flow is not linear, but circular; just as is the direction of hate and violence in the world:

The river that opens its heart to embrace everyone's nightmares and to take the evil away from them becomes the burial place for love and loved ones. Violence, death, and love spurt through them and into the whole village so that whatever people eat has the flavor of love, creation, and destruction. As in the rivers, and in the villagers' bodies, life and death, love and hatred, and creation and desolation cohabit. (Talebi 160)

Satrapı touches on a wide array of public and personal dilemmas and traumas. Quickly glimpsing at terror through the black and white panels, the reader is struck by the antinomies inherent in the playful medium and the traumatic narrative. The full-length memoir written through an adult perspective can elaborate longer, less playfully, more poetically. Or rather, the poetry becomes a function of play for Talebi; what destabilizes accepted hierarchies, what disarms the critic. What makes the two works comparable is their inward looking glance. The glance that does not purge the self by blaming the other, but sees the complicity of the self in the plight of the Other.

Common Misreadings of *Persepolis*

Hillary Chute and Jennifer Worth in their different publications have alluded to *Persepolis* as the only means of visibility for a subaltern, or visually “effaced” Satrapı. Despite her scholarship in the field of comics, when it comes to women of Iranian descent, Chute falters. Without discrediting the rest of her well-grounded research on “graphic narratives,” *Persepolis*, for Chute, marks an ethical call to bring the invisible subject with no other chance of visibility to the attention of Western readers. Her ethics contain an elitist mission of re-facing, retracing, or rather, “repeating”:

I am interested in this notion of ethics as it applies to autobiographical graphic narrative: what does it mean for an author to *literally* reappear – in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page – at the site of her inscriptional effacement? Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors’ own traumas and those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to

counteract. It is useful to understand the retracing work of graphic narratives as ethical repetitions (of censored scenarios). (Chute 93)

Although I am all in favor of an ethical approach to autobiographical graphic narratives, I do not believe that the author has “reappeared at the site of her inscriptional effacement” nor that the act of visual representation with all its shortcomings is a moment of “repetition” or mimicry. Chute’s question of effacement is absurd in the case of Satrapi, as Satrapi is not a subaltern who would be “effaced as she discloses herself” (Spivak). Why would Satrapi need to “reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement” – if not by assuming that had she not reappeared, she would have been inscriptionally effaced. It is as if Satrapi had no other method for self-disclosure other than her text – the site of her inscriptional effacement. Cloaked in flowery adjectives, the argument is offensive to women authors of Iranian diaspora, with strong voices. Chute indirectly labels them as subaltern supposedly because of their Iranian origins, and despite their social position.¹ She is as vague regarding the drawing style: “Satrapi’s choice of pared down techniques, of line and perspective —as with modernist painting of Cezanne’s as with German Expressionism; and as with abstract expressionism”² The three art examples are very different, general and unspecific. Chute is not alone in her generic categorization of literature written by Iranian women diaspora. Jennifer Worth’s far less rigorous reading “Unveiling: *Persepolis* as Embodied Performance,” relies heavily on generalizations, half-digested

¹ She also labels all her choice comics written by women as “feminist” only because of their attention to the body!

² These three examples are analogous to saying: A book’s writing style is similar to that of Margaret Atwood, to Canadian indigenous writing and to American Postcolonial texts!

theoretical interpretations and stereotypes. After enumerating a handful of autobiographies published by the women of Iranian diaspora she remarks: “Clearly, the subaltern has learned to speak” (Worth 143), including renowned women of Iranian diaspora – authors, university professors, journalists and such as Azadeh Moaveni, Farzaneh Milani, and Azar Nafisi – as “subaltern” who have “learned to speak.”

Had she known the usage of the word Subaltern as circulated by Antonio Gramsci or Gayatri Spivak, she would not have called relatively well-off, Iranian women living in the global North as Subaltern. For Spivak, the subaltern is “outside the mode of production, narrative,” (“Can the Subaltern Speak”) having no access to discourse, except through effacement or death. Whether the subaltern can learn to speak is outside the question here. Worth’s un-professional usage of theoretical terminology is apparently widespread when it comes to the marginal genre and diasporic literature. Considering any woman of Iranian/Islamic background as subaltern – who may or may not learn to speak – is reminiscent of what Spivak calls “sanctioned ignorance.” The astonishing flourishing of post-revolutionary women in Iran in all walks of social life is not accounted for due to the same sanctioned ignorance that relies on “knowledge passed down” (Said *Orientalism*). And these are among the better fallacies. Stacey Weber-Feve thinks that the reader is following Satrapi’s coming of age in the “Islamic Revolution of 1978”! (324) Nancy K. Miller in her own, to some extent, autobiographical article “Out of the Family” sees Marji’s taking up of *Second Sex* as “turning theory into practice: peeing standing up”(19)! Stretching the panels to accommodate her vision of Marji’s feminism, Miller forgets the utter failure of this

act, denounced quickly after by the protagonist. Theory does not turn so easily into practice for women who negotiate the borders. The panel that depicts Marji's failure of peeing while standing up may, instead, be read as a critique on the inapplicability of the Western framework of feminism to Iranian women.

Many have alluded to *Persepolis*' connection to Persian miniatures. I accept that miniatures and *Persepolis* both lack perspective and a vanishing point. Miniatures also tell a story through the conjugations of words and images. But miniatures function within a tradition of classical poetry with strong mystical connotations. Elements of the divine and transcendental take precedence over the material and mundane. The delicate line is not just a line, but the manifestation of an ecstatic state, an amorous dance with the lover, an mystic state. There are many other art movements that shun linear perspective and vanishing point. Only because the works are both originated within the same country does not necessitate their relationship. Such a classification is based on a lack of knowledge regarding Persian art history movements as well as the general lack of visual literacy of literary critics of comics.

***Persepolis* Conclusion**

Although Satrapi starts the English edition with a statement of authorly intent, I see the complex book's lack of explicit volition what actually arms it with free aesthetic play, a political tool in subverting hierarchies of domination. The playfulness of the comic medium that allows for identification with the face of the cartoon avatar at the same time that it creates an uncanny moment of difference is pivotal in this subversion. The comic medium leaves small aporetic gaps for contemplation in an interrupted verbal-visual narrative. The reading pace moves with *ritmo lento*,

proceeding slowly multi-focally: an eye on the image, an eye on history, another on politics, aesthetics, ethics... Satrapi intricately sews intimate personal “knowledges from below” to a web of histories of masked battles to complicate the process of finding an easy enemy whose elimination will heal the traumatic scar. The position of the Other as the evil enemy swirls from the kin to the state, from homeland to West and returns, always with a similitude, always with a difference. The torturer is affiliated once with Pahlavi, another time with the Islamic Republic, but it is also channeled deep within the quotidian circle of parental brutality, playground cruelty and Iranian intolerance toward one another. The beloved leftist father could also be the enforcer of class segregation, the loving mother who preaches forgiveness can scream for the “execution of executioners.” In *Persepolis*, upper class westernized Iranian women renouncing the Islamic veil can become traditionalists regarding women’s sexual affairs, while Islamic clergy can accept argument regarding interpretation of Islam and reconcile themselves with the desires of the youths. There is tension and a delay in the apparently easily communicable text. Iran at war is not favorable for an artist, but Austria at peace is hostile to Marji. She is subject to xenophobia and suffers from lack of profound bonds, to an extent that she exclaims to her husband: “but in the west you can collapse on the street and no one will give you a hand” (*Persepolis* 126). Iran is not ripe for invasion and the West is not overflowing with freedom. *Persepolis*’ aestextasy that consists of its visual aesthetic, political subversion and ethical landscape engulfs a text that is dissensual, challenging, yet paradoxically accessible.

Chapter 2 Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*

While *Persepolis* is perceived to provoke an immediate, visceral connection with the audience, using its intrinsic “free play,” Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road* appears to be more mediated, somewhat keeping the critical distance, and more philosophizing. Regarding aestextasy, Bashi¹ is concerned mainly with positioning herself in an “ethical” ground between Iranian and Western negotiations of identity. The double-sided connection between aesthetic and politics is somewhat overshadowed by her overt attention to a certain dialectical ethics. This ethics is an internal sense of responsibility that she kindles via internal dialogues as she re-visits herself at pivotal points in Iran's turbulent modern history. The narrative style is interrupted by spats of intellectual self-argumentations regarding the protagonist's current beliefs and past convictions. The explicit auto-critique takes up the majority of the panels, turning the book into a manifesto on ethical thinking instead of a graphic memoir (as the title suggests). When read in conjunction with other memoirs about Iran, this poses no problem. It actually fills a very important ethical gap. Bashi challenges the easy binaries that most Iranian memoirist draw between a free West and fundamentalist Iran. She looks at the threats to world peace posed by regarding Islam as the cause of all that went wrong with Iran and the world. She contrapuntally glances at extremism in Iran and radicalism in the West. However, on its own, *Nylon Road* lacks the intimacy of a memoir. It actually leaves abrupt gaps in the personal story starting from the first page. The book opens with a full-length self-portrait of Pari who appears to be modern, relatable and candid.

¹ I will use Bashi to refer to the author and Pari for the cartoon avatar of the protagonist in her present self in Switzerland. Her past selves will be introduced later. It is crucial to note that the narrator and the protagonist remain unnamed throughout the book. The only name in the entire book is in its dedication: “To my daughter Abi.”

The first panel reads: “I’ve been living in Zurich since the 23rd of April 2004” (*Nylon Road* 1). But then in the second panel we encounter Pari talking on the phone (across the years) with a mystery man whose face is not fully disclosed. It is however similar to a companion of hers whom we meet further on in the book. She writes “The reason why I came here is another story that I won’t explain now”(1) but she won’t explain it “later” either. She will explain the socio-political situation in Iran and negotiates her own identity constructions in between these territories. However, in this enigmatic panel she is actually referring to a romantic relationship with a Swiss man who later becomes her husband. This is never clarified in the book. I agree that the choice of omissions in the personal narrative is with the author. The continual lapses and abrupt ends to chapters —some of the chapters are only made up of two pages—steer the attention away from the life story and towards the intellectual personal debate with her “selves.” According to Rancière’s politics of aesthetics, she does create a space to imagine what was not supposed to be imagined before. As mentioned in the Preface, Rancière, politics is a *repartage*, a redistribution of the tribune to vent a dissensual argument, to break new grounds, to say something against the quiet consensus. To this end, she tries to combat her past dogmatic conventions, i.e. as an astute communist teenager. This shattering of the consensus is a moment of possibilities that functions like an aesthetic intervention, it rearranges the set frames of mind and hierarchies of domination. Dissensus prefigures an acknowledgement of the Other’s stance and calls for an ethical engagement with it, despite the dangers that such an embrace might entail. When—with the help of the comic medium—this Other is a Self, the outcome

could be an aesthetic break. Nevertheless, Bashi's push to police a reconciliation is what prevents the break.

The book's English translation appeared in North America in November 2009, a few months before the "Green Uprising" against Ahmadinejad's rigged re-election. Despite the international attention to this spontaneous popular revolt, *Nylon Road* did not trigger a wave of critical acclaim in English, enjoyed previously by *Persepolis*. The reviews and interviews were mostly in German, the book's original language. Composed in the tradition of Satrapi, *Nylon Road* poses challenging questions about the problematic understanding of Iranians and Westerners regarding one another. Instead of relying on a few rudimentary internal monologues, Bashi conducts extensive external dialogues between her different "selves": the happy go-lucky child avatar, the communist adolescent, the fashionista youth, the "drowned in sorrow" divorcee or the independent artist and intellectual. These different versions of her past alternatively accost the current day immigrant Pari in Zurich, Switzerland at moments that intensify the contrast between Iranian and Swiss lifestyles and frames of mind. Bashi takes full advantage of the comics' potential to have several speakers from different chronologies appear simultaneously in a dialogue. They appear at pivotal moments in the new-immigrant's adjustment process to her new life in the West. Bashi attempts to internally reconcile her traumatic experiences with the apparently happy and quiet life in Switzerland. The criticism that she offers is dialectical, literally self-critical, and less playful than Satrapi's. Bashi's voice lacks Satrapi's immediate intimacy. Her characters—mainly her different "selves"—are not as easily identifiable as Satrapi's, say, child narrator. Satrapi's characters are not "quickly consumable"

either. Satrapi produces an arguably universally identifiable rebellious child/teenager but then marks her with an intrinsic enigma that prevents the book's ideological cornering or docketing. Satrapi's art starts with the known and moves toward the destabilizing unknowns as the book progresses. What is unique about Satrapi's aesthetic is its inexplicable yet striking feel of "honesty" in gaining the trust of the readers while recounting personal as well as political traumas. The phantasmagoric apparitions of Pari's younger selves, ambushing the current day self of the protagonist contest the "nonfiction" or "memoir" tag. The English translation has been subtitled: "A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran." The coming of age, I would argue, happens in Switzerland through the critical and physical distant, through the process of looking "back" at her episodic self squarely in the face. It by looking at her past selves directly in the face, and holding rigorous dialogues with them that she comes of age in Switzerland. After all, the main audience of this book is the author herself, as she claims in an interview:

The main audience of the work was "*myself*"; just as in diary writing or memoirs, that an individual writes for herself. Then I had in mind my close friends and people I lived with. Now that the book has been published, I believe its audience is among the intellectual spheres, the curious, and mostly people with an open mind, and probably Western left-leaning subjects who are deeply interested in learning about Middle Eastern societies. (Kuzegar interview)

Bashi acknowledges that her intended audience has been primarily herself. She is set on a therapeutic mission of diasporic self-discovery; a project of comparing the social

values of Iran with the West. The feisty conversations are to reconcile the self—removed from Iran’s intellectual circles with all its dilemmas—to a rather isolated, yet trouble-free self as an immigrant. In the midst of a rather schizophrenic battle between her present and past selves, Bashi introduces and analyzes bits of controversial history or concepts. The lengthier speech balloons provide the required space for textual analysis while reducing the effect of an immediate response to the images. Bashi’s *forte* is this strong and rather ethical critical analysis, which she does masterfully by presenting juxtaposed panels consecutively, a technique widely used by Satrapi but mostly not for such a critical analysis of a concept. One the most controversial topics taken up skilfully and fairly by Bashi concerns Islam. While Bashi’s theoretical arguments regarding religion are surprisingly accurate, the graphic narrative of her life experiences belies a balanced approach to religion. In words, her battle is fair. However, it is interesting that she is battling herself.

Paratext

The original Swiss publishers consented to her wish of not flashing the name “Iran” on the book’s front or back covers for commercial gains. The American publishers of the English version did not. The U.S. edition relies on an irrelevant but catchy script in the dust cover: “a young Iranian woman’s struggles with growing up under Shi’ite law,” despite the fact that neither Shi’ite nor Sunni laws are mentioned in the entire narrative. Pari’s older self does distinguish between government and religion. But that rich analysis is never carried through to the book covers. As an experienced book cover designer herself, she expresses aversion to catchy book covers that surf the waves of cultural stereotypes:

I wanted my audience to choose and read the book based on its content; not for example based on the cover photo depicting a woman in burqa, a camel, a desert and so forth. (Kuzegar, BBC)

The New York based St. Martin's Griffin even changed the choice of the original cover, designed by Bashi herself, against her wishes:

I intentionally avoided picking a title with any direct reference to Iran, let alone subtitle or back cover. As you know, not all Iranian memoirists are famous for the quality of their work. Many gain visibility because of the vogue of Iran in Western media. This makes the memoirs about Iran "in fashion." To procure this marketability, the publishers need a name of an Iranian landmark, or an Iranian symbol and the like. I was strictly against this and wanted the book to be read for the quality of its content and not based on marketability. That is why I picked the mysterious word "*Nylon Road*" which has a paronomasia with the ancient "Silk Road." In the English edition the New York publisher correctly knew that the chance for selling more books will be increased with the addition of a subtitle containing the word "Iran." The back cover was entirely written by the publishers themselves. (Ebrahimi, email interview 1)

In chapter 11, young Pari shows aversion regarding the "burqa covers" that are not even ethnic to Iran. Although she spots this misrepresentation problem in the West, she is quick to see this problem in her own self as she tried to acquaint herself with

Western culture. The older Pari admits of having herself designed book covers with wrong European cultural symbols.

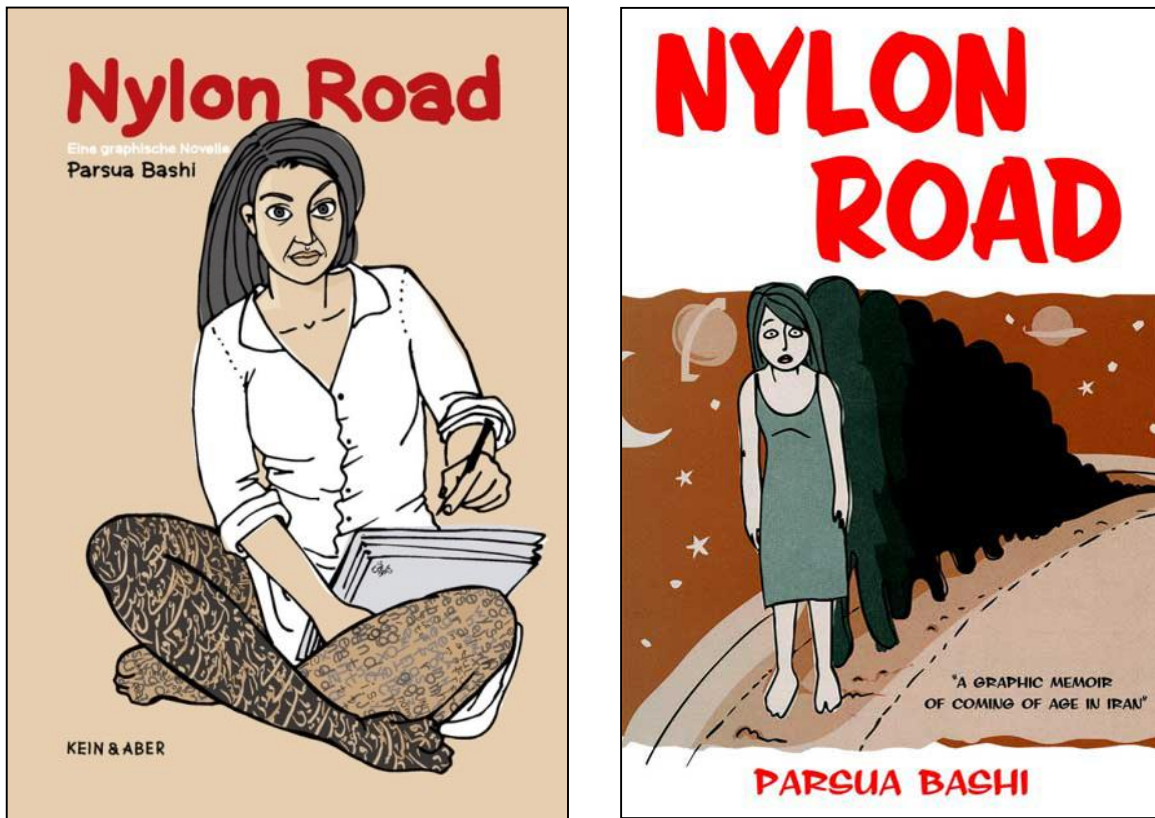


Figure 12 the two covers designs of Nylon Road for different editions
 Left: The original cover designed by Bashi, herself, for the Swiss edition.
 Right: The American edition, subtitled: "A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran"
 absent in original cover, and quite misleading, according to the author.

In addition to the wrong and misleading English subtitle: “A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran,”—which explicitly references *Persepolis*—the difference in Swiss and American publisher’s taste for the cover is astonishing. Gerard Genette claims that “the paratext is what enables a text to become book” (1). He expounds that:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or . . . a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. . . . This fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (Genette 1-2)

It is with an eye on the significant contribution of paratext that I would like to offer a comparative study of the book’s different facades, images and texts. The Swiss cover has only delicate implicit allusions to Persian culture and history: the graceful calligraphy *siyah mashgh*¹ on Pari’s right leg, the author’s Farsi signature on Pari’s manuscript and the paronomasia between Nylon Road and the ancient Silk Road,

¹ *Siyah Mashgh* literally translates to “blackening exercise” and is a style of Persian calligraphy in which the artists practices her technique by covering the whole page with the black ink of her words. *Siyah Mashgh* which was originally a homework for pupils of calligraphy has become an art form nowadays in which the beauty of the words are appreciated, devoid of their cohesive meaning.

connecting East and West. The Latin letters on Pari's left leg, however, fail to create meaningful word combinations, pointing to her challenges with connecting to the new language. Nonetheless, the Latin letters are inscribed on, and may form part of her body, her "self." The Latin letters and the Persian words are crossed and interlaced as she sits to write, leaning on her left leg, the Latin side. The book, after all, is written in German. The body inscriptions have intertextual references to Shirin Neshat's play with Muslim female body inscriptions, discussed in the following chapter. In addition to body inscriptions, the author is also in the act of "self-representation," or "self-portraiture," with her Farsi name signed on the paper, and a curious stare that positions her in the place of the subject and object of study. Craig Owens highlights the shifting role of portraiture in contemporary art practices: "the subject poses as an object *in order to become a subject*" [emphasis in original] (215). She is portrayed as the author of a text about herself. Her raised eyebrow and curved bodily gesture connote inquisition before an artistic creation. This empowering transgression from the role of a Muslim/Iranian woman is evident in the Swiss cover through implicit references or "winks." The American choice, on the other hand, complies with an Orientalistic reading of the phenomenon "Iranian woman." It displays a harrowing blood-red title, hanging in capital letters over Pari's lowered head. It depicts Pari in an awestruck, uncomfortable, standing pose. She might even be hovering without a firm ground, without a shadow, on an alien planet. She appears ghostly, ominous and alien, followed by a train of darkening shadows. That is what "coming of age in Iran" probably signifies: a woman crushed by a murky past tinted with black and bright red. This image has been chosen and cropped from the opening chapter in which Pari

meets a younger self for the first time. It depicts the shock of encounter with her “happy child” self. Cut from the context and twisted with a subtitle and the title font, the panel stands in mimetic repetition of a dictated text.

Religion and Politics

Although in words, Pari, fights a fair battle, in recounting the life story, we encounter no fair “Muslims.” All Iranian Muslims in the narrative are given “revolting” facial features. The female librarian looks like a man in chador. The judge’s clerk picks his nose and throws it around as Pari pleads for the custody child’s custody, and all the clergy members are angry and unjust. No Iranian Muslim is endowed with a single admirable quality. In words, she distinguishes between the oppressive government and religion:

After years of living outside of my country, in this peaceful Europe, I had almost forgotten how frustrated I used to be—just like other Iranians—because of our fundamentalist government. We were all so poisoned by rage that we falsely projected everything on religion.

(Nylon Road 56)

The argument about religion occurs after a dreadful encounter with an unnamed young Iranian science student in Switzerland. The latter could be described as a pseudo-intellectual who carries chauvinistically racist beliefs about Arabs. She boasts about a millennia old civilization but blames all that went wrong with Iran on the young government’s Islam. Pari wants to distance herself with avid Perisian, pre-Islamic nationalists, but her younger selves remind her of the same student-scientist. Replying to the avid student, Pari asks herself:

Is it really possible for a 2,500-year-old civilization to change from white to black simply by being oppressed for 27 years by the acts of a government? . . .

The great Persian paradise of hers might even have existed—how do I know?—but for 1,400 of those 2,500 years, Islam was the religion of these people. Islam merged with the Iranian culture and mentality to the extent that they now might be inseparable. (*Nylon Road* 56-57)

It is interesting that the slightly younger Pari not only shares the young scientist's views, she even goes further: "If those grasshopper eating Arabs had left us alone I wouldn't have had to live my entire life under these mullahs!"(55) Hatred brings with it generalization. The self-identified intellectual youth of Iran are quick to mix "Arabs," "Islam," and "Iranian Government," relating them all to a backwardness they want to escape by adopting a Western lifestyle. However, chauvinism leaks through the intellectual vestige under cross examination. It was in this spirit that *Persepolis*' heroic journalist who published comics against the Islamic government showed dogmatic qualities in quotidian atmospheres against his own wife. The problem cannot be transferred all to the Islamic governance. For Bashi, that is a misconception:

No, they [The Islamic Republic of Iran] don't believe in Islamic law as much as we think. It's simply for political purposes. Imagine: if they got rid of the hijab and alcohol laws, they'd look just like a dictatorial regime, or like any other atheist, secular, totalitarian regime in the world . . . And then under the cover of this sacred mission, they get

exclusive hold of the national wealth. They love it when everyone calls them a strict religious regime. (*Nylon Road* 58)

The double-sided blade of generalization cuts both ways: it helps the propaganda machine in the west to gain favor for invasion and suppress peaceful dissensus. It also gives the extremists in the Iranian government an excuse to point to an external enemy outside and curb civic liberties in turn:

And if we too blame every wrong thing on Islam, we are helping the propaganda which is based on those false clichés. The stronger the anti-Islam criticism the better for Iranian and other undemocratic systems. It makes their mission look even more sacred. (*Nylon Road* 58-9)

Such observations are rare in other works of literature produced by the Iranian diaspora. The strict self-judgmental, and ethical glance at all the mistakes that the Iranian culture has passed down to its immigrants needs much courage for expression. Especially at a time when Iranian diaspora writers are trying hard to assert their sense of identity in their new found homes in the West. This identity, they claim, is strictly non-Arab, non-Islamic, and non-religious.



Figure 13 Western attitudes toward Muslims, wars, refugees.
from *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi, © St. Martin's Griffin, used with permission. Pg.59.

Auto-Critique in *Nylon Road*

One of the few memoirists who explicitly mentions that Iran's sole problem is not the ban on the public consumption of alcohol and women's dress code is Bashi. While hijab and prohibition on alcohol consumption, and sale do pose nuisances for the upper and middle classes, the most urgent challenges faced by the majority of the nation lie elsewhere. Bashi comes to this conclusion at the end of one of her lengthiest and most fierce self-dialogues: "Yes the Iranians' problems are not alcohol or scarves. My people's problems are the oil-based economy and the lack of education, freedom, and democracy" (*Nylon Road* 61). The beautiful discussion however is cut short by the introduction of another chapter. While in *Persepolis* the chapters are dialogically relevant, there is a rift between the theoretical discussions and life stories in *Nylon Road*. None of the selves are elaborated enough for the reader to establish a relationship based on identification. Chapters two and seven are only four pages each.

One of the most memorable narratives in *Nylon Road* is the tale of the 13-year-old Pari who flirted with what she calls a branch of "Leninist Marxism" as a teenager. The teenage-self ambushes the current-day Pari as the latter is peacefully people watching from a café terrace on a sunny day in Zurich. The young and old Western women she is observing appear to follow the same fashion: tight, short-pants, a short tank top revealing the belly button and breasts, with a ponytail. All of a sudden appears the "communist teenager" Pari the one who became involved with political groups that were finally freed after the demise of Shah. These leftist ex-prisoners joined ranks against the new Islamic Republic and soon became a threat to the new government by their booming public support and their armed activities which included

political assassinations. As with the Shah's regime, the new government too, banned radical leftist groups and imprisoned its activists. Many faced summary execution during the crisis of the Iraq war. For young Pari, joining the communist party is explained as a rational decision: "To me, as the daughter of an old leftist, choosing a radical communist party seemed reasonable" (*Nylon Road* 103). However, the haphazard nature of the choice is explicated in a panel in which the 13 year old is plucking flower petals in order to choose her affiliation. The petals are inscribed by separate tags of "Fidelists, Marxists, Maoists, Socialists, Trotskyists, Reds, Leninists" she enthusiastically plucks out "Marxist Leninist"!

She recounts the years of her early adolescence spent chanting slogans of her party in the streets, engaging in fiery arguments with members of other groups such as the Islamic Socialists *Mujahedeen*, or the Islamic Republicans, group discussions of the books "specified by their party's reading list," fierce physical training, self-criticism, and preaching to the immediate family members. She obviously fails to carry out her commitments at such a tender age. Outside novels, she does not understand any of her party's choice books such as: *Historical Materialism*, *The History of October Revolution*, *History of the Middle Ages to Industrial Revolution*, *Dialectic Materialism*, *Charles Darwin's Revolutionary Theory*.

Then came the most exciting part many of us were looking forward to: strengthening our minds and bodies for the event of partisan combat or being captured by the enemy...



A very important part of the "self-building" process was what we called "self-criticizing" in groups.



We also had to be prepared to be criticized by our comrades.



Figure 14 Pari as a young guerrilla. from *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi, © St. Martin's Griffin, used with permission. Pg. 106

For the older Pari, “communist activities were a teenage fashion just like any other” to which the partisan answers: “The bourgeois class doesn’t pay any price for following their class-based selfish desires. We paid a big price for being faithful to our ideology, for the people’s sake. That is not a fashion” (*Nylon Road* 109). The older Pari corrects herself that she is not “talking about true fighters” but about “teenagers”(111). Trying to prove her point, Bashi looks at three classes of people: the petit-bourgeois consumers of the latest fashion, the self-sacrificing religious, and the teenage activist. For Bashi, during adolescence, fashion cults and political groups are comparable as they both need young consumers of their ideologies.

She concludes that:

No matter what cult you are involved in, anything that is dictated from above is garbage. The existence of the cult depends on the number of its followers. And do you know why? It’s all about power and wealth.
(*Nylon Road* 112)

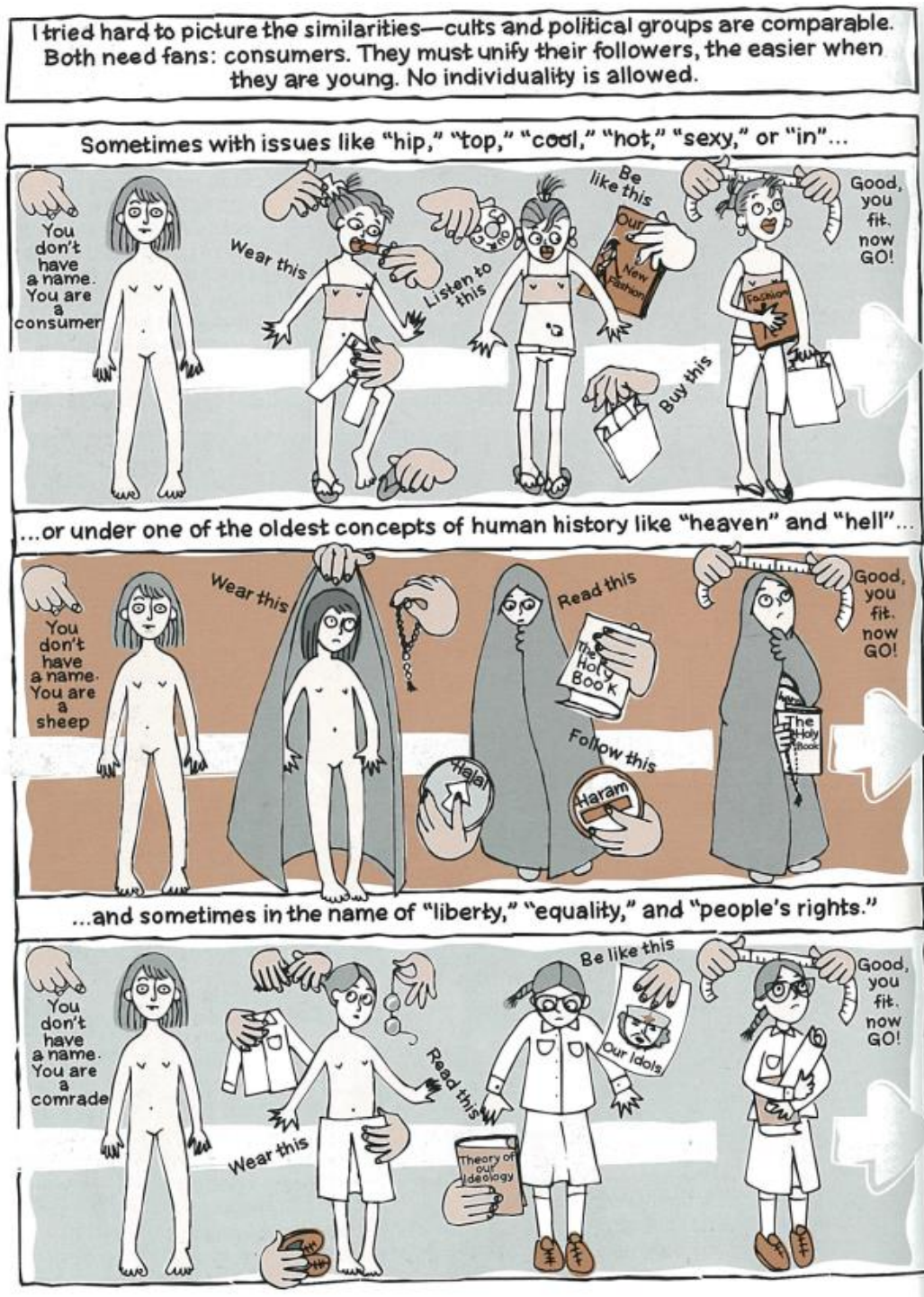
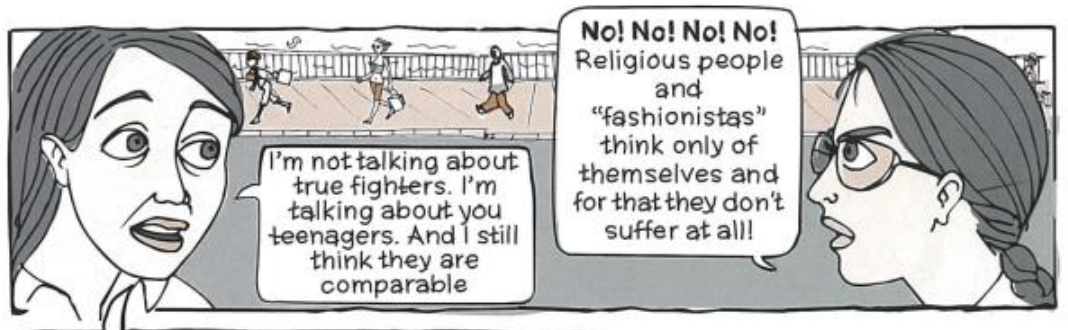


Figure 15 comparing affiliations of teenagers to cults of politics, fashion, and religion. From *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi © St. Martin’s Griffin, used with permission. Pg. 110.



Of course they suffer! Just in different ways...



But I do agree with her that we DID pay a rather BIG price.

Figure 16 similar outcomes for teenagers following cults. from *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bash © St. Martin's Griffin, used with permission. Pg. 111.

The inclusion of the two page long panels are strategic. Although Bashi advocates agency as opposed to cult assimilation, the very last panel illuminates an internal lacuna in the argument, a moment of antinomy. It is only the activist child who is depicted as “intelligent”; the only one who has not lost her “brain.” Of the three representatives, the activist is the one in the likelihood of Pari. It is the one she identifies with. However Pari herself argues that the activist is brainwashed but she refuses to void her “mind” in the comics. It can be argued that the teenage activist has been brainwashed into risking her life for a cause for which even the leaders of the movement do not believe. The religious and the fashionista teens end up losing their brains, but the activist only loses her heart and possibly her freedom.



Figure 17 Cults of fashion, religion, and politics produce similar leaders.
from *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi, © St. Martin's Griffin, used with permission. Pg. 112

Diasporic Visual Self-Presentation

As already discussed with regards to paratext, the importance of self-portrait cannot be stressed enough in a book concerned with the position of self in diaspora, with characters that are almost entirely her “selves” at different stages of psycho-social development. Just as in *Persepolis*, the first panel of *Nylon Road* presents a self-portrait. In the case of *Persepolis*, Marji gazes boldly at the viewer, a direct unapologetic gaze. Pari however looks slightly upward. Although both cartoon avatars are shown as having their hands crossed in a defiant gesture, Pari seems less rebellious, more at ease in her situation. Appearing without a veil as a young woman, Pari’s posture references her (almost) comfortable status as a new immigrant outside Iran. While little Marji is veiled, she looks more recalcitrant and gazes directly at the audience while being cut off from her classmates. She stands out from the group. *Nylon Road* has several intertextual references to *Persepolis*. It even shows the protagonist reading *Persepolis* as an adult. However, from the start it appears that the book is not about the dilemmas of growing up in Iran. The entire book could be described as a self-portrait in which chronology plays the least important part. In the *Poetics of Literary Self-Portrait*, Michel Beaujour clarifies: “The operational formula for the [literary] self-portrait therefore is: ‘I won’t tell you what I’ve done, but I shall tell you *who I am*’ (3).



Figure 19 first panel from *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi, © St. Martin's Griffin, used with permission. Pg. 1.



Figure 18 first panel from *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, © L'Association, used with permission. Pg. 1.

Nylon Road opens with a full-length image of a strong modern woman who has a barely noticeable smile, and crossed arms. The severity of the defiant crossed arms is in contrast to the coyness of the *contrapposto* stance. There is a tension between the laxity of the stance and the rigidity of the crossed arms, reflected in the eyes that slightly escape the direct gaze in order to look “above and beyond.” The same tension is carried out throughout the book as the author shifts her weight from one leg to another, from one perspective to another, and from one self to another. The protagonist’s outfit is also significant. Outside one scene (depicted in the American edition cover page), she does not change her clothes throughout the book. This is strange for an author who is a self-proclaimed fashion designer and has written chapters on the link between fashion and politics, especially for Iranian women. She wears a simple white shirt and a greyish blue pants, with walking shoes. Her outfit could be approaching the mark of being called: gender unspecific, middle class, casual-modern. She wears no jewelry. In a personal email interview, she explains the choice:

As Iranian women, we are supposed to change our appearance according to circumstances. I have always fought with this mental and physical masquerading. In the streets, we are dressed according to the legal code, in order to fit among our fashionable co-workers we are supposed to follow artistic dress codes. Even in the circle of relatives, we are not supposed to exceed the norm: dressing down and wearing less make up will not do. We are supposed to fit-in and assimilate to the shifting settings. The same is true about our behaviour. I have paid a

hefty price by escaping from these masks to appease this or that cult . . .

I have tried to be myself. (Ebrahimi, Email Interview 2)

The strife toward an uncomplicated dress code as the struggle toward a homogenous self fails nonetheless. The Iranian woman's body and its attire is the haunted territory of contested ideologies regarding gender, class, political affiliation, religious beliefs and identity. Bashi tries but is unable to escape their grasp. The continual self-argumentations are only a hint at the impossibility of unifying the Self, clean from all ideological mark-ups. The fluidity of the concept of Self is reflected in the dichromatic water wash of the colouring style as well. The water color wash is soft and flowy. She claims that she has adopted the two-colored tonality to facilitate the economical printing process, an unnecessary precaution, she adds. Shades of ochre and grey fill the delicate outlines of the figures in *Nylon Road*. This is while *Persepolis'* inking style is in blunt black and white with limited shading, marked by an absence of color or delicate lines: "simplified to amplify." Many of the clashing past selves never reconcile with the present Pari and the book ends abruptly in the middle of her ponderings regarding a conclusion.

***Nylon Road* Conclusion**

In *Nylon Road* the overpowering, self-effacing ethics leaves less room for the aesthetic *repartage* in the visual memoir. Ethics as primarily a technology for self-correction is expounded through prolonged dialogues between present and past Pari. This relationship with the self does fill the gap in the Iranian memoir corpus. It gives the space and time to an "Other" perspective for voicing a dissensual argument; the very stuff of ushering democracy through literature. Using the comics form, she animates

lively discussions of controversial topics ranging from religion, politics, jurisprudence, to the censorship in Iran as well as the West. However, the systematic autocritique prevents her from stepping outside self-argumentation to tell an intimate life story. It is deeply ironic that the English paratext tries to “sell” the book by playing with the common stereotype of Islamic brutality against women, which Bashi argues against throughout the book. She differentiates between religion and the political manipulation of Islam by the government and heeds the perils of generalization and demonization in Western media. *Nylon Road* presents a “persistent dredging operation” vital for works written by the new brigade of Iranian diasporic authors. It keeps reminding the critics and authors that they may not be free from what they criticize (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 1). *Nylon Road* is self-therapeutic, in the words of the author, and maybe thus, it is much less known and read than the other graphic narratives in this selection. It embodies a comprehensive critique of a generation of Iranian diasporic self-renditions without being a complete autobiography, memoir, or a full-length manifesto. The lack of this self-critique plunges fictional comic-memoirs such as *Zahra’s Paradise* down possible slopes of bigotry. The latter book’s distance and unfamiliarity with the complex system of Iranian politics also creates a text that mirrors the media’s depiction of Iran, not a personal interaction with that land.

Chapter 3 Amir and Khalil's *Zahra's Paradise*

The last of Iranian diasporic graphic narratives discussed in this dissertation is Amir and Khalil's *Zahra's Paradise*. Serialized as a web-comic in 2010, *Zahra's Paradise* quickly caught the attention of world publishers as it revived Iran's June 2009 popular uprising against the possibly fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The public march of millions—called the Green Movement—and its eventual violent suppression, caught on shaky cellular cameras, has arguably sparked the Arab Spring and later inspired the Occupy Wall Street movement. The event also officially heralded the age of “citizen journalists” where injustice could be recorded with (even cheap) mobile phones and disseminated across the globe via a feeble internet connections. The intervention of technology in the dissemination of news by the protestors themselves introduced a new “pace” into the reality of human affairs: “For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 8). The change of pace that the video sharing technology brought about allowed the international audience to access footage of Tehran protests immediately. This access to the trauma abroad created a shared community of sympathizers, who used international channels to push the Iranian government toward moderation with regards to the detainees, some of whom were severely beaten, tortured and held with no trials. I do not dispute the fact that ease of access ushered by technology facilitates the creation of a shared sense of belonging to a human community. In this section, I want to focus on the pitfalls with regards to truth-claims made by some of the surrogate victims in diaspora. It is a fact that the fast pace does not necessitate fair treatment and accuracy. I argue that fast, uncritical,

“click through activism” has devastating effects for humanitarian causes in disputed controversial cases. By “sharing” and “liking” a news item virally, one can contribute to the spread of misconception and bigotry, and facilitate the communication of unverified information that can potentially jeopardize the lives of individuals.

Other than its ethical pitfalls, online activism can both hamper and spur political activity on the ground. *Zahra’s Paradise* is hailed, in the words of the author, as a witness account based on a “true story” in the form of “docu-fiction.” The documentary part comes from anonymous grainy YouTube videos, and obscure tweets that the author has mixed with general regurgitated media misconception, the kind that confuses Iran with Afghanistan under Taliban. The ensuing batter is sold as a homogeneous historical fact that tells one coherent story. To the sloppy mix is added the author’s prescriptions regarding Iran’s de-contextualized politics. Most definitely, the graphic narrative is cloaked in the self-righteous rhetoric of human rights. I chose to analyze *Zahra’s Paradise* because it illustrates the dangers of overlooking ethical scholarship in engaging with a stereotyped people. *Zahra’s Paradise* also emphasizes the catastrophic impact that paratext leverages against a fictional narrative by imposing on it a sense of credibility and veracity. Also problematic is the use of homophobic and Islamophobic tropes as well as the appropriation of a real victim’s narrative and faces. *Zahra’s Paradise* presents itself as a witness account, however it never mentions that the author is a “vicarious spectator” one from the safe distance of an internet user in North America.

The author himself, born in Britain, is an armchair activist who has lived the majority of his life in the U.S. and has not set foot in Iran since the age of 12. Among

his political activism is creating the Facebook page of Zahra, the female cartoon protagonist of the book who is now a fictional candidate running for Iranian presidency. Also in his dossier there is a drafting of an open e-lettet, to former president Khatami regarding suppression of student activism, and making a documentary film about destitute garbage recyclers in California (by far the most touching and tangible project in his portfolio).

Zahra's Paradise has its own advantages and limitations. Amir's poetic writing style and the expertise of Khalil in cartooning make it an aesthetically pleasant read. Nonetheless, in the arena of ethics, it encounters pitfalls. It makes historical truth claims based on a farfetched *deus ex machine* plot. The *denouement* is based on an appropriation of a real mother's quest to find her teenage son after he disappeared in Tehran during street protests in June 2009. The rest is all fiction with Orientalist tropes that mimic a documentary style.

In the book, Zahra's younger son is the blogger who witnesses and publishes the excruciating events in his blog through which we gain access to the horrors of one government official. The whole book seems to be a homage to online-activism. In their journey, the mother and her younger son, come across an Evin prison official who has the key to the disappearances, rapes, and murders of protestors. Inadvertently, the villain in the story leaves a CD containing all his prison crimes along with the names of all those whom the government has murdered—including rape clips—at his paramour's apartment. The courageous woman-lover leaks the CD to the family of the disappeared man (whom she meets randomly at a coffee-net). For an armchair activist, this is a great wish-fulfilment. The book is epilogued by a list of 16,000 names of

individuals who have been allegedly murdered by the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution. These names include etching of initials on prison walls, remembered by former prisoners. The Boroumand foundation, which has Azar Nafisi on its executive board, has endeavored to record the human rights abuses of the post-79 Iranian government. Its annexation to the end of the book validates the passive click-through-activists' claims: Iran's government is no different from the most brutal regimes in the world and should be externally toppled. With all their questionable methods of collecting names, Boroumand's annexation is aimed at adding credibility to the so-called docu-fiction, just in the same way that the mystery CD proves the distant activists, right. Here is evidence that injustice has been, indeed, performed. Nevertheless, such a CD does not exist; neither does the villain as described. When the author is questioned on the grounds of his book's authenticity, he resorts to its fictional base, and when criticized in the use of mistaken, orientalist, or bigoted tropes, he plays the card of humanitarian plight, and the fictional free hand.¹

Zahra's Paradise opens by an abstract parable that gives a pessimistic foreshadowing about what is to occur. Parts of this parable repeat throughout the frames of the narrative to define moments of oppression. The story opens thus: it is springtime and ice is melodramatically melting near Evin prisoner. In a fictional mountainous village nearby a little boy is feeding a female dog who is in turn watching over her many pups suckling. With the Muslim call to prayer in the background—*Allah-u-Akbar*—an ominous looking bearded man is getting ready to

¹ The strategic swinging from fiction to fact reminds me of the mythical Persian CamelBird (akin to ostrich), that can neither fly nor give rides. Proverb has it that when you ask the CamelBird to give rides, it says I am a bird and I don't provide rides. When you ask her to fly, it says that I am a camel and cannot fly. In a similar fashion, Soltani sways between fact and fiction depending on the agenda of the questioner.

perform the ablution for his prayer. He takes out a shovel, forcefully steals the puppies from their mother, places them in a bag and smashes them to pieces with the violent hackings of his shovel before drowning the bloodstained sack in the river: “ablution” says the narrative voice. Later, we discover that the angry, bearded, sadistic man is the embodiment of the Islamic government and the dead puppies are the Iranian revolutionaries of 2009. The analogy is inaccurate on almost all levels and offensive to both sides of the protests. Is the spirit of revolt completely crushed, lying at the bottom of the river, rotting like dead dogs? Is *Allah-u-Akbar* a call to murderous, senile rage? Can the complex power system of Iran be crystalized in one angry bearded man with a shovel? The tropes are dogmatic and Orientalist: beard, *Allah-u-Akbar*, irrational violence, against immature voiceless victims that need external liberation. Not all bearded men are violent. *Allah-u-Akbar* was a rallying cry of 2009 protesters themselves. This defeats the purpose of the book: to associate the song of the protests as well as that of Islam with cruelty only; what the media has so successfully done.

Stigmatization of Islam aside, the authors rely on homophobic imagery to depict the relationship between Ahmadinejad and the leader. This runs to an extent that even the opposition leader Mousavi is counted amongst the jealous concubines in a “male harem.”



Figure 20 Homophobic references to demean Iranian past and present presidents as concubines, showing a lack of political literacy regarding the cause of the Green Movement. From Zahra's Paradise © Amir and Khalil. Used with permission.

Despite my own criticism of Ahmadinejad's theft of Iran's wealth, comparing him to a woman will not demean him; it will point to the homophobic perspectives of the author who thinks it is demeaning to be a male bride. If people take to the streets to protest the ballot turnout, it means that they believe an injustice has taken place. It means that they were hopeful that their chosen candidate, Mousavi, represented by the color green, should have come out victorious. Had the people known that they were living in complete dictatorship, the ballots would not have incited a public unrest. By lumping all past presidents together, including Mousavi and moderate Khatami, the author claims that the movement was only meant to topple the regime, and that the political figures are all "male concubines" fighting jealously over the love of the supreme leader.

This is political illiteracy and a lack of familiarity with the Iranian people's involvement in their political landscape. It is a disempowering conspiracy theory: the only powerful man is Khamenei and the rest are just fighting for his alms. Although Khamenei is, arguably, the most powerful man in the country, yet power is not centralized in Iran's complex political arena. Different military, paramilitary, private and political groups hold sway over Iran's oil-rich economy that relies heavily on imports of foreign goods in exchange for oil money. The "docufacts" that Amir alludes to, have reached him via citizen journalists. They are anonymous YouTube videos, unidentifiable tweets, amateur snapshots, and a plethora of blog posts that form the platform through which the story of Iranian dissidents reached a global audience. By looking closely at the phenomenon of "citizen journalism" or rather, what is more appropriately called "witness images," I argue that lack of careful scholarship will lead

to the fast spread of wrong, fraudulent, or life-threatening news items. These widespread images are usually decontextualized, partial if not biased, and are handpicked by the internet gatekeepers. Their perspective cannot form an accurate base of a docu-fiction, which makes references to documentary honesty nonetheless.

Docu-fiction

Amir Soltani has hinted in interviews that *Zahra's Paradise* was “inspired” by the plight of Sohrab Erabi, the 19-year-old man who “disappeared” during the Green Movement. “Inspired” here is a euphemism for “appropriated.” Scenes from the book have been directly inked from the quest of the teenager’s mother to find her missing son, available on social media.¹ Without directly crediting the grieving family whose story they abduct and “sell,”² or even trying to contact them, the authors appropriate the mother’s voice in this docu-fiction. The real Sohrab’s mother, Parvin, searched for her missing son for weeks after the popular uprising. After 26 days, officials produced his dead body to her for proper burial—with a bullet in his heart. The governmental bodies claimed that the enemies of Iran killed him in order to stain the regime’s reputation. This claim is not verifiable, but most probably fabricated. During the confusion of street protests, with millions of people walking in main streets, many criminal organizations abused the mayhem for personal advantage. In some Basijis’

¹ The scenes are available on YouTube as well as a host of other media such as Twitter, Facebook, and weblogs.

² Parvin is very vocal about her lawsuit against the murderers of her son. She is unafraid to talk about her son to foreign media. She has conducted phone interviews with the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America and numerous other channels. Finding her would only require a will, since she is the one seeking out an audience. Finding her would be especially simple for a human rights group that claims to investigate Iran’s government violations but apparently cannot contact a very visible victim’s family.

(militia) eyes, the protestors are Western spies or at best Westoxified.¹ The Basij resorted to violent means in dispersing the crowds. There is no accurate count of the deceased, but the opposition leaders claimed 72 people died, including the Basiji, those who died in the detention centers, or those who are missing.

The real Parvin's heart-wrenching public mourning as she departs with her teenager's corpse at Iran's largest cemetery, Beheshte Zahra (literally translated to *Zahra's Paradise*), before she faints from grief and groans on the coffin, is widely circulated on YouTube and marks the climax of the story of the fictional Zahra in the book. However, the author takes this story much farther.

There is an author embedded in the narrative: Hassan. He is the blogger through whose eyes the story unfolds. He is also the brother to Mehdi, the missing son. At the end of the story, he eventually leaves Iran on a donkey to gain refugee status in the American embassy in Turkey. Narrating the story through a blogger who has witnessed the events firsthand and then published the details as a citizen journalist is different from being on the receiving side of the blog in the U.S. and pretending to have been a witness. The Iranian/American author, Amir, joined with an Algerian/American graphist, Khalil. With the help of a self-identified but unnamed Jewish editor, they set to impose a coherent fictional narrative on fragmented images circulated online from the works of amateur Iranian citizen journalists. Here, I will quickly glance at the concept of citizen journalism to see if it can embody direct, unmediated, uncensored access to world events as they happen. Can citizen journalists

¹ Westoxified as a translation for *Gharbzadegi* غریزدگی, is term introduced by Jalal Al Ahmad. Other related words could be Westitis, Eruomania, or Occidentosis. The secular Iranian scholar saw Iran's modernization in tandem with a movement away from rich cultural traditions. He noticed a fascination with and dependence on the West to interpret Iranian and Islamic history, culture and literature.

and the cyber activists online create a shared community of affect, a Kantian *sensus communus*, as the one expounded by Rancière? I believe that the ease of access to information does not necessitate a shortcut to knowledge production. Quite the contrary, the link between information reception and its passive circulation via social platforms facilitates the possible transmission of unverified, potentially harmful, biased, *idées reçues*. I find Edward Said's broodings over the function of modern "scriveners"—instead of scholars—quite analogous and befitting the condition of online slacktivism as opposed to those who research oppression:

Knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously; they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *idées reçues*: what matters is that they are *there* to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically. (*Orientalism* 116)

The concept of "sharing" news links on Facebook, "retweeting" on Twitter and click-through activism seems reminiscent of the "silent, anonymous, uncritically repeated and re-echoed propagation of ideas" that Said bemoaned decades earlier.

This dissertation started with a firm belief in people's power to bring about democracy through dissensual engagement with the police state. Politics, as opposed to policing, does allow space for litigation, introduction of new voices and the presence of invisible bodies. The news produced and disseminated by the people promises to create a podium for the "voiceless masses." Citizen journalism can bring a "radical decentralization" allowing individuals to "bypass" political and corporate

censures (Deluca & Lawson 368). Such digital power can prove paramount for a “democracy to come.” However, with widespread and obtrusive governmental spyware embedded in the online cloud, it is too soon to celebrate the age of digital democracy or the immediate, unmediated access to world atrocities. In addition, the uncritical dissemination of the discourse of power accompanied by a blind enthusiasm for political causes can rip the social fabric and create the illusion of political participation. In reality, active participation is marred by click-through slacktivism, as it can spur actual participation on the ground. The illusion of political participation follows the dissemination of usually uncritical propaganda. The drive to galvanize the most number of viewers quickly usually precedes and outweighs careful investigation, contextualization, and validation of the accuracy of information dispersed. I do not want to rule out the emancipatory possibilities of the new technologies, they are easily understood and self-explanatory. Rather I point to the technology’s seductive pitfalls that can have devastating effects on the nature of human misery and its propagation. I question the validity of an unmediated circulation of news by the people—as anonymous digital witness narrative. The gatekeepers, governmental spyware, and the business model through which many online platforms hand-pick news raise flags, to say the least. To what extent can these forces actually restrict user’s ability to access news, is outside the scope of this dissertation. But accessing pure unmediated news from a neutral, disinterested view point has been always a challenge with the new wave of digital media.

Claims of authenticity

In numerous interviews, Amir Soltani has claimed that his book is based on a true story and that his characters are real. He claims that the fictional narrative reflects a historical event and thus documents human rights abuses:

Marjane [Satrapi]'s work left a deep impact on me. Satrapi's work was the voice of our generation with this difference that she utilises her unique personality, art and technique. The difference between the two works is that *Zahra's Paradise* is not a memoir. It is about a historical event. I wrote the book for human rights purposes. (Amir Soltani *Euronews Persian*)

Amir insists that "the characters are real—they are reflections of what happens to people after living for decades under tyranny" (Meredith May, 2012). In fact, some characters have been drawn from life. The villain in the story, a round-bellied Basiji member has been actually taken from the YouTube clip of Parvin enquiring after her son at Evin prison gates. Without knowing his exact position and authority, he is cartooned in a lifelike way albeit with a hairier body and fuller belly. The original YouTube video is not fully audible, but it can be inferred that the bearded man actually takes a long look at the photo presented by the mother and gives hope to the family that "it's almost done, soon we shall call you regarding their release." Choosing to draw a real man whose identity and official position is not clear to the authors is unethical enough. The bearded man is villainized in the book to the extent that the sexually graphic details of his alleged affair with a young modern woman are not spared the readers.



Figure 21 The face of this random official at Evin door is also used to create an illicit affair with a temporary wife.

From Zahra's Paradise © Amir& Khalil. Used with permission.





Figure 22 The authors appropriate the face of the unknown official as the villain in the story, who dismisses Zahra's pleas for help and mocks her plight.

The appropriation of his face without confirming his culpability is one thing, assuming that he is a sexual-beast who gives false promises to young women and cheats on his wife continues Orientalists conceptions regarding Muslim men. Based on a short, out of focus YouTube clip, the author and artist tarnish the reputation of a person, apparently in mourning himself. The book ends by almost forty pages of documents regarding the brutality of the Islamic Republic in suppressing dissent, anecdotes about rebellion, and a glossary of Persian terms and context. The documentation by an external humanitarian institute, the Boroumand Foundation, tries to add legitimacy to the fictional account. However, I wonder how accurately the website gathers information from inside Iran if they cannot do so little as contact the mourning mothers in Iran who are very vocal about their plight. Parvin takes every opportunity to raise awareness about the injustice she has suffered.

Amir was born in England but grew up in Iran up to the age of 12. He remembers passing by the Evin prison on his way to school. The most traumatic event he claims to have come across is the execution of “One of his schoolmate's grandfathers.” Can Amir be a reliable witness from such a vague and ambiguous stance? What are the relationships between the citizen journalist, the witness and the armchair activist?

Citizen Journalism: Democracy or Passive, Uncritical Recycling

According to Jay Rosen, citizen journalists are “the people formerly known as the audience,” who:

were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another—and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all* [emphasis in original].(PressThink, 2006)

The professor of journalism at NYU goes on to elaborate that “The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable” (PressThink 2006). The term *citizen journalism* gained prominence since the advent of 21st century with the public proliferation of the World Wide Web.

Citizen journalism “appeared to capture something of the countervailing ethos of the ordinary person's capacity to bear witness” (Allan, Encyclopedia entry). Recently there has been a spike in the celebration of the emancipatory potentials of the digital media in shattering the monopoly over the dissemination of news. The virtual world has the potential to provide a space/time for the invisible and the marginal to gain visibility and audibility and thus it is, in principle, a democratic instrument. Yet, there are drawbacks concerning the lack of persistent scholarship on the framed trauma presented in the era of fast-paced virtual headline war. The citizen journalist, as a participant in the street protests, has an invested interest in framing her footage. Mette Mortensen calls it a “partial, if not biased” perspective “due to the merging of participation and documentation” (151). Although professional journalists are partial

and may have a vested personal interest in their documentation as well, they are trained to look at both sides of the conflict and not participate personally in the dilemma they are recording. This is not the case most of the time, but the discipline calls for credibility and fairness to the enemy. Citizen journalists on the other hand can fall into the same perils of eyewitness narratives. Mortensen prefers to call “citizen journalism” as “eyewitness images” (151). This way, the amateur and possibly un-contextualized nature of the images is stressed:

Eyewitness images also share the traditional witness testimony’s subjective viewpoint and the partial, fragmented narration due to the ‘annihilation of perspective’ . . . involved in the personal investment and proximity to events. (*Citizen Journalism* 147)

There is something more than the common fragmented nature of witnessing involved in the circulation of online images of atrocities. There are many amateur snapshots of military presence in the city circulating anonymously online, without a particular audience or addressee. These clips from unknown authors to unknown viewers remind me of the Derridean letter without an address in *Signature Event Context*. Without the signature of the author and without a final reader, the letter will make sense because it is written by borrowed words that everyone understands; they are iterable. To be writing, “It must be repeatable-iterable-in the absolute absence of the addressee” (315). Thus in the online circulation images—in the absence of a producer’s signature, her intention, and even an audience—the clips become “citable, duplicable, or iterable.” From the stance of ethics, such ease of citation can prove deadly to a world used to exorcizing monstrous Others with or without a provocation.

It is interesting to note that, as Derrida also is aware, “iteration” comes from the Sanskrit word for “other”; iteration precludes othering from the start. There is an inherent othering in iteration and repetition.

Once the galvanizing effect of the visuals gain priority, alternative interpretations might appear less appealing. Models of framing and business orientation that are widespread in professional news organizations are also at play in the dissemination of citizen journalism. The merger of digital with the Humanities does not necessitate an immediate triumph of the democratic. The movement from data to knowledge requires a certain patient scholarship that is mostly short-circuited in the ephemeral online news carnival. The digital provides a platform, a new medium of communication that can reshape the transferred content but does not produce it. The same bigotry that is possibly present in framed, imbalanced, censored professional reporting can reappear to perform gate-watching for citizen journalism (*Citizen Journalism*). The gate watchers do not own the content but can handpick, highlight, or ignore the work of citizen journalists.

Citizen journalism is now established as a common, if not entirely reliable, news source for mega news stations. Citizen images carry an aura of unobtrusive access to the event itself. They have an air of rugged exposure, credibility and authenticity. However as recent scholarship pinpoints, they are also fraught with the same problems of framing that are common in the institutional news media. Amir and Khalil have composed *Zahra's Paradise* based on the endeavours of citizen journalists and thus have a claim to authenticity of their “witness account.”

Here I will look closely at the ambiguous concept of authenticity in witness accounts, as well as in journalism to discover the interventions that aesthetics can make in the discourse of power.

Case Studies of Catastrophic Cyber Enthusiasm—Innocent Lives Endangered due to Click-through Hypes

Hannah Arendt contends that the onlooker’s position to the world events is critical since “he could discover a meaning that the actors ignored; and the existential ground for his insight [is] his disinterestedness, his nonparticipation, his non-involvement” (*Lectures on Kant* 54). Arendt further elaborates that what elevates the spectator above the actor is that he:

occupies a position that enables him to see the whole; the actor, because he is part of the play, must enact his part—he is partial by definition.

The spectator is impartial by definition—no part is assigned him. Hence withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is a condition *sine qua non* of all judgment. (Arendt *Lectures on Kant* 54)

The actor, seeking fame depends on the opinion of the spectator, making the latter the standard. “And this standard is autonomous.” Here we arrive at the “supremacy of the spectator’s way of life . . . here one escapes from the cave of opinions altogether and goes hunting for truth” (55). These lectures delivered during the first semester of 1970 at the New School for Social Research were inspired by a political reading of Kant. I want to test to see if the internet activists who watch the news of world atrocities can function like the Kantian “disinterested” (impartial) spectators. To this end, I will

survey the manner in which anonymous, eyewitness images are disseminated worldwide along the reactions that they beckon.

The prime internet platforms for crowd-driven footage, news, or comments are: Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, Vine, Tumblr, Instagram, Vimeo, Eventbrite, Wikipedia, LinkedIn, the GNU Project, Linux, Pinterest, and Yelp (Deluca & Lawson 368). Twitter came to prominence during Iran's Green Movement to the extent that the movement was hailed as a "Twitter Revolution." The accuracy of that remark has been systematically disproven. In "The Twitter Devolution," Golnaz Esfandiari argues that Twitter's most prolific authors tweet in English, and claims that the most number of followers reside in Europe and North America. This is while young Iranian, ground-activists mostly talk and tweet in Persian—a language spoken less commonly by journalists—and thus have access to a far smaller circle of followers. In this case study, I would like to see how Twitter's recycling of gossip by "click through activists" mostly by users residing comfortably outside Iran, undermined the credibility of protesters inside the country. "Click-through activism" is the term used by Chris Csikszentmihályi, an MIT Civic Media affiliate to describe the participants who might excitedly look into an online group, then lose interest and flutter away toward something more stimulating (qtd. in Esfandiari). In some ways, he says, the ease of the medium "reminds me of dispensations the Catholic Church used to give"(qtd. In Esfandiari). Here, I will quickly glance at three different case studies that prove uncritical cyber activism is more lethal than beneficial, sometime even when users have humanitarian aims in mind.

One of the most proactive online accounts during the Green Movement was @Oxfordgirl with currently more than 18,500 followers. The Guardian describes her thus: “as the resident of a quiet village in Oxfordshire with a plummy accent to match, she makes an unlikely revolutionary” (2010). Regarding her activism, she says, "Before they started blocking mobile phones I was almost co-ordinating people's individual movements—'Go to such and such street,' or 'Don't go there, the Basij [militia] are waiting . . . It was very strange to be sitting in Oxford and co-ordinating things like that" (The Guardian 2010). Esfandiari doubts such claims especially because during most protests the mobile system was down, as the government tried to stop the people from organizing a regime change. This is while twitters from inside Iran who upload personal footage about the unrest remain in a small circle of followers. They usually write in Persian (Farsi) as they reside within Iran and would like to spread the word within the country to other protesters and prefer to stay anonymous. They may indeed write in English, but this has proven very much out of the ordinary at crisis times during a popular uprising. @Oxfordgirl is just one example among many who mediate the insider knowledge from a position outside the country. The click-through activists would receive her window of interpretation onto the events, and not firsthand impressions.

Rape/Burn scenario of Saeedeh and Mystery of Taraneh

A failed case of cyber enthusiasm (a term which gained currency through Evgeny Morozov), is Saeedeh PourAghayi who was introduced in social media as a daughter of a war veteran. The father was claimed to have suffered from chemical attacks by Saddam and died a martyr recently. The twitter followers of #iranelection introduced

her as a Green protestor, who was caught chanting *Allah-u-Akbar* on a rooftop. She was allegedly imprisoned, raped, killed, and burnt by acid by the paramilitary guards. Her case was hyped to an extent by cyber activism that Ahmadinejad's opposition leaders Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi attended her funeral. She was however, alive and well. She appeared on TV and confirmed that she had actually run away from home. She had run away several times before as well. But this time due to the chaos, her mother believed that she was shot during protests, a claim taken up by cyber activists and disseminated without a grain of doubt. Karroubi later confirmed that her father was not a war veteran and had died of natural causes. He expressed doubts regarding the unfolding of her story, especially about the possible unidentifiable body buried in her stead. The unconfirmed rape and burn scenario reached the US congress where Republican Senator Thaddeus McCotter brought a photo of Taraneh Mousavi as a token of regime brutality and a sign of Iran's rigged election. Taraneh's story unfolds like that of Saeedeh: she is allegedly raped and then burnt. However, unlike Saeedeh, no other photo of her is available and no one has claimed any relation to her. Ironically, McCotter, who was pushing for intervention in Iran, later had to resign from Congress due to pervasive election fraud. He never answered people's questions regarding his sources for Taraneh's case. When pressed, his secretary finally claimed they had no idea about where McCotter's claims came from. The Iranian government did stage an interview with an alleged Taraneh who resides in Vancouver, but such official steps in wiping out the existence of a person are deeply problematic. The image of a beautiful woman putatively named Taraneh still circulates online and is revered as a martyr of the movement. No one however has

claimed her image, like other victims, and no one has found any source about the murder scenario. She can be an ultimate muted victim or a baseless fabrication. The ephemeral dissemination of online news has not solved that mystery after 6 years.



Figure 23 U.S. Republican Senator McCotter with the only photo of Taraneh Mousavi. Her alleged murder, rape and burn has not been confirmed or logically denied to date.



Figure 24 Saeedeh Pouraghayi
 Left: her death notice,
 Right: her eventual odd appearance on TV

Neda Agha-Soltan; Victimized the Victim

Maybe the most devastating eyewitness clip from the 2009 movement was that of the death of a young, beautiful woman, named Neda Agha Soltan. Neda's video gained a "viral" spread online and galvanized world spectators unanimously. Neda died breathing through her own blood after being shot in the chest with a pro-government militia bullet during the 2009 street protests. She makes a brief appearance in *Zahra's Paradise*, as one of the ultimate victims of the 2009 uprising.

Neda which means "beckoning" or "a call" in Persian, became famous through her grainy, shaky, death video, full of screams and gore. Soon many political leaders such as Barack Obama, and even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad condemned the murder, calling for immediate action against the culprit(s); artists started making veiled and unveiled statues of her, the Iranian diaspora flattened her image into icons, printed it on "I am Neda" masks and held candlelight ceremonies for her (Naghibi "Diasporic Disclosures" 64). Neda became the iconic face of the movement, the ultimate innocent, angelic martyr of the brutality of regime thugs. Her image with one eye drowned in blood, while the other beautifully gazes upward is burnt in the popular imagination circulating the event. The death footage brought a world community of mourners together and incited Iranian diaspora to produce more works of art, and memoirs.

The tragedy of Neda's narrative consequently became a vehicle through which diasporic Iranians in particular began sharing their own life narratives not just through social media, but in documentary film, as

well as through more conventional ways such as the autobiographical memoir. (Naghibi *Women Write Iran* ch 1)

The effects of digital media in disseminating news and creating a shared community of spectators is indisputable. However, I found the response of many of the digital spectators fraught with misappropriation. The cause of the general fascination with Neda's death and various reactions from spectators is enigmatic. This is while other tragedies in the same week of her death, such as the death of 60 Pakistani civilians including women and children, go unnoticed. Aside from the common human sense of sympathy, the repeated reference of world spectators including politicians, artists and the Iranian diaspora to Neda points to her function as the symptom of an age of victimization of women under Islam. The observers return to her as obsessive subjects return to their left over symptoms, seeing in her their own lost causes, but failing to grasp or decipher the reason for such fascination. What makes a certain archetypal trauma—that of the death of a beautiful innocent young woman—galvanizing worldwide? But the drone aggression against a country not at war with us is deemed unworthy of media attention. In my opinion Neda is, unfortunately, the perfect victim, the case of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak “Subaltern” ii) she is the one who cannot represent herself, and thus she “must be represented” (Marx). Neda demands foreign intervention, she is a mirror onto which all human misery can be reflected, she is identifiable, relatable, mournable. Human rights has many interpretation, but in the case of intervention in Middle East, it has commonly become the “privilege of the avenger” while the “saga of a world cut into two becomes a war against terror” (Rancière *Aesthetics* 131).

Humanitarian intervention becomes a call for political and social consensus, the disappearance of difference and with it the disappearance of dissensus. The mission to bring about infinite justice becomes a trope for waging wars for those with “infinite rights” by those claiming the “absolute right of the victim” (116). However, cyber enthusiasts mistakenly put up the portrait of a different Neda—Neda Soltani—instead of Neda Agha-Soltan in order to mobilize public mourning (Naghibi “Diasporic Disclosures” 62). This resulted in Neda Soltani’s involuntary involvement in the cross fire of conspiracy theories between the Iranian government and the people. Not only on social media, but major news agencies were inappropriately showing her photo as the murdered Neda.

This young woman, Neda Soltani, sent out desperate pleas to news media and social media asking people to remove her picture from their blogs, websites, and videos, but her photo continued to circulate—in fact, many used her image as their Facebook avatars in a collapsing of their identity with hers, and her photo remains online in some places as the face of resistance and the Green Movement. (Naghibi “Diasporic Disclosures” 62)

One government-owned news agency Press TV, Iran’s first 24 hour English news channel broadcasted a long documentary on Neda with exclusive interviews with her relatives. They tried to prove their own message of conspiracies, calling the whole story “a plot by the West.” In this narrative, apparently, Neda was faking her own death but her partners decided to really kill her to prevent a leak. Others who believed in the sanctity of the Iranian Islamic Republic claimed that forces paid by Britain, the

U.S. or Israel shot at the protestors to tarnish the reputation of the government and incite hatred among the population. The government used this opportunity to invalidate the claims of the protestors. They then forced Neda Soltani to uphold the identity of Neda Aghasoltan, making the former flee the country to gain refugee status in Germany. She has recently published her memoir called *My Stolen Face (Women Write Iran Ch 1)*.

Neda Agha-Soltan may be the victim of Iranian government thugs, but Neda Soltani is a victim of the blind enthusiasm of galvanized spectators who are quick to take up a cause without completely understanding the situation. While twitter activists around the globe are gaining followers for taking up Iran's plight, people inside the country such as Neda Soltani and Saeedeh PourAghayi are being victimized due to the what Edward Said earlier called: "silent, anonymous, uncritically repeated and re-echoed propagation of ideas." Creation of Kantian *Sensus Communus* has prerequisites that are not met in the fast paced cyber news rush and pop-humanitarianism.



Figure 25 A Tale of Two Nedas
Left: Murdered Neda Agha-Soltan.
Right: The mistakenly mourned, yet alive, Neda Soltani.

Zahra's Conclusion

I argue that the Arendtian world-spectators are not the ancestors of the passive click-through activists of Facebook today. In order to deserve that title, a certain level of critical thinking is required. The scholarship and the quiet pensiveness that are the prerequisites of contextualizing a historical event is often absent from the consumers and recyclers of galvanizing events today. The process of nation building by watching atrocities through the internet can turn into a process of fortifying socially unacceptable stereotypes, popularizing gossip and stigmatization. Among the qualities to which Arendt refers as the criteria for world spectators who drive humanity forward by their analysis of the events are the spectators' "disinterestedness [impartialness], nonparticipation, and non-involvement" (*Lectures on Kant* 54). A citizen journalist filming police brutality through her cell phone is usually quite partial in the demonstration for which she has taken to the streets; she is an active participant and involved in its cause. The online watchers imagine themselves to be first-hand witness to the event from a neutral perspective. This is an age when the witness can circulate events as she watches them unfold through the frames of her cell phone camera; yet this clip will always remain fragmented, framed, partial, decontextualized unless rigorous scholarship precedes the conclusion. Citizen journalism, in this current form, is still in its infancy. I believe in its potential to offer a "radical decentralization" of institutionalized mega media corporations. However the amount of government censorship, spying, and threats online prevent the creation of a safe oasis for online activists. The gatekeepers of online platforms for the dissemination of news are quick to foreclose or highlight witness images according to their agendas. The business

model of many internet platforms for the dissemination of witness images hinders the public mutual sense of the e-community. The swirling of anonymous video clips online give the allure of first-hand witnessing while they may work toward appropriation of the other s' traumas, as well as projection, incorporation, decontextualization, and prejudice.

Amir and Khalil, by choosing a "dead puppy" analogy for the 2009 revolutionaries, defeat their own purpose of liberating Iran by active Iranians. The Iranian people however, have always compared the Green Movement to "the fire under the ashes": it seems subdued, but only a spark is necessary to set the world on fire again. The movement is not dead as the twitter activists imagine it. The movement is alive through the Iranian people's daily dissensus with authorities, pushing the boundaries of their rights and privileges. Contrary to the authors' claims, the enemy does not crystalize into one angry bearded Muslim man. Portraying the ultimate enemy as one archetypal Muslim man gives the illusion that by killing him, the inexplicable abuse will end. However, without an ethical bond and recognition of interdependence of people in a society, it is unlikely to be able to uproot a menace. It is as if by decapitating the leader, the society will be rid of all evil. Due to *Zahra's Paradise's* lack of an auto-critique, it is easy to project all the troubles onto the figure of a bearded man and its many reincarnations inside the regime. *Persepolis* and *Nylon Road* are careful not to externalize evil so easily. The evil that *Zahra* fears is in the eyes of the blog. The evil occurs when people stop believing that they are the creators of their own future. The community of connected senses, a *sensus communis* shapes and reshapes everyday with the majority of youths who are politically literated,

courageous, and free from the dream of a messiah, which comes to their rescue on a fighter drone. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Human rights, when taken up as a general rallying cry for territorial hegemony, turns into an alibi for a new *mission civilisatrice*. Human rights without a persistent scholarship, contextualization, and political literacy can contribute to further disenfranchisement. It is here that Rancière says human rights is the “privilege of the avenger” and the “saga of a world cut into two becomes a war against terror” (*Aesthetics* 131).

**Part III Diasporic Iranian Visual Literature Manifested in the Oeuvre of
Shirin Neshat: Photo-Poetry and Poetic Film**

The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

—Walter Benjamin “The Work of Art”

To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.

—Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (88-89)

The third part of this dissertation moves on from the medium of graphic novels produced by the Iranian diaspora to Shirin Neshat’s photography and film. Her art bespeaks the ancient language of visual icons, signs, enchanted gazes, and inhabitable realms of phantasmescapes and dreams. Although unabashedly mediated, her photgraphic “point blank” subjects depict the face/body of the Other with its incorrigible difference dangerously close-up. Neshat’s art reaches a poignant, poetic minimalism that functions through allusions, elision, and collage. Later, I put her feature film *Women Without Men* into dialogue with Shahrnush Parsipur’s eponymous novel and Forough Farrokhzad’s short documentary film “The House is Black.” This

way, the zones of the confluence of politics with ethics and aesthetic play are delimited in her abstract art.

Age of terror has been brought to the domestic space of the Western world through images. Images of violence and distant traumas abound in the popular imagination but not all incite a sense of curiosity, attention, and response-ability. What is it in the aesthetics of the images of Neshat that can bring the poetry of radical alterity to such intimate proximities, in order to foster an ethical bond with her subjects? To answer this question, firstly, I will survey the way-photographic images, in contrast to other media, represent the trauma of the Other, how the medium relays affect, awakens a response, or possibly reproduces the hegemonic discourse. In a quick review, I will grapple with concepts such as photography's clutch on truth, ethics of representation of alterity, photograph's inherent violence, space and skin politics, and finally test the power of images to create a shared community of humanity. After this familiarization with the nature of photographs, or what Sontag calls "memory freeze frames," (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 22) I take a closer look at Shirin Neshat's early photographic oeuvre, which depicts Muslim women, guns, and veils with a unique aesthetic poetry. I look specifically at one of her untitled photos that superimposes poetry onto the hand of a woman in order to understand to what extent the complex net of signification of another nation can be transferred via the medium of photo-poetry. For this face-to-face encounter with the armed yet alluring Muslim woman, I consult Emmanuel Levinas. His ethics stares into the naked face the Other, a face that shivers with an excessive exposure and vulnerability. This gaze onto the vulnerable, naked face of the Other urges violence while beckoning an ethical responsibility at once.

But before starting on Neshat, I would like to touch on and survey the contours of the photographic medium and its contribution to humanitarian discourse. Moving from the medium of graphic novels to those of photography and film, I wonder whether claims to truth can be made more directly here, thus creating a community of humanity through photographs.

Because commercial images have had a certain clutch on truth, the audience have lost faith in finding truth in images. Images of violence have been dubbed either intolerable, therefore receive an averted gaze, or ignored as “advertisement.” For an image regarding the trauma of an Other to receive its due attention, a fresh approach to the concept of distant traumas is required. What regime of representation is used to show the misery of others in which we might be complicit, even through our silence or lack of imagination? I believe that one cause for the failure of imagination is not generic apathy. For images of atrocities to hold the world's imagination, they have to use regimes of aesthetic representation in order to awaken a deep-seated curiosity regarding alterity. With reality shows, round the clock news coverage of decontextualized war footage, and the advertisement industry competing to sell their version of “truth,” images have started to lose their ability to shock and awe or to inspire curiosity, attention, and imagination. Even gory footage of civilian casualties is treated with either skepticism or an averted gaze (“The world is full of misery so I don’t need to know more.”) Aesthetics, on the other hand, as a reconfiguration of the common space, can do more than de/familiarize us with those who suffer. Images by Shirin Neshat, for example, bring us the radical Other—the armed Muslim Woman—to point blank immediacy, demanding an engagement through the faculty of

imagination, beckoning an encounter, a response-ability. With media desensitization, can the cult of the image be the catalyst of an aesthetic *repartage*?

Creating a Virtual Community of Humanity by Disseminating Images that Incite Curiosity and Attention

We are living in an era of the hegemony of images. Ocular-centrism, or the domination of sight, prevails over our private and public visibility. Visual communication has been arguably called a democratic means of connecting world spectators, who are themselves divided by language, geography, and social class. This is because the terrors and traumas of distant Others reach us through images. Sharon Sliwinski argues that images of atrocities regarded by world spectators during the past two hundred years have created a shared understanding of human rights violations in the world. Humanity is connected through the dispersion of such images:

Humanity is not simply given but rather exists only as a precarious, virtual community brought into being, in part, through our grappling with world events at a distance—in camera. (Sliwinski *Human Rights in Camera* 144)

Sliwinski re-visits several historical sites where the attention, recognition and the faculty of imagination of world spectators have advanced the formation of a “virtual community.” She points to the first great human rights intervention—that of the Congo Reform Association—in reaction to the abuses of Belgium’s King Leopold II. This first alignment of witnesses around the world has been instigated by what Sliwinski recognizes as images of violence doted on from afar. Critical distance is necessary for ethical imagination. It is the nature of trauma to disrupt vision. Cathy Caruth calls the

failure of vision in grasping trauma “the ceaseless betrayal of bodily sight” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 50). Our psychological defense mechanism prevents access to the moment of unbearable pain. The photograph of atrocity as witness “memory freeze frames” (Sontag) can bypass that defense mechanism and create a novel engagement with terror. The safe distance of an image and the absence/presence of violence *contained* in the frame allow for the working of the faculty of judgment. The fascination with gazing at violent, excessive imagery of ecstatic bodies in pain or pleasure is a recurring motif in the visual arts and literature. For Sontag, “It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. For many centuries, in Christian art, depictions of hell offered both of these elemental satisfactions” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 41).

Violence performed to the imagination through representation of the unrepresentable have been a long standing subject of enquiry for philosophers. It is the distance from this violence that allows the intellect to grapple with it and overcome it. Aesthetic photography provides this safe distance of contemplation. A Greek rhetorician, Pseudo-Longinus, has been credited with the first conceptualization of the sublime in literature. He looks at writing as the gateway to “great conceptions” that lead to transcendental pleasure. While for him the ecstasy of sublime leads to a loss of reason, it is Kant who categorizes it as a “twofold mode of representing an object” (*Critique* 78). In the Kantian sublime, in order for the “negative pleasure” to arise, the engagement with the sublime should be performed from a safe distance; otherwise aesthetic judgment cannot crystalize. This double process of attaining rational pleasure through a painful tear in the imagination is envisioned thus:

The feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no play, but a serious matter in the exercise of the imagination . . . since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, but it merits the name of a negative pleasure. (Kant *Critique* 75-6)

Standing against the sublime, violence is done to the imagination as it reaches its limits. The subject gasps. There is an initial feeling of terror in the utter un-representability of “the idea” to the faculty of imagination. It is the mind that recognizes this “supersensible” fissure. Imagination flutters and fails to perceive the magnitude in horror. This failure of imagination has been taken up as a complete failure of human ability to represent trauma by some critiques. Many believe that in the face of absolute terror, language completely halts, imagination withers and the tongue stutters. For me, the failure of narrating a cohesive tale can provoke the onrush of powerful feelings, a reaching out, through other creative means. Kant considers “imagination itself as an instrument of reason” and one which refines thought (99). The sublime points toward the power of mind to hatch and grow toward a higher purposiveness. To consider the sublime as an arrest of imagination in front of the unrepresentable does not do justice to the creative judgment in the spectator. For Rancière the utter un-representable is a function of terror. Everything is representable, he invokes, yet the regimes of making

present are what define the contours of the politics of aesthetics. Speaking against the utter unrepresentability of Holocaust, he claims:

it is because everything is representable, and that nothing separates fictional representation from the presentation of reality, that the problem of presenting the genocide arises. This problem is not to know whether or not one can or must represent, but to know what one wants to represent and what mode of representation is appropriate to this end.
(Rancière *Dissensus* 196)

The silence and stutter that accompany an encounter with the Lacanian *Real* can give way to “a discharge all the more powerful” of “vital forces” (Kant). The “ceaseless betrayal of bodily sight” (Caruth) in the face of terror can be doted on afar through aesthetically playful images that engage the faculty of imagination and reason, and thus, bypass the defence mechanism against distant dilemmas.

I opened this discussion by claiming that images of atrocities have stopped to engage the cultural imagination of the Western audience. Presented with raw footage of violence, the generic response is to express incredulousness or to look the other way. According to Rancière, this aversion is due to the lack of an appropriate aesthetic regime of representing atrocities. Analyzing a collage by Martha Rosler, “Bringing the War Home” in which a dead Vietnamese child is superimposed over a comfortable middle class house, Rancière analyzes the elitist method of displaying other’s sufferings. The artist here gives the question and the answer on the same page to the viewer. She chooses a regime of representation in which the engaged artist dictates: this is how you are supposed to feel: guilty of living in a luxurious house while

children are being killed. Such view of world-spectators as an ignoramus mass waiting for the wisdom of the artist to translate the world events is against Rancière's belief in the equality of intelligence. If the artist tries to raise curiosity as opposed to trying to enforce guilt, the artwork might engage the spectator's imagination more actively.

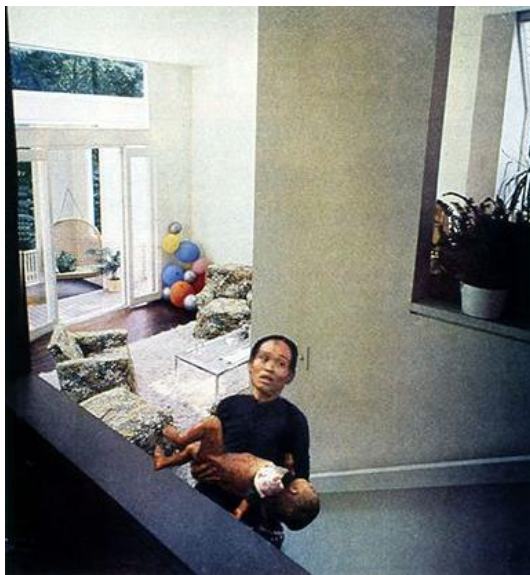


Figure 26 A photomontage that asks and answers a question on the same page.
 © Martha Rosler, "Balloons", from the series, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, 1967–72.

And this is one of the pitfalls of committed art; it presupposed that the audience are ignorant, emancipatory ideals should be dictated to them. The artist believes that by forcing the audience to view violent gory images, she can force them to understand the sordid state of the world. However, seeing intolerable images is not the answer to awakening public empathy. Aesthetics and its playful regimes of representation can help. In a chapter named "The Intolerable Image" Rancière contends that the depiction of raw violence is either de-contextualized, clouded by the voice of experts, or devoid of the voices of victims and thus rarely awakens real engagement in the audience:

The stock reaction to [intolerable/violent] images is to close one's eyes or to avert the gaze. Presenting an image of a traumatic incident does not guarantee or necessitate the "understanding" on the part of the viewer of the historico-political context of the world affairs that have led to such injustices. They do not even imply the viewer's sense of implication in the atrocities committed in the photo since in order for that to happen, the viewer must already feel guilty about standing there, in front of an image of trauma, and doing nothing about it. (Rancière *Emancipated Spectator* 85)

I argue that for the Kantian faculty of Judgment to function the attention and curiosity of the viewer must be incited through an aesthetic regime of representation, one that is fluid, poetical, playful. It is not that there is no engaged art. Art can be engaged without being Fascistic. A dictatorial art is based on an elitist binary: I, the intellectual will school the ignoramus masses about the shame of capitalism. This is while an aesthetic regime of representation does not dictate an affect but incites "curiosity and attention" in the audience:

I speak here of curiosity and . . . attention. These are in fact affects that blur the false obviousness of strategic schemata; they are disposition of the body and the mind where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know what it should make of it. Their tension also point towards a different politic of the sensible —a politic based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effect. Images change our gaze and the landscape of the

possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects. (*Emancipated Spectator* 104-5)

This curiosity and attention, this negotiation of proximity and distance are absent in the wide spread dissemination of images of atrocities in the media. Meaning is spoon-fed to the spectators by the omniscient voice of the expert, or the imbedded journalist. But spectators are not clean slates. Without an active engagement of the faculty of imagination, the possibility for the creation of that shared community of humanity diminishes. What Rancière is battling here, in my opinion, is visual dictatorship which dictates the “message” of the image. Images of violence disseminated in the news, without a historical context, or the voices of the victims/witnesses are prone to the averted-gaze phenomenon. This defense mechanism is rather recent, and rose with the spike in the appeal of images.

Only recently has humanity been able to visually witness distant crimes. In ancient times, oral narrative of the elders, as well as epic poetry, were reminders of crimes against humanity. Those who would survive a genocide, and witness a conquering army burning the libraries and building bridges of the defeated army’s skulls would tell of the plight of their people to others via tall tales. Still to this day, epic poetry which is memorized and narrated feistily in tea houses in Iran is a remnant of the classical survival and communication techniques. The *Shahname* or the “Book of Kings” composed in 1010 AD by the wise Ferdowdi is the oral history of Persia in epic verse. It visually (through miniature drawing) as well as verbally envisages wars, conquests, as well as the love-life of Iranian nobilities from antiquity to the Arab invasion in the 7th century. The approximately 100,000 lined poem of the polymath

revived the Persian language and invigorated a sense of Persian nationalism during those turbulent years. *Shahname* has been compared with the *Odyssey* in that it captures the spirit of a nation in its ancient songs. *Shahname* or *The Book of Kings* is the name of one of Neshat's photographic installations as well in the aftermath of the

2009 popular revolt as well. In this, she visits Iranians faces, at point blank, and inks their bodies with scenes of the historical resistance



Figure 27 Shirin Neshat inscribing Ferdowsi poetry onto her subject Roja in NY studio. From the *Book of Kings* collection. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts.



Figure 28 Miniature scenes from the battles in *Shahnameh* are painted over the subject's body.

©Shirin Neshat. "Mourners" from *The Book of Kings* collection. 2012. Gladstone Gallery.

of the people against conquering armies. Neshat superimposes the historical struggle of the people of Iran over the body of modern Iranian subjects who are currently battling against the oppressive regime. She does not equate the two but hears echoes from the forgotten battles that this resilient nation has endured in current day Iran. This is a photomontage in some way, with tenth century epic poetry enchanting twenty-first century subjects, but in an aesthetically playful manner. The subject could be read at once as political, aesthetic, and ethical. Neshat as usual asks questions without answering them, leaving space for viewer's imagination, identification or curiosity.¹ For those who are strictly interested in the question of politics, the truth in images is of prime importance. What truth do the photography of Neshat convey?

While epic poetry has not lost its purchase in the Iranian tradition, modernity brought a different spectacle to the attention of the world. For Susan Sontag, being a spectator of catastrophes taking place in another country is "a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists" (*Pain of Other* 18). With images, the wound is felt immediately, viscerally. But how true can this distant pain be?

¹ Reading the poems about national defence, courage, and honesty closely and relating them to the current day events of the country is another feat that an intrepid researcher can accomplish. It does not fit the scope of this research however.

Truth in Images

Whether shocking or not, images are relatively unbound by complexities of language in translation. The modern spectator sitting semi-comfortably before a screen is bombarded by images. Equipped with a remote control, a mouse, or a bag of pop-corn the spectator is anything but a clean slate, a quiet consumer. The images are diverse: advertisement, entertainment, news: bodies in pain or in pleasure. Although the advertisement industry, Hollywood included, have become more sophisticated at creating or rearranging desire, I believe that the human mind is not a *tabula rasa* to be imprinted by ads. The complexities of the human being to connect, empathize, and imagine differently can soar above the Hollywood brouhaha by using the faculties of imagination and reason. The usually safe spectator goes through this “quintessential modern experience” of peering into distant dilemmas with different eyes; voyeuristic, incredulous, skeptical, truth-seeking. The messy entanglement of photography with journalistic truth has urged a retreat from aesthetically pleasing in photography: if it is truthful it should not be beautiful. The “shady commerce between art and truth” (Sontag *Photography* 4) has penalized the aesthetically pleasing in favor of what is perceived to be the raw, rugged, naked Truth. But what are these truth for which we dismiss images of atrocities?

truths are illusions about which one has forgotten their origins;
 metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins
 which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer
 as coins.

We still do not know where the urge for truth comes from; for as yet we

have heard only of the obligation imposed by society that it should exist. (Nietzsche “On Truth” 46-7)

This quote by Nietzsche points to the metaphoric understanding of truth by human beings. It is always salutary to remember that truth can be truth claims, limited by frames and circumstances. The quest for truth in images is ubiquitous. I do not deny the urgency of presenting atrocities, but call on the aesthetics not to shy away from this responsibility in an ethical manner; one that does not compromise the intelligence of the viewer or try to sell guilt. Photographs dutifully “witness” and function as “evidence.” This might be because, as Sontag contends: “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (*On Photography* 2). With its claim to truth-content and mimetic honesty photography has become a witness to the traumas of the modernity and a documentation of the inhumanity of the human-animal; lest we forget. Their quality of being “a piece of the real,” a “trace” and “radiations of life” makes claims of authenticity. This is while each image is framed in a subjective perspective, cropped, focused, foreclosing the rest of the visible landscape. I call this intrinsic battle between objectivity and subjectivity of the photograph, its existential double bind.

Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. (Sontag *Pain* 26)

The truth that an artistic photograph emanates is not a juridical one. It is of the essence of time concentrated in a gaze, the eternal *Memento mori*, an air. Without

superimposition of a master narrative a meaning or a message—the selected images in this chapter speak with the ancient language of visual icons, signs, enchanted gazes, and inhabitable landscapes of imagination.

Ethics in Images; Levinas and the Danger in the Other's Face

Although unabashedly mediated, Neshat's frontal "point blank" images in *Women of Allah* collection bring the face/body of the Other, with its incorrigible difference, dangerously close-up. I will face radical alterity—with Emmanuel Levinas—in the self/portrait photography of Shirin Neshat. His philosophy of the face is useful in coming to contact with Neshat's Muslim women with guns. Levinas famously accounts for the face of the Other as the nakedness that beckons a deep seated violence in us. We are stopped by an internal ethical interdiction: "thou shalt not kill." That first instinct for violence is only checked by an ethical call for peace when encountering the vulnerable face of the other:

The proximity of the other is the face's meaning, and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms, which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself. This extreme exposure —prior to any human aim — is like a shot 'at point blank range.' . . . From the beginning there is a face to face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious

forsakenness. Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other. (*Levinas Reader* 82-3)

It is useful to gaze back at self/portraits of th an understanding of the ethical implications that this extreme exposure entails. Face (or the body) here is a synecdoche of the self and of being. In the Levinas oeuvre, the face is “naked, destitute, defenseless, vulnerable, mortal,” and “exposed to an invisible death,” to “a mysterious forsakenness.” Portraiture of radical others are suitable venues to test the urge for destruction and violence that Levinas bemoans, and the terror that resides in the world. The photograph initially distances us because it is a foreign object, a flat representation of what is assumed to be “reality”—so even before we grapple with the photograph’s content we are confronted by its own strangeness, in an uncanny way.¹ On a slightly different angle from Levinas, I believe that gazing at the eyes of the Other, it takes but a split second to identify or disengage with their alterity. The image, with or without its plastic features, emits clues that demarcate our distance / proximity to the other: gender, race, age, social class, air, attire. It is the proximity or distance from which we locate our subjectivity that triggers or neutralizes the initial urge for combat. For Levinas, the urge to harm is hampered by the ethics of responsibility. This responsibility toward alterity is a demand, a fact, a bond. “An ethical philosophy of responsibility grounded in the phenomenology of the face” is a central concern for him (*Otherness than Being* 3). He quotes Dostoyevsky as saying: “We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others” (In *Ethics and Infinity*).

¹ Thanks to Dr. Blackmore for suggesting this connection.

This sense of ethical responsibility for the Other, which is not a reciprocity, is a primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity:

I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed. (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*)

I will here delve deeper into the connection between images of face of the Other, death and aggression.

Image and Death

In her last monograph published in 2003, before her death from cancer, Susan Sontag writes: “Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death” (*Regarding Pain* 24). Portraiture, specifically, manage to freeze an instant in time, while the source of that radiation ages or dies. Those photographed faces, nonetheless, become sockets of affect and temporality.

Photography is a gift from the advances in technology. Walter Benjamin cautiously hails the advent of new technology and the mass accessibility of the arts, claiming that they are freeing humanity from its dependence on ritual function, religion or superstitious cults:

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual . . . But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to

artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.

(Benjamin IV)

However, the religious, the magical, even the auratic, do not just melt away with the advent of photography. Benjamin himself attests to this: “For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty” (VI). So the face, or the gaze, can be the repertoire of magic, aura, air, or ritual, despite the photographic battle with authenticity. Regarding the portrait of loved ones kept close at hand, Susan Sontag believes: “all such talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical” (12). The photographic faces of Shirin Neshat bring together the religious and the magical, the violent and the aesthetic.

Punctum & Studium in Neshat’s photography

The evocative, or rather, provocative texture of Neshat’s art stems from its capacity to present a simple archaic binary and at the same time, shatter it to a million fragments with an aesthetic *punctum*. Standing still in front of her oeuvre, armed (with theory, stigmas, suspicions) the spectator is drawn-in by the familiar, minimalistic, dialectic of all her favourite universal binaries: man/woman, life/death, black/white, private/public, illusion/reality, beauty/violence.... All of a sudden a different plane of cognition, a detail, an anomaly, pierces the visual/audial field, which playfully and teasingly subverts and displaces the hierarches established by the ancient dichotomy. It shakes the firm ground under the viewer’s feet, disarms the critics, and shuttles her from the comfortable familiarity of the known to the uncanny strangeness of

nightmares, or daydreams of a collective, affective, unconscious. I borrow the Greek term *punctum* from Roland Barthes' phenomenological reading of photography in *Camera Lucida*. Like all borrowed tools, it is modified slightly so that it fits within my purview. Barthes describes the *punctum* as a: "sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (*Camera Lucida* 27). The spectator's position within a specific cultural milieu, her personal investment, and repository of cultural imagination will aid her to find a unique, piercing *punctum*. The distinctive function of this "detail," which in my reading, is a different plane of the sensible (poetry, aesthetics, self/portrait, music), is that it carries the spectator and the art—*beyond*:

The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward "the rest" of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a praxis, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.
(Barthes *Camera Lucida* 59)

In Barthes' lexicon, the *studium*—the subject matter—can be jarring in many images, it cannot necessarily wound the affective unconscious.

The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like / I don't like*. The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, —not—of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demivolition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds "all right." (Barthes 27)

The *studium* is deliberate, culturally specific, coded, it “pleases or displeases” without “pricking.” The spectator glances through “loud” images of violence quickly, averting the gaze here, moving on. But piercing images linger with the viewer long after the eyes are shut. Their imprint burns on the affective unconscious a negative that—just like an encounter with the Real—demands re-vision. This encounter with the uncanny asks questions, beckoning a reply. Neshat’s art does not spit back a regurgitated answer to the viewer. After all, it is my eyes that re-view the vibrating superimposed planes of reality. “I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own” (Barthes 51).

Chapter 4 Shirin Neshat's Politi(cized)cal Aesthetics

This chapter brings the visual art of Shirin Neshat under critical attention. Neshat's subjects shuttle between symbols of femininity, violence, eroticism, and poetry in order to parcel out a new humanity for the represented Muslim woman. In the words of Audre Lorde, Neshat "gives name to the nameless," to imagine alterity anew, to change our gaze and envision a different landscape for ethics. In a face-to-face encounter and through an excessive exposure to Neshat's mysterious women, a rearrangement of desire occurs that can crush notions of proximity and distance with alterity. When in contact with radical alterity at point blank, Levinas reminds us about an ethical philosophy of responsibility. The distance from which we locate our subjectivity against the Other triggers or neutralizes the initial urge to combat. Aesthetics, politics, and ethics can reverse and readjust problematic hierarchies and partitions that we draw with the one outside the self. Inscribed over Neshat's women bodies are the material history of Iran in its condensed form. Their photographed bodies become "the inscribed surface of events" (Foucault) glowing with poetry, violence, seduction, enigmas, religion as well as myths.

In this chapter I look at her controversial debut photographic collection *Women of Allah* and then move to her feature film *Women Without Men* in the following chapter. I argue that through the work of Neshat, the Other is brought to a face-to-face encounter which beckons an ethical response-ability. Inspired by Levinas, I consider Neshat's intimacy with the radical other through self/portraiture a daring move that "objectifies in order to subjectify" (Barthes). What distances her work from claims of tokenism and *kitchness* is the aesthetic regimes with which she superimposes layers of

verbal and visual poetry in such a way that annuls the possibility of fixing a quick prejudice or meaning over the work. The photographs and poetry instigate curiosity and attention regarding the aesthetic world with which we are unfamiliar. Neshat's subjects violently traffic between "Eastern" and "Western" iconography, tradition and modernity, religion and superstition, conformity and revolt. The binaries are again strategically and payfully drawn to be shattered.

Shirin Neshat's artistic and actual persona occupies an irreconcilable paradox for me. On the one hand, as a charismatic cult figure, she is one of the few artists that continually challenges, critiques and analyzes her own work, impelling herself to move from one visual medium to another. On the other hand, as a public speaker, she resorts to the "grand and bland" tales of Muslim women's subjugation. Her masterful adoption of "aesthetic regimes of representation" confuses and plays with easy binaries and dichotomies regarding agency and subjecthood. When I first attended one of her popular public speeches on the binaries between West and Muslim women, I immediately thought of those native informants who "identify a middle class readership and then pander skillfully to its whims," (Holland & Huggan viii) and cash in on what I call a First World Compassion-Industry. Despite being a charming speaker, in "parole" she fortified the binaries that she dismantles in her artwork. But tagging her as a native informant does not do justice to her multifaceted art-work. Of course, the concept of native informant as delineated by Spivak is not an alien one with regards to the Iranian diaspora artists in general. There are quite a few Iranian authors, who by holding a distorted mirror up to the narcissistic/paranoid cultural imagination of their target audience, fatefully reproduce the fears and anxieties about

“the generic terrorists” that have already been instilled in the popular imagining through coercion and consent. Native informants can definitely produce “an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to ‘other’ cultures, peoples, and places,” ab/using “the defamiliarizing capacities of travel writing” (Holland and Huggan viii). I consider Marina Nemat’s *Prisoner of Tehran* and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as such examples in that they use the selfsame rhetoric against Islam as the American propaganda/war machine. Both authors coming from the elite higher middle class families are alienated from the concerns of their population and uphold a “white feminist” framework for understanding the situation in Iran. Not a few of such works have proved as manna for the war mongers in the government. Politicians take up such rhetoric as proof of the righteousness of their paranoid attitudes against the new Other of the West: the Muslim Terrorist, a term that mistakes religion for political dispute.

Spivak, herself, does not shy away from implicating herself in the object of her critique. She docket a “class apartheid,” in which the cultures of class and access to discourse are often more important than East/West coordinates. She borrows the problematic term “Native Informant” from ethnography to describe a person given the space and time to speak on behalf of her ethnic group or nation. This is typically done for the benefit of the Western intellectuals/audience. The term denotes the informants from the Third World diaspora living in the West. Spivak cautions against making marginality fashionable and against pedestalling the native informant’s voice to that of the representative of an ethnic minority. As Ilan Kapoor and a plethora of other

critiques after Spivak have noted, if ethnicity is used as a token or a badge, it runs the risk of essentializing one's ethnic identity and romanticizing national origins.

It was in this spirit of disdain that I first beheld the now renowned photographs, videographic installations and the feature film of Shirin Neshat. However, the poetics of her visual world transformed my judgment. In the words of Levinas, she brings the Other in a face-to-face encounter, in a way that one enters into an ethical discourse with what may have been excluded from the domain of the human. This address, to an Other, is the condition that makes discourse, even language possible. On the other hand, she puts in juxtaposed visibility the realm of the poetic with the visual. The interstice creates a different dimension for toppling of fixed hierarchies. As a multifaceted artist, Neshat has an access to the "hermetically sealed culture" (Dabashi) of Persia and possesses the artistry to bring that sealed culture to visibility in the globalizing market of art.

Born in the small town of Ghazvin, Iran in 1957, she left the country at the age of seventeen on the advice of her physician father who had a preference for Western education systems. Even in Iran, she attended a Catholic boarding school in Tehran (away from home) which plagued her with a life-long anorexia. Almost six years before the revolution of 79 against Shah, she left Iran as a teenager for the U.S. and did not return for decades later only to be shocked at the pre and post-revolutionary atmospheric change. This homecoming-shock condensed visually for her in the new Islamic dress codes, war propaganda, and skewed relationship between the sexes. Not only had she missed out on the blooming of a nation into a body of dissent against the monarch, she also did not witness how an internationally isolated country had to battle

against Iraq and the world using aesthetic means of gaining public support. What impacted her unique style “wasn’t just the revolution,” she clarifies.

It was all these years of war with Iraq... years of grief...

In a very strange way I was envious of them... . In looking at how profound their experience had been, I felt so very much an outsider and so stupidly narcissistic. (Enright and Walsh)

She had escaped the terrorizing as well as enchanting war years. This enchantment came from a sense of belonging to a national community that only a war or national trauma can foster; the sense of belonging to a unique society, for which you are willing to give up your life. She did fortunately miss the bombardment by Saddam’s planes over cities in Iran. But with that, she also missed the war chants and icons that incited the youth to “kill or be killed,” in order to defend the motherland. She missed the women taking to arms in the absence of men to act as guardians of the sacred garden: their homeland. In those violent but formative days the social fabric of the new Iran was being woven. She missed the songs that bound the people together, the resilience and communality that is almost only possible during war time. Her sudden artistic outpour after a decade of productive silence was this urge to re-connect with the lost culture through her artwork. She meant specifically to make sense of the role of women in defying the gender norms by actively participating in the “sacred defense” of the homeland. After the war against what appeared to be the whole world, the women started their own private war against oppressive laws.

Twenty years after the debut of her *Women of Allah* photographic collection, Neshat is now among the most well-known speakers at art venues on all matters

pertaining to Iran/Islam/Women, and the recipient of numerous international awards.¹ Her photography, video and sound installations have been purchased by major art institutions and museums, including the Guggenheim, the Whitney and the British Museum. Cindy Sherman was the first person to buy her photography from the *Women of Allah* series. Neshat is one of eight female artists referenced in a critical retrospective of women artists and their influence on contemporary art. Entitled *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, and co-edited by Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal and Sue Scott, this collection surveys the work of women artists at their full artistic potential, ones who help inform American contemporary art and its global impact. Neshat is rubbing shoulders there with Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, Marina Abramovic, Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith. Some critics believe that Neshat's recipe for success is using the most vicious orientalist discourse against Muslim/Iranian/Women in her speeches and the narrative of some of her installations. Strangely, it is only through a break from the didactic-mimetic regimes of narrative and leaping to the uncharted territories of the poetico-aesthetics that she haply morphs into the painter of a new polychromic constellation. Although when talking about her artwork and in some of her visual grammar she adheres to a reductionist binary between a veiled=oppress(ive)ed, and

¹ These awards include but are not limited to: the First International Prize at the Venice Biennale (1999), the Grand Prix at the Kwangju Biennale (2000), the Visual Art Award from the Edinburgh International Film Festival (2000), the Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography in New York (2002), the ZeroOne Award from the Universität der Künste Berlin (2003), the Hiroshima Freedom Prize from the Hiroshima City Museum of Art (2005), and the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize in New York for beautifying the world and helping mankind (2006). The last award has also been awarded to Arthur Miller (1999) & Chinua Achebe (2006).

Western=emancipated, the aesthetic language of her artistic work since 1995 sings an unworldly, reworlding song.

Neshat launches her artistic career with a collection of photographs entitled *Unveiling* in 1991 as a part of a larger series of the *Women of Allah* that took over the art venues in 1995. In this which she depicts (mostly) herself clad in her signature black chador, guns at hand (or held by feet, placed behind the ear, etc.) and literarily inscribed with untranslated Persian scriptures. Neshat's oeuvre is dynamic and defies easy categorization. It is not bound to photography and film. From a Shakespearean Ballet choreography of the *Tempest* in Amsterdam(2014) to depiction of tribal love songs and courtship ritual of elderly in Laos in her *Games of Desire* collection, her signature is made unique, via her attention to the poetics of the mundane, by liberating dichotomies as well as by a relentless attraction to themes of love accented by a restless exploring spirit. As I argue later, the colour of her palette is tainted with the selfsame spectrum of the female modernist poet Forough Farrokhzad. Neshat composes the embodied fundamentals of humanity under strains of a collective nightmare. A non-exhaustive list of her artwork runs as follows:

Photographic Collections:

Unveiling/Women of Allah (1993-7), Games of Desire (2010), The Book of Kings(2012)

Videographic installation (short films):

“Turbulent” (1998), “Rapture”(1999), “Soliloquy” (1999), “Fervor” (2000), “Passage” (2001), “Tooba” (2002). “Logic of the Birds” (2002).

Mahdokht (2004), Zarin (2005), Munis (2008), Faezeh (2008),
Possession (2009)

Directed films:

Women Without Men (2009) based on a novel of the same name by
Shahrnush Parsipur (1990). *Illusions and Mirrors* (2013) featuring
Natalie Portman.

Omm Kolthum (project at hand)

Here I will examine the collection that introduced Neshat to the world of the
visual art.

Women and War; Socio-political context for Neshat's *Women of Allah*

In order to grasp her allusions to armed Muslim women, I have identified two
significant streaks in the highly metaphorical collection: the concept of Shi'ite militant
women, as well as modern Persian poetry. Forough Farrokhzad¹ the most renowned
female/Iranian modernist poet lends her imagery, atmosphere, and actual words to the
enigmatic work of Neshat. The influence of poetry in general and Forough in
particular are studied in the context of Neshat's oeuvre.

Neshat draws a parallel that playfully parcels out a different agency for her
veiled figures. The Eight years of Iran-Iraq war acquainted women with guns. In the
absence of young men (killed in millions due to an imposed war), "*Women of Allah*"
become the guardian of the land and its green memories. Despite presupposition that
Iranian women are absent from the country's historical armed struggles, their support
or lack thereof is the secret cause for the success/failure of all Iran's revolutions. Time

¹ Iranians call her by her first name, "Forough," as a sign of endearment.

and again Neshat confesses that the photo collection was shot in order to acquaint herself with the enigma of the Muslim Iranian woman: on the one hand she is covered from head to foot, on the other, she takes to arms and defends the land, all the while shuttling between subjecthood and objecthood by a certain poetics. Women in Iran have been the sign posts of the governments' ideology. Imposed dress-codes, on the one hand, hamper the woman's bodily visibility in the work force, and on the other, boosts it. Despite the forced modernization of Reza and Mohammad Reza Shahs, Iran was a country which cherishes its traditional beliefs. Among them was the reverence of modesty, chastity and decency in women, which have always been playfully subverted. These traditions are not confined to religious beliefs. They are an amalgamation of *Adab* (or the proper conduct), *Adabiat* (Literature, aesthetics which plays a significant role in the Iranian sense of national identity), culture (or what Said calls systems of friendly inclusion and "hegemonic" exclusion. In Iran, it has been tweaked for survival purposes), myths, oral traditions, and the unofficial knowledge below the hearts and homes of people as discussed *a la* Foucault in *Persepolis*. The imposed dress codes after the revolution in many respects facilitated the parade of women in the public space—with "decency." It liberated many house bounded women to explore the streets outside, without being tarnished by tags of immodesty. No longer were women called "streetwalkers" if they worked in offices or had a bold presence in the shared space of the community. "Properly clad," they took to arms to defend the country in times of invasion, peopled universities, became surgeons, lawyers, engineers. In post revolution Iran more than 60 percent of university students and thus

degree holders are female. With the drastic rise in women's postsecondary education, a new wave of gender-oriented dissent against the government rose.¹

Significance of poetry for Neshat

Poetry, as an aesthetic re-arrangement of the audiovisual field fares greatly in her installation. Even her feature film, analyzed in the next chapter, is imbued with a feminine poetics:

Perhaps this clear and long interaction of poetry with, and within, other art forms explains our implied acknowledgement that poetry exists independently of any one medium and that therefore film, too, can be poetry. (Harrington 176)

Poetry is part of the photographs in the collections. Especially prominent are the verse of the most renowned female Iranian poet Forough. I argue that, not only the poems themselves are embodied in the photographic collections, videographic installations and feature film, but the aura of the poems have been metaphorically incorporated into the fabric of the art work. The stylized and visually haunting world that Neshat brings to life, tastes, smells and feels like the world of Forough's poems. In vibrant words of Audre Lorde:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the

¹ BBC claims that the number of women graduates in some subjects is as high as 70%: "Women Graduates challenge Iran."

way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (*Sister Outsider* 36)

Forough was a pioneering female poet in Iran's long tradition of versification. She "gave name," to the nameless as Lorde suggests. She gave name to feminine erotics and above that, humanity's embodied solitude with its simple pleasures and deep tears. Forough's poetry was her own way of survival, a new birth that is compared to procreation, vegetation and growth. Over the course of her twenty-year career, Neshat does visit other classical poets as well. Some of her photo and film collections feature prominent ancient Persian poetry books. These include *the Book of Kings* by Ferdowsi and the *Logic of the Birds*. The latter is a multi-media performance that borrows its title from the magnum Opus of the 13th century Persian poet, Attar. In this long poem, a large number of birds embark on a self-discovery voyage to find the mythical *Simorgh* (Phoenix), the everlasting bird of fire that rises from its own ashes. At the end of the journey, only thirty birds remain: in Persian *Si Morgh*. These thirty bird are the *Simorgh* themselves, (a pun on the word thirty-birds which is the same word as phoenix in Farsi) they just needed the trial of the dangerous voyage to discover themselves as the object of their discovery quest. Playing on the Persian pun, the poet connotes that the prize of your quest is within you, discover yourself, to discover eternity. The voyage of self-discovery that opens forking gates within, as much as it looms without, inspires Neshat on her own artistic Odyssey. Her *Logic of Birds* is accompanied with singing, Sufi dancing and performance by the renowned vocalist Susan Deyhim in front of three screens depicting dream-like films. However, what

gives Neshat's work an uncanny poetics is her bond with Forough's unabashedly feminine universe.

Poetry of Forough; Poetics of the Feminine

I argue that Forough affected the accent, color, and atmosphere of the artistic production of both Shahnush Parsipur and Neshat. Forough Farrokhzad (1935-67) the most prominent 20th century Iranian poet, is the most iconic female poet of Iran's millennia old (male dominated) poetic tradition. Poetry is not just a literary form reserved for the elite or the *avant garde* in Iran. It is arguably the most constitutive part of an Iranian sense of identity. Poetry is a way of life, a survival instinct which makes it possible to bear life's fair share of hardship and yet dream of transcendental beauty. In the Rancièrean terms, it is a reconfiguration of the space of possible and sensible. The young and the old, the educated and the illiterate, across the social divide, each have a reservoir of memorized verse used on a regular basis to make sense of the situation at hand. In the words of cultural critic Hamid Dabashi:

Iranians take poetry quite seriously, a habit that tends to lend a certain poetic diction to our historical recollections, the way we remember ourselves. If jazz is the cadence of American culture . . . then Persian poetry is the pulse of Iranian culture, the rhyme and rhythm of its collective memory. It is said that what Muslims do is not memorize the Qur'an but Qur'anify their memory. If that is what Muslims do, then that must be what Iranians do too with their poetry, when they remember their past as the poetic resonance of their present—in fact, of their presence in history. (Dabashi *A People Interrupted* 13)

Poetry creates a shared community of aesthetics in Iran. It is as important as the bread on the table, and the lover by the side. For example in the playful quatrains of Persian polymaths, politician, and astronomer Omar Khayyam (11—12 Century AD):

A book of verses underneath the bough,
 A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou
 Beside me singing in the wilderness—
 Oh, wilderness were paradise enow (XII)

Even with the onset of the Islamic Republic, Persian poetry which is overflowing with carnal and spiritual desires, with wine, dance, lovers, music, and with its non-conformism to religion and politics still found its way to official children's school books, universities and the publishing houses. Verse has a flexibility to “playfully” escape censor. This is language distilled into a creature that cannot be tamed or pinned down into a single meaning. It cannot be defined. After all it was Oscar Wilde who reminisced that “to define is to limit.” In Iran, even politicians use poetry in their speeches to indicate their ties to the culture. Iran's minister of foreign affairs for 16 years, Ali-Akbar Velayati, who is also the councillor to the Leader was the subject of hearty laughs and public ridicule as he stumbled on, and ended misquoting a line of Hafez verse (almost a graver blasphemy than stuttering on a verse of the Qur'an). Rumi, Hafez, Attar, Sa'di, Ferdowsi, the list of more than thousands of master poets have not only provided Iranians with a sense of belonging to a community of aesthetics, they have also passed down visual metaphors cherished or challenged by younger poets of contemporary generation. Forough is an heir to such a visual poetic

tradition. A fatal accident at the age of 32 ended a 15-year-career in poetry composition, theatre performance, translation, and film direction. Forough's persona has a revolutionary impact on the generation of artists, especially women after her. The visual art of Shirin Neshat and the novels of Shahrnush Parsipur contain distinctive motives that have a Foroghean accent. Abbas Kiarostami, the internationally renowned Iranian filmmaker, quotes one of her poems in the entirety—"The Wind Will Carry us Away"—in an eponymous film. Forough's short documentary film, "The House is Black" debuted Iran's now globally recognized New Wave cinema. Not only has Neshat's aesthetics been inspired by that of Forough, but her poetry itself is an integral and arguably the most central part of Neshat's photography, installations and the feature film. In an interview with *Border Crossings* magazine, Neshat rejects a Kafka and Rumi influence over that of Forough:

-Border Crossings: There is something positively Kafkaesque about "The Last Word" [one of Neshat's videographic installations]. The way the woman is treated by the interrogator seems to come entirely out of Kafka.

-Shirin Neshat: Well one of the major influences I had, and continue to have to this day, was the poet Forough Farrokhzad, who died when I was only 10 years old.

. . . At that time [of Forough, before the revolution], we were a very progressive society and were quickly becoming Westernized, but there were still religious and social taboos about women speaking openly about sexual issues, about the body's temptation and about love. She

was immediately considered a whore, but nevertheless she became a ground-breaking writer. She is one of the figures I became very close to—not just me, but a whole generation of younger artists and writers as well.

-BC: Would you gravitate towards [Forough] Farrokhzad more than Rumi because she's a woman and a contemporary poet?

-SN: Absolutely, as opposed to Shoja [Neshat's partner], who is well read in the classics. My tendency was for more contemporary, darker, sadder and more melancholic writing. (Enright & Walsh 2009)

The *Women of Allah* collection (1993-1997) is dedicated to Neshat's familiarization with the role of women in the eight years of imposed war by Saddam Hussein against Iran. Recent declassified CIA files confirm the aiding of Saddam by the CIA in Chemical Weapons attacks against Iran and Iraqi Kurds. Armed with Forough's prognostic poetry, Neshat's arduous subjects morph into the guardian of the invaded garden, the endangered homeland. No longer the mute, immobile victim as imagined in the Western unconscious, these Muslim women have a different story to tell. These women might be Muslim, but they have a certain erotics in their camouflaged bodies, their gaze speaks louder than their closed or covered lips. The words are inscribed on their bodies, as poetry, as tradition. Forough, whose poetry is widely used by Neshat is known to be the first female Persian poet to have sung of intimate, visceral, female experiences after a millennia of male dominated poetic tradition. There were many female poets before Forough, but none had the distinct, confident, female voice of Forough.

Besides Forough, during the turbulent heydays of the revolution and war when the disparate social stratum were unified under the symbols of Shi'ism, a revived ideal of womanhood appeared. These strong women were called the Zeynab-like women. Neshat had the strong sight to capture this particular revolutionary figure in her debut collection.

Warrior Shi'ite Women; the *Zeynabs*

The Women of Allah are the post-revolutionary Zeynabs. In order to understand the rise of powerful veiled women in Iran—and to a lesser extent in the Islamic world—it is vital to be aware of the link between women and war in Islam. In the Shi'ite Iranian tradition, the most iconic Muslim woman is the figure of Zeynab the Great, and her mother Fatima. The tragedy at Karbala, not only is the nexus for the growth of Shi'ism, it is a trauma passed down and narrated by a *woman*. Every year during the Ashura mourning season, street dramas of the event are recreated and the tales retold. I will only glance at the role of Zeynab, the woman who kept the trauma alive for the Shi'ites, in order to understand the woman at arms in Neshat.

After the assassination of her father Imam Ali—the 4th caliph of Islam—as he led the Morning Prayer in a mosque—Yazid the son of the second Caliph claimed the throne of the world's largest and wealthiest empire in 7th Century A.D. . Ali was the son-in-law of Mohammad, a scribe to the illiterate prophet as he narrated the revelations, and a poet and scholar whose books such as the *Sea of Wisdom* are still revered today. Shi'ites believe that he had been stripped of official service after the death of the prophet due to Ali's justice seeking qualities that incited vengeance in the wealthy empire. Hasan, Hussein, and Zeynab, the children of the martyred Ali, and the

beloved grandchildren of Prophet Mohammad, did not pledge allegiance to Yazid who was known to be a corrupt and tyrannical leader. To join forces with other insurgents and rise against the usurpation of power by Yazid, the three children of Ali and their supporters were invited by the town of Kufa in Iraq to form an alliance. Zeynab leaves (probably divorces) her husband to join her brother's marching caravan of political rebels. However, as the caravan reached midway, stranded in a desert, the Kufis betrayed their oath to Hussein and instead, take allegiance with Yazid. They ambush Hussein in Karbala, set a siege on the families for a few days, cut their water supply and violently kill, loot, and burn the starving caravan, women and children included. Zeynab is a survivor and a witness of the tragedy at Karbala. She takes a proactive role in narrating the injustice that befell on the house of Mohammad. She risks her life to save and nurse their ailing brother Hassan, through whom the bloodline of Mohammad's children survives for the Shi'ite believers. When brought to the foot of Yazid to plea for her life, she stands strong to eloquently and vehemently reprimand him, delivering a fiery speech in front of a large audience of men. Yazid unbinds and frees her after the speech, fearing more protests to his weak rule. She dies six months later from sorrow, as she was a witness to the assassination of both her parents, her brothers and all their children. At the age of 7, she saw her mother Fatima's murder, as her pregnant body was crushed behind a door that she tried to hold locked. Later, she lived through the ordeal of her father's assassination during his short caliphate. As a great scholar and the first Muslim man, Ali had grown up in the house of Mohammad. After the prophet's death, he had been refused power for 25 years. She also witnessed the violent slaughter of her brothers, her children and their children. The Shi'ite

religion of dissenters would not have been created had it not been for Karbala, and Karbala would not have survived had it not been for the power of Zeynab's march of dissent, taking to arms, and finally her witness testimony. Describing women's agency in the paradox of post-revolutionary Iranian women, Farzaneh Milani writes:

Women fully veiled but carrying guns on their shoulders, or in conventionally male arenas, contrast sharply with any traditional or simple definition of womanhood. A woman bearing arms is not quite the secluded and segregated other/wife. Herein lies the paradoxical nature of this neo-traditionalism regarding women: veiled but not excluded from a traditionally male domain; silent and obedient yet outspoken and articulate like Hazrat Zeynab in Kufa where upon the martyrdom of her brother in 680 A.D., she showed amazing courage, resiliency, and eloquence in defending and pursuing his cause. (*Stories by Iranian Women since the Revolution* 5)

And such are the women of Neshat's photo collection: "paradoxical, neo-traditional, veiled but not excluded" from public service. Neshat composed the collection upon her return from Iran, after decades of living in diaspora. She stands in awe of these women, incapable of understanding what propels them to kill or be killed during the war with Iraq, unable to translate their beauty, their *adabiat*, their poetry, their tradition except through portraits. She stands in a Levinasian face-to-face encounter that urges violence, but then stops at point blank for an imperative to acknowledge the nakedness and vulnerability of the Other's mystery. Those clothes, that gaze, those arms, bespeak of centuries old battles against injustice fought by women; remembered

through their stories, their poems, their bodies. It is this genuine curiosity and withholding of quick-fix answers that emancipates the work from mere propaganda about angry Muslim terrorists. Neshat says:

From the beginning I made a decision that this work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject. I put myself in a place of asking questions but never answering them. The main question and curiosity, however, was being a woman in Islam. (James Rondeau, “Shirin Neshat Rapture”)

The militant Shi’ite aspect is only one hue in the Kaleidoscope of Neshat’s art. She is unique in that she effects a re-distribution of the space that the visual provides her and rearranges its aesthetic elements in her poetics. Facing her art, the eye does not know in advance what it beholds, and the mind how to judge it. Grappling with the controversial topic of Muslim women, violence and poetics, she effects an ec-stasis by stepping into the position of the object: objectifying to subjectify. After *Women of Allah* she moves into short and long films in which she draws a personal reading of universal symbols of gardens, orchards and trees in relation to the female body and the life circle. But what unites her magical signature is a poetic flare that she inherited from Iran’s gem: Forough.

Case Study: “Standing in Awe”

Here I will “wash my eyes, to regard anew” (Sohrab Sepehri) an “Untitled” photograph in the *Women of Allah* collection, published in 1996. The charm of this specific photograph which—for ease of communication—I have dubbed “Standing in Awe,” is manifold. A close reading/seeing of this image will be illuminating to

understand many of Neshat's most enigmatic motifs. Here, Neshat's art reaches a poignant, poetic minimalism that functions through allusions, elision, and collage. This certain shot is emblematic of her visual grammar. Nonetheless, the veil, the gun and the seductive gaze are completely absent from it. The visual field is covered by a hand, which in turn has been covered by Farsi/Arabic calligraphy. The finger tips are gently touching voluptuous lips. The magic of this image is in an explosion of affective sensorium which the lull of the quiet image cannot hide. The lip speaks with poetry and symbols while being covered. Each plane of imagery forks into many possible fluid, interpretive dimensions, including:

1. Forough's poetry, especially the "garden poem" colours the whole oeuvre of Neshat. Forough re-claims a feminist epistemic space for a different aesthetic rebirth through the garden enclosure imagery.
2. Sacriliging poetry/the body by inscribing it with Islamic/Qur'anic calligraphy. It is ironic that Neshat chose religious calligraphy since the words of holy texts are not to be touched, save with pure bodies.
3. Hand symbolism:
 - 3.1. The *Khamse* (literally number five) sign of hand is used in traditional religious performance of Shi'ite mourning in Ashura as a banner under which the mourners march.
 - 4.1.1 Number five (as in the five fingers) has significance for Shi'ites who believe in the holy family of five: the prophet and his immediate family who were all soon murdered after Mohammad's death.

- 3.2. The name of Imam Hussein's half-brother is written at the centre of Neshat's hand. يا قمر بنى هاشم *Ya Ghamare Bani Hashem* translates to "Oh, Moon of Bani Hashem tribe." It literally alludes to hazrat Abufazel. He lost his hands in the battle of Karbala trying to bring water to the thirsty children of the besieged camp. As he was carrying the water flask by his mouth, he was shot and killed by an arrow.
- 3.3. The pre-islamic sign of inscribed hand from deities such as the Babylonian Goddess Ishtar. This patron of war, sex, fertility and love, is a predecessor to the Greek Venus. Ishtar with her inscribed hands was the most renowned goddess of the entire Middle Eastern and North African region.
4. The gesture of touching the lip by hand, or covering the mouth as a gesture of reverence, or awe. That appears even in Achaemenid reliefs. Other possible universal interpretation of touching or covering the lip with hand include: invitation to silence, preserving a secret, a sensual touch, or revealing a lie.

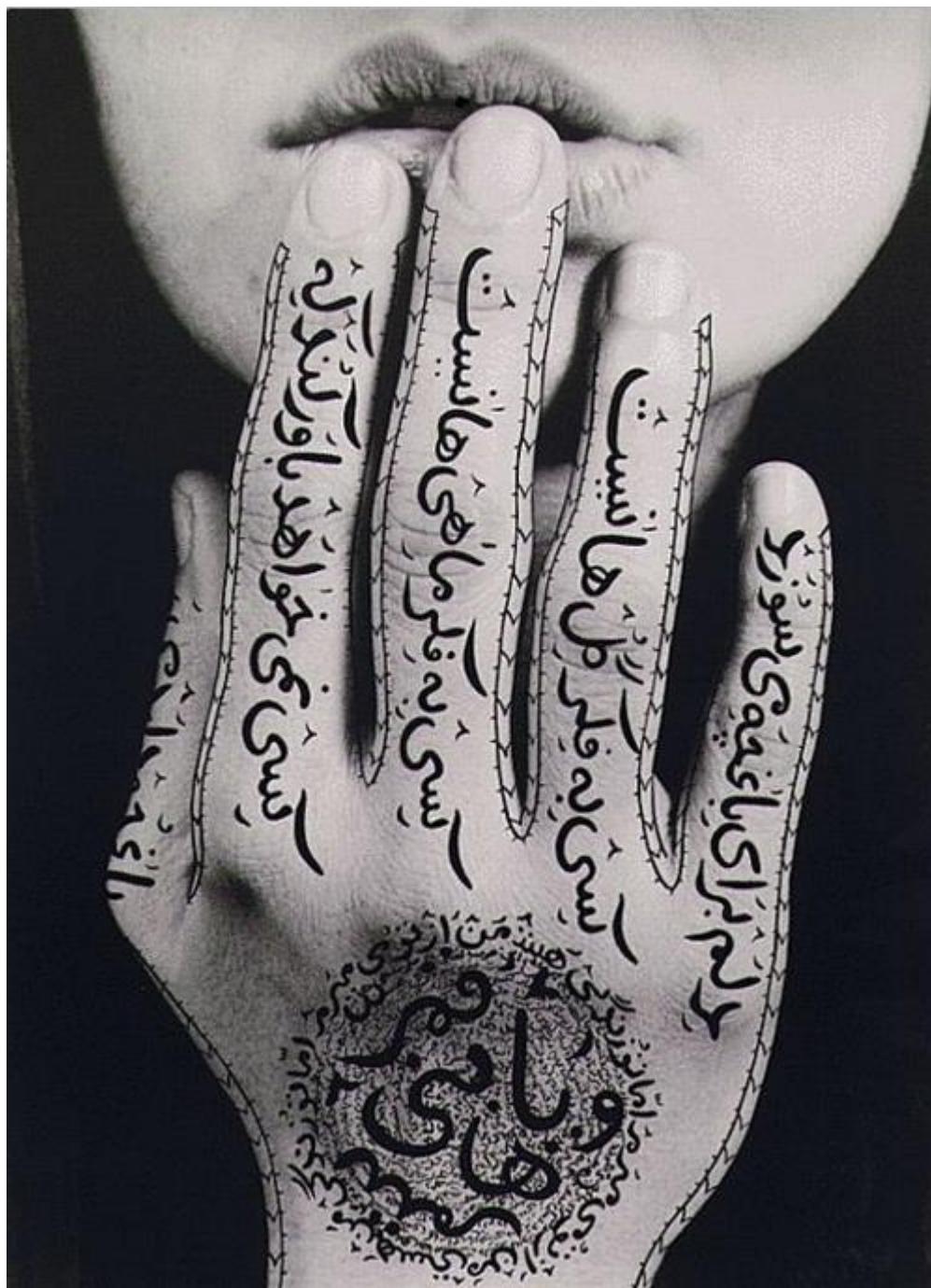


Figure 29 Figure 23. Shirin Neshat, *Untitled (Women of Allah)*, 1996, Ink on RC print 47 7/8 x 33 1/4 in. (121.6 x 84.5 cm), Photograph taken by Larry Barns © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Space Politics; Embodied Geographies in the Symbolic Garden

The interstitial space of the garden in Forough and in the classical Persian tradition figures prominently as the home, or *heim*, the archetypal Eden, or Elysium, or in the Lacanian lexicon, this precarious garden can represent the forever lost security of the imaginary womb. The garden in front of the complex Persian houses transits the highly *haremed* (guarded as sacred) interior space of the house to the *namahram* (not sanctified) outsiders. Structured between the inside and the outside world, the walled garden creates a Bhabhaesque liminal productive and regenerative space for the flourishing of the poet's metaphors, as in:

I will plant my hands in the garden

They will sprout I know, I know, I know,

and swallows will lay eggs

in the inky grooves of my fingertips (Forough Farrokhzad "Rebirth")

The ink-stained fingerprints synecdochally refer to the lonely poet whose profession demands visceral acquaintance with ink. This ink, or by an extension this poetry, is to revive the stifled air of the country, to engender a new birth. The nation and the garden are connected via a plethora of motives. It is the artist who heralds a new age of generation, vegetation and flight.

Inspired by the poetry of Forough—both Parsipur and Neshat—trace the garden to the body of the woman, to the homeland and to a sense of security and fruition. What distinguishes Foroughian enclosed, small, garden (*bagh-che*), from classical Persian poetry gardens (*bagh*, *bostan*, *golestan*) is that the Forough's small

garden stands in exigent danger of neglect, invasion/rape, political turmoil and military coups. The *locus amoenus* or the idyllic garden can transform into a perilous *locus terribilis*. Just in the same way, in *Women Without Men*, Neshat shows the fall of the garden as the country comes to its knees with the CIA backed *coup*.

Forough's poetry is geopolitically situated. At the same time, it is budding with an embodied feminine sensuality through which she reaches out to the public and the abstract. Whether singing about her male lover (almost absent from classical Persian poetry from a female speaker), or lamenting the scars thereof ("and my scars are all of love"), her feet are firmly rooted in space, in time. The poem "Standing on this Soil" illustrates this embodied defiance:

I've never longed to turn into a twinkling star in the mirage of heavens/
 or like the spirit of saints, enter the silent circle of angels/ I've never
 been estranged from this soil/ never affiliated with the stars/ I have
 stood firmly on this ground/ so that my body, like a green offshoot/
 sucks-in the sun, the wind, and the water to survive./ Fertile with desire,
 bursting with pain/ I have stood on this soil/ so that the stars worship
 me/ so that the winds caress me. (Farrokhzad *Rebirth*)

The revolt against the transcendental, given the context of mysticism prevalent in Persian poetry is awe striking. This physical occupation/re-claiming of solid space is a feminist *repartage* of politics of the allocation of visibility for women. Forough is the woman who dares to say "No" to the mirage of transcendence and the polite prison of silence. Mapping the connection of "rhetorical space" to gender hierarchies, Roxanne Mountford asks: "While we are accustomed to the trope 'women's place,' we might

ask ourselves why it is that gender hierarchies are so persistently associated with geography”(53). It is true that gender hierarchies are associated with geography and its allocation of space. The space’s power and sanctity are not only the carriers of a certain meaning to a congregation, according to Mountford; the space also conveys authority and power, particularly in the context of gender hierarchies. The space does not have power on its own. The power is endowed to it symbolically by the inhabitants, who represent and are a continuation of that space to an extent that the space becomes a metonymy of the identities of its inhabitants, i.e. nation states. Continuing this trajectory of thought, Valerie Palmer-Mehta connects the woman-space of Neshat’s garden as “a site of rebellion” that “functions as a feminist epistemic space: a productive, working site where new meanings are forged and emancipatory visions are produced” (78). Surveying the significance of world gardens quickly, she turns to the Persian gardens and finds Parsipur and Neshat’s gardens unlike those of their predecessor. What separates my reading of Neshat from her, is our understanding of the significance of Forough. In all that Neshat touches, I trace the fingerprints of Forough, her voice. Palmer Mehta however has to pierce two walls to access Forough. First, she has to read the translated verse, which I doubt she has, and then enter into the intertextual milieu through which Parsipour, Neshat and a plethora of other female and male authors are linked. Her article refers to Forough through the critique proposed by Farzaneh Milani:

Love clearly exists in [Neshat’s garden]. However, it is not the kind of romantic love Milani (1992) identifies in [Forough] Farrokhzad’s

poetry. Rather, the garden gives rise to a love, as the title infers,
between women (without men). (Palmer Mehta 93)

Without discrediting Palmer-Mehta's brilliant recognition of Neshat's garden as "feminist epistemic space," I am suspicious of her reductive reading of Forough's garden as a "romantic" space only. I invoke that Forough is very pertinent to Parsipur and Neshat's world views and frames of mind with regards to a generative female space. The short gasp in that article may be the fact that the poetry of Forough has been read through a double veil; that of a translated poem, accessed through the critique proposed by Dr. Farzaneh Milani. The latter's stance has not even been given due justice. Her reading of Milani is limited, if not flawed. "Milani (1992), for example, argues that pre-Revolutionary poetess Forough creates a utopian garden where a man and woman are equal and share responsibility for their 'needs and deeds'" (85). Forough's poetry, letters and film have affected several generations of both female and male intellectual voices and senses of identity. Forough has raged against an abstract expression of a utopic love in interviews, mocking the classical ideal lover "Majnoon" as a psychopath. Her poetry is spatially rooted in the political soil of Iran at a specific junction in its history. Maybe this groundedness is a political embodiment of space that contributes to Forough's appeal for the Iranian diaspora specifically.

Body, Woman, Map

In "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" Adrienne Rich rages against the image of the faceless, race-less, sexless, nation-less, laborer, called woman. For her, the question of the woman is tied deeply to the politics of her location, a map, a space, a body:

As a woman I have a country, as a woman I cannot divest myself from that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times “As a woman my country is the whole world” [quoted from Virginia Wolf]. Tribal loyalties aside, and even if now nation-states are just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interest, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, I am created and try to create. Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body. (Rich 30)

Rich stresses that the body becomes a vessel of meaning and can access power only when geographically situated. Abstractions regarding woman’s body can be deadly. Abstractions of the corporeal can sever it from its roots in the land, history and social culture. Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe argue that the physical body is a cultural site for the expression of a social body. Scholarship about the body is especially prevalent in Western canons. Michel Foucault for example theorizes the body as a nexus for power struggle on a personal and national level. In *Power/Knowledge* he argued that:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally

imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 148)

Here the body replaces the mind as the identifier of the subject. In his work, even the abstract concept of history is as an inscription on the body. The question of social change shifts from a focus on ideology to a focus on body inscription. For Foucault bodies are discursive practices. They are disciplined, overwritten, controlled, and censored. The job of the genealogist is to expose "a body totally imprinted by history."

Reclaiming the body through a feminist re-sharing of the common space started almost two hundred years ago in Iran with another poet, Tahereh Qurratulayn in mid nineteenth century.¹ The occupation of visibility, voice, and authority by women has been a political struggle the world over. Due to millennia old tradition of oral storytelling and poetry by women, Iranian feminist movement has been carried over to the field of aesthetics, before it gained flesh in the political arena. Forough is the culmination of centuries old battle for expression of female intimate desires, whether political, or private, be it about pleasure or sorrow.

Forough Reclaiming the Corporeal

In Forough's poetry, the woman's space as that of a green-offshoot or a tree not only references the connection between the woman's body and the natural cycle of re-generation, but the connection between the woman and the soil, motherland, trees, nature, garden are loaded signifiers that weave the body of woman to the social fabric, to the texture of what is common in society; politics, economy, and social struggle.

¹ She was a religious scholar and the leader of a new sect. During a first act of public unveiling, she heralded a new religion of Bab-ism in Iran. Her charismatic character affected many scholars after her. Refer to Milani's *Veils and Words* for a feminist reading of Tahereh.

After all, the most important lesson of Rancière could be that the occupation of a certain space of the visible or audible is the joint task of aesthetic and politics. A task that is undermined by the current universalism of policing.¹ The term “political” in *Aesthetics and its Discontent* (2009) signifies that which can partition the space of the “sensible,” reducing the right to visibility, audibility, and perceptual occupancy of certain marginalized themes/groups. Art, on the other hand, is also concerned with regimes of visibility, audibility and occupancy of time/space. Although the message of the photograph might be policed via a forced narrative into a reductionist slogan, the politico-aesthetic play has the potential to explode the reductionist interpretation into a versatile creative canvas. “Traditionally, in order to deny the political quality of a category —workers, women and so on —all that was required was to assert that they belonged to a 'domestic' space that was separated from public life” (Rancière *Dissensus* 38). They could not put forth an argument, a discourse since it was commonly believed that their occupation bound them to what was domestic or private:

And the political aspect of these categories [of woman, worker, the subaltern occupying a private, domestic place] always consists in re-qualifying these spaces, in getting them to be seen as the places of a community; it involves these categories making themselves seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation). (Rancière *Dissensus* 38)

¹ Politics and policing are different. Politics as having a share in the common fabric of society has its own aesthetics, as discussed in the introduction to the theory section at the beginning of the monograph. Policing however, is about limiting those rights to visibility and audibility.

Forough births that forbidden space for the flourishing of her desires as a woman, not just in the private realm of the sexual satisfaction, but a proud rebirth in open air, under full light, and unapologetic visibility:

I am not talking about trembling whispers in the dark,

I am talking about the full day, and open windows, and fresh air,

And a furnace in which useless objects burn

And a soil fertile with a different crop

And birth, and maturity, and pride. (Farrokhzad *Rebirth* “Conquest of the Garden”)

This space of revolt is the Other of hegemonic patriarchal traditions. She creates that space of dissensus in the private realm of the garden, in her poetry, a space that originally was associated with the unthinking labourers, or with private pastime. The aesthetic and rhetorical space created in the poetry of Forough has a strong purchase for Iranian diaspora authors and artist today.¹

Forough ties the woman “to the tree, to water, to fire” (“Rebirth”) the imagery elements of paradise, life, and love in Persian poetry respectively. She grasps the millennia old male dominated, classical and disciplined Persian poetry to ponder about her own ephemeral body, pleasures, nostalgia and pain that was a continued thread in her short life. It is interesting that her short life was haunted by her unorthodox private affairs. Becoming enamoured and having an affair with a married filmmaker in 1960s,

¹ There are many causes for the appeal of Forough in diaspora that are outside the scopes of this research. These include Forough’s poetic sense of alienation, abandonment, melancholy, and nostalgia for a lost homeland. All these sentiments are strongly experienced by the diaspora who cannot return and yet cannot stop thinking about the return to the homeland. Refer to Farzaneh Milani’s scholarship on Forough in Diaspora.

and composing poetry about embodied feminine sensuality, Forough was shamed and shunned by her father, by the public as well as the *Avant garde*. It took another generation for the readers to stop judging the biographical in order to appreciate the intricacies of her poetics. She was the first woman to revolutionize Persian verse, standing side by side with pioneers such as Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlou, Mehdi Akhavan Sales and Sohrab Sepehri.

Returning to Neshat, the *unheimlich* garden in Neshat's oeuvre has distinct Foroughian shades. Neshat's gardens, for example in the feature film, look primeval at first encounter. Then the psychology of its inhabitants affect its bloom. It is a space outside and a space within the women. It whirls, births paper flowers, and falls according to the climate of the country, or the thoughts of its shelter seekers. The garden, that like a dream-work has superimposed metaphors and concepts, vegetates in exigent times. It is the nature of this gasping realization of standing at the cusp of impending doom that the photograph captures, so aesthetically. Citing Forough, Neshat has written over the photograph subject's fingers:

No one cares about the flowers,
 no one worries 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's mind is slowly being drained of green memoires,
 that the garden's senses are an abstract thing, rotting in the garden's
 isolation (Farrokhzad *Let Us Believe in the Advent of the Cold Season*)

The poem “My Heart is Burning for the Garden”—دلَم برای باغچه میسوزد—composed in Iran of post-53-*coup d'état* heralds an age of political suppression for the free thinkers. It encapsulates the barrenness of creative energies of intellectuals during the reign of consumerism and terror in the aftermath of the joint CIA-MI5 overthrow of Iran’s first democratically elected premier—Mohammad Mossadeq. The incident paved the way for national discontent with the monarchy which led to the revolution of 79. A fatal car crash at the age of 32, prevented Forough to witness the efforts of Iranians who gave their lives for rebuilding the garden. The atmosphere of “the garden poem” is tinged with a sense of Beckettian “Waiting for Godot.” The poem references the degeneration of the fertile garden under the scourging sun and the uncaring glances of house-dwellers who have lost their hope in its rebirth. Forough outlines the reaction of several characters toward the putrefaction of Edenic home, or homeland, in their courtyard. Starting with the patriarch, the father, who claims to have no more responsibilities toward the garden, as he has retired. He buries his head in historical accounts or the *Book of Kings*. Evading the responsibility to take charge of the present moment, many in Iran still contend themselves with a nostalgic reverence for Iran’s golden past. The mother “is a spread prayer matt.” She sees decadence as the outcome of a sin. She “imagines that the garden has been corrupted by the unbelief (*kofr*) of a vegetable”(4th stanza). “She is awaiting the saviour [the 12th Shi’ite Imam who is said to be alive and who will come to save the world] and the prospect of the bounty it will bring.” Her attitude is the mix of superstition with religion. But this makes her fail to see the reality of the trouble and resort to magic or superstition to “cleanse” or cure the garden/country. The religious class eventually gain sway of power in Iran. The next

stanza describes her brother who acts as a synecdoche for the intellectual class. He “is addicted to philosophy,” and “counts the number of dead fish in the little pond” in a scientific approach to the current disaster. His identity is constructed around this “air of hopelessness” with the political situation, but then he “mocks and laughs at the misery of the garden” with an objective air. The critique of the intellectual class is the most sever. In this poem, the intellectual ones do not understand the country. They turn humans into numbers and believe that “annihilation is the only cure for the garden” (5th stanza). Only in the last stanza the incongruous nature of the political struggle makes itself visible in the space of the private garden:

All through the day/ I can hear the tremor of explosions/ our neighbours
 have germinated the gardens with grenades/ their ponds are secret wells
 for gun powder/ school kids fill their backpacks with tiny bombs/our
 yard is hazy./ I am fearful of a Time that has lost its heart/ I am afraid
 of the futility of all these idle hands/ and the estrangement of all these
 faces. (“Let Us Believe” last stanza)

Here in the final stanza the poet envisions the impending battle ahead, a revolution that could have been avoided if the hands were not so “idle,” and the faces so “estranged.” Had the intellectuals not segregated themselves from the people and the patriarch not evaded their responsibilities, the garden may have flourished again. Words from this poem are inscribed over the hand in the aforementioned shot. For Iranians who enjoy an oral poetry culture, even the title of this poem brings to mind images of the loss of the precious homeland and the responsibility of the people who have failed it. It is written however, not in the words of politicians, but in the familiar dialect of

embodied femininity, fertility and love. This is an elegy for the allegorical garden, an image to which Neshat returns in “Tooba”¹ and *Women Without Men*. In the latter, the garden blooms with the coming to life of Zari, and starts to fall apart with her descent into sickness which has been accompanied with the raiding of the garden by the military. The psychological state of the women in the garden affect its bloom. In “Tooba,” like the virgin of Guadalupe, the woman finds solace in tree and appears to be one with it, at least until the enclosed garden is invaded by a group of angry bearded men.

Calligraphy, Body writing, Magic

Alluding to the Islamic *tazhib* tradition by adorning her images with arabesque and Qur’anesque pagination, Neshat sanctifies the female body, and consecrates her poetry. The poetic play in Neshat however creates a protein image which dodges one fixed meaning. The claustrophobic body writing could also be closely associated with magic: the Other of religion.

The collection *Women of Allah* created over a span of four years (1993-7) observes a minimalistic economy with a shared visual grammar: black and white silver gelatin prints have been over written with black or red ink by Neshat herself. Black chadors, captivating gazes, rifles, and poetry by modern female Iranian poets. To display the poetry, she opts for a peculiar calligraphy that sits at the interstice between the sacred and the profane; poetry written as Qur’an, or a calligraphy reminiscent of talisman body-writing or black magic scripts. Aside from the font, there are *Tazhib-*

¹ Also spelled as Tuba, and Touba.

like adornments commonly known as Arabesque. These are decorations based on “rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage and tendrils” (Flemming) that can be repeated many times. These decorations in Neshat’s photos are reminiscent of the art of Qur’anic miniature pagination that include geometric shapes. The curious touches of Arabic accents also reinforce the possibility of Qur’anic sacrilege. Islam as a descendent of Abrahamic religions looks-up to the moment when prophet Abraham broke all the idols (resembling humans, animals, or a combination thereof) to retrieve the Ka’ba as a place to worship a single divine, faceless, god. In Islam, God is *Sobhan*, clear and pure from all that a mortal, limited imagination can envisage. In Islamic art, realistic representations of humans or animals were forbidden as idolatry. In Shi’ite Iran however, these Sunni orthodox bans on portraiture are much laxer. Even the prophet’s face has been painted in ancient miniatures. Portraiture of Imam Ali and his son Hussein commonly adorn the Iranian cityscape in mourning ceremonies. By adopting an Islamic calligraphy reserved for the Holy Scripture, Neshat elevates the poetry to the level of the divine, and sanctifies the female body through its intimacy with the sacred text. It is ironic that the sacred Islamic texts are written on the skin, because Qur’anic words are sacred and should not be touched, unless by the pure. The skin-deep closeness with poetry pierces the aloofness from transcendental words. But on the other hand, the claustrophobic font, which disregards stanza formation or punctuation—so vital to the visual effect of poetry—opts for the unnecessary Arabic accents on a Persian poem. A tradition that closely resembles this form of body writing is related to magic, an offshoot and a double of religion. The font is not the traditional poised calligraphy of Persia which in and by itself is a form of

visual art. The font is in the style of black magic scriptures written over female bodies by semi-literate cup-readers or *jinn* catchers. As a proud owner of several such talisman depicting chants written over the body, Neshat displays them in an interview.



Figure 30 Neshat Displays magic charms during interview © Sarah Trigg

This is where I got my ideas in terms of writing calligraphy on the bodies. These are charms. When you make a wish. Every one means something. *I'm not even sure what the meaning of the symbols are.* As you know in *Islamic cultures*, it was taboo to replicate images, for example, of the prophets, but it was allowed to draw outlines of bodies and just fill it in with words.¹ So here, I think, is a very sexual piece of a man and a woman. He's touching her and then there's a fish below, which has to be about fertility. This could be a charm for someone who wants to get pregnant. Some of the writing is in Arabic

¹ Actually she is mistaken, charms are forbidden in religious discourse.

and some of it is in Farsi, but I haven't been able to make out what it means. (Trigg, Italics mine)

Although Neshat is fascinated by the enigma of the magical plates, she confesses her own ignorance regarding their precise symbolism. Aesthetic intuition and cultural perceptibility lead her toward a selection of *punctums* that are to some extent unintended yet loaded with signifiers. That moment of undecidability between the photograph's leniency toward magic or religion, agency or suppression marks the aesthetic play. It helps the viewer to ask questions, shatter ready-made stigmas, and explore Neshat's world anew. Her artistic intuition leads her in search of symbols that are only partially visible in the horizon of her own consciousness. "I put myself in a place of asking questions but never answering them."

But there is much that is incurably unresolved in the photographic collection, leading many critics to tag her as a native informant. The fake veil is made from the wrong choice of fabric, it is not ironed, and is dressed in a manner that tells of her lack of acquaintance with the heavy cloth. She admits to her generalized knowledge about her subject and her lack of certainty about many aspects of her artwork, including and especially the body writing. "I was ... struck by the tradition of tattoo in the Middle Eastern and Indian cultures. Later, when I was composing my images that dealt with the body of a Muslim woman, inscription on her skin seemed appropriate" (Bertucci 1997, 86). Here, her fascination is with the generic orient: as general as Middle Eastern and Indian cultures. Iftikhar Dadi compares her inscription technique to that of henna

and tattoos that are “practiced in the generic orient, such as ‘Indian cultures,’ which are not necessarily Muslim” (143).¹

Delving into the philosophy of images, this chapter started by questioning “the shady commerce between art and truth.” There is a mistrust in representation of beauty. In general truthful images are supposed to lack in beauty, another binary that Neshat shatters. the history of a country and its women’s struggles toward its freedom are condensed in her photographic collections. Skillfully, methodically, and poetically, she superimposes many layers of culturally untranslatable symbols into a simple image. To delve into her abstract yet grounded art, requires familiarity with Persian poetry, conceptual art, as well as history of a land and a people at war.

After almost two decades of grappling with deeply conceptual icons—mostly accessible to museum goers— Neshat steps out of the gallery to face a larger audience through the cinematic medium. But as with other nomadic artists who shuttle between media, she carries along her signature style of simplified yet amplified tropes to the theatre. Her body-writings morph into poetic voice-overs. Of prime importance to her are images of a lost or invaded garden, an endangered *heim*, and homeland under attack. Here in the new medium, narrative steps forth: Muslim women’s bodily history and space politics are narrated through a story-line as opposed to photographic “memory freeze frames” (Sontag 22). Transiting from photography to film, for Neshat,

¹ In Philippines as well, the “sacred ink” of tattoos is used to drive out evil spirits from the body in a religious ceremony. The power and magic of the inscribed words are so strong that they possess the whole being of the devotee. Refer to a documentary film and photo exhibits by Cedric Arnold called “Yantra: The Sacred Ink” to view an elaborate ritual around religious tattooing in Philippines in which the person being tattooed freed from the evil haunting spirits.

narrative and characterization becomes paramount. Speaking in terms of the distance between film and photography, Neshat asserts:

In the art world you are very free, but you end up making something that few people see. In the film world anybody can view your film for the small price of a ticket, but you are not as free. There is also a big difference between film producers and art dealers. Producers are extremely involved. Everything has to go through them, while an art dealer basically leaves you alone and remains uninvolved in the production. (Heartney interview)

Neshat moved from the solitary studio of an artist to a large crew working on a visual narrative that reaches more viewers. In the new cinematic medium, the trace of her visual signatures, poetic imagery, and aesthetic accents can still be discerned. The next chapter will closely regard Neshat's feature film which took six years to complete and brought home the Silver Lion for the best director award at 2009 Venice film festival.

Chapter 5 Neshat Moving on to Movies

Perhaps this clear and long interaction of poetry with, and within, other art forms explains our applied acknowledgment that poetry exists independently of any medium and that therefore film, too, can be poetry.

—Harrington, 176

In this chapter, Shirin Neshat's poetic feature film *Women Without Men* (2009) based on Shahrnush Parsipur's eponymous novel will be addressed with questions regarding the ethics of representing radical alterity. The film exposes to the witnessing eye, the camouflaged, corporeal, imprinted, skin of Iranian women at the crossroads of history, politics, and democratic outburst more than half a century ago. Woman, nation, and freedom are intertwined in a magical, feminine garden. I argue that the worldview of both Neshat and Parsipur are coloured by the courage, poetic vision, and cinematography of Forough Farrokhzad. Forough's documentary film, "The House is Black" (1967) lighted the path for Iran's cinematic New Wave and was an inspiration for Neshat. In "The House is Black" Forough visits the leprosy colony in a forgotten corner of the country where the literally and metaphorically effaced and ostracized lepers live in absolute destitution. What brings an ethical, humanizing touch to this otherwise pathological or socio-political work is the excess of dignity, life, and beauty that abound in the camera's loving eye toward radical alterity. Her lens is a human one, focusing on the joys of life, children's play, a limping dance. Forough's voiceovers have a melancholic tone as she recites her own poems over the heart-wrenching scenes of tormented individuals. Jarring noises such as those of a

wheelbarrow, or the monotonous footsteps of a blind man pacing along a mudbrick wall stand in sharp contrast against the dirge-like poetry. This cinematic juxtaposition remind the audience of the chiasm between the beauty of the poetic voice and the utter devastation of the subjects. At the end, it is this aesthetic repartitioning that gives the lepers visibility, audibility, and a sense of belonging to the world community. This house in which the rejects of the society have been incarcerated is comparable with Neshat's garden that houses four women who themselves rejected the social norms and found shelter in a utopic, Elysiumatic, orchard. Critical references will be made to arboresque fertility and resilience of these women, and the politics of the body, skin, and space. In order to better comprehend these theoretical streaks, two of the most enigmatic characters—Munis and Zarin—will be visited individually. Characterization and storytelling are the *object trouve* of Neshat's cinematic journey. Regarding the significance of characterization in cinema, Neshat claims:

In the end, I learned that the fundamental difference between cinema and art is the question of character development. In all my past work, such as the videos *Rapture* [1999] and *Passage* [2001], I had treated people sculpturally, devoid of any character or identity. They were simply iconic figures. But with this film, I had to learn how to build characters, how to enter their inner worlds, their mindsets. This was an entirely new experience for me. (Heartney)

Especially in focus regarding characterization will be Munis. She is the narrator of the film who rises from the dead to find freedom in suicide or “disclosure in

effacement.” She will be compared to Spivak’s Bhubaneswar in “Can the Subaltern Speak.”

Women Without Men, the original novel written in the style of magic realism, contrapuntally looks at the questions of gender and feminine intergenerational and inter-class bonding while keeping political concepts such as democracy and dictatorship at arm’s length. In her cinematic adaptation, Neshat brings out and highlights the political through the bodily. Regarding the political backbone of the film, Neshat says that she composed the film as a reminder to “Westerners” about their roles in the interrupted democracy of Iran:

Selfishly, I found it very timely to revisit history and remind Westerners that the American and British governments were directly responsible for overthrowing a democratic system in Iran. The CIA organized the *coup* in 1953, which in turn paved the road for the Islamic Revolution in 1979. As far as I know, this is the only film made so far that tries to depict this monumental political moment. (Heartney)

In order to understand the complexity of Neshat’s cinematic creation, I will quickly glance at the novel that inspired it. Looking at the novel will not solve the mystery of the film, but it unravels Neshat’s preference in highlighting, lowlighting and erasing certain characters and events.

Parsipur’s Original Novel

Shahrnush Parsipur’s novel, *Women Without Men* (1990), was first published during the presidency of the moderate Mohammad Khatami who wished to lax publishing

restrictions on intellectuals.¹ The book sold-out in less than two weeks, but it was soon banned in Iran. Despite the air of change that Khatami ushered, he was not omnipotent in the cultural arena. Power is not centralized in Iran. Different hardliner factions reacted strongly to a rising wave of what they understood to be a “Western frame of feminism.”² Its publication prohibition by the traditionalist was due to the alleged light handling of issues pertinent to female virginity, infidelity, etc. Once imprisoned by Shah’s notorious SAVAK with fears that her short stories were left-leaning,³ Parsipur’s second incarceration was instigated by *Women Without Men*. The author belongs to the prolific intellectual circles before the revolution who pushed the boundaries of the state and the people’s sense of normativity.⁴ A contemporary and acquaintance of Forough, their friendship was cut short due to Forough’s tragic death. Parsipur studied Chinese Philosophy at Sorbonne and her publications such as *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (which inspired an installation with the same name by Neshat) include concepts of Sufism, femininity under Islam, women rebellion, as well as Iranian tradition and its modernity. *Women Without Men* was later reprinted in the U.S. and Europe and translated into several languages. Written in the style of magic realism, *Women Without Men* was originally penned as a collection of several short stories about five different women. More than half way through the volume, the author decides to connect the stories of the female characters and turn the collection into a

¹ For a list of Parsipur’s other publication refer to the Appendix.

² For a comprehensive study of the disruptive nature of Western Feminism in Iran in the past two hundred years, refer to Nima Naghibi’s *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*. In it she outlines the way that the idea of “global sisterhood” created an Other of the Eastern sisters in order to justify their own feminist advantage leading the way to a post-revolutionary backlash and mistrust against the feminist efforts of Iranian women themselves.

³ In her prison memoir, *Kissing the Sword*, Parsipur claims that she is not a communist and she can, with difficulty, call herself a Social-democrat.

⁴ For a list of her other publication refer to the Appendix.

novel/novella. Shirin Neshat became infatuated with the portraits of five women in this novel and spent more than six years producing short films (videographic installations) on each one of them separately.¹ In the novel, the *locus amoenus*, this Karadj garden, is bursting with fertility, growth and sprouting “of a different kind,” and yet it stands in danger of doom. The garden or orchard can signify a feminine *sensus communus* that moves along with the currents of social freedom and democracy. With the rise of Western backed dictatorship during the 1953 *coup*, the garden begins to “fall.”

Woman, nation, and freedom are intertwined in this magical dwelling place.

Parsipur’s vision is acute and metaphoric with regards to the physical sex organs, even to the nature of hymen itself. Her book contains a tongue-in cheek sarcasm absent from the more politicized feature film. The physical merges with the magical in this Edenic womb. Zarrinkolah (Zarin), the prostitute, marries the Gardner without the conventional clerical blessing. She turns into a translucent body of light when pregnant. They give birth to a lotus flower² which they plant on the bank of the frozen river. The germination thaws the ice of the orchard. The two friends Faezeh and Munis walk through the gates having been raped on the way to the garden. It is the female social life there that heals them. The new owner, Fakrolleqa (Fakhri) has just reached menopause when she decides to buy the Karadj garden. Shortly before this, she has inadvertently killed her husband by punching him in the loins and causing him to roll down the stairs. In the novel, she has been unfaithful to this disdainful, distant, and

¹ These include *Mahdokht* (2004), *Zarin* (2005), *Munis* (2008), *Faezeh* (2008). She was presented the novel by the cultural theorist Hamid Dabashi.

² “*Gole Niloufar*” has been mistranslated to a “morning glory” in the English edition. The original word in Persian *Niloufar* refers to a flower which has foliage and is planted in the pond, thus referencing the lotus flower. Given her facility with Eastern mythologies, and mysticism, lotus seems a more likely translation.

mocking husband for eight years. She goes to the garden in order to “cultivate” intellectual friends, find her poetic voice, and to eventually climb her way to the parliament—an aspiration she fails to realize. She is unable to compose poetry and leaves the garden to the girls so that she can live a fuller life outside the garden with a new found companion. Women’s creative capacities and metamorphoses from sterile to proactive happens through a union in this symbolic garden. Here, I will turn my lens toward Neshat’s adaptation of these ancient motives, through Forough and Parsipur.

The Human-Tree; Mahdokht

“Mahdokht,” is a three-channel video/audio installation in color filmed in Morocco in 2004. The enigmatic character of Mahdokht has been omitted from the feature film due to a directorial decision of Neshat, who has called her “the most magical” character of them all. In the original novel written by Shahrnush Parsipur, Mahdokht embodies the obsessive compulsive spirit of a purist, in search of absolute harmony. She has an aversion to sexual or physical intimacy—while at the same time obsessing with procreation—that leads her to imagine and become a human tree, planted in the Karadj garden. Fed by the breast milk of Zarrinkolah and the morning dews collected by the Kind Gardner, Mahdokht-Tree becomes the nexus of rebirth as she explodes into a thousand seeds scattered in the wind. In the words of Rebecca R. Hart: “Mahdokht explores issues of fertility and the links between women, fecundity, and the earth” (120). Hart argues that it is her olive skin complexion that leads her to wonder about the origins of a green pallor. But nonetheless she has a desire to become a tree. “My virginity is like a tree . . . Perhaps that is why I am green [olive skinned] . . . I am not an acorn, but a tree. I should plant myself” (Parsipur 8). In her ode to

Mahdokht who is the first portrait introduced in the book and who has been omitted from the film for the sake of narrative flow, Neshat depicts a slender dark haired woman past her prime of youth who has phobic tendencies but dreams of caring for hundreds of children. These children run through the woods of the mystique garden toward her, wearing her woolen clothes. She knits yellow clothes interminably for them and paints the floor of the garden with the bright color. The film pays a quick homage to this scene by depicting a knitting woman in the brothel, using the same vibrant yellow colored thread.

Tree, Fertility, Rebirth

Exploring the mythological symbolism of trees in the novels of Shahrnush Parsipur, visual poetry of Neshat, and the ground-breaking verse of Forough is yielding. It joins the three women to a long tradition of dissent through space politics. In the novel, the women's embodied sexuality is closely associated with the political turmoil in the country, and bloom in the cycles of a tree's life. Woman and the tree are linked to an extent that the milk of a lactating woman (Zarin) is given to a human tree (Mahdokht). Virginity, prostitution, struggle for political seats, pregnancy, rape and menopause have close links to the psychological contours of the characters that eventually adorn the enchanted garden.

The gateway to the garden is a stream that feeds its lush green trees through a hole in the mud wall. The garden in the poetry of Forough is of utmost significance as a space for women liberation and emancipation. Forough alludes to "planting her ink stained hands in the garden" so that they will grow and that "sparrows will lay eggs in their inky fingertips." This poem links the working of intellectuals (through the

metonymy of ink stained fingers) to a future growth and freedom (hatched eggs, flight). Neshat in turn has taken all these verbal allusions to trees, the garden, sexuality and growth and turned them into a new visual poetry. In addition to all this, she has intuitively accentuated the political unrest of a nation at the bursting moment for political democracy in the ruined garden called Iran, in 1953.

There is a corpus of scholarship based primarily on the significance of Persian and world gardens in literature and the visual arts. Haim Bresheeth for instance writes:

The oldest texts of Babylon, and some of its architecture, deal with the garden—a secret, private and sacred space, devoted to love and to the deity, symbolising the Garden of Eden which the ancients placed at the source of four different major rivers, variably, in Iran, Asia Minor or Iraq. Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Egyptian art, as well as Indian and Chinese, are all focused on the garden and its beauty, so it is little surprise that the Bible also uses the garden as a simile of the female body and the act of love. This sexualised space will of course also appear in Western art. The Renaissance was clearly influenced by the gardens of Islamic Andalus, an implant of the sensuality of the East at the heart of Christian Western Europe. (Bresheeth *Third Text* 756)

In a videographic installation called *Tooba*¹, Neshat returns to the haunting analogy of woman and tree. Shahnush Parsipur too, has a novel by the name of *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1986). In Neshat's work, a gracefully aged woman is

¹ *Tooba*, spelled as *Touba*, or *Tuba* is driven from an Arabic word which means pure, sanctioned, and clean. It is a tree referred to several times in the Qur'an, having roots on earth and fruits in heavens.

standing tall inside a tree, embraced by it. It is as if she is part of the tree and vice versa. The enclosed space is invaded by angry, judgmental men. Neshat comments that:

In the Qur'an¹, the myth of Tooba is explained as the 'sacred tree,' the 'promised tree,' which in popular Iranian culture is also identified as a feminine tree. But interestingly enough one finds this symbol exists in other religions such as in Christianity where the Virgin Mary is portrayed inside a tree and I believe it is called the Virgin of Guadeloupe. Furthermore, the garden itself is a universal concept—man's attempt to re-create a fragment of paradise on earth, a place where one can truly escape the banality of the material world and transcend into the spiritual realm. (Neshat "In Movement" 7)

Trees and gardens are among the most ancient archetypes of humanity signifying life, sustenance, fertility, sexuality, growth, abundance, and knowledge. Civilization was based on the cultivation of trees. In the Abrahamic cosmogony it was the (sexually charged) forbidden fruit of a tree that expelled first humans from the Garden of Eden. The universal myth of world tree with its branches into the skies and roots deep into the earth connects the three worlds: linking heaven, earth and the underworld. A tree is both a feminine symbol, bearing sustenance and a masculine phallic one: a union. For the old master, Lao-tzu, whose philosophy Parsipur studied at Sorbonne, a tree is the enigmatic sign for resilience through flexibility:

¹ Abraham: 24-26.

When life begins, we are tender and weak; when life ends we are stiff and rigid. All things, including the grass and trees, are soft and pliable in life; dry and brittle in death. Stiffness is thus a companion of death; flexibility a companion of life. An army that cannot yield will be defeated. A tree that cannot bend will crack in the wind. Thus by Nature's own degree, the hard and strong are defeated while the soft and supple prevail. (*Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition* 89)

Not just resilience, but asexual flourishing is possible by the arboresque. This metamorphosis from flesh to seeds, ensures the intellectual longevity of the woman without the need for physical procreation. After all, "seeds of knowledge" have been a consistent metaphor for the proximity of trees to a different sort of rebirth: through the words written on paper produced by the tree. Daphne in ancient Greek mythology turns into a tree to avoid the loving embrace of Apollo under the spell of Eros. Pierced by the "lead" arrow of the God of Love, she harbors a loathing of Apollo, who unfortunately has been hit by a golden arrow of *amour*. While in his arms, her skin cracks into bark and her hair turn to flowing branches of Laurel. Apollo vows to give the tree eternal youth: ever green branches. In this light, Daphne gains eternity and her leaves are worn by kings and queens, an eternity without the need for carnal union. The tree here is an asexual signifier for regeneration. Daphne becomes immortal, not through a displeasing coitus, but through a metamorphosis to a different medium.

So far the connection between arabesque resilience and longevity with women's political struggle for a *partage* of the sensible has been established. The garden of Forough's poem reappears in the novels of her acquaintance Parsipur and in

the works of the next generation artist, Neshat. Another lasting impact of Forough on the artistic creation of Neshat is Forough's short documentary film which will be quickly visited here.

Forough's "The House is Black" a precursor to Neshat's *Women Without Men*

I argue that it is not only Forough's poetic imagery that enrich the frames of Neshat's art, but she also quotes directly from Forough's short film "The House is Black."

These quotes include the use of melancholic poetic voiceovers, comfort in handling paradoxes such as freedom in death and beauty even without skin, painterly attention to frame compositions/sequencing and a poetic outlook to the mundane. In an interview with *Border Crossing*, parts of which have appeared before, Neshat agrees that Forough's images have left a lasting impact on her work:

[Forough] is a really heroic figure for me and, in fact, I have an obsession with the only film she ever made, a short 20-minute-long film called "The House is Black". . . She was revolutionary and extremely subversive in the way she spoke out. She is one of the figures I became very close to—not just me, but a whole generation of younger artists and writers as well. (*BorderCrossing*)

Hailed as the touchstone of Iran's cinematic New Wave, "The House is Black" has been dubbed as "the greatest of all Iranian films" by critic Jonathan Rosenbaum. The documentary takes a tender, poetic, and humanizing glance at the people affected by leprosy in the North-Western province of Azerbaijan in Iran. Rosenbaum brings to a sharp relief the paradoxical demonization of Iran in the West against the universalization of its ethical cinema:

More than any other Iranian film that comes to mind, it highlights the paradoxical and crucial fact that while Iranians continue to be among the most demonized people on the planet, Iranian cinema is becoming almost universally recognized as the most ethical, as well as the most humanist. (Rosenbaum “Radical Humanism” 260)

“The House is Black” is the only film directed by Forough, at 27 years of age, working for 12 days in *Baba Baghi* leprosy colony with a crew of three. The original 21.23 minute black and white film won the top documentary award at Oberhausen Film Festival in 1963.¹ Like the human unconscious, The House of Forough is filled with the *refusé* of social normativity, the abject, the Other. Ejected to the outskirts of the town of Tabriz, this house is black and shun from society due to skin-deep fears of leprosy contamination, human touch, and interpersonal bonding. Forough is unbound by fears of abjection. She looks at fears in the eye, identifies with the rejects, and laments the condition of mankind, imprisoned by its own stigmas. In a society censured by the royalist of Shah against any opposition to his divine ruling, speaking of the ills of class divisions and the shortcomings of the medical system needed much poetic maneuvering. The producer, Ebrahim Golestan (Forough’s paramour), fearing the censors, claimed the film has no socio-political critique to offer and is made solely with the humanitarian intention of aiding the lepers. His voiceover in the film is

¹ A different version with additional scenes was screened in the US recently. The original producer of the documentary Ebrahim Golestan of the Golestan Film House rejected the existence of a longer alternative version and questioned the accuracy of the subtitles. A still better version — with French subtitles, taken mainly from the print shown in Oberhausen, and authorized by producer Ebrahim Golestan — was issued on DVD along with *A Fire* as part of the [then] biannual French magazine *Cinéma* (#07, printemps 2004) edited by Bernard Eisenschitz and published by Editions Léo Scheer.

surgical, objective, and matter of fact. His judgment is in stark contrast against Forough's affectionate, melancholic, intimate voiceovers. The short black and white essay-film benefits from fast montages, jarring yet musical ambiance sounds, and is superimposed with passages from the Torah, and the Qur'an. The tone of the voiceover recitation of Forough is described by Rosenbaum as a "dirgelike tone, halfway between multi-denominational prayer and blues lament" (260). The magic of Forough's lens is in the sensitivity with which she depicts the subjects; not as victims, but as humans with aspirations, joys, and wounds. Abbas Kiarostami's *ABC Africa* (2001) is said to be a kinder spirit with Forough's "The House." The former depicts the small joys of the children of Uganda's AIDS victims, focusing on human agency in trauma instead of its victimization.

Forough's black screen opens with a disclaimer: "There is no shortage of ugliness in the world. By closing our eyes and averting our gaze, we work to intensify that ugliness. But mankind is resourceful" ("The House is Black" opening scene). Made at the request of the Leprosy Aid Association, the film creates an analogy between our modern condition and the lepers who are incarcerated due to ostracization, poverty, and genetics. They are bound by physical walls while the people outside those walls are bound by mental ones. In an interview with Farajollah Saba, Forough outlines how at first she was troubled by encountering the lepers, but then how she befriended them, gaining their confidence:

The colony was full of people who had all the qualities and emotions of a human being except for the face. I saw a woman in whose entire face was one hole, through which she spoke. It is terrible. But I had to gain

their trust. They hadn't been treated well before. Anyone who had approached them in the past had only seen their defect. But I swear to god, I would eat from their food and touch their wounds. I would touch their toes, devoured by leprosy. It was so that the lepers trusted in me. As I left them, they prayed for my wellbeing. Now after one year, some of them still write me letters asking me to pass their requests to the ministry of health. (Hasanzadeh *Aparat*)



Figure 31 Film-stills from "The House is Black"
© Forough Farrokhzad, Golestan Productions, 1967.

If the face is the condition of discourse for Levinas, what happens to the effaced subjects of Forough's film? The charm of Forough is able to identify with the effaced, creating a faceless relationship with those who are allegedly outside the possibility of discourse. Forough's bilateral human relation with those literally and figuratively outside the condition of discourse is the basis of her "Radical Humanism." In an interview, Forough claims that:

Ugliness is not a material concept, in my opinion. I saw the lepers as humans who are only sick, just like any other person who catches a disease. Nonetheless, when you see a leper mother breastfeeding her babe in a close embrace, absorbed in the child's continence, you are faced with complete beauty. Only at first glance, a leper might appear appalling. But with a humane bond, you are in relation with a number of human beings where there is affection, where there is love. (*Aparat* quoting Forough)

It is these moments of radiant beauty in a dark house that have a lingering effect in the memory. In the film, a leprosy affected woman brushes her long black mane and smiles after putting on makeup. A destitute, barefoot, limping man, dances to his own song under the sun; a joyous, sonorous dance. At the end, it is the lepers who finally shut the gates onto the audience's gaze, as if we are not worthy of their company; as if we are not yet ready for the human encounter. Without denying the severity of the condition, Forough manages to enter the gate, see a human face-to-faceness or better yet, extend an ethical, loving embrace to the effaced, the Othered.

Neshat's Feature Film *Women Without Men*; Introduction

Women Without Men is not a documentary. The foundation of the film, however, circles around the effect of the fall of Iranian democracy on the lives of four women with different social status, class, age, and aspirations who have taken refuge in an enchanted, symbolic, Elysium-like garden. Historian Dominick LaCapra contends that documentary truth-claims may shine better through the medium of fiction, as they relay “affect” easier:

Narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery, or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible “feel” for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restrictive documentary methods. (*Writing History* 13)

This magic-realistic movie that sits at the juncture where the force of history blasts through the psychology of the female characters is delivering a “plausible ‘feel’ for experience” of a nation at unrest. *Women Without Men* contrapuntally looks at the questions of gender, feminine intergenerational and inter-class bonding and the larger questions of democracy and dictatorship. Just like Forough's House, this garden envaginates the *refusé* of social normativity; a prostitute, a raped girl, a middle-aged independent woman artist, and a political activist. Neshat politicizes Parsipur's novel, or rather, brings out the political already latent in its fabric:

I politicized the book more when I turned it into a film. The perspectives on the *coup d'état* of 1953 were not detailed in this book.

So from the beginning it was interesting for me to consider the efforts of these women to achieve democracy, freedom and independence at the same time that Iran as a country was searching for democracy and freedom. I tried to make a film that when it reaches its audience they can make a relationship between these woman and Iranian society, which are both pursuing the same goal. Women pursuing freedom and Iranian society pursuing democracy. (Dabashi interview with Neshat)

The garden of Neshat is a mirror held against the aspirations of a nation, of women, of democratic emancipation cut short by dictatorial coups. While Forough Farrokhzad's "The House is Black" starts with the concrete House and moves to the metaphoric country, seeing in the lepers' the same inhibition on movement that are latent in the mental predisposition of people outside, Neshat starts with a symbolic, Edenic garden and transforms it to the backdrop of the feminine psyche. She draws a lifeline between the garden, the women, and the turbulent, occupied homeland. The garden is a generative space that changes with the mindset of its inhabitants. It thrives as Zarin's health improves and starts to fall as Iran's democratically elected prime minister is ousted by the CIA and MI5.

The garden is an erotic, camouflaged female space, a political space, a space of generation and growth, as well as decay and fall.¹ But what makes this house and orchard comparable with Forough's is in their respective ease with ambiguities and paradoxes. There are several scenes of radical otherness in Forough's film such as the

¹ The political significance of the garden and trees has already been elaborated on in the previous section.

shaving of a leper skin by a doctor. But she manages to bring out radical humanity, aesthetic beauty, play, and joy in a documentary about a leprosy colony. Neshat, too, uses an aesthetic regime of representation in which paradoxes are the norm. The “fall” from the roof of Munis becomes flight and her death marks the moment of her freedom. A prostitute such as Zarin becomes a prophetic, connected to the garden, and the planter of paper-flowers which impregnate a barren land. The language and imagery are both multifaceted, metaphoric, and layered with interpretation. In the new Foreword to Parsipur’s novel, Neshat pinpoints the enigmas with which she grappled:

Women Without Men has a powerful and paradoxical arc that traverses various notions of opposites: magic/realism, nature/culture, local/universal, men/women, mystical/political. Shahrnush [Parsipur] situates the city of Tehran as a point of entry to all sorts of culture, sociopolitical, and historical realities, while the orchard functions purely on a metaphoric level. (Parsipur viii)

Iranian cinema is replete with images that bespeak of alterity, poetry, transcendence. Persian mysticism or *Erfan* is a lifestyle, and not a religion or etiquette. The ability to read metaphors in the concrete real and see the real as illusive has historico-political roots that have been pointed to during the section on Iranian love of poetry. For Dabashi, this camouflage of the real, the material, the bodily, in favour of the unseen and metaphoric is a function of resistance to a power politics:

In its colonial context, the Islamic body has been denied its corporeal materiality, mutated into a politics of power or aesthetics of resistance to power, in a hermetically sealed culture that has given birth to [. . .] a

globally celebrated pararealism in Iranian cinema. (Dabashi “It Was in China One Moonless Night” 936)

Whether fleeing from reality toward the realm of metaphors was instigated by a fear of life or resistance to oppression, this “para-realism” has become a staple with Iranian cinema and visual poetry. Magic Realism is no longer even relevant. All reality is already magical, symbolic, incorrigible. But what Neshat does, is that she brings these inter-cultural, insider secrets of this “hermetically sealed culture” to the global market:

Shirin Neshat is singularly responsible for having successfully punctured that hermetically sealed cultured, defeated its inflated self-absorption, and dared it to “step outside” from the self-suffocating air of its own environment, out in the open air of a public space globalized beyond a particular politics of power or a marked aesthetics of resistance to that power, where the categorical differences between private realities and public truth can be settled in completely different terms. (Dabashi “China” 936)

Having already outlined Parsipur’s novel, I want to consider these “different terms” with which Neshat brings to the global movie market what was ostensibly a Persian coveted way of speaking, acting, looking. I will analyze this movie closely in order to understand the regimes of representing the political Other, in an aesthetic and ethical manner.

Neshat's Feature Film; Scene/Character Analysis

The trill of Muezzin opens Neshat's feature film—as Munis is committing suicide. On the surface, it appears that Neshat is resorting to FOX news' strategy for superimposing *Allah-u-Akbar* over death. But as the mistress of paradoxes, Neshat builds binaries and stereotypes only to break them with the help of the audience. As the most politically invested character, Munis ties the personal narrative of the women to the political upheavals of the nation at a democratically significant pivot point.

Munis' fall is visualized as a free flight, her death: a rebirth in the garden. Images of flight, fluidity of movement and rebirth in the garden make intertextual connections with Forough's verse: "I will plant my hands in the garden/ They will grow, I know, I know" (*Rebirth*) or "Remember the flight / the bird is only mortal" (*Let Us Believe*).

The human flight, plantation in the garden and the phrase *Allah-u-Akbar* are in themselves allusions to the incomprehensible, the magical, the divine. *Allah-u-Akbar* literally translates to "God is greater" [than whatever can be perceived by human cognition]. It highlights the limits of human perception and points to the *beyond*. The mysterious unravelling of the narrative is also beyond comprehension. Between the cadences of the call, the murmur of a distant demonstration is heard. The poetic voiceover with Forough's signature tone stops the circular echoes and the distant hum: "And now, there was silence / silence/ and nothing more." In an interview with Eleanor Heartney, Neshat gives a reading of this first scene:

The film begins with Munis' flight from the roof, which could be interpreted as a suicide but also as a leap toward freedom, since the shot

is exaggerated. She is also now the narrator, who is telling us a story while flying and observing the world below. (*Art in America Magazine*)

Moving across several different media in her career as an artist, Neshat has expressed her desire and constant challenge to “tell a story” in the cinematic medium. With the original novel composed as separate short stories that connect half way through the book, the narrative sequence for the story becomes paramount. The black of the first scene gives way to the white pyramid-like Tehran roofs, in accord with Neshat’s renowned minimalist black and white style. The blue of the sky is in stark contrast to the roofs and the dark figure of Munis. The whirling white clouds create the visual link to the next scene: the whirling translucent water stream (reflecting the clouds) through which the Karadj garden is irrigated. There is an airy, fluid quality established from the beginning: the flow of the black veil in the wind, the whirling of the clouds, the flight of Munis. They are in contrast to the granite ground and the mud wall of the garden. Harsh realities are traversed and surpassed in the magic realism of the tale. However, physical reality does not stop the fluid motion. The wall gives way to the stream, and the fall toward the granite ground does not mute Munis’ voice.

Munis

Gayatri Spivak in the now classical text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” contends that masculine imperialist rescue missions obstruct the alternative histories that the subaltern woman might write with their bodies. One of these alternative histories is suicides; as an act of self-negating agency. Speaking in terms of *Sati* or the practice of widow burning, Spivak points to it as a theologically illegitimate practice performed to prevent the woman from material inheritance. Spivak rejects criminalizing *Sati* and

turning it to the object of a rescue mission by colonial armies. In tandem with that, the rescuing of Muslim women from the claws of Muslim men has become a rallying cry for the globalizing economies today. Spivak warns that ideology attaches to any young woman's suicide, and the task of the critic becomes "unlearning" these ideologically coloured judgments. As an example, she points to the suicide of Bhabaneswari Bhaduri in 1926. She failed to carry out an assassination against the British colonizers. In order not to reveal the whereabouts of her comrades, she commits suicide. But she waits until her menstrual cycle to stress the fact that the suicide is not due to an act of dishonour such as illegitimate pregnancy (as was the wont). This is a "figure who intended to be retrieved, who wrote with her body. It is as if she attempted to 'speak' across death . . . she spoke, but women did not, do not, hear her (22). Munis' death is also an attempt to "speak across death with her body." Fearing dishonour to the family name, Munis' traditional and abusive brother Amir Khan, hides the suicide of her sister. With the help of Faezeh, he stealthily buries her in the garden. She is dug up from there several days later by the power of magic realism along with Faezeh's talisman. It is interesting to note that Faezeh—who is in love with Amir Khan—is a co-conspirator in the Munis' murky burial in order to win his affection. She resorts to witchcraft and philters to stop his engagement to an infamous girl. As she is blowing enchanted words and burying a talisman in Amir's garden, she hears the beckoning of Munis from the ground. The magic of the love-charm intertwines with the magic of Munis' character and with the magic realism of the movie. Munis is resurrected from a Foroughean garden of rebirth. These details are highlighted more in the novel. Neshat

claims to have “politicized” the character of Munis. In an interview, she confesses a personal identification with Munis:

Just as Parsipur constructed the characters according to her own personality, I’ve done the same. Munis and I share a passion for political activism, a belief in social justice. (Heartney)

In the Author’s Note at the end of the novel, Parsipur too confesses that Munis is the one character that closely resembles her own persona, mixed with that of her cousin (121).¹

Hers is the voice of the narrator. As a political brain-child of Neshat, Munis is the character that deviates boldly from the novel. She is the one who attends the communist party’s underground meetings and stands in vigorous demonstrations against the military along the side of men.

Munis of the novel is not as powerful as that of the film. Listening to the news on radio is the most politically charged activity in which she partakes. In the book, she is eventually raped by a driver and his aid as she makes her way to the garden with her friend Faezeh. Her first suicide ensues her conversation with Faezeh about the nature of hymen². Feeling betrayed and misinformed, she decides to jump off the roof. She never dies however. She roams Tehran’s streets, buys and read books about sexuality and eventually returns home after a month of wandering. This time, her brother stabs her, thinking she has run away from home as a fallen woman. This murder gains the

¹ The cousin was a simple and righteous young woman and a victim of an unhappy arranged marriage. She later divorces her husband and lived a pious life as a dervish (Parsipur, Afterword).

² She has been restricted from climbing trees since childhood fearing the breakage of her hymen “curtain” but Faezeh informs her that the hymen is no film, but an orifice.

approval of Faezeh who is madly in love with Amir. Neshat claims: “With Faezeh, I share the desire for a normal, traditional life” (Hearney Interview). Faezeh who yearns for the traditional pleasures of marriage and religious prudence witnesses the withering of her dreams by a rape. Munis returns once again from the dead and after scolding her friend, confesses that now she has the power to read people’s thoughts. She takes Faezeh to the Karadj garden.

However in the film, she belongs to the world of politics more than the domestic arena. She refrains from entering the garden, and remains the knowing voiceover of the narrative. Through her, we learn of the forgotten fighters for ideals of freedom and democracy. Ideals that were trashed by the needs of the globalized market.

Zarin

If the garden is interpreted as Iran, a feminine space, and as the body of the woman, then Zarin—on a symbolic level—embodies Iran’s essence/spirit of freedom. She is the hope for its salvation, as she makes the desert bloom, planting her paper flowers in the barren land (a Foroughean image). The garden flourishes with her health and her health improves with the rise of Iran’s anti-colonial government. The film’s most aesthetically pleasing scenes and enigmatic imagery include Zarin. As Rancière reminds us, aesthetics and politics intertwine. Performed by the grace of the Hungarian actress Orsolya Tóth, Zarin is the saintly prostitute who escapes the brothel for the holy shrine upon encountering a faceless man. Hysterically scrubbing her naked anorexic body red and blue in a magnificent *hamam*, she is ready for ablution, the ritual cleansing of the body that signifies purification of the soul. The conjunctions of

body, geography, history and politics have already been discussed and will be re-examined. The shame in the skin is a metonymy for a sense of guilt or filth in the self, the ideological make-up of the mind, the political frame of the nation. Neshat herself declares that she shares Zarin's bodily aversions:

[What I share] With Zarin, the character that I perhaps feel closest to, it is the problem of the female body and feelings of shame. As a Muslim woman, I have grown up with a complex about my body, always feeling inadequate.¹ (Heartney Interview)

As Zarin lights candles in the shrine, she inadvertently becomes the object of prayer of a congregation of men who sit upright after touching the ground with their foreheads. We as the audience cannot see their faces, but Zarin can. This is a powerful image that transforms the stigmatized sex-worker to a holy *qebela*, toward which the believers kneel. It is ironic that she may notice many of their faces as her costumers. After her purification frenzy, she has now become an essence of purity, the worshiped sanctuary. Finally entering the Karaj garden like the stream through the hole in the wall, she finds shelter. She is later discovered by Fakhri and the gardener as she floats Ophelia-esque in the pond, baptized, born again. Zarin soaks in the algae green water in an image that is closely linked with Forough's "Summer's Green Waters" poem:

Lonelier than a leaf I gently row
 through the summer's green waters
 with my load of bygone joys,
 moving towards autumn's grave shores,

¹ As previously mentioned, Dabashi clarifies that Neshat picked up a "nasty case of anorexia" in a Catholic boarding school in Tehran as a teenager.

toward the land of death (*Rebirth* Trans. Wolpe)

She is the first inhabitant of the garden, guarded by the gardener (who marries her in the novel). For the entire film, she is voiceless and does not enter in dialogue with any other character. Hers is not the realm of words, but images, the Imaginary, phantoms, and sensations. Maybe that expressive silence and intense presence is what immortalizes her act in this movie. In the novel, she does not die, but is wrapped in a lotus flower she gave birth to, and disappears into the sky. The last words of the book read:

“Zarrinkolah” [Zarin] her husband called to her, “we must go on a journey.”

Zarrinkolah cleaned the house and packed a bundle of clothing for the journey.

“But we don’t need clothes where we’re going,” her husband said.

“Leaver your bundle behind.” She obeyed, and took her husband by the hand.

They embraced the [lotus flower]. The flower wrapped its foliage around them and they all rose to the sky in a puff of smoke. (Parsipur

113)

But in the more political movie, as the military takes over the intellectual, the private, and the activists’ quarters, Zarin starts to hover above the garden rootlessly. She is feverish and finally dies simultaneously with the death of a boy-soldier, superimposed over the climax of Fakhri’s party song.

If the garden is symbolic of Iran, Zarin is the spirit of hope for its salvation. The precarious soul of freedom is finally trampled under military boot with the help of foreign friends and domestic intellectuals.

Faezeh

Devout and traditional Faezeh closes the film as she walks away from the garden toward the town. The garden has been left to ruins by the military and by the detached and collaborator intellectuals.¹ Zarin has died and Munis is torn in the political struggle. Faezeh's resolute walk, without her veil, toward the capital is a return of the repressed. The traditional, marriage seeking woman, shuns her previous beliefs in order to march toward the cause of the trouble. Spivak contends that the agency of the third-world woman² has been forgotten in the battle between subject-constitution and object-formation. Faezeh is that woman caught between tradition and modernization, but her aporetic voice is not lost in the movie:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. . . a violent aporia between subject and object status. ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 61)

¹ Forough, too, in "My Heart is Burning for the Garden" laments the indifference and the objective gaze of intellectuals in the death of the garden, as mentioned earlier.

² As already mentioned, words such as Third-World, and West and are used strategically with full knowledge of the problematic binaries they create. They are used to facilitate communication not to validate the dichotomy.

In the space of the movie, the aporia of the repressed third world woman reappears. Having shuttled violently between the rule of the patriarchy and the boot of the military, Faezeh—the weakest and the most grounded of all the women—stands tall and marches forth toward the epicenter of political unrest.

Neshat Film Conclusion

Neshat's cinematic pallet is coloured by several trans-national influences. I argue that the most prominent of Neshat and Parsipur's muses is Forough, Iran's beloved, *avant-garde* poet, film maker, theatre actress, and translator. More than half of Neshat's artistic career has been devoted to translating Shahrnush Parsipur's novel characters into cinematic personages and a feature film. The most intimate motif prevalent in the three women's texts is the possibilities that space-politics allocates to the female characters and their embodied resilience, resistance and revolt.

In Forough, Parsipur, and Neshat, the body or rather the skin—this disturbed surface of modernity—is peeled, bruised, chopped, pierced, and scrubbed bare. The largest organ of human body, the skin, is the interstice between the inside of the human being with the world outside. With the tension put forth by poverty, moral stigmatization, and armed struggle, the symbolic skin fails to mediate between self and the other. Throughout a grueling ritual in the film, Zarin scrubs-off what she perceives to be the source of her impurity, her body, her skin. Jean-François Lyotard calls the skin a “Moebian-Labyrinthine skin, single-sided patchwork of all the organs (inorganic and disorganized) which the libido can travers” (*Libidinal Economy* 4). From the faceless men of Neshat to the effaced lepers of Forough, what lies at the junction between us and them is skin deep fears and bodily aversion. Body

enhancement, adornment, or mutilation techniques have been prevalent for more than 30,000 years. As noted earlier, critics argue that the physical body is a cultural site for the expression of a social body. Scholarship about the body is especially prevalent in Western canons. Michel Foucault famously theorizes the body as a nexus for power struggle on a personal and national level. In *Power/Knowledge* calls the body “the inscribed surface of events” (148). It is thus that genealogy or “an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (148). In his work, even the abstract concept of history is as an inscription on the body. The question of social change shifts from a focus on ideology to a focus on bodily inscription and embodied ideology. For Foucault bodies are discursive practices. They are “disciplined, overwritten, controlled, and censored” (148). However as Spivak criticizes, the godfathers of modern philosophy, Kant and Foucault included, do not directly consider the effects of colonization of the past (and globalization of the present) on the body of third world women. Although recent scholars from the Middle East and India such as Sara Ahmed, Farzaneh Milani, Hamid Dabashi, have tried to write an alternative history for the “women of the global south,” but I believe that the works of visual artists entangled with a long tradition of poetry and prose accomplish much more in a single stroke, or visual shot. Neshat, inspired by Forough and Parsipur, illuminates our eyes with bodies imprinted by history of Iranian women, and their forgotten struggles for emancipation. In displaying its alluring erotics as well as grotesque realities, the bodies as material and discursive practices point to all the violent shuttling that Iranian women, and by extension humanity, have undergone in

the transition between “object-formation” and “subject-construction”(Spivak “Subaltern”). Neshat does not let the “exhausted affects” of the image of the veiled other dominate the surface of her enigmatic work. With Neshat, the eye does not know in advance what it sees and the mind does not know ahead of time, how to analyse the art work. She perhaps effects a displacement of the exhausted affect of indignation and leads the eye toward curiosity and attention when confronted with radical alterity. In an age when a simple icon of a veiled woman carries with it connotations of subjugation, abuse, lack of agency, and victimhood, Neshat’s female characters create aesthetically playful, as well as political personalities that cannot be oversimplified into a cliché. The aesthetics, politics, and ethics in Neshat’s lens foment a bond with the radical alterity of these women, creating curiosity and attention in the viewer regarding what was previously only a loaded signifier.

Last Words

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

—Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*

This dissertation proposed a fresh practice of reading and regarding literature and art produced by the Iranian diaspora in an age of war against terror. In line with Spivak, it aims to “uncoercively rearrange desire” or train the imagination to see the complicity of the self in the plight of Others. I read these interstitial works of art and literature through their engagement with the trio of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. The new world order has uprooted millions of refugees, expelling them from the only real human rights, which according to Hannah Arendt includes: that of belonging to a political community. For Arendt, the “loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights,” maybe because “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (“Human Rights” 31). Speaking in the aftermath of the Second World War and as a refugee herself, Arendt’s words resonate in these dark days of war against terror that witnesses millions of displaced humans outside the conditions of humanity and citizenship. The image of radical other shuttles between violent terrorists and destitute refugees on flimsy boats in popular imagination. Aesthetics can intervene in this bipolar representation of the radical other by giving a human face to the plight of the other. Through an ethical engagement with alterity, a new bonding, engagement and imaginative embrace has been made possible whence the privileged are not exempt from the trauma in the putative third world. It is the pain

of the other that lets us step outside our comfort zone (a state of *ex-statis*) and extend an imaginary arm. This is what Spivak calls ethics: an embrace, an act of love. The face of the other brought forth through the artists and authors in this collection, can perhaps act as a metonymy of that outstretched arm that creates a virtual community of humanity. While the military funded by tax-payers ravishes the world, tearing the shared fabric of humanity, it is the task of artists to bring its fissures to touch. The danger to the civilized world as framed by Arendt, does not come from without. By forcing people into desperate situations, through wars, famines, sanctions, regime change and military coups, the menace will come from within. “The danger is that a global, universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages” (“Human Rights” 34).

Graphic novels, photographic/poetic collections and the feature films discussed in this dissertation occupy the fertile interstice between the visual and verbal domains, where, just as in gutters, there is more space to dismantle fixed hierarchies of a policed mentality. The domain of politics and that of aesthetics are interlocked in such works as *Persepolis*, *Zahra’s Paradise*, *Nylon Road*, *Women of Allah*, and *Women Without Men*. I resonate with Rancière as he argues that Politics, not policing, is a re-configuration of the common space of the possible, visible, sayable, and audible. Space politics, or the occupation of a place constitutes the basic unit of human existence, and a corner stone whence all rights emerge. “The fundamental deprivation of human rights takes place first and above all in depriving a person of a place in the world which makes his opinions significant and his actions effective”(Arendt “Human

Rights” 29). As such, aesthetics also concerns itself with ideas of occupation of the space of the visible, and a *re-partage* of what has been previously off limits.

Aesthetics cannot be severed from its political texture, studied in isolation, or pedestalled independently. This luxury of looking at decontextualized beauty in literature and the arts is a ploy of mental policing, prevalent in the ivory towers of academia. Detached aesthetics has purposefully given-up on its response-ability of belonging and connecting to a world community. Artists such as Shirin Neshat have confessed that they do not have that luxury to produce works of art in vacuum about their experience as a Middle Eastern/ Iranian diaspora.

The ethical is a third knot in my Borromean circles that adds a more humanitarian bond to the study of aesthetics and politics. Ethics brings out the question of the treatment of the Other to the forefront. Ethics has been compared to an embrace, a relationship, or an act of love. This is while Levinas, and in turn Judith Butler and Susan Sontag look at the face of the Other, or its visual reproduction, as the surface whence ethics springs forth as a responsibility with regards to the vulnerable, naked Other. It is salutary to re-visit the long quote here in order to understand how the proximity of alterity can change precepts, from violence to ethics. The face (or any representation of the body) as a shorthand for an encounter with the Other has been theorized thorough by Levinas. This face of alterity has been brought to an intimate proximity through the works of graphic novelists and their personal avatars such as Marji, Pari, and Zahra in *Persepolis*, *Nylon Road* and *Zahra’s Paradise* respectively. The face can be synechdochially read in hands, feet, lips, or eyes in Neshat’s photographic collection, as an “inscribed surface of events.” Levinas famously

accounts for the face of the Other as the nakedness that beckons a deep seated violence in us: “thou shalt not kill.” That first instinct is only checked by an ethical call for peace when encountering the vulnerable face of the other.

The proximity of the other is the face's meaning, and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms, which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself. This extreme exposure —prior to any human aim — is like a shot 'at point blank range.' . . . From the beginning there is a face to face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious forsakenness. Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other. (*Levinas Reader* 82-3)

There are serious dangers associated with externalizing an enemy, or seeing the cause of current day misery in a detached Other. *Zahra's Paradise*, though visually pleasing, falls into the pitfall of picking one cause for the current turmoil in Iran, illuminating which will right all wrong. Such demonization purges the self while giving room for external regime change and imported democracy. Being away and estranged from Iran's complex political scene, the authors used the most generic Western media representations of Iran's post-election riots in 2009, reverting from

ethical balance in painting the enemy's image. Evil does not possess one leader, killing whom will bring justice to the country. Such is the tall tale sold to the military. As Foucault outlines, power, moves in circular fashion, from bottom-up in society. It is only the people of society who can renounce their leader. As in the case of the latest regime changes by world's superpowers, elimination of the tyrant will not usher democracy. As discussed in the Preface, democracy cannot be exported. Democracy is a waking up of people, it is people coming to acknowledge a sense of belonging to a community of politics, in which the subjects are willing to rule and be ruled, alternatively. When that empowerment is stolen from the citizens, rulers resort to violence to control the crowd. This is not feasible without the help of a certain class of society who benefit from such a ruling elite. To eliminate the simplified notion of "evil," what Amir and Khalil outline in the figure of Khamenei, more force from below is required, much more than a U.S. invasion and decapitation. Once a military body is convinced that there is an Other outside the self, outside one's nation, one's ideology, who is completely independent of "us" and is the source of all that is wrong in the world, then the brutal generic crushing of such a distant enemy needs no explanation. I referred to this cognitive process as pesticization. The enemy is turned psychologically into a pest ready to be crushed. Democracy is not a given that can be shipped with missiles, and is only achieved by a coming into awareness of the people by their share in the common allocation of politics in a country. Any other interruption in the democratic process by an outside force, such as the CIA coup of 1953, and the current interference of world superpowers in the Middle East will only backlash and

stall the process.¹ Art intervenes here. Aesthetics as a re-allocation of space to the forbidden, shatters the deadly binary between self and the other. It is useful to gaze at the faces brought forth by the Iranian graphic novelists or the self/portraits and the characters of Shirin Neshat with an understanding of the ethical implications that this bilateral relationship invokes. The comic technology utilized in *Persepolis* and *Nylon Road* aids in shuttling the face of the other to intimate enclosures. Face (or the body) here is a synecdoche of the self and of being. In the Levinas oeuvre, the face is “naked, destitute, defenseless, vulnerable, mortal,” and “exposed to an invisible death,” to “a mysterious forsakenness.” Portraiture is a suitable venue to test the urge for destruction and violence that Levinas bemoans. The image emits clues that demarcate our distance / proximity to the other: gender, race, age, social class, air, attire. It is the proximity or distance from which we locate our subjectivity that triggers or neutralizes the initial urge to resist. For Levinas, the urge to harm is hampered by the ethics of responsibility. This responsibility toward alterity is a demand, a fact, a bond. “An ethical philosophy of responsibility grounded in the phenomenology of the face” is a central concern for Levinas (*Otherness than Being* 3).

Training and re-arranging human perception through an ethical aesthetics can change worldviews and perhaps the world. This dissertation started by delving into the roots of Othering as it contributes to democracy and terror. Many diasporic memoirs or works of visual arts are received here with the axiom or the self-explanatory mindset that the West is ripe with democracy while the Middle East is brewing with terror. Pandering to the whims of the imaginative audience, many ex-patriate authors

¹ The enforcement of ISIS by arming Syrian rebels with Western weapons is an example of such a backlash.

such as Azadeh Nafisi, or Marina Nemat reproduce the troubled mentality back for tokens which can range from immigration papers, international podiums, academic seats or even public recognition. These native informants ride the tide of the public curiosity about Islamic cultures, the demand to pierce through the veil. The perpetrators of the war, on the other hand, claim to bring “infinite justice”¹ (Rancière, *Aesthetics & its Discontent* 111) to the axis of evil produced by the imagination of the super powers. Infinite justice here becomes a displacement of terrorism, as humanrightist-Imperialism feeds fundamentalism. The philanthropic discourse of aiding the third world and saving the Muslim woman become our contemporary alibi for yet another civilizing mission.

The trouble over-seas with wars, famine, and exile are presented to us with difficult to view images. But our sight fails to grasp the magnitude of suffering without an ethical, political, and aesthetic bond. What is the cause of what Caruth calls the “ceaseless betrayal of bodily sight” (*Unclaimed Experience* 50)? How can we see and see again the trauma of the Other, outside the set visual clichés of war-escapes and destitute individuals? Aesthetic photographs, images, as well as graphic narratives can bypass that defense mechanism against viewing distant traumas and in so doing, create a novel engagement with terror. The safe distance of an image and the absent/presence of violence *contained* in the frame allow for the working of the faculty of judgment. After all “nothing separates fictional representation from the presentation of reality”

¹ Iran, Iraq and North Korea were dubbed as the “Axis of Evil” by George W. Bush in his State of Union Address in 2002 as governments that aided terrorism or had/sought weapons of mass destruction. Even the military operation in Afghanistan was to be dubbed: “Operation Infinite Justice,” which due to some opposition was switched back to “Operation Enduring Freedom”.

(Rancière *Discontent* 123). What brings the successful authors of diaspora in engaging with the distant other, the religiously different, and racially dissimilar, is the narration or representation of an embodied existence with art, play, imagination. The visual representation of an identifiable face and body through the comic medium has been studied along scholars such as Scott McCloud.

Bodies and portraits in the graphic narratives, photography and films in this study are “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (Foucault 148). It is the embodiment and occupation of the space that empowers the precarious women in these chapters. The space of the garden in Neshat’s *Women Without Men* creates a *locus amoenus* that bursts with fertility and creates a community for fallen women. This woman-space stands in conjunction with the nation and its strife toward freedom. In her *Women of Allah*, it is the sanctified visible skin of the Muslim woman which becomes the telltale heart of ancient rhymes with new messages. The occupation of space and embodiment within a labyrinth of skin are material traces over which abstract struggles take place regarding agency, visibility, and individuality. Within the articulation of body, history, politics, and aesthetics, the exposed face of the other looms, making a demand, waiting for a response. Bodies as discursive practices point to all the violent shuttling that Iranian women, and by extension humanity, has undergone in the transition between object-formation and subject-construction. Iranian artists depict the subject caught “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation . . . tradition and modernization, culturalism and development (Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 61).

Through aesthetic playfulness, the aporia of the repressed third world woman reappears. Literature and the arts allows the mind to revel in an aporia, to struggle with antinomies and find tolerance for paradoxes. To offer change in lethal desires of domination and destruction, the aporia of the religiously, traditionally, Othered can be very well dealt with in academia.

While not much intellectual activity is expected from the media or the movie industry, the academia too, quite contrary to its claims to challenge the reason of the state, successfully manages to either profess neutrality¹ or, in most cases, reproduce the sanctioned government stance. Resistance to such domination would entail the recognition of the complicity of the self in the globalization of capitalism and its mission-liberations as well as an aestheteo-political engagement in world and word affairs. However I resonate with Slavoj Žižek that in the post-political biopolitics of today even the educated can become reminiscent of Nietzschean apathetic last men who have no great passions, no binding commitment; tired of life, taking no risks, seek only comfort and security while expressing *tolerance* with one another:

Taking a little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams.
And much poison at the end, for a pleasant death. They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. 'We have discovered happiness,' say the Last Men, and they blink. (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*)

¹ Howard Zinn claims that “you can’t be neutral on a moving train” in a memoir by the same title. In the previous discussion on democracy, neutrality, indifference, or silence in the face of atrocities is comparable and contributing to the fascist shift. For a discussion of this shift, please refer to the Introduction.

As a female Iranian student in Canada, it seems audacious of me to question Western enlightened ideals of freedom and democracy. But my subject position as a non-immigrant woman of Islamic background, oscillating between Middle East and North America, has created a critical distance and an intimacy with “disparate” psychological geographies that facilitates the questioning of the concept-metaphors of freedom of thought and expression, ability to critique, deconstruct and doubt; more here than at home. In Iran, the corrupt government within, and the fierce reality of global sanctions without, have put the onus on citizens to voice and challenge the system. Such voicing of citizen’s needs, such dissensus imprints the freshly woven and rewoven fabric of the political. Having spent my ninth year of (non-sequential) residence in Canada, I have rarely encountered departments of humanities dissenting against corporatized universities which boast of their outstanding schools of law, business and dentistry.¹ What I have mainly encountered has been brilliant retracing of the history of thought within the European and recently American tradition, quite unparalleled in breadth and abstraction but one which does not threaten the government’s stance loudly, clearly. Much of the courses offered and the research undertaken reiterate the authorities’ stance and do not connect the ivory pinnacles of theory to the material existence of humanity, right here, right now:

Theory—the seeing of patterns . . .—can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over.

But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth. (Rich 31)

¹ The Quebec student uprising and the Occupy movement might be among the few flares of hope against this anesthetization of the universities with regards to political affairs.

An optimistic reading of the situation would call this a hoarding of data perhaps, and a certain elitism of liberal humanists that avoids embracing the Other or even looking at its human condition eye to eye. Some believe that it is our *zeitgeist*; that the consumer culture has turned even education and cultivation of the mind to a commodity chiseled for quick liquidation:

Again, while it is a great blessing that a man no longer has to be rich in order to enjoy the masterpieces of the past . . . this ease of access . . . can become a curse. We are all of us tempted to read more books, look at more pictures, listen to more music than we can possibly absorb, and the result of such gluttony is not a cultured mind but a consuming one; what it reads, looks at, listens to is immediately forgotten, leaving no more traces behind than yesterday's newspaper. (Auden, *Secondary Worlds*)

However, this approach to the disciplines, these cement, impenetrable walls that have been built to secure the domain of influence of each “faculty”—to partition the visible, sayable, thinkable, grievable—once systematic and repetitious, establish categories of verifiable Truth that are quick to dismiss research done outside the security of the domain. With the vogue of interdisciplinary practice in place, the hardening of these divisions becomes most palpable in cross hatched departments. Looking at the history of ideas and theories is a legitimate undertaking and I do not intend to disavow that, but to point to the lack of autocritique, which teases the easy binary of outside and inside, self and other, aesthetics and politics—while heeding at every step to fall into easy essentialism, oversimplified reification, or nativist utopianism.

The recognition of the evil One (Hitler, Stalin, Saddam...), purges the self and locates the cause of misery Outside the self. The politically disengaged yet educated youth learn about humanitarian catastrophes in the world such as genocides, illegal occupations, coup d'états, human rights abuses without recognizing their ongoing contribution to it currently and historically. Such desensitized education, that "sanctioned ignorance," which privilege the security of the proximity as opposed to opening up to the possibility of an encounter with the "the dangers" of that which is distant (language, color, race, religion, geography, time) inhibits an ethical relations with the self and the Other. The paranoid relation with the "enemy" is based on a narcissistic self-preservative securitarianism that will not benefit the imprisoned Self cut from the life lines of an ethical relation with the Other. Under such unethical regimes, although the aim is to *protect* a fragile vulnerable Self (nation, civilization, religion) what implodes and disintegrates inwardly is that isolated metonymy of a self. Ironically the mission to salvage the self becomes the cause for its annihilation. The unethical securitarian approach backed by world's strongest iron fist will crush the self with the other using transcendental signifiers of Democracy and Terrorism as alibi, unless a relationship is established that, while not "selfing the other," does not expunge it entirely. This is where the aesthetic break intervenes. This is how artists can challenge the status quo; not by succumbing to an engaged literature, but by using aesthetic means to bring the traumas of the distant others, closer. In the era of compassion fatigue, media desensitization, and parochialism, the contribution of intellectuals/artists/philanthropists in the perpetuation, reinforcement of the hegemonic discourse or on the contrary to challenge is undeniable.

The graphic narratives, photographic collections and films studied in this dissertation sit at the intersection between aesthetic engagement with historic and private events at a distance that can have political connotations. Only through an ethical balance with regards to representing radical alterity can rusty hierarchies of subjugation be subverted, displaced and turned on their decapitated heads. As Sharon Sliwinski reminds us, “humanity is not simply given but rather exists only as a precarious, virtual community brought into being, in part, through our grappling with world events at a distance” (*Human Rights in Camera* 144). The dynamic interlocking of aesthetics and politics enable a throbbing and shifting of boundaries that were previously codified, untouchable. When wars are fought over images, the diasporic visual literature produced about a distant land’s march toward freedom may be able to change our gaze and imagine a new landscape of what is possible. Aesthetics can reshape the sense of belonging to a world community via its entanglement with politics and ethics; if it is not anticipated by a quick fix interpretation and leaves space for the play of the imagination.

Appendix

List of other Shahrnush Parsipur's Publications:

- *Asieh Between Two World* (novel—2009 — (آسیه در میان دو دنیا—داستان بلند)
- *The Blue Reason* (novel —1994 — (عقل آبی —داستان بلند)
- *The Dog and the Long winter* (novel —1974— (سگ و زمستان بلند —داستان بلند)
- *The Simple and Small Adventures of the Spirit of Tree* (Novel —1999 — (ماجراهای ساده و کوچک روح درخت —داستان بلند)
- *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (novel —1989— (طوبی و معنای شب —داستان بلند)
- *On the Wings of Wind* (novel—2002) (بربال باد نشستن (داستان بلند)
- *Prison Memoir* (memoir—1996) (خاطرات زندان)
- *Shiva* (science fiction—1999— (شیوا —داستان دانش—1999)

Short stories, Novellas & Collections

- “Cristal Pendants” (short stories—1974— (آویزه های بلور مجموعه داستان—1974)
- “Men from Various Civilizations” (novella—1993—Translation: Steve MacDowell & Afshin Nassiri (داستان های مردان تمدن های مختلف
- “Red Ball (short story for children” —1969— (توپک قرمز—1969)
- “Tea Ceremony in the Presence of the Wolf” (short stories—1993— (آداب صرف —1993) چای در حضور گرگ
- “Trial Offers” (novella—1975)— (تجربه های آزاد داستانی—1975)

Translations

- *China History for Young People*, (1990)—From French تاریخ چین برای نو جوانان، ترجمه از فرانسه
- *Chinese Astrology*, Paola Delsos (1975)—From English طالع بینی چینی
- *History of China (1995)—From Opium Wars till Cultural Revolution 4 Volumes*, From French تاریخ چین، از جنگ های تریاک تا انقلاب فرهنگی، چهار جلد ترجمه از فرانسه

- *Laotse and the Taoist Master*, (1987) By Max Kaltenmark—From French
لائوتزه و مرشدان دائوئی نوشته ماکس کالتنمارک، ترجمه از فرانسه
- *Mythology*, (2003) By the group of Professors of different Universities اساطیر
جهان، نوشته گروه دانشمندان اسطوره شناس دانشگاه های مختلف دنیا ترجمه از انگلیسی
- *Parapsychology, from the series of What I know*, (1990) From French
پیراروانشناسی از سری چه می دانم، ترجمه از فرانسه
- *Spanking the Maid*, (2004) By Robert Coover نوشته رابرت
کوورو ترجمه از انگلیسی
- *Tanius' Cliff*, (1991) By Amin Ma'luf—From French صخره تانیوس نوشته امین
مالوف، ترجمه از فرانسه
- *Travel to the West*, (1995) By Wu Chengnen, translated from French سیر باختر،
رمان، نوشته ووچنگ نن، ترجمه از فرانسه
- *Un Unquiet Mind*, (2004) By Key Redfield Jamison—From English ذهن بی
قرار، نوشته کای ردفیلد جامیسون، ترجمه از انگلیسی
- *Witch Hunting*, (1990) By Shirly Jackson—From English شکار جادوگران شرلی
جاکسون، ترجمه از زبان انگلیسی

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