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REIMAGINING THE FEMININE SELF: STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSION IN THE WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN FEMALE ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the works, produced over the last thirty years of around fifty contemporary Iranian female artists, both living in Iran and the diaspora. The artists discussed, mostly were either very young or were born after the Iranian Revolution (1978-79), thus being "children of the Revolution". The works discussed are, likewise, produced from the 1990s onwards and greatly impacted by the socio-political events and rhetoric which emerged after the Revolution which, apart from causing a fissure in the fabric of society, were also catalysts for both a questioning of identity and a great rise in women artists who became concerned with these subjects.

The identity found in these artists' works is complex and quite often paradoxical. It stands at the crossroads between Tradition and Modernity, East and West, Private and Public and other such competing binaries. It has been formed, in great part, as an identity of resistance in response to the state's Manichean worldview, which has been increasingly at odds with the individual desires of Iranians.

In dealing with these issues, artists have also had to invent new ways to convey meaning whilst under the scrutiny of the regime, resulting in imagery that is frequently couched in metaphor and allegory and often performative in its staged and scripted presentation of the "self", projecting the self onto quotidian narratives of alterity and dissent by emphasising women's bodies as sites of social contention upon which discordant visual signifiers compete to criticise State and/or Western-prescribed identities. By scrutinising and resisting such prescribed narratives these artists deconstruct conventional interpretations and epistemological structures and make us question the veracity of these historical accounts, offering in their stead an alternative feminine identity and narrative which is both destabilising and pluralising.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> "It is one of the great tragedies of history that there are times when a whole country disappears behind a heavy curtain. Sometimes this is the result of an authoritarian regime that wants to darken the lives of its own people; at other times, those outside the country choose to see it, for their own purposes, through a veil of ignorance. Iran has suffered both fates."
> (Bhabha, 2008: 6).

As the cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha observes, Iran has for some time now disappeared behind a "heavy curtain" which has had serious and paradoxical effects on the lives and identities of its people, particularly its female population which has been put under pressure to conform to politically and socially prescribed identities which have been diametrically opposed to their own desires, as well as the norms of the outside world. For this research project, I examine the works of some Iranian female artists, living in both Iran and the diaspora, who explore questions of identity in their works and analyse them against the socio-political and cultural developments that have shaped their lives. This study, therefore, analyses these tensions in terms of, and as visualised by, art and aesthetics.

The artists discussed in this study, for the most part, matured artistically after the Iranian Revolution (1978-79) and so were either very young or were born after it, thus being "children of the Revolution" and part of what became known as the "Burnt Generation" (*Nassl-e Sookhteh*). The works discussed here were, likewise, produced from the 1990s onwards and greatly impacted by the socio-political events and rhetoric which emerged after the Iranian Revolution (1978-79). Apart from causing a fissure in the fabric of society, these events were also catalysts for a noticeable increase in female artists who became concerned with these subjects, since they faced constraints and threats to their personal and collective identities as

Iranians, women, and artists. Thus, as female identity has been most under pressure to conform and change, there is a fierce struggle to establish identity in the work of these female artists. This has resulted in an art which expresses doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity regarding knowledge and a crisis of identity which is both personal and cultural, since individual identity is at the mercy of a state-imposed cultural identity in Iran.

I deliberately and consciously chose to exclusively focus on the works of female artists from the beginning of my research. This was primarily due to female artists being largely underrepresented in the Iranian artistic canon, as reflected in most other parts of the world. Recognising this disparity, I believed it was of critical importance to allow women to come into representation by providing a platform and an art historical study that highlighted those who had and have been marginalised by the dominant discourse. To this end, I have also set out to include as many artists as possible in this thesis. Again, this decision was fuelled not only by the wish to provide exposure to the largest number possible, but also to solidify my argument. I felt the need to include as many examples as possible, both from Iran and its diaspora, to show that these were not isolated examples, but could be found across the board of contemporary Iranian female artists who were all, in many ways, fighting for the same goal – autonomy and the ability to speak for themselves whilst also attempting to dispel long-held misconceptions and stereotypes.

Another crucial aspect that drove my decision was the necessity to explore the concept of gender difference, particularly within the context of the patriarchal nature of Iranian society and the state. Iranian female artists have created their artwork within a system that continually defines them as different and often limits their opportunities. Instead of ignoring these complex issues, I sought to acknowledge and shed light on them, especially since the artists themselves are keenly aware of these challenges, actively addressing them through their art. As such, this thesis serves as a feminist intervention, challenging the traditionally masculine and Western structures of knowledge and perception. By focusing exclusively on the works of Iranian female artists, I aim to disrupt these structures and provide a platform for a more comprehensive understanding of the artists and their art. Through this endeavour, I hope to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced discourse surrounding Iranian art while fostering a greater appreciation for the unique perspectives and contributions of female artists in shaping the artistic landscape.

Broader Research Questions

Despite the numerous restrictions and constraints imposed after the Iranian Revolution (1978-79), there has been a remarkable surge in the number of female artists, especially since the late 1990s. These artists have been at the forefront of new artistic developments and have parlayed their existential angst visually, finding new creative strategies to critique their socio-political circumstances and scrutinise and question previous accounts and histories, weaving their own alternative and unapologetic narratives. Although these artists have generally not collaborated and there are no explicit theoretical links between them, and despite their different ages and geographic locations, they all seem united in their fierce desire to visually narrate the stories and situations of Iranian women. Edward Lucie-Smith draws a comparison between China and Iran, observing that although China is a secular society, with gender equality (at least in theory), only a very small proportion of the interesting new art is made by women, whereas, in Iran where there is no gender equality, much of the interesting avant-garde art is now being made by women (Lucie-Smith 2011: 38). I will consider why the artistic output of female artists has risen so sharply, despite their situation and the constraints they face. I will also look at the variety of factors, including social, political, and cultural, that influence their works and the identities that are manifested in them. Furthermore, I will explore the strategies that artists use to convey meaning in their works.

I will address these issues within the framework of Iran's socio-political and cultural developments and sensibilities, using the works of Iranian sociologists and feminists, whilst at the same time employing Western theories and methodologies such as Feminism and iconography to analyse the works. My research is qualitative and thematic, ascertaining and comparing the themes, events and strategies that are common to these artists in their construction of identity. It is important to emphasise that this is a multidisciplinary study which examines the art produced against a backdrop of socio-political and cultural issues. I examine not only the art and the culture that has produced the artists/art but also the receiving culture (mostly Western) and the signs and symbols used by the artists that are, at times, difficult to interpret and in need of "translation". It is, therefore, an art-historical study that also incorporates the anthropological, sociological, and political, using the medium of art and artists to extrapolate and examine the data.

Theoretical Framework

As a researcher working within a Western art historical tradition, I will be using Western art historical theory such as iconography (Panofsky 1970), since its concern with the subject matter and meanings of artworks provides a useful methodological framework for these images. I will also utilise semiotic theory (Barthes 1977, 2009; Baudrillard 1994, 1998, 2001), to examine the polysemy of meaning and identity inherent in these works, where realities are hidden beneath the surface and require semiotic tools and understanding of the signs and their underlying meaning to interpret them. The interpretations of these works often yield a multitude of potential readings, some of which may be at odds with each other, creating a tapestry of complex and sometimes conflicting perspectives. I will also draw on theories of identity and, particularly, notions of displacement, "otherness" and "hybridity" (Hall 1990, 1997, 2000; Bhabha 1994; Said 1994, 1997, 2003; Spivak 1990, 2010) to explain the fragmented identity found in these works. These identities are, as Stuart Hall argues, more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, (Hall, 2000: 17), since without these relations of difference, representation cannot occur. However, what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, and serialised (Hall, 1990: 229). This approach similarly recognises that identities are constructed "through" not "outside" difference and through the relation to the "other" (Hall, 2000:17). In the case of Iranian women, this "other" has not only been the outside world but also, increasingly, their own country, resulting in their construction of identity being an act of resistance. Hence, in their art, there has been the pressure either to emphasise their "Iranian-ness" (by a Western art market that encourages such signifiers of "otherness") or to shed and deny it (usually in the case of artists studying in the West).

One recurring theme is the deconstruction of identity, and Jacques Derrida's notion of Deconstruction (Derrida 1976 1978, 1998) – to pick things up against their own grain and to show how they are structured by the very things they act to exclude from themselves, thus displacing and bringing into question the stability of such structures – is useful in this examination. Derrida's deconstruction challenges traditional assumptions about language, meaning and the nature of reality, seeking to reveal the inherent contradictions and instabilities within discourses. It highlights how meanings are not fixed but are contingent and subject to interpretation. Deconstruction aims to undermine binary oppositions and hierarchical

structures by exposing their underlying complexities and inherent contradictions. Derrida argues that language is fundamentally unstable and that there is always a gap between the signifier (word or symbol) and the signified (concept or meaning). This gap gives rise to endless interpretations and alternative readings, as meanings are never fixed or definitive. Deconstruction also focuses on the ways in which texts and discourses privilege certain meanings or positions while marginalising or excluding others, examining how these hierarchies are constructed and maintained through various mechanisms of power and exclusion. Rather than providing a fixed set of answers or a singular interpretation, deconstruction encourages a process of questioning, challenging and reimagining traditional frameworks. It aims to unsettle established norms and assumptions, revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in language, culture and thought. Hence, the deconstructive approach involves critically analysing texts and discourses to expose the underlying instability and intricacy of meaning, challenging binary oppositions and hierarchical structures, and promoting a more nuanced and open-ended understanding of language and reality. I found this approach very useful in the interpretation of many of the works discussed since the art of contemporary female artists often deconstructs absolutes; it is alterity often posing as conformity.

I also consider Western Feminist art-history and theory (Butler 1999, 2004; Butler et al, 2016; Felski, 1995, 2000) as well as the works of Muslim Feminist scholars (Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2013; Ahmed 1992, 2011; Mernissi, 1991, 1996, 2011), despite the feminism in this art lying not so much in a professed ideology, but in the very act of making it in a history that has been glaringly devoid of women as art makers. Even though such theories are useful in explicating the art discussed to a Western audience, I must stress that this research will, nonetheless, always be set within the context of an Iranian historical, sociological, and artistic tradition and sensibility. Thus, finally and most importantly, my work is grounded in the research of Iranian Feminists, sociologists and scholars (Najmabadi, 1991, 1998, 2010; Moghissi 1996, 1999, 2006; Shirazi 2003, 2011; Milani 1992, 2001; Sedghi 2007; Afary 2009) to explain notions of gender and society in Iran, as well as contemporary Iranian art historians (Keshmirshekan 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015; Daneshvari 2014, 2017).

Review of Scholarship

There are several accounts of modern and contemporary Iranian art such as those by Hamid Keshmirshekan (2007, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) which were instrumental as a starting point and for providing a historical backdrop. In *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives* (2013) Keshmirshekan explores the critical evaluation and review of tradition and modernism in Iranian art and culture during the 20th century, emphasising the inseparable relationship between artistic and ideological concerns. He examines fundamental questions about modern and contemporary art in the context of non-Western art and provides an understanding of modern and contemporary Iranian art within the broader context of global art. Keshmirshekan also explores the impact of socio-political movements such as nativism, nationalism, anti-Westernism, and "Islamicism" on Iranian art. He contextualises art produced inside Iran and acknowledges the impact of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on artistic attitudes and diasporic art practices, briefly touching on the topic of diasporic artists and their concerns about identity and other contemporary discourses through case studies.

Abbas Daneshvari (2014, 2017) was another art historian whose works on contemporary Iranian artists were very useful as a starting point. Daneshvari's poetical analysis of contemporary Iranian art aligned with my own vision and his account also incorporated many of the artists I have included in my study. Daneshvari delves into the multifaceted nature of Iranian art, shedding light on the artistic practices, themes and techniques employed by contemporary Iranian artists. He examines how these artists navigate the crossroads of tradition and modernity, questioning societal norms and addressing pressing issues of identity, gender, politics, and global interconnectedness. Daneshvari also delves into the social and cultural dynamics that shape the production and reception of contemporary Iranian art, exploring the role of art institutions, galleries, and curators in promoting and supporting Iranian artists, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in the global art market. Thus, Daneshvari's understanding of the contemporary Iranian art scene, much like my own, is greatly posited on the complexity of contemporary Iranian life and aimed at dismantling stereotypes and preconceived notions about Iranian art and culture. Both Keshmirshekan and Daneshvari, therefore, provided a strong framework for understanding the background of the art as well as the more recognised artists, but particularly concentrated on male artists, in the case of Keshmirshekan.

I have relied on Judith Butler's works for the conception of a "feminine" self. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler argues that the concept of "the subject" is a critical issue for politics, particularly for feminist politics. This is because legal subjects are created through practices of exclusion, which are not immediately evident once the legal framework of politics is established. In other words, the construction of the subject in politics is carried out with certain legitimising and exclusionary goals, and these political operations are effectively concealed and normalised by an analysis of politics that takes legal structures as its basis. Legal power inevitably creates what it claims to represent, thereby making it necessary for politics to consider this dual function of power: the legal and the productive. Hence, it is not sufficient to simply examine how women can be better represented in language and politics. Feminist critique must also comprehend how the category of "woman", the subject of feminism, is produced and constrained by the very structures of power that are being challenged in the pursuit of emancipation. This is of course, very relevant for the study of Iranian women in the Islamic Republic, where the idea of an "Islamic woman" is strongly grounded in the law of the country.

Butler maintains that in the contemporary political discourse of identity, the binary opposition between the "I" and the "other" is a deliberate and strategic move within a particular set of signifying practices. Shifting the focus from an epistemological account of identity to one that examines signifying practices allows for an analysis of the epistemological mode itself as one possible and contingent signifying practice. The question of agency is then rephrased as a question of how signification and resignification operate (Butler 1999: 170). Butler also argues that gender is a socially constructed concept that is often hidden from view. The collective agreement to create and maintain binary gender categories is so deeply ingrained that it appears natural and necessary; those who resist or question it are often punished. The different ways in which individuals embody gender are not inherent or natural, but rather are shaped by cultural norms that are enforced through punishment and regulation (Butler 1999: 165). In this manner, Butler argues that gender is performative and requires repeated actions to maintain its social meaning. These actions are not just individual, but also collective and temporal; they serve to legitimise and reinforce the established gender norms. Consequently, gender is not fixed, but rather fluid and dynamic, constructed through the repetition of bodily gestures, movements, and styles. The performance of gender is a public action aimed at maintaining the binary

framework of gender, and through this stylisation of the body, gender is produced and maintained (Butler 1999: 165).

Similarly, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler argues that performativity is not a singular action but rather a repeated set of norms that, over time, have become accepted as standard. It may appear theatrical, but only because its history and conventionality are hidden. This creates an inevitable sense of theatricality, as the full disclosure of its historicity is impossible. This performative aspect of gender is something that is found in the works of many contemporary Iranian women artists and greatly influenced my studies of their works (**Figs.4,24,26,34, 97,112,144,155,157,159,179,185** as examples).

Butler's work was similarly important for analysing the parody found in many of the works by contemporary Iranian female artists. Butler stipulates that simply creating a parody is not enough to challenge established norms and values. One needs to identify the elements that make certain parodies genuinely disruptive and subversive, as opposed to those that are accepted and even perpetuated by society. To truly challenge traditional gender identities and sexuality, Butler believes that one needs to create performances that challenge the very foundations of these constructs. Thus, she states that there is the need to establish the kinds of performance that can make us question the binary distinctions between masculinity and femininity and expose the performative nature of gender itself (Butler 1999: 164). The use of parody can, furthermore, reinforce the idea of a natural gender identity and create a distinction between it and those who do not fit this mould. However, a failure to conform to a natural gender identity is inherent in all gender performances since such identities are impossible to fully inhabit. Therefore, there is a subversive element to parody that reveals the constructed nature of natural gender identities and can be used to challenge them: the use of parody in repeating gender roles can reveal the false belief that gender identity is a fixed and inherent quality. Gender is instead a performance that is subject to fragmentation, irony, and self-evaluation. Parody can also highlight the artificial nature of the concept of "the natural" by exaggerating it to the point of revealing its unreality (Butler 1999: 172). This "performative" aspect of gender is, once again, one that is found in the works of many of the artists discussed in this thesis, and more generally in the Iranian female population since a certain performance of a pious Islamic woman is expected from them by the country's regime.

Butler's belief is that the main goal of feminism should not be to find a standpoint that is beyond constructed identities, since this idea would be based on an epistemological model that disavows its own cultural location and promotes itself as a global subject, using imperialist strategies that feminism should critique. Instead, feminism's objective should be to identify subversive strategies that are made possible by the constructions of gender, to acknowledge the local potential for intervention by participating in the practices of repetition that create identity and, as a result, offer the potential to contest them. As Butler stresses, the objective is not to simply repeat established gender norms, but rather to repeat them in a way that challenges and disrupts those norms. By radically proliferating gender, we can displace the very norms that make repetition possible in the first place. Similarly, it is not possible to establish a fixed and inherent ontology of gender that can be used as a foundation for politics. Gender ontologies always exist within pre-existing political frameworks and function as normative mandates that determine what constitutes acceptable gender expressions. They reinforce restrictions on sexual reproduction and prescribe certain requirements for gendered bodies to be culturally intelligible. Therefore, ontology is not a foundation but rather a normative mandate that subtly embeds itself into political discourse and presents itself as a necessary foundation (Butler 1999: 174). This is a strategy that is intuitively demonstrated in many of the works discussed in this thesis and which I have found invaluable as a point of reference for their analysis.

The work of identity theorists has been crucial in framing my thesis question and the placement of these identities. Stuart Hall is an important source for any discussion of identity. In the essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Hall posits that the concept of "cultural identity" can be viewed in two distinct ways. The first perspective regards it as a shared culture that serves as a collective and authentic sense of self, concealed within other superficial or artificially imposed identities. This shared culture is held in common by people with a similar history and ancestry, and our cultural identities are shaped by our collective historical experiences and shared cultural codes. This provides us with a stable, unchanging, and continuous frame of reference and meaning as a unified people, despite the changing circumstances of our actual history. However, there is another viewpoint on cultural identity that is related but distinct. This perspective acknowledges that while there may be similarities between groups, there are also crucial and significant differences that shape who we truly are. In this second sense, cultural identity is not just a matter of being, but also of becoming. It is not a fixed concept that exists beyond time and place, but rather, is constantly evolving and changing. Cultural identities have histories and come from somewhere, but they are not grounded in a static and

unchanging past, but are instead constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Difference and continuity persist alongside each other, and diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference. Hall suggests that a conception of identity that lives with and through difference, rather than despite it, is necessary for understanding the complexity of cultural identity.

In *Resistance Through Rituals* (2003), Hall also argues that an individual's social identity is intricately intertwined with the institutions and relationships they are born into. They inherit a unique set of meanings that grant them access to and position them within a specific culture. These structures, which encompass both social relationships and shared meanings, not only shape the collective existence of groups but also impose limitations and modifications on how these groups live and perpetuate their social existence. It is through the intricate relationship between society, culture, and history that individuals, both men and women, are formed and actively shape themselves.

Within this dynamic framework, existing cultural patterns serve as a historical reservoir, representing a pre-existing "field of possibilities". It is within this field that groups operate - taking up, transforming, and developing the available resources. Each group brings its unique perspective to these starting conditions, and, through its practices and actions, culture is reproduced and transmitted. However, it is important to acknowledge that these practices are bound by the constraints and possibilities inherent in the given cultural and social context. The interaction between agency and structure becomes apparent as groups navigate and negotiate within the existing framework, both adhering to and challenging the established norms and beliefs. In essence, the nuanced interrelationship between society, culture, and history shapes the individual and collective identities of groups. Culture serves as a dynamic and evolving entity, influenced by the historical context and the agency of its participants. It is through this ongoing process of interpretation, adaptation, and transformation that culture continues to evolve, whilst remaining rooted in its historical foundations. Negotiation, resistance, and struggle: the interactions between a subordinate and a dominant culture, regardless of their position on the spectrum, are consistently dynamic and inherently oppositional. Even when this opposition remains hidden or is perceived as the norm, it is always present. The outcome of these interactions is not predetermined but rather actively shaped. The subordinate class brings a range of strategies and responses to this "theatre of struggle", encompassing not only methods of coping but also means of resistance. Each strategy within their arsenal utilises specific

tangible and social elements, effectively constructing the foundation for different ways in which the class lives and combats its ongoing subordination. Thus, Hall argues that subcultures must be examined through three different lenses:

1. Resistance and incorporation
2. Social divisions and fragmentation
3. Interpretation and representation.

These lenses were similarly very useful when looking at the works of Iranian women artists as they allowed for the visibility of the strategies used by artists to fight for alternative representation, as well as highlighting the issues that they struggle against.

Hybridity was another concept that was invaluable in my analysis of artists and their works. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity as a central element in understanding cultural identity and the dynamics of colonial and postcolonial societies. Bhabha argues that hybridity emerges due to the encounter between different cultures and the mixing of diverse social, cultural, and political elements. He believes that hybridity challenges the binary distinctions and fixed categories that are often imposed by colonial powers. It disrupts the notion of pure and homogeneous cultures by highlighting the complex and fluid nature of identities and cultural practices. Hybridity is not a simple blending or synthesis of two cultures but instead creates something entirely new and different. Bhabha emphasises that hybridity is a product of ambivalence and contradiction. It occurs in the “third space" – an in-between liminal space where cultures interact and negotiate with each other. This third space is a site of cultural translation, where meanings are destabilised and reconfigured. Hybridity resists assimilation and the domination of one culture over another. It challenges essentialist notions of identity and offers possibilities for alternative forms of representation and subjectivity.

However, hybridity also involves a strategic reversal of this process through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. This leads to the deformation and displacement of sites of discrimination and domination. Hybridity challenges the narcissistic demands of colonial power, while simultaneously implicating its identifications in subversive strategies that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the power. The colonial hybrid is an ambivalent space where power is enacted on the site of desire. Thus, for Bhabha, hybridity refers to the shift of value from symbol to sign, resulting in the fragmentation of the dominant discourse’s power

to represent and exert authority. The concept of hybridity poses a significant challenge to this discourse as it disrupts the binary opposition between self and other, and internal and external. Consequently, the hybrid is perceived as a source of paranoia because it cannot be confined within these categories and resists the attempts of the dominant discourse to maintain its authority.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is closely related to the notion of mimicry. He argues that the colonised subjects often mimic and imitate the cultural practices and behaviours of the colonisers, but this mimicry is never a perfect replication. It contains an element of subversion and mockery, destabilising the power dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised. Bhabha's concept of hybridity thus recognises the complex, dynamic, and transformative nature of cultural identities and practices. It highlights the potential for resistance, negotiation, and the creation of new cultural forms in the spaces of encounter between different cultures. Bhabha uses the example of migrant women, who are often socially and politically invisible, to argue how mimicry is used as a tool to manipulate representations of power and authority, and to exercise power at the limits of identity. Bhabha, likewise, draws on the example of the veiled Algerian woman during the revolution, who used the veil both as a means of resistance and as a form of camouflage. The veil, which was once used to demarcate the boundaries of the home and womanhood, now served to transgress the familial and colonial boundaries. However, as the veil circulated beyond cultural and social norms, it was subjected to paranoid surveillance and interrogation, making every veiled woman a suspect according to Fanon.

Bhabha further argues that in colonial discourse, the concept of "fixity" is crucial in constructing the ideology of otherness. Fixity represents cultural, historical, and racial difference, and is paradoxical in that it connotes both rigidity and disorder. The stereotype is a major discursive strategy used in colonialism that vacillates between what is already known and something that must be anxiously repeated. It is not a simplification because it is a false representation of reality, but because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation. The stereotype is a substitute and a shadow, revealing the fantasy of the coloniser's position of mastery. Bhabha's notions of hybridity, mimicry and the subversion of stereotypes were all, therefore, very useful concepts to analyse many of the works I discuss in this thesis. Despite the artists not directly trying to engage with Bhabha's text, it was critical for myself as a researcher in explaining the works and ideology behind them which are often misunderstood.

In analysing the notion of identity, I found Manuel Castells *The Power of Identity: The Information Age – Economy, Society, and Culture* (2009), particularly relevant. Castells posits that the construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, biology, collective memory, personal fantasies, and many other sources. Individuals, social groups, and societies, however, process all these materials and rearrange their meaning, according to "social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework" (Castells 2010: 7).

Castells distinguishes between three forms and origins of identity building:

1. Legitimising identity – introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination vis a vis social actors.
2. Resistance identity – generated by those actors who are devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival based on principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society.
3. Project identity – when social actors, based on whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure (Castells 2010: 8).

The identity found in the works of many of the female artists discussed can be seen as "Resistance Identity", formed in response to the regime's Manichean world view and proscriptions, as well as the stereotypes imposed by the West, which has led to both resistance on the part of citizens as well fragmented, dichotomous identities (**Figs.27,29,30,31,33,39,48, 98,112,117,126,132,133,137,140,144,151,152,155,157,159,160,178,183,190**).

Equally important have been works that examine Iranian identity through a historical lens. According to Ehsan Yarshater's article "Persian Identity in Historical Perspective" (1993), national identity can be established through various elements such as geography, language, religion, and shared history. However, when one or more of these elements are challenged or endangered, a crisis of identity can occur. Throughout history, the Iranian identity has been threatened many times, with the constituent elements such as territory, religion, and language all being challenged. The first documented challenge arose with Alexander's conquest of the Persian empire and the emergence of Hellenism on Persian territory. Later, the Arab conquest and the imposition of a new religion and world view confronted Persians with a more potent challenge. However, they compromised by adopting Islam while preserving the Persian

language and cultural heritage. Today, the most significant challenge to Persian identity comes from the West; Persians face the impact of Western technology and expansionism, causing their traditions to fade, their way of life to change, and their self-reliance to erode.

In “Iranian Identity Boundaries: A Historical Overview” (2012), Abbas Amanat also contends that throughout Iran’s early modern and modern history, there has been a tension between the centre and periphery, which has influenced the construction of national identity. However, the process of state-imposed national identity is a dual phenomenon, as it is constructed from above but also influenced by the assumptions and interests of ordinary people. Iranian identity has also taken on a life of its own, somewhat independent of the sources of power and at times even against the state. Identity formation has been shaped by encounters with neighbouring communities and countries, such as the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols to name a few. The emphasis on the role of the state as the enforcer of a collective identity made it common to return to ancient roots when speaking of Iranian identity. Identification with Iran’s ancient past has been deeply ingrained in Persian historiography, literature, and collective memory. Amanat’s appraisal of the Iranian identity was invaluable in explicating the hybrid identity found in the works discussed. It shows that despite not being colonised in the traditional sense, due to the conflicting ideologies enforced upon it, Iran still experienced/experiences some of the effects of colonialism. Similarly, it explicates the continuing resistance of Iranians (particularly women) to the dominant patriarchal discourse and the reversion to an ancient “mythical” past as a way of resistance and maintaining a “Persian” identity.

In *Identities in Crisis in Iran: Politics, Culture, and Religion* (2015) Ronen A. Cohen similarly addresses the Iranian identity through a historical lens. Cohen emphasises the fact that the creation, shaping, denial, and exposure (to other influences) of identity involve sociological and theoretical/creative factors, which are influenced by cultural foundations and environmental circumstances. Cohen argues that the conflict between an Islamic and a Persian identity in Iranian society has existed since the Arab invasion and the introduction of Islam. The resulting identity is a blend of often-contrasting values expressed at the level of the self, formed from the symbiosis between Islamic Shiʻa religion and Persian culture. Cohen believes that the guardians of the revolution failed to impose a uniform religious identity for society, resulting in the constant development of identity through private and common social factors. Furthermore, Cohen argues that in Shiʻi Iran, where an Islamic identity is prioritised over personal or national identity, there is a debate about the right to maintain a private identity and

self-image. This has created an atmosphere of ambiguity and duality, allowing people to embrace Western cultural norms of beauty and aesthetics without openly defying religious institutions, but also without their approval. Cohen's account was useful for explaining the competing ideals in Iranian society as well as the duality in Iranian culture and identity, which is likewise found in many of the works discussed in this thesis (**Figs.3,4,5,7,10,27,31,32,33, 34,112,140,144,148,150,151,157,190**).

Another indispensable text was Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi's *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (2001), which offered a nuanced exploration of the transformation of Iranian identity in the modern era, shedding light on the emergence of a distinct Iran-centred historiography and the role of a "secondary identification" with the Iranian homeland (*vatan*) in shaping this identity. One of the central ideas in Tavakoli-Targhi's book is the concept of the maternal homeland (*madar-i vatan*). He argues that this notion played a pivotal role in the formation of modern nationalist subjects and subjectivities in Iran. The identification with Iran as a maternal homeland provided a strong foundation for the development of a distinct Iranian national identity. This maternal metaphor implies a deep emotional and cultural connection between individuals and their homeland, fostering a sense of belonging and attachment that contributed to the forging of modern nationalist sentiments. Tavakoli-Targhi also examines the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Persian travellers' impressions of European women. These travellers' accounts provided a narrative basis for the establishment of Europe as a significant cultural "other" in Iranian discourse. Positive accounts of European women informed the nationalist call for unveiling and educating Iranian women, while negative accounts led to the development of a Europhobic discourse cautioning against the Europeanisation of Iranian women. This tension between fascination and apprehension toward European culture played a crucial role in shaping Iran's evolving relationship with the West.

Another critical aspect of Tavakoli-Targhi's work is his exploration of the emergence of a secular national identity in the nineteenth century. He highlights how many nineteenth-century historians, influenced by *dasatiri* texts, represented Iran's pre-Islamic past as a "golden age" that came to a "tragic end" with the Muslim conquest. This representation allowed for the construction of a new collective memory, identity, and political reality. By linking the end of the pre-Islamic era to the origins of human history, this narrative positioned Iran's "decadence" as the result of Arab and Islamic influence, whilst internalising desirable attributes from

European culture into the Iranian self-concept. Additionally, Tavakoli-Targhi explores two competing styles of national imagination that emerged during this period. The official nationalism identified Iran as a "familial home" led by the "crowned father" (*pidar-i tajdar*). This paternalistic style of nationalism emphasised hierarchy and authority. However, it faced opposition from a counter-official discourse that saw the "homeland" (*vatan*) as a dying mother in need of immediate care. This "matriotic" style of nationalist imagination called upon all Iranians to protect and nurture the motherland, emphasising a more egalitarian and collective approach to national identity. Tavakoli-Targhi, therefore provided a comprehensive analysis of the complex processes through which modern Iranian identity has evolved. By examining the maternal metaphor, the influence of European encounters, the construction of a secular historical narrative, and competing styles of national imagination, he sheds light on the multifaceted nature of Iran's engagement with its past and the shaping of its modern identity.

Finally, and most importantly, my work is grounded in the research of Iranian Feminists, sociologists, and scholars such as Farzaneh Milani. Although Milani writes about female writers of the previous generation such as Forough Farrokhzad, I found her arguments very relevant to my own interpretation of the female artists I was studying. In *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (1992), Milani deftly weaves historical events, religious influences, and societal constraints into the fabric of her analysis. By grounding the literary works which she discusses within their specific cultural milieu, she emphasises the profound impact of these external factors on the authors' creative expressions. Milani argues when analysing the works of female writers, it is essential to be mindful of the cultural and social realities that have shaped their attitudes and concerns. In the context of Iranian literary history, it is crucial to consider gender as a critical perspective. Examining women's writing through the lens of their gender allows us to compensate for overlooked aspects, challenge misconceptions, and address sexually biased assumptions. Although we should avoid double standards, gender should still be considered when evaluating art. Additionally, due to their gender, women have historically been denied recognition for their social contributions, making it even more important to acknowledge their work. Milani states that the tradition of female writers in present-day Iran documents the evolution of consciousness and identity that extends beyond the confines of traditional culture. Through their literature, Iranian women are finally able to express themselves and provide a new outlook on their lives. They are no longer confined to secrecy or anonymity, and their literature is a celebration of their dual triumphs: gaining control over their bodies and having their voices heard. It was interesting for me to

notice that Milani's observations regarding women writers from one or two generations prior were applicable to the women artists that I was studying and the socio-political debates around the female body, as well as their constant censorship, still held true (**Figs.98,108,137,153, 160,161**).

Hamideh Sedghi, in her book *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (2007) also argues that the state, regardless of its form, intervenes in women's lives to achieve its political and cultural objectives. The control of women's sexuality and labour is a tool used by the state to legitimise its position and consolidate its power. Gender is a critical factor in the state's global image. Sedghi also notes that women's mobilisation and activism have played a significant role in state-building in Iran, with the Islamic Republic initially mobilising poor and working-class women. She argues that gender plays a significant role in Iranian politics, with the state using it symbolically to strengthen national identity and enhance legitimacy in global relations. Domestic policies are often linked to the international stage and world politics is gendered. The way women's bodies are portrayed, whether uncovered or masked, and categorised as "Western" or "Islamic", contributes to a specific national identity. The unveiling of women can be seen as an attempt to emulate the West and modernise, whilst re-veiling can be interpreted as a rejection of the West and an attempt to construct an authentic Islamic history. Both approaches distort women's representation, placing them in a double-edged dilemma of national and international patriarchy. Sedghi's historical analysis in the way Iranian women have been used symbolically by the state to further its own agenda, provided the groundwork for the understanding of contemporary Iranian women and their push back against the various pressures put on them by both state and society. The strategies of contemporary Iranian artists should also be seen in light of these historical developments and using much of the same symbolism, with gender as the starting point for such discourses.

Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (2009), is another author who offers a comprehensive analysis of the intricate relationship between sexuality, gender, and politics in Iran during the 20th and early 21st centuries. Afary delves into the complex historical, cultural, and social forces that have shaped the understanding and regulation of sexuality in Iran, challenging prevailing assumptions and shedding light on the nuanced realities of Iranian society. She argues that the development of modern sexuality in Iran is a historical phenomenon that occurred in a similar fashion to the Western world and dismisses the common belief – that Islamism in Iran has led to a harsh form of sexual repression – as an

oversimplification incapable of capturing the complexity of contemporary Iranian society. Afary explores the emergence of modern Iranian society and the ways in which Western influences, religious discourses, and nationalist movements intersected with notions of sexuality. She examines the impact of these factors on the transformation of gender roles, sexual norms, and practices within Iranian society. Afary then delves into the significant role that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 played in reshaping sexual politics, examining the challenges of women's struggles for equal rights and the multiple narratives surrounding feminism and gender activism within the country. Furthermore, Afary explores the strategies employed by the Iranian state to control and regulate sexuality, such as the imposition of modesty codes, the enforcement of gender segregation, and the censorship of artistic expressions. She maintains, nonetheless, that there have been notable improvements in women's education and health, and a significant decrease in birth rates, all of which have positive implications for women. However, this coexistence of progress and misogyny in laws and policies raises the question of how these two seemingly contradictory phenomena can exist together. One reason is that prior to the Revolution, Iranian women had already made significant advancements in these areas. Afary asserts that even in the face of political obstacles, feminist ideas persisted in Iran and continued to influence higher education, arts, and other cultural spheres so that women overtook men at university. Additionally, the introduction of women's studies programmes in universities and women's periodicals also demonstrated the growth of feminist discourse and allowed feminist writers to use their platform to scrutinise and condemn patriarchal views on gender.

Thus, Afary proclaims that by the turn of the twenty-first century, Iranian feminism had evolved and was in its third generation. Unlike the previous generations who fought against the Shah or endured the early days of the Islamic Republic and war, the third generation grew up during the reform era and was more assertive in its approach to the state. This new generation of young urban women has expressed confidence in their feminist ideals and have been determined to confront the state. Furthermore, the policies of the Islamist government cannot be easily characterised as "puritanical" or "moralistic". Using a Foucauldian framework, Afary argues that various factions within the state have clearly actively deployed a new "sexual economy" for the population. At times, the Islamist state prioritised patriarchal interpretations of gender norms over modern ones, while at other times it embraced modern projects alongside a discourse that presented them as indigenous to traditional Islam. Throughout, the state utilised modern institutions to disseminate these varied discourses. Once

again, this account provided a better understanding of the evolving feminist landscape and beliefs of the post-Revolutionary generation, challenging monolithic interpretations to offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in Iranian society, whilst situating these historically within the larger socio-political developments of the country.

Similarly important in the exploration of Iranian youth and the culture of resistance, was *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, edited by Annabelle Sreberny, and Massoumeh Torfeh (2013). Sreberny explores how behaviours, attitudes, and expressions of identity herald new subject positions for Iranians. In the same volume, Pardis Mahdavi's analysis of the cultural revolution enacted by young people in Iran, and Mahmoud Arghavan's examination of Iranian youth culture's resistance of the dominant social order and their "bricolage" of element from different cultural influences were important in my understanding of contemporary Iranian culture which was in turn reflected in the images that I was examining. These studies of the post-Revolutionary youth and the strategies of subversion used by them was also invaluable to my research as most of the artists discussed are from this generation and grew up with the restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic or with its repercussions in exile (**Figs.3,4,5,27,32,33,34,150,151,157**).

Other useful sources for this thesis have been the various websites, newspapers, journals, and exhibition catalogues mainly in English, Persian and French, which have filled in the gaps that have been missing in the literature. Although there have been various studies on Iranian women's lives both before and after the Revolution, there has not been much academic research on contemporary Iranian (particularly women) artists. This is arguably the case for contemporary art in general, but perhaps more so in the case of Iranian female artists who are either isolated in Iran or scattered across the world. Some of the artists discussed in this paper have been included in various token exhibitions abroad which invariably group them together with other women artists from the Middle East to portray the shared experience of being a Muslim/Middle Eastern woman ("She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World", Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2013). Others have been included in exhibitions on Iranian art ("Iranian Contemporary Art", Barbican Centre, 2001; "Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists," Chelsea Art Museum, 2009), yet the focus of none are (or perhaps can be) comprehensive. More recently, the exhibition "A Bridge Between You and Everything" (2019), curated by the artist Shirin Neshat at the Centre for Human Rights in New York,

showcased the works of 13 Iranian women artists picked by Neshat herself, who live and work in different countries (including one from Iran) and attempted to bring together an Iranian feminine voice from the artists' own perspective. I hope that, in the future, we can see more such endeavours and on a larger scale.

Aims and Summary

With the ongoing sanctions it continues to be very difficult for artists living in Iran to exhibit in the West, thus limiting both their chances of growth and recognition in a global market as well as hindering any research on their works. My aim is to introduce these artists to a Western audience in the context outlined, whilst steering clear of any Orientalist representations, allowing the artists' own voices and stories to come through. As such, I have been greatly reliant on the participation of the artists themselves, in the form of interviews where possible, whether by phone, in person or by consulting previous interviews they have given. Additionally, this voice is compared to that of the receiving audience (in Iran and globally, but particularly the West) and art world, as well as my own interpretations.

The works examined in this study are not state-sponsored or governmental art. It is crucial to underscore this distinction, for in the wake of the Revolution, a new division emerged between such works and state-sponsored art, which can be characterised as either propaganda or art constrained and directed by the state and its ideologies. The artworks examined in this study, were either created independently without seeking state approval, or if the work was submitted for approval by the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance for an exhibition or competition, the works had to undergo self-censorship, to avoid the possibility of rejection. Hence, as Pamela Karimi contends, in contemporary Iran, art practices vacillate between "legality and illegality, visibility and nonvisibility, publicness and privacy, presence and absence, transparency and ambiguity" (Karimi 2022: 5).

I believe this research will be important in advancing our knowledge not only of contemporary Iranian art practices, but also about the important socio-political events of the past four decades and how Iranian female artists are using their art to safeguard and to perpetuate a feminine identity that has been under threat both in and out of the country. It is only through their personal, political, and artistic struggles that these artists explore their indeterminate state of hybridity and create new identities that can straddle previous boundaries and create a new narrative. As an Iranian woman of the "Burnt Generation" myself, I feel personally vested in this project not only from the point of view of self-awareness and understanding, but also from the desire to shed a light on the misunderstood subject of Iran, its society, women, and the contemporary art that has emerged in recent years. As a researcher within a Western art-

historical tradition, I view my role in this endeavour as one of translator, conveying the nuances and subtleties inherent in this art to a Western audience and hope that this thesis will be a step in the direction of dispelling stereotypes and pre-conceptions regarding the country and its people. My intention (within the outlined parameters) has been to be as inclusive as possible in my selection of artists, to best show the diversity and scope of artwork and identity that they portray and to highlight not only the challenges faced by these various artists but also the different tools and iconography they use to relay and search for new discourses and alternative identities.

Thus, I will include both artists living in Iran as well as those of the diaspora to show the differing challenges faced by each group, as well as including artists working in different media, to demonstrate the different strategies employed by artists to convey their identity. Likewise, I concentrate on works which best convey the identity of contemporary Iranian women – many of which are either self-portrayals or portrayals of other women. In my selection process, I have drawn on artists whose works are very personal and concerned with the (hitherto unprecedented in Iranian art) semiotics of gender, identity, and society. These artists are visual raconteurs, who project the self onto quotidian narratives of alterity and dissent, using discordant visual signifiers to challenge both the State's and Western gender constructs and stereotypes. In doing so they draw, not only on historical perspectives (the use of Qajar, Safavid and Pahlavi symbols and signifiers), Iranian literary history (such as the *Shahnameh* and the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad), traditional styles (miniature, calligraphy) and mediums (carpets) but also on modern socio-political themes (war, censorship, women's rights) and new media (video, installation, photography) in order to show the diversity of competing ideologies and historical narratives that comprise their hybrid and fragmented identities.

The underlying catalyst for the artists discussed, however, remains the Revolution and its aftermath. Shirin Neshat (b.1957), for example, has confessed that much of her work has been defined by the Revolution, and by her reaction to it, and that her life has also been defined by it. She believes that the Revolution defines many peoples' lives, whether they stayed in Iran or left, and it had a direct influence on her thinking, to the extent that had it not been for these issues, she does not think she would have become an artist (Shamaa 2015). The sense of displacement felt by many Iranians, applied not only to those who left the country, but also to those who stayed and were displaced within their own country due to the changing and

unfamiliar socio-political climate, brought about by many factors such as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), compulsory veiling, laws regarding personal appearance and behaviour, and the segregation of public spaces, amongst many others. As a result, both women who stayed and those who left, became increasingly aware of borders, whether they were the physical one between Iran and the rest of the world from which they had been excluded and barred, or the enforced borders between the sexes and between the realms of the private and the public, erected by the regime to contain and control women. Additionally, since the Revolution, Iran has increasingly become the "other" country in the Middle East and the World. Its women, likewise, have become "othered" not only around the world, but also within their own country. The sense of fragmentation and otherness is one that is experienced by both the artists living in the diaspora and those living in Iran, given that both occupy liminal spaces corresponding with diaspora identities, which are, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, those that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference (Hall 1990: 235), to adapt and survive.

This sense of liminality is portrayed by Gohar Dashti (b.1980) in In *Iran Untitled* (2013) (**Fig.1**). The image features eleven women dressed in black, evoking the imagery of mourners, all seated in a single row along a bench. This arrangement creates a striking visual contrast between the women and the barren, inhospitable landscape behind them. This juxtaposition of the women and their environment serves as a metaphorical representation of the challenging circumstances faced by women in Iran within the framework of the Islamic Republic. The women's attire resembling mourners' clothing suggests a sense of sorrow or loss, highlighting the emotional burden that many women in Iran may carry due to various societal and legal constraints imposed on them. The visual alignment of the women in a single row along the bench symbolises the routine bureaucratic processes that many women must engage with daily in the Islamic Republic, dealing with various aspects of their lives, from legal matters to administrative procedures. This positioning creates a feeling of monotony and routine, emphasising the recurring challenges they face in navigating the complex bureaucracy of the state. The choice of the arid and desolate landscape as the backdrop further amplifies the sense of isolation and hopelessness experienced by these women. The landscape appears barren, offering no signs of life or growth, mirroring the societal limitations and restrictions placed on women in Iran. It suggests that these women are in a state of limbo, neither moving forward nor looking back, as they grapple with the challenges of their daily lives. It signifies the disconnection many women may feel from their own personal histories and aspirations due to

the societal constraints imposed upon them. It also underscores the intricate relationship between women and the Iranian landscape, which simultaneously isolates them and ties them to their homeland.

More generally, Dashti's image can also be seen as a commentary on the resilience and endurance of women in Iranian society. Despite the isolation and challenges they face, they remain tied to their homeland, symbolising their enduring connection to the culture, history, and identity of Iran. The photograph captures the tension between these women's sense of isolation and their unwavering commitment to their country, reflecting the complex interplay of identity, gender, and societal dynamics in contemporary Iran. Through this image, Dashti invites viewers to contemplate the multifaceted realities faced by women in Iran and the profound resilience that characterises their relationship with their country.

The large number of Iranians who have left the country and have had to, in many cases, re-write their history and re-assess their identity to fit in with their host (mostly Western) countries has likewise resulted in fragmented identities. In such cases, these identities and accounts are largely liminal and defensive, and require a re-writing of Iranian history and identity to justify and defend themselves from Western pre-conceptions whilst also preserving a sense of self. In defining their identities, these artists are offering alternative accounts to those being offered (on their behalf) by both the Iranian regime (past and present) and by the outside world and media, particularly the West. Contemporary Iranian artists thus use art as a way of expressing identity under the guise of metaphor and allegory, in a way that allows for a global dialogue as well as bypassing the scrutiny of the regime. This is, nonetheless, often achieved by addressing these stereotyped identities and deconstructing them, offering instead a hybrid identity that encompasses many different ideologies, frequently achieved by projecting the self onto the body, which becomes a signifier for identity. The (female) body, also becomes a metaphor for these alternative and in-between spaces and the battleground on which competing ideologies fight for supremacy.

The notion of identity used here, is one that is multiple and fragmented – forged in the intermediate spaces between tradition and modernity, past and present, private, and public, homeland and exile. It is based on a self that is inextricably linked in its formation to space, place, and history and often forcibly displaced. Thus, as Stuart Hall suggests, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should instead think of it as an

incomplete “production”, constituted within representation (Hall 1990: 222). This space is a feminine one, which takes what it needs from these binary concepts and builds on paradox and difference - constantly negotiated and renegotiated. This notion of identity accepts, as Hall posits, that identities are never unified and are increasingly fragmented and fractured – they are not singular but multiply, constructed across different intersecting, and often antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions; constantly in the process of change and transformation (Hall 2000:17).

This hybrid identity can be seen in the *Self-portraits II* series (2003), consisting of three large self-portraits, *The Talking Eye* (**Fig.2**), *Duality* (**Fig.3**), and the tryptic *Social Identity* (**Fig.4**), combining photographic prints with wood, by the diaspora artist Shadi Yousefian (b.1978). The use of different media, as well as the deconstructed parts, portrays the fragmented identity that Yousefian feels, as an Iranian woman living in the United States (particularly as someone who went there at the age of sixteen, without having a good command of English). In *The Talking Eye*, as in her *Self-portraits I* she has deconstructed and then recomposed her face, using photographic prints mounted on wood panels, in a new and challenging manner. She has switched the placement of her eyes and mouth, so there are now two mouths where her eyes should be and one eye substituting her mouth. In this manner she is both unable to speak or see normally. The impression of a puzzle fitted incorrectly, makes the viewer uneasy since communication is difficult for Yousefian (through the image) and vice versa for the viewer. This symbolises the difficulty Yousefian has as an interlocuter in an alien culture who must communicate a self that is not static and unchangeable, as conveyed by the stereotypes found in the West, but the site of multiple readings and meanings.

In *Duality*, Yousefian portrays herself sitting in a cross-legged meditative pose, holding a different version of her head (metaphor for identity) in each hand (one wearing Islamic headgear and the other with braided hair). The thin red strip of cloth used on both side of the painting, acts as a hair ribbon on one side and as the knot of the *hijab* on the other, demonstrating the sameness as well as the difference inherent in this identity. This dual function of the red strip serves to highlight the multifaceted nature of the artist’s identity, emphasising that it cannot be neatly categorised into one single narrative. The title of the artwork speaks directly to the core theme of the piece. It signals the artist’s recognition and acknowledgment of the dual identity she grapples with daily. The term “duality” implies a sense of division and multiplicity, suggesting that merging these two distinct aspects of her

personality is a complex and ongoing process. The painting encapsulates the idea that achieving a coherent whole, where both Iranian/Traditional and American/Modern identities harmonise, comes at a cost – an internal struggle to reconcile the seemingly contrasting elements of herself. In this sense, Yousefian's artwork resonates with the experiences of many individuals who find themselves navigating the challenges of multicultural or multi-identity backgrounds. It serves as a commentary on the challenges and the richness that can arise from holding dual or hybrid identities. It also invites viewers to reflect on the broader themes of identity, self-discovery, and the negotiation of cultural and personal narratives in an ever-globalising world.

Likewise, in *Social Identity*, Yousefian delves into the intricate interplay between identity, self-image, and the societal contexts in which they are shaped. By splitting herself into three life-sized self-portraits, she illuminates how one's identity is not a static or monolithic entity but rather a complex construct influenced by the society one belongs to. This triptych serves as a visual exploration of the various facets of identity that Yousefian has encountered and navigated in her life, highlighting the impact of societal norms and expectations on her self-perception. The first self-portrait in the triptych represents Yousefian donning the covered Islamic dress code imposed by the Iranian government. This image reflects the restrictive clothing regulations that she would have had to adhere to while residing in Iran. It signifies the influence of the state and its imposition of religious and cultural norms on the individual's outward appearance. This representation of enforced identity underscores the idea that one's self-image can be shaped and even coerced by external forces, particularly in societies with stringent dress codes and cultural mandates.

The second self-portrait stands in stark contrast, presenting Yousefian in a Barbie-esque image that is idealised by the West and increasingly embraced in Iran as well. This portrayal points to the pervasive influence of Western beauty standards and consumer culture, which often promote a specific image of femininity that may not align with an individual's authentic self. It highlights the pressure to conform to these idealised standards, which can lead to a fragmentation of one's identity as they attempt to fit into predetermined moulds. The third self-portrait depicts Yousefian in what seems to be her normal daily attire. However, this image also represents a façade presented to the world in order to integrate into Western society, where she currently resides. This suggests that the blending of cultures and identities is often a strategic and adaptive response to the demands of a new social milieu. It underscores the idea

that individuals, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, may engage in a process of identity reconstruction to find their place in a different society.

Collectively, these three self-portraits in Yousefian's triptych serve as a powerful commentary on the fragmentation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identity in response to societal expectations and pressures. They highlight the adaptability of individuals in navigating complex social milieus and the ways in which hybrid identities emerge because of these interactions. Yousefian's work invites viewers to contemplate the broader themes of cultural assimilation, identity negotiation, and the constant evolution of self in a multicultural and globalised world. It serves as a visual exploration of the dynamic and evolving nature of identity in the face of societal influences and expectations, shedding light on the intricacies of identity formation, fragmentation, and adaptation, offering a compelling reflection on the diverse experiences of individuals navigating different cultural landscapes.

Gohar Dashti (b.1980), who lives and works in Iran, likewise portrays the hybrid identity of Iranian women, in the project entitled *Me, She, and the Others* (2009) (**Fig.5**), which is a documentary of the clothing Dashti and other women born after the Revolution in Iran must wear. In this series, Dashti has photographed women looking at themselves in the mirror, in three situations, from left to right, as they would dress for the workplace, indoors, and in the outdoor spaces of the country. Dashti observes that every woman featured in this series possesses a commanding presence in society, demonstrating the remarkable capacities of their generation across diverse domains. Nevertheless, despite their achievements, they are compelled to modify their appearance based on their occupation and social surroundings. Dashti contends that clothing is one of the critical factors that shape one's personality. Hence, when individuals are unable to exercise their choice in clothing, they become susceptible to a fractured sense of self, adapting to diverse social situations by assuming multiple personas. She maintains that this is one of the most significant and pressing challenges that Iranian women have encountered following the Revolution (Dashti 2009). Furthermore, Dashti asserts that women of her generation have grown up confronting a pervasive issue: the internal struggle to reconcile their personal preferences with the expectations of others. They may have the liberty to choose their clothing indoors but once outside, they relinquish that control to external forces, leaving them vulnerable to the imposed sartorial standards of others. As a result, whenever they must present themselves in a public setting, they feel a lack of agency over their own appearance, an issue that remains a source of constant anxiety (Dashti 2013). Dashti portrays

the dichotomous and often conflicting personas that Iranian women assume in their everyday lives, highlighting the performative nature of this complex endeavour. As Rose Issa has claimed, this phenomenon represents “the schizophrenia of dressing for outside and inside the home” (Issa 2008: 11). Consequently, women’s personal autonomy is largely constrained to private spaces, where they can be their true selves without fear of reprisal. In contrast, the public spaces of the Islamic Republic limit women’s agency, as they are compelled to adhere to the state’s mandates regarding their appearance and behaviour.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will examine how some artists enter a dialogue with Iran’s past from a political, social and artistic standpoint, in order to establish their identity as Iranian women and artists. Iran has had a rich artistic history, however the traditional arts that were valued in Iran (apart from architecture which is not included in this study), do not always correspond with those that were prized in the Western world (Painting and Sculpture). In an artistic context, this engagement, is largely informed by the knowledge that this mantle is inherited mostly from male artists and reclaimed by these women artists in terms of subject matter, style and medium to best convey a contemporary female sensibility. Historically, Iranian women have been absent as makers of art, and even as subjects in over 2,500 years of Iranian written history. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg points out that women are completely absent among the many figures in Persepolis and that even the animals carried as gifts for the king by the various delegations are, with one exception, male. The presence of the only female creature, a lioness, brought by the Elamites, can be explained by the age of the two cubs she accompanies, that still need suckling (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1993: 22). It is this absence of women, particularly as makers of art in Iranian history that contemporary Iranian female artists are challenging by forging a space for themselves in this history.

As Stuart Hall has observed, cultural identities have histories, but like everything historical they undergo constant transformation and are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power, so that identities are the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall 1990: 225). In effect, historical narratives are often manipulated not only by the state and society, but also in the construction of a personal identity. As Hall distinguishes, identity is not rediscovered but produced since it is not “grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past” (Hall, 1990: 224) – so the past is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth (Hall, 1990: 226). History,

in this "mythical" manner, is an important building block in the construction of (particularly national) identity and one that has been explored by some of the artists discussed here.

Contemporary Iranian artists thus engage with Iran's history, particularly in relation to women and the role they have played therein. One such period of engagement is with the Qajars (the Turkic dynasty that ruled Iran from 1785-1925), since this was not only the period in which the "woman question" emerged, but also because the Qajars were the first dynasty to pursue the modernisation of Iran, with Nasser al-Din Shah (r.1848-1896) being the first Iranian monarch to visit Europe. Nasser al-Din Shah was also the person whose passion for photography and vast archive of photographs mostly of the women in his harem (some 20,000 albums, that are still at the Golestan Museum) inspired artists such as Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974) (**Figs.6,144,145**) and Rabee Baghshani (b.1982) (**Fig.7**), since Qajar images can, on the one hand, be seen as an homage to the first body of photographs that were produced in Iran (and their importance in the history of Iranian photography), as well as reclaiming the gaze from the Qajar male (photographer) to a contemporary female one.

Some artists use the Pahlavi past as an alternative reference for identity and reminiscing about a past where Iranian women enjoyed more rights and freedoms. Images of icons from the Pahlavi regime such as Googoosh (**Figs.8,9,10**), the popular pop singer or Empress Farah Pahlavi (**Figs.11,12**) evoke memories of a collective past and an era when women had a visible (and unveiled) presence in the country. This iconography is discernible in the works of artists such as Malekeh Nayini (b.1955), Afsoon (b.1960) and Soheila Sokhanvari (b.1964) who were born before the Revolution and have personal recollections of that period. Sokhanvari further evokes this past by painstakingly drawing images from this era (when Iran prospered largely due to oil revenues), in crude oil especially brought over from Iran. These images unite shared (and imagined) memories, constructed through a collective amnesia and an obsession with what has been lost (without being known or at least fully known to this generation), so that it now must be recreated in the collective imagination, stripped of its flaws and made into a utopian vision. It is a paradise deconstructed and reconstructed in the imaginary. Thus, as Cohen argues, social interactions in concrete social contexts allow society to recount collective narratives form the shared imaginary of the group and to produce a system of symbols, significances, and narratives that establish shared significance for members of the group. This process of establishing collective identities can take a long time but is assimilated in the

personal identities of the individuals in the group so that they cannot imagine themselves or their social environment without them (Cohen 2015: x-xi).

Another important association with an artistic and literary past for Iranians has been with the epic *Shahnameh* ("The Book of Kings") by the great Persian poet Ferdowsi, which is of central importance in the language and ethno-national cultural identity of Iran and its disassociation with Islam. It provides important semantic and symbolic resources which allowed for an identification with Iran's imaginary pre-Islamic past. Artists like Shirin Neshat (b.1957) in the *Book of Kings* (2010) series (**Figs.13,66,67,68,69,70**), Houra Yaghoubi (b.1979) in *Who is my Generation?* (2005) (**Fig.14**) and Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955) in the *Traveling Demons* series (2007) reference the Shahnameh by using images and text from it and tying it to Iran's contemporary life and society.

Artists such as Neshat also use the poetry of women writers like Forrough Farrokhzad (1934-1967), the iconoclastic poet who has been revered by generations of Iranian Feminists (including Neshat herself) and whose writings were banned for more than a decade after the Revolution. In *Untitled* (1996) (**Fig.15**), from the *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997), Neshat uses Farrokhzad's poetry along with Shi'i iconography and writing to further portray the mixed heritage of Iranian women. The use of text in these images not only ties these artists to a literary past, but also to an artistic past in the form of calligraphy which has been one of the artistic traditions of Iran and the Islamic world. Additionally, the text in Farsi safeguards this historical dialogue since it is only the Iranian viewers who can read and understand the meaning and symbolism of these texts.

Other artists like Farah Ossouli (b.1953), use the traditional miniature style of Persian painting, as in the *Ars Poetica* series (2010) (**Fig.16**), to introduce contemporary themes and issues, whilst artists like Nazgol Ansarinia (b.1979) in *Rhyme and Reason* (2009) (**Fig.17**) and Shahbaza Shirazi (b.1974) in *Farah* (**Fig.18**) use the traditional Persian craft of carpet weaving to portray images and scenes of contemporary Iran and to continue this artistic tradition. In these artworks, history and memory are reclaimed and re-written, since neither history, memory and for that matter identity are neutral – they are multi-layered and constantly edited to fit in with a notion of the "self" which is in constant flux. These contemporary artists re-evaluate previous traditions and mediums and make it their own by contemporising them and impregnating them with personal and contemporary issues and experiences, portraying that the

dichotomy between Tradition and Modernity still exists in the everyday lives of Iranians, who nonetheless weave their stories and identities by incorporating both.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I examine the political, social, and artistic influences and themes that emerge in the works of female artists following the Iranian Revolution. This event marks a crucial turning point that has deeply impacted Iranian identity and society, both within the country and on the global stage. Artists, especially women, have drawn from their post-revolutionary experiences to explore new frontiers in artistic expression and direction. In addition to the Revolution itself, numerous internal and external factors and developments resulting from it have had profound effects on Iranians and have reshaped Iranian society in unprecedented ways. New themes emerging from these experiences include war (**Figs.20, 117, 120,121,122,123,124,125**), martyrdom (**Figs.21,119**), women's rights (**Figs.25,98,99,100,101, 112,145**), torture (**Fig.22**), executions (**Figs.23,128**) and censorship (**Figs.28,108,110,113,137**) amongst others.

I will analyse both state-imposed prescriptions and identities as well as the way in which women in Iran have been seen as signifiers for the State, its policies, and its image at home and abroad, for the past century. This has become an important issue for contemporary Iranian artists. As Abbas Daneshvari observes, contemporary Iranian art displays an acute awareness of the identity imposed by the State with numerous artists addressing this aspect of identity, through direct or indirect means, drawing inspiration from the political narratives propagated by the State and its ideology (Daneshvari 2014: 69). An important reason for this, particularly in relation to women, is the symbolism associated with women and the "motherland". For Hammed Shahidian, the metaphorization of nations as women is grounded in patriarchal relationships, so that the female body becomes a loaded symbol not only for countries and their enemies, but also for competing definitions and notions of national identity. In this manner, the state views the protecting and controlling of women's sexuality as equivalent to preserving a "pure" national identity (Shahidian 2002: 19). This ideology can be observed in the machinations of the Iranian state particularly after the Revolution, when the Islamic regime attempted to curtail women's sexuality to adhere to its Islamic ideology. Images of chaste, veiled women became the symbol of a successful Revolution and Islamic Republic (**Figs.115,116,167,168,171,172,174,175**). This has also been particularly problematic since the ideologies of the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic regarding women, have been

diametrically opposed, causing a crisis of identity amongst contemporary Iranian women who feel the pull between these opposing definitions of a feminine self.

After the Revolution, the State fostered an Islamic rather than a national identity. As Mehri Honarbin-Holliday contends, in the Islamic Republic the word "identity" is widely and routinely used by the government, both in the national and international arena, to mean primarily Islamic ideology/identity from a Shi'i perspective (Honarbin-Holliday 2013: 50). This model was based largely on the concept of "us" vs "them", manifesting itself not only in the IRI's foreign policy, which very much alienated the country from other (particularly Western) countries, but also demarcated the population along the lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, and politics. However, whilst the laws regarding women were rolled back a century, the experiences of the Pahlavi years and the rights women had acquired during this period left a lasting impression. As Mahnaz Afkhami points out, once rights have been achieved, they settle in society's collective consciousness creating a new set of historical conditions which cannot be easily dislodged (Afkhami 1994: 15). This coupled with the country's young population (around 80% were born after the Revolution), significant improvements in women's health and a sharp drop in birth rates due to the government's reversal of their original birth-control policies, increased literacy rates and women's whole-hearted pursuit of education after the Revolution (to the point that they have outnumbered men at university for many years now), meant these dictates were not accepted by many women.

The state has been very monolithic in its prescription for Iranian women, including instructions on how to dress, how to behave, and even their mobility (needing the permission of a male guardian to leave the country or take jobs). However, as Honarbin-Holliday observes, it has overlooked the diverse realities of the lived experience of its citizens and the richness and diversity of the country's ethnicities, languages, and religions. In this manner, it often fails to consider the growing complexity and diversity of contemporary Iranian society, two-thirds of which is under the age of thirty and increasingly engaged with new ways of expressing and understanding their lives (Honarbin-Holliday 2013: 51). Furthermore, Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut believes that the implementation of Shari'a law after the Revolution paradoxically triggered a radical change in women's self-perception, making them more autonomous and individualistic, and no longer allowing themselves to be considered only as mothers and wives (Kian-Thiébaut 2002: 127). This was largely because prior to this, women had not had to fight for their rights, many of which were given by the state (during the Pahlavi regime). The retraction of these by

the Islamic Republic and its rhetoric and ideology regarding the ideal Islamic woman, made women question their situation and rebel against these prescriptions. This has, of course, largely been exacerbated by the access to the internet and satellite television, which has allowed Iranians to compare their circumstances to those of the rest of the world (particularly the West).

Therefore, as Janet Afary argues, although it is clear that Iran has undergone not one but "several paradigm shifts with respect to gender and sexuality" (Afary 2009: 4), but neither the Pahlavi regime, nor the Islamic Republic have succeeded in moulding Iranian female identity according to their vision of the ideal woman. Rather, the effects of these changes on the nation's psyche and particularly on women, who were most under pressure to conform and change, have been complex and frequently paradoxical, creating resistance on their part. As Ronen A. Cohen contends, when identity experiences difficulties, whether of a personal or environmental kind, there is an opportunity to rebuild and create a new form of identity (Cohen 2015: xi). Thus, the socio-political developments of the past century and particularly those of the past 44 years have been largely instrumental in the unprecedented rise of female artists whose work is deeply personal and preoccupied with the semiotics of gender, identity, and society. According to Shirin Neshat, these limitations, like inhospitable climates that produce some of the most robust vegetation, often propel an artist to more vigorously exercise their creative energies and the need to circumvent, outwit, and elude the censor has resulted in the production of dynamic and sophisticated works of art (Sheybani 1999).

In the fourth chapter, I examine the binaries and thresholds between the interior/private and the exterior/public spaces that have been constructed by the regime and society in Iran, as well as the threshold between self/Iran and other/West which is again constructed not only by the regime but by the West and is manifested both in Iran and the diaspora. These thresholds and boundaries have resulted in a struggle for expression of autonomy in contemporary Iran where the prescriptions of the State have come increasingly in conflict with the individual desires of the post-Revolutionary generation, forcing them to live dichotomous lives.

The boundaries between the interior/private and the exterior/public were very much a by-product of the Islamic regime's gender policies which resulted in the segregation and increasing relegation of women to private spaces. Additionally, as Farzaneh Milani distinguishes, the indoors, domestic, private, and personal, world of women was trivialised, whereas the outdoors, public, world of men was affirmed and elevated (Milani 1992: 5). This

also led to the monitoring of the population's (particularly women's) appearance and behaviour in public, with the "Morality Police" punishing anyone who violated the regime's Islamic regulations, thus resulting in women having to lead separate lives and adopting different appearances and personas in public and in private (**Figs.5,140**). Whilst in public they are required to adhere to Islamic mores, but behind closed doors they live unrestrained lives where casual sex and drug use are common practice. These dichotomous personas and actions are often in conflict with each other, leading to fragmentary and often schizophrenic identities.

The chasm between self/East and other/West has also formed part of Iranian's daily discourse, particularly in the aftermath of the Revolution when, on the one hand, the country has been secluded and alienated from the West due to the regime's anti-Western stance and policies, as well as the sanctions imposed against Iran by the West. On the other hand, globalisation, the internet, and satellite television have meant that people have increasing access to a global world and community. Iranian artists have also had to struggle with Orientalists tropes and stereotypes, particularly those that have emerged after the Revolution and 9/11, as well as the State's mandates and imposed Muslim ideology. As a result, their works tend to be critical of both East and West, often juxtaposing symbols and signifiers of both cultures to show the dichotomy between them, challenging Orientalist tropes and the subjugation of women to the male gaze in the Western media and art-history (**Figs.4,7,29,30, 31,108,110,153**).

The relationship with the West is therefore, like many other countries from the Global South, one of love/hate since Western societies are often seen as morally corrupt and materialistic but simultaneously, Western goods and lifestyle are coveted by the much of the population with many young people dreaming of immigrating to the West. Another aspect of this dichotomy is expressed in the works of artists of the diaspora, most of whom live in the West. They are faced daily with the disparity between their country of origin and that of their host country, along with the condition of living in exile, in a state of liminality and not belonging to either culture. They incorporate aspects of each culture in their works, often portraying the irresolution and conflict between the two cultures and ideologies (**Figs.3,4,38,155,156**).

In the fifth chapter I explore the strategies used by artists to express dissent and resist prescribed identities as well as examining alternative identities and practices found in their works. One of the main sites of contention for Iranian women (and these artists) is that of their bodies, since in Shi'i orthodoxy, the female body has always been a contested site whereupon the battle for

male supremacy and honour has been fought. The State has likewise adopted and promoted this ideology so that, as Hamideh Sedghi argues, women's bodies matter for the state's national identity (Sedghi 2007: 278), making this a very loaded subject for female artists who often challenge the State on the battlefield of their own bodies, using self-representation (both of a personal and collective self) to criticise State and/or Western-prescribed stereotypes and reclaiming agency. As Michket Krifa observes, most of the radical discourses and activities in the Middle East are "crystallized in and projected onto the female body, the eternal object of identity-based fantasy" and so women artists must wage a battle on two fronts: for their creative and intellectual freedom, and also against discrimination (Krifa 2013: 9).

Accordingly, as Mehri Honarbin-Holliday argues, even though the word identity is rarely mentioned, it is referenced through various acts and thoughts, such as the observations of dress codes for women, which serve as signifiers of imposed, constructed, and contested identities. Through these dress codes, complex acts of body management are expressed, shedding light on the intricate nature of identity within society (Honarbin-Holliday 2012: 51). Hence, many young Iranian women use their bodies and appearances as tools for defying the State and rejecting the regime's dictates (**Figs.27,32,33,34**), engaging in a constant battle with the "morality police" by wearing makeup, flouting the Islamic dress code and being "badly veiled" by showing strands of hair and wearing form-fitting clothes that barely meet the minimum standards laid down by the regime, playing illegal music loudly on their car stereos, and consorting with members of the opposite sex. Pardis Mahdavi asserts that both the regime and the young people who oppose it view social and sexual behaviours as political, and so young people have been enacting a "counter-revolution of values" through a cultural revolution which challenges state morality codes and creates alternative values through sexual and social behaviours (Mahdavi 2013: 19).

Shirin Aliabadi's up-town girls in the *Miss Hybrid* (2006-2007) (**Fig. 33**) or *City Girl* (2010) (**Fig.34**) series, portray the subversive attitude of many young girls in Iran who, in defiance and rejection of the regime's proscriptions, embrace a Western aesthetic and lifestyle. These girls are a hybrid construct between their traditional Eastern upbringing and their yearning for Western goods and lifestyle. They do not wear the traditional *chador*, but instead adapt the compulsory veil to Western standards, wearing colourful headscarves showing a lot of hair (contravening the regime's rules regarding the colour and style of the *hijab*) and eradicate their

Eastern features by having nose-jobs (and sporting the surgical tape in public as a badge of honour), wearing blue or green contact lenses and bleaching their hair blonde. Their provocative poses which draw attention to themselves as sexual objects seeking the gaze and attention of the viewer, is diametrically opposed to how a "good" Muslim girl should act and look like, thus challenging the viewer's preconceptions as well as defying the regime.

The proscriptions of the State have also meant, as Iranian lawyer and human rights activist Mehrangiz Kar asserts, that women have learnt the secrets of "defending their individual identities" (Kar 2006: 36). One method by which artists have achieved this is by the applications of masks and blindfolds (**Figs.24,35,36,37,38**) or other methods to avoid the gaze, not only to obscure the eyes, which are the "windows to the soul," but are also evocative of the blindfolds used on prisoners facing a firing squad. This is particularly relevant in Iran where, after the Revolution, apart from the many executions, it was common practice to blindfold prisoners, line them against the wall and shoot blanks at them to intimidate them. The face being the primary identifier of a person, the absence of facial identity also often highlights the state's attempts to efface the individual identity of women. This strategy creates uncertainty and inscrutability, signifying not only the State's desire to undermine individuality, but also the desire of women to conceal and guard it. This allows for a questioning of any pre-prescribed identity and rejects the gaze of both the State and the Orientalist gaze, and their preconceptions. As Abbas Daneshvari states, these masks not only conceal identity but also question "the structures of knowledge as they have been known and as they have defined personal and cultural identity" (Daneshvari 2014: 41).

These artists have, therefore, had to invent new ways to convey meaning whilst under the scrutiny of the regime and, as a result, their art is ambiguous, because transparency is not a possibility in the IRI. This has resulted in the emergence of imagery couched in metaphors and allegories to circumvent the regime's censors and undermine epistemological structures. According to Neshat, Iranian artists have learnt to speak metaphorically and subversively because of the regime's policies and censorship and even though much of their art is not "upfront", people understand the message (Enright and Walsh 2009). Andrea Fitzpatrick also believes that the "allegorical turn" in contemporary Iranian art allows artists to "speak" about polemical issues in the country in ways that ensures their safety, whilst still resulting in poetic and multifaceted results (Fitzpatrick 2014: 158). This art is also often performative in its staged and scripted presentation of the "self", whereby the various personas prescribed by the state

and society are enacted against a backdrop of these women's conflicting desires. Therefore, it is an art of alterity and dissent but one that uses the regime's own prescriptions (such as censorship and the veil) to criticise and question its practices.

Another artistic strategy is the use of parody and irony (**Figs.7,24,25,27,30,31,32,33,34,37,38**), to challenge both the regime's dictates and Western pre-conceptions. Hamid Keshmirshekan notes that, this ironic and humorous language has become a common method for reacting metaphorically against the "supposedly united sacred values defined by the State", allowing artists to celebrate fluid identities and self-definitions, which take centre stage, while hegemonic identities recede and lose prominence (Keshmirshekan 2014: 151). This art is, thus, fundamentally ontological portraying the underlying tension that is part of life in Iran, by using pre-existing codes and symbols in an ambiguous way and loading images with hidden meanings, some of which are inaccessible to the regime and some which are unavailable to the Western viewer.

The art of contemporary Iranian artists also references new (and hitherto unprecedented) tropes such the veil (**Figs.3,4,5,6,7,14,19,24,25,29,30,31,32,33,34,35,37**) which remains perhaps the most powerful and recognisable symbol for the Iranian woman. The trope of the veil is a very good example of the difficulty of navigating the fine line between perpetuating stereotypes and making socio-political statements. Using such tropes, artists have learnt to appropriate the language of the State in order to challenge it and propose alternatives. However, this has also been a problematic strategy at times, since the use of such signifiers has been condemned by some art critics as "self-exoticizing" and a way for artists to commercialise their art. As a result, when encountering these symbols, the viewer (both Iranian and otherwise) must overcome their own personal preferences and prejudices and see these works and signifiers for what the artists have meant them to be – not always an easy feat since these prejudices are substantial and the information on these artists and their process is often scant.

The use of the veil and Western reductive interpretations implying "repressed Muslim/Iranian woman" have, however, also undermined the message and scope of these artists' works, which are sometimes taken literally. Hamid Keshmirshekan argues that the "obsession with cultural difference" is now being "institutionally legitimized through the construction of the 'postcolocial other' that is allowed to express itself only as long as it speaks of its own otherness" (Keshmirshekan 2014: 152), and that this has led to both stereotyping and self-

exoticising on the part of the artist (Keshmirshekan 2014: 152). As a result, some artists such as Simin Keramati eschew such ethnic signifiers. In the video, *I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist* (2014) (**Fig. 40**), Keramati depicts herself without veil and clothes, having a nosebleed as an objection to everything she names in the title. She has professed that she finds it offensive when professional art writers look at her as an "exotic product of the Middle East", since her gender and nationality are not the "museum" in which her art should be seen (Keramati 2018). Hence, many artists are now rejecting not only the state-imposed ideologies, but also Orientalist tropes and expectations by avoiding signifiers of "Islam" and "Iranian-ness."

It is clear then, that the events of the past four decades have had a great impact on the collective identity of the nation and have particularly shifted the female internal and external landscape, which I believe is the reason for the exponential rise in the number of women artists in the post-Revolutionary decades. Additionally, as Golnar Mehran points out, even though the world presented to young Iranians is a black and white one; where people are either good or evil, with nothing in between, the "children of revolution" have constructed their own narratives, often in direct contrast to what they have been taught (Mehran 2002: 241-42). Thus, despite efforts by the regime to mould their identities, most women have rejected these prescribed models and have instead assimilated markers and character traits, from various ideologies which, on the surface, may appear dichotomous. In the process, as Nayereh Tohidi remarks, they have constructed diverse identities, chiefly through a "pragmatic and selective synthesis of the traditional and modern, the Islamic and the Western" (Tohidi 2002: 320).

One observation which emerges from this study, is that there is no such thing as a homogenous "Muslim" or even "Iranian" woman. Instead, women have assimilated different markers and character traits which, on the surface, may appear dichotomous, resulting in an identity that is polysemous, fragmented and, at times, schizophrenic, both adhering to and resisting stereotypes of Iranian women and demonstrating their paradoxical lives. Contemporary Iranian female artists effectively capture and convey this sentiment through their works. Their art becomes a reflection of the complex interplay of forces shaping the identities of Iranian women in a rapidly changing society.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

> "We are set – stuck, really – somewhere between Scheherazade's famed *One Thousand and One Nights* and the bearded terrorist with his manic wife disguised as a crow. By way of flattery, we are told that we are Persians and that Persia was a great empire. Otherwise, we are Iranians. The Persians are in Montesquieu's writings, in Delacroix's paintings, and they smoke opium with Victor Hugo. As for the Iranians, they take Americans hostages, they detonate bombs, and they're pissed at the West. They were discovered after the 1979 revolution."
> (Satrapi 2006:20)

In the following chapter I explore the various historical influences that have informed the identity and art of some artists discussed in this thesis and examine how they process historical narratives to construct alternative histories and accounts. This is not a historical survey but rather an examination of the *role* of history (both collective and personal), as an important building block in the construction of a sense of self (particularly in traditional communities and cultures such as Iran). In this examination it is important to understand, as Stuart Hall observes, that cultural identities are not fixed but rather undergo constant transformation and that identities are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990: 225). Furthermore, histories are not singular, but multiple, and historical narratives are often manipulated not only by the state and society (in the formation of national and collective identities) but also by individuals in the construction of a personal identity. Additionally, the imposition of the past on the present is a "wilful" act in socialisation and in social movements whereby the relationship between the constitution of identity and the identification of the past is "strongly systematic" (Friedman 1992: 853). Understanding identity is closely linked to how we reconstruct the past through memory and fantasy. Self-definition does not happen in isolation; it occurs within a pre-existing framework of a defined world. As individuals redefine themselves, they inevitably break away from the larger identity they were once a part of. This process alters the overall

identity space, turning history, including modern historiography, into a form of mythology (Friedman 1992: 837). This “mythical” history has been crucial to Iranian national identity in the past century as it has been used by both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic as a source of legitimacy. As a result, it has impacted modern and contemporary Iranians who have been presented with conflicting accounts of history, leading to fragmented cultural and personal senses of self.

2.1 Political History

History is important in constructing a national or ethnic sense of self, which separates the "self" from the "other". The "other" is an important factor in our definition of the "self" since we need a benchmark in our construction of identity. Hence national or ethnic identities are virtually always conceived of in terms of the past, as they validate the ways in which we conceive of ourselves in relation to those who do not share the same background (Davis 2012: 39). History is thus not objective and stable, but subjective and changeable, constantly re-interpretated and manipulated to reinforce the narrative that best supports our sense of self. In this manner, history is largely imagined and mutable; it can be contradictory and dichotomous, depending on its narrative, leading to fragmented identities.

The construction of a "self" discussed here is itself dependent on the construction of a history which accommodates it and the narrative of the self which fits in with its discourse – this is a tool which has also been acknowledged and employed by the Iranian state in the past century. Touraj Atabaki contends that the construction of a collective identity is "a politically motivated project" aimed at filling the gaps between people's real or imagined past and their actual political present. He further claims that it "often corresponds with amnesia" (Atabaki 2012: 65-66) and results in the falsification of historical facts. These historical revisions are particularly cogent for a country like Iran, where the collective identity has repeatedly been threatened by various conquests and attacks on its territory, and which have consequently resulted in several paradigm shifts that have caused a crisis of identity.

Another important historical aspect has been the country's adoption of Shi'ite Islam in the early sixteenth century which, along with the Shi'ite rituals that continue to be observed in modern day Iran, allows for this past to be fixed in the present. With the incorporation of Shi'ism, Iranians, set themselves apart from the rest of the Muslim world. The same quest for individualism was instrumental in the discourses of Iranian nationalists in the 19th century, who propagated the glory of a pre-Islamic Persian past, aimed at distancing the country from the Arab world and bring it closer to the European West. These factors along with the advent of

Modernity in the 19th century, were instrumental in perpetuating the growing dichotomy between Tradition and Modernity which has preoccupied Iranian intellectuals for the past century and continues to affect contemporary Iranian society. These tensions have been exacerbated after the Revolution, when Iranian history was largely re-written and co-opted by the new regime (as it had been by the previous regime) to suit its purposes.

However, despite repeated efforts at rewriting historical narratives, it has been difficult (as the Islamic regime have found out when they tried to eliminate pre-Islamic festivities such as the Iranian New Year, *Nowruz*, and the fire festival *Chahar Shanbeh Suri*) to eradicate certain persevering histories and memories from the collective psyche of the nation. This anomaly between the historical account of Iran as the continuation of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire (propagated by the Pahlavi regime and marked by observation of pre-Islamic festivities and traditions) and the history propagated by the IRI (largely anchored in Shi'i mythology and its traditions), has caused not only a rupture in the expected continuum of history but also a crisis of identity both at a national and personal level. As Jette Sandahl remarks, the notion that history is subject to negotiation is often difficult to comprehend for generations that have grown up believing that there is a true, factual history and, in such cases, identity needs to undergo a similar renegotiation (to history) to make sense of itself (Sandahl 2005). In this manner, many Iranians have negotiated their identities in line with these conflicting histories, choosing aspects from these accounts which best fit in with the "self" they wish to project, thus favouring the narrative propagated by the previous or current regime or, more often than not, attempting to reconcile the two.

The fragmentation of identity experienced in contemporary Iran is, therefore, a result of all these historical factors, compounded by the global age of technology which has allowed Iranians to access alternative sources of history thus writing their own blended narratives. The artists discussed in the following chapter show an awareness of a national, artistic, and personal history, but refuse to be limited by them. Rather, they scrutinise and reinterpret these historical accounts, expressing doubt and uncertainty on an ontological and epistemological level regarding the nature of history, memory, and experience.

2.1.1 Qajars

Some contemporary Iranian artists engage with and scrutinise these historical narratives and deconstruct them to either consolidate or repudiate them, whilst constructing new (and particularly female) accounts which incorporates those marginalised in the master narratives. One such period of engagement is with the Qajars (the ruling dynasty in Iran from 1785-1925). Certain artists, like Shadi Ghadirian, portray the regressive nature of the regime by using Qajar iconography to intimate that the imposition of Sharia law by the Islamic Republic has taken women back a century. During the Qajar era, women were primarily confined to the household and when they ventured out, they not only wore the *chador* but also a *rubandeh* (face veil). Streets were segregated after four in the afternoon, with men walking on one side and women on the other. If women wanted to cross the street to get home, they needed to get permission from the street police (Sedghi 2007: 26). The reinstatement of the veil and Sharia law after the Revolution made many draw parallels between the Islamic Republic and Qajar rule resulting in Qajar iconography becoming prevalent in the works of some contemporary artists. In *Qajar #2* (1998) (**Fig.6**), Shadi Ghadirian depicts two veiled women holding a mirror, reflecting part of a bookcase (including some banned books), suggesting not only the censorship of books in Iran, but also the absence of women from the history of Iranian literature, as well as the misrepresentation of women in both Iranian and Western literature. The fact that these women are wearing the face veil (worn by Qajar women when they went out) in an interior setting, which is not how women were dressed indoors, further highlights their cloistered and alienated lives. It is interesting that Ghadirian won first prize for this photograph in a competition, although the Ministry for Guidance and Culture (*Ershad*) revoked the prize two days later, announcing that she portrayed women as limited by the *chador* (a subsequent photograph from this series was also rejected on the same grounds) (Ghadirian 2000), showing that the regime is itself wary of the veil imagery used by artists. The reception of audiences was likewise mixed, with Iranian audiences understanding the nuances and the history behind the images which was often lost on non-Iranian audiences who needed further explanation. Ghadirian has herself commented on this dual understanding, stating that in Iran people know the historical context behind these images and the implications of the style and dress worn, whereas when this series was first shown in England, many thought women in Iran still looked and dressed like this (Ghadirian 2000). Thus, these images cannot be removed from their geographical/

historical context, proving that the subjective and collective memory of the originating country (Iran) is of great importance in many of these works.

Rabee Baghshani (b.1982), who lives and works in the traditional city of Mashhad (Iran), is another artist who deals with images of the Qajar period. In *Golestan Vogue* (2018) (**Fig.7**), Baghshani uses an image of some of Nasser al-Din Shah's wives (rendered in colour) set against the cover of Vogue magazine. In the background of this image, she has used the famous painting of Nasser al-Din Shah, entitled *Hall of Mirrors* (1885-1890) (**Fig.40**), by the renowned court painter Kamal ol-Mulk (1847/48-1940). Kamal ol-Mulk occupies an important position in the history of Iranian art because he was considered the greatest painter of the Qajar period. With him as the leading artist of Nassir al-Din Shah's court, we see Iranian norms of art appreciation and production turn significantly to European standards. Kamal ol-Mulk who had studied in Florence, Rome, Paris, and Vienna, expressed his admiration for the paintings of Rembrandt, Raphael, and Titian, whilst ignoring the works of contemporary Impressionist painters (Diba 2013b). Consequently, in an inverse relationship to Europe, where artists broke away from Realism in favour of what came to be known as the beginning of Modern Art in Europe, in Iran it was the move towards a realistic style that indicated a new modern style. In both cases, these new styles were largely inspired by the advent of photography, even though the results were different. *Hall of Mirrors*, Kamal ol-Mulk's most famous painting, is one he executed over a five-year period whilst serving as court painter to Nasser al-Din Shah, both on site and with the help of daguerreotypes. This painting is further significant because it breaks with the previous tradition of idealising the ruler and presenting him in a position of authority. It instead depicts a diminished Nasser al-Din Shah, engulfed by the pomp and splendour of the palace. Baghshani goes one step further than Kamal ol-Mulk by not only relegating this image to the background but also making it monochrome – giving priority and centre-stage to the women of the harem, who are now also in colour (as opposed to the original photographs). Moreover, by emulating the cover of Vogue magazine (the arbiter of fashion and beauty), Baghshani makes us question Western ideals of beauty, since these Qajar women (replete with moustaches), who were considered the epitome of beauty during that period, would probably not have been seen as such from a Western perspective and sensibility or indeed from a contemporary Iranian aesthetic perspective. These images further demonstrate how, historically, Iranian women were either not represented publicly (as in Qajar Iran) or exoticized by the West to fulfil its fantasies. Unlike Ghadirian (who has often professed that she produces

works for an Iranian sensibility), Baghshani is only represented by galleries outside of Iran, since she finds working with galleries in the country problematic, citing issues of sexual harassment and other difficulties faced by women in particular (interview with author). As a result, she is more aware of appealing to a Western sensibility and interpretation, with references that are more easily accessible by this audience.

Fataneh Dadkhah (b.1952), likewise engages with the Qajar period, this time as a visual metaphor for the transformation of historical memory. In her *Destruction* series (2006), she records decaying architectural elements in Iran, from worn wooden doors to walls covered in mangled advertisements to chipped tile revetment. *Untitled* (2006) (**Fig.41**), from this series, is a print that captures a mural (most likely of a young Nasser al-Din Shah) which has suffered both from the ravages of time and from intentional defacement, including graffiti. Thus, it portrays not only the destruction and decay that occurs naturally with time, but also the revision and destruction of history and memory by intent and design. The deliberate act of defacing this mural raises questions about the manipulation and reinterpretation of historical narratives – a theme that reverberates through the annals of history. Hence, Dadkhah's *Destruction* series becomes not only a visual record of decay but also a thought-provoking commentary on the malleability and fragility of collective memory, urging us to contemplate the layers of history that continue to shape our understanding of the present.

Consequently, the use of Qajar imagery symbolises the historical and cultural crossroads where Tradition meets Modernity, reflecting the enduring engagement of Iranians with both ideological spectrums. Moreover, it encapsulates the ongoing conflicts within Iranian society, mirroring the enduring struggles that persist to this day. The Qajar period serves as a powerful backdrop that embodies the complexities and nuances of Iranian history and society, providing a canvas for contemporary artists to explore, challenge, and reflect upon the evolving cultural and political landscape of Iran.

2.1.2 Pahlavis

The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) was the first to actively pursue the modernisation of Iran, viewing women as important signifiers for modernity, and connecting the social and familial roles of women to the overall status of the nation, making gender policies a central element of their agendas for national development and sovereignty. Reza Shah (r.1925-1941), the founder of the dynasty, implemented a series of reforms that encompassed actions like the unveiling of women, the establishment of free educational opportunities, and the expansion of employment prospects for them. These reforms had been a longstanding aspiration of women activists dating back to the early 1900s. However, the state's underlying goal in enacting these changes was to promote national advancement by legally defining women's roles as active members of society, educated mothers, and obedient wives (Yeganeh 1993: 5). His successor and son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r.1941-1979), gave Iranian women many emancipatory rights, including the vote (1963), and the introduction of The Family Protection Law of 1967 and 1975, which were designed to mitigate the abuses of male authority within the family by establishing a family protection court (Yeganeh 1993: 6). These strategies were strongly opposed by traditional clerics like Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989). The Pahlavi's drive for modernity also led to a growing anti-Western attitude amongst the intelligentsia. Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1923-1969) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977), for example, viewed the rapid modernisation and "Westernisation" of the country as a threat to Iranian hegemony and autonomy. This conflict was a major contributor to the collapse of the Pahlavi regime and the institution of the Islamic Republic (1979), which reversed many of the changes implemented by the Pahlavis – particularly those affecting women.

It was also with the Pahlavi regime that the role of an "imagined" history became important in the process of state building, since this was one of the cornerstones in their construction of a collective and national identity. To achieve this, the state drew on a repository of collective memories and shared symbolisms to shape a national identity which appropriated/ misappropriated many elements from the country's cultural past (Amanat 2012). Hence, the Pahlavi regime borrowed pre-Islamic myths and images to articulate a new social imaginary and historical identity, whereby their undesirable customs and conditions were attributed to Arabs/Islam and desirable (European) customs and manners were presented as originally Iranian and harking back to pre-Islamic times. According to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi the

identification with European culture was an important factor in the dissociation from Arab/Islamic culture; an endeavour which was largely aided by fake etymology and assumed resemblance between Iranian culture and a European one (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001).

The Pahlavi period was, additionally, crucial for the emergence of women into the public realm and gaining access to education and public office. This was particularly the case during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah when the various rights and protections afforded to women under the new Family Protection Law of 1967 (expanded in 1975), allowed them to break free from many of the legal and religious constraints they had hitherto experienced. As a result, some artists portray images of women from the Pahlavi era with nostalgia for a time when women had more rights and freedoms, and as an alternative reference for identity. This is particularly the case with artists who were born and grew up before the Revolution and, therefore, have certain childhood and/or adolescent memories from that time. Invariably these images are also more prevalent in artists living in the diaspora.

Soheila Sokhanvari (b.1964), who was born and raised during the reign of Mohamad Reza Shah Pahlavi and left Iran before the Revolution to study in the UK, explains that, for her, Iran froze in time at the time of the Revolution, just as Dublin froze in time for James Joyce in 1904 on the occasion of his exile. Thus, she focuses primarily on images of women from this period because she associates them with her memory of Iran, making history and memory pivotal to her work and her sense of both a personal and artistic identity. Like many other artists discussed in this thesis, she is vested in presenting an alternative image to the veiled Iranian women in the contemporary art world, as well as compensating for the lack of unbiased representation of Iranian women in the media since the Revolution (correspondence with the author). Sokhanvari's solo exhibition, *Rebel, Rebel* (7th October 2022 – 26th February 2023), at the Barbican's Curve Gallery, featured 28 of these pre-Revolutionary women, depicted in Sokhanvari's signature miniature style. Using egg tempera, a technique she learnt from her father, on calf vellum which, for her, is symbolic of the sacrificial animal in the Abrahamic religions, as well as the Iranian ideological concept of martyrdom, she creates "a notional palimpsest of the stories of the many exiled Iranians like herself" (Rady and Pohlman 2014-2015).

For this exhibition, the entire gallery space underwent a remarkable transformation, becoming a manifestation of Sokhanvari's feminist vision. The walls were adorned with hand-painted

murals featuring intricate Islamic patterns, echoing the visual elements present in her paintings. At the entrance, visitors were greeted by a dazzling monolith adorned with 27,000 meticulously arranged glass tessellations. This remarkable creation, painstakingly crafted by Sokhanvari herself, harkened back to the mirrorwork artistry of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922-2019), perhaps the foremost female artist from the Pahlavi period – once again demonstrating the influence of the pre-Revolutionary era on Sokhanvari. This was further complemented by the soundtrack, featuring Sokhanvari's favourite songs from the period, performed by many of the female artists represented in the portraits, as well as by the videos of them played on various screens.

The women depicted in the exhibition all have special importance for Iranian feminism (and for Sokhanvari who one feels is searching for herself in each and every one of them). The first image in the exhibition was Roohangiz Saminejad (**Fig.42**), the first Iranian actor to appear in a sound film (subsequently receiving death threats for her unveiled appearance and suffering social ostracism and sexual harassment from men to the point that she had to change her name and live in anonymity and seclusion). The narrative culminated with the image of Nosrat Partovi (**Fig.43**), the last unveiled woman to grace the screens in *Filmfarsi*. Her sole movie, "The Deer", was showing in Abadan's Cinema Rex when it became the tragic site of a devastating event. Islamic revolutionaries locked the cinema doors and set the building ablaze, resulting in the tragic loss of 377 to 470 lives. This horrific incident is considered one of the pivotal events that ignited the Iranian Revolution.

In her portrayal of these iconic women, Sokhanvari skilfully captures the essence of their surroundings and the fates that befell them. Saminejad is depicted in a simple black-and-white composition, with her hair impeccably styled. Sokhanvari refrains from incorporating her signature exotic backgrounds in this portrayal, as the mere presence of an unveiled Saminejad carries profound significance (Saminejad's unveiling in the film took place before the ban on the veil by Reza Shah in 1936, making it a very courageous act). Sokhanvari deliberately avoids distractions, allowing Saminejad's image to stand as a powerful symbol. In contrast, Partovi is depicted as a polaroid within the larger image, still rendered in Sokhanvari's customary black-and-white style. The image of Partovi shows slight burn marks at the top, epitomising the tragic Cinema Rex fire. Partovi is positioned against a vivid red background, symbolising both bloodshed and the fire itself. Within this composition, images of deer, representing her film "The Deer", dominate the scene. Unlike Saminejad, Partovi's image is not placed at the centre

but is slightly off-centre, held by a hand – Sokhanvari's own – as though it is being picked up and rescued from the fire. Sokhanvari thus seems to be rescuing Partovi's image not only from the fire, but also from oblivion. Through this commemoration, Sokhanvari pays tribute to the victims of the Cinema Rex fire while also mourning the end of women's unfettered participation in Iranian cinema.

Amongst the other female entertainers portrayed by Sokhanvari, none were (or still are) more popular than Googoosh, Sokhanvari's favourite singer, who is known not only to women who were born before the Revolution but those who were born after, whether they live in Iran or the diaspora. Googoosh, who started her career as a child entertainer, starred in many films (including the most commercially successful Iranian film of all time), but was best known as a pop singer, everyone's favourite, from the people in the streets to the Royal Family (for whom she often performed). At the time of the Revolution, Googoosh was in Los Angeles, but decided to return home because she felt homesick. On her return she was banned (like all other artists) from performing and was not to perform for 21 years until she finally left Iran for good – after which she resumed her singing career and continues to give concerts around the world for her adoring Iranian public. Consequently, Googoosh represents a direct link to a rosier Iranian past (particularly where women are concerned), to an era when artists (reflecting the Pahlavi regime's ideology) were encouraged to be seen and heard. It is, therefore, not surprising that Googoosh is the most represented Iranian entertainer, since many Iranians grew up with her.

In *The Love Addict* (2019) (**Fig.8**), Sokhanvari depicts Googoosh in colourful attire against an equally colourful background, with different floor and wall designs – both inspired by traditional Persian/Islamic patterns. Contrasting with these colours are the face and hands of Googoosh, which appear as though from a black-and-white photograph or movie – frozen in the past whilst the world around has moved on. This is made more cogent by the fact that, in the background is another portrait of Googoosh (from the waist up) hanging on the wall where her features appear slightly larger than the Googoosh in the foreground and her face and hands are normal skin colour – signifying the fact that images of famous people take on a life of their own, appearing larger than real life and the people they represent. Additionally, the background portrait portrays an older version of Googoosh, depicting her from a decade later, highlighting the passage of time and the evolving nature of fame and identity. Like Dorian Grey, the painting in the background is growing older, but the "real" Googoosh in the foreground is frozen in time and as she is remembered.

The title of the piece comes from a Robert Palmer song (1985), "Addicted to Love," which included a video featuring high fashion models, catering to a male gaze. Sokhanvari makes the comparison with the lyrics (and video) of this song, which objectifies women, to the way Iranian cinema (symbolised here by Googoosh) objectified women. In her discussion of this painting, Sokhanvari references Simone de Beauvoir, who posits that due to the unequal power dynamics between men and women, love can become a "curse" that restricts women within the confines of the feminine sphere. De Beauvoir's perspective highlights the notion that "romantic love" serves as a foundational element of compulsory heterosexuality, subjecting women to societal messages about marriage, motherhood, and romance from a young age which, subsequently, contribute to the entrapment of women within a prescribed and ultimately false construct of womanhood (conversation with author). In this manner, Sokhanvari weaves a story of Googoosh which not only reflects Googoosh's story but also Sokhanvari's own interpretation of this story, largely tinged by her personal experience and intertwined with Western references and the sensibility of someone who doted on Googoosh as a young girl, but now sees her through the eyes of a woman who has lived her entire adult life outside of Iran.

In *The Private Dancer* (2019) (**Fig.44**), also depicting Googoosh, Sokhanvari uses sculpture, a medium traditionally not much utilised in Iran. This piece is inspired by Islamic geometrical patterns which inform Sokhanvari's art and which she sees as embodying Islam's inherent philosophy of the oneness of God and the vastness of universe (correspondence with author). This monochromatic structure sits on another monochrome Brancusi style plinth which is again painted in the artist's geometric design vocabulary. Sokhanvari explains that the sculpture's black-and-white colour scheme is symbolic of the positive and negative ways these female artists were perceived by Iranian society and the ideological division in the country before the Revolution. At the centre of the sculpture there is an aperture which when viewed from one side looks clear and empty and observed from the other displays a hologram of Googoosh dancing to her famous song "*khalvat*" ("Solitude"). Sokhanvari believes that this is the ultimate story of the woman alone perpetually dancing forever, becoming a Sisyphean character that repeats the same task for eternity, turning in the void that is represented by the rectangular opening in the art piece. This highlights the loneliness of these female artists who had to negotiate objectification by the patriarchal society whilst still carving a space for their sexual freedom and the rights to their own bodies. For Sokhanvari, Googoosh was a musical and style icon and a childhood idol. Consequently, the hologram portrays her as unattainable, distant,

and an almost ethereal figure (correspondence with the author). By literally (and figuratively) putting Googoosh on a pedestal in this piece, Sokhanvari not only idealises the vision of womanhood as represented by Googoosh, the icon, giving her a platform where she has visibility, but ultimately makes her unattainable and unreachable. She remains an elusive and imaginary construct which, like the hologram, is not real. Thus, once again Sokhanvari's Googoosh, like most of her other subjects is tinged with a sadness that comes from not only what they lost with the Revolution, but also what Sokhanvari herself lost; through these depictions, one senses that the artist is searching as much for herself as for those she portrays.

London-based artist, Afsoon (b.1960), also grew up during the Pahlavi period and with the music and movies of Googoosh and has done several works using her image. In *Googoosh* (2010) (**Fig.9**), from the *Fairytale Icons* series (2009-2013), Afsoon juxtaposes an image of Googoosh against a wall of cassette tapes. The cassette tapes (relics of the 1960s and 1970s and symbols emblematic of the era) evoke a sense of nostalgia for the time when Googoosh reigned supreme, a period during which women in Iran could sing and express themselves freely. This period also corresponds to Afsoon's own formative years in Iran, thus intertwining her personal memories and experiences with this cultural icon. The inclusion of the poignant quote, "Come back again – a flower has no front or back", drawn from one of Googoosh's songs, reinforces the sense of longing and nostalgia encapsulated in the artwork. These words echo not only a yearning for a bygone era but also a longing for the time when artistic expression, particularly through music, was unhindered by the constraints that would later be imposed. Afsoon's portrayal of Googoosh in this context transcends mere symbolism. It serves as a potent representation of a lost era; one where artistic freedom flourished, but it also signifies a personal lament for the passage of youth and the fading memories of home. Through this artwork, Afsoon intertwines her own narrative with the broader cultural and social dynamics of her homeland, inviting viewers to reflect on the profound impact of music, art, and nostalgia in shaping one's identity and sense of belonging.

Paris-based artist, Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955), also depicts Googoosh in her *Past Residue* series (2009) (**Fig.10**). In this series, Nayiny superimposes advertisements and magazine covers from the Pahlavi era, reflecting the time when she, along with many others, perceived women as being encouraged to embrace notions of "liberation" and "westernization" (concepts that were intricately intertwined during that era). Nayiny places these images onto abandoned

construction sites, creating a juxtaposition that highlights the shifting ideals and discarded remnants of that time. In *Googoosh*, this juxtaposition creates a poignant tableau that seems to speak of a bygone era that has crumbled and lost its lustre. Googoosh's crown and trophy in the image (perhaps also symbolic of Iran's monarchic past), appear strangely out of place amidst the decay, serving as symbols of the stark contrast between the aspirations and ideals of that time and the sombre reality that followed. Yet the images persevere despite the rubble around them since, as Nayiny insists, these memories and histories "cannot be erased however hard the demolition process is at work" (https://malekeh.com/past-residue/). Nayiny's visual narrative, through the integration of these disparate elements, invites viewers to ponder the complexities of cultural change and the passage of time. It reflects the disillusionment that can arise when the promises of an era, symbolised by Googoosh's iconic image, are confronted with the stark realities of history. In this way, Nayiny's artwork captures not only a specific moment in time but also the broader themes of transformation and the enduring impact of cultural shifts on individual and collective memories.

The images of Googoosh, woven into the tapestry of these artists' creations, therefore serve as a unifying force for memories. These are, however, memories that have been reimagined and reconstructed within the collective imagination. They are presented through a utopian lens, one that often romanticises and idealises the past, transforming it into a realm of aspirations and dreams. This artistic endeavour, where Googoosh's image becomes a symbol of a bygone era, unites people's recollections and perceptions, weaving them together into a shared narrative. These images are not merely historical artifacts but rather vessels that transport us to a time marked by a particular set of ideals, desires, and experiences. They function as a kind of visual poetry, evoking nostalgia, and a sense of longing for a past that may never have existed in the precise way it is now remembered. In this manner, as Sandahl argues, memory is not neutral and does not represent the past as it was, but rather as it is: "mediated – rewritten and revised…accompanied by the twin concept of forgetting and selective and partisan amnesia" (Sandahl 2005). In essence, the images of Googoosh within these artworks function as vessels for the collective memory, inviting us to contemplate not just the past as it was but, more significantly, the past as it is now perceived and cherished. They serve as windows into a world where memories, both personal and collective, are shaped and reshaped, and where the past is reimagined through the lens of nostalgia and idealism.

Likewise popular, from this period, were images of Mohammad Reza Shah's glamorous wives – Princess Fawzia of Egypt (m.1939-1948), Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiary (m.1951-1958) and Farah Diba (m.1959-1980) – he was the first ruler in over 2,500 years of Iranian history who was married to only one woman at a time (even his father Reza Shah had taken more than one wife). This was a deliberate act, by Mohammad Reza Shah, aimed at portraying Iran as a modern country, on a par with the Western world. As a result, even though he was very much in love with his second wife Soraya (who could not have children), he would not take a second wife to produce an heir (which he was entitled to do according to the religious and legal laws of the country) and decided to divorce her before marrying Farah Diba. The Shah implemented another first by crowning his third wife Farah as Empress (the first Empress ever to be crowned in Iranian history) during his own coronation ceremony and made her regent in case of his demise before the heir to the throne was of age. To achieve this the Iranian Constitution had to be amended in 1967 – another deliberate act by the Shah aimed at giving women greater agency and a larger role in society. Subsequently, the Empress had a very visible presence in Iranian society (as well as the international scene) and became a role model for Iranian women. Moreover Farah, who had been an Architectural student in Paris when she met the Shah, had a very keen interest in the Arts and promoted Iranian arts, both traditional and modern, including many of the young Iranian artists at the time (such as the Saqqakhaneh school of artists). She was also responsible for the building of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA, inaugurated in 1977 and built by her cousin, architect Kamran Diba), which housed both International and Iranian Contemporary Art and is considered to have one of the most valuable and extensive collections of modern and Western masterpieces outside the West.

Even though she resides in exile, Farah Pahlavi continues to hold a special place in the hearts of the Iranian people, spanning across generations. She is regarded as the symbolic "mother" figure for all Iranians – a unifying and beloved presence in the collective consciousness of the nation. This enduring popularity and deep-seated affection for Farah transcends age, resonating with both the older generation who lived through the era of the Pahlavi dynasty and the younger generation born after the Revolution. Farah's status as a cherished figure extends into the realm of contemporary art, where she is celebrated as an icon by various artists. Through their creative expressions, these artists pay homage to Farah's enduring influence and her role as a symbol of unity, strength, and hope for Iranians, both in the country and in diaspora communities. In their artistic interpretations, Farah becomes a source of inspiration and a representation of the spirit of the Iranian people.

In *Shah and his three Queens* (2009) (**Figs.11,45**), from the *Fairytale Icons* series (2009-2013), Afsoon has used official photographs of the Shah and his wives posing in their fineries and has juxtaposed these images against a wall of images and stamps that are relevant to them. Fawzia, the Shah's first wife who was an Egyptian princess, has images of Egyptian characters and stamps portraying the Shah that date back to when she was queen. Soraya, his second wife, has stamps of the Shah relating to when she was a queen, as well as stamps portraying a girl in traditional Bakhtiari (an Iranian clan) dress, since she was from the Bakhtiari tribe. Finally, Farah Diba, his third and last wife, has stamps of the Shah from the period when she was Queen as well as illustrations of arched traditional doorways behind her, since Farah was an architectural student when she met the Shah, and was always a great patron of the arts. However, despite their beauty and fairy-tale appearances, none of these women ended up with their happily ever after: the first two, Fawzia and Soraya, were divorced and lived the rest of their days outside Iran, and the last, Farah, lost her crown alongside her husband who she buried shortly after leaving Iran for exile. Afsoon explicates this series by referring to the fairy tales she read as a child, about beautiful princesses and heroes who were loved and admired and how she expected these beautiful princesses to always emerge happy and victorious but realised later that this did not transpire – so she asks, if these women could not have a fairy tale ending, what chance do ordinary mortals have to achieve this (https://afsoon.co.uk/fairytale-icons/). Thus, Afsoon not only questions the veracity of these (historical) mythical accounts, but also the underlying ontological basis for her identity as an Iranian woman. Her work prompts us to consider the expectations that society, culture, and history place on women, which often lead to the burden of striving for idealised, fairy tale-like existences. By challenging these expectations and narratives, Afsoon invites us to reflect on the complexities of identity, aspiration, and the pursuit of happiness, ultimately underscoring the importance of embracing the real, imperfect, and nuanced journeys that define us as individuals and as women in today's world.

Soheila Sokhanvari has likewise painted images of the Shah's wives, particularly professing her admiration for Empress Farah for her unwavering dignity and grace – qualities that have shone through even in the face of the numerous trials and tribulations she has confronted throughout the years (conversation with the artist). Sokhanvari, as is her tendency, likes to use lesser-known images showing the private moments of her subjects, as she does with *Farah*

Diba (2011) (**Fig.12**) and *Empress Soraya* (2013) (**Fig.46**). Sokhanvari has painstakingly drawn these images using crude oil, an unconventional artistic medium and simultaneously the most traded commodity in the contemporary world, smuggled over especially from her hometown of Shiraz, once again showing attention to detail and symbolism in her works. The challenging and inherently unpredictable use of crude oil as a medium for painting, marked by its challenging manipulation and frequent errors, coupled with the small dimensions of Sokhanvari's paintings, results in images that are deliberately blurry – even more so than the inherently grainy quality of the source images Sokhanvari uses as her starting point. This intentional blurriness, which makes it difficult to discern the subject matter, serves a dual purpose – it not only presents the women as enigmatic figures but also grants them a level of anonymity, a stark contrast to their highly public personas as queens. The unpredictable nature of crude oil as a medium for painting, also mirrors the inherent instability of Iran and the precarious situation faced by its women, including notable figures like Farah and Soraya. Sokhanvari draws a parallel between this unconventional medium and the historical queens of Iran, shedding light on the intricate interplay of wealth, beauty, and power, offering an insight into the lives of these queens. These queens, celebrated for their beauty and grace, enjoyed positions of power and prestige, yet this affluence proved to be a double-edged sword. Ultimately, it did not secure them lasting happiness, much like the volatile nature of crude oil itself.

The use of crude oil further underscores the significant role of oil revenues in fuelling Iran's prosperity and modernisation during that era, as well as the inherent challenges and conflicts associated with this precious resource. Notably, the nationalisation of oil in 1951, orchestrated by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, was a pivotal moment in Iran's history. It laid the groundwork for the 1953 coup, orchestrated by the United States and the United Kingdom, which led to Mossadegh's removal from power. Sokhanvari's use of crude oil not only pays homage to this complex historical backdrop but also invites viewers to reflect on the dual nature of prosperity and turmoil that has been intricately tied to Iran's relationship with oil. It serves as a reminder of the nation's dependence on this resource and the profound impact it has had on the course of its history, both in terms of progress and the challenges that have arisen from it, particularly in its interactions with the Western world, allowing Sokhanvari to address not only artistic but also political, economic, and environmental themes.

2.2 Historical Arts

Iran has had a rich artistic history, but the traditional arts that were valued in the country (apart from architecture which is not included in this study), did not always correspond to those prized in the West (i.e. Canvas Painting and Sculpture). Historically, Iranian women have been absent as makers of art and sometimes even as subjects in the over 2,500 years history of Iranian art. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg points out that among the many figural representations in Persepolis women are completely absent and even the animals carried as gifts for the king are all male, apart from the one exception of a lioness who is accompanied by her cubs indicating that they still need suckling (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1993: 22). It is this absence of women, particularly as makers of art in Iranian history that contemporary Iranian female artists are challenging by engaging in a dialogue with the artistic past, using a new rhetoric and new artistic conventions. This engagement is, nonetheless, informed by the knowledge that this art-historical tradition is inherited from male artists and reclaimed by these female artists in terms of subject matter, style and medium in order to best convey a contemporary female sensibility.

Traditional arts continue to play a significant role in contemporary Iran, serving as both a link to the country's rich cultural heritage and a source of inspiration for modern artistic expressions. There have been many efforts to preserve and revive these arts through educational programs and workshops, particularly given that these traditional arts are often part of Iran's Islamic past and, as such, more amenable to the regime. These traditional arts encompass a wide range of disciplines and crafts that have been passed down through generations, often infused with new interpretations and adaptations. They serve as a dynamic foundation upon which artists build, offering a sense of cultural continuity while embracing the spirit of innovation. These arts not only preserve Iran's historical identity but also contribute to a diverse and evolving artistic landscape that resonates both within the country and beyond its borders.

2.2.1 Miniature

The art of miniature painting has a rich and storied history in Iran, dating back to the medieval period. It involves intricate and highly detailed depictions of various scenes, often depicting stories from literature, religious texts, or historical events. Traditional Iranian miniatures are characterised by their meticulous attention to detail, vibrant colours, and intricate patterns. In the modern and contemporary period, there have been efforts to preserve and revive traditional miniature techniques through educational programs and workshops. These initiatives aim to pass down the intricate skills and methods to new generations of artists. There has also been a notable rise in the number of female Iranian artists engaging with this historically male-dominated artform. While the art of miniature is still rooted in its traditional techniques and aesthetics, contemporary Iranian artists have reimagined and adapted this art form to engage with modern issues, concerns, and artistic sensibilities. These artists are bringing new perspectives and voices to the tradition, challenging conventional norms by exploring themes related to gender, identity, and personal experiences. They may address current social, political, and cultural issues through their artwork, using the symbolism and visual language of traditional miniatures to convey modern messages. Thus, many contemporary Iranian artists use this art form as a means of commenting on societal and political issues. Additionally, while traditional miniature painting primarily employed techniques such as watercolours and gold leaf, contemporary artists have expanded their repertoire to include a variety of media. Some combine traditional miniature techniques with digital art, photography, and mixed media to create innovative and thought-provoking pieces. Additionally, while traditional miniatures often depicted specific stories or scenes, contemporary artists often focus on evoking emotions and concepts through their work. They might create abstract narratives or visual metaphors that encourage viewers to reflect on deeper meanings.

Farah Ossouli (b.1953) is one artist who is trained in the traditional style of miniature painting and uses this style in her paintings, such as the *Ars Poetica* series (2010). In *Vincent, Reza and Me* (2010) (**Fig.16**) from this series, which Ossouli refers to as a conversation between Van Gogh, Reza Abbasi and herself, as an Iranian woman artist, in "no man's land" (http://www.farahossouli.com/?gallery_type=ars-poetica), she engages in an artistic dialogue not only with Reza Abbasi (c. 1565-1635), who was one of the greatest Iranian miniaturists, but also with the Western artist Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). This work is inspired by a

Reza Abbasi miniature (**Fig.47**) showing a woman holding a mirror whilst lining her eyes with kohl. On the cushion she's leaning on, is an image of a man gazing at her in admiration while filling his cup with wine. In Ossouli's image, however, instead of the kohl stick the woman is stabbing her own eye with a dagger, while her reflection in the mirror closes its eyes in pain or resignation. On the cushion, the image we see is that of Vincent Van Gogh, with bandaged ear, hat, and pipe (as in his self-portrait), but in Safavid garb. He looks on at this scene without surprise – as one suffering artist to another. Ossouli describes the woman as a painter and the knife as her painting brush, perhaps alluding to herself as a woman artist. She explains that in the past, when a miniaturist refused a royal decree to create art, they would either face blinding by the king or willingly blind themselves. Ossouli further challenges tradition through the decoration surrounding the image. At first glance, this decoration appears to resemble traditional Persian motifs, featuring elements like flowers and leaves. However, upon closer inspection, one can discern not only these traditional motifs, but also guns (which Ossouli refers to as the gun Van Gogh killed himself with), knives and bullets, seemingly covered in blood. As Ossouli herself articulates, "All of the catastrophes which are revealed with beautiful decorations in this piece, show the contrast of our souls, insides and our surroundings" (http://www.farahossouli.com/?gallery_type=ars-poetica).

This painting is also decorated with various lines of Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry repeated around the sides, such as "I couldn't, I couldn't anymore" and "I cried the whole day in the mirror." These lines are from Farrokhzad's poem "Green Delusion", which for Farzaneh Milani is one of her "most eloquent statements" of the personal sacrifices she had to endure for her art (Milani, 1992: 66). In this context, Ossouli once more alludes to the notion of the suffering artist, underscoring the idea that the challenges faced in the pursuit of art are not bound by gender, geography, or cultural background, and that the capacity to endure and grapple with the tribulations inherent to artistic expression remains a universal aspect of the creative journey.

Osssouli has professed that the figurative, decorative, and narrative style of Persian miniatures provided her with expressive potential, and she found the impassive look of miniature figures suitable for her protagonists who engaged in universal themes (Ossouli 2014). Moreover, in these images Ossouli uses all three traditional characteristics of Persian miniatures: calligraphy, *Tazhib* (the decorative arts and book illuminations) and painting but she infuses them with new features, such as contemporary Iranian poetry, *Tazhib* designs with weapons, and new themes.

Through this combination of traditional techniques and contemporary concepts, Ossouli's art transcends cultural boundaries, making it accessible and relatable to a global audience. Her use of intricate patterns, delicate brushwork, and a rich colour palette draws viewers into a world that is both familiar and otherworldly. At the same time, Ossouli's exploration of themes such as gender dynamics and social issues subtly addresses them through visual metaphors and symbolism, encouraging viewers to engage with these topics on a personal and intellectual level. In Iran, where traditional and contemporary values can sometimes clash, her work can be seen as a bridge between tradition and modernity, fostering a dialogue about the importance of preserving heritage while embracing innovation and exploring the interplay of culture, history, and contemporary life, exploring themes of identity, memory, gender, and social issues, presenting a fusion of past and present through her artistic lens.

Another artist who uses and manipulates well-known miniatures, is Soody Sharifi (b.1955). In her *Maxiature* series (2007), Sharifi uses existing manuscript paintings in which she intervenes digitally by incorporating collages of contemporary scenes and images from Iranian's daily lives. The artist then enlarges this new image – hence the humorous title *Maxiature* (as opposed to miniature) coined by the artist. In *Courtly Love* (2007) (**Fig.48**), from this series, Sharifi uses an image from a late 15th century copy of the *Khamsa* of Nizami Ganjavi (c.1141-1209), depicting the Sassanian king Khosrow professing his love for the Armenian princess Shirin in front of her palace (**Fig.49**). In Sharifi's version, however, there are several contemporary Iranian girls engaged in various activities such as skipping rope or using the hula-hoop, as they would in a school playground. There is also a young woman leaning over the balustrade and taking part in what looks like a modern-day courtship with a man standing outside. Here Sharifi transforms the epic story of Khosrow and Shirin and the traditional courtship rituals, into modern day Iran, although the fundamental traditional framework remains, and they continue to be separated by the barriers that segregate the sexes in modern day Iran. This anachronism mirrors the historical practices of miniature artists who, in their manuscript illustrations, often incorporated contemporary clothing and styles of their own era. By adapting these historical images to the context of contemporary Iran, Sharifi effectively carries forward this long-standing tradition within the realm of miniature art. However, the artist explains that this series ruptures the miniature tradition on two different levels: firstly, the medium used (photography) and secondly, the narratives that are depicted, which she describes as bringing about "a creolized understanding of Western and Middle Eastern identity to…miniatures" (http://www.kashyahildebrand.org/zurich/sharifi/sharifi002.html).

Sharifi's objective, therefore, is to add layers of significance and interpretation to subjects that have previously been portrayed as monolithic and to translate the "hidden" lives of Iranians for an international audience, situating them in the collective experience of globalisation. Additionally, by doing so she challenges the assumptions held in the West about Iranian art and artists. Hence, these images continue the tradition of story-telling explicit in the original miniatures, but now they are no longer stories of heroic quests but of the mundane and the everyday. Instead of scenes of courtly life we are presented with scenes of contemporary homelife, where tradition blends with modernity and the past with the present. In this manner, they mirror contemporary Iranian life where traditional arts and mores live side-by-side with modern interventions and practices.

Rabee Baghshani is another artist who skilfully merges traditional miniatures with anachronistic contemporary elements to create artworks that bridge the gap between the past and the present. In *Vogue III* (2018) (**Fig.50**), Baghshani has used, as her starting point, a Safavid miniature folio depicting a woman (in full-length) holding a spray of flowers (**Fig.51**). Transforming this initial image into a close-up, she replaces the traditional spray of flowers with a Coca-Cola bottle in the woman's hand. Furthermore, Baghshani situates the woman against a backdrop adorned with the Coca-Cola logo. Additionally, this new image is presented as a Vogue magazine cover, a symbol of Western beauty standards and consumerism. This juxtaposition highlights not only the evolving ideals of beauty but also the increasing influence of Western aesthetics and consumer culture on the global stage. In this manner, Baghshani's work effectively captures the underlying forces of tradition and modernity that coexist within Iranian society, and skilfully adapts the traditional visual language to integrate it into a global aesthetic and sensibility.

Contemporary Iranian artists are, therefore, redefining the realm of traditional miniature art, infusing it with fresh perspectives to address contemporary issues and themes. Whether it is the active creation of miniatures by artists like Farah Ossouli, or the innovative adaptation of existing miniatures with the use of different media to mirror the facets of modern Iranian society, as seen with Soody Sharifi and Rabee Baghshani, these artists actively engage with their artistic heritage, juxtaposing the past with the present and tradition with modernity. They continue to honour the rich history of this art form while using it as a platform to explore, critique, and celebrate the complexities of modern life.

2.2.2 Calligraphy

The art of calligraphy has deep roots in Iranian culture and has been an integral part of artistic expression for centuries. Calligraphy in Iran is rooted in the Islamic tradition, where it has been used to transcribe religious texts, poetry, and philosophical works. Additionally, calligraphy was used as a decorative element on many media other than paper, on objects and in architecture. Calligraphy is, in many ways, a more personal art form, as despite its decorative and aesthetic properties, it also often conveys a message – one that can be understood by speakers of that language.

In Iran calligraphy continues to be considered an art form and is still taught in the traditional way, requiring many years of practice to perfect. As with other traditional art forms, there are initiatives to revive and teach calligraphy techniques to new generations of artists. These artists continue to honour and preserve the traditional scripts and styles, such as *Nastaliq* and *Thuluth*, while also incorporating innovative approaches. They often explore new techniques, materials, and styles, pushing the boundaries of the art form and reimagining its visual language. Calligraphy has also been an inspirational source for modern artists from the mid-20th century onwards, with movements such as the Saqqakhaneh school of art (artists such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram and Parviz Tanavoli) as well as the Painting Calligraphy movement, *Naqqashikhat* as it is known in Iran (notably the works of Mohammad Ehsai and Reza Mafi), which emerged in Iran and other parts of the Middle East (known elsewhere as the *Hurufiyya* movement). These artistic uses of calligraphy emerged as a reaction to modernisation and westernisation, seeking to reconnect with Iran's cultural and spiritual roots. As such, they drew inspiration from traditional Iranian art, including calligraphy, but presented these elements in a more abstract and symbolic manner, with the emphasis being on the visual aesthetics of the calligraphic forms rather than the literal meaning of the words. These artists also worked with mixed media, combining calligraphy with other elements such as paint, collage, and found objects, treating calligraphy as part of a larger artistic expression, contributing to the overall visual narrative. By abstracting and symbolising the calligraphic forms, they aimed to evoke a deeper, emotional connection with the viewers and to tap into the spiritual essence of Iranian culture. These movements were part of a broader reconnection with traditional artistic roots during a time of cultural change and transformation in Iran. In this modern sense, calligraphy is not limited to standalone artworks but is often integrated into

various visual art forms, including painting, sculpture, and mixed media, allowing artists to create dynamic and multifaceted compositions. As with miniature art, calligraphy is often used as a vehicle for social and political commentary, with artists incorporating words or phrases that carry powerful messages about societal issues, cultural identity, and the challenges of the modern world. These artists are also influenced by global artistic trends and not limited solely to traditional Islamic themes, incorporating elements from other cultures and art forms, allowing them to contribute to cross-cultural dialogues and the global artistic landscape.

In contemporary Iran, same as with other art forms, there has been a rise in the participation of female artists in this traditionally male-oriented field. These artists use calligraphy to bring diverse perspectives and contribute to the evolution of this field whilst challenging gender norms. Artist Golnaz Fathi (b.1972) is one of the few Iranian women to excel at the still largely male-dominated discipline of traditional calligraphy. She gained the Diploma in Iranian Calligraphy (the culmination of six years of study) at the Iranian Society of Calligraphy (ISC) in Tehran and was named the Best Female Calligraphist by the ISC. Many of Fathi's works involve the tradition of *siah-mashq* (literally meaning "black homework"), a process used by calligraphers to warm up their hand by repeatedly writing a letter or word on a paper, until it is covered with black ink. She explains that despite her studies she works on "destroying the word" (Balaghi 2016a: 7), a process that could only be achieved once she had learnt the art of calligraphy to perfection. Fathi's inspiration comes from Iran's rich cultural heritage and her artistic aim has been to transform calligraphy from words into forms, since for her it is not the literal meaning of the words that is important, but the form and the aesthetics (Fairweather 2008). Thus, she concentrates on the form, making the words illegible and abstract. Fathi confesses that over the years she has tried to eliminate the meaning of words from her painting as she did not want them to affect her work, but instead wanted the audience to relate to the painting itself (Assad 2010). In this manner, she continues the works of the previous generation of modern artists who used calligraphy as painting, whilst introducing her own innovations, thereby pushing the boundaries of calligraphic painting to new limits.

Additionally, in works such as *Untitled* (2016) (**Fig.52**), Fathi uses a medium forbidden to students of traditional calligraphy, the rollerball pen, combining its use with acrylic to produce an abstract image where the words are mostly illegible and are more akin to abstract art, with a colour palette that is very restricted – mostly black and white with small splashes of colour, usually red, yellow, or blue. She explains that it was a revelatory experience for her to realise

that one can make art with even a simple pen (Balaghi 2016b:10). Since Fathi shuns the literal confines of words, she refrains from assigning titles to works, believing that this would limit the individual interpretation (Assad 2010). This further allows her to evade any predetermined interpretation and forces the viewer to make their own interpretation unhindered by titles, labels, or other guiding markers. As a result, despite being grounded conceptually in the tradition of calligraphy, Fathi's work has departed dramatically from its function as a purveyor of words and meaning.

Pouran Jinchi (b.1959) is another trained calligrapher who deconstructs the written word. Her creative inspiration usually comes from a text or book, as exemplified by her *Blind Owl* series (**Figs.53,54**). This series draws inspiration from the highly influential 1937 novella of the same name (*Buf-e Kur*), by the iconic writer Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951). Hedayat's work, considered a masterpiece of modern Iranian literature, was banned in Iran due to concerns that it might incite suicidal thoughts. The novella is known for its surreal, psychological, and symbolic narrative that delves into the mind of the protagonist, exploring themes of alienation, madness, and existentialism. Jinchi's series serves as a creative response to Hedayat's text, offering her interpretation of its vivid imagery and profound concepts through her unique artistic perspective. Her work seamlessly integrates her deep fascination with text, symbolism, and Persian culture. In this series, she leverages calligraphic forms and abstract imagery to capture the psychological and emotional landscape depicted in Hedayat's work. Jinchi weaves textual elements, including Persian letters and script, into her compositions, resulting in intricate patterns and designs which effectively mirror the enigmatic and labyrinthine nature of the novella itself.

In *Untitled #2* (2013) (**Fig.53**), from this series, Jinchi has written out the entire book on 18 sheets of pink Plexiglas and laid them on top of each other like the pages in a book. This work is offset with *Dots* (2013) (**Fig.54**), displayed on the wall behind it in the exhibition, which again consists of the entire book written out on 94 sheets of paper, but this time omitting the letter shapes, retaining only the diacritics, called *noqteh* (dots). Jinchi explains that she wanted to focus on the dots and diacritical marks "as codes that can either reveal or obscure layers of meaning", because they frequently go unnoticed in writing despite being pivotal in shaping the form and phonetics of letters (Pollman 2016). Thus, in these works the text is not legible, the forms are not complete and, like the text itself (and Hedayat himself), not understood fully.

Jinchi has deconstructed the text and recreated it in her own vision, highlighting the rhythm and movement of the words, along with the significance conveyed by the symbols, all the while veiling the actual meanings they carry. Jinchi explains that, for her, this work represents the "pain" and "violence" that the book portrays (Hosseinian 2021) – she identified with *Blind Owl* since she, like Hedayat, felt at times that she had no voice and wanted her art to speak for her – just as she hoped that people would read the book and derive their own interpretation (Seaman 2013). In this manner, Jinchi is not only continuing an artistic tradition using calligraphy but is also entering into a dialogue with Iranian literary history, using this as another marker for connecting to an Iranian audience since even though these artworks engage with a global audience on the surface, they speak to an Iranian sensibility in their overall message and understanding on a deeper and more fundamental level.

Shirazeh Houshiary (b.1955) is another artist who deviates from the conventions of traditional calligraphy. In *Fine Frenzy* (2004) (**Fig.55**), Houshiary has painted a canvas with multiple layers of water-based black ink. Then, using a white pencil and ink, she has repeatedly inscribed and erased a word, that she does not identify, until it has disappeared and is unrecognisable. Houshiary declares that in this painting she is exploring the relationship between "existence" and "non-existence", between "life" and "death", elucidating that the demarcation between these states is remarkably delicate and that *Fine Frenzy* captures that very brink. The term employed in the work operates as a symbolic tool, transcending the confines of its literal meaning to avoid becoming a mere descriptive notion. Houshiary explains that she employs repetition of the word to the point where its energy seems fragmented and dispersed. It is almost as if the word undergoes a metamorphosis, transcending its conventional form and established meanings. This transformation symbolises the amalgamation of the ephemeral and the fundamental, shedding illusory identities to embrace the authentic one (Houshiary 2004). By adopting the universal language of art, Houshiary seeks to render her creation accessible to all, transcending specific geographical and linguistic delineations, allowing the artwork to communicate on a broader, global plane.

Parastou Forouhar (b.1962) also often uses calligraphy, such as in her site-specific *Written Room* series (**Fig.56**) which she has been executing since 1995 and which involves writing, in the "*shekasteh*" calligraphic style all along the walls and floors of the different venues she has exhibited in. In these works, Forouhar transplants calligraphy from the page onto walls and floors and, with this change of scale, both immerses the viewers within the words and takes

away their ability to distance themselves (physically and metaphorically) from them. The text is foreign to non-Persian speakers, resulting in a sense of alienation, as they are immersed in a text they cannot decipher or comprehend. However, the text is also not fully comprehensible for Persian speakers either, failing to convey any discernible meaning. Forouhar intentionally obscures the meaning of the text in her works, and this deliberate ambiguity is not without purpose. In traditional calligraphy, the primary role was to convey religious texts, aligning with its function as a vehicle for communicating lofty ideals. However, Forouhar's intent diverges; she aims to liberate calligraphy from its conventional function and emphasise its intrinsic design and pattern, fostering an artistic focus distinct from its historical associations.

Thus, in Forouhar's artworks, the calligraphic script does not aim to convey a coherent or meaningful message. Instead, it serves as a mnemonic device, a tool to trigger memories of a homeland and a language that was left behind, now existing primarily in the realm of imagination. Forouhar, as an immigrant, expresses a deep concern for the gradual fading of Persian, her mother tongue, from her daily life. However, this language remains vivid and alive in her memory, and through her art, she seeks to preserve and reconstruct it, connecting with the profound sense of nostalgia and longing for her homeland (https://vimeo.com/174805989). Forouhar has further admitted that she does not know how much of her memories of Iran have been manipulated by herself, since she is aware that at some unprecise point, she started re-building the idea of her homeland into a "fortress of illusions" which grew in her mind "invisibly and beautifully". She searches for this homeland by writing words in her mother tongue to remember "the beautiful Persian patterns that the old masters of past centuries have left to us" (Becker 2010: 18). These *Written Rooms*, therefore, are Forouhar's way of keeping herself surrounded by a culture and language that she wishes to preserve, even if it is as a beautiful illusion she has constructed in the realm of memory.

Forouhar also uses script, this time in a religious (Shi'i) context, along with Shi'i iconography in the *Kiss Me* (2013) (**Fig.57**) series. This series references Ashura, the annual ceremony that commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his family and supporters in 680 AD, at the Battle of Karbala on the 10th day of the month of Muharram – an important date in Iran's Shi'i history and mythical historiography. This kitsch series incorporates Islamic patterns in bright colours with the single sentence, in Persian: "Kiss Me"! These are also the words from a popular song by the same name from the early 1950s. This song was recorded just before the 1953 coup d'état in Iran, known as "Operation Ajax", when the democratically elected Prime

Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, was removed by the United States and the United Kingdom in order to return and strengthen the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah. It came to be regarded by some as an anthem for what transpired and the loss that the country suffered. This event was another one that remains in the collective memory of all Iranians, like that of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, as an act of injustice which has contributed significantly to Iran's enduring mistrust of the West. In her series, Forouhar employs textual elements to evoke this sense of collective memory, urging Iranians to remember past injustices. Through symbolic representation, she establishes a connection between historical injustices and those perpetrated by the Islamic Republic in the present day. By drawing these parallels, she underscores the gravity and detrimental impact of both historical and contemporary injustices on the Iranian people, fostering a deeper understanding of their shared experiences and the enduring consequences of such actions.

Taraneh Hemami (b.1960) is another artist who uses text, in the *Alphabet of Silence* (2000) (**Fig.58**), where she references the loss of language for Iranians living in the diaspora. In this work, Hemami amalgamates tear-shaped ceramic sculptures and wooden panels adorned with tear-shaped motifs and Arabic script letters, arranged in grids reminiscent of ancient talismanic symbols and numerical configurations found on protective amulets and talismans (**Fig.59**) which are supposed to protect the wearer. The calligraphic inscription on talismans had also been an inspiration for the Saqqakhaneh artists. This use of calligraphy as a decorative element, without regard to semantic content, was a somewhat defiant act which broke from tradition, instead touting the popular idiom used by the common people, whilst marking calligraphy's migration from paper to canvas as a pictorial tool. In this manner, Hemami is entering into a dialogue with the Saqqakhaneh artists as well as with the traditional Iranian and Islamic traditions and crafts.

Silent Tears (2011) (**Fig.60**) is another work from this series, which comprises of seven ceramic "tears" of differing sizes, covered with texts and letters that are obscured by a layer of clear wax and are mounted vertically on a grey wall, looking like tears running down a face. These tears, with the words muffled by the wax layer as though silenced, symbolise the silent tears of Iranians living in exile who have lost their home, culture, and language, as these become obliterated like tears and are washed away. Hemami's exploration of text in these works, therefore, goes beyond mere linguistic symbolism; it serves as a visual representation of the cultural and emotional complexities associated with displacement and the yearning for

connection to one's homeland. This loss of language not only reflects the challenges faced by the Iranian diaspora but also emphasises the power of language in preserving cultural identity and memory, making her works a poignant commentary on the immigrant experience and its enduring impact on individuals and communities.

These interventions into traditional calligraphic practices, therefore, represent a significant and deliberate departure from historical norms within the art world. The decision of these female artists to engage with calligraphy on their own terms serves as a powerful reclamation of their place within Iran's art historical practices. Female artists are effectively challenging and reshaping traditional notions of calligraphy by introducing innovative techniques and addressing contemporary sensibilities and concerns. Through this transformation, they bridge the gap between the rich heritage of Persian script and language and the evolving perspectives of modern Iranian society. By adopting new techniques and subject matters that resonate with their own experiences and the realities of the present day, these artists not only assert their creative agency but also facilitate a broader dialogue about the role of women in art. Their work showcases the diversity of voices and expressions within contemporary Iranian art, ultimately enriching and expanding the boundaries of a historically male-dominated field. In this way, these artists contribute not only to the evolution of calligraphy as an art form but also to the broader narrative of women's empowerment and inclusion in Iran's artistic legacy.

2.3 Literary History

The importance of the text also manifests itself with the association, in many of these works, with Iran's literary past. Iran's literary history is a tapestry woven with threads of rich cultural heritage and artistic expression. Spanning over centuries, it encompasses a wide array of genres, themes, and styles that reflect the diverse facets of Iranian society, politics, religion, and philosophy. One of the earliest and most enduring legacies of Iranian literature is its poetic tradition, which dates to antiquity. Persian poetry boasts luminaries such as Ferdowsi, whose *Shahnameh* not only celebrates Persian identity but also serves as a repository of ancient stories, values, and language. In the modern era, Iran's literary landscape has been marked by contemporary writers who grapple with the challenges of modernity, political turmoil, and social change. The works of authors like Sadegh Hedayat, Forough Farrokhzad, and Ahmad Shamlou reflect a diverse array of themes, ranging from existentialism and feminism to social critique and resistance against oppressive regimes.

Iran's literary history serves as a mirror to its society, reflecting its evolution, conflicts, and aspirations. It showcases how literature has been a vehicle for Iranians to explore their identity, question prevailing norms, and engage with global ideas. As Iran continues to grapple with its past, present, and future, its literary tradition remains a resilient and ever-evolving testament to the power of words in shaping cultural consciousness.

2.3.1 Shahnameh

A particular source of inspiration has been the epic *Shahnameh* ("The Book of Kings"), by the great Persian poet Abu'l Qasim Ferdowsi (935-1020), the longest ever poem by a single author in history. The *Shahnameh*, which as Charles Melville notes, has been called the Iranian "identity card" (*shenas-nameh* in Persian) (Melville 2010) is of central importance to the ethno-national and pre-Islamic cultural identity of Iran, as it allowed for an identification with Iran's imaginary pre-Islamic past. Iran is a diverse nation with various ethnic groups, languages, and traditions and the *Shahnameh* acts as a unifying cultural touchstone that transcends these differences, fostering a shared sense of identity among Iranians of different backgrounds. As such, it holds immense importance for Persian identity due to its role in shaping, preserving, and reinforcing the cultural, linguistic, and historical foundations of the Persian people. It has acted as a repository of Persian culture, encompassing myths, legends, historical events, and moral teachings, weaving together a narrative that covers both mythical origins and historical accounts of Persia. By doing so, it constructs a comprehensive identity that includes the mystical and the historical aspects of the Persian people.

The *Shahnameh* has also provided a sense of continuity with the past, connecting modern Iranians to their ancient roots and heritage. Ferdowsi's choice to write the poem in classical Persian played a pivotal role in preserving and promoting the Persian language. The epic's eloquent verses and rich vocabulary have contributed significantly to the development and enrichment of the Persian literary tradition. Likewise, the stories of heroes, kings, battles, and tragedies within the *Shahnameh* form an integral part of the Persian collective memory. They shape the way Iranians perceive themselves and their place in history, fostering a strong sense of belonging. The epic imparts a range of ethical values such as courage, loyalty, honour, justice, and wisdom through the actions and dilemmas faced by its characters. These values continue to resonate with modern Iranians and contribute to their moral framework. The *Shahnameh*'s stories of resistance against adversity and foreign invasions likewise reflect the Iranian people's historical struggles for independence and identity. As a result, the *Shahnameh* has served as a source of inspiration for various forms of artistic expression, from visual arts to music, literature, and theatre. This continuous reinterpretation and engagement with the epic

ensure its relevance and vitality in contemporary culture. The *Shahnameh* also propagates binaries such as Good vs Evil and the Self vs Other which are, to this day, part of the Iranian *weltanshauung*. Hence, the Shahnameh embodies the essence of Persian identity by encapsulating the core elements that define the Persian people. It reflects their historical, linguistic, cultural, and ethical heritage, serving as a source of pride, inspiration, and unity for Iranians across generations and geographical locations.

Tavakoli-Targhi believes that the *Shahnameh* became a formative element of modern Iranian national identity, starting in the nineteenth century when recitations of its stories displaced the narration of popular religious epics in the coffeehouses and "resulted in a process of cultural transference that intensified the desire for the recovery of the 'forgotten history' of ancient Iran" (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 99). The Pahlavi regime drew strongly on the Shahnameh as a symbol of Iranian-ness (with implied anti-Arab/anti-Islamic undertones) and, surprisingly, the Islamic Republic has also found that the *Shahnameh* is a politically-expedient text – this time emphasising Ferdowsi's (supposed) shi'ism as the factor that separates Iranians from non-Iranians. The *Shahnameh* is also of great importance in the formation of an "imagined" Iranian identity. Dick Davis contends that when considering the importance of the past in questions of identity, the *Shahnameh* is "twice blessed" since it is both the first major literary work of the Islamic period in Iranian history (having a huge influence on Iranians' continuing perception of themselves), and it is also the chief means by which the mythology and history of pre-Islamic Iran entered the national consciousness. Thus, this dual significance as the first major literary work of the Islamic period and as the "virtually sole custodian of the narratives of the pre-Islamic period", has made the *Shahnameh* crucial in discussions pertaining to Iranian identity, given that it is seen as "the repository of a quintessential "Iranian-ness," or "Persian-ness," which cannot be found elsewhere" (Davis 2012: 39). The *Shahnameh* has, therefore featured largely in the artistic production of the Persianate world, with various illustrated versions over the centuries found in the collection of museums all over the world.

One of the main reasons for the influence of the *Shahnameh* is its propagation of a mythical conception of Iran. Mythology is one of the elements that shape culture and identity in society. In the case of Iran, recurring symbols of Iranian myths are seen in art as early as the Luristan

bronzes from three millennia ago and continue to be seen in contemporary Iranian artistic production. The importance of the *Shahnameh* in the artistic production of the Persianate world is further evidenced by the fact that it is the most illustrated text in Persian painting (Saadi-Nejad 2009). Its influence has continued in the works of many contemporary Iranian artists who incorporate the *Shahnameh* in their iconography and retell its stories in new and innovative visual styles. It is interesting that the contemporary female artists discussed here do not engage with an actual ancient Persian history, such as with images from the Persepolis and characters from Iran's pre-Islamic past, in the way that some Saqqakhaneh artists such as Parviz Tanavoli (b.1937) and Massoud Arabshahi (1935-2019) have done, but instead they engage with a "mythical" ancient Persian history in the form of the stories of the *Shahnameh*. This may have to do with the fact that, as mentioned previously, women do not figure in the representations in Persepolis, whereas they do in the *Shahnameh* and are important to its stories. Similarly, in post-Revolutionary Iran, Ferdowsi's historical role in preserving and promoting the Persian language, at a time when it was at risk of being superseded by Arabic (something that happened in much of the Islamic world), resonates deeply with a population resentful of the regime's efforts to reintroduce an Islamic/Arabic identity and language.

Farah Ossouli is one of the artists who engages with this mythical past, in her *Shahnameh* series. In *Love and Death* (2007) (**Fig.61**) from this series, Ossouli depicts the less-known story of a heroine of the Shahnameh, princess Tahmineh, the beautiful daughter of the King of Turan, who became the lover of the hero Rustam (it is important to note that this is her "choice": she offers herself to him and is not seduced by him). Subsequently, unbeknownst to him, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy, the great Turanian warrior, Sohrab, who Rustam ends up killing, only finding out afterwards that he has killed his own son. *Love and Death* is divided into four sections, indicating the four elements in nature. The top scene depicts Tahmineh lying in Rustam's arms, when she becomes pregnant with Sohrab – the blossoming bud being a symbol of this conception. The bottom image mirrors this but depicts Sohrab lying in Rustam's arms as he dies, having been fatally wounded by Rustam who had been unaware that Sohrab was, in fact, his son. The intimate indoor (the domain of women) scene at the top is where life is made, and the outdoors (the domain of men) is where life is taken away; Rustam who has given life to Sohrab in the top image is taking away that life in the bottom image. From the blood of Sohrab the tree of wisdom has sprouted, whilst an angel and a devil watch

on either side of these scenes – the bloody sword of the devil symbolising the fact that evil has triumphed over good. This battle between Good and Evil is also the ancient struggle between the forces of Ahura Mazda (the creator) and Ahriman (the destroyer). Ossouli has not chosen any of the heroic stories that depict Rustam and Sohrab, but rather tells the story of loss from the point of view of the woman (Tahmineh) and how, ultimately, she paid the highest price since she first loses her lover (by him leaving) and then her son (by him being killed). Thus, even though in the *Shahnameh*, Tahmineh plays a supporting role as lover and mother, here she assumes a pivotal role in this saga of pain. By magnifying Tahmineh's narrative presence, Ossouli underscores the critical contribution of women like her in the stories of men's lives, highlighting the fact that without the presence and influence of women, the very existence and narratives of men would remain incomplete and untold. This portrayal posits woman as the giver of life and man as the one responsible for its termination, imbuing the depiction with a poignant exploration of gender dynamics and the often-unacknowledged significance of women's roles in shaping the epic tales of history and mythology.

Yasmin Sinai (b.1969), likewise, concentrates on the feminine in the *Shahnameh* by avoiding its famous heroes such as Rustam and Sohrab in favour of Gurdafarid, the only female warrior in the book. Gurdafarid is the daughter of a ruler whose fortress guards the border between Iran and Turan. When her father's chief champion is captured by the invading Turanian army, she defends her father's castle and fights the leader of the Turanian army, thus delaying his march on Iran. In *The Act of Gurdafarid* (2015) (**Fig.62**), Sinai eschews the traditional mode of depiction of the *Shahnameh* (painting), for sculpture and, furthermore, deliberately challenges the established norms of representation, by opting to execute the piece in cardboard: an everyday material, disposable and transient, which contrasts sharply with the usual elaborate mediums used for the portrayal of the *Shahnameh*. This choice of material serves as a powerful symbol, underlining that women and their stories do not need extravagant ornamentation to be significant or noteworthy. It is a statement that the heroism of these lesser-known female figures can shine even when presented in modest and accessible forms.

Furthermore, by focusing on a lesser-known female character from the *Shahnameh*, Sinai magnifies the voices of the marginalised and overlooked heroines who have played essential but often uncelebrated roles. This emphasis extends beyond the pages of the epic into contemporary Iranian society, where women persistently challenge and confront the

dominance of men, especially within the backdrop of an oppressive regime. Sinai's art, with its choice of medium and subject matter, thus champions the cause of the marginalised, echoing the struggles and resilience of women both in ancient legends and in the present-day context. It is a testament to their enduring spirit and determination to break free from the overshadowing presence of male heroes, asserting their rightful place in the narratives of history and contemporary society.

Malekeh Nayiny is an artist who elects to tell the stories, not of the heroes of the *Shahnameh*, but of its monsters, known as *Div(s)*, who were supernatural demons that had to be defeated by the first kings, so they could control the world and acquire the necessary skills to govern. In the *Shahnameh*, the heroes and the *divs* embody the struggle between the forces of Good and Evil, which is one of the main themes of the book and continues to influence Iranian society. In her *Traveling Demons* series (2007), Nayiny has produced papier-mâché masks (in black and pink) which she has modelled on men or women, wearing contemporary clothing, and posing in various locations. The anachronistic juxtaposition of the *Div* dressed in contemporary clothing is something that is mirrored in the manuscripts of the *Shahnameh* itself, which often depicted characters and scenes in attire and settings that reflected the fashion and culture of the artists' own era. The gender, age and cultural ambiguity of these demons also demonstrates the fact that they transcend these markers of time. In *A Ruin from the Past* (2007) (**Fig.63**), a figure wearing the pink mask and dressed in trousers, sneakers and a shirt with motifs resembling hearts pierced by arrows, poses tourist-like in front of a building depicting a scene from the Shahnameh, showing Rustam raising his dagger and killing the White *Div* – Rustam's sombre expression contrasting with the *Div*'s comical one with its tongue hanging out. In case the image is not self-explanatory, there is an accompanying text beneath the dagger stating that this is the "Killing of the White *Div* at the hand of Rustam". On the floor lies an empty open bag and several cuts of what looks like some type of red fabric, resembling the spillage of blood from the *Div*.

In this series, the *Div*/Demon represents not just the mythological figures found in the *Shahnameh* but also serves as a representation of our innermost fears and demons that are universal and timeless, transcending the boundaries of both historical context and geographic

location. These artistic representations, therefore, invite viewers to confront and reflect upon the enduring presence of these inner struggles in our contemporary daily experiences. Such juxtapositions between characters from the contemporary world with those of the *Shahnameh*, whereby they move in and out of each other's worlds, also produce what Abbas Daneshvari refers to as "epistemological indeterminacy, where the known and the unknown shift and trade places…Contemporary signs turn symbolic while symbolic spaces of the past become quotidian imagery" (Daneshvari 2014: 144). This "epistemological indeterminacy" is what exemplifies the works of many of the artists discussed above, who refuse to be limited by pre-existing symbolism and artistic traditions and instead forge polysemous and amorphous symbols and spaces.

Taravat Talepasand (b.1979) likewise uses the figure of the Div in her *White Div* (*White Devil*) series, where she depicts the Div being slayed not by Rustam, or another of the male protagonists from the *Shahnameh*, but by a woman. In *White Div I* (2019) (**Fig.64**) the woman dressed like a *Saghi* (cup bearers, often depicted in Persian miniatures), smiles brazenly with hair flowing down her back and breasts jutting out, in a blatantly eroticised manner, with the *Div* holding onto her arms as though they are dancing, as she stabs him in the forehead. Talepasand has used glair to paint the image onto Iranian currency, on which she has also used the drug LSD. Talepasand refers to the historical use of drugs in Iran (opium traditionally) and divulges that this is the reason she also uses hash oil in her works, along with egg tempera, to link the past and the present. LSD is also a drug that, according to Talepasand, offers a heightened spiritual experience often accompanied by feelings of a loss of identity, ego, and relationship to the exterior world. As such, she believes that it can offer the prospect of reshaping the prevailing gender norms entrenched within Islamic societies, by reshaping one's mindset. The use of LSD similarly highlights the wide availability and usage of such drugs. Additionally, Talepasand states that a hit of LSD gives back some value to the hugely depreciated Iranian currency, since putting LSD on a country's currency implies that "one doesn't only have the power to recreate a country's image – to own it in some way – but to also consume it (adding insult to injury) and get high off of it" (Bekhrad 2017). Thus, by breaking the rules, Talepasand wishes to write her own and "reconfigure" the structures that are restrictive for her not only when she visits Iran, but also in the US where she was born and resides. Through this approach, she imbues the heroes and heroines of the Shahnameh, along with its demons and vices, with a contemporary relevance. She seamlessly transplants them

into the present world, where they confront the pressing challenges afflicting Iranians, including drug abuse and economic uncertainties. This adaptation underscores a timeless truth: while eras may shift, the potential for human corruption, internal strife, and personal demons remains unchanged.

Golnaz Fathi also engages with the *Shahnameh* in her *Falling Leaves* series (2012), where she diverges from her signature abstract style to include some figurative elements and more recognisable text. In *Untitled 3* (**Fig.65**) she incorporates images based on a lithographic illustration of the poem along with some text, which are both executed in white acrylic on black, with visible patches of white canvas that have black paint dripping down them. This tableau is interrupted only by two splashes in Fathi's signature red and yellow colours. This departure from the artist's more abstract style demonstrates her inner visual dialogue and interpretation of the poem. Within this framework, the artist draws a parallel between the *Shahnameh*'s themes of futile wars and their continued relevance in her native Iran and the broader Middle East. Through this connection, Fathi underscores the idea of history's cyclical repetitions. She highlights the enduring conflict between the forces of Good and Evil, a theme deeply embedded in the *Shahnameh*, and suggests its ongoing resonance in the contemporary socio-political landscape. In doing so, Fathi prompts viewers to reflect on the timeless nature of human conflict and the potential for historical patterns to persist in the present day.

Shirin Neshat (b.1957) has also been inspired by the *Shahnameh* in her *Book of Kings* series (2012) (**Figs.13,66,67,68,69,70**), consisting of forty-five large monochrome prints featuring close-ups, half-length, and full-length portraits of Iranian subjects, dressed in plain black clothing, with the addition of text or, in some cases images. As Layla Diba observes, the numerous prints and recurring images serve as curatorial tools, which remind us of Neshat's innate grasp of how images possess a silent yet direct communicative force, surpassing the capabilities of critical or art historical writings (Diba 2015: 39). In this series, the tight close-ups place the focus on the subjects' faces, rather than on contentious elements like veils, firearms, or rifles, seen in some of Neshat's previous imagery (**Figs.117,118**), hence signifying a deliberate shift towards highlighting the shared human essence depicted in these portraits, whose prior identities are shed, replaced by a universal and timeless one, devoid of exoticism or self-Orientalising (Diba 2015: 39).

Diba further elaborates that even though the *Shahnameh* has often been perceived as a singular celebration of monarchy, more recent interpretations have demonstrated that the work also raises questions about the utilisation and misuses of authority, as well as the boundaries of allegiance. She believes that this underlying theme is what resonated with the artist, prompting her to craft her own contemporary "Book of Kings" – a rendition suited to the 20th century. In this version, the emphasis is on the common people rather than rulers and heroes. The chosen texts are not solely excerpts from the original work; they also encompass verses from leftist poets of the 20th century such as Ahmad Shamloo and Mehdi Akhavan Sales. Furthermore, figures from the past who were once revered now symbolise present-day oppressors (Diba 2015: 40).

In this manner, Neshat juxtaposes the *Shahnameh* with the Green Movement (2009) and the Arab Spring (2010-2011), thereby continuing its narrative into the contemporary world. The Green Movement (*Jonbesh-e Sabz*), which was born after the contested 12th June 2009 elections, resulted in the arrest, imprisonment and death of many Iranians participating in the protests. Through the juxtaposition of these events with the narratives of the *Shahnameh*, Neshat forges a connection, illustrating the persistent endeavour of Iranians to confront tyranny and their unwavering courage and heroism. Neshat confesses that although she is not by nature political, she was deeply moved and impressed by the narratives of the brave young men and women who put their lives at risk in their call for justice and democracy. She found an "uncanny and ironic parallel" between the *Shahnameh*'s tales of heroes, who were "brutalised" for their love and devotion to their nation, and the devastating events and consequences of the Green Movement (Proctor 2019). Neshat professes that she did not approach the *Shahnameh* as a way of questioning her own "personal" identity, but rather as a way of addressing a Persian "national" identity as she felt that, since the Revolution, many Iranians felt deeply conflicted about their "dissipating Persian past, versus the current Islamic identity" so referencing the *Shahnameh* was an intuitive and symbolic effort on her part, as well as a gesture towards a collective ancient Persian heritage (Proctor 2019). Like the *Shahnameh* which narrates stories of heroism and combatting injustice, Neshat sees these contemporary uprisings as comparable and their participants as heroic as the greatest of those found in the mythical tales.

The *Shahnameh* is normally divided into three sections: myths, legends, and history and in a nod to the original book, Neshat likewise categorises her *The Book of Kings*, into three categories, but of participants in this case: *Villains*, *Masses* and *Patriots*. Here, unlike her

earlier *Women of Allah* series which only depicted women, Neshat portrays both men and women. The *Villains* (**Fig.66**), consisting of three full length portraits are, however (perhaps tellingly), all men, with their bodies covered in depictions from the Shahnameh taken from an early 20th Century edition. Diba points out that although the text originated in the 11th century and was intricately depicted in manuscripts starting from the 14th century, Neshat opts to incorporate visuals and text from a black-and-white lithographed edition dating back to the early 20th century. This version follows a style popular among artists in coffeehouses of the bazaar, differing from the opulently adorned and vibrantly illustrated manuscripts associated with the royal court (Diba 2015: 40). These black-and-white photographs are also the only ones in the series that introduce colour: two out of the three villains are depicted with scenes incorporating the colour red (for blood) which is an important colour for the IRI and its martyr symbolism. Unlike the other two categories, there is no text on these bodies, as though they are beyond words and can only portray age old symbols and representations of conflict.

The *Patriots* (**Figs.67,68**), on the other hand, are a mixture of men and women, photographed from the waist up and posing with a hand on their heart as though pledging allegiance as well as recalling the chest beating that is customary during the Ashura processions. The Patriots' bodies are inscribed with contemporary poetry and prose, running down their faces in three columns (in a similar manner as the text in the *Shahnameh*), with the blank spaces between the columns running down the two sides of the face and the neck like tear tracks. Their eyes and mouths (the conveyors of words and feelings) are left blank as though they cannot speak but must find alternative ways to communicate. The poems inscribed on the Patriots such as *Neda* (**Fig.67**) and *Muhammad* (**Fig.68**) include writings of feminist poets such as Forough Farrokhzad's "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" and Tahereh Saffarzadeh's "Allegiance with Wakefulness", both of which had previously been used by Neshat in her *Women of Allah* series, such as *Untitled* (1996) (**Fig.15**) and *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (1994). However, as Manya Saadi-Nejad argues, unlike the body decorations used by Muslim women in some countries (though not so much in Iran), Neshat's inscriptions are not primarily decorative, but rather serve as a kind of narration, recalling the "juxtaposition of word and image" found in the paintings of illustrated manuscripts (Saadi-Nejad 2009: 241-242). The use of modern poetry by feminist writers also allows Neshat to pick up the artistic and feminine mantle from these women and continue the feminine narrative by using the same devices of allegory and metaphor which are historically dominant in Iranian literature and are now an important characteristic of many contemporary Iranian artists. This use of modern poetry and prose is further

demonstrated in the portrayal of the *Masses* (**Figs.69,70**), who are photographed from an even closer angle – from the shoulders up – and bearing much smaller, continuous writing which is difficult to decipher but includes Simin Behbehani's "Saga of Pain" (*Mana*, **Fig.69**) and Ahmad Shamlou's "Of Death" (*Salah*, **Fig.70**), further affording Neshat the opportunity to draw on Iran's literary past as part of her identity whilst linking the present suffering of Iranian youth to that of these previous writers. Thus, as with her other series, the use of these Persian texts provides historical and literary references and a common ground between Neshat and her Iranian viewers who would know these writings and their significance in this context.

2.3.2 Forough Farrokhzad

The works of 20th century Iranian poets and writers have also been a major source of inspiration for contemporary artists. Among these literary figures, none has perhaps wielded greater influence, especially on women artists, than Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967). Farrokhzad, the iconoclastic poet, holds a revered place among generations of Iranian feminists. Her writings faced a ban lasting over a decade following the Revolution, adding to her aura of cultural and artistic significance. Even today, her poetry is not published in Iran in its original form but edited and censored. The free spirit and independence of Farrokhzad, who died at the early age of 32 in a car accident, after a tumultuous life – married at 16, a mother at 17, divorced at 19, losing custody of her child, several suicide attempts, mental hospital admissions and shock therapy – has continued to resonate with new generations of Iranian women who still live under similar constraints (familial and societal) to those Farrokhzad wrote about. To this day, women flock to Farrokhzad's grave, which has become a shrine, despite the various restrictions around visiting it. As a result, the regime is very sensitive about her as demonstrated by the fact that when Vista Gallery in Tehran organised a show based on artwork inspired by Farrokhzad in 2014, it was shut down and the curator taken away for "questioning" (Shahandeh 2022: 70).

It is therefore not surprising that Neshat has repeatedly chosen to inscribe the poetry of Farrokhzad on her images. In *Offered Eyes* (1993) (**Fig.71**), Neshat has inscribed the opening verse of one of Farrokhzad's most famous poems "I Pity the Garden", onto the white of her own eye, which fills most of the pictorial space. This poem has been used by Neshat many times and uses the garden as a metaphor for a woman as well as for the nation:

> "*No one thinks of the flowers.*
> *No one thinks of the fish.*
> *No one wants to believe the garden is dying,*
> *that its heart has swollen in the heat*
> *of this sun, that its mind drains slowly*
> *of its lush memories*"
> (Farrokhzad 2007: 100)

This poem gives voice to a young girl lamenting the destruction of her family's garden and the indifference of her family members to its ruin. It also has political significance since, in the early 1980s, university students would chant the words of this poem in anti-government protests. Despite its modern form, the poem evokes several tropes of classical Persian poetry, particularly that of the "Garden of Paradise" which is an important and traditional motif, not

only in Iranian/Islamic literature but also in Iranian/Islamic visual culture. It was also frequently used by Iranian writers in the twentieth century to denote the Iranian nation. Similarly, Farrokhzad's description of the father who lives in the past and reads the *Shahnameh* every day, the mother who sees sin in every corner, the nihilistic brother, and the sister who has lost her compassion and is content to live an artificial life on the other side of town, all depict the plight of the Iranian nation, not only when Farrokhzad wrote the poem, but today in contemporary Iran, thus proving Farrokhzad's enduring relevance. As Jasmin Darznik remarks, Neshat "stages a visual dialogue between violence and silence, concealment and exposure, the particular and the universal" which are the same dialogues that Farrokhzad used in her poems and films (Darznik 2010: 108).

Neshat also uses the same poem in *Untitled* (1996) (**Fig.15**), from the *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997). However, whereas in *Offered Eyes*, Neshat foregrounds the eye and the act of looking, in this image she draws attention to the lips and the act of speaking. Here, a hand rests lightly on slightly parted lips, implying both the act of kissing and silencing – highlighting not only the sensuousness of the mouth but also the silenced voices of women. Along the fingers Neshat has inscribed the words of Farrokhzad's "I Pity the Garden" whilst at the centre of the hand, written in a small circular pattern, is the writing of not only Farrokhzad but also an additional poetess, Tahreh Saffarzadeh (another favourite of Neshat). On top of this small writing, and as though to overwrite it, is boldly written *Ya Ghamar-e Bani Hashem* ("O Moon of the Hashimites") – a saying used to evoke and call upon Abbas (the half-brother of Imam Hussein). Abbas is an important figure in Shi'i orthodoxy – he was with Imam Hussein at the battle of Karbala where his hands were cut off and he was martyred. As a result, the iconography of the hand (*panjeh*) is widely used in Ashura proceedings during the month of Muharram and the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his followers. Therefore, in this image, Neshat engages with multiple layers of symbolism and ideologies which inform Iranian identity. Darznik argues that Neshat evokes Farrokhzad's poem in order to stage a dialogue between the visual and the literary as well as between the past and present, and that in response to the "useless hands" evoked by Farrokhzad, Neshat "extends her own hand", inscribing the poem onto her subject's hand, so that Neshat's legacy is one "borne on the body, signifying not silence but its opposite, self-expression" (Darznik 2010: 111). Additionally, this series was originally exhibited in New York, where most people could not read the texts, hence allowing for two separate readings. In this manner artists like Neshat turn the rhetoric of the "other" upon its head by othering non-Persian speakers because of barriers,

not only of language, but also of geo-political and socio-political ones. This reverse alienation, whereby Neshat's viewers are forced to encounter the "other" on their own terms, language and symbolism, is one of the potent characteristics of Neshat's imagery, conveying her existential angst, living in an alien culture where she was "othered" her entire adult life.

Farah Ossouli also engages with the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad in several of her works such as *Vincent, Reza and Me*, from the *Ars Poetica* Series, (2010) (**Fig.16**) and *Leonardo, Forough and I*, from the *Wounded Virtue* series, (2012) (**Fig.72**). In this work, Ossouli engages with Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *Mona Lisa* but reinterprets it through a feminine/feminist lens, drawing on Forrough Farrokhzad's feminine voice. Ossouli had previously engaged with da Vinci's masterpiece in *Monalisa* (2009) (**Fig.73**), where she depicted Monalisa with a slit throat. In *Leonardo, Forough and I*, however, Monalisa is crying tears of blood whilst still maintaining her enigmatic smile. She also appears to be holding what looks like a baby in the folds of her dress (we only see an arm showing, so it is impossible to tell if the baby is alive). Within the elaborate borders of the painting, Ossouli has inscribed Farrokhzad's "Earthly Verses" poem, in a manner emulating the style of Persian Safavid miniatures:

> "*No one dreamed of love anymore.*
> *No one dreamed of beginnings.*
> *No one dreamed of anything anymore.*
>
> *In the caves of loneliness futility was born.*
> *Blood reeked of henbane and opium.*
> *Women birthed headless infants and cradles hid in graves from shame*"
> (Farrokhzad 2007: 53).

The image is, once again, surrounded by delicate bands of decoration (*tazhib*) made of knives, bullets, and grenades, emphasising the violence and bloodshed rampant in the region. Ossouli explains that the overriding theme in the *Wounded Virtue* series is that appearances can be deceptive and underlying realities very different from what is seen in the news and media. Thus, her insistence on intricacy and beauty serves to attract and draw the viewer in as a witness to the disconcerting events that have happened or are happening. Ossouli points out that the "contrast between surface beauty and serenity and lurking violence" also exists in traditional miniatures, but in the *Wounded Virtue* series she wanted to highlight the tension and conflict she feels about the gap between appearance and reality in the country, the region, and the world that we inhabit (Ossouli 2014). Hence, Ossouli highlights the duality in Iranian society and culture, where despite whatever one is suffering, there is a pressure to keep up appearances.

She further demonstrates that this duality and tension has existed historically in the country but has become exacerbated in contemporary Iran.

Hadieh Shafie (b.1969) has likewise made several works of art inspired by Forough Farrokhzad. However, Shafie eschews figural representation and chooses to engage with Farokhzad on a textual level since the collaboration between text and image is an important aspect of her work, as well as a historically important element in Persian art. Shafie wanted to explore how, as a visual artist, she could use her mediums of paper, ink, and paint, to express poetic meaning using language, or actual components of books, to reflect upon the way the text in a book is embedded and hidden inside, so that when the pages are turned, the words collide and overlap (Nichols Goodeve 2015). The nonfigurative, material abstraction of Shafie's work is particularly suited to the way in which Farrokhzad, as a modernist poet, used language. Both artists share a tendency to transcend literal interpretations and instead focus on the inherent qualities of their chosen mediums. Shafie's nonfigurative, material abstraction involves employing elements such as paper, ink, and paint in ways that go beyond straightforward representation. Her works often emphasise texture, form, and the physicality of these materials. This resonates with Farrokhzad's modernist approach to language. In her poetry, Farrokhzad delved into linguistic experimentation, breaking free from traditional conventions to explore the raw essence of words and their emotional impact. Hence, both artists, in their respective domains of visual art and poetry, navigate beyond the surface meanings. Shafie's material abstraction invites viewers to engage with the physicality and texture of her artworks, prompting them to consider the artistic process itself. Similarly, Farrokhzad's modernist approach to language encourages readers to explore the multifaceted layers of words, embracing ambiguity and allowing for personal interpretation. Furthermore, just as Shafie's art often conveys deeper poetic meaning through the arrangement of materials and textures, Farrokhzad's poetry often transcends literal language to convey profound emotions and themes. Thus, the materiality of Shafie's work and the linguistic innovation of Farrokhzad's poetry share a common artistic ethos: the pursuit of meaning beyond the surface and the conventional, fostering a rich, multi-dimensional engagement for their audiences. Both artists, transcend the mundane and delve into the realms of the evocative, the abstract, and the emotionally resonant, inviting their audiences to embark on a journey of discovery where the interplay of materials and language transcends the ordinary to evoke deeper connections and interpretations.

In *Forugh 7* (2014) (**Fig.74**), Shafie uses Farrokhzad's celebrated poem "Another Birth" ("*Tavalodi Digar*") in a diptych which uses two different formats. On the right hand, Shafie has written/painted some lines (not in the right order) from the poem:

> *There is an alley*
> *which my heart has stolen*
> *from the streets of my childhood.*
> *I shall wear*
> *a pair of twin cherries as earrings*
> *and I shall put dahlia petals on my fingernails.*
> *There is an alley*
> *which my heart has stolen*
> *from the streets of my childhood.*
> (Farrokhzad 2010: 113)

These lines are written by Shafie herself, who never studied calligraphy and left Iran as a teenager, in an untrained and child-like hand, with the letters and diacritics executed in multiple colours, reminiscent of early Quranic manuscripts. On the left of this artwork are what Shafie calls her "*ketabs*" ("books" in Persian), because she explains that they are miniature books that go back to the most basic book form – a scroll. As such, she thinks of the larger piece as a library (Kino 2015). These "books" are individual strips of 2.5 cm x 28 cm paper, whose edges are saturated with colour, and have been inscribed with text from Farrokhzad's poem. Each strip is then tightly rolled to create a core, around which successive strips are added, so that the result is individual bobbins of different sizes and density. During the repetitive process of adding paper strips to create individual rolls, text and symbols are both hidden and revealed within the concentric rings of the finished object. These rolled up strips are then turned on their sides and packed tightly into the wooden casing of the frame; the circular pattern partly inspired by Sufi whirling dervishes (Kurchanova 2015). The words in these "books" are hidden, like the banned, censored books and furtive, prohibited activities in the IRI and engage in an interplay between the concealed and the revealed, the private and the public. After the Revolution, the Islamic regime banned many texts which were deemed subversive, and they became available only through the black market. Shafie was intrigued by the way people transported these texts and other prohibited items during and after the Revolution – hiding them under clothes, veils, or containers (Ekhtiar 2013).

Shafie describes her works as "part sculpture, part drawing, part artist's book" (Kino, 2015). Her process comes from a long and celebrated tradition of bookmaking and calligraphy in Iran. Using the scroll as her medium of choice, allows her to combine the hidden word, the process

of repetition and her love of colour all at the same time. Shafie has admitted to being drawn to the love of excess and abundance in Islamic art, along with the tendency to fill entire surfaces with repetitive patterns. In her compositions, this is manifested in the dense and compact arrangement of the scrolls within the frame which recalls the *horror vacui* of much of Islamic art. Other sources of inspiration have been the works of the Saqqakhaneh artists (the pioneers of Iranian Modernism) as well as the works of the Colour Field and other American Modernists, such as Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, and Eva Hesse (Ekhtiar 2013). However, despite a very strong Modernist influence, they are far from the flat surface of Greenbergian Modernism, because Shafie resists using the canvas frame in the traditional manner. The art dealer Leila Heller believes that Shafie does the reverse of what other Middle Eastern artists do by starting with an American artistic language (which includes Minimalism, Conceptualism and Colour Field painting), and bending that to incorporate her own casual, unschooled twist on Islamic calligraphy (Kino 2015).

Shafie, thus, engages with Farrokhzad's texts in her own hybrid visual vocabulary, inspired by Western Modernist painting, Persian manuscripts, and her own personal experiences as an Iranian woman, in a process she dubs "controlled deconstruction" (Hassan 2015). She stresses the significance of process, repetition and time in her works and explores themes such as the temporary nature of memory, history and personal experiences related to living in exile, longing, and the struggle to find identity and independence. Her artistic process is, therefore, intimately bound to the conceptual nature of the works themselves, as artifacts of memory and meditation, loss and displacement (https://www.msac.org/artists/hadieh-shafie#/0).

Pouran Jinchi, is another artist who grew up with Farrokhzad's poetry and continued reading and being inspired by it when she left Iran. She similarly connects to Farrokhzad, on a textual and abstract level, in various works in her *Forough* series. In *Untitled 6* (2008) (**Fig.75**) from this series, Jinchi has presented words from Farrokhzad's poems in a dense cluster of overlapping text and letters, using a limited palette of blues, greens and yellows, with some words, letters and diacritics drifting out of the cluster so that only certain ones are legible such as "*zanbagh*" (Iris), "*navazesham*" (my caress), "*negah*" (look), "*tanam*" (my body), "*jonoon*" (madness), "*majnoon*" (insane) and "*setayesh*" (praise). The scattered nature of these words beckons not only the Persian reader, whose closer scrutiny is necessary for their decipherment, but also prompts deeper introspection regarding their integration into the original poems and the intent behind their selection. As the viewer seeks to weave these words back into the

original tapestry of Farrokhzad's poetry, a contemplative journey emerges – one that involves deciphering the intention behind each choice. It becomes an exploration of the artist's mind, a search for the essence of why these specific fragments were chosen, and how they contribute to the artwork's thematic resonance. In this dual process of decryption and introspection, the artwork transcends the visual and enters the realm of the personal. This engagement encourages viewers to weave their personal interpretations within the intricate tapestry of Jinchi and Farrokhzad's artistic choices. The interplay assumes a more profound significance for Persian readers, allowing for a nuanced engagement specifically tied to Iranian culture and a feminine collective psyche with Farrokhzad at its core. Jinchi's acknowledgment of Farrokhzad's iconic stature for her generation underscores the influence that guided her choice of poetry.

Thus, Jinchi strives to visually articulate Farrokhzad's poetry and its personal resonance. In this context, the cluster of words on Jinchi's canvas mirrors the constraints that Farrokhzad, as an Iranian female artist, grappled with. Simultaneously, the words liberate themselves from order, drifting freely across the canvas. This contrast between clustered restraint and unbridled flow captures the dichotomy between confinement and liberation – symbolised by Farrokhzad – faced by Iranian women navigating societal boundaries while nurturing aspirations for freedom and progress. Likewise, Jinchi's choice to deconstruct and reinterpret Farrokhzad's poetry underscores the resilience of the artistic spirit. By allowing the words to cluster organically and roam freely, Jinchi invites viewers to reflect on the transformative power of art, the enduring influence of cultural icons, and the ongoing quest for personal liberation.

Afsoon, another artist who has been inspired to produce several works referencing Forough Farrokhzad, comes from a generation and family that grew up with her poetry. In *Forough* (2009) (**Fig.76**), Afsoon reproduces a black-and-white photograph of Farrokhzad that has been treated with a red wash (the colour of passion, which is a defining factor of Farrokhzad's poetry), next to a linocut of a swallow in flight, printed, cut out, and glued onto the background, which is a print of a 1950's fabric. Afsoon divulges that she imagined Forough wearing a dress made with such a fabric (correspondence with the author). Above Farrokhzad's head is inscribed: "Preserve the memory of flight" which is the penultimate line (the last one being: "The Bird Shall One Day Die") from Farrokhzad's poem *The Bird Shall One Day Die*, which is an evocative piece that delves into themes of mortality, fragility, and the transient nature of life. Written in the mid-20th century, the poem captures the depth of human emotions and the contemplation of mortality with Farrokhzad's signature introspective style. The poem's title

itself, *The Bird Shall One Day Die*, introduces the central metaphor that Farrokhzad employs throughout the piece. The bird symbolises life, freedom, and vitality, while its inevitable death alludes to the transient nature of existence. The title sets the tone for a reflective exploration of life's impermanence and the emotional landscape that accompanies such contemplations. Through the imagery of the bird's eventual demise, Farrokhzad crafts a meditation on the ephemerality of moments, experiences, and the passage of time. The juxtaposition between the transient nature of the bird's life and the lasting impact it leaves on the world mirrors the human experience, where moments of vitality and significance coexist with the inevitability of mortality. Thus, both Farrokhzad and Afsoon invite readers and audiences to confront their mortality, appreciate life's fleeting moments, and reflect on the legacy that endures even after one's inevitable passing.

Soheila Sokhanvari also professes a great affinity and admiration for Farrokhzad. Like many other Iranian women, Sokhanvari was introduced to the works of Farrokhzad by her mother (at the age of 12) but failed to understand her at that age. It was with time, age and departing Iran that she came to understand Farrokhzad's poetry and felt a kinship with her. Sokhanvari believes that as artists, both she and Farrokhzad have an autobiographical voice. She even identified with the poet on a personal level, citing the fact that both had only one son and felt as outsiders in Iran. Sokhanvari notes that the more she delved into Farrokhzad's life and work, the more she discovered shared political and social ideologies between them (communication with the author). In *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad) (2022) (**Fig.77**), Sokhanvari, in her characteristic style, chooses to paint Farrokhzad's portrait using a lesser-known photograph of the poet holding her cat. In this portrayal, she departs from her usual colourful and patterned backdrops, opting for a predominantly black-and-white palette. However, she accentuates Farrokhzad's lips with a dark pink hue, symbolising the intensity and passion in Farrokhzad's voice. This visual contrast represents Farrokhzad's struggle against the conservative society in which she was raised. Her black eyes, staring unapologetically at the viewer, reflect her unwavering spirit, a sentiment echoed by her cat. Sokhanvari reveals that she specifically chose this image because it was less widely recognised, and because she felt that Farrokhzad, like herself, had an affection for animals. Sokhanvari, therefore, identifies with Farrokhzad on both an artistic and a personal level – a sentiment shared by many Iranian women, since the trials and tribulations faced by Farrokhzad continue to plague Iranian women (and artists). Consequently, Farrokhzad's pioneering role in giving voice to Iranian women remains a significant source of inspiration

for subsequent generations of female artists. Her fearless expression and candid exploration of women’s experiences in Iran and beyond have paved the way for contemporary artists to continue her legacy. These artists have taken up the mantle passed on by Farrokhzad, using their creative talents to convey the stories, struggles, and triumphs of Iranian women through various forms of art. In doing so, they not only honour Farrokhzad’s ground-breaking contributions but also contribute to the ongoing dialogue about gender, identity, and societal change in Iran and the broader world.

2.4 Traditional Mediums

Many contemporary artists also draw inspiration from Iran's artistic past, incorporating elements from traditional arts and crafts like the Persian carpet. The Persian carpet holds great symbolic value in Iran, representing the country's rich artistic heritage. It is an item that, to this day, is found in all Iranians' homes whether they live in Iran or not. Persian carpets are known for their intricate patterns, vibrant colours, and skilled craftsmanship. They represent Iran's rich artistic heritage, regional diversity, and the skills passed down through generations. Each carpet is a unique piece of art, often reflecting the region it comes from. Contemporary artists use Persian carpets as a bridge between the past and the present. They incorporate elements of this traditional art form into their work to pay tribute to Iran's culture while reinterpreting the patterns, colours, and textures of Persian carpets, exploring themes like identity and tradition.

In this vein, Nazgol Ansarinia (b.1979), designed *Rhyme and Reason* (2009) (**Fig.17**) and had it hand woven (in the traditional manner) by weavers from Tabriz (North Iran) who took six months to create it. This piece, which was awarded the Abraj Capital Art Prize for $200,000 in 2009, incorporates many of the essential elements of traditional carpets, such as the dominant medallion in the centre, the borders, and the elaborate corners, as well as the colour scheme and vegetal motifs. However, Ansarinia has replaced many of the conventional representations and designs with depictions of everyday life in Iran. In place of the typical lush motifs like "Gardens of Paradise", her carpet showcases scenes from Tehran's urban landscape. These scenes often feature playful or ironic elements, such as depictions of street fights, families precariously riding a single motorcycle, shoppers patiently queuing with their baskets, schoolchildren, police officers, and prominently, veiled women gathered in a circle at the centre of the composition. Just as traditional Persian carpets historically used outdoor motifs like vegetation, trees, and flowers to bring elements of the outdoors inside homes, Ansarinia's contemporary reinterpretations now incorporate scenes from the bustling city of Tehran. This shift effectively brings the public sphere, represented by urban life, into the private and traditionally feminine spaces of the home. It blurs the boundaries between the external world and the domestic realm, offering a commentary on how modernity and urbanisation have permeated traditional domestic spaces and the lives of Iranian women.

Ansarinia's interest in Persian carpets began in 2006 during an artist residency in Italy (Fakhr 2009). This experience inspired her *Displacement* series (2006), where she explores the notion of displacement and the idea of home as an intangible entity which exists solely in the form of memories, narrations. One of the videos she produced, entitled *Carpet* (2006) (**Fig.78**), shows Ansarinia cutting a carpet obsessively so that it covers every spare inch of the unfamiliar room she was assigned to inhabit. This deconstructive (and destructive) action of cutting the original carpet and re-arranging its fragmented pieces to fit into the new space, was symbolic of the act of migration and assimilation into a new culture and society. For this, the familiar must be mutilated and changed, and then refashioned in a manner that allows it to "fit" into these new spaces. This deconstructive approach is also seen in *Mendings* (2010) (**Fig.79**), where Ansarinia has cut a Persian carpet in half, removed equal portions from it and then sewn it back together. The new disjointed carpet retains aspects of its original self but is, at the same time, not the same – it is scarred and changed, in a similar way that displacement and the ensuing deconstruction and reconstruction of identity changes the self, always carrying with it the evidence and trauma of loss.

Neda Razavipour (b.1969) also uses the Persian carpet in her work *Self Servi*ce (2009) (**Fig.80**). In this installation, ten traditional hand-knotted Persian carpets of varying sizes were laid out on the gallery floor at the Azad Gallery in Tehran, alongside which a pair of scissors was provided. Visitors were actively encouraged to participate by cutting a piece from one of the displayed carpets, placing it into a bag adorned with a quote from Plato's *Republic*, and taking it home with them. The act of cutting and taking away a fragment of these once-intact carpets symbolised the fragmented memories carried by immigrants when they leave their homeland. These fragments represented who they once were, but now, dispersed and altered, they can never fully reclaim their former identities. In this interactive scenario, the audience becomes an integral part of the evolving narrative. Each person departs with a unique fragment that resonates with them individually. The title "Self Service" alludes to the act of selecting and preserving facets of our identity, highlighting the power of choice in shaping who we are. This engagement prompts contemplation about the fluid nature of identity in a globalised world, where individuals must navigate the complex interplay of memory, heritage, and the ever-changing forces of their new environments.

Furthermore, the act of cutting up (and essentially destroying) these carpets can be perceived as sacrilegious. Persian carpets hold immense cultural and artistic significance, and their creation involves a meticulous and time-consuming process. Iranians hold these carpets in high regard; they are often considered prized possessions, family heirlooms, and symbols of tradition and heritage. Razavipour's decision to invite viewers to physically alter these carpets challenges these established perceptions. It disrupts the traditional reverence associated with these objects and compels individuals to confront the idea of transformation and loss. The act of cutting the carpets becomes a symbolic act of dismantling and reimagining one's connection to their cultural and historical roots, raising questions about the complexities of identity in a rapidly changing world.

In discussing this work, Abbas Daneshvari references the time when Arab invaders cut up the carpet of Taq-e Kasra (the Sasanian palace of the last Iranian king before the advent of Islam) and took it away piece by piece. He raises the question of whether Razavipour is evoking her cultural heritage and ponders if we, in our current context, are inadvertently becoming "invading hordes" towards our own cultural legacy. This contemplation leads to the notion of a "symbolic re-enactment", serving as a reminder of the persistent influence of history's intangible threads, resurfacing in new and transformed manifestations, suggesting that the echoes of the past linger within us, giving rise to novel ideas and entities with each resurgence (Daneshvari 2014: 351).

Self Service also raises questions about authenticity and the impact of consumer culture on personal identity. The Persian carpet, deeply rooted in cultural heritage and symbolism, is contrasted with the impersonal and transactional nature of consumerism as represented by the title. The juxtaposition encourages viewers to consider the ways in which cultural elements are commodified, packaged, and consumed in the current global landscape. Likewise, the juxtaposition of these contrasting elements also addresses how individuals navigate their cultural roots within a rapidly changing society. Razavipour therefore engages with issues of identity, consumerism, and cultural heritage, offering a commentary on the evolving nature of identity and the interplay between personal narratives and societal influences. She invites contemplation about the tension between tradition and modernity, and how these forces shape our perceptions of identity and belonging in an ever-evolving world.

Bita Ghezelayagh (b.1966) is another artist who works with traditional Iranian textiles and crafts, such as felts and carpets, aiming to preserve traditional Iranian artisanship and designs, whilst at the same time giving them new life and motifs. In *The Letter that Never Arrived* (2013) (**Fig.81**) series, Ghezelayagh has rescued unwanted, threadbare Persian carpets, frequently sourced from Western households (Islamic Arts Magazine 2013). She meticulously cleans, cuts, and transforms these carpets into garments resembling traditional Islamic Talismanic shirts or Shepherds' cloaks. She then further embellishes these with pen nibs sewn alongside the diamond design at the top of the carpet to resemble a "breastplate", as well as more nibs around the middle, and with the title sewn (in Persian) in silver thread. The act of writing letters as a form of protest has deep historical roots in Iranian culture and dissent. These letters, known as *Shabnameh* ("Night Letters") were often composed and distributed clandestinely to convey revolutionary messages and grievances. In these works, the pen nibs take on a symbolic significance, representing the act of writing and communication. However, they are deliberately disjointed and detached from the main body of the pens. This deconstruction mirrors the process that the carpets undergo as they are transformed into garments. It is a powerful metaphor that speaks to the resilience of displaced Iranians who have faced upheaval and displacement. By repurposing these discarded materials and incorporating pen nibs into her pieces, Ghezelayagh bestows new life and dignity upon them. This act of transformation allows for continuity, preserving elements of the past while embracing change – a reflection of the lives of many displaced Iranians who have sought to rebuild their identities from fragments of their own histories.

Shirana Shahbazi (b.1974) likewise, works with the medium of Persian carpets but diverges from their traditional design by incorporating contemporary photographs (Shahbazi is trained as a photographer) onto carpets such as in *Farsh-01-2004* (2004) (**Fig.82**), which literally means carpet (along with the date of production). The artwork's title reflects Shahbazi's practice of naming her pieces in a systematic and categorical manner. The woman depicted on the carpet is, additionally, not Iranian but Swiss – the subject of the photograph *Woman-02-2003* (2003) (**Fig.83**) – thus, there is no Iranian reference, other than the Persian carpet itself. Fereshteh Daftari argues that Shahbazi's carpets, render the rubric "Islamic" problematic, due to Shahbazi's deliberate avoidance of fixed categorisations and her reluctance to adhere to any singular and unquestionably genuine source. Therefore, Daftari believes these works challenge traditional expectations, as they engage with the carpet tradition but do not conform to the conventional role of carpets. (Daftari 2006: 18-19). Additionally, one of the key aspects of this

work is Shahbazi's manipulation of scale – the carpet at 90 x 55 cm being much smaller than the originating photograph which is 150 x 120 cm. This deviation from the expected size of a carpet serves to disrupt viewers' preconceived notions and expectations, prompting them to question the boundaries of art and function. Hence Shahbazi's work serves as an intersection between photography, cultural symbolism, and contemporary reinterpretation. It prompts viewers to consider how they perceive and interact with visual art, as well as how they engage with cultural references. By subverting traditional expectations of subject matter, style and size, Shahbazi encourages a fresh perspective that transcends the boundaries of traditional categorisation and embraces artistic innovation and exploration.

Negar Ahkami (b.1971) is similarly inspired by Persian carpets but mixes its design with Persian tiles in her artwork *After Winter Must Come Spring* (2018) (**Fig.84**). This large, three-dimensional installation resembles a Persian carpet but also serves as a dance platform, with audiences actively encouraged to engage with the artwork by dancing on it. The title, suggests a cyclical pattern of change and rebirth, alluding to the natural progression of seasons as well as broader themes of growth and rejuvenation. In addition to drawing inspiration from Persian carpets, Ahkami's artwork, incorporates elements from various sources such as magic carpets from the *One Thousand and One Nights* tale, and the 70s movie "Saturday Night Fever" with light-up disco dance floors which became popular during the period and which Ahkami associates with pre-Revolutionary Iran. Ahkami, thus, creates a layered visual narrative that transcends cultural boundaries and bridges different time periods. By drawing inspiration from her Iranian heritage and the rich history of Persian art and design, while also embracing modern technology and participatory art practices, she speaks to broader themes of adaptability, transformation, and the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity, prompting viewers to reflect on their own connection to cultural heritage and their role in shaping its narrative.

By allowing viewers to physically interact with the artwork by dancing on it, she blurs the line between spectator and participant. This participatory aspect of the artwork carries several layers of meaning: it suggests that cultural heritage is not static but can be reimagined and reshaped by each generation. Additionally, Ahkami professes that she wanted to reclaim the Persian carpet and other Orientalist imagery, including the way in which the West perceives Iran and Iranians, whilst at the same time paying tribute to dance-floor-loving Iranians and the rhythmic patterns in Persian art. As such, she wanted to present a different and more joyous

image of Iranians, which corresponded to her own experience, whilst also celebrating what all humanity shares: the desire for escapist pleasure and happiness (Ahkami and Murphy 2020).

Through their inventive and distinctive approaches, the artists examined here have harnessed the potent symbol of the Persian carpet, which carries profound cultural significance both in Iran and the Western world. Each artist has embarked on a creative journey to construct a contemporary visual language firmly grounded in Iranian tradition. In this endeavour, they skilfully repurpose historical materials and designs, breathing new life into them and challenging conventional notions of art. What sets these artists apart is their remarkable ability to transcend established boundaries. They blur the lines that the West has traditionally drawn between "fine" and "applied" arts, igniting an examination of Western art historical categorisations and values. By doing so, they foster a dialogue that welcomes alternative narratives and fresh aesthetic perspectives into the discourse. These artists, in their innovative use of the Persian carpet, exemplify the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary expression, showcasing the enduring relevance and adaptability of Iranian artistic heritage on a global stage.

2.5 Historical Memories

Personal histories and memories are a dominant factor in the construction of identity since they lie at the heart of our sense of self, and the prominence of memory has been integral to philosophical debates about personal identity. John Locke, in what has come to be known as the "memory theory of personal identity", maintained that personal memories are part of what makes people who they are (Locke 2004). This is particularly cogent in cases when identity comes under threat, such as in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, where the act of remembrance, of both collective and personal histories, became critical, especially for the large number of Iranians who left the country and needed to safeguard these for the next generation, many of whom would never visit Iran.

The fragmentation of identity in post-Revolutionary Iran emerged as a complex interplay of several factors. At its core were the regime's efforts to impose a specific Islamic identity on the population, a move that inherently clashed with the diverse cultural and ideological influences seeping into Iran. This influx of external perspectives was facilitated by modern mediums such as the internet and satellite television, enabling Iranians to access a wide range of ideas and values that often directly contradicted the state-prescribed identity. As a result, the Iranian population found themselves caught between the regime's push for a singular Islamic identity and the allure of alternative worldviews and cultures. This dissonance created a fracture in the collective Iranian identity, leaving individuals grappling with conflicting influences and struggling to reconcile the prescribed identity with the newfound exposure to global perspectives. This complicated interplay between internal state pressures and external cultural influences gave rise to the fragmentation of identity among the Iranian populace during this transformative period.

Iranians of the diaspora, in particular, faced the dual challenge of preserving their historical identity for succeeding generations born outside Iran, while also recalibrating their narrative and traditions to align with their host cultures. This entailed retaining and strengthening aspects that resonated harmoniously, such as their connection to the great Persian empire, while judiciously excising elements that diverged, such as certain aspects of an "Islamic" identity (or even their Islamic names) that might not be compatible with their new environments. Hence, the recollection and conservation of personal histories and identities features strongly in the

works of many of these artists, particularly those of the diaspora who in an alien (and often hostile) culture, collate their histories and memories for safekeeping.

Images are an important *aide-mémoire* in the act of recollecting the past and the identities that accompany it – as a result, family photographs and mementos appear in the works of several contemporary artists, who use these items to recount and reconstruct their stories. Artists such as Taraneh Hemami work with materials of history; organising archives of images, data, and information, to weave complementary and contradictory narratives, presenting history and historical identity not through textbooks and media, but through the collective consciousness of Iranians themselves, who choose the memories they want to preserve and the stories they want to tell for the next generations. Hemami engages in diverse strategies to examine the careful crafting of images as sources for legitimacy and crafting of identity, as well as the manipulations of truth and historical facts, and the fictionalised realities that have infiltrated everyday lives. She explores themes of displacement, preservation, and representation in installations that intermingle with the spaces they occupy, complicating their identity and at times altering or enhancing their function.

Works such as the *Hall of Reflection* series (2000) (**Figs.85,86,87,88,89,90,91**), act as *lieux de mémoire*, attempting to archive these historical identities to preserve them. In this series, Hemami draws on Persian and Islamic designs and structures to creates a unique archive of personal photographs and narratives to explore themes of loss, preservation, displacement and belonging, which are specific to the historical experience of Iranian immigrants. The series was started by Hemami after she had been in the US for over twenty years and had applied for American citizenship, at which juncture, she felt she needed a historical record of who she was as well as the collective history of Iranians in exile. She confesses that the project was initially viewed suspiciously by many Iranians because she started calling around the Iranian community asking for stories at the same time that INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) was calling them.

The installation comprises of different sections – *Mirror Assemblages* (**Fig.85**), *Relics* (**Fig.86**), *Absence* (**Fig.87**), *Ruins (Avaar)* (**Fig.88**), *Cutouts* (**Fig.89**), *Albums and Letters* (**Fig.90**), *Missing* (**Fig.91**), incorporating traditional Iranian patterns and designs, with text and images of people being placed on top of mirrored tiles, referencing the traditional use of mirrors in gathering halls in Iran which bring the community together. Similarly, this project intended

not only to bring together people who had been separated from their home country and their culture in the present moment, but also to allow pasts to come together. For the project, Hemami invited female authors and storytellers such as Shahrnoush Parsipour and Persis Karim to collaborate and tell their stories. Additionally, the project was made available online for Iranians to upload their photographs, memories, and experiences. These were all embedded in mirror and glass along with old photographs and travelled around the world, until finally finding its home at the Persian Centre in San Francisco. The exhibition was also recreated for Tehran and the reaction there was different – making Hemami realise that even those who had not migrated still felt displaced, proving that displacement and exile are not purely geographical (Hemami and Kasravi n.d.). This change of venue shed light on the multifaceted nature of displacement and the complex interplay of emotions tied to one's sense of belonging. The reactions of those who remained in Iran yet resonated with the theme of the exhibition demonstrated that displacement transcends physical borders. It encompasses a broader spectrum of emotions, including feelings of alienation, detachment, and longing for a lost sense of home, suggesting that the emotional experience of being displaced can be just as profound as the geographical displacement itself. This realisation prompts a broader consideration of the various factors that contribute to feelings of displacement, including cultural shifts, political changes, and the erosion of a familiar sense of identity.

Samira Alikhanzadeh (b.1967) also uses old photographs to explore issues of identity and reality in relation to the past and present. Alikhanzadeh mainly uses images of women, children, or brides and grooms from the 1930s, 40s and 50s Iran (following the abolishing of the veil). She subsequently manipulates these images by adding colours, strips of mirror – mostly to cover the eyes – making not only the past unseeing, as though they could not conceive the present, but also reflecting the viewer (in other words the present) within the images. In *Family Album* (2008) (**Fig.92**), Alikhanzadeh has used a photograph portraying what appears to be a family which includes a mother, father and their four daughters of varying ages. Here, the mother and the four girls all have their eyes covered by strips of mirror, inviting the viewers to step into their world and to see through their eyes. In contrast, the father's presence in the picture is incomplete, as only a portion of him is visible, and the missing half is artistically rendered. This representation may suggest that he is never fully present, existing only as a fraction of himself, while the remainder must be reconstructed in one's imagination. He also stands to the side, as though he was included as an afterthought. It is the mother who takes centre stage, making it clear that it is her narrative and life story that we are connecting with

and that, unlike the patriarchal state, the home is a matriarchy. The father's eyes are, likewise, not covered by mirrors – he stares at an indeterminate point, neither engaged with his family nor with the viewer. Thus, the feminine past looks onto the present which itself looks back at the past, reflected in its eyes and rendering the passage of time capricious, allowing the viewers in the present to connect with the subjects in the past and become a part of their lives. In this manner, Alikhanzadeh assimilates the viewer into her pieces, inviting them to contemplate their past, present, identity and gender, whilst at the same time recasting the past in her own more feminine vision.

Malekeh Nayiny, is likewise fascinated by the past and personal memoires, which play a significant role in shaping both her identity and her artistic expressions – issues that she has tackled in several series. Nayiny, like many other Iranians, left Iran before the Revolution to pursue her studies abroad. She did not return to Iran until 1993, a return prompted by the passing of her mother, followed by the loss of her father a few years later. She keenly felt a loss of family, home, and her roots upon this homecoming after many years. The artist recalls that once in Iran, she slept in her mother's room for ten days and noticed that nothing had changed, becoming particularly captivated by the paraphernalia around the room and how "animated" these objects still seemed even though her mother was no longer there to use them (https://malekeh.com/observations/). She found her father's memorabilia equally fascinating and tried to connect these images and objects, to reanimate the contact with her parents and her past and, in so doing, accomplish a "prorogation" of her separation with the past (https://malekeh.com/observations/).

Thus, in *Observations* (1999) (**Fig.93**), Nayiny has digitally manipulated her parents' wedding photograph (set against a wall of stamps) to incorporate poignant elements. On one side she has assimilated nine individual works each with a passport photograph of her mother under which she has included another image of an object unique to her, such as a comb or her pearl necklace, which evoked memories of her. On the opposite side, she has mirrored this approach with photographs of her father, accompanied by objects he once owned, such as a watch or stamps. These sentimental mementos, lovingly preserved and archived by Nayiny, serve as a poignant observation on how the personal and intimate possessions of individuals play a crucial role in their social positioning and identity formation. These images seem to echo Proust's observation that: "The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object" (Proust 2003: 47). The images of Nayiny's mother also highlight the

stark transformation of Iranian women following the Revolution and how, over a few short months, their appearances (as well as their lives) changed.

Nayiny also found many old photographs of her family, some of whom she had never met and decided to work on them, reinventing them in a way that allowed her to connect with her ancestors and "revive the past" (Farooq 2019). In *Updating a Family Album* (1997-1998), Nayiny has taken old family photos and reimagined them in a new context, highlighting not only her sense of loss but also reconnecting with her past on her own terms. This can be seen in *Three uncles* (1998) (**Fig.94**), where she has creatively reimagined a black-and-white photograph of her uncles, overlaying images of old Iranian stamps (featuring birds) onto their outfits, juxtaposed against vibrant, colourful backgrounds. Nayiny describes her use of computer technology in these images as a sort of "time machine", allowing her to rejuvenate and breathe new life into her family album, infusing it with more colour and vitality. Through the incorporation of anachronistic elements like these unrelated backgrounds, Nayiny (and by extension the viewer) is afforded the chance to see them "in a new light and to transplant them into a different time, a different place" (https://malekeh.com/updating-a-family-album/). Nayiny's art resonates with the Proustian concept that memories of the past are not always exact recollections of reality. Instead, they are often coloured and enriched by the imagination, much like how a child's mind can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Her work imbues the past with vibrant hues, akin to viewing it through a nostalgic and technicolour lens, creating a sense of enchantment and wonder that adds layers of depth and complexity to our memories.

Likewise, in *Traces* (2000) (**Fig.95**), Nayiny uses photographs from the past to show the passing of time and the past's connection to her present. After her parents' death, the artist felt that all that was left for her were traces of their lives such as their objects, letters, and pictures and that she felt haunted by these symbols, that tangibly connected her to her past (https://malekeh.com/traces/). In *Traces* Nayiny takes on the role of the central character, portraying herself from both the front and back against a backdrop adorned with Persian script in white. Photographs from her past cascade down her back, collecting at her feet. Nayiny's own image is rendered with a sense of blurriness and obscurity, depicted in sepia tones, while her vibrant hair provides a stark contrast. This juxtaposition symbolises the passage of time and the varying intensity of memories. The photographs falling along Nayiny's spine evoke the idea that the past forms the backbone of her present, while those at her feet resemble ashes

from which she has emerged, like the Phoenix, reflecting the experiences of Iranians from the "Burnt Generation". Nayiny, therefore, not only invites viewers to contemplate their own relationship with personal and collective memory but also encourages a deeper understanding of how these two realms intersect and contribute to the complex mosaic of identity and cultural heritage.

History, whether collective or personal, plays a central role in the artistic expressions of the discussed artists in this chapter. It serves as a foundation for the construction of their individual and artistic identities. By delving into historical narratives, these artists establish a vital connection between the past and the present, facilitating the emergence of long-buried memories and the reinterpretation of historical events. This exploration of history is a powerful means through which they navigate their multifaceted identities and convey them through their creative works. The act of remembering holds a dual significance, offering both catharsis and the opportunity to craft alternative narratives. Throughout this chapter, it becomes evident that the historical narratives underpinning these artists' works often contain conflicting elements. These narratives have been extensively reconstructed and edited over time to align with evolving concepts of selfhood, a process that has played out repeatedly in Iran over the past century. Friedman's insights underscore the central role of history in discussions of identity. The question of who has the authority to "own" or appropriate the past is intrinsically tied to the ability to assert one's identity and recognise others within a specific temporal and geographic context. Consequently, in a world where cultural identities are becoming increasingly diverse and multifaceted, the multiplicity of histories emerges as an essential component of this complex interplay of identities (Friedman 1992).

Contemporary Iranian artists engage in a process of reclaiming and rewriting history and memory, recognising that these constructs are far from neutral. Instead, they are multi-layered and subject to constant editing to align with evolving notions of selfhood, which are in a perpetual state of flux. The works discussed in this chapter depict the ongoing struggle between dichotomous histories and memories, each vying for recognition and allegiance. In this artistic arena, these conflicting narratives engage in a dynamic battle, each attempting to assert its version of history. This creative process results in the emergence of fresh and alternative historical accounts, providing artists with a platform to carve out a unique space for themselves within these revised narratives. These artists re-evaluate previous traditions and mediums, re-

appropriating the past by impregnating it with personal and contemporary issues and experiences, showing that the dichotomy between Past and Present, Tradition and Modernity, and Real and Imagined Histories, still exists in the everyday lives of Iranians, who nonetheless weave these histories and memories into new stories and incorporate them in their construction of new and hybrid identities. By doing so, they recognise the role of history in their artistic and personal identities and development, whilst also attesting to the fact that this history is not immutable and has largely been written by a traditional and patriarchal society. As a result, their engagement with this history is probing and involves a reinterpretation of it to accommodate the feminine sensibility and renegotiate its role in the annals of Iranian history.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

> "These images speak a common language in the place where I live. Portraits of my generation, our common experiences and challenges in life. A generation that has experienced revolution, war, immigration and more. Experiences, any one of which is said to be sufficient to turn a boy into a man, but which are apparently assumed to leave the other sex wholly untouched. In my own small, personal voice I say: Not so. Instead, it's hard, sad and often unbearable."
> Katayoun Karami (Zanchi 2016).

In this chapter I will examine the political, social, and artistic influences and themes which become apparent in female artists' works following the Iranian Revolution. This event has been the watershed that has irrevocably affected Iranian identity and society, both at home and abroad. Artists, particularly women, have drawn on their post-revolutionary experience to chart new territories in artistic expression and direction. Apart from the Revolution itself, there have been many other internal and external factors and developments consequent upon it that have greatly affected Iranians and shaped Iranian society in unprecedented ways. These have included war (Iran-Iraq War) and uprisings (the Green Movement and more recently those around "Woman, Life, Freedom"), as well as tensions and isolation (because of sanctions and the regime's attitude towards the West, particularly the US). Furthermore, the regime's imposition of Sharia law and strict regulations has led to compulsory veiling, gender segregation, censorship, and various other limitations, particularly affecting the female population. As a result, there has been a significant migration of Iranians to various parts of the world, fostering interactions with their host countries and facilitating the transmission of these experiences back to Iran. Moreover, Iran's young population, with approximately 80% born after the Revolution due to the Islamic Republic's initial birth policies, holds diametrically opposed views to those of the regime. This youthful demographic has embraced a culture

influenced by Western consumerism, bolstered by the rise of globalisation and technological advancements like the internet and satellite television.

These circumstances, coupled with Iranians' increasing awareness of themselves as autonomous individuals, have resulted in a fragmentation of the traditional Iranian self and society. This transformation has made the younger post-revolutionary Iranians, including the artists in this study, re-evaluate many previously held epistemic beliefs, and search for alternative modes of narrating the self. The expressive ability afforded by art, as well as the strategies used by artists to couch dissent under the guise of metaphor and allegory (techniques deeply rooted in Iran's literary tradition), have made it possible for artists to communicate their message whilst eluding the censor. Thus, contemporary Iranian art, both in Iran and the diaspora, shows an acute awareness of a state-imposed identity and many Iranian artists treat identity either directly or indirectly through the lens of a state-imposed ideology.

3.1 Loss of Rights

After the Revolution, and with the emergence of the *Velayat-e Faghih* (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist) which came to govern the country, a very bright spotlight was shone on the role of women in society. The new Islamic regime demarcated the population along the lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, and politics; relegating women to the role of wife, mother, and support system to men, rather than treating them as independent agents. Additionally, women lost many of the rights they had gained in the decades before the Revolution. Among these changes were the abolition of the Family Protection Laws, which resulted in men having unilateral rights to divorce and custody of children. The minimum marriage age for girls was reduced from eighteen to nine, temporary marriage (*sigheh*) and polygamy for men were reinstated, women's testimony in court was valued at half that of men's, and Retribution Laws (*qesas*) mandated that compensation for women's lives would be half that of men's, while women would inherit half of what men did. Compulsory veiling, restrictions on wearing makeup, bright nail polish, colourful or form-fitting clothing in public, segregation in schools and public spaces, exclusion from nearly half of the academic subjects taught at university, bans on holding senior offices like the presidency and judgeships, participation in certain sports including the Olympic team, singing and dancing in public, and travelling or taking jobs without their husbands' permission were imposed on women. Violations of these rules led to punishments such as flogging (74 lashes for hijab violations) and imprisonment (10 to 60 days for hijab violations) (Sedghi 2007: 201). Moreover, adulterous women and prostitutes faced flogging, stoning, or execution, and virgin female prisoners sentenced to execution were subjected to torture and rape, as some religious interpretations required sexual fulfilment before death (Sedghi 2007: 208).

However, whilst the laws regarding women were rolled back a century, the experiences women had gained, coupled with the country's young population, increased literacy rates and women's whole-hearted pursuit of education after the Revolution (to the point where they have repeatedly outnumbered men at university), as well as significant improvements in women's health and a sharp drop in birth rates due to the government's reversal of their original birth-control policies, meant that these dictates were not accepted by many women. Paradoxically, it was some of these accomplishments in literacy, health, and family planning, implemented by the new Islamic regime, that nurtured this new generation of dissidents, leading to a radical

change in their self-perception and giving rise to an epistemological and ontological crisis. These limitations and restrictions have, likewise, proven artistically propitious for some of the artists discussed in this thesis. As Shirin Neshat has argued, restrictions, much like harsh climates giving rise to resilient vegetation, frequently impel an artist to channel their creative forces more fervently. The art of manoeuvring around, outsmarting, and evading censorship has effectively yielded dynamic and refined artworks.

Consequent to the inequities that ensued after the Revolution, the injustices inflicted upon women due to the Islamic regime have become a prominent concern for numerous female artists. One of the first artists to address this issue, was Sonia Balassanian (b.1942), an Iranian artist of Armenian descent, who left Iran for the US after the Revolution. With this move came a change in art style from her previous abstract style to a socio-politically informed art, focused on human rights and the situation of women. In *The Other Side* (1992) (**Fig.96**), Balassanian has filled a room with figures covered entirely by black *chadors* (contrary to the usual tradition of the face being visible), with spotlights shining on them, as if in an interrogation room or a prison courtyard. Since we do not see the faces of the figures, we assume their gender by extrapolation of the *chador* signifier, which indicates that they are Iranian/Muslim women. However, these are not the Odalisques seen in an Orientalist art history, but the sisters of the veiled women of the Islamic Republic. The figures are shrouded, they cannot speak, see, or move, becoming what Mehranzig Kar (the Iranian lawyer and human rights activist) refers to as the "ideal woman" for the regime – that is, a woman without: "eyes to see, a tongue to speak, and legs to run away" (Kar 2006: 35). They not only cannot see but cannot be seen – a double negation – which emphasises the fact that Westerners are blind to who is under the veil. The spotlights, in the meantime, shine on the women to highlight their plight, but also on the viewers who are free to move, unveiled, through this exhibition, to expose their complicity in this situation. On the wall there is also a series of blocks each with a single eye – these replace those of the women's which are obscured by the veils and meet the gaze of the spectator in their stead (since good Muslim women are not meant to make eye contact). They can also be interpreted as the eyes of the morality police that constantly monitor women to make sure they are compliant with the edicts of the state.

In *Shadows of My Sisters* (1993) (**Fig.97**), the figures seen previously in *The Other Side* are no longer standing to attention and are instead in various positions across the room, standing, lying down, slumped against the wall and kneeling, like weary prisoners in a cell. These various

poses not only show their restlessness, but also emphasise the breaking of the uniformity imposed on them (and as seen previously in *The Other Side*), symbolising the loss of control by the state and the emerging individuality of women. The tall spotlights are likewise now replaced by low lights which cast shadows of the figures on the walls. The audience, once again, does not escape unscathed, as the mirror on the side forces them to look at their own image alongside those of the veiled figures. This stark disparity engenders a feeling of alienation while concurrently assimilating them into the unfolding scene, creating a sense of alienation as well as complicity as bystanders.

Another Iranian artist of the diaspora, who left Iran for the US, (escaping via Turkey), is Haleh Niazmand (b.1962). In the exhibition *From Far Away* (1996), which consists of several parts, Niazmand addresses the injustices suffered by Iranian/Muslim women. In the part entitled *Veiled* (**Fig.98**), Niazmand addresses the issues of enforced veiling, polygamy, and the importance of virginity in Muslim marriages. On one side of this installation stands a figure shrouded in a *chador* (again without showing a face) and enclosed in a metal cage, secured with chain and lock. The phallic-looking figure reinforces the fact that these inequities are instigated by men. To the side of this figure hangs a long black piece of cloth (resembling the *chador*), against which are suspended four misshapen metal circles that look like chastity belts (including small padlocks), encased in which are oval metal shapes resembling the female vulva. These shapes represent the four wives that Muslim men are entitled to and the fact that they must be sexually available to their husbands and nobody else, emphasising that the veil is part of the institution that enslaves women's sexuality in a patriarchal society where men are the enslavers and the holders of the keys. In another part of the exhibition, entitled, *All Men Created Equal* (**Fig.99**), Niazmand similarly depicts a life-sized figure swathed in black cloth (again with no visible and identifying characteristics other than the *chador*) and further wrapped with a red rope that represents bloodied entrails. It stands next to a set of scales containing more red rope/entrails which should weigh the scales down, but do not. The legs and feet of the figure are bound and not defined like the freestanding punching figures/bags used in boxing, indicating not only her immobility but also the fact that she is a sitting target, like the women who are stoned under Sharia law. The figure also recalls representations of "Lady Justice," who is blindfolded in order to be impartial. Niazmand's figure is likewise blind due to the all-encompassing veil, however this does not ensure impartiality since she is not the judge but the judged, with the judgments passed by men on women (who were barred from

being judges after the Revolution). Thus, the ruling is not impartial, and the scales are unfairly tilted against women.

Parastou Forouhar (b.1962) also addresses the status of women in Iran and their diminished rights, in her *Signes* series (2007) (**Figs.25,100**). In these pictograms, that resemble road and traffic signs, the figure of the woman is separated from the man by a red line, like a no entry sign –symbolising the boundaries between the sexes which are enforced in the Islamic Republic, such as separate metro carriages and bus sections as well as rails and curtains in many public spaces. However, like the Sharia law of the country (which deems women's lives worth half that of men), the woman occupies half the space of the man and is depicted kowtowing beneath him. Likewise, women are seen as being closed in on, whereas men have their space opened; men go forward whilst women go down. By thus condensing these imbalances into simple pictograms, Forouhar drives home the impact of these injustices and how they have been institutionalised, to become instructions for women's conduct, rights, and behaviours. This simplification underscores how these instructions were seamlessly integrated into laws that were to be followed unquestioningly.

Farzaneh Khademian (b.1972) also addresses the segregation of men and women in public spaces in several series such as *Inside the Bus* (**Fig.101**) (2010-2012). In this collection of black and white images, Khademian captures the separation of men and women by bars inside buses. Khademian's choice of black and white photography adds to the solemn and sombre mood of the images. The series captures not only the physical segregation but also the emotional and psychological impact it has on the passengers. The expressions on the faces of those depicted often convey a sense of weariness and resignation, symbolising the daily challenges faced by many Iranians due to these restrictive gender policies. The images serve as a powerful reflection of the constrained atmosphere in which Iranians, particularly women, navigate their daily lives. Khademian's work underscores the societal implications of gender segregation, shedding light on the complex issues surrounding gender dynamics and restrictions imposed by the Iranian regime. By depicting the everyday reality of gender segregation on public buses, she invites viewers to contemplate the broader implications of such policies on the lives of individuals and the fabric of Iranian society.

Khademian also deals with how these segregations and rules start at a very early age in her *Padina* series (**Figs.102,103**), where she records the "*Jashn-e Taklif*" (Obligation Ceremony) of nine-year old Padina, an Iranian girl from Isfahan. *Jashn-e Taklif* is the biggest celebration for elementary students in Iran in post-revolutionary Iran, enforced by the ministry of education. It must be held by schools for every nine-year-old girl and fifteen-year-old boy and is meant to celebrate their transition from being a child to an adult. During this ceremony, religious teachers announce to students that they are henceforth "*Mokallaf*", meaning that they are at a responsible age and must perform their Islamic duties such as wearing the veil (for girls), saying prayers, and fasting. In this ceremony, girls wear white chadors, covering their body and hair, and are told that they are no longer allowed to appear in public without the Islamic veil according to the Sharia rule of Islamic Iran. They must also start praying five times a day.

Khademian captures two distinct aspects of Padina's life, both during the ceremony and in her everyday life as an ordinary nine-year-old girl who plays with Barbies. Additional context is provided about Padina's family: she is the youngest of two daughters, her father works as an engineer, and her mother manages a women's beauty salon in Isfahan. It is important to note that Padina's family does not align with extremist ideologies, suggesting a more moderate approach to their cultural and religious practices. During the religious ceremony, Padina and her schoolmates are seen listening to a clergyman who imparts religious and social guidance to them. This event marks their transition into womanhood according to religious customs. Afterward, they engage in their first formal prayers at a mosque. However, once the clergyman departs, the girls revert to their childlike behaviour, dancing and playing as typical young girls would, shedding the solemnity of the ceremony. Khademian's series also includes images of Padina when she returns home after the ceremony, where she is portrayed hugging her Barbie dolls and playing with a hula hoop, despite having "become a woman" according to the religious law of the country (http://www.farzanehkhademian.com/albums/24).

Through her portrayal of Padina engaging in typical childhood activities, Khademian draws attention to the inherent incongruity of the laws and expectations imposed on her by Iranian society. Despite her age and the universal experiences of childhood, Padina is subject to laws and norms that consider her a responsible adult capable of entering marriage and facing the same consequences as an adult. Khademian, thus underscores the absurdity of such regulations, highlighting the disconnection between Padina's true emotional and developmental state and

the premature responsibilities thrust upon her by societal and religious conventions. In doing so, Khademian invites viewers to contemplate the impact of these rules on the lives of young girls like Padina, whose childhood innocence and experiences are overshadowed by expectations that do not align with their readiness or desires.

3.2 Imprisonment and Torture

The increased use of imprisonment and torture after the Revolution, coupled with the growing number of artists in the diaspora who had the freedom to speak openly about these issues, led to the emergence of this themes in the works of some artists. One artist deeply affected by these events is Parastou Forouhar, whose art is profoundly influenced by her personal history and the tragic murder of her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar. Her parents, prominent members of the political opposition in Iran, were brutally stabbed to death by agents of the Islamic regime. Their murders were part of a broader series of chain killings targeting dissident intellectuals, orchestrated by Iranian government operatives spanning from 1988 to 1998. The victims included more than eighty writers, translators, poets, political activists, and other citizens.

In *Funeral* (2003) (**Fig.104**), Forouhar displays 22 Ikea office chairs that are sheathed in fabric covered in Shi'ite slogans and motifs used during the Ashura ceremonies. This annual ceremony commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, his family and his supporters in 680 AD, at the Battle of Karbala on the 10th of Muharram. It is an important date in Iran's Shi'i history and mythical historiography. Many Iranians observe it annually by taking to the streets, where they beat their bodies with their hands and sometimes iron chains as a demonstration of their deep affiliation with Imam Hussein and his family. The significance of the chairs and this "funeral" in Forouhar's work, however, goes beyond mourning the death of Imam Hussein. It also serves as a poignant reminder of her parents' tragic murder on November 22, 1987. The number of chairs in the artwork is a deliberate choice to commemorate and mark both the date and the event. Her father's body was placed in a chair facing the Qibla, the direction of Mecca, by the murderers. Additionally, the number 22 alludes to the 22nd of Bahman (the eleventh month in the Iranian calendar), which is the official day for celebrating the Iranian Revolution. This connection firmly implicates the Islamic regime in the murder of her parents. Through these multiple symbolic references, Forouhar draws a parallel between the assassination of her parents and the death of Imam Hussein, highlighting the ongoing issue of unjust murders in contemporary Iran. The artwork, therefore, becomes a testament to the enduring struggle for justice and accountability in a society marked by political oppression and human rights violations. It is a powerful example of how artists can use their work to bear witness to injustice, honour the memory of those lost, and call for change.

Forouhar also uses the Karbala paradigm in connection to injustices in modern day Iran in the *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name I* (2007) (**Fig.105**), *II* (2009) (**Fig.106**) and *III* (2016) (**Fig.107**) series. In these images, she employs a subtle and intricate visual language that, at first glance, appears to draw from traditional fabrics and banners associated with the Ashura rituals, as well as the colours of the Iranian flag. However, a closer examination reveals that within the seemingly innocuous patterns lie depictions of blindfolded and tortured figures, alongside instruments of violence and death, including guns, knives, whips, scissors, and pliers. Through these meticulously crafted compositions, she underscores how contemporary injustices can be concealed beneath the veneer of everyday life, much like the hidden figures and objects within her designs. Additionally, by her repeated allusion to the Ashura rituals, Forouhar is invoking the rhetoric of the Karbala paradigm, co-opted by the regime after the Revolution. Consequently, within the framework of Shiʻi ideology, an imperative arises to embrace suffering as a means to grasp the profound import of the Karbala tragedy. This entails not merely empathising with the pain, but also acknowledging the feelings of guilt, felt by the survivors, and the consequent need for retribution and punishment. Forouhar prompts us to delve beneath the façade, urging a closer inspection that reveals the dissonance between beauty and brutality coexisting within Iranian culture. This duality challenges our superficial perceptions, compelling us to re-evaluate not only our understanding of these images, but also the broader plight of Iranians enduring the regime's oppression.

3.3 Censorship

Censorship in Iran has been a significant and complex issue that has influenced various aspects of the country's cultural, artistic, and intellectual landscape. Stemming from a combination of political, ideological, and religious factors, censorship has affected literature, media, arts, and even digital platforms, shaping the boundaries of permissible expression within Iranian society. One of the driving forces behind censorship in Iran is the government's desire to maintain control over public discourse and prevent content that might challenge its authority or deviate from its prescribed ideologies. This has led to the suppression of critical voices, political dissent, and even discussions on sensitive topics such as human rights, religion, and social issues. The censorship apparatus is often managed by bodies like the "Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance", which have the authority to review and approve various forms of media and artistic works before they are released to the public.

Literature and the arts have frequently been subject to censorship in Iran. Writers, poets, and artists often find themselves navigating a fine line between creative expression and compliance with established norms. Works that are deemed to be in violation of religious or moral codes (or those that challenge the prevailing narrative) face the risk of being banned, confiscated, or edited to align with the government's stance. This has led to self-censorship among creators, who may alter their works to avoid government intervention. Media outlets, both traditional and digital, have also faced strict censorship measures. Newspapers, magazines, and online platforms are monitored for content that contradicts state-approved narratives. Online censorship restricts access to certain websites, social media platforms, and communication apps. This control over information flow aims to curtail the spread of dissenting viewpoints and to prevent the organisation of protests or opposition movements.

Despite the challenges posed by censorship, Iranian artists, writers, and journalists have found innovative ways to express themselves and navigate these limitations. Metaphor, allegory, and symbolism have become essential tools for conveying deeper meanings beneath the surface of their works. Additionally, some artists choose to address societal issues through indirect means or through works that are intentionally open to interpretation, allowing audiences to decipher hidden messages. The tension between creative expression and censorship has led to a dynamic and often unpredictable cultural landscape in Iran. While the government seeks to exert control,

Iranian creators continue to find ways to challenge, subvert, and adapt to the restrictions imposed upon them. The struggle for freedom of expression and the push for reform within Iran's censorship regime remain central issues in the ongoing dialogue between the state and its artistic and intellectual communities.

3.3.1 Censorship of Women's Images

Censorship of women's images in Iran emerged after the Revolution because of conservative interpretations of Islamic principles, which are aimed at aligning visual representations with deeply ingrained notions of traditional modesty. This concerted effort to maintain societal values resulted in the imposition of stringent guidelines that dictate various aspects of women's appearance, poses, and conduct. These regulations extend not only to public spaces but also to the realm of visual media, where photographs are subject to thorough scrutiny and potential alteration to ensure compliance with established standards of propriety. This practice of censorship reflects the intricate interplay between religious values, cultural norms, and the desire to uphold a particular image of women in Iranian society. While it ostensibly seeks to preserve morality, it raises important questions about individual expression, gender dynamics, and the broader impact of censorship on artistic and social discourse within the country.

When asked, by a museum in Barcelona to depict how Iranians regarded the West, Shadi Ghadirian opted to showcase visuals reminiscent of what she had encountered in Western publications in Iran (censored by the regime) (Ghadirian 2015: 4) – thus presenting censorship through an "aesthetic evaluation" (Aznavourain 2015: 46). Hence, in the series *West by East* (2004) (Fig.108), Ghadirian addresses the complex interplay between representation and censorship of women in the Islamic Republic where, among the many intrusions of the State into the lives of Iranian citizens, is the right to dictate what is "morally permissible to see" (Ghadirian 2015: 4). This involved censoring books (**Fig.109**), magazines and films, using a black marker to cover women's bodies and hair in make-shift *hijabs*, in order to, as Ghadirian puts it sarcastically, protect the public "from harms issued from the body of women" (Aznavourain 2105: 46). Censorship extended not only to foreign/Western goods, books, and media, but also to women's bodies and movements. Additionally, there are the self-imposed censorships that have become the norm in Iran, as a strategy for survival, such as not consorting with men in public, covering-up and what Rose Issa calls "the schizophrenia of dressing for outside and inside the home" (Issa 2008: 11). Furthermore, the Ministry for Guidance and Culture (*Ershad*), closely monitors artists' works, inspecting them for anything contrary to the regime's ideology.

For this series, shot in the studio, Ghadirian, called on friends and family, asking them to wear their normal clothes (the ones they wear under the obligatory *hijab*) and pose in the manner of fashion models in Western magazines. She then added another layer to the images, in the form of a glass upon which she painted over the visible parts of their bodies, such as arms, legs, hair and sometimes even the clothes themselves with black paint, to resemble the marks made by the regime's censors, making the iconography of these images immediately recognisable to an Iranian audience. By this act of self-censorship, which appropriates the visual language and practices of the regime, these images which Glen Harcourt likens to "Duchampian 'rectified ready-mades'" (Harcourt 2017: 149), seemingly adhere to the guidelines of the regime. This mimesis underscores the inherent absurdity of a practice that seeks to erase the identity of women, essentially diminishing them to mere fragments of their true selves. By stepping into the role of the censor herself, Ghadirian assumes control over the narrative. She skilfully harnesses these imposed limitations to her artistic advantage, effectively turning them into a tool for reclaiming both feminine and artistic agency.

Moreover, Ghadirian's images encompass a broader critique beyond the confines of censorship in Iran. They serve as a commentary on the pervasive issues associated with women's representation in fashion magazines and society's problematic fixation on ideals of perfection, youth, and a Westernised notion of beauty. Ghadirian addresses the cultural dichotomies between East and West, fought on the battlefield of women's bodies and sexuality, revealing deficiencies on both fronts. She highlights how Western cultures and the Iranian regime, despite their differences, are complicit in reducing women to objects and exploiting their bodies to conform to narrow social and moral standards of perfection. Ghadirian's work, thus, underscores the shared culpability of these seemingly divergent cultural forces in perpetuating harmful stereotypes and ideals that place unrealistic expectations on women. By addressing this cultural dissonance, Ghadirian prompts viewers to question the damaging impact of these standards and the need for a more inclusive and empowering representation of women in both Eastern and Western societies.

Censorship is also addressed by Katayoun Karami (b.1966) in her *Censorship* (2004) series (**Fig.28**), in which she applies the censor's black marks to her own prisoner-like mugshot, reinforced by the 1993 Tehran license plate around her neck, which gives new meaning to the term "artistic licence". In this series Karami, like Ghadirian, examines the censorship practices

of the regime and how female artists face a "triple bind" as women, Iranians, and artists, whereby their physical appearance, moral character and their art is scrutinised and censored to meet the aesthetic, moral and religious requirements of the Islamic Republic. By replacing the state censor in these works and assuming the role of censoring women's bodies themselves, these artists deftly employ this mimetic device to their artistic advantage. Their intention is twofold: to unveil the inherent absurdity of state censorship and to underscore its undermining of women's autonomy. Moreover, this technique allows them to reclaim feminine and artistic agency, effectively wresting the power of censorship away from its traditional wielder. In doing so, they effectively strip the censor of the ability to gaze upon these uncensored bodies, thus challenging the very foundation of their control.

Leila Pazooki (b.1977) is another artist who addresses state censorship of women's images, this time in the arena of art history and education. In the research project and installation, *The Aesthetics of Censorship* (2009) (**Fig.110**), she presents several framed reproductions of famous examples of Western art depicting the female figure, such as Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* and Edouard Manet's *Dejeuner Sur L'herbe* and *Olympia*. In these reproductions, the bodies of the women are subjected to extensive censorship, rendering them practically unrecognizable through the liberal use of a black marker. These images originated from actual art history books housed in the library of the University of Fine Arts in Tehran, where Pazooki pursued her studies in painting. The critical point to note is that art students were exposed to these heavily censored representations right from the outset of their education. This pervasive censorship effectively erased the feminine presence from these images, thereby shaping the students' perception of art history in a manner that negated and excluded the female body and presence. In the sound piece that accompanies the images Pazooki gives voice to an authorised censor, who reveals the ideological motivation and the aesthetic choices and techniques that guide these subjective "reworkings".

Pazooki strategically places these reimagined images within similar framing as the original artworks often exhibited in global museums. In doing so, she not only interrogates the aesthetic judgments of the regime's censors, but also raises questions about the nature of the original works themselves and Western art-historical traditions. This includes a critical examination of the utilisation of the female nude form and the impact of the male gaze within these conventions. Furthermore, the act of displacing these images from their original contexts, coupled with the additional intervention of censorship, imparts a sense of uncertainty to their

status. This calculated displacement challenges established museum norms and prompts a re-evaluation of the very concept of artistic originality. By blurring the boundaries between the familiar and the transformed, Pazooki's work disrupts preconceived notions and paves the way for a more nuanced discourse on the intersections of art, politics, and identity.

3.3.2 Censorship of Women's Voices

Apart from women's images, women's voices were also censored after the Revolution, since as Farzaneh Milani has noted, the same values that regulated a woman's physical appearance also applied to her voice. Hence, a woman's chastity, charm and allure depended, to a large extent, on her silence (Milani 2001: 8). This ideology was articulated in 1986, by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then Speaker of the Parliament and later the Iranian President, who warned that women's voices were sexually stimulating and that women should not speak in a tone or voice that would be "arousing and seductive to men" (Sedghi 2007: 212). The sexual arousal associated with a woman's voice also resulted in the prohibition of women singing in public and recording songs.

Shirin Neshat's *Untitled* (1996) (**Fig.15**) (from *Women of Allah* series, 1993-1997), discussed in Chapter Two, is a notable artwork that alludes to the censorship of women's voices in the Islamic Republic. This artwork captures the nuanced and challenging struggle of Iranian women to convey their thoughts and emotions within the confines of a society that imposes strict codes of modesty and conduct. Neshat professes that in this series she wanted to concentrate on the parts of the female body that can be exposed in the Islamic Republic and therefore have to be expressive, as well as the efforts of women to speak in "the most unspeakable way" (https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/196/2618). The cropped face in the artwork directs the viewer's attention to the woman's hand, which delicately touches her slightly parted lips. This gesture carries multiple layers of meaning. On one level, it draws attention to the sensuousness and expressiveness of the hand, highlighting the human need for communication and expression. On another level, it symbolises the silenced voice of women within a repressive regime. The act of placing the hand on the lips can be interpreted as a conscious effort to conceal words that might be deemed inappropriate or subversive. In this way, the hand becomes a vessel for the unspoken thoughts and feelings of women. It represents the creativity and resilience of Iranian women who find alternative ways to communicate and share their experiences, even when faced with censorship and oppression.

As Farzaneh Milani has observed sex segregation does not only censor a woman's voice, but it also marks the public arena as a masculine space (Milani 2001: 9). This concept is further explored by Neshat in *Turbulent* (1998) (**Fig.111**), a nine-minute video shown on two screens

(which are supposed to face each other). Neshat, once again, appropriates the practices of the Islamic Republic by segregating men and women, portraying each on separate screens and not allowing them to occupy the same space. Both videos are shot in a concert hall: one filled by a male audience all dressed in white shirts and the other, empty. On the first screen we see the entrance of a male singer (Shoja Azari, Neshat's partner) to the applause of the all-male audience whilst at the same time a veiled woman (Sussan Deyhim, the Iranian composer and vocalist) enters the quiet and empty concert hall on the other screen. The man starts to sing a love song by Rumi (the 13th Century poet) – as Layla Diba explains, in this context, music is introduced as a replacement for the role that calligraphy usually plays in Neshat's images, underscoring the significance of poetry in Persian culture (Diba 2017: 36). On the other screen, the woman waits silently for the man to finish singing, at which point the audience bursts into applause, and he takes his bows. It is then that the woman starts her rendition, but there are no words just haunting melodies and chanting. The male singer and audience listen mesmerised, whilst the woman continues with her chanting, at times screaming, at times humming, with the sound echoing and reverberating across the two screens. Finally, the woman stops but there is no applause for her – the men all continue to stare dumbfounded, until the screens black out. Neshat thus portrays that despite segregation and not being able to utter words, the woman nonetheless shines and expresses herself, proving that she cannot be held back or silenced, communicating in whatever mode is at her disposal. Here, as Farzaneh Milani observes: "The unsung is as important as the sung" (Milani 2001: 8), and the words that are left out are implied by their very absence. This portrayal underscores the idea that the human spirit, especially that of women in repressive societies, cannot be easily suppressed. Despite the challenges and obstacles imposed by societal norms and gender segregation, individuals find innovative and creative ways to make their voices heard. Neshat's work, therefore, serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of women and their unwavering commitment to self-expression, even in the most challenging circumstances.

State censorship of women's voices is also an issue tackled by Newsha Tavakolian in her series *Listen* (2010) (**Fig.112**), which consists of simultaneous looped videos of female singers (who are banned from performing in the Islamic Republic), silently mouthing words to songs they perform in front of a pretend audience. For these, Tavakolian who has professed that she wanted to be a singer herself, has also shot "Dream" CD covers, portraying the same emotionless girl (herself) against isolated landscapes, which contrasts with the emotion on the faces of the singers and the warm and intimate backgrounds of their interior settings. The text

on the covers, inscribed in Persian, makes statements such as: “This is not in the Western Woman’s thought”, “The Glass Ceiling” and “Do you remember that you are not yourself?” further demonstrating the disenfranchised status of women in the Iran and how the stereotypes associated with them do not hold true. Through the empty CD boxes and the silent performances, Tavakolian captures the indomitable spirit of these women who refuse to be silenced. Their hope, resilience, and commitment to their art offer a profound testament to the enduring power of artistic expression in the face of oppression. These women continue to prepare and strive for the day when they can openly perform and fill their CD boxes with their music.

3.3.3 Censorship of the Press

The censorship of the press and freedom of speech has also been a topic addressed by artists such as Farideh Shahsavarani (b.1955) in her site-specific installation *I Wrote, You Read* (*Neveshtam, Khaandi*) (**Fig.113**) which ran for a week from November 20, 2006. The reason for its short life was that Shahsavarani, did not secure permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) for this project and ended up having to take it down after just one week, meaning that it did not get the attention that it would have otherwise received. The space for this installation was, appropriately, the abandoned (and soon to be converted into a shopping mall) headquarters of the famous *Ettela'at* newspaper near Toopkhaneh Square in Tehran. Shahsavarani spent nine months planning the installation and it took twenty days to set it up with the help of ten labourers. Shahsavarani aimed to highlight the censorship of the press, which had reached a peak with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and had resulted in the closure of many publications. Hence, the walls, floors, windows, and ceilings were papered with newspapers, engulfing the viewer, whilst some newspapers were enclosed in barbed wire stands, or shown in videos accompanied by the sounds of typewriters and sirens. These installations were all lit with blue light. A small room (this time lit by warm light) was dedicated to the memory of journalists who had been arrested and imprisoned (Karimi 2022: 74). The site therefore both embodied and enhanced the message of the installation, amplified by an overall sense of abandonment and ruin which became the plight of many older buildings in Iran that were torn down and replaced; a metaphor for much of what was happening in the country.

3.4 War

Shortly after the Revolution, on 22nd September 1980, Iraq, under the presidency of Saddam Hussein, Iraq attacked Iran, hoping to take advantage of the post-revolutionary chaos in the country. Despite Iraq's expectation of a swift victory, this war dragged on for eight years, becoming the longest and deadliest conflict between two states since WWII, and the worst confrontation between two Muslim states in history, causing up to an estimated one million deaths on Iran's side alone. Both sides targeted each other's urban centres, resulting in a large civilian death toll, in what became known as the "War of the Cities", and included the use of banned chemical weapons by Iraq. The trauma of this event has stayed with Iranians to this day, exacerbated by the threat the country feels because of strained relationships with the US and its allies, as demonstrated by the assassination of the senior Iranian military officer, Qassem Soleimani, in a targeted American drone strike on 3rd January 2020 in Baghdad, on the orders of U.S. President Donald Trump. Animosity has been exacerbated by crippling sanctions against Iran by the US and much of the Western world, which have severely affected the lives and livelihoods of Iranians.

In a semi-illiterate country as Iran was at the time of the War, visual iconography played a crucial role in engendering the support of the population. Artists were seconded to produce propaganda art (**Figs.114,115,116**), populating urban spaces, designed to encourage men to sacrifice themselves and their families to accept this sacrifice. Good mothers were "Mothers of Martyrs" – those who sent their sons to the front, celebrated if they were martyred and mourned if they came back alive. The rhetoric of the regime reinforced the female duty to procreate and produce more volunteers for the War/IRI. It was encouraged by the dismantling of the Family Planning Board and the passing of pro-natal laws. These measures, coupled with the legalisation of early marriage, polygamy, and the establishment of the Iranian Marriage Foundation, aimed at incentivising marriage (through the provision of furniture for newlyweds), led to a notable increase in birth rates. Consequently, most of Iran's population today were born after the Revolution.

Hence, even though the preamble to the Iranian constitution forbids the use of women's images in any private sector commercials, the Islamic Republic sanctioned the public's right and duty to gaze upon images of women, which supported both the war and the veil (Shirazi 2011: 112-

113). In addition to the war propaganda, graphic artists also translated the regime's vision of an ideal woman into images that were plastered all over the country; on walls, outside and inside buildings, government, and educational facilities, since even though women were not allowed to fight in the war, their participation and their image were crucial to the war effort. With the War, women and their image became even more important for the regime, no longer being just signifiers of piety and obedience, but actively supporting the war effort by calling her menfolk to war and martyrdom. Central to the war effort were images of both martyrs and their mothers (**Fig.116**). Through these images, the regime presented the argument that by sacrificing those they loved, Iranian women too would be considered martyrs (Shirazi 2011: 135). As a result, the appearance of Iranian women came under even more intense scrutiny since it became intrinsically tied to the war effort and images of veiled women with guns populated the country, showing their dual obligation towards both correct veiling and being the pious mother, daughter and wife who called on her men to pick up arms and go to war. During this period, there is also a noticeable semantic fusion of *hijab* and *jihad* (holy war) in the context of martyrdom. (Shirazi 2003: 4-7; Afary 2009: 293) and women's duty to veil correctly stood hand in hand with men's duty to become martyrs.

Shirin Neshat draws heavily on the fusion between *hijab* and *jihad* in her *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997). In images such as *Seeking Martyrdom #2* (1995) (**Fig.117**), Neshat not only uses the *chador* iconography, but also re-appropriates the semiotics of war and martyrdom, using symbols such as guns and tulips (the symbol of martyrs depicted on the Iranian flag). Neshat, by donning the veil and carrying a gun, casts herself – a woman who, additionally, was not in Iran during the Revolution and War – in this revolutionary role, subverting these symbols. Like the women portrayed by the regime, Neshat is not actually engaged in battle, but rather uses the performative aspects of the veil and the gun as props in an ideological performance. The centrality of the veil and the use of guns in this series may be seen as perpetuating the stereotypes surrounding Muslim women, however the use of guns and the direct gaze of Neshat also emphasises the role that women played in the Revolution and War, as well as defying Orientalist tropes of submissive Muslim women. Hence, although Neshat uses the trope of the veil, she displaces its charge "from being the passive object of the erotic gaze toward a confrontational modality" (Dadi 2008: 146). Likewise, the calligraphy covering the image forming a secondary veil, is appropriated by Neshat, who instead of traditional Islamic texts, uses the poetry of Feminist writers such as Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967), the iconoclastic poet who has been revered by generations of Iranian Feminists (including Neshat herself), thus

introducing a level of subversion that is only appreciated by an Iranian audience. The inclusion of these Feminist writers is significant because not only were they the first Iranian women who "unveiled" their voices by speaking about women's situation, but because Neshat is following in their tradition of a subversive, Feminist narrative, transferring this dialogue from a traditional literary medium, to a novel visual one.

In *Untitled* (1996) (**Fig.118**), from the same series, Neshat portrays a veiled woman (herself) again but this time her face and body are completely covered by the veil. The only part showing is a hand that emerges from the veil and holds the hand of a young boy (Neshat's own son) who unlike the woman is completely naked. On the child's body Neshat has superimposed designs like Indian Henna tattoos (mehndi) which are not common in Iran and especially not for boys. This addition imparts an extra layer of Orientalist imagery to the composition, harking back to a complex history of cultural interaction and Western perspectives on the East. In this image, Neshat draws on the iconography of war, a period in which women were expected to give birth and raise martyrs, leading to the enlistment and tragic deaths of many underage children in the conflict. These young children were often used as "human shields", tasked with advancing ahead of the soldiers to trigger landmines, allowing others to advance safely. Here, the veiled woman is entirely consumed by the veil, her sole duty being the production of soldiers for Islam. This image serves as a powerful commentary on the role of women in times of war and the societal pressures placed upon them during such periods.

This ethos is seen in the *Companions of Qods* (1980) (**Fig.114**) by Hossein Khosrowjerdi (b.1957), where a woman in a black chador is holding an infant child in one hand and a red tulip (symbolising martyrdom) in the other, showing that she is prepared to sacrifice her child for the war (symbolised by the soldier) and religion (symbolised by the figure of the Mullah). Likewise in *Guardians of the Light* (1980) (**Fig.115**), Kazem Chalipa (b.1957) depicts a woman pushing her young son (towards war and martyrdom). He is holding a grenade in one hand and a Molotov cocktail in the other, while a soldier/father stands slightly behind holding a gun; all under the image/guidance/shadow of Ayatollah Khomeini.

In the *Mothers of Martyrs* series (2006) (**Figs.21,119**), Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981), also addresses the state's rhetoric and imagery of martyrdom during the War, when the country was inundated by images of martyrs and their mothers (**Fig.116**) in the form of large murals, posters

and even postage stamps. These images were deeply entrenched in Shi'i iconography and allusions to Imam Hussein and the battle of Karbala, as well as the state's own iconography such as tulips/red flowers to represent martyrs. In this series, Tavakolian uses images of actual mothers of martyrs each holding pictures of their martyred sons. In one image (**Fig.119**) we see the mother, in a black *chador*, against a black background into which she seems to have merged, holding a photograph of her dead/martyred son, staring directly into the camera. The predominant black (the colour of mourning and the preferred colour of the state for its women) is broken up by the white scarf the woman wears under her *chador* as well as the writing behind her which is shaded in red (the colour of martyrs and the background colour of the son's photograph) and green (the colour of Islam) – the three colours which make up the Iranian flag. The word spelled out is "Muharram" (مُحَرَّم) which is the month of Imam Hussein's martyrdom and thus of great importance for Shi'i Muslims – it is also one of the four sacred months of the year when warfare is forbidden. Another meaning of the word is, in fact, "forbidden" which adds another layer of meaning to the senseless death of both Imam Hussein and the martyrs of the War, as well as what the Islamic Republic did to justify those deaths. Additionally, Tavakolian has emptied this image of the idealism used in the regime's propagandist iconography – instead we are just presented with the stark reality of an old woman, holding the photograph of her young, and now dead son, surrounded by the signifiers used by the regime to justify and glorify this death.

Gohar Dashti (b.1980) deals with the issue of war in *Today's Life and War* series (2008) addressing its effects on the lives of ordinary Iranians and how, during that period, they had to live their lives and continue their daily activities under the shadow of war, death and destruction. Dashti who was born in Ahvaz, a town very near the border with Iraq, saw first-hand both the destruction of the War and people's resilience in dealing with it. In this series Dashti has staged scenes depicting a couple going about their daily lives in an arid landscape, amidst conspicuous military presence such as tanks and armed soldiers. These scenes were shot in a film location in a suburb of Tehran where the Iranian movie industry produces war scenes. The couple are shot as part of an ongoing narrative, like stills from a movie, where Dashti contrasts the everyday lives and activities of Iranians with the war imagery to which they were subjected daily. Dashti explains that her aim in this series was to explore how the violence of war symbolically influenced the emotional life of her generation and permeated all aspects of contemporary society (Gresh 2013: 93).

In one image (**Fig.20**), Dashti portrays a couple engaged in what appears to be a routine breakfast, seated at a small table for two. The man gazes at the woman who seems to be engrossed in a conversation on her mobile phone. This seemingly mundane activity unfolds against the backdrop of an arid, lifeless landscape, devoid of any vegetation or signs of life. The colour palette is subdued, with both individuals dressed in khaki and neutral tones that blend seamlessly with the desolate surroundings. What sets this scene apart from typical domestic scenes worldwide is the extraordinary element introduced by Dashti: a tank's barrel pointed directly at the couple. Despite the looming threat, the couple remains remarkably imperturbable and unreactive. Their faces betray no emotion or acknowledgment of the imminent danger, as if the presence of these instruments of war has become an indistinguishable part of their daily existence, seamlessly integrated into their bleak landscape.

In another image (**Fig.120**), Dashti presents a woman lying on a simple single cot, similar to beds found in army barracks, while a man sits barefoot at the foot of the bed, casually smoking a cigarette and gazing into the distance. At first glance, this scene might appear ordinary, suggesting a couple at the beginning or end of their day. However, the disquieting reality lies in the background, where a tank and five soldiers, all wearing gas masks, advance ominously toward the couple. The use of gas masks in this context serves as a stark reminder of the devastating impact of chemical warfare during the Iran-Iraq War, a conflict in which Iraq deployed banned chemical agents with catastrophic consequences for both combatants and civilians. Many individuals were killed instantly by these nerve gas attacks, while others continue to suffer from lasting health effects and require ongoing medical treatment. The presence of the tank and the approaching soldiers, clad in gas masks, evokes the spectre of that traumatic past.

Once again, what is particularly striking in this composition is the couple's apparent indifference to the imminent threat. They maintain their normal activities, seemingly oblivious to the encroaching danger, as if they have become immune to their harsh surroundings or have resigned themselves to their fate. This juxtaposition underscores the helplessness and isolation experienced by individuals living in conflict zones, where daily life unfolds amidst constant peril, rendering them numb to the ongoing threats that define their existence. Dashti's series is, therefore, a powerful commentary on the normalisation of conflict and the desensitisation of individuals to the pervasive threats that surround them. It highlights the resilience and

adaptability of people living in conflict zones who continue with their daily lives despite the persistent spectre of violence. The juxtaposition of ordinary activities against the menacing backdrop of military hardware serves as a stark reminder of the human capacity to endure and carry on even in the most adverse circumstances, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Shadi Ghadirian also addresses the effects of war on the everyday life of Iranians in two series entitled, *Nil Nil* (2008) and *White Square* (2009), which include John Lennon's song *Imagine* as part of her artist's statement. Ghadirian who was six-years old at the outbreak of the war, which was to last into her teenage years, has admitted to being greatly affected by it. Like most other Iranians, she lost family and friends, as well as her childhood years. She explains that theirs was a "marked generation" marred by revolution and war (Gupta 2009). The extent of this devastation is apparent in the fact that in these two series Ghadirian eschews her usual human representation, addressing what Harcourt describes as "the invisibility of the body in society…by means of synecdoche or indexical trace" (Harcourt 2017: 94). When planning these two series, Ghadirian visited soldiers from the War, to borrow authentic items she could use in her images and recalls that, without exception, everyone she met had brought back a memento from the war, even if it was a scrap of metal or a handful of earth, which they treated like a sacred treasure. This made her realise that they wanted to keep a piece of it with them, like a precious gift, with them till the end of their lives (conversation with the author).

In the *Nil Nil* series (2008) (also the title of a short story about war by Ghadirian's former husband), comprising of eighteen photographs staged in the home, Ghadirian portrays the war from the perspective of the woman who waits at home, whilst the man goes off to war. In these vibrant still-lifes, Ghadirian portrays the insidious intrusion of war/outdoors, into the sacred space of home/indoors by inserting various military items and ammunitions such as grenades, bullets, helmets, and boots that have become seamlessly integrated into this space, masquerading as normal household objects. Ghadirian has observed that in Iran, people lead two distinct lives – one outside the house and one inside – and that transitioning between these two realms often involves crossing a border, but occasionally elements from the external world seep into the domestic sphere (Pal 2011). Thus, in this series, we see the effects of war seeping into all aspects of daily life, demonstrating that everyday life and war co-exist simultaneously.

Additionally, in *Nil Nil*, objects personify gender and the intrusion of the male instruments of war into the female domain of the house (which in Ghadirian's previous series have been devoid of men and their symbols), and residing alongside female accoutrements, puts these private spaces of bourgeois domesticity under threat. Even though we do not see the woman, we sense her presence as if she has exited the frame mere seconds before the image was taken. We see the woman's imprint in *Nil Nil #1* (**Fig.121**), in the form of a pair of red stiletto shoes, that face a man's scuffed combat boots sporting a drop of red blood, as though colour co-ordinating with the woman, but also bringing death and bloodshed into the house and showing the proximity of violence and destruction. Both are juxtaposed against a shiny, white floor, which is like Ghadirian's usual neutral backgrounds. The red shoes, which are, here, as incongruous as the boots, since their colour and style are unacceptable in the Islamic Republic, represent the woman's private desires. One of the woman's shoes is pointing towards the half-open door, as though poised to leave, whilst the other stands at an angle between the door and the man's boots, seemingly undecided as to whether it should stay or leave. The man's shoes point towards the interior, mirroring the position of the woman's shoes, highlighting the fact that the man at war is yearning to come home, whilst the woman is trying to escape the confines of the house – both are forced to do otherwise.

War's impact on children is also evidenced in *Nil Nil #5* (**Fig.122**), portraying a net filled with soft toys, hiding amongst which is a gas mask (which reappears in some other images of this series), incongruously posing as a toy. These images strike a particularly jarring chord due to the stark juxtaposition between the innocence of childhood and the devastating reality of war. This contrast becomes even more pronounced when considering the historical context of the Iran-Iraq war, where children were often featured prominently in the visual iconography of conflict **(Figs.114,115)** and many enlisted in the war and died. This image, thus, serves as a stark reminder of the profound inhumanity of thrusting the horrors of war into the lives of children. Beyond the loss of fathers and other family members, the imagery underscores the tragic reality that children themselves became victims of war, robbed of their innocence and, in some cases, their lives. In capturing this paradox, Ghadirian's work compels viewers to confront the devastating consequences of war on the most vulnerable members of society.

The encroachment of war into the everyday is also seen in *Nil Nil #10* (**Fig.123**), where a grenade mixes nonchalantly with various other fruit in a bowl – its shape and direction mirroring that of a pear slightly behind it. Ghadirian's choice of juxtaposition serves as a

powerful commentary on the pervasive presence of war in Iranian life. She points out that war has become a familiar and enduring concept for Iranians, given their long history of conflict and the fact that many of their neighbouring countries have also experienced warfare. Additionally, there exists an ever-present fear of potential attacks by the U.S. Nevertheless, she declares that people seem to be fine with this and like in the photos act as though "everything is ok, everything is neat, you have fruit" (Pal 2011). Ghadirian, however, wants us to look for and notice these signs of war and to create a sense of discomfort and paranoia, since the calm and complacency with which Iranians face potential war is something that scares her. Thus, *Nil Nil* is mostly about the fear and shock of war. As Ellen Feldman asserts, Ghadirian has chosen her title (Nil, Nil) well as it embodies various layers of meaning. Initially, the word implies a direct interpretation of "nothing". However, through repetition, it evolves into broader connotations such as nihilism and denial. These photographs construct visual representations that serve as metaphors for the absence of war and violence, issues we tend to distance ourselves from. Ghadirian's work therefore "gives the lie to our self-deceptions" (Feldman 2010: 18).

In the *White Square* series (2009), Ghadirian revisits the military items and ammunitions featured in *Nil Nil*. However, she now isolates and removes these from their previous domestic settings, tying them with a red ribbon like a gift and presenting them as still-life compositions against a white background. In this manner, war and violence are presented as neatly packaged and simplified. As Sohrab Mahdavi argues, if in *Nil Nil* these objects appeared as though they were in "life-style magazines", in *White Square* they appear as "advertisements" (Mahdavi 2015: 15). In this series, the war paraphernalia retains its symbolic representation of war/man but what was previously depicted in the broader context of *Nil Nil* has now been distilled and encapsulated within the confines of a vivid red ribbon. This symbolic transformation emphasises the central theme of conflict and its impact, channelling the essence of the entire narrative into this singular and evocative visual element.

Comparing *White Square #1* (**Fig.124**) and *Nil Nil #1* (**Fig.121**) we see a similar colour scheme, but the imagery is more complex, as the onus of representation for everything else rests upon the red ribbon. Here the red ribbon can be seen as symbolising the woman, but it can also symbolise death and martyrdom, which were touted as redemptive and liberating. The colour red was also used extensively in the War iconography to symbolise the blood of martyrs and

as a metaphor for loss. As a result, the red ribbon becomes a floating signifier, adding to the incongruity of these images, which like war itself, becomes contradictory. Similarly, in *White Square #6* (**Fig.125**) the grenade which had previously been concealed among familiar objects and fruit in *Nil Nil #10* (**Fig.123**), now takes centre stage. It proudly presents itself as a gift, drawing parallels with how the regime promoted martyrdom as a divine gift. In this manner, these objects transform into sacred relics, preserving the memory of war long after its conclusion. Ghadirian's *White Square* series thus serves as a poignant commentary on the enduring legacy of war and the emotions associated with it.

The theme of war, therefore, emerges as a powerful and evocative motif in the works of contemporary Iranian female artists, serving as a lens through which they explore the multifaceted dimensions of conflict, resilience, and societal transformation. These artists navigate the intricate interplay between the personal and the political, reflecting on the enduring impact of war on individuals and communities. Through their art, they engage in a profound dialogue about the enduring scars of conflict, shedding light on the resilience and strength of those who have borne the brunt of war's consequences. Their works challenge prevailing narratives and offer a nuanced perspective on the human experience within the context of war, ultimately contributing to a broader discourse on the complexities of conflict and its far-reaching effects on society, culture, and identity.

3.5 Protests

Since the Revolution, Iran has experienced a series of significant protests and movements that reflect the evolving socio-political landscape of the country. These protests have covered a wide range of issues, from political discontent to social and economic grievances. One of the earliest major protests occurred in 1999 when students demonstrated against the closure of a reformist newspaper, *Salam*. These protests, dubbed the "Iranian Tiananmen Square", spread to universities and cities, resulting in clashes with security forces and the arrest and death of students and activists. Other notable protests have been the Green Movement (2009); Iranians joining the Arab Spring protests (2011) to express dissatisfaction with political repression, economic challenges, and human rights abuses; protests in response to hikes in fuel prices, economic hardships and inequality (2019); the Khuzestan uprising (2021) centred on water shortages and perceived discrimination; and most recently those following the death of Mahsa Amini (2022).

Women's rights activists have also organised various protests against discriminatory laws and practices, such as the mandatory *hijab* and limited legal rights. These movements advocate for gender equality and have gained momentum over the years. These protests and movements collectively reflect the diverse concerns of Iranians, spanning political reforms, human rights, economic challenges, and cultural issues. The government's responses have varied, encompassing both suppression and limited concessions. These events underscore the complicated dynamics between the Iranian people's aspirations for change and the government's efforts to maintain control.

3.5.1 The Green Movement

The Green Movement (*Jonbesh-e Sabz*) emerged following the controversial presidential election in Iran on June 12, 2009. During this election, the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner with 63% of the votes in what was widely seen as a fraudulent election. Additionally, the other three contenders who had been vetted and approved by the Council of Guardians also insisted that the election had been fraudulent. However, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, publicly defended Ahmadinejad causing further animosity against them both. As a result, thousands of protestors poured into the streets, chanting "Where is my vote?" culminating in one of the largest turnouts since the Revolution, when up to three million protesters congregated at Azadi Square in Tehran on June 15.

The adoption of the symbolic colour green by the Movement, signalled its Shiʿi affiliation. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the leader of the Movement, who was a "Seyyed" (descended from the Prophet), had declared that the colour Green symbolised the devotion of the Movement to "an Islam that had the kin of the prophet as its first educators" (Holliday and Rivetti 2016: 28), thus indicating that the Revolution and the Islamic regime had lost its way and the following of a true Islam. Additionally, green was the colour of Imam Hussein (Moussavi's namesake) and connected the movement to the Karbala paradigm, long used by the regime self-referentially. It thus challenged the Islamic Republic's monopoly of this leitmotif, particularly given that during the 1979 National Referendum, "green" had been used for voting yes (green being the colour of Imam Hussein) and "red" for no (red being the colour of Yazid his opponent) – hence to vote green was tantamount to voting for Islam and for good versus evil. As Charles Kurzman has stated, this was a strategic use of an Islamic symbol, whereby a small green ribbon was all it took for Iranians to convey their support subtly but effectively for the opposition (Kurzman 2010: 9).

The core of the Movement consisted of college students, middle-class professionals, women's groups, intellectuals, and trade unionists – in short, those who had been most disenfranchised by the regime and Ahmadinejad's policies. Many were arrested, imprisoned, and killed. The Green Movement held significant symbolic importance as a beacon of hope for many Iranians who sought political change and reform. Consequently, the regime's crackdown on the movement marked the loss of hope for many. The movement had far-reaching consequences,

leading to the separation of families and friends due to imprisonment, exile, or loss of life. As a result, several contemporary artists have addressed the Green Movement in their works, reflecting on its significance, the challenges it faced, and the broader themes of hope, dissent, and political change in Iran.

The *Miss Butterfly* series (2011) by Shadi Ghadirian was inspired by these events which led to many executions and arrests, including Ghadirian's journalist friend, Nazanin Khosravani, who was imprisoned for six years on charges of collusion against the regime, and to whom this series is dedicated. Ghadirian has stated that *Miss Butterfly* is the story of a "rude awakening," and the realisation that a social system that is meant to ensure security, purpose and, identity for its people, has collapsed and can no longer uphold any validity or justice, resulting in a loss of optimism (Aznavourain 2015: 82). She confessed that she wanted to play a role during that time but was gripped by crippling fear which left her unable to leave the house for several months, as she worried about her family's safety. Instead, she became the "butterfly" that blocked the exits to protect them against intrusion (Aznavourian 2015: 17).

This reference draws from the story of *Miss Butterfly (Shahparak Khanoum)*, a tale that Ghadirian used to share with her daughter (Cirelli 2015). This story is rooted in an ancient Iranian fable and has also been adapted into a play by the renowned Iranian playwright, Bijan Mofid. The story revolves around a butterfly's pursuit of the sun, leading her into becoming captive in a spider's web. The spider proposes a deal: if she delivers one of the insects hidden in the cellar, he will guide her to the sun. Initially agreeing, Miss Butterfly changes her mind after hearing the insects' plight and returns empty-handed. Instead, she offers herself to the spider. Touched by her compassion and courage, the spider releases her and points her toward the light. Miss Butterfly extends an invitation to the other insects to join her, but they opt to remain in the cellar, so she embarks on her journey alone.

This series comprises fifteen black-and-white photographs that feature a lone woman within an indoor environment. In these images, she is seen meticulously weaving a web near the rooms' exits or sources of light, like windows and skylights. While some photographs show chairs and sofas arranged as if for company, the woman remains solitary and seemingly unaware of the viewer's presence in each image. In *Miss Butterfly #9* (**Fig.126**) the various figurines near the window, mimic her stance and figuratively join her in this lonely defence of

hearth and home. At times, the interiors are stark and devoid of luxuries, resembling a prison cell or the cellar that the insects of the story live in. In some interiors, we see alternative light sources, such as candles, chandeliers, and lamps, but these are tellingly not illuminated, further highlighting the fact that light is absent, in these interiors, along with hope. The use of black and white, enhanced by chiaroscuro, emphasises the woman's isolation and anxiety and heightens the effect of this melancholic, isolated world that lives in the shadows. The web, here symbolic not only of the Islamic Republic, but also of social strictures which both restrict and structure the woman's life, is spun by her to protect herself from the outside world, acting like a cocoon or safety net, but it also entraps her and keeps her from the light/freedom. The woman, like Miss Butterfly and the insects in the cellar, must choose whether to stay in the dark comfort of the known, or muster the courage to go to the light/freedom.

The presence of light infiltrating these interiors from outside, serves to convey both the threat posed by the outside world and the potential for freedom. It encapsulates the struggle between the desire for safety and the yearning for freedom, illustrating the idea that one may need to be sacrificed to attain the other. In this series, the woman symbolically chooses to protect her home at the expense of her personal freedom, a sentiment that likely resonated with Ghadirian, a mother who wished to safeguard her family. When discussing this series, Ghadirian articulates the broader struggle faced by many Iranians, describing it as the "painful struggle to keep hope alive by any means possible, either by enduring and fighting the oppressive condition despite all the existing risks and dangers, or by letting go of one's home and loved ones in search of a promised land" (Aznavourain 2015: 82). While her perspective is deeply personal, these images convey a universal message, representing women's innate instinct to protect their homes and families from external threats and the dilemma that involves choosing between the safety of the familiar and the risky pursuit of a possibly better, yet unfamiliar, life.

Parastou Forouhar also references the Green Movement in her *Papillon* collection (2010-2015). Papillon, meaning butterfly in French, is translated as "Parvaneh" in Persian which was Forouhar's mother's name. The butterfly is highly symbolic in Persian literature as it symbolises both an ideal of beauty and freedom as well as the fleeting nature of life and the imminence of death. In this series Forouhar, in her signature style, combines beauty (in the form of a butterfly) and pain (in the form of scenes of death, terror and torture) simultaneously, showing the ugliness beneath the surface and how the threshold between them is the few seconds it takes for our eyes to register the true nature of the depiction. It underscores the

importance of training ourselves to discern these horrors. In *Green Times* (**Fig.127**), from this series, Forouhar integrates, within the outline of a butterfly, images of people falling, fleeing, and cowering. The composition features ribbons of green, reminiscent of calligraphy strokes, intertwining with these figures. This green alludes to the Green Movement and serves as a poignant reference to the countless individuals who were subjected to violence, persecution, and even death during or in the aftermath of the uprisings. Furthermore, within the boundaries of these human forms, Forouhar incorporates hands making the iconic "V" sign, symbolising victory. The "V" sign gained significant prominence during the Green Movement, particularly associated with Mir Hossein Moussavi, and consequently became an emblem of the movement itself. Followers often proudly displayed this symbol, with some even dipping their fingers in green paint before raising the sign, underscoring their solidarity with the cause. This careful juxtaposition of symbols and imagery within the butterfly's form encapsulates the complex interplay of hope, resistance, and tragedy experienced during the Green Movement.

In *Khavaran Cemetery* (**Fig.128**), also from this series, the butterfly is made up of dead and fallen bodies. Khavaran cemetery located in southeast Tehran, was where many murdered dissidents were buried in unmarked mass graves, so that they could not be identified by their relatives. Additionally, the Iranian regime does not allow the families of the dead to mourn at the site. In this image the "butterfly" is placed against a gradient green background, within which a multitude of hands are intricately blended into one another, gradually fading out towards the top. Apart from the colour green, another motif used by the Movement was the hand (*panjeh*), which is symbolic in Shi'i iconography for the mutilated hand of Imam Hussein's half-brother Abbas and also represents the five members of the Prophet's family (Mohammad, Ali, Fatemeh, Hassan and Hussein). During the Green Movement, this symbol was reintroduced from the earlier Revolution period when protesters would dip their hands in blood, leaving bloody handprints on city walls to symbolise their suffering at the hand of the regime. The Green Movement subsequently re-appropriated this symbol to convey the same message. By incorporating these hands into the background, Forouhar makes several points. She references the Green Movement and highlights the stark contrast between its goals and the unfulfilled promises of the Revolution. Additionally, she uses Shi'i iconography and the Ashura paradigm, often exploited by the regime, to reveal its hypocrisy. In this image, Forouhar therefore charts the protestors' journey from the demonstrations to their deaths and finally to their unmarked graves in Khavaran Cemetery. Once again, pain and suffering are camouflaged within the beautiful wings of the butterfly, showing that all is not as it may seem. The image

underscores the idea that behind the veneer of beauty and hope there often lies a layer of pain and suffering, and challenges viewers to look beyond the surface, to recognize the harsh realities concealed beneath.

Mandana Moghaddam also references the Green Movement in her installation *Sara's Paradise* (2009) (**Fig.129**). The title itself, a play on words with *Behesht-e Zahra* (meaning Zahra's Paradise), alludes to the major cemetery in Tehran where the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war are interred. The title, therefore, immediately draws parallels between the sacrifices made by those who fought in the Iran-Iraq war and the contemporary struggle for political change in Iran. At the heart of the installation is a pond filled with red water, reminiscent of the "pond of blood" found at *Behesht-e Zahra* cemetery, (a fountain filled with red-coloured water to look as though it is spurting blood), which symbolised the blood of the martyrs of the war. However, Moghaddam adds another imagery by illuminating the fountain with vibrant green neon lights arranged in trios. This arrangement evokes the abstract Allah/tulip motif found at the centre of the Iranian flag, aligning the concept of martyrdom with national identity and patriotism. The colour scheme further underscores the connection to the Iranian flag, symbolising the continued presence of death and martyrdom in Iran, even beyond the Iran-Iraq war. By using green neon lights to illuminate the "blood" within the fountain, Moghaddam crafts a visual metaphor that suggests the enduring spirit of the Green Movement, where ideals of freedom and justice persist despite adversity.

Surrounding the central fountain, Moghaddam strategically positions empty plastic canisters of various shapes and sizes. These canisters serve a dual purpose within the installation. On one hand, they symbolise those who have given their lives, with the vessel itself representing individuals, as often portrayed in Persian literature and poetry. These individuals are now "empty", signifying their ultimate sacrifice. On the other hand, the canisters also allude to the depletion of vital resources in the country, such as oil and water. This depletion represents not only a loss of life but also a drain on the nation's resources and potential, in the post-Revolutionary years. Moghaddam, therefore, crafts a thought-provoking visual narrative that encapsulates the multifaceted layers of the Green Movement and its profound impact on Iran's socio-political landscape. Through her use of symbolism and colour, she invites viewers to contemplate the interconnectedness of history, sacrifice, and the enduring quest for justice and freedom.

Leila Pazooki likewise gives a nod to the Green Movement in *This is Not Green* (*In sabz nist*), a green neon sign in Persian displayed at Brot Kunst Halle, Gallery Enrst Hilger, Vienna (2009) (**Fig.130**). The title, takes its cue in word association from *The Treachery of Images* (1929) by René Magritte, depicting a pipe accompanied by the words "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*". Magritte's work is a commentary on the deceptive nature of visual representation and the complex interplay between art, language, and reality, serving as a reminder that images are not the things themselves but rather representations of those things. In a similar manner, Pazooki encourages viewers to question the nature of perception, representation, and the assumptions we make about the connection between images and the objects they represent. Apart from an exploration of the limits of visual representation and a statement on the fundamental nature of art as a medium that meditates between reality and interpretation, Pazooki comments on the importance of the Green Movement. Going beyond the mere representation of a colour, it held profound significance for Iranians and its ultimate failure was a treachery that was deeply felt by the population.

By bringing this text in Persian to a building in Vienna, where most viewers would not be able to read it and can only understand the green-ness of the colour, but not the underlying message, Pazooki further makes it difficult for the viewer, to "read" the work, since to fully understand its message they would need to have a knowledge not only of the Persian language and contemporary Iranian history but also Western art history and the intention of Magritte in painting *The Treachery of Images*. This also underscores the Western misunderstanding of Iranian society and politics, primarily because they lack the essential information required for a comprehensive understanding. Pazooki's installation is, therefore, a commentary on the multidimensional nature of representation and the challenges of cross-cultural understanding. It underscores the importance of context and cultural awareness when interpreting artworks and, by extension, events in a globalised world. The artwork encourages viewers to question their assumptions and seek a deeper understanding of the narratives and symbols presented to them, ultimately promoting a more nuanced and informed perspective on complex issues.

3.5.2 Woman, Life, Freedom

A more recent event inspiring many artists has been the protests following the death in custody of Mahsa Jhina Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was fatally beaten after being arrested on 13 September by the "morality police" for not wearing the *hijab* "properly". This event was a catalyst that caused women and men of all ethnicities to spontaneously gather in protests around the streets of more than 150 cities in Iran shouting the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom", originally a Kurdish slogan "*Jhen, Jhian, Azadi*", in both Persian and Kurdish. This was an unprecedented solidarity which, for the first time, voiced not a particular political agenda (as had been the case in previous protests), but a very feminist one, leading to the movement being dubbed the first "feminist revolution" of the world.

Artists were also very quick to support this movement and produced artwork, in various media, which was either a reworking of a previous work, updated to reflect the movement, or altogether new works to support it. Shirin Neshat was one of the first well-known Iranian artists to formally support the movement by producing artwork for public spaces. One such work was the billboards commissioned by the Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Art (CIRCA) which were displayed on 1-4 October 2022, at the Piccadilly Lights (Piccadilly Circus, London) and the Pendry West Hollywood (Los Angeles) at 20:22 local time. Additionally, a limited-edition print was produced (**Fig.131**), with 50% of proceeds donated to Human Rights Watch and the remaining 50% donated to #CIRCAECONOMY to support their free public art programmes (https://circa.art/products/shirin-neshat/). For this project, Shirin Neshat selected two works from her *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997) titled *Moon Song* and *Unveiling*, with the resulting new work, entitled *WOMAN LIFE FREEDOM* (*Zan Zendegi Azadi*) (2022) portraying two female hands held open and holding two bullets.

On the left hand of this image, inscribed in Persian is an excerpt from the magic realist book *The Drowned* written by the Iranian female author Moniro Ravanipour. Neshat states that she was inspired by the writer's "visual and imaginative narrative that makes an allegorical analogy between a storm taking place under the sea and the political climate on land". This juxtaposition of the natural world's turbulence with the political turmoil above the surface reflects the complexities inherent in Iranian society. The bullets also serve as a symbol of the violence, conflict, and upheaval that have marked Iran's recent history. The presence of paisley and other

floral motifs in the artwork adds another layer of symbolism. These motifs are deeply rooted in Iran's ancient Persian history, signifying cultural richness and heritage. However, Neshat highlights that this cultural wealth often coexists with a sense of cultural contradiction, representing Iranians' ongoing struggle to reconcile their historical identity with the demands and challenges of the modern world. This internal conflict and duality, as expressed through the artwork, echo the sentiments of many Iranians who grapple with their nation's rich past and complex present (https://circa.art/press/press-release-shirin-neshat-woman-life-freedom/).

London-based freelance illustrator Roshi Rouzbehani (b.1985) is another artist who drew inspiration from the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Prior to this, she had created portraits of individuals who had lost their lives at the hands of the Iranian regime, including Neda Agha-Soltan. Following the death of Mahsa Amini, Rouzbehani felt a deep sense of urgency to contribute to this cause. In response, she swiftly produced a multitude of illustrations that revolved around the movement and paid tribute to Mahsa Amini. One crucial factor that drove her dedication was the severe internet shutdown enforced in Iran, which effectively silenced many Iranians, making it nearly impossible for them to share their voices and stories with the world. Through her illustrations, Rouzbehani endeavours to honour the resilience of the Iranian people's struggle and express her solidarity. Leveraging the potency of art, she communicates their message in a universally comprehensible manner that transcends the need for translation (https://www.creativeboom.com/inspiration/roshi-rouzbehani/). One such illustration is *Woman, Life, Freedom* (2022) (**Fig.132**) for *The New Yorker*, which captures the essence of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and serves as a representation of the diverse voices and ages of young women involved in the protests in Iran. In the illustration, five girls of different ages are depicted, each symbolising a unique facet of the movement. The group includes a young girl, a schoolgirl proudly displaying a victory sign, a veiled girl raising her fist in defiance, and another girl courageously cutting her hair in protest. They all walk together behind a girl with flowing red hair who proudly carries a red flag bearing the words "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom) in Persian. The choice of reds, whites, and greens in the colour scheme mirrors the colours of the Iranian flag, adding a powerful layer of symbolism to the artwork. This illustration conveys the unity, determination, and resilience of women from different backgrounds and age groups who came together to demand their rights and freedom in Iran. It captures the spirit of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and serves as a visual testament to the worldwide protests advocating for the movement and the freedom of Iranians. By utilising her art as a means of expression,

Rouzbehani has contributed significantly to raising awareness and rallying support for the cause, both within Iran and on a global scale. Her illustration encapsulates the strength and collective power of women who refuse to be silenced and continue to fight for their rights and a better future.

Ghazal Foroutan (b.1994) is another artist interested in art as a tool to protest injustices around the world, especially regarding the rights of women in Iran. Foroutan, who had previously explored the intersection of art and activism in her MFA thesis, particularly focusing on opposing the compulsory hijab, recognized the potential of art in advocating for change and raising awareness about the suppression faced by Iranian women. As a result, she was actively generating artwork for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, intending for these images to be accessible and used without restrictions. Her goal was to empower activists and supporters of the movement by providing them with visual materials that could effectively convey their message and amplify their cause. By creating these images for widespread use, Foroutan aimed to facilitate and strengthen the movement's visibility and impact, both within Iran and on the global stage (https://www.unladylike.co/episodes/168/iran-feminist-revolution). In one image (**Fig.133**), Foroutan has reworked the motivational poster *We Can Do It!* (known as "Rosie the Riveter") by J. Howard Miller from the 1940s (**Fig.134**), which was meant to inspire women in the workplace during WWII. This image is not well-known in Iran but is iconic in the West and Foroutan specifically used it to appeal to a Western audience and sensibility. She has, however, adapted Rosie to convey a contemporary Iranian look and message. Hence, "Iranian" Rosie has black hair and thicker eyebrows to emphasise her ethnicity and background and she is wearing a mask to stay anonymous and protect her identity. She is not wearing a headscarf, as in the original image, but is instead waving a white scarf in peace, which also reflects the "White Wednesdays" movement, instigated by the activist Masih Alinejad, whereby people would wear a white item (usually their headscarf) in protest against compulsory veiling. On Rosie's arm we see a tattoo, in Persian, reading "no to compulsory *hijab*" to reiterate this message. In a speech bubble we see the words "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi!" and "Woman, Life, Freedom" echoing the slogan of the movement in both Persian and English.

The use of a colour scheme consisting solely of pink and blue, also serves as a symbolic commentary on the gendered nature of the Islamic state in Iran, since these colours are often associated with traditional gender roles and stereotypes. By employing these colours, Foroutan

highlights the inequalities and restrictions placed on women within the Iranian context. Foroutan's image is therefore designed to engage in a dual conversation. On one hand, it directly addresses and resonates with the local protesters in Iran by incorporating the movement's slogans and reflecting the ongoing struggles and symbolism of their activism. On the other hand, it also appeals to a foreign audience by using a well-recognized Western image of female empowerment – the adapted "Rosie the Riveter". This dual approach allows Foroutan's artwork to have a meaningful impact on both local and global audiences, bridging cultural and geographic boundaries to raise awareness and support for the cause of women's rights and freedom in Iran.

It has become clear from studying the artwork produced by the female artists discussed in this chapter, that the Revolution and the subsequent events of the past four decades have greatly affected them. These events caused great tremors in the collective psyche of the nation and shifted the female internal and external landscape, causing both emotional and psychological transformations, as well as triggering shifts in societal and cultural dynamics. This also led to not only an exponential rise in the number of women artists in the post-Revolutionary decades, but also engendered the emergence of fresh themes, an imaginative iconography, and innovative outlets for artistic expression. Equally, the pre-occupation with self-identity in these works (as opposed to a cultural or national identity, which had been the focus of attention in the pre-Revolutionary decades as seen in the works of artists from the Saqqakhaneh movement for example) seems to stem from the need to safeguard a female identity, increasingly under threat, both for artists who live in Iran and have had to fight for their personal and artistic identity against the proscriptions of the state, and for artists who had to leave Iran and were faced with an alien and often hostile culture.

The issues and themes discussed in this chapter have been tackled by female artists with the intention not only of raising awareness amongst a broader global audience but also of depicting these issues through the lens of female consciousness and experience. These aspects have often been perceived and represented distinctively from those of their male counterparts. In addition to this, these female artists employ contrasting visual cues, along with the regime's imposed limitations and rhetoric, as well as Western preconceptions, in order to subvert these narrative and shed light on their constraints. In doing so, they effectively challenge both the state's

established gender constructs and stereotypes, as well as those prevalent in the Western context.

What has, consequently, mostly unified these artists, despite their different geographic locations, is the fact that they were all deeply affected by the Revolution and the ensuing developments in Iran which, for many, represented the choice to either leave their country of birth and live in exile or to stay and face the difficulties and the censorship of their artistic output. What also emerges from these works is a shared compulsion to convey the experiences and record the, often untold, stories of Iranian women after the Revolution, whether in the diaspora or in Iran, who face different challenges, but continue to defy their circumstances to forge their own path in an unprecedented manner. These images can be seen as narratives, offering us a glimpse into post-Revolutionary Iranian women's lives and identities. Many of these artists, particularly those who live in Iran, refer to themselves as storytellers and express their need to, as Shadi Ghadirian states "be the voice for what could not otherwise be heard and the eyes for what could not otherwise be seen" (Ghadirian 2015: 6). It can, therefore, be argued that the shared experiences and traumas of the past four decades have become the most prominent theme and the unifying underlying current in these works. Consequently, their analysis and comprehension cannot be disassociated from the contextual backdrop of the events that have profoundly shaped and informed them over this period.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SELF AND OTHER: BINARY OPPOSITES

> “The world presented to young Iranians is a black and white one; there are no shades of gray. People are either good or evil, with nothing in between.”
> (Mehran 2002: 241).

In the previous chapters, I examined the historical influences on the works of the female artists discussed, as well as exploring the specific incidences and influences following the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 and the subsequent inception of the Islamic Republic with its repercussions for women and artists. In the following chapter, I will explore how female artists address the paradoxes inherent in Iranian society. I will also examine how they react to and interact with the “other”, which is both the “other” of the state and a Western/non-Iranian “other” and includes the representations and expectations placed on Iranian women by both. One of the ways in which the “self” and “other” is manifested is in the bifurcation and tensions that exist between the private/female/interior (*andaruni*) and the public/male/exterior (*biruni*) spaces in Iran, traditionally being the boundaries that demarcate the feminine self from the masculine other. Additionally, there are the binaries between tradition and modernity, as well as those between East and West, the local and the global.

These binary tensions have been traditionally present in Iranian culture (particularly in the past century) and have been exacerbated in the post-modern age and post-Revolution Iran. They have introduced paradoxes at the level of the “self” which have given rise to a sense of fractured identity, a theme explored by contemporary Iranian female artists like Samira Eskandarfar (b.1980). Eskandarfar delves into the inherent duality within contemporary Iranian society in her painting series titled *I am not me* (2013) (**Fig.135**), where she depicts two women, or perhaps two facets of the same woman, presented either together or separately. One figure is adorned in white attire, wearing a white mask, while the other is dressed in black with a corresponding black mask. The symbolic use of black and white, signifying concepts such as

good and evil, day and night, and other contrasting ideologies, mirrors the Manichean worldview propagated by the Iranian regime. This stark contrast serves to emphasise the conflicting inner desires and external pressures that shape and constrain the lives of women in Iranian society. Eskandarfar's art highlights how women must conceal their innermost desires and emotions behind a metaphorical "mask", whether it be black or white, preventing any true colours from revealing themselves. Consequently, their authentic identities remain perpetually obscured, hidden not only from the world but, perhaps, even from their own selves. The series derives its title, "I am not me", from this profound sense of inner conflict and the constant negotiation between societal expectations and personal desires. Within these images, the "other" represented by the mirror image of the "self" symbolises the quest for understanding and self-discovery. Searching for the "other" becomes inseparable from the search for the lost "self", capturing the complex struggle of women navigating a society marked by contradictions and dualities.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, a significant portion of the Iranian population, particularly the younger generation, found themselves compelled to lead double lives. This phenomenon emerged due to the growing incongruence between the rigid prescriptions imposed by the state and the individual desires and aspirations of the post-Revolution generation, as well as the influences of an increasingly interconnected and globalised post-modern society. As a result, people in Iran had to navigate the challenging terrain of balancing their personal beliefs, aspirations, and values with the conflicting demands and pressures from various oppositional forces at play in their society. The State has itself also adopted opposing/conflicting strategies regarding many of these issues, particularly where women are concerned, to suit its own purposes. An example of this is the regime's attitude towards birth control, which was initially banned as un-Islamic, but later because of massive population growth, the policy was reversed, and birth control encouraged. These paradoxes are evident not only at the state and societal levels but also within the regime's foreign and domestic policies, which have increasingly demarcated the boundaries separating the "self" from the "other."

These dichotomies also partly stem from the profound impact of technological advancements, social media, and satellite television on Iranian society. These developments have empowered Iranians to compare the prevailing ideology and value systems of their regime with those of other nations across the globe. Consequently, a stark contrast emerges between the values promoted by the Iranian regime and traditional society, which emphasize conformity, and the

messages propagated by international media, which champion modernity and individuality. As a result of this exposure to contradictory messages, Iranians, even from a young age, grapple with the necessity of compartmentalising their lives. They learn to keep their domestic existence separate from their experiences at school and in public spaces, often hiding what the authorities deem "unlawful" behaviours, such as drinking, consuming foreign news outlets, or interacting with members of the opposite sex. Consequently, individuals may carry a sense of guilt and secrecy, as many activities considered normal and acceptable by global media and societies are categorised as crimes within their own nation. This tension between societal norms, official regulations, and global influences creates a challenging environment for Iranians, shaping their perceptions of self and society and compelling them to negotiate a delicate balance between their personal values and the demands imposed by their government and traditional cultural norms.

Women in Iran have refused to conform to the regime's efforts to shape their identities, but they have also not blindly embraced Western influences. Instead, they have proactively forged hybrid identities by carefully selecting elements from both sides, demonstrating their agency and a resolute rejection of homogenisation and stereotyping imposed upon them. This process underscores their determination to define themselves independently, drawing from a diverse array of cultural influences, and challenging the one-size-fits-all expectations placed upon them by society and the state. These women navigate a complex path that allows them to incorporate aspects of both tradition and modernity, asserting their individuality while pushing back against the constraints imposed by their society and government. Their hybrid identities are a form of resistance and a powerful assertion of autonomy in a society shaped by diverse influences and conflicting worldviews. They are, however, also keenly aware of this hybrid identity which promotes a "profound sense of duality" (Honarbin-Holliday 2013: 67). The duality of Iranian culture can be observed during flights to and from the country. Foreigners are often taken aback when they see unveiled Iranian women boarding planes outside of Iran transform themselves into their Islamic personas. Conversely, when leaving Iran, veiled and demure looking women board the plane, to later adopt, once the plane has left Iranian airspace, different identities with styled hair, make-up, and fashionable clothing that seamlessly integrate with the fashion of their destination.

Shirin Aliabadi's series “Miss Hybrid” (2006-2007) (**Fig.33**) and “City Girl” (2010) (**Fig.34**) offer a striking representation of the hybrid identity of young Iranian girls living in uptown Tehran. These young women have adeptly navigated the delicate balance between traditional values and contemporary aspirations, seamlessly blending Middle Eastern cultural influences with Western aesthetics. They reject the societal and governmental norms that restrict their individuality and instead embrace a hybrid lifestyle that contravenes many of the Islamic Republic’s rules and regulations. These girls construct their identity through a unique blend of their traditional upbringing and their desire for Western goods and lifestyle. They reject the traditional *chador* and instead modify the compulsory veil to meet Western standards, wearing brightly coloured headscarves that reveal their hair, which is in stark contrast to the regime's rules regarding the colour and style of the *hijab*. In addition, they alter their appearance through plastic surgery (Tehran is the “nose-job capital of the world” with more rhinoplasty than even Hollywood) (Kirkova 2013; Omaar 2016), wearing blue or green contact lenses and bleaching their hair blonde to conform to Western aesthetic ideals. Their provocative poses which draw attention to themselves as sexual objects seeking the gaze and attention of the viewer, is diametrically opposed to how a “good” traditional Muslim girl should act and appear. In this manner, Aliabadi’s young women both defy the regime while also confirming its fear and discourse regarding the “cultural invasion of the West” (**Figs.167,168,170**) and an identity crisis among young Iranian people (Golshiri 2009). Aliabadi thus captures the essence of the hybrid identity that these girls have forged for themselves in a society that demands conformity. Her work is a testament to the resilience of young Iranian women who refuse to be defined by the restrictive norms of their society and instead create a unique identity that blends their heritage and aspirations.

4.1 Private vs Public

The dichotomous nature of Iranian life is largely caused by the strict separation between private and public life, which has been enforced by the Islamic Republic. As a result of the government's penalisation of various activities such as drinking, listening to music, and intermingling with members of the opposite sex, many Iranians have been forced to retreat from public spaces and instead engage in these activities privately. This has contributed significantly to the divide between the two spheres of Iranian life. Furthermore, within the Islamic Republic, public spaces are often dominated by men, while women are typically confined to the private realm and expected to take on domestic responsibilities. To integrate women into traditionally male-dominated public spaces, certain measures were implemented that involved regulating women's physical presence and appearance, effectively turning the female body into what sociologist Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi describes as a "fence". The regime promotes the slogan "*Hijab* is immunity, not limitation" as a means of reinforcing this notion (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004: 6). Thus, the *hijab* functions as a form of both protection and constraint, serving as a barrier to shield women from strangers while also enabling their presence in the traditionally male-dominated spaces of the Islamic city. However, it also stifles any expression of feminine individuality by essentially creating a protective barrier.

The public spaces in the Islamic Republic are intentionally exclusive, designed to keep women out or contained through measures such as the veil and gender segregation. After the Revolution, there was a swift and significant transformation in the appearance and presence of women in public spaces, as noted by Amir-Ebrahimi. This change had a close and unprecedented relationship with power, particularly with regards to gender and age, and had a profound impact on women and the younger generation in the social spaces of the country. The large public spaces in Tehran, such as Vanak and Vali-Asr squares, are subject to strict control by the regime's agents and are transformed into enclosed spaces under the traditional rules and regulations of interior/exterior spaces (*andaruni/biruni*). The imposition of strict control by the regime's agents is carried out through a combination of overt surveillance, presence of security forces, and the deployment of regulations that restrict the permissible activities within these spaces. This control creates a palpable atmosphere of surveillance and scrutiny, where individuals are aware of being under observation, leading to a sense of self-censorship and adherence to the regime's norms and values. The delineation of spaces as either

interior or exterior is culturally significant and carries symbolic weight. By imposing traditional rules and regulations that dictate how public spaces should be used and experienced, the regime exerts control over not only the physical environment but also the cultural and societal meanings associated with these spaces. This blurring of spatial boundaries contributes to a sense of confinement, where public areas that should symbolise openness and freedom are transformed into controlled and confined environments.

The impact of this is particularly significant in how women can navigate social spaces, as it necessitates a constant negotiation between the interior private spaces and the external spaces of the global city. Hence, Amir-Ebrahimi argues that the large and crowded spaces of the city would transform into places where appearance, behaviour, and presence had to follow a pattern consisting of bans and permissions, which changed the function and even the identity of the place and space, creating more complexity and contradiction within society (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004: 3-4). In a society and state that values homogeneity over diversity and difference, women are often required to have a more discreet presence in public and typically male-dominated spaces. This necessitates an "absent" presence in society that is neither seen nor felt. According to Amir-Ebrahimi, the inclination of women to maintain a low profile within public spaces is primarily rooted in their heightened sense of insecurity within the urban environment. This heightened sense of vulnerability is further compounded by their keen awareness of the potential breach of established interior norms and regulations (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004: 7). Amir-Ebrahimi emphasises that this sense of insecurity is particularly pronounced for women who are alone in the city at night. She argues that, according to societal norms, a woman can only be out at night if she is either accompanied by a male relative or, if she is alone, in the enclosed and private space of a car (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004: 8).

Farzaneh Milani also argues, the "private" (which is the domain of women) is trivialised whilst the "public" (the domain of men) is affirmed and elevated (Milani 1992: 5). As a result of this cultural and political dynamic, the population, especially women, are subject to monitoring of their appearance and behaviour in public spaces. The so-called "Morality Police" enforce the regime's Islamic regulations and punish anyone deemed to have violated them. This results in women adopting different appearances and personas in public, where they must conform to Islamic mores, while behind closed doors, drug use and casual sex are common among many, especially the younger generation who have openly rejected many of the regime's, and their parents', moral codes. (Moaveni 2006; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009; Navai 2014; Erdbrink

2016). These personas are often in conflict with each other, leading to fragmentary and often schizophrenic identities. Shirin Neshat has been a vocal critic of the gendered dynamics of public space in Iran, which she argues are dominated by men who dictate social norms. In contrast, women are relegated to the private sphere and expected to embody collective societal values. When women do venture into public spaces, they must conform to the rules set by men: veil themselves and suppress their sexuality and individuality. This reinforces their segregation from men and reinforces the rigid gender roles of Iranian society (Sheybani 1999).

In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the Islamic Republic's values were also reflected in the content and spirit of State-propagated art that occupied public spaces, such as the numerous murals found throughout Iran. Most galleries and art institutions were closed, which forced artists to resort to private means of producing and exhibiting their work. This led to the marginalisation of female artists, and other artists who were not producing art aligned with the regime's ethos (with Revolutionary, Islamic and War/Jihad iconography in particular), and their relegation to private spaces, both socially and artistically. Moreover, in contrast to the previous regime, the Islamic Republic did not prioritise supporting artists, as they had to allocate resources towards more pressing matters, such as the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88). As a result, any art sponsored during this period was intended for propaganda purposes, rather than for aesthetic value. Nevertheless, female artists have managed to thrive, adeptly transforming several of these challenges into opportunities. One such example is the strategic reclamation of gendered spaces, where they assert ownership over traditionally private domains and repurpose them to their advantage. Many of these artists, such as Shadi Ghadirian (Figs.**6,24,26,108,126,144,145,176,184,191**) have focused on depicting the private/indoor lives of women in the Islamic Republic, highlighting the stark contrast with the public spaces from which they are often excluded.

Female artists, particularly, encounter significant obstacles when attempting to engage with public spaces in Iran. Due to the restrictive societal and governmental norms, any public engagement by female artists, must be done covertly. The regime is suspicious of public recordings or engagements, making it difficult for them to obtain permission for such activities. As a result, the process of creating art in public spaces is hindered, with many female artists forced to pursue their craft in private, enclosed spaces. One artist who intervenes in public spaces despite the restrictions is Nastaran Safaie (b.1984), who has produced several videos that were recorded covertly, without permission from the state. In *High Heels* (2017) (**Fig.136**),

Safaie has filmed herself walking the full length of Vali Asr Street – the 18-kilometer-long thoroughfare, demarcating Tehran's western and eastern sections – for five hours in high heels (https://www.nastaransafaei.com/High%20Heels/920/). Safaie begins her subversive video project by strapping on a concealed GoPro camera at 10:30 am, which she wears until 5:30 pm as she walks through various public spaces. During this time, she captures numerous instances of people staring at her, with some individuals expressing anger or frustration, especially in response to her choice of high heels. Shockingly, she also endures 36 instances of sexually explicit comments and harassment, with half of them directed towards her footwear. During her walk, Safaie captures not only people's reactions to her presence but also the physical toll it took on her, including the six blisters she acquired along the way. These blisters symbolised not only the discomfort that women face when navigating public spaces in Iran but also the harm caused by the state's gentrification efforts on the historic buildings and entities in the Vali Asr area. Thus, Safaie's work conveyed multiple messages, critiquing not only the difficulty women face in public spaces but also the urban planning strategies employed by the state (Karimi 2022: 179). By highlighting the difficulties women encounter while navigating these spaces, Safaie prompts a broader contemplation on societal norms and values that contribute to these challenges. She brings into focus the limitations imposed upon women's presence in public areas, inviting viewers to consider the larger implications of these constraints on individual agency and collective societal progress. Hence, Safaie's work serves as a catalyst for dialogue, compelling viewers to reflect on the interplay between societal constructs, spatial arrangements, and individual experiences within the cityscape.

In another video entitled *In Tehran* (2017-18) (**Fig.137**), Safaie literally brings the private into the public spaces of the country (https://www.nastaransafaei.com/In%20Tehran/921/). Here Safaie addresses the policed and censored public spaces of the country by posting nude photographs of herself (taken in private) around Tehran, but immediately censoring them with a black marker (in the manner of the regime's censors). By posting intimate photographs of herself in areas subject to strict public surveillance, she tactically brings the private into the public, generating a powerful visual juxtaposition. This act serves as an act of self-expression, but it is immediately countered by the act of censorship – her overlaying of the images with black markers mirroring the regime's control over visual narratives. This contrast underscores the constant negotiation between individuality and societal norms, embodying the intricate dance between self-representation and state censorship.

Safaie's decision to venture into the streets of Tehran alone is, additionally, an act of defiance that resonates on multiple levels. By navigating public spaces unaccompanied, Safaie highlights the disparity between men's and women's freedom of movement, shedding light on the restrictive nature of these expectations. Safaie has professed that she envies men's freedom to go out alone late at night and longs for a similar freedom (Karimi 2022: 180), revealing the deeply rooted desire for equality and autonomy. Safaie's work, therefore, serves as a striking manifestation of artistic activism, encapsulating a layered critique of gender norms, societal constraints, and the intricate interplay between private and public spaces in contemporary Iran. Through her interventions, Safaie employs visual symbolism to challenge established norms and provoke a re-evaluation of the status quo.

Safaie's work also explores the notion of space, both physical and psychological. The boundaries between the private and public realms are blurred, offering a poignant commentary on the policing of spaces. Her navigation of these spaces and the presentation of her own body within them challenge the patriarchal appropriation of public spaces as male-dominated and regulated zones. Hence, Safaie's intervention is not just an individual statement; it becomes a collective voice representing the experiences and aspirations of countless women in Iran and contributes to an ongoing discourse that seeks to reshape societal perceptions, pushing the boundaries of artistic freedom and reshaping the narrative around gender, identity, and autonomy in the contemporary Iranian context.

Jinoos Taghizadeh (b.1971) is another artist who has clandestinely engaged in artistic interventions within the public spaces of the country. In *Titus Andronicus* (2015) (**Fig.138**), a 160-minute-long video named after William Shakespeare's play of the same name (which narrates the massacre and bloody revenge around five locations in ancient Rome), Taghizadeh surreptitiously (due to the prohibition of filming in public spaces without official permission) affixed a Go-Pro camera to her forehead and embarked on a journey across Tehran. She visited five crucial locations where Iranian citizens had been subjected to various forms of violence, whether physical or legal, such as the unmarked mass burial grounds of political activists in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, the Islamic Republic Parliament, and the political prison, Evin. At each location, Taghizadeh shifted the camera, lowering her head to show portions of Shakespeare's text, then raising her head to capture the site she had visited (Karimi 2022: 182), with the video unfolding as a narrative of observation and commentary. Taghizadeh's method of framing, wherein she lowers her head to reveal the textual passages before raising it to

capture the sites, becomes an evocative symbol. It captures the dual act of witnessing – observing the text and beholding the sites. This technique underscores the duality of memory, where literary narratives are entwined with lived experiences. It is through this dynamic interplay that the weight of historical and contemporary violence is infused into the very fabric of the cityscape. The juxtaposition of Shakespeare's text against the sites visited, further establishes a connection between timeless artistic expression and the contemporary Iranian context, prompting viewers to contemplate the parallels between universal themes in literature and the socio-political currents of the nation.

Throughout the video, Taghizadeh's presence is marked by her voice which gives a commentary on both the street and the footage, deftly avoiding and simultaneously adopting the viewer's gaze, giving her complete authority over what, when, and where she chooses to observe. Her voice serves as a guiding commentary, providing both context and interpretation. This element not only contributes to the immersive experience but also allows her to exert agency over the viewer's perspective and assume an authoritative role in shaping the visual narrative. This auditory dimension serves as an embodiment of her autonomy as an artist and as a chronicler of the spaces she traverses. Taghizadeh, thus, undertakes an exploration that delves into the intricate intersections of violence, memory, and the act of witnessing, all while leveraging visual and auditory strategies to challenge conventional modes of perception and authority, inviting viewers to reconsider conventional viewpoints, prompting a deeper engagement with the complex interaction between artistic expression, historical resonance, and the contemporary socio-political climate of Iran.

One of the aspects of public spaces, is the gender separation that is enforced within public buildings, transportations and elsewhere in cities. The metro in Iran, for example has separate carriages for women and on buses, women have a separate area at the back (**Fig.101**), whereas men sit at the front with a metal bar between them. In *My Own Privacy Policy* (2013) (**Fig.139**), Curator Elham Puriya Mehr (b. 1979), converted a city bus, departing from Sanandaj (in the Kurdistan province of Iran), customising it inside and out, with artworks created by the A3 art project group (artists: Negar Farajiani, Babak Kazemi, Sohrab Kashani, Maryam Khosroshahi, and Khadije Mohammadi-Nameghi) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F9z0ypFR4U). The artworks varied in medium from photographs, a shadow play, a soft sculpture, and a video, with some having a blatantly political theme – such as the one entitled "Evin", which is both the word for "love" in Kurdish as well as the name of the infamous political prison in Tehran.

The bus was supposed to run its regular route, picking and dropping people along the way, whilst acting as a mobile exhibition space, which allowed a more intimate and free space for discussion of the artwork. To this end the exhibition was not advertised widely either, since Puriya Mehr wanted to get audience's unrehearsed reaction and interaction. With this short-lived exhibition (it was supposed to run for three days but ended up running only for one), Puriya Mehr wanted to confront private sentiments in public places, stating that she wanted to ask exactly what "Privacy Policy" is, given that Iranians' privacy is repeatedly violated by different people, from the morality police to members of one's own family or even strangers, who offer advice on others' behaviour or appearance (Karimi 2022: 188-189).

Hence, the regime's proscriptions have resulted in Iranians having to lead separate lives in public and in private, involving not only their outward appearance but also codes of conduct imposed by the regime and ratified by law (such as segregation of the sexes). As Shahram Khosravi argues, after the Revolution, private spaces became, in the Foucauldian sense, "heterotopias of deviation" (Khosravi 2008: 145), whereby other sites found within society are "represented, contested, and inverted" (Khosravi 2008: 145). These spaces, while seemingly separate from the mainstream, become vital sites of cultural negotiation, where individuals navigate and negotiate their identity in relation to the established norms. In this manner, women must transform themselves when they leave the house, but at home many Iranians indulge in similar activities to other young people elsewhere such as drinking alcohol and having sex before marriage. Thus, their lives are split between what Erving Goffman refers to as "front stage", in this case the outdoor spaces of the Islamic Republic and "back stage", the private spaces of homes. Iranians have learnt to switch on cue from one performance to another (Khosravi 2008: 124). From a young age, individuals are presented with conflicting messages regarding how to behave and present themselves. While the state, schools, and media may enforce certain norms, families, Western media, and social networking sites may promote different ideals. Similarly, from a young age, individuals may be taught to keep secrets and withhold information about their "private" lives from "public" authorities and institutions such as schools. As a result, parents may caution their children not to disclose certain behaviours, such as the presence of alcohol in the household or practices which may be deemed un-Islamic. In addition, certain activities such as being unveiled, associating with the opposite sex, and watching satellite television – which individuals may engage in privately – are categorised as "crimes" if done in public, further necessitating the need for duplicity. Consequently, many young Iranians have come to believe that their parents are pressuring them to act deceitfully,

and that Iranian society is characterised by hypocrisy and falsehood (Khosravi 2008: 124). This is because they are unable to express their true selves and must constantly conform to values mandated by the state – values that are often also held by their parents' generation – which directly contradict their own desires and beliefs.

The need to constantly monitor one's actions and appearance has resulted in a persistent state of awareness and anxiety, as well as a division in one's identity between a performed self in the public sphere and a private self. The graphic novel "Persepolis" (**Fig. 140**) by Marjane Satrapi (b. 1969) explores the challenges posed by the disparity between private and public spaces, particularly regarding how women were expected to behave in these spheres. Satrapi addresses the notion that women were required to exhibit "polar opposite" behaviours in these arenas, which contributed to a sense of internal conflict or "schizophrenia" (Satrapi 2008: 344). In one image, Satrapi illustrates a group of women in public wearing the Islamic uniform, which results in their becoming indistinguishable from one another, losing their sense of individuality. The same group is then depicted beneath in their private setting, where they are free to express their individuality through unique hairstyles and clothing choices. This contrast highlights the fact that it is only within private spaces that women can express their individuality. The novel's black-and-white style serves to emphasise the stark disparity between these spheres, as well as the regime's Manichean worldview and its efforts to limit colour within women's lives and clothing.

In the *Look* series (2012) (**Figs.141,142**), Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981) puts on display the isolated private lives of Iranian middle-class youth living in a concrete apartment building, depicted alone, sitting in front of a window looking out against more concrete buildings. All the photographs were taken at 8 pm, a time between light and dark in Tehran, thus further symbolising the grey and in-between places and lives lived by Iranians, faced with unemployment, rising living costs and the lack of any viable alternative. These images were then displayed both as photographs (**Fig.141**) and as videos (**Fig.142**) on screens set against glass windows that looks out upon more concrete buildings standing on watch in the background like the "morality police", creating the sense of an infinity of mirrors, and highlighting the sense of inevitability and despair of their lives. By displaying these images (in public), the private worlds of these individuals are presented to a "public" who often, are themselves, caught in the same trap. Tavakolian has declared that, in this series, she wanted to portray the story of the middle-class youth in Iran, who "lack hope for the future and are

constantly battling with themselves in isolation" (Larson-Walker 2013). Young Iranians have repeatedly expressed despair when considering their prospects, citing factors such as high unemployment, inflation, sanctions, and a general lack of rights and opportunities. Statistics show that this demographic also has the highest rates of unemployment, delinquency, and mental illness (Khosravi 2008: 6).

In other works, Tavakolian also explores the, often, hostile external environment such as *Portrait of Somayyeh* (**Fig.143**) from the *Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album* photobook. Tavakolian has professed that she was always obsessed with childhood photo albums but realised that they tend to end at around the age of thirteen or fourteen, after which there is a blank space where parents stop dressing their children up and taking their photos. She thus came up with the idea of finishing people's albums by taking photos of their day-to-day lives to fill in the gap. According to Tavakolian, many photo albums from Iran dating back twenty or thirty years feature the same generic landscape photo on the cover, depicting a lush, green mountainside with flowers, which is both beautiful and hopeful. She aspired to create her personal tribute to the stock mountain photograph – one that would represent the actuality of the lives of modern-day Iranians. Consequently, she discovered a barren hill in Tehran, devoid of flowers and almost devoid of hope – a stark contrast to the lush and vibrant stock photo that was used as inspiration. To produce this photobook, she carefully handpicked nine individuals whom she believed were emblematic of her generation. She then accompanied them to the mountain to help them discover the exact location that resonated most deeply with each person. In this image, we see Somayyeh, who Tavakolian states, she has been acquainted with for eight years. Originally from a conservative area just outside Isfahan, she lived with her family and aspired to move to Tehran. When she finally made the move, the city had a profound impact on her. In Tehran, she was able to blend in and maintain anonymity, allowing her to take the significant step of divorcing her husband, which was not possible in her hometown where she felt more exposed and visible. Tavakolian expresses her deep admiration for Somayyeh, noting that she perseveres tirelessly to carve out a place for herself in the world. (Tavakolian 2015). The portrayal of women's spaces in Iran depicted here is one of hostility and inhospitality. To navigate and endure in such an environment, women like Somayyah must employ adaptability and resilience, vividly depicted by her contorted posture as she bends to fit within the sprawling, lifeless branches that seem to encroach upon her. Her coat, adorned in a rich shade of crimson, and her scarf, a vibrant verdant green, starkly contrast the surrounding lifelessness of the branches. This contrast evokes the powerful image of a flower tenaciously pushing

through a bed of thorns, unwavering in its determination to flourish despite the challenging and inhospitable surroundings. The image of Somayyah, therefore, serves as a metaphor for the lives of many Iranian women who must navigate a challenging and often hostile sociocultural landscape. It captures the dichotomy and struggle faced by Iranian women as they assert their identities and aspirations within a society that often seeks to silence them. Somayyah's defiant presence amidst adversity serves as a testament to the strength and resilience of women in Iran, who continue to push boundaries and strive for self-expression and empowerment despite the challenging environment.

Many artists, therefore, navigate the intricate interplay between the personal and the societal, offering intimate glimpses into the lives of Iranian women while simultaneously challenging and reshaping the rigid boundaries that define public spaces within their country's context. Through their art, they dissect the often-restrictive dynamics that govern public spaces and, in doing so, assert the importance of individual agency and self-expression. By shedding light on the complexities of the private realm and how it interacts with the public, these artists initiate critical conversations about gender roles, societal expectations, and the transformative potential of art as a means of navigating and negotiating the intersection of these two spheres.

4.2 Tradition vs Modernity

Another dichotomy that has preoccupied Iranian intellectuals for more than a century is that between tradition and modernity. In the present context, when speaking of tradition, I am referring to those pertaining to Iran's Islamic past and mores rather than the pre-Islamic traditions and rituals (such as Nowruz, the celebration of the first day of Spring). The Islamic Republic has tried to reinforce the first kinds of traditions, whilst trying (and failing) to eliminate the latter. Modernity has also posed challenges as a concept, particularly in non-Western countries like Iran, where it is often equated with Westernisation. As a result, modernity has been both rejected and embraced in the country, in part due to its association with the West which, to a large extent, remains a prevailing sentiment even today. Iran's success or failure as a modern nation has, therefore, been evaluated based on Western models and criteria.

In this section, when discussing modernity, I adopt the notion of "multiple modernities" as expounded by S. N. Eisenstadt. According to Eisenstadt, there are multiple paths to modernity, each influenced by the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of different societies. In other words, there is no single model of modernity that all societies must follow; instead, modernity can take various forms and trajectories. Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities emerged as a response to earlier theories of modernisation that assumed a linear and convergent path to modernity based on the Western experience. He argued that societies across the world are shaped by their own historical legacies, cultural traditions, and social structures, which interact with modernising influences in distinct ways. These interactions result in diverse forms of modernity that reflect the specific characteristics of each society. Eisenstadt suggests that there can be "alternative modernities" where societies modernise in ways that challenge or deviate from the Western model of modernity. These alternative paths may involve a different balance between tradition and modernity. By recognising the concept of multiple modernities, we acknowledge that modernity and Westernisation are not interchangeable, and that Western modernity is not the sole "genuine" form of modernity, despite its historical precedence and its role as a fundamental point of reference for other forms of modernity. Hence, the modernity that unfolded in many societies, including Iran, was characterised by a tension between conceptions of the self as part of the modern world and ambivalent attitudes toward modernity in general and towards the West in particular (Eisenstadt 2000).

Modernity is a term that can, therefore, have positive or negative connotations, depending on the interlocutor. The Pahlavi regime, for instance, placed a strong emphasis on a Western-style modernity in various facets of the state and society. Conversely, the Islamic Republic has largely rejected these "modern" ideals, particularly with regards to women's role in society. Paradoxically, despite the Islamic Republic's traditional stance, women have surpassed men in educational attainment and have become increasingly aware of their rights. Additionally, although Iran's practices may seem contradictory, the country can still be considered modern, in many ways. Ramin Jahanbegloo argues that Iran's modernity can be seen through the lens of its past as a semi-colonised country, which instilled in the Iranian people an appreciation for the positive aspects of modernity, but also made them vulnerable to its negative consequences. As a result, Iran's relationship with modernity is fraught with ambiguity and challenges because, from the outset, modernity was intertwined with feelings of inferiority and the loss of an Iranian identity under Western domination (Jahanbegloo 2004: xi-xii). The tensions and attitudes surrounding modernity in Iran are also mirrored in the works of contemporary Iranian artists. As Hamid Keshmirshekan contends, many artists find themselves caught in a state of conflict between traditional values and the allure of modernity and Western trends, resulting in works that reflect Iran's experience with modernity and the conflicting social processes currently at play (Keshmirshekan, 2007: 365).

The discourse of modernity entered the consciousness of Iranian intellectuals during the Qajar period, (1796-1925 AD) in the late nineteenth century, as Iranians began to travel to Europe and became acquainted with European culture, technology, and democracy. The exposure to European advancements led Iranian intellectuals to seek similar progress in their own society and strive to establish a modern nation-state akin to those of Europe. From the outset of this discourse, modernity was often equated with Westernisation, as was the case in many other non-Western societies. The Qajar dynasty made certain efforts towards modernisation in Iran, particularly notable during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896), who became the first Iranian monarch to visit Europe, being impressed by the technological advancements he saw there. According to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, both the Modernists and Traditionalists in Iran looked to Europe as a reference point while creating competing notions of modernity (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 37). This led to a type of historical thinking that framed Iranian history through a European lens. As with other non-Western societies, accounts of modern Iran were based on a regressive conception of history, in which the transition to modernity represented a

radical departure from the perceived “stagnant” way of life in Iran (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 5). According to this view, tradition, particularly as embodied by Islam and the Arab culture, was a primary factor contributing to Iran’s underdevelopment and weakness. Hence, modernists sought to supplant Islam and its traditions with a mythical pre-Islamic Iranian past which was idealised as being akin to those of the great Western empires. Equipped with their newly acquired knowledge, they embarked on a mission to establish a modern Iran, which entailed a redefinition of Iranian society and identity. The Iranian intelligentsia began to adopt concepts such as nationalism, modernism, and constitutionalism, which were prevalent in Europe, and considered them essential in establishing a modern Iran. The struggle between tradition and modernity led to a reassessment of the Iranian intellectuals’ perception of self. This ongoing conflict has continued to trouble Iranians to this day (Fazeli 2005: 27).

The traditionalists in Iran considered an authentic self as one defined by Islamic Shi‘ite culture, whereas for the modernists, it was the (European) modern culture that shaped their sense of self (Fazeli 2005: 43). The traditionalists were (and still are) concerned that modernisation would corrupt the country and erode its Islamic values and principles. Furthermore, the rift between traditionalists and modernists, led to them referring to each other in pejorative terms with modernists seeing the traditionalists as “backwards” and outdated and the traditionalists seeing the modernists as treacherous and derivative. The Iranian intelligentsia’s pursuit of modernity culminated in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), a demand for democracy and modernisation. Subsequently, the dichotomy between Tradition (as mostly represented by religious ideas and laws) and Modernity (based on a largely Western and secular model), entered the discussions and preoccupation of both government and society.

Likewise, the modernist discourse which entered the rhetoric of Iranian intellectuals during the Qajar period, was largely reliant on the “Woman Question”, which itself was symbolised by the appearance of Iranian women and predominantly articulated around the issue of the veil. The first Iranian modernists who travelled to Europe linked (the unveiling of) women to the progress of the nation and attributed what they perceived as Iran’s “backwardness”, to women’s condition and especially to “their imprisonment in veils” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 64). Likening the veil to a “shroud,” a “blackcrow”, or an “inkpot”, Modernists argued that the veil had prevented women from developing to their fullest potential” (Milani 1992: 29) and they believed that removing it was imperative for the country’s progress and disassociation from Arab/Islamic culture (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 54). In other words, the “woman question” and

women's appearance marked the boundary between tradition and modernity and became the *cause célèbre* of modernists and traditionalists alike who stood on opposing sides of the debate. This debate was mostly waged by men on both sides, and it took some time for women themselves to get involved in this conversation. Subsequently, women and their bodies became the central battleground for the clash between tradition and modernity in Iran.

Hence, according to Michael Cameron Amin, the idea of a "modern" Iranian woman only came about in the nineteenth century. This concept was influenced by European, American, Ottoman, Turkish Republican, and Japanese women, and it was often shaped by male authority. This "modern" Iranian woman was associated with unveiling and relied on the symbolism and practices associated with the unveiled woman (Amin 2002: 13). Consequently, when Iranian intellectuals began to imagine modern Iranian womanhood in the nineteenth century, the counterimage they constructed of the "traditional" woman was of an uneducated victim who was trapped in poverty, ignorance, and superstition, and, importantly, she was a burden to her husband as a result (Amin 2002: 20-23).

As these discourses started during the Qajar period, many contemporary artists, such as Shadi Ghadirian, use Qajar iconography to denote the tension between tradition and modernity. In the *Qajar* series (1998) (**Figs.6,144,145**), Ghadirian engages in a dialogue with Nasser al-Din Shah's (r.1848-1896) vast archive of photographs, some 20,000 albums, that are still at the Golestan Museum in Tehran. The original Qajar photographs (**Figs.146,147**), which were primarily taken by Nasser al-Din Shah himself, similarly depict the interplay between tradition and modernity. This is mainly because photography was itself a symbol of modernity during the Qajar era. It had been introduced in Iran only a decade after its invention, and Iran was the first country in the region to adopt its use. Additionally, Nasser al-Din Shah used photography extensively as a tool to present himself as a modern monarch (Diba 2013a; 2013b). Ghadirian became particularly fascinated by the sheer volume of photographs of the Shah's wives and intrigued by the women depicted in the images, who were shown in activities such as riding bicycles – something women in Iran are forbidden to do – wearing strange make-up and costumes inspired by European dancers (Scheiwiller 2011: 115).

In her series of sepia-toned photographs, Ghadirian masterfully employs mise-en-scène to create clever parodies of the original Qajar portraits. She dresses her friends and family in period clothing, including the *shaliteh*, a tutu adapted by Nasser al-Din Shah during his visit to

Paris and subsequently made for his wives, and places them in front of custom-made and borrowed backgrounds. Following the studio portrait tradition of the time, Ghadirian incorporates objects from the women's daily lives. However, an anachronism arises as these objects are not from the Qajar era, but rather from the contemporary world. This juxtaposition signals to the viewer, that the images cannot possibly be from the 19th century. In Qajar #3 (**Fig.144**), Ghadirian's use of a boom box as a modern prop held by the model on one shoulder, exemplifies the clash of cultures found in contemporary Iranian society. This image mirrors the way young people in the US play music on the streets. However, in Iran, it is forbidden to play music, especially the type that is played on a boom box, in public. Despite this, Iranians still enjoy listening to the latest pop music, playing, and listening to it in private. Ghadirian's model's defiant stance, with one hand on her hip and her chin jutted out, further challenges the authorities in this choice of music, demonstrating that life in Iran continues despite restrictions.

The painted backdrop in these images depicts a curtained window, serving as a portal to an imaginary world where women are forbidden from engaging in certain activities, such as playing music or riding bicycles, as depicted in Qajar #5 (**Fig.145**). In Iran, women have been prohibited from riding bicycles due to traditionalist beliefs, which turned outdoor cycling and horse riding into political issues. Despite this, Ghadirian's images portray women defying these restrictive laws by incorporating these prohibited items. This act of defiance is reflected in the societal movements where women, who may have had no prior interest in cycling, demanded their right to do so (Kian-Thiébaut 2002: 137). Hence, in Qajar #5, the woman positioned in the back is fully veiled and appears to be disengaged from the bicycle, embodying the traditionalist view of women who are expected to be silent and unseen. In contrast, the woman in the front boldly holds the bicycle as if she is about to ride it. Furthermore, she has lifted her face veil (*roobandeh*), a gesture that was considered an act of protest during Qajar times, thus defying the ban on women riding bicycles and challenging the restrictive laws imposed on them. This emphasises Ghadirian's point that Iranian women continue to embrace modernism on their own terms, despite societal limitations and laws that attempt to dictate their behaviour (Scheiwiller 2011: 102). This coexistence of the old and the new is a recurring theme in Ghadirian's work, and it speaks to the complexities of Iranian society and the women who navigate it.

Ghadirian herself has revealed that in this series her intention was to capture the interplay between modernism and tradition, and the coexistence of past and present through the

juxtaposition of old costumes and new inventions (Gupta 2009). Thus, the series emphasises the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, a theme that had already been explored by other Iranian artists in the past. The neo-traditional artists of the 1960s, known as the Saqqakhaneh movement, drew inspiration from Iran's rich cultural and religious history, incorporating traditional motifs into their work, whilst simultaneously attempting to engage in a modern global art discourse. The artists from the Saqqakhaneh movement, who were primarily concerned with creating art that was unique to their country and culture, and not merely a derivative of other modern art forms, believed that tradition was an essential element in constructing a national and Iranian identity, and therefore embraced it as a positive symbol (Daftari, 2002, 2014; Emami, 1971, 2014; Keshmirshekan, 2007, 2013). In contrast to the Saqqakhaneh movement, Ghadirian employs traditional imagery to offer a critique of the restrictions imposed on Iranian women. By using Qajar women as a metaphor for women living in the Islamic Republic, she suggests that despite a century and a half of progress and modern inventions, women in Iran continue to be hindered by outdated traditions and the rules of a patriarchal, male-dominated society, represented by the enclosed and isolated space of the harem. According to Ghadirian, Iranian women are not "frozen in time", as some might believe. Instead, it is the laws and societal norms that seek to keep them rooted in the past, preventing them from fully embracing modernity and progress (Gupta 2009). Ghadirian's goal is not to completely abandon tradition in favour of modernity, but rather to seek a unique Iranian perspective on modernity. She is interested in finding an "Iranian filter of modernity", one that considers the country's history, culture, and traditions while still moving forward with progress (Gupta 2009). Ghadirian believes that modernity (as represented by its symbols in her images) was meant to bring liberation to third-world countries – through technological progress, economic growth, gender equality, and democratic values. She believes that it has not achieved this purpose – instead, it sits on top of old traditions, creating tension between the two. Abbas Daneshvari also highlights the dual nature of the Qajars, viewed as both a representation of progress and decline, qualities that continue to shape the ongoing tensions in present-day Iran (Daneshvari 2014: 44).

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity was also felt in the next chapter of Iran's history, with the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), who actively pursued a rapid modernisation of Iran, at times at the expense of long-held traditions, particularly those pertaining to religion. This led to a growing anti-Western/Colonial attitude among the country's intelligentsia, including figures like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1923-1969) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977), who

viewed these modernisations as a threat to Iranian hegemony, potentially endangering Iran's cultural autonomy and imposing Western influences on the nation's identity. This apprehension stemmed from a belief that the modernisation process could erode the nation's historical and cultural legacy, giving rise to a sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis the West. The traditionalists also viewed the modern woman as morally corrupt and inauthentic. They believed that the modern woman's departure from established cultural and moral norms threatened the coherence and continuity of Iranian society. In their eyes, the modern woman's adoption of what were considered Western or foreign practices was not only a rejection of the nation's cultural heritage but also a disintegration of the authenticity that defined Iranian identity. This perception was intertwined with concerns about the erosion of moral values. Traditionalists often associated the modern woman with behaviours and attitudes that were perceived as morally questionable, driven by their interpretation of Western values as antithetical to Iranian ethics. This judgment was exacerbated by the fact that many of these changes were indeed influenced by Western cultural trends, leading to a perception of moral degradation and cultural inauthenticity. Al-e Ahmad, for example, viewed women as the "guardians of tradition" and believed that the process of modernity had pushed them "to the streets" and into adopting a "loose" manner of behaviour (Afary 2009: 240).

The Pahlavi regime promoted two seemingly contradictory ideals in their rhetoric: modernism and a return to mythical ancient times and traditions – both concepts were at odds with an Islamic identity and traditionalism. They also utilised the appearance of Iranian people, particularly women, to demonstrate to the world that Iran was becoming modern and sophisticated. Women were encouraged to embody the modern and educated ideals of their European counterparts, as part of the regime's push towards modernity (Cohen 2015: 115). The Pahlavi regime portrayed the "modern" Iranian woman as a contrast to the "traditional" Qajar woman, who was depicted as embodying "backwardness", tradition, and corruption in Iranian society. While the Pahlavis did not initially prioritise the woman question in their social policies, it became a crucial element in their criticism of the Qajars (Amin 2002: 46). The modernising reforms initiated by the Pahlavi regime brought about fundamental changes in the traditional fabric of Iranian society and widened the cultural chasm between Modernists and Traditionalists (Hunter 2014: 47-48). The conflict between tradition and modernity was, therefore, also present during this period, as evidenced by research conducted among students at Tehran University in the early 1970s. The study found that over 50% of "youth problems" were related to tension with "old customs and traditions", and 53% were attributed to

"prejudice and family adherence to old customs and traditions" (Shahidian 2002: 59). While women were given rights and encouraged to pursue education and enlightenment, societal and familial expectations still adhered to traditional gender roles. This led to a dichotomous society, even at that time.

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity during the Pahlavi period also became increasingly visible in the public spaces and particularly in the appearance of women. This incongruity is evident in Katayoun Karami's *Stamp* series (2005) (**Fig.148**), where she showcases two official ID photographs, placed side by side and framed as stamps. The first photograph portrays Karami wearing the mandatory Islamic *hijab*, enforced after the Revolution, while the other captures her mother before the Revolution, immaculately coiffed and in Western clothing. These images powerfully illustrate the striking transformation in the appearance of Iranian women over just a few short years. Surprisingly, the older generation of women in the photographs appears more modern than the current generation depicted in later photographs. Despite Karami's photo being taken years after her mother's, it appears more antiquated due to the regime's concerted efforts to reinstate traditional values and appearances among Iranian women. In contrast, Karami's mother exudes the essence of a typical modern woman who could belong to either Western or Iranian culture. These images effectively underscore the stark contrast between the "modern" ethos of the Pahlavi regime and that of its predecessors, the traditional Qajar era and the subsequent Islamic Republic. They shed light on how women have become symbolic battlegrounds for competing ideologies and reflect the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity.

The pendulum subsequently swung back towards tradition with the Islamic Republic (1979-). Just as modernists aimed to liberate women from "ignorance and superstitious" traditions with Women's Awakening, the Islamic revival sought to protect women from the "moral decay" caused by Western modernity (Amin 2002: 243). Women remained symbols of the state's prescriptions – this time for tradition. The traditional woman now symbolised the state with the introduction of mandatory veiling and the regime's imposition of standards on women's appearance. Khomeini also capitalised on peoples' dissatisfaction with modernity as part of his political agenda and revolution (Afary 2009: 262). However, the Islamic Republic also took a hypocritical approach to modernity, taking from it what was expedient. For example, the IRI has an elected president, but one who is vetted by an unelected Supreme Council of Islamic

Jurists and answerable to an unelected Supreme Leader. Both the Pahlavi and Islamic Republic regimes, therefore, had their own internal contradictions about which aspects of modernity and tradition they chose to prioritise. The Pahlavi regime emphasised women's rights, modern technologies, and weaponry, but neglected many democratic principles in the modernisation process. Similarly, the Islamic Republic rejected modernity when it comes to women's rights, but has still embraced many modern technologies, weaponry, and communication.

Nevertheless, the new Islamic regime did not represent a wholesale return to the past, but rather as Afary argues, they reinvented and expanded certain retrogressive gender and cultural practices, presenting them as a "regime of truth" through modern technologies of power, as Foucault had described (Afary 2009: 265). The new regime continued the modern literacy and health campaigns initiated by the previous regime. However, they simultaneously encouraged traditional practices such as polygamy, temporary marriage, easy divorce for men, and a reduced age of marriage. Additionally, they promoted motherhood and large families. The regime prioritised patriarchal interpretations of gender norms over modern ones on occasion, while at other times, it adopted modern practices, presenting them as consistent with traditional Islam. In both cases, the regime disseminated these discourses through modern institutions (Afary 2009: 324).

However, the traditional roles imposed upon Iranian women by both state and society are increasingly in conflict with the modern world that is encroaching on them through various channels and a global youth and feminine culture that is at odds with these proscriptions. Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut has argued that the rule of political Islam is incompatible with the realities of modern Iranian society. As a result, Islamic and secular women have joined forces to reclaim modernity and challenge institutionalised gender inequalities. Women, both traditional and modern, have developed a new self-awareness and a desire to exist as individuals rather than being exclusively defined by their roles as mothers and wives, which has in turn led to a shift in how women perceive themselves (Kian-Thiébaut 2002: 141).

Consequently, there is a clash of ideologies between traditional values, which are enforced by both law and society, and the modern/post-modern order at a global level. Women and other marginalised groups have, nevertheless, found ways to adapt and navigate these contradictory ideologies in their daily lives. However, this has resulted in a society divided between the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Nonetheless, women have found ways to express

their "modern" leanings, within this status quo. Marjane Satrapi (b.1969) captures this subtlety in the graphic novel *Persepolis* (**Fig.32**), where she humorously depicts the new boundaries between the "modern" and "traditional" or "fundamentalist" woman in the way they dressed. The traditional woman embraced the *chador*, which was the regime's preferred mode of veiling, while modern women adopted a less restrictive approach, wearing a scarf and long coat over trousers (*roopoosh o roosari*). This dichotomy underscores the enduring struggle between these two contrasting identities, even within the confines of the strictly traditional spaces of the Islamic Republic. Satrapi's work brilliantly captures the nuances of this ongoing cultural negotiation. It demonstrates how women's clothing choices became symbolic battlegrounds in the ongoing contest between tradition and modernity, a theme that resonated deeply with Iranian women's lived experiences.

Nevertheless, Haleh Esfandiari argues that the increasing belief among Iranian women that they have rights and opinions suggests that the dichotomy between traditional and modern women cannot be neatly defined. Women desire the freedom to choose elements of both traditional and modern lifestyles that best suit them (Esfandiari 1997: 7). Hence, while many Iranians continue to uphold traditional values regarding marriage, motherhood, and family life, they also reject the notion of being limited to these roles alone. They desire access to education, the freedom to choose their partners, and other forms of autonomy. To overcome traditional impediments, they have adopted modern demographic and social behaviours, resulting in a higher average age of marriage, a sharp decline in fertility rates, and an increase in women's education and activity. Ironically, these outcomes are among the unintended consequences of the Islamic regime's modernisation policies (Kian-Thiébaut 2002: 139).

Rabee Baghshani (b.1982), who lives and works in the traditional and religious city of Mashhad, is an artist who skilfully navigates the complexities of tradition and modernity within contemporary Iranian culture through her Pop Art-inspired creations. In *Rokhsareh II* (2017) (**Fig.149**), Baghshani portrays a wine-bearer (*saqi*), a popular figure throughout Iranian history and depicted in miniatures and celebrated in poetry. The wine bearer, prohibited in the Islamic Republic (all alcohol is prohibited) is juxtaposed against yet another banned item – a playing card, associated with gambling. Here, Rokhsareh, portrayed as the Dame of Hearts, has combined her traditional (Qajar) outfit with modern accoutrements such as red-rimmed Ray-Ban sunglasses and an iPhone, which she holds in one hand, posing for a selfie, whilst holding the wine carafe in the other, becoming a modern-day *saqi*. Baghshani, thus, challenges societal

norms and delves into the intricate interplay of traditional and modernity, shedding light on the challenges of navigating these dichotomies in contemporary Iran.

Soody Sharifi (b.1955), is another artist who explores the themes of tradition and modernity in many of her works such as the *Persian Delights* series, where she juxtaposes traditional images taken from miniatures with images of contemporary Iranian youth. *Blades* (2007) (**Fig.150**) from this series, portrays a young girl in the Islamic uniform of a long overcoat and scarf – here paired with blue jeans and sunglasses, putting on a pair of rollerblades. At the girl's feet, Sharifi has superimposed the image of a man in Safavid garb. He wears a white turban, mirroring the girl's white scarf, with one hand on his sword's hilt and the other holding on to one of the girl's feet as though trying to stop her from taking off. The two characters are set against a black plain background, allowing the focus to be entirely on them.

In this composition, the man symbolises tradition, while the girl embodies modernity. Positioned below, he gazes up at her with a somewhat beseeching expression, while she appears oblivious to his presence, unperturbed by his grasp on her foot. This image becomes a metaphor for contemporary Iranian society, where youthful desires and aspirations reflect modernity, even in the face of traditional laws and constraints. Sharifi's *Blades* thus underscores the resilience of modernity within Iranian culture, where the younger generation seeks to transcend traditional boundaries and societal expectations, symbolised by the girl's effortless ascent above the figure of tradition.

Hence, the theme of tradition versus modernity serves as a recurrent motif in the works of many Iranian artists. These artists grapple with the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Through their art, they offer thought-provoking reflections on the evolving roles and identities of Iranian women in a rapidly changing society. Their works often challenge stereotypes and preconceived notions, celebrating the resilience of tradition while simultaneously questioning its constraints on individual freedom and self-expression. In this dialogue between past and present, these artists not only confront the complexities of their own identities but also contribute to a broader discourse on the multifaceted nature of Iranian culture and the ongoing quest for balance between tradition and progress.

4.3 East vs West

Iran's relationship with the West has been a paradoxical one, fraught with mistrust and misunderstanding, particularly since the Revolution. The Islamic Republic has championed an anti-Western rhetoric from the start, considering the West (particularly the US) as its main existential threat. This rhetoric has become a politically-expedient, self-perpetuating myth that forms a core pillar of the regime's ideology and sense of identity. Despite this official stance, Iranian youth are attracted to Western goods, media, and music, perhaps partly because of the regime's vitriol against the West. The regime's propaganda has backfired, making the West a forbidden fruit that many aspire to. The Western treatment of Iran has also contributed to this paradox. Sanctions have particularly made life difficult for ordinary Iranians, leading some to ascribe their financial woes to the West. In a December 2012 Gallup poll, 47 percent of Iranians blamed the United States for the economic situation in Iran, while only 10 percent held their own government responsible (Zimmt 2015: 145), although recent developments in the country suggest that this figure may no longer hold.

On one hand, Iran's anti-Western stance and policies, as well as the sanctions imposed by the West, have isolated, and alienated the country from the outside world. On the other hand, the growth of the internet and satellite television has given Iranians access to global news and trends, leading to an adoption of Western fashions and practices. Many Iranians also wish to immigrate to the West, considering life there to be easier, though obtaining visas and facing financial barriers makes this difficult. Additionally, Iranians living in the diaspora are aware of their outsider status in their adopted countries, which are often antagonistic (politically) toward Iran.

Iranian artists also have had to confront both Orientalist tropes and stereotypes that have emerged in the wake of the Revolution and 9/11, whereby Muslims are portrayed as terrorists, and their women as oppressed, whilst also battling the regime's demands for women to primarily be pious and obedient wives and mothers. As a result, their works not only deal with the challenges posed by the regime but also the negative image of Iran in the West. Shirin Neshat aptly articulates the struggles of many artists, emphasising that they are fighting two distinct battles on different fronts. On the one hand, they are being critical of the West's perception of their identity, including the erroneous image of Iranian women, politics, and

religion. On the other hand, they are simultaneously fighting against their regime and government, which impose restrictions and ideological constraints on their artistic expression (Neshat 2010).

These artists actively challenge stereotypes perpetuated by Western media, press, and movies. At times, they deliberately emphasise these stereotypes to expose their absurdity and challenge preconceived notions. Nevertheless, they are also confronted with the pervasive influence of the West on their artistic endeavours. They grapple with the necessity of appealing to the Western "gaze" and gaining Western approval as a pathway to success. Many artists in Iran believe that artistic recognition in the West will positively impact their success in Iran, further complicating their negotiation between artistic aspirations and the expectations imposed by the Western lens. This creates a complex dynamic, as the Western gaze often reduces them to mere stereotypes. This conundrum underscores the delicate balance these artists must strike, seeking to transcend stereotypes while embracing the universal aspects of their work that can resonate across cultural boundaries. Ultimately, they aim to foster genuine dialogue and appreciation that goes beyond superficial perceptions, all while preserving their unique cultural narratives.

In this vein, Newsha Tavakolian's (b.1981) award-winning photo essay, *Women in the Axis of Evil* (2006) (**Fig.151**), was conceived as a response to George W. Bush's labelling of Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil". Through her work, Tavakolian aimed to challenge the Western media's stereotypes of Iranian women and to showcase a different side of Iran. As Edward Said has argued, one aspect of the electronic, postmodern world has been the "reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed" (Said 2003: 26). Consequently, the Western world has access to greater avenues to propagate and circulate stereotypical depictions of Iranians, with a particular emphasis on women. This assertion is underscored by the prevalence of images portraying veiled Iranian women – usually in a black chador (**Fig.165**) – in stark contrast to their male counterparts. Such imagery perpetuates deeply ingrained notions and biases, further exacerbated by the Western perspective, often influenced by a male-centric lens. This unequal representation underscores a broader pattern where Iranian women's identities are predominantly interpreted through the Western gaze, fostering a skewed understanding that fails to encapsulate the complex realities they navigate.

Tavakolian's approach of depicting ordinary Iranian women engaged in their everyday activities serves as a powerful counterpoint to prevailing narratives that seek to label an entire nation as "evil". Through her work, she strives to convey that the experiences, aspirations, and emotions of Iranian women are in many ways analogous to those of their Western counterparts. By highlighting the universal aspects of human existence and showcasing the shared human qualities that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, Tavakolian challenges the divisive rhetoric that perpetuates the "othering" of Iranian women and, by extension, the nation. She underscores the idea that reducing an entire nation to one-dimensional labels not only perpetuates bias but also neglects the individual stories, struggles, and triumphs that shape people's lives. Through her lens, she offers a profound argument against reducing the complexities of Iranian identity to a monolithic, villainous narrative. By engaging in this narrative intervention, Tavakolian urges viewers to recognise the shared humanity that transcends cultural and national boundaries. Her work serves as a call to reject the dichotomy of "us" versus "them", offering an alternative framework that encourages empathy, understanding, and an appreciation for the diverse experiences that unite us as human beings.

US-based artist Sara Rahbar (b. 1976) also delves into the complex relationship between Iran and the West, using cultural symbols from both worlds to illuminate the challenges faced by Iranians. The photographic series, *Love arrived and how red* (2008) (**Fig.152**), named after a poem by the Iranian poet Simin Behbahani, features Rahbar herself (wearing either a colourful, tribal dress or a wedding dress) and/or a man in a soldier's uniform. In all the images, both characters are wearing black balaclava/ski masks, giving them both anonymity as well as a menacing appearance. When the female subject is wearing a white Western-style wedding dress, an American flag replaces the customary veil. This juxtaposition of the wedding veil with the Iranian chador, coupled with the inclusion of the balaclava, invokes connotations associated with threat and "terrorism". The culminating pair of images portrays the female figure, adorned in wedding attire, lifeless on the ground. In the penultimate photograph, she rests in the embrace of the soldier, her form draped across an American flag; the subsequent image isolates her amidst pomegranates, one of which she extends in her hand, ruptured like a grenade. These pomegranates, while symbolising abundance and fertility in traditional Persian depictions, acquire a contrasting connotation of bloodshed and demise within this context. The substitution of the veil with the American flag and the woman's tragic demise in the concluding images imbue the work with a politicised message, shedding light on the struggles of Iranian women.

Rahbar's artistic narrative not only underscores the hypocrisy of the United States but also its role in the prevailing predicament faced by Iranians. Ultimately, it is the woman who bears the consequences of these transgressions, depicted amidst scattered pomegranates – the national fruit of Iran. Rahbar states that this series not only records the history of America's involvement and meddling in Iran, but also records her own personal travails as a child fleeing Iran with her family on foot for seven days, through mountains and snow and nearly dying, to go live in the very country that abetted the chaos and destruction that caused them to flee in the first place (Merali 2016). This deeply personal experience informs her artistic expression, infusing it with a sense of urgency and authenticity. Rahbar simultaneously accuses and enquires: "Our flags are soaked with blood – is it all right as long as it's not mine?" (Merali 2016). This inquiry challenges viewers to confront the ethical and moral implications of geopolitical actions and their far-reaching consequences on individuals and communities.

Haleh Anvari's (b.1962) travelling photographic installation, *Chador Dadar* (2007) (**Figs.29,153**) also addresses the contradictions within the cultures of East and West. In this series, Anvari juxtaposes Iranian women dressed in colourful *chadors* against backgrounds of non-Iranian landscapes and symbols from various cultures around the world. The term "dadar" is a slang word for "going away on a trip". Anvari's intention with this series is to showcase the *chador* alongside symbols from other nations. She explains her artistic approach by stating: "If the chador is the icon for Iran, let it meet the icons for some other nations" (Germanà 2014: 71). In one image (**Fig.29**) the women, in their colourful *chadors* are standing with their backs towards the viewer, in front of the Louvre museum (one of the largest repositories of Oriental images of women), and a poster for an Ingres exhibition (arguably the greatest Orientalist artist of all time), featuring the *Grande Odalisque* (1814). Contrary to the women whose faces we cannot see, the Odalisque is both nude and staring at the viewer. The Odalisque, in other words, is an Orientalist fantasy, based on the desire of a Western male audience, whereas the veiled women who avoid the gaze of the viewer, are the reality of the Oriental women who would not have been exposed to a male public gaze.

In another image (**Fig.153**) the women are standing in front of a news kiosk with a blown-up poster of Elle magazine's special body and diet edition. Once again, we cannot see the faces of the veiled women, whereas the Elle model is nude and exposed. Anvari thus questions Orientalist tropes regarding Eastern women as well as the subjugation of women to the male

gaze in the Western media and art-historical tradition – showing that veiling is the other side of the coin to Orientalist fantasies and images of unclad or semi-clad women catering to a male gaze, which are no less exploitative of women than veiling. This is particularly cogent in the case of France where, despite being a democracy, between 1994 and 2003, in events that came to be known as "*affaires des foulards*" (affairs of the veils/scarves), around 100 female students, from middle and high schools, were suspended or expelled for wearing the scarf in class. In this manner, Anvari demonstrates that coercive measures regarding the appearance of women are not just limited to Islam and the East and that in the West women's autonomy is also disrespected.

The dichotomy between East and West, is further exemplified in the works of diasporic artists, many of whom reside in the Western world. Iranian artists in the diaspora are particularly affected by these conflicting ideologies, as they face the challenge of navigating political and social pressures from their country of origin, while also contending with misunderstandings and preconceptions from their adopted countries. These artists must constantly confront the stark contrast between their country of origin and their adopted homeland, while grappling with the challenges of living in exile, in a state of liminality and ultimately not belonging to either culture. Nevertheless, their experiences in the West also shape their perspective so that, as Edward Said asserts, they may view their homeland through "more than one set of eyes" (Said 1993: 9). Parastou Forouhar, is one such artist who has confessed that when she arrived in Germany, she was just "Parastou Forouhar" but somehow, over the years of collaborating with Western colleagues and delineating her artistic territory, she became "Iranian" (Fitzpatrick 2014: 160).

In *Swanrider* (2004) (**Fig.154**), Forouhar seamlessly blends her Iranian and adopted cultures by depicting herself wearing a black chador while seated on a large white swan floating along the river Lahn in the town of Bad Ems, Germany. The image is a fusion of diverse Western iconographies and tales, including Hans Christian Anderson's "The Ugly Duckling", the Greek myth of Leda, and the American movie "Easy Rider" (1969) (https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/swanrider/). These references, incongruous with the chador signifier, allow Forouhar to integrate Eastern and Western cultures and signifiers while highlighting their inconsistencies, demonstrating that the veil is a construct akin to these other myths (constructed by men) that attempt to fabricate the ideal woman. However, the complexity of Forouhar's artwork lies in its potential incomprehensibility to both Iranian and German audiences. Her

Iranian viewers may struggle to grasp the Western cultural references embedded in the image, while her German audience may find it puzzling why a veiled woman is depicted floating on a swan. In this sense, Forouhar replicates the sense of alienation experienced by Iranian women, whether they remain in their homeland or choose to emigrate. Her artwork becomes a reflection of the cultural dissonance that many individuals in the Iranian diaspora encounter as they straddle the boundaries of multiple worlds, striving to reconcile their heritage with their adopted cultures.

Forouhar likewise showcases this dichotomy in another work, *Flashing* (2009) (**Fig.155**). In this image, Forouhar creates a juxtaposition by featuring a Muslim woman clad in a black *chador* from behind, standing in front of an H & M store with two posters of the same male model. The woman is holding her *chador* open, seemingly flashing the model(s). Forouhar, thus subversively challenges Eastern/Iranian societal norms by exposing the outwardly chaste Muslim woman to the male and Western gaze, while acknowledging that this very gaze is also subjected to the viewer's gaze, highlighting the fact that these Eastern and Western attitudes and visual cultures are the flip side of the same coin. Moreover, the woman in the image exposes herself voluntarily, choosing who she flashes while evading the viewer's gaze and defying the Islamic state, hence showing autonomy. The male model, on the other hand, cannot escape the gaze of either the woman or us, the viewers. In this manner, Forouhar invites us to contemplate the underlying tensions within Eastern and Western cultures, emphasising the complexities of identity and agency for women in both cultures.

Shirin Neshat offers another compelling perspective on the dichotomy of straddling Western and Eastern cultures. Neshat's video installation *Soliloquy* (1999) (**Fig.156**) features a double-screen projection portraying a veiled woman (Neshat herself), on parallel journeys in two distinct landscapes: one a Western metropolis, the other an Eastern city set amidst desert surroundings. The two landscapes symbolise how the woman/Neshat does not ultimately belong to either, despite having to occupy and navigate both. As an immigrant, Neshat has candidly spoken about the sense of cultural uncertainty, lack of equilibrium, and constant psychological shifting that comes with living between cultures (Enright and Walsh 2009). This experience often results in a need to constantly adapt one's personality according to the situation and people they are dealing with. *Soliloquy* is a poignant reflection of this complex reality, highlighting the challenges and complexities of cultural identity for those who navigate the intersection of different cultures.

Ghazel (b.1966), is another artist who juxtaposes East and West in her ongoing series entitled *Me* (1997-2000) (**Fig.157**). In this series, the artist films herself in short, candid shots lasting up to two minutes. These videos, reminiscent of home-movie recordings, predominantly feature scenes shot in Iran, featuring Ghazel performing various tasks such as weightlifting or going into the sea (in Iran beaches are segregated and women can only swim veiled) whilst always wearing a black *chador*. These actions are then explicated with subtitles in English, French or both, drawing on Western references and iconography such as Feminism (there is no word for Feminism in Persian) or Botticelli's Venus, which are relatable for a Western audience, in contrast to the *chador*-clad woman which is not.

By providing the sub-titles, Ghazel gives the woman a voice whilst making her more relatable for a Western audience, showing that she is not different in her habits and aspirations than women in the West. Ghazel is here appropriating the controversial trope of the veil (particularly controversial in France where Ghazel lives) to highlight the difficulty of translating the East into the West and vice-versa since the veiled woman is the antithesis of a Western viewers idea of both Feminism and Botticelli's Venus. The performative aspect of these videos allows for both intimacy and distance and by the performance of such mundane and ordinary tasks and showing the woman's universal aspirations (such as wanting to be beautiful), Ghazel is humorously portraying that the *chador*-clad Muslim woman is like her Western counterparts despite her outward appearance. In so doing she parodies not only a culture that would force its woman to perform such tasks encumbered by the veil, but also the culture that would judge her for a piece of cloth showing sameness to be the other side of difference and both to be equally myopic. Ghazel's character, therefore, resists the stereotype of the passive and oppressed Muslim veiled woman, but in fact engages in all the activities that a Western woman would do, albeit encumbered by the veil, becoming the hero of her own story. Ghazel thus invites viewers to question stereotypes and delve deeper into the intricate layers of cultural identity and the ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their place within a globalised world.

Another strategy employed by artists to show highlight the East-West dichotomy, is a form of reverse Orientalism, whereby Western signifiers/icons are orientalised by the inclusion of Eastern/Iranian signifiers such as the veil. In this vein, in *Liz Undercover* (2008) (**Fig.30**), Afshan Ketabchi (b.1966) re-appropriates Andy Warhol's image of the actress Elizabeth

Taylor by veiling her with a *chador*. Thus, the Iranian/Eastern artist (Ketabchi) has taken a Western artist's (Warhol's) image of a Western icon (Taylor) and using the *chador* (an Iranian signifier), claims it as her own. Talinn Grigor notes that Ketabchi reverses the Orientalist matrix on to itself so that instead of the "passive and generic veiled oriental", it is Elizabeth Taylor that is "eroticized under the veil", thus shedding the veil off the Orient and revealing that "there is nothing but a woman under it" (Grigor 2014: 215). Interestingly, Elizabeth Taylor had herself donned the veil when she had travelled to Iran (before the Revolution) (**Fig.158**), even though at the time it was not compulsory to wear. Taylor was, therefore, "dressing-up" in these photos and enacting an orientalist fantasy herself. Ketabchi's (re-) appropriation of the image of the "oriental" woman, therefore, comes as a full circle in such appropriation by the West and East respectively.

In a similar manner, the late artist Shirin Aliabadi (1973-2018) collaborated with her husband, Farhad Moshiri (b.1963), to create *Hejab Barbie* (2006) (**Fig.31**), as part of the Operation Supermarket series (2006). The series takes a satirical look at both Western consumerism and the Eastern culture's enthusiastic adoption of it. As part of this series, the artists appropriated the iconic Western doll, Barbie, which carries significant cultural associations, to transform her into a pious and modest Muslim woman/doll. This appropriation is particularly ironic since the Iranian regime has long regarded Barbie as un-Islamic, going so far as to claim that she is "more harmful than an American missile" (Bailey 2008). Consequently, the sale of Barbie dolls has repeatedly been prohibited in the country, with stores selling them risking closure (Mcelroy 2012). By veiling Barbie, the artists are highlighting the absurdity of a regime that needs to veil even dolls (store mannequins were likewise veiled), to legitimise itself as a Muslim state. This expectation of Barbie to be a pious Muslim doll/woman, is however not any more unreasonable than the West's expectations of Barbie which endow her with unrealistic proportions and features that are then passed on to young girls as impossible aspirations. Thus, *Hejab Barbie* shows that the expectations and signifiers placed on women by both the East and West are equally unrealistic. Likewise, by moulding Western images of women/dolls to become Iranian/Muslim ideals, artists such as Aliabadi and Ketabchi inverse the acculturation process, embraced by many young Iranians who adopt Western dress and physical appearance to achieve this unrealistic (and particularly unrealistic for the Iranian who has a different physiognomy to that of a Western woman) standard of beauty. In a Bakhtinian sense, these artists employ parody for its oppositional potential to appropriate an existing discourse but introduce into it an orientation which is "oblique or even diametrically opposed" to the original

(Stam 1992: 173). In doing so, artists like Aliabadi and Ketabchi engage in a subversive act of cultural commentary. They highlight the complexities and contradictions that women face in their pursuit of identity and self-expression within the intersecting realms of Eastern and Western cultural influences. Through their art, they invite viewers to critically examine the unrealistic ideals and expectations imposed on women, challenging the binary perspectives that often oversimplify these complex cultural negotiations.

The works of Iranian female artists, therefore, reflects the complex interplay of contrasting forces in their society. The works discussed in this chapter are imbued with the dichotomies that permeate the daily lives of Iranians, forming a central theme in their art. These binaries encompass a spectrum of opposing forces, including the relationship between the public and private realms, the balance of tradition and modernity, and the dialogue between the East and the West. Iranian artists seamlessly integrate these seemingly contradictory elements into their works, offering viewers a nuanced perspective that defies simplistic categorisations. Through their creative expressions, they extend an invitation to contemplate the profound complexity of Iranian society, challenging conventional narratives and encouraging a deeper understanding of the multifarious dynamics at play.

CHAPTER FIVE

STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSION

> "The complexity of Iran's contemporary life and thus its art is necessarily sodden with tensions and conflicts that, given the State's rigid proscriptions, have produced a theatre of signs, evading and avoiding official obstacles…In these works the epistemology of cognition is bypassed so that meaning, highly discursive, may not be easily codified. Though political repression has vitiated freedom of expression, new tactics and strategies of communication have both overcome the State's demands and enriched the various arts and their meanings." (Daneshvari 2014: 4).

In the previous chapters I examined the various historical, political, and social factors that have influenced the art of contemporary Iranian female artists, as well as the binaries that have inevitably arisen from these multifaceted influences. In this chapter, I will delve further into the strategies employed by artists to convey meanings, especially when operating under the scrutiny of the regime. I will discuss how these artists have crafted a distinct visual language that is deeply steeped in metaphor and allegory, enabling them to navigate the constraints imposed upon them. This carefully constructed visual language is marked by the adept manipulation of various artistic tropes, most notably the veil, to subvert authoritative narratives and reveal the latent stereotypes intertwined with them. Through this analysis, I aim to shed light on the ways these artists challenge established norms and dismantle preconceived notions while operating within the confines of a complex socio-political landscape.

On the eve of the Revolution, Iran had a relatively burgeoning art scene, with artists enjoying royal patronage, being sent on scholarships to study abroad as well as having the opportunity to exhibit at home. The newly inaugurated (1977) Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) had one of the best collections of Western contemporary art outside the West as well as of works by Iranian artists. After the Revolution, many of the avant-garde and well-known artists left the country, following a period known as "The Cultural Revolution" (1980–1983),

during which universities were closed, academia was purged of Western and non-Islamic influences and many books were banned in line with the revolutionary and political ideology of the new Islamic regime. In the arts, as in other disciplines, the aim became to cleanse (*pak-sazi*) the environment of all signs of the previous regime and of Westernisation, and to create a new Islamic vision. Many of the laid-off teachers and professional art experts held private classes in their homes and taught subjects that were banned in schools and universities. This, in turn, posed difficulties since the instructors or the curricula were not subject to any scrutiny, leaving the students (particularly female ones) vulnerable, as became apparent in the case of one of the most popular art educators, Aydin Aghdashloo (b. 1940), who was later accused by many women of sexual harassment (Fassihi 2020).

The official art produced in the first decade after the Revolution, particularly the years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), was for the most part, propogandist and made mostly by art students, many of whom had been active during the Revolution (**Figs.114,115,116**). This art populated the cities and was reproduced on walls as murals and as posters to adorn all public buildings. These populist new artists started to fuse revolutionary art from Mexico and Cuba with Islamic iconography. After the end of the War and the death of Khomeini shortly after, the Era of Reconstruction (*baz-sazi*) was launched by President Rafsanjani to reform the damaged economy and infrastructure. This paved the way for the Reform Era under President Khatami which started with his election in 1997 and which included the beautification (*ziba-sazi*) of the environment with the establishment of thousands of neighbourhood parks and the introduction of non-political murals to decorate cities. During this period there was greater artistic freedom, with the opening and expansion of many private galleries, art schools, societies and journals leading to the emergence of new artists, many of them women, in this freer environment. This transformation was significantly facilitated by technological advancements that granted artists access to a global art discourse. Additionally, the use of new media, such as video and installation, eagerly adopted by the emerging generation of artists provided them with greater artistic freedom (Keshmirshekan 2015). This period also saw the re-emergence of TMoCA, under the leadership of British educated Dr Alireza Sami Azar (from 1999 to 2005), as a leading institution of Modern and Contemporary art and support for artists. However, art and artists continued to face censorship and artists seeking to exhibit their work still had to navigate specific rules and regulations, including restrictions on displaying unveiled women or any content deemed un-Islamic or critical of the regime.

Nevertheless, despite these numerous restrictions and constraints, there has been a notable increase in the number of female artists, particularly since the late 1990s when many of these artists began their artistic career. This period has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the presence and contributions of female artists, surpassing any other period in Iran's history. The very nature of Iranian art has changed greatly because of women's participation and critique of key assumptions, not only about women's identity and society but also about the nature of art and art history itself, which had largely excluded women artists and their viewpoint. These women have been at the forefront of new artistic developments and have parlayed their existential angst visually, finding new creative strategies to critique socio-political circumstances, scrutinising and questioning known structures and narratives, and weaving their own alternative narratives.

These artists have had to invent new ways to convey meaning whilst under the scrutiny of the regime and, as a result, their art is ambiguous, because transparency is not a possibility in the Islamic Republic. They have adeptly navigated these restrictions by conveying their often-political messages through visual imagery rich in metaphor and allegory. They frequently employ the rhetoric and visual cues reminiscent of the regime's own symbols and iconography, to challenge and subvert the very system they critique. Hence, one of the artistic strategies used by these artists is the subversive use of mimicry to highlight these stereotypes, often achieved by using parody and irony to challenge both the regime's dictates and Western pre-conceptions. This art is, thus, fundamentally ontological, portraying the underlying tension that is part of life in Iran. It employs pre-existing codes and symbols in an ambiguous way, loading images with hidden meanings, some of which elude the regime and some which are inaccessible to Western viewers.

5.1 Language of Resistance

To address the restrictive policies of the regime, many artists employ metaphor and allegory as effective tools in their creative repertoire. As Neshat argues, Iranian artists (including those of the diaspora), have learnt to speak metaphorically and subversively, primarily because of the censorship they face in the Islamic Republic, so that in the arts and filmmaking, audiences have learnt to read between the lines and glean the underlying intention of the artist (Enright and Walsh 2009). Andrea Fitzpatrick has remarked that this allegorical turn in recent Iranian art is a method for artists to "speak" about polemical issues in Iran which they would not have been able to do so freely, whilst at the same time offering poetic and multifaceted results (Fitzpatrick 2014: 158).

Neshat also claims that poetic language is "inherently" part of Iranian culture because Iranians have an ability to use the idea of metaphor, whereby they say something but mean something else (Enright and Walsh 2009), and so Iranian artists have learned to speak "metaphorically" and "subversively" because of censorship. Yet despite this metaphorical visual language, Iranian audiences understand the underlying meaning conveyed (Enright and Walsh 2009). This art is also often performative in its staged and scripted presentation of the "self", whereby the various personas and identities prescribed by the state and society are enacted against a backdrop of these women's conflicting desires. Thus, it is an art of alterity and dissent but one that uses the regime's own prescriptions (such as censorship and the veil) to criticise and question its practices.

Iranian female artists often employ the metaphor of women's bodies as a powerful symbol that encapsulates both personal and collective identities, reflecting the imperative to protect and reclaim their sense of self. Additionally, they utilise various signifiers like the veil, hair, and masks to symbolise the constraints imposed on women's autonomy and self-expression. The works discussed often emphasise the body as a site where cultural meanings and personal identifications intersect. They challenge the notion of natural bodies in representation, highlighting instead the constructed nature of gender and selfhood. These artistic representations, further, actively confront the mechanisms through which the notion of "woman" functions as a sign within visual culture, as well as the pervasive influence of representations of women that shape and regulate the definition of womanhood in Iranian

society. By participating in the definition and redefinition of sexuality, gender, motherhood, and ideals of beauty, these works not only reaffirm the significant impact of visual representation on the construction of female identity, but also serve as acts of resistance and defiance against these norms.

5.1.1 Metaphorical Bodies

In Shi‘i orthodoxy, the female body has always been a contested site whereupon the battle for male supremacy has been fought, and a man’s honour is closely tied to a woman’s body. The patriarchal state is ultimately responsible for maintaining the honour of its women, which forms part of its legitimacy as an Islamic state. As a result, the patriarchal state also takes a vested interest in dictating appropriate female behaviour, with rules regarding female sexual conduct serving as crucial components of the overall body politic. Since the Revolution, the regime has exerted control over virtually every aspect of Iranians’ lives; from dictating their clothing, food, and drink choices, to restricting their movements and social associations. Nevertheless, many young Iranian women have resisted the state’s authoritarianism by employing their bodies and appearances as tools for defiance and rejecting the regime’s mandates. They thus engage in a constant battle with the “morality police” by wearing makeup, flouting the Islamic dress code and being “badly veiled” by showing strands of hair and wearing form-fitting clothes that barely meet the minimum standards laid down by the regime, playing illegal music loudly on their car stereos, as well as consorting with members of the opposite sex. As Pardis Mahdavi has argued, these young people are enacting a “counter-revolution of values” challenging the state morality codes and creating an alternative value through sexual and social behaviours, since both the state and young people opposing it, view sexual behaviours as political (Mahdavi 2013: 19).

Consequently, the body serves as the intersection where the social and biological aspects converge. It is not merely a naturally given entity, but rather a complex tapestry woven with symbolic significance and subjective identities. Importantly, the body is inherently shaped by both biological factors and historical contexts, influencing the definition and experiences of women. These effects are intricately woven into systems of representation, where the interplay between biology and history moulds and defines the understanding of women and their place in society. As Judith Butler has pointed out, the body imposes boundaries on the symbolic interpretations it gives rise to, but it is always subject to a symbolic representation. The idealised body cannot be comprehended based on the actual body; rather, it can only be comprehended in connection to another culturally established fantasy that asserts itself as the “literal” and the “real” (Butler 1999: 98). In this manner, the body becomes a metaphor for the

self, and attempts to censor the body, such as veiling or other restrictions, become attempts to censor the self and contain it.

The State's emphasis on women and their bodies has made this a very loaded subject for female artists, who often wage the battle against the State on the battlefield of their own bodies, using self-representation (both of a personal and collective self) to criticise State and/or Western-prescribed identities, whilst forging their own and thus reclaiming agency. Hence, the re-examination of representation in the visual realm coincides with a re-examination of representation in the socio-political sphere. The ability to govern the production of meaning directly influences the control of knowledge. This has resulted in an art which expresses doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity regarding knowledge and a crisis of identity, which is both personal and cultural, since individual identity is at the mercy of a state-imposed cultural identity in Iran. Additionally, since it is female identity that has been most under pressure to conform and change, there is a fierce struggle to establish identity in the works of these female artists. In this manner, as Elizabeth Grosz observes, the body as well as being the site of the inscription of power and knowledge, is also a site of resistance since it allows the possibility of being self-marked and self-represented in alternative ways (Grosz 1990: 64). As such, Iranian women have, learnt to use their bodies subversively to address the state's interference in their lives, so that, as Michket Krifa declares, most of the radical discourses and activities in the Middle East are "crystallized in and projected onto the female body" resulting in female artists having to wage a battle on two fronts, both for their creative and intellectual freedom, as well as against discrimination (Krifa: 2013: 9).

The centrality of women's bodies and presence in the socio-political developments that have shaped Iran in the past century can be seen in Mitra Tabrizian's (b.1964), *Surveillance* (1988-89) (**Fig.159**), which restages the key moments in Iranian history and how men (both from the State and the West) have manipulated women to further their politics. Central to this image is the role of women personified by a veiled woman (the ideal Islamic woman) standing on a pedestal at the centre, which reads: "In His name memory is mute. History speaks in the quickening of the dead". The saying can be interpreted as a commentary on how memory and history can be manipulated or controlled by powerful forces, such as religion or ideology. It also highlights the role of history in preserving the stories and experiences of individuals who might otherwise be forgotten. As such it captures the complex relationship between individual

memory, collective history, and the various influences that shape and control narratives in a broader social and cultural context.

At the feet of the central figure, lying face down on the floor with what looks like blood running from her left hand, is an unveiled woman. On the left is a young girl in a black *chador* who looks up to the figure of the pedestal and on the right is a veiled bride standing with a soldier who is wearing the image of Ayatollah Khomeini on his chest. Around these women are men, both representing the West (depicted by the two men shaking hands in the forefront, with pocket squares in the patterns of the flags of the US and the UK), and secular and religious figures, who are all making deals, at the expense of the women it seems. In this image, Tabrizian succinctly summarises how women have been used as central to the various regimes and policies implemented by the Iranian government, as well as how Western powers have tried, repeatedly, to use the country for their own purposes and their impact on the nation.

Women and their bodies have also always played an integral role in the works of Shirin Neshat who was one of the first contemporary Iranian women artists who used the "body" (mostly her own) in her *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997) (**Figs.117,118**). Neshat has saturated these images with all the accoutrements associated with contemporary Iran and its women, namely the veil, calligraphy, and weapons. In *Seeking Martyrdom* #2 (1995) (**Fig.117**), Neshat's utilisation of firearms and her unwavering gaze serves to underscore the pivotal role played by women in times of upheaval, while also defying the pervasive Orientalist stereotypes of meek, submissive Muslim women. Furthermore, Neshat's decision to use the poetry of feminist writers like Forough Farrokhzad to cover the visible parts of her body, including her hands, feet, and eyes, is a deliberate choice that aligns with the tradition of subversive feminist storytelling. In doing so, she transforms her own body into a canvas for these powerful messages, allowing her art to serve as a vehicle for the voices of these writers and, more broadly, Iranian women.

Women of Allah symbolises not just Iranian women but the "Muslim other", embodied within the female form as a canvas for visual representations of diverse Muslim societies throughout history and geography. Though superficially reliant on common Orientalist tropes, Neshat instead subverts them through the strategic appropriation of Islamic symbols, deconstructing their meaning and power in the process, whilst encouraging introspection on the cultural lens through which such images are traditionally perceived. They challenge the Orientalist gaze,

inviting the viewer to question their own cultural assumptions and offering a provocative commentary on the diverse experiences and perspectives of Muslim women. Neshat's use of the body, therefore, transcends the physical, delving into metaphor and allegory, inviting viewers to reconsider preconceptions and engage in a deeper exploration of the human condition within the context of Iran and its women.

Katayoun Karami likewise uses her body as a canvas to speak to the experiences and challenges of her generation, which has been shaped by revolution, war, immigration, and other traumas. In *Resurrected* (2009) (**Fig.160**), Karami poses as the dead or suffering Christ with a crown of thorns made of barbed wire and cascading hair covering her bare breasts. The image is overlaid by broken glass, further emphasising the broken and wounded body, and crudely written inscriptions, smudged in placed, in English and Farsi, that includes the repeated words "atheist", "prophet" and "justice", which highlight the duality in Iranian society and the increasing dichotomy between personal beliefs and the demands of state and society. Additionally, the Christian imagery as well as the addition of the English words, allows the iconography of this piece to be accessible to an international audience, who can "read" the messages and understand the over-arching context more readily than other works that solely use the Farsi script and/or Iranian/Islamic iconography.

At the top of the image, written in Persian are the words "woman" (*zan*) and "free" (*azad*) with the word "leader" in English between them. This not only suggests Karami's feminist inclinations but also carries an intriguing prophetic element, foreshadowing the emergence of the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" in protests more than a decade later. Additionally, as a woman (and a Muslim one to boot), Karami's adoption of the persona and imagery of the "son" of God (a concept rejected by Muslims, who, while acknowledging Jesus as a prophet, do not accept him as the son of God) inherently contains elements of subversion and blasphemy. Hence, Karami's portrayal blurs the lines between Islamic and Christian symbolism, encouraging viewers to contemplate the intersections of faith, spirituality, and cultural identity. It also carries feminist undertones, challenging patriarchal interpretations of religious narratives and exploring power dynamics within religious traditions.

Marsha Meskimmon refers to the representation of the (male) artist as Christ, by artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Paul Gauguin, Salvo, and Stephen Seemayer, as an explicit conceit used in Western self-portraiture to link the figure of the artist with alienation and creativity. In this

manner, she argues that the artists' creativity becomes associated with divinity, as well as presenting them as misunderstood and persecuted. Meskimmon further argues that this paradigm allows the (male) artist to adopt a seemingly weak position but use it as empowerment (Meskimmon 1996: 25). One would imagine that at least some of these strategies are also at play in Karami's image, even if she was not aware of this tradition in Western art-history. The title of this piece in Persian is *Rastakhiz*, which apart from meaning resurrection, was also the name of Iran's sole legal political party from 2 March 1975 until 1 November 1978, founded by the Shah in response to international pressure to establish openness in the political life of Iran, but which may have ultimately been instrumental in the downfall of the Pahlavi regime since it alienated previously apolitical Iranians, particularly the bazaar community (merchants who, to this day, resist taxation), due to the mandatory membership of the party and the associated dues, which were viewed as taxes. Additionally, the party's perceived interference in various aspects of people's lives, including politics, economy, and religion, further contributed to the discontent among certain segments of society. Thus, interpreting this image requires an understanding of not only Karami's personal biography as an Iranian woman and artist living in Iran, but also the religious, political, and artistic contexts both in Iran and the West.

Mandana Moghaddam is another artist who explores the representation of the body, specifically the pregnant body (not a common subject in Iranian art), in her work *Manijeh* (2008) (**Fig.161**). In this series of three photographs, Moghaddam depicts the body of a pregnant woman lying prone on her back or her side, surrounded by water. The concept of pregnancy and childbirth carries numerous associations, including the parallels between procreation and creation itself. Moreover, women have been historically burdened with the expectation of fulfilling their primary role as bearers and nurturers of children. This rhetoric has been further reinforced by the Iranian regime, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, when women were actively encouraged to bear children. The theme of pregnancy and motherhood also holds deeply personal significance for women, as these experiences shape their identity formation.

Contrary to the stereotypical depictions that relegate pregnant women to the fringes of cultural visibility and marginalisation, Moghaddam places Manijeh at the centre of the image, emphasising her significance, but also her isolation. The surrounding water can both imply the amniotic fluid her unborn child is surrounded by, but could also be indicative of drowning,

although there is no resistance, giving the impression of indifference and apathy. She is thus about to give birth to a child, who will transition from the suspended state in her womb to another form of suspension in the outside world, which seems to be no different from her current environment. Hence, the image can imply that the woman has become so accustomed to her situation that she is unaware of the impending danger.

The circular ripples surrounding Manijeh's body also resemble the solar system, with Manijeh at its centre, like the sun. As the source of life, she radiates energy outward, but also represents loneliness and abandonment in a sterile universe. As follows, the woman becomes the centre of an uninhabited universe, where she can only rely on herself. Moghaddam thus portrays the role of "woman" as the source of all life but also as ultimately alone. In this manner, Moghaddam eschews the usual romantic portrayal of the pregnant woman and instead deals with the more personal encounter of the woman herself.

The representation of the female body therefore serves as a vital tool in the creative repertoire of these artists. They skilfully delve into themes encompassing femininity, sexuality, and societal expectations through the body as a central motif. By doing so, they confront issues pertaining to identity and freedom, actively questioning cultural norms and the traditional roles thrust upon women in Iranian society. Consequently, the body, both as a physical entity and a symbol of empowerment or constraint, becomes a powerful vehicle for conveying complex narratives and emotions, adding a unique dimension to the evolving artistic discourse of Iranian female artists.

5.1.2 Metaphorical Self-Representation

Self-representation, depicting both a personal and a collective self, has also become a new area for self-exploration and to stage interventions in the historical representation of women as objects rather than subjects. To attain political representation, it has become necessary to reconsider all forms of discursive representation. The connection between the visual portrayal of women and their political authority is evident, as power is wielded by those who control representation in its broadest sense. By gaining control over self-representation, one can initiate a challenge for a political position. Notably, the pursuit of adequate self-representation has not compelled female artists to simply mimic the artistic language of their male counterparts. Rather, it has led them to re-evaluate the very nature of representation itself. Many of these artists strive to redefine the very essence of women's identity as political actors in the process. In their works, the search for the "other" is also a search for the lost "self," a desire for unification with that part of their identity which has been denied them. Self-representation (both of a personal and a collective self) in depicting the female figure, has therefore, been a major theme in the works of contemporary Iranian female artists who have claimed the figure of woman as subjects in charge of their own representation, rather than objects of male desire and dominance.

A central concern in this art has been the need to liberate the female body from being objectified as a voiceless and beautiful object for the male gaze and to disrupt traditional ways of perceiving the female subject. One of the ways female artists have tackled this issue is by using their own bodies in their works, enabling them to be in control and to direct the rhetoric they wish to convey. This self-representation allows female artists to assert themselves and become part of the broader canon of artists, both politically and artistically. The artist's placement of self is a powerful tool for representing themselves and gaining agency and voice in the public sphere.

Traditionally, in Persian art as in most other art historical traditions, women have been the object in art when depicted, whether in painting, illustrations, or photography. By representing themselves, women take on the role of object and subject, thus staging a critical intervention into the representation and subsequently the viewing of the image. Through self-representation, female artists are not only able to control the viewer's gaze but also to claim recognition and

power. Self-representation is also a powerful strategy that can be used by subjugated groups to regain their voice. By bringing marginalised identities into the centre of discourse, self-representation challenges dominant paradigms and becomes an important political strategy for Iranian female artists. This strategy provides the opportunity for artists to take control of their own representation and gives them agency as subjects rather than objects for the male gaze and enjoyment.

These self-portraits, however, often use the "self" to denote a collective self which extends beyond the individual to communicate broader issues and concepts. By employing themselves as the foundation of their artwork, contemporary female artists have successfully humanised abstract ideas, creating a feminist version of personification that reinforces the concept that the personal is political. This approach resonates with viewers as they can connect with the artist's face and body, and it brings attention to the larger issues at hand. Consequently, this blurs the line between traditional self-portraiture and representation of a concept or idea, frequently giving rise to more profound underlying themes. Similarly, the depiction of other women likewise stands as a shorthand for a collective self that is the Iranian woman.

Additionally, these self-portraits are also often performative in their staged and scripted presentation of the "self", whereby the various personas and identities prescribed by the state and society are enacted against a backdrop of these women's conflicting desires. This performative alterity is found in Ghazel's *Me* series (**Figs.37,157**), whereby Ghazel films herself engaging in various sports and leisure activities, such as ice skating, boxing, skiing, and sunbathing, as well as general reflections during the day about everything from family history to her aspirations, all while wearing a traditional chador. In this manner, Ghazel draws a contrast between the physical freedom associated with the (Western) cult of the body and the limited physical mobility that comes with wearing a *chador*, but also deliberately embraces a symbol of cross-cultural misunderstanding, one that remains a central point of contention between competing ideologies, specifically, the visibility and control of the female body. However, she subverts this symbol, both literally and metaphorically, by challenging the dominant narratives surrounding Iranian women. The *Me* series is, therefore, a deliberate parody and performance, with viewers (at least Iranian ones) aware that the artist is playing a role. The ironic distance created by the mimicry between the subject and the representation being mimicked, enhanced by the fact that the character never looks directly at the viewer, seemingly oblivious to them, allows for resistance and the subversive transformation of the

underlying representation. This paradoxically leads to heightened viewer identification with the protagonist, as viewers recognise their shared repressions. These performances are, thus, self-portraits that utilise irony to convey Ghazel's sense of being absurdly torn between two cultures. Through her art, she presents herself as a person who embodies the contradictions of living in a world where conflicting cultural norms are constantly at play.

Simin Keramati is another artist who examines the self in her various *Self-Portrait* pieces. In the video *Self-Portrait* (2007-2008) (**Fig.162**), running for 7:19 minutes, Keramati explores her own female identity through a combination of text and image. The written texts appear in both Persian and English, and in accordance with the language they are appearing in, move from right to left and vice versa on the dark screen, reflecting the artist's personal handwriting. The use of two languages allows the artist to communicate to both an Iranian audience as well as a non-Iranian one, highlighting the desire of artists to speak to and be understood by a global audience. These diary-like entries allow viewers a glimpse into Keramati's thoughts and emotional states, such as her desire to escape her thoughts by walking: "I do walk a lot these days; I just want to get rid of my thoughts" (Allerstorfer 2014: 183). Keramati juxtaposes her inner and outer worlds, walking outside (although the only clue to her outdoor environment is the sound of her footsteps and rustling of leaves) whilst grappling with her internal thoughts.

About a minute into the video, a black liquid, which can be symbolic for the pressures that plague women in the Islamic Republic as well as the censorship and suppression of expression, begins to spread over her left eye and gradually covers her entire face. At the same time, her writings seem to come out faster and several words are erased, with the rapidly expanding dark fluid hindering and undermining her recordings, as though she is writing against time. Before the black colour has finally wiped out Keramati's face completely, leaving only her scarf visible, the spectator can read the artist's final notes: "There is always this portrait of myself, melting, while walking I feel drops of my face, running over each other and fall into nowhere, and at last, I find myself walking on the streets of this city while I am faceless" (Allerstorfer 2014: 183).

Thus, through the interrelation and interaction between the face, veil, and personal handwriting, Keramati explores the abstract idea of identity and the notion of the self. The elements displayed in the video, such as the face and handwriting, are deeply associated with the artist's personal identity, while the veil serves as a cultural emblem of the conventions found in Islamic

societies, such as Iran, where women are required to wear it. The veil, along with the black ink, creates a sense of uniformity that conflicts with the personal signs of identity represented by the face and handwriting. Despite appearing faceless at the end of the video, the artist's handwriting and underlying messages continue to be conveyed until the screen finally obscures. Hence, through her writing and the sounds of her breathing and footsteps, Keramati challenges normative characteristics that are often used to determine one's identity.

Ghazaleh Hedayat likewise examines the notion of the self, in various self-portraits such as *Contact* (2008) (**Fig.163**), from *The Strand and the Skin* series and *Untitled* (2019) (**Fig.164**) from the *Repetition* series. The earlier image, on a smaller scale is revisited by Hedayat on a larger basis, in the subsequent one, both employing a technique whereby she shaves off layers of the image using a sharp object. In these images, Hedayat scratches the photographs of her skin, face, and the back of her head and shoulders to create vertical and horizontal grains, but it is unclear if the resulting image is the consequence of an addition (lines/layers being added) or a subtraction (lines/layers being removed). This brings the materiality of the paper and the image closer together. Hedayat uses the act of removal, scraping, and defacing the photographs to explore the inner being hidden beneath the surface. These works, thus, create a contrast between what is present and what is absent and suggest that the artist's hands can reveal what cannot be captured by the camera. This technique allows Hedayat to move beyond the surface of the photograph and explore the image's depth. Though Hedayat's body is no longer entirely present in the photographs, traces of her presence remain, creating a haunting effect on the viewer. This act of removal can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against photography's claim to accurately represent reality and challenges the idea of photography as a referential medium. Similarly, the disappearing image can be interpreted as symbolic of the Iranian regime's attempt to erase the identity and individuality of Iranian women.

5.1.3 Veiling Metaphors

Perhaps the most prevalent trope found in these works is that of the veil since for the past forty-four years no symbol has been more evocative of the Iranian woman in the collective imagination of both the Iranian regime and the Western world. The portrayal of the veil, particularly in its Iranian form, the *chador* – literally meaning tent (an all-enveloping, shapeless piece of cloth, usually plain black, held under the chin and covering women from head to toe only showing the face and hands) – which Foad Torshizi calls a "super-sign" (Torshizi 2012: 556), has become the single most attributed symbol representing the Iranian woman, appearing in most interpretations and visual representations and acting as a signifier for her. Women in Iran must be veiled by law and any contravention of this rule is punishable by fines, beatings, and imprisonment. Artists likewise cannot portray unveiled women and any representation of women is de facto veiled. Any discussion of contemporary Iranian women and representations of them are, therefore, inseparable from discussions about the veil – in fact, for much of the past century, the veil has stood at the centre of any such discussions. By putting on the veil (or by not putting it on in some Muslim countries) women become, in one way or another, something else; their actions take on a significance larger than the mere act of veiling/unveiling since the veil has become, above all things, a political statement. In this manner, as Frantz Fanon noted, the veil has been manipulated and transformed into "a means of struggle" (Fanon 1994: 61).

Throughout the twentieth century in Iran, largely engendered by the confrontation between tradition and modernity and their accompanying rhetoric, the state has drawn on women as a source of legitimacy and the veil (or the lack of it) has been crucial to this endeavour. Additionally, the wearing of the veil has been imposed, withdrawn, and re-imposed within a single lifetime, making it not only a heavily charged symbol, but also a dichotomous one. In the past century the veil has been particularly entrenched in politics on three significant occasions: the first when Reza Shah forcefully unveiled women; the second during the Revolution when women wore the veil to show their opposition to the Shah and finally with the forceful (re-) veiling following the Revolution. Apart from the second instance when the political act was a voluntary one, instigated by the women themselves to indicate their dissent, the other two were forced upon women and therefore have had serious implications for women's agency. On those instances women's only way of showing dissent was to resist as

much as possible, in the first occasion by refusing to leave their houses and in the last by the adoption of “bad *hijab*,” whereby women tried to evade, as far as possible the state’s *hijab* requirements. Thus, the veil has been at the centre of the political struggle over women’s sexuality which has been raging between the state/clergy and women themselves. However, despite attempts by the various regimes, it has been difficult to indoctrinate women, many of whom hung on to their underlying beliefs regarding the veil and the identity they wished to construct for themselves as a veiled/unveiled woman. It is, as Leila Ahmed argues, the history of struggle behind the veil that has now made it “pregnant with meanings” (Ahmed 1992: 166).

The veil, in Iranian culture, has likewise gone through centuries of change and the semiotics of the veil has evolved to support these evolving and often contradictory ideologies and applications. The first Iranian modernists who travelled to Europe linked the unveiling of women to the progress of the nation and perceived the veiled woman as “a caged bird” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 63). They attributed what they perceived as Iran’s “backwardness,” to women’s condition and especially to “their imprisonment in veils”. Likening the veil to a “shroud”, a “blackcrow”, or an “inkpot”, Modernists argued that the veil had prevented women from developing to their fullest potential (Milani 1992: 29) and that its removal was essential to the modernisation of Iran as well as its dissociation form Arab/Islamic culture (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 54). To facilitate the idea of unveiling, Nationalists and Modernists adopted the rhetoric of Iran the motherland and its subjects, her children, as brothers and sisters so that women could unveil in the same manner as they would in front of family members (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 133). For the traditionalists, on the other hand, the (un-veiled) European woman became the symbol of Westernisation and its accompanying corruption, immorality and feminisation of power (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 54).

Despite the rhetoric of modernists during the Constitution Era, it was with the advent of the Pahlavi regime and Reza Shah (r.1925-41) that unveiling could be realised. On 8th January 1936, during a graduation ceremony at a women’s teachers’ college, Reza Shah issued a formal decree known as “Kashf-e Hijab”. This decree, a part of the “Women’s Awakening” project, ordered women to unveil themselves in public spaces. This initiative, inspired in part by Turkey’s Atatürk and his efforts at secularisation, aimed to integrate women into the public life of the country. Notably, during this event, Reza Shah's wife and two daughters appeared unveiled and dressed in European clothing. That date was thenceforth designated as Women’s Day (renamed after the Revolution as “The Day of Shame”). Khomeini would refer to Reza

Shah's campaign for the emancipation of women as "one of the darkest moments in the history of Islam", declaring that it forced women to either stay at home or become prostitutes (Shubart 1995: 114). Iran thus became the first Muslim country to ban the veil through legislation, causing great opposition from the clergy and resentment among traditional women many of whom refused to leave their houses since for them the veil was a symbol of propriety as well as a defence against the male gaze, whereas unveiling represented a major sin and disgrace. The full force of the law was thrown behind the enforcement of the unveiling edict and local authorities were ordered to rid the streets of the most conspicuous signs of "backwardness" (which was the *chador* according to Reza Shah) by arresting anyone who resisted the new orders – policemen would tear women's veils off and even beat them. Veiled women were prevented from entering any public places (such as cinemas, theatres, stores, bath houses, bus stations and even shrines), taxi and bus drivers were liable to fines if they accepted veiled women passengers (Milani 1992: 34) and high-level officials who appeared in public with veiled wives were dismissed while low-ranking government employees who did so were fined (Sedghi 2007: 87).

With these measures, Reza Shah attempted to reverse the semiotics of the veil by making respectable women unveil, whilst at the same time forcing prostitutes (who had previously not been required to veil) to veil, thus transforming the veil from a symbol of virtue into a symbol of vice (Chehabi 1993: 219). Camron Michael Amin argues that unveiling women was one the most essential symbols of Reza Shah's reign, since women's bodies had to be unveiled in order for the state to "display" and "celebrate" the progress of women in Iran – one that it had not only initiated and co-opted, but also controlled (Amin 2002: 80). Additionally, apart from removing the veil, the state tried to empty it of its traditional symbolism, so that virtue, religion, and culture were no longer located in the veil, making its removal of no consequence. Moreover, continued veiling, indicated a disinterest in national or individual progress, making it a selfish and even treasonous act (Amin 2002: 81).

With unveiling the class structure accompanying the veil also changed and whereas veiling was previously a sign of class and leisure, now unveiling became popular among the upper and new middle classes, whilst the rest of society continued their practice of veiling. For the Pahlavi regime and elite, the veil meant backwardness and they thought that its removal signalled to the world that Iran was becoming a modern nation on a par with Europe – women were the signifiers of this modernity. Tavakoli-Targhi argues that Reza Shah's efforts were an attempt

to visually contemporise Iran with the West and that this refashioning was driven by both a sense of inferiority to contemporary Europeans as well as to the imperial ancient Persians (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001: 76). Nationalists also blamed cultural practices such as veiling and polygamy on Arabs and Islam, claiming that they were not part of Iran's pre-Islamic past, thus trying to bring pre-Islamic Iran in line with contemporary Europe. Thus, the enforced unveiling came to be regarded as the liberation of women by the modernists and as the degradation of women by the traditionalists. It also challenged the authority of the patriarchy and represented a critical blow to the power of the clerics, especially over women's sexuality, becoming a symbol of their emasculation. However, its enforced nature meant that it was not a democratic undertaking and thus not accompanied by personal autonomy. Afary believes that after this forceful unveiling, women's bodies became sites of political and cultural struggle, which was further complicated by the subjection of the newly unveiled women to an intense public gaze and sexual harassment (Afary 2009: 9), resulting in both veiled and unveiled women being harassed – the veiled women had their veils ripped off and the unveiled women were seen as licentious and thus open to unwanted approach. Since the veil had marked the physical boundary between acceptable and unacceptable gender roles, its elimination also resulted in a crisis of identity for both men and women (Afary 2009: 156).

After Reza Shah's removal from power, many clerics pressed for the return of the veil and many traditional women resumed veiling – the veil thus became a marker for tradition and religion. Although during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979) veiling (or unveiling) was not enforced, many of the connotations of the veil as "backward" remained whilst others, interpreted its decline as a sign of Western encroachment on their country and traditions. This ideology had been propagated by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-69) who popularised the term "Westoxification" (*gharbzadegi*) and encouraged women to embrace the veil as a strategy of rejecting Western ideology for a Muslim one. Many middle and upper-class women, in fact, wore the veil, during the run-up to the Revolution, to show their opposition and unification against the Shah and the Western influence in the country, although this was not a religious stance but a political and personal one. However, despite women's participation in the revolutionary process, a month after his return on March 7th, 1979 (one day before International Women's Day), Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) called on women to comply with the religiously sanctioned dress code for Muslim women (the *chador*) and the Revolutionary Council issued an edict requiring women to wear the veil in public. Several thousand women took to the streets in protest and were attacked and beaten, causing the Prime

Minister at the time, Mehdi Bazargan (P.M. February-November 1979) to proclaim that the Ayatollah's statement had been distorted by leftist and royalist troublemakers and that there would be no compulsory veiling. Nonetheless, by the summer of 1980 Islamic veiling was required in all government and public offices and by 1983 veiling had become compulsory for all women (from the age of six), including non-Muslims and foreigners and the Parliament passed the Islamic Punishment Law (*Qesas*) that stipulated 74 lashes for violation of the *hijab* and in 1995, a note to Article 139 of the Islamic Criminal Code specified 10 to 60 days of imprisonment against those who publicly resisted the *hijab*.

Consequently, the veil became the non-negotiable and essential hallmark of the patriarchal state, and from the beginning, Ayatollah Khomeini made the veil one of the pillars of his ideology and his vision for the good and proper Muslim woman since, for him, it symbolised all the evils committed by the Pahlavi regime and had caused the ruin of Iranian women. Clerics like Ayatollah Beheshti (1929-81) argued that wearing the *Chador* gave women "national character", made them "dignified" and showed opposition to "colonialism and imperialism", while the ban on the veil under the Pahlavis was an effort to "embarrass" women and draw them into "lightheaded loose behaviour" (Seliktar 2015: 45). Likewise, Ayatollah Motahari (1919-79) in his famous book *Mas`aleh-ye Hijab (The Issue of Hijab)* postulated that women's sexuality can cause *fitna* (social chaos) unless properly controlled, which was the function of the veil. Motahari believed that the veil provided a barrier between the sexes and served to uphold the social order and he made women responsible for keeping this barrier and preventing *fitna* (Motahari 2000).

The veiled woman was now assigned new roles as the guardian of religion, state, and society all of which required the veil as its foundation. The veil thus became a powerful political symbol, central to the ethos of the regime and its policies and the use of gender imagery in the form of the veiled woman transmitted across the world signalled the assertion of clerical and patriarchal domination over women, since women's (veiled) bodies were an integral part of this rhetoric. Veiled women also became the inadvertent public ambassadors of the IRI with their images, clad in black *chadors*, broadcast and recognised globally and gleefully lapped up by the Western media who frequently included such images when reporting on Iran (and often photographed next to the regime's anti-American murals) (**Fig.165**). Subsequently, it is mostly artists of the diaspora, who have been subjected to these images and the perception abroad of the Iranian woman, who use the black chador in their works in a subversive manner to contest

such stereotypes. Examples can be found throughout this thesis, but notably amongst the works of Shirin Neshat (**Figs.117,118**), Ghazel (**Figs.37,157**) and Parastou Forouhar (**Figs.18,25,100, 154,155**), who particularly use the trope of the black chador as a shorthand for the situation of women in the Islamic Republic. Artists living and working in Iran, like Shadi Ghadirian (**Figs.6,24,108,144,145,176,184**) Gohar Dashti (**Figs.1,5,20,120**) and Newsha Tavakolian (**Figs.21,112,119,141,142,143,151**) on the other hand are obliged to use the veil in their works if they want to exhibit them publicly in the country, since the rules that apply to women in the public spaces, also applies to their images when shown in such spaces. These artists, however, rarely use the trope of the black chador because of its negative association. The use of the veil and Western reductive interpretations and predetermined vocabulary signifying "repressed Muslim/Iranian woman" have, however, also undermined the message and scope of these artists work, as their works can be seen as "othering" and "self-exoticism".

The issues of veiling/unveiling have also been closely tied to debates on tradition/modernity with proponents of tradition supporting veiling and those supporting modernity espousing unveiling. Likewise, the dichotomy between public/male and private/female spheres has been entrenched in the semiotics of the veil – given that it acts as a barrier, shielding women from the male gaze and enabling them to access the public/male sphere. A woman in traditional Islamic cultures represents the domestic, personal domain, which disrupts the social order if she crosses into the public space. As a result, she needs to take the private space with her by wearing the veil and by removing all signs of sexuality and individuality – thus continuing to segregate herself. Thus, the veil delineates boundaries and consigns "power," "control," "visibility," and "mobility" to one social category (men) at the expense of the other (women) (Milani 1992: 5). The veil is complicit and indeed instrumental in this division as it is the prop that allows for women's segregation and oppression – by shrouding her, it dehumanises her, allowing her to become "lesser" to the Man's "more." Hence, it carries within it both meaning and intent.

It is also important to note the very gendered (read negative) association of the veil and that it is deemed degrading for a man to wear it and any man who did so was seen as being reduced to the level of a woman and so would lose his privileged masculine position. Hence when Iran's first post-Revolutionary Prime Minister Abdolhassan Banisadr (PM 1980-81) and Massoud Rajavi, the Mojahhedin-e Khalq's leader, escaped Iran, the regime circulated stories that they had done so dressed as women and even produced (fake/manipulated) photographs of them

wearing the *chador*, thus implying their cowardice and effeminate nature (Milani 1992: 23). Parastou Forouhar's (b.1962) *Blind Spot* series (2001) (**Fig.166**), which portrays the back of a man's shaven head wearing a black *chador*, plays on these assumptions. Apart from cleverly exploiting the metaphors associated with both the veil and hair, this composition disrupts conventional expectations because it is uncommon to see a man veiled, and this dissonance is amplified by the *chador* being worn in reverse, adding to the sense of discord. This could allude to the fact that women in Islam must walk behind men and so, are constantly staring at the back of their heads or it can suggest that, in such societies, women's identities are obliterated by men. Likewise, it can imply that wearing the veil is a "backwards" tradition, implemented by men. The background of these images has been digitally removed; the white contrasting with the black of the *chador*, allowing not only for the universality of the message, but also highlighting the alienation of the figure. Forouhar, therefore, offers multiple layers for interpretation and multiple "Blind Spots" to address, from political, social, and feminist viewpoints. In an ironic twist, the Iranian Cultural Ministry's decision to disallow the exhibition of these images in Tehran in 2002 only served to underscore the power of Forouhar's work. Her response, displaying empty frames on the opening night as a form of protest, garnered significant attention and support. Many people attended the exhibition and even purchased the empty frames, expressing solidarity with her cause and making a statement against censorship and the suppression of artistic expression.

Given that the veil is the sine qua non for the Islamic Republic in its conception of womanhood and an important symbol for both the regime and the West in their rhetoric and imagery of the Iranian woman, it has become an increasingly loaded symbol for women themselves. Subverting and transforming these elements involves challenging their predetermined meaning and purpose, and instead assigning them alternative meanings and uses. The iconography of the veil has therefore played an important role in the visual arts of post-Revolutionary Iran, both in the case of state-sponsored (propaganda) art as well as that of independent contemporary artists (in Iran and the diaspora) who often use it as a shorthand for the Iranian woman, seemingly employing the same rhetoric and symbolism as the regime and the West. However, these artists are using pre-existing codes associated with the veil subversively to "un-veil" and expose underlying gender and social issues, loading their images with hidden and contradictory meanings which challenge not only the ideology of the regime, but also gender constructs and Western and Orientalist pre-conceptions – allowing them to criticise one without reinforcing the other.

By navigating the intricacies of the veil as both a physical garment and a symbolic construct, contemporary Iranian artists elevate the trope beyond its conventional confines. Through a nuanced fusion of its performative dimensions, metaphorical implications, and allegorical resonances, these artists push the boundaries of interpretation and transcend the limitations of established stereotypes. These artistic representations transcend the reductive dichotomy of merely critiquing the veil or Muslim women. Rather, they embrace a multifaceted approach that allows for an array of readings and interpretations. The complexities woven into these artworks challenge preconceived notions and encourage viewers to grapple with the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the veil. A prime example of this intricate exploration can be found in the works of Shirin Neshat (**Figs.15,111,117,118,156**), who was one of the first Iranian female artists to use the trope of the veil in her works. Her art extends the trope of the veil, utilising its performative nature, metaphorical connotations, and allegorical dimensions to create a canvas of multi-layered interpretations. Through her lens, the veil becomes a rich symbol that embodies various tensions: between tradition and modernity, visibility and concealment, personal and societal, and East and West. Neshat's artworks go beyond mere critique, inviting viewers to engage in a dialogue that transcends binary narratives. Her pieces offer a glimpse into the lives of women navigating complex socio-cultural landscapes, amplifying their voices and experiences. By wielding the veil as a tool of introspection, expression, and negotiation, Neshat's works exemplify the intricate interplay between personal narratives and broader social dynamics.

Similarly, since from the beginning, the regime was concerned not only with veiling women but veiling them correctly, women who were badly veiled were suspect in the eyes of the regime and perceived to be eschewing Islamic values. Accordingly, similar punishment was meted out for improper veiling as for not being veiled, making "bad-*hijab*" equal to "no-*hijab*" in the eyes of the state. The women's magazine, *Zan-e Ruz*, outlined bad-veiling or improper-veiling not only as uncovered head but also showing of hair, make-up, uncovered arms and legs, thin and see-through clothes or tights, tight clothes such as trousers without an overall over them, and clothes bearing foreign words, signs, or pictures (Sedghi 2007: 213). Importers and traders of such items were threatened with fines, imprisonment, and flogging. Badly-veiled women were labelled as "Western dolls" or "prostitutes" and subjected to harassment with morality police, *pasdaran* (Guardians of the Revolution), paramilitary security forces, armed members of *hezbollah*, and the gender police and female vigilantes, known as Sisters of Zainab,

roaming the streets and dragging any women not in compliance with the rules to the "Centre for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice," fining and even beating them for minor violations of the veiling requirements, such as wearing makeup or allowing strands of hair to show from under their veil. Mehrangiz Kar, points out that fines paid by women accused of *bad-hijabi* represent a considerable revenue for the judiciary (Payvar 2015: 38).

The rhetoric regarding the veil was very aggressive (towards unveiled women) and promulgated unveiling as a plot by the West to weaken Islam by corrupting and exploiting its women (**Fig.167**). Slogans such as "*Ya Russari, ya toossari*" (either a head-scarf or a head-beating), "*Marg bar zan-e bi hijab*" (death to the unveiled woman, "*Bi hijabi-e zan az bi-gheyrati-e mard ast*" (the lack of a veil for a woman is due to the lack of honour in a man), "*Marg bar zan-e bi-hijab va shohar-e bi-gheyrat-e an*" (death to the unveiled woman and her dishonourable husband) were written on walls and chanted around the country. Unveiled/poorly veiled women were, and continue to be, likened to sweets without wrappers that would attract flies (**Fig.168**), discarded/emptied vine leaves (**Fig.169**) and ugly caricatures (**Fig.170**) with small brains (**Fig.171**), whilst properly veiled women were like well-performing appliances (**Fig.172**), well-looked after cars (**Fig.173**) and pearls (**Fig.174**) that would go to heaven (**Fig.175**). Thus, the regime, itself, heavily used and still uses the metaphor of the veil to propagate a certain morality and Islamic sensibility.

The regime alternates between periods of tolerance for "bad veiling" and others when they crack down on it. Women in turn have found new ways of defying the regime's enforcement of the veil by for example, posting their un-veiled photos online, on platforms such as "My Stealthy Freedom," which since 2014 has been inviting Iranian women to post pictures of themselves without the veil. The issue of compulsory veiling took on a life of its own after the death of Mahsa Jhina Amini in custody, on 16th September 2022. Mahsa who had been visiting Tehran with her family from the Kurdish town of Saqez, had been arrested and beaten for not wearing the *hijab* properly, causing her to potentially have a cerebral haemorrhage or stroke from the head injuries she sustained because of the beatings. In the aftermath of this incident, many Iranian women started burning their scarves and appearing in public spaces unveiled, despite government crackdown and arrests, as well as more beatings and deaths. The issue of the veil is now, more than ever, political and symbolic in Iranian society.

Therefore, since the state puts so much emphasis on the veil, women themselves see this trope as a way of fighting the state's proscriptions and women, particularly the younger generation who are the "children of the revolution", continue to resist the dictates of the state by "bad-veiling" (and more recently unveiling), enacting their own "counter-revolution of values" (Mahdavi 2013: 19). The veil has thus become a means to an end, a political statement and a tool in the arsenal of both the state and women themselves to wage the war for supremacy fought on the battlefields of women's bodies and so despite the harassment, fines and punishment, women have continued using the veil as a tool for defying the State and rejecting the regime's dictates, turning both the public spaces and their own bodies into battlegrounds. Thus, defiance and flouting of masculine authority and challenges to patriarchal gender relations all seem to start with opposition to the veil, and liberation and modernity become inseparable from the rhetoric of unveiling (Milani 1992: 44). Many contemporary Iranian women thus engage in a constant battle with the "morality police" by wearing makeup, flouting the Islamic dress code and being "badly veiled" by showing strands of hair and wearing form-fitting clothes that barely meet the minimum standards laid down by the regime. Whereas during the Pahlavi era being unveiled signalled modernity, now women signified their modernity by wearing the minimum veil, as opposed to the traditional women who continued wearing the black *chador.* Marjaneh Satrapi illustrates these subtleties in her autobiographical graphic novel Persepolis (**Figs.19,32,140**) which highlights the veiling strategies Iranian women use to convey their identities and political leanings. By using a black-and-white graphic novel Satrapi effectively mirrors the Manichean view of the regime, where the world is divided into binary opposites, and shows how women must navigate within such a landscape where resistance and individuality are only discernible to the knowing observer. Likewise, by allowing us to follow her own story from her childhood years through to adulthood, through revolution, war, and exile (twice), Satrapi makes herself and the women she portrays human and accessible as well as individualistic, despite their monochrome portrayal. Satrapi's work echoes the modernist discourse surrounding the veil and offers a fresh perspective on its contemporary interpretation within Iran. In this context, women are ingeniously employing the veil to signify their modernity and assert their autonomy, even amidst the requirement of its compulsory usage.

In the *Be Colourful* (2002) (**Fig.176**) series, Shadi Ghadirian portrays the increasing desire of Iranian women to eschew the dark and drab colours prescribed by the regime, exploring the evolving desires and aspirations of Iranian women within the socio-political context of the

Islamic Republic. The series resonates with the changing dynamics of personal expression and individuality in a society characterised by rigid dress codes and public behaviour norms, particularly for women. Ghadirian's choice to portray women wearing colourful veils is a metaphorical statement, reflecting the growing desire of many Iranian women to reclaim their agency and personal identity by defying the monotony of the dark and subdued clothing enforced by the regime. These colourful veils symbolise not only the right to express oneself but also the longing for freedom of choice. The smeared grey glass that frames the women in these photographs serves multiple symbolic purposes. Firstly, it acts as an additional layer of "veil", emphasising the physical and metaphorical barriers that Iranian women face in their daily lives. The images also illuminate the stark contrast between the constraints of public life, represented by the grey-smudged glass, and the vibrant, expressive desires that lie beneath. By occasionally touching the glass, the women in the photographs make these societal constraints tangible, underscoring the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. For Western viewers, these photographs might evoke a sense of exoticism, particularly regarding the veil. However, for Iranian audiences, the true exoticism lies not in the veil itself but in the freedom to embrace vibrant colours in their public lives, a freedom that has become increasingly elusive. In this nuanced visual narrative, Ghadirian empowers the women in her photographs by allowing them to choose and wear their favourite colours, symbolically granting them a measure of freedom in a restrictive society. The colourful veils, while still veiled themselves by the grey screen, become a powerful statement of individuality and defiance against conformity. Ghadirian's work invites contemplation of the complex interplay between personal desires and societal constraints, offering viewers a glimpse into the evolving landscape of identity and expression in contemporary Iran.

The veil, therefore, comes with many requirements, which apart from the colour, shape and form also include the conduct of those who are supposed to wear it, so that the observant woman is not only covered but also chaste, restrained, and obedient in both private and public. Hence, the badly-veiled woman is contravening not only the rules of veiling but also the associated norms of conduct. Shirin Aliabadi's (1973-2018) up-town girls in the *Miss Hybrid* (2006-2007) (**Fig.33**) or *City Girl* (2010) (**Fig.34**) series are the epitome of this bad-veiling deplored by the regime and demonstrate the subversive attitude of many young girls in Iran. Saghar Daeeri (b.1985) likewise portrays these badly-veiled women in her painting, *Tehran Shopping Malls* (2008) (**Fig.27**), depicting exaggerated stereotypes of Iranian women who look

very similar to the regime's own depictions of badly-veiled women (**Fig.170**). In Iran, women who wear a lot of make-up, and have over the top hairdos and looks are referred to pejoratively as "*palang*" (leopards). This has not deterred women, and many have adopted this extreme look as their ideal of beauty – one would imagine very much in defiance of the regime which discourages make-up and drawing attention to oneself. Daeeri thus portrays how Iranian women refuse to adhere to any one cultural value and instead pick and choose aspects that appeal to them, resulting in Western and Eastern ideologies and signifiers assimilating on top of each other, producing a schizophrenic hybridity epitomised in the figure of the women and their aesthetic and material choices. The exaggerated stereotypes and uniformity of the women's appearances in the painting mirror the regime's portrayal of a specific type of veil, often used to criticise those who do not conform to its standards of modesty. This visual mimicry serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it draws upon the regime's rhetoric and imagery that questions the authenticity and identity of unveiled women, and on the other, it subtly subverts these representations by revealing their artificiality. Daeeri's portrayal of these women challenges conventional notions of veiling and authenticity by exposing the constructed nature of such visual symbols. Through this mimicry, Daeeri not only acknowledges the regime's narrative but also appropriates it as a means of resistance, revealing the inherent hypocrisy and contradictions within the imposed norms. By reimagining the veil in an exaggerated manner, the women not only challenge the rigid expectations placed upon them but also showcase their agency in shaping their own identities. This subversive act speaks to the women's ability to navigate and negotiate their societal constraints, finding empowerment even within the limits imposed upon them. These girls are defiant and subversive in their own way, and the ludic aspect of their defiance does not escape the viewer.

The veil, therefore, functions as a cultural symbol, having been imbued with meanings, associations, and social connotations, which may appear fixed and inherent, but, in reality, arise from the complete appropriation of its meaning by the dominant culture. The veil has lent itself to diverse personal and political ideologies which have been reinforced by a patriarchal society, where woman is the "other" to man's "self". Woman as signified by the veil very much falls into the Aristotelian-Pythagorean philosophy of opposites, of Man vs Woman, Good vs Evil, Light vs Dark and the accompanying *Weltanschauung*. This perspective reflects a larger cultural and ideological framework that has historically associated certain qualities and attributes with specific genders. The veil, in this context, becomes a visual representation of the perceived division between genders and their inherent qualities. Moreover, the veil's

symbolism often extends beyond the realm of gender to encompass broader cultural, social, and religious meanings. The contrasting symbolism associated with the veil highlights the complex web of cultural and historical narratives that have shaped the identities of women. Beyond its originating cultures, the veil encounters new layers of meaning due to its interaction with different societies and contexts. In Western societies, the veil has often been portrayed in the media as a symbol of oppression and backwardness, reflecting prevailing stereotypes and misunderstandings about Islamic cultures. This external interpretation can turn the veil into a symbol of resistance, as some women choose to wear it as an act of defiance against cultural homogenisation and discrimination. The veil thus comes with a plethora of meaning both in its originating cultures and outside, becoming both the signifier and the signified. By invoking the complexities of the veil, contemporary Iranian artists navigate the intricate tapestry of identity, culture, and society, inviting audiences to partake in a rich and multi-dimensional conversation. The veiling trope like the veil itself is polysemous, standing at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, the public and the private, the masculine and the feminine, the East and the West, oppression, and liberation. As Farzaneh Milani has pointed out, veiling is perhaps one of the most "symbolically significant structures" that expresses, among other things, Iran's prevailing attitude toward "the self and the other" (Milani1992: 23).

The strategy of incorporating the imagery of the veil is, consequently, a recurring theme observed throughout this study, serving as a key element in the artworks of many contemporary Iranian artists. By closely analysing the images presented within this context, one can gain a clear understanding of the pervasive nature of the veil as a powerful symbol and motif within these artists' works. The veil, an emblematic feature of the sociocultural fabric of Iran, is skilfully employed by artists to convey a multitude of meanings and narratives. Its prevalence reflects the artists' deliberate choice to engage with a symbol that holds profound significance in the context of Iranian society. By weaving the veil into their visual narratives, these artists navigate the complexities of identity, gender roles, religious and societal expectations, as well as the intersections between tradition and modernity. Through the veil's recurrent presence, artists engage in a dialogue that addresses the multifaceted nature of the veil itself, transcending its literal interpretation. The veil becomes a conduit for exploring themes such as agency, autonomy, and the negotiation of public and private spaces. Additionally, its repeated appearance allows for a deeper exploration of the concept's socio-political implications, its potential as both a tool of empowerment and a means of control, and its role in shaping perceptions of Iranian women both within and beyond the nation's borders.

Similarly, the visual arts in Iran (including cinema) which depict women are, anchored in the semiotics of the veil since images by being displayed, make private scenes public and thus need the veil to enter the public/male spaces which presuppose an unfamiliar male gaze. Thus, the same rules of veiling and modesty that apply to public spaces, come to be applied to these images. The centrality of the veil (both symbolically and metaphorically) in the visual culture of the country, has led Hamid Naficy to develop what he calls an "Islamicate gaze theory", since he believes that in dualistic, hierarchical societies such as Iran, desire is always expressed through the hermeneutics of veiling and unveiling (Naficy 2012: 106). Notwithstanding the social/cultural hermeneutics of the veil and the requirements of the State for its inclusion in artists' representations of women (without which they cannot exhibit their work), there are also the demands of an international art market and audience who search for signifiers of "Iranian-ness". This mode of representation has led some critics to accuse artists, who employ such signifiers, of "self-exoticism" aimed at attracting a Western public which likes signifiers such as the veil, that signal "otherness". Nonetheless, despite such reductive interpretations, the iconography of the veil is central to the strategies of subversion employed by artists in their construction of alternative narratives, allowing them to shine a spotlight on the stereotypes of the veil (and by extension Iranian women), and show that the veil, like the women it covers, is polysemous and equivocal. These types of works have been termed work "chador art", suggesting that the veil has become the easiest way for an artist to promote his/her work (Golshiri 2009). The curator Vali Mahlouji also believes that artists like Shirin Neshat rely on "heightening cliché" and elevating the *chador* in their works to "stardom", to appeal to their (Western) audience (Aspden 2008). The reality, however, is far more complex particularly for artists who live and work in Iran – Shadi Ghadirian has expressed her frustration about this, arguing that in the West, they always think her main theme is the *chador*, but they do not realise that artists in Iran must use the veil if they want to exhibit (Callamard 2006: 16). As a result, the stereotype of the veil has also led to the stereotyping of Muslim/Iranian women with reductive interpretations and predetermined vocabulary, using phrases such as "repressed Muslim/Iranian woman," undermining the message and scope of their art. Iranian women have been stereotyped by both the regime and the West, who each have their expectations of what an Iranian/Muslim woman should be. However, in today's Iran the stereotypes of the veil do not hold validity and most veiled women are vociferous, visible, and present despite their veils; this is likewise affirmed and reiterated by Iranian artists' portrayal of her.

5.1.4 Metaphor of Hair

The hair that the veil must cover, has become another important symbol in the works of some contemporary artists. Women's hair is a distinct gender sign that holds both metaphorical and metonymic significance. Hair, particularly for women, symbolises sexual potency as it affects a man's desire for her. Therefore, a woman's hair and sexuality are closely intertwined and often used interchangeably. As Abbas Daneshvari has pointed out the sexual symbolism and meaning of a woman's hair have also been associated with her genitals. This connection has been made by various figures throughout history, including Paul (a third-century bishop from North Africa) in his writings in Corinthians and Tertullian. They argued that a woman's hair and head were closely linked to her genitals and therefore needed to be covered. For Paul, an uncovered head was as shameful as exposed genitals. This belief is echoed in the surrealist art of Rene Magritte, particularly in his painting *Rape* where the head and genitals are depicted as one and the same, indicating the continued influence of this idea (Daneshvari 2014: 93).

Hair (particularly long hair) has been a symbol of beauty and femininity in most cultures (including the West) for centuries. Manadana Moghaddam (b.1962) in her *Chelgis* series, addresses the role of women by using hair to stand in and symbolise them. "Chelgis", literally meaning "forty braids" in Persian, is the name of the heroine from an Iranian fairy-tale about a beautiful woman with long hair who was imprisoned and cursed so that if anybody saw her, they would be turned into stone. In *Chelgis I* (2005) (**Fig.177**), Moghaddam completely covers what appears to be a female figure with hair and places her under a vitrine for extra protection (like the secluded ideal women of the regime), similar to the heroine of the story, who was imprisoned for her femininity (as symbolised by hair). This harm from hair/female sexuality was highlighted by Iran's first post-Revolutionary Prime Minister Abdolhassan Banisadr (PM 1980-81) who, in a speech in 1981, declared that women's hair emanates harmful rays that is damaging to men and should be neutralised by wearing the veil (Naficy 2012; Taheri 2010; Sedghi: 2007). By covering the woman completely with hair, Moghaddam emphasises how interpretations of women and their sexuality has become all-encompassing, subsuming and limiting her by imprisoning her under a "glass ceiling". This symbolic representation also encapsulates the idea of a figurative "glass ceiling", a term originally coined by feminists to describe the invisible barriers hindering the progress of accomplished women, and other marginalised groups, from advancing to higher positions in their careers or organisations,

especially in fields traditionally dominated by the majority or a privileged group. This metaphor suggests that, like a ceiling made of glass, these obstacles are not immediately apparent but are very real and difficult to break through.

Likewise, in *Chelgis II* (2005) (**Fig.178**), Moghaddam addresses the "weight" of the expectations placed on women by portraying a large block of cement (87" x 75" x 39") held up by four braids of natural dark hair (both black and brown) woven together with red ribbons, hanging from the ceiling. The hair here becomes a powerful metaphor for women in Iranian society, and the choice to suspend the cement block from the ceiling reinforces the idea of women carrying a burden that may seem insurmountable. Yet, the braids, resilient and interwoven, effectively hold up this weighty load. This juxtaposition between the immense burden and the undeniable strength of the braids underscores the duality that many Iranian women face in their lives. They bear the heavy expectations and constraints imposed upon them, yet they also demonstrate remarkable resilience and endurance. The red ribbon, woven into the hair, deepens the narrative and reflects the intricate contradictions and nuances prevalent in Iranian society. Its resemblance to veins running down the braided hair evokes a powerful connection to the human body. This visual metaphor can symbolise the life force coursing through these women, highlighting their vitality and resilience despite the heavy burden they carry. It suggests a connection between the women's inner strength and their ability to withstand societal pressures. Additionally, the colour red traditionally holds a spectrum of meanings. It is often associated with themes of passion, love, and excitement. In this context, the red ribbon may symbolise the women's desires, emotions, and personal aspirations. It represents their longing for freedom, love, and self-expression, which are deeply embedded within them. However, the red ribbon also introduces elements of suffering and danger. Red can signify warning and prohibition. In the context of Iranian society, where women face significant restrictions and limitations on their autonomy, the red ribbon can symbolise the dangers and challenges they encounter when attempting to break free from societal constraints. Additionally, in contrast to *Chelgis I*, where the figure remains isolated and unapproachable, in *Chelgis II*, the audience can interact with the piece, feeling both the textures of the hard cement and the soft hair. This tactile engagement highlights a sensory experience that enhances the contrast between these opposing elements. This contrast further serves to convey the inherent duality within Iranian society and women's lives, creating a more profound narrative within the artwork.

In *Chelgis III* (2007) (**Fig.179**), Moghaddam uses the medium of video, projected across the wall and floor, portraying the lower half of a woman standing in a shower (forming a long silhouette that looks like a veiled woman), cutting off snippets of dark hair that she repeatedly kicks away across the shower floor. Here, Chelgis appears to have given up waiting for the hero (of the fairy tale) and has decided to rescue herself, becoming the heroine of her own story. The only way to do so seems to be by divesting herself of her femininity (as symbolised by her long and beautiful hair). It is by so doing that she is now able to get out of her glass cage and unshackle herself, but it comes at the cost of losing part of her (feminine) identity. Moghaddam thus questions the role of women and traditional expectations placed on her in all societies, where women are held back by virtue of their sex.

Ghazaleh Hedayat also engages with the metaphor of hair in her installation *Hair Stored in Wooden Drawers* (*Keshohayeh Choobi ba Moo*) (2008) (**Fig.180**), where she has placed cuts of hair in an apothecary's chest of drawers. On the one hand, the chest represents a seductive collection of sensual powers, a museum referencing stored and packaged beauty and sexuality. On the other hand, it is a symbolic repository where the natural and sensual powers of various women, cut off and denied, are preserved. Here, the hair can stand for women who are sequestered each in their "designated" compartments (similar to the harem), to be taken out and viewed when wanted but otherwise "cut" away from their selves, highlighting the moral dilemmas inherent in a patriarchal society that simultaneously privileges and marginalises women by collecting their sexual signs. In this way they become relics; reminders of the sexual power of the woman which must be contained in order not to harm.

The drawers also serve as a tomb where the hair is buried, not to see the light of day (in the same way the veil hides hair), thus implying a lack of autonomy. At the same time, this can also be interpreted as a mechanism for preserving and safeguarding the woman's identity, whereby the act of storing her hair serves as a metaphorical shield against the invasive male gaze. This concept of storing hair could symbolise a conscious effort to protect one's personal essence and private self from the prying eyes of a society that often imposes external judgments and stereotypes. Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of this symbolism allows for various layers of meaning to emerge. The act of storing hair might be seen as an assertion of agency, where women reclaim control over their own image and representation. By holding onto their hair, they resist objectification and assert their autonomy. It could also be interpreted as a method of preserving tradition and cultural identity, emphasising the significance of hair as a

symbol of femininity and heritage in Iranian culture. The interpretation of this metaphor hinges on the observer's perspective and the societal context. It underscores the complexity of the symbolism of hair and the diverse ways in which women navigate its implications in contemporary Iranian society. In this light, the act of storing hair becomes an act of agency, a form of resistance, and a means of asserting one's individuality within the intricate web of cultural and societal expectations.

Hedayat also engages with the metaphor of hair in her minimalist installation, *The Sound of My Hair* (2010) (**Fig.181**), consisting of four individual strands of the artist's own hair, strung across eight nails positioned on the gallery wall. At first glance, this arrangement may resemble the lines on a sheet of musical notation or even the strings of a stringed instrument, drawing a subtle connection between the artwork and the auditory realm. Yet, the strands of hair, stretched taut by the nails, also bear a resemblance to an instrument of torture. In this interpretation, the hair transcends its traditional symbolism of beauty and femininity to become a symbol of both strength and fragility. The tension created by the taut strands serves as a metaphorical reminder of the delicate balance between power and vulnerability, echoing the intricacies inherent in women's existence.

The metaphor of woman as musical instruments, of course, has a history in Modern Western art as seen in the works of artists like Picasso and Man Ray. However, by the process of abstraction, Hedayat desexualises this reference. Here the allusions are multiple, and not readily available to the (at least non-Iranian) viewer, whereby the musical instrument can be both interpreted as how women are seen as instruments to be played, but also about how their voices are silenced since, if the hair has a sound, it is silenced by the compulsory veil women must wear in public. Additionally, Hedayat has subversively managed to display her hair in public, albeit in an abstract and deconstructionist manner, defiantly asking us to listen to its message. In this context, Hedayat's use of hair transcends its mere physicality; it becomes a conduit for broader themes of constraint, empowerment, and vulnerability. The act of displaying her own hair in such a manner becomes an intimate act of sharing a part of her identity, while the tension in the strands suggests the intricate balance between self-expression and societal expectations. The juxtaposition of hair as both a symbol of beauty and as a means of exerting control serves as a powerful commentary on the duality of being a woman in a society that often imposes conflicting demands. Thus, the sound of Hedayat's hair is a feminist utterance that raises questions about female sexuality and structures of power in society.

Katayoun Karami is another artist who uses the metaphor of hair in several works such as *The Other Side* (2007) (**Fig.182**). In this work, Karami displays several double-sided self-portraits showing herself unchanging from the front but with different hairstyles from the back. She incorporates a gradual fading of the black colour saturation, achieved through the application of a handmade black and white silver gelatine emulsion. This process results in a transformation of the exposed female hair, rendering it as something seemingly "limp, wasted, and useless". Karami states that Islam dictates that when a girl reaches the age of nine, she must cover her hair. Thirty-one years later when she turned 40, she realised with sorrow that her hair had started to grow grey without ever having had the chance to be touched by the sun. Karami explains that this series portrays the dual image of this moment of her life, with the reverse image, reflecting that which is "always unseen and forgotten" (Karami 2007). In this manner, Karami uses the metaphor of hair not only to challenge conventional beauty standards but also to explore the deeper layers of identity and self-perception. It serves as a commentary on how societal norms and expectations, like the requirement to cover one's hair, can influence a person's identity and self-perception over time. Hence it encourages viewers to contemplate the ways in which our exterior can influence and potentially obscure our inner selves, and to reflect on the complex interplay between personal identity and societal pressures.

The significance of hair and the performative act of cutting it as a mode of opposition, gained significant importance in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death, when Roya Piraei (daughter of Minoo Majidy who had been killed by security forces amid a demonstration) was seen at her mother's burial site with a shorn head, grasping her white scarf in one hand and her shorn hair in the other. This act of protest swiftly garnered global attention and resonated with women worldwide, finding support and solidarity from an array of celebrities and political figures, including prominent French actresses who took part in this movement, demonstrating their commitment by sharing a video in which they cut their hair as a symbol of unity with Iranian women (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRsmkm-LN44).

The symbolic act of cutting hair has a long history in Iranian culture, dating to ancient times in Iran with many ancient gravestones from the Lorestan province depicting female figures cutting off their hair as a symbol of mourning. In ancient Iranian mythology, women's hair held immense significance as a symbol of fertility and blessings. As such, it is considered a crucial aspect of femininity. This is because the absence or loss of hair is believed to signify

the end of fertility and blessings. The act of cutting hair as an act of mourning, is also present in Iranian literary tradition. In the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) Ferdowsi vividly portrays the tragic tale of Farangis, who upon learning about the murder of her husband (Prince Siavush) at the hands of Iran's enemies, cuts her long black hair, wrapping it around her waist like a belt and starting the tradition of *Savushun* (incidentally also the title of the novel by Simin Daneshvar, the first novel in Persian, written by a female author). Her act not only signals her intention to remain abstinent but is also a protest against the enemies of Iran. This tradition of cutting hair as a sign of mourning is similarly found in *Darab-Nameh* by Abu-Tahir Tarsusi, and is also used by poets such as Hafez, Khaghani, and Salman Savaji. Thus, hair serves as a vibrant and powerful symbol of life, while the act of cutting it represents loss of life, not only of the loved one but also for those who are left behind, who have lost a part of themselves.

In the diptych *After Farangis* (2022) (**Fig.183**), London-based artist and activist, Anahita Rezvani-Rad (b.1978) references the Shahnameh's story of Farangis, as well as the women who cut their hair in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests. Rezvani-Rad portrays their act of defiance, with the image of a woman who has cut her hair and is holding it in her raised hand, whilst she seems to be shouting (one can imagine "Woman, Life, Freedom). The separation into two panels of the woman on one side and her raised arm holding the hair in the other, attests to the importance of this act of protest which has taken on a life of its own. The woman's red dress further emphasises the spilt blood of the protesters during this movement and their sacrifice, as well as showing her defiance. Thus, Rezvani-Rad not only links the struggle and resistance of Iranian women throughout history, but also freezes these moments of subversion for posterity, making these women contemporary heroes.

5.1.5 Masked Metaphors

Another metaphor used by contemporary Iranian artists is that of the mask. The use of masks is twofold, both to protect the identity of women, as well as to indicate the restrictions imposed by the regime. As Mehrangiz Kar, asserts, since the Revolution, women have learnt the secrets of "defending their individual identities" (Kar 2006: 36), hence, the use of masks or the obliteration of facial features, can serve as a strategy to protect the identity of individuals. With the face being the primary identifier of a person, the absence of facial identity, likewise, often highlights the awareness of a state-imposed identity that attempts to efface the individual identity of women. This strategy creates uncertainty and inscrutability, signifying not only the State's desire to undermine these individual identities, but also the desire of women to conceal and guard them, thus questioning any pre-prescribed identity and rejecting the "gaze" and its preconceptions. As Daneshvari points out, the use of masks serves to both conceal identity and to question the structures of knowledge regarding personal and cultural identity (Daneshvari 2014: 41).

Marsha Meskimmon contends that masking and masquerade are powerful tropes through which female artists can bring femininity into representation. These tropes serve as versatile tools for female artists to challenge stereotypes, tell personal narratives, critique culture, explore intersectional identities, and empower themselves, enabling a nuanced representation of femininity in art. Likewise, the notion of masquerade can be connected to the idea of excess and the carnivalesque body, as elucidated by Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, the carnival created a space where boundaries between bodies were fluid, with masquerade allowing identities to be destabilised. This destabilisation of identity is crucial in the representation of femininity, challenging patriarchal norms. Masquerade portrays womanliness as a removable mask, disrupting the power dynamics of the masculine gaze and recognising femininity as a performative expression. This challenges the binary concept of sexual difference by concealing an authoritative female subject that threatens established norms (Meskimmon 1996: 122-123).

Samira Alikhanzadeh is an artist who employs a creative approach to the concept of masking and masquerade in her artwork, often "masking" parts of her subjects' faces – particularly the eyes (**Fig.35,92**). Through her manipulation of images taken from the 1930s to 1950s Iran, a period following the abolishment of the veil, she adds layers of meaning to the notion of

concealing and revealing. By introducing strips of mirror to cover the eyes of women, children, or brides and grooms in the images, Alikhanzadeh not only obstructs their sight, symbolically disconnecting them from the present day, but also reflects the viewer's own image back into their eyes, thus creating an intricate interplay between past and present. Alikhanzadeh's use of mirrorwork draws inspiration from the similar works found in places like the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz, echoing the artistic legacy of a previous generation of Iranian women artists such as Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1924-2019). However, Alikhanzadeh's approach is distinct, as she integrates the viewers into her pieces. Through this incorporation, she prompts viewers to reflect on their personal histories, contemporary identities, and gender dynamics. By simultaneously reimagining the past through a more feminine lens, Alikhanzadeh's mirrored masks not only engage the viewer but also serve as a unique integration of the viewer's present into the lives of the subjects depicted. This technique becomes more of an inclusive act that invites contemplation about the past, present, and the multifaceted nature of identity and gender, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of historical imagery and its resonance in contemporary contexts.

In the painting *Where are You?* (*Self-Portrait* series, 2007-2008) (**Fig.36**), Simin Keramati also engages with the metaphor of making, by depicting herself blindfolded. The blindfold, in this image, not only obstructs direct eye contact with the viewer, effectively shielding Keramati from the observer's gaze, but also encapsulates a deeper metaphorical layer. This loss of sight can be seen as a commentary on the pervasive restrictions that exist within Iranian society. It symbolises the limited perspectives and diminished agency that women often face due to both political and societal impositions. The blindfold, in this context, becomes a potent emblem of the silencing and suppression of the female self in a complex cultural milieu. Furthermore, the title "Where are You?" adds an additional layer of meaning to the artwork. It serves as a reminder of the ongoing search for identity that characterises the experiences of contemporary Iranian women. The act of questioning the whereabouts of the self not only highlights the struggle to find one's place within a shifting and often confining landscape but also reflects the endeavour to break free from predetermined roles and expectations. This title emphasises the theme of self-discovery and the multifaceted journey that women navigate as they attempt to reconcile societal pressures with their individual desires and aspirations. Hence, the work, underscores the challenges posed by external limitations and internal uncertainties while highlighting the determination of Iranian women to reclaim agency, forge new identities, and challenge established norms.

Blindfolds are also a recurring motif in several of Ghazel's body of work, notably seen in images such as, *Better Not See* (**Fig.37**) from the *Me* series (1997-2000), in which the artist documents herself undertaking various tasks whilst always wearing a black *chador*. In this image, Ghazel is depicted (in her signature black *chador*), standing against a white wall, wearing a blindfold with the words "Better Not See" describing the scene. This image in its starkness is evocative of the blindfolds used on prisoners when they are in front of a firing squad. This is particularly relevant in Iran where, after the Revolution, apart from the many executions, it was common practice to blindfold prisoners, line them up against the wall, and shoot blanks at them to intimidate them. *Better Not See* serves not only as a stark reminder of this practice but it also underscores how many individuals in today's Iran choose to turn a blind eye to the ongoing atrocities around them as a means of self-preservation in the face of a repressive regime. Ghazel's image thus becomes a powerful vehicle for confronting uncomfortable truths, challenging societal complacency, and emphasising the importance of bearing witness to injustice. In its stark simplicity, it compels viewers to reflect on their own roles in acknowledging and addressing the injustices that persist in their own societies, urging them not to remain passive bystanders to the suffering of others.

Ghazel similarly masks the eyes in her *Wanted (Urgent)* series (1997-now) (**Fig.38**), shedding light on the plight and vulnerability of individuals who are compelled to leave their homeland in pursuit of a better life or to escape unfavourable conditions. Here, the act of masking the eyes can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the need for anonymity and protection that many immigrants require as they navigate unfamiliar territories. It symbolises the (often precarious) nature of their journey where anonymity becomes a shield against potential dangers, discrimination, or persecution. These individuals are, in essence, seeking refuge, both physically and figuratively, in foreign lands. Ghazel's artwork serves as a poignant commentary on the urgent and pressing nature of immigration issues, particularly for Iranians who have faced political, social, or economic challenges in their homeland. By concealing the eyes, she draws attention to the anonymity and vulnerability of these immigrants, reminding viewers of the critical need for empathy, understanding, and support for those who have undertaken the difficult journey of leaving their home in search of a safer and more promising future. Ghazel's art, thus, harnesses the visual potency of blindfolds to construct a nuanced discourse that addresses layers of meaning. Through these symbols, she invites her audience to contemplate

historical legacies, contemporary challenges, and individual responses to societal issues, offering a rich tableau of interpretations that resonate both within and beyond the borders of Iran.

The use of metaphor and allegory in the work of contemporary Iranian female artists is, therefore, a central and compelling aspect of their creative expression. Through these powerful literary devices, they infuse their art with layers of meaning and depth that transcend mere visual aesthetics. By incorporating these traditional literary devices, these artists pay homage to their rich literary and artistic heritage, bridging the gap between tradition and innovation, and creating a cultural continuum that connects past and present, enriching the dialogue on the complexities of human existence across cultural boundaries.

5.2 Mimicry

The art of this new generation of female artists, thus, deconstructs absolutes; it is alterity posing as conformity, often adopting the language of the state (the use of the veil or censorship) as a visual strategy but making the signs subversive in order to criticise and resist conventional narratives, instead suggesting a multitude of frequently opposing interpretations. Mimicry is a way of blending in and becoming indistinguishable from one's surroundings. This technique is used not only in the natural world but also in human warfare, where camouflage is employed to deceive the enemy. Bhabha declares that in the context of colonialism, mimicry is the desire to create an "other" that is similar but not identical to the colonisers. This ambivalence is at the heart of the discourse of mimicry, which relies on constantly producing differences that undermine the authority of the colonisers. Mimicry, in its complexity, encompasses a multifaceted interaction between regulatory control, disciplinary mechanisms, and the appropriation of the other's visual symbols as expressions of dominance. At its core, mimicry signifies a paradoxical act – it involves an attempt to emulate the dominant culture while simultaneously concealing the inherent power dynamics that shape such imitation. Furthermore, mimicry involves appropriating the visual and cultural symbols of the other – a strategic means through which the colonised seek to exert agency and navigate the complex power dynamics. This appropriation can be both an assertion of cultural identity and an attempt to challenge the dominance of the colonisers by reclaiming their visual signifiers. Hence, mimicry is emblematic of the intricate interplay between power, identity, and cultural exchange within the colonial context. It operates as both a tool of regulation and an assertion of agency, all while concealing the underlying power dynamics that shape colonial relationships. It reflects the intricacies of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and the dissonance between assimilation and assertion (Bhabha 1994: 121-127).

Luce Irigaray has similarly argued that historically women had limited options within patriarchal societies and were constrained to follow a singular path, that of mimicry, which was presented as their primary avenue for engagement within societal norms. This path of mimicry necessitated that women consciously adopt prescribed feminine roles. This involved adhering to established gender norms and conforming to societal expectations of how women should behave, think, and interact. In a sense, mimicry demanded that women transform their state of subordination into an active affirmation of the roles assigned to them, even though these roles

were often limiting and disempowering. By embracing these predetermined roles, women were paradoxically engaging in a form of resistance. Instead of directly opposing the dominant structures, they were strategically using mimicry to navigate within them. Through mimicry, women could carve out spaces of agency within the confines of their assigned roles. This allowed them to operate within the existing framework while subtly challenging it (Irigaray 1985).

Irigaray's insight into mimicry as a strategy for women to begin subverting their subordination underscores the complexities of historical gender dynamics. It signifies how women had to manoeuvre within restrictive boundaries, using the tools available to them to gradually transform their position. By consciously adopting the prescribed roles, women initiated a process of subversion from within, disrupting the status quo without overtly confronting it. In this context, mimicry becomes a nuanced form of resistance, allowing women to navigate the limitations imposed upon them and use those limitations as a starting point for change. The concept of mimicry, particularly in the context of women's agency within societal norms, is, therefore, intricate and multidimensional. It encapsulates the idea of women strategically engaging with established discourse and expectations, not as passive recipients but as active participants seeking to transform their position. Mimicry, as articulated in this context, allows a woman to reclaim the space she occupies within the (masculine) discourse that has historically exploited her. Instead of being relegated to a subordinate role, mimicry provides a means to navigate and engage with established norms while refusing to be confined solely within them. This signifies a form of resistance and reclamation, where women acknowledge and use the discourse that has shaped them, but on their own terms. By engaging in mimicry, a woman voluntarily positions herself within the constructs defined by a predominantly masculine framework. She allows herself to be immersed in ideas and concepts that have been traditionally developed and upheld by men. However, the transformative power of mimicry lies in its playful repetition and subversion. Through this repetition, what was initially intended to remain hidden or marginalised – the potential of the feminine – is brought to the forefront of visibility.

Mimicry thus serves as a tool of exposure, revealing the suppression and erasure of the feminine within societal structures. It highlights the strategic repetition of prescribed roles, emphasising the duality of women's actions: they are complying with established norms while simultaneously making visible the underlying mechanisms of control and constraint.

Importantly, mimicry disrupts the assumption that women are completely absorbed or defined by the roles and norms they engage with. Instead of being passive recipients of discourse, women are shown to transcend the boundaries imposed upon them. Their engagement with mimicry showcases their ability to exist beyond the roles they play, suggesting an inherent complexity that goes beyond the prescribed functions assigned to them. Hence, mimicry becomes a way for women to navigate, challenge, and reshape the terrain of societal discourse. It is a process that simultaneously acknowledges the limitations imposed upon them while revealing the potential for transformation and subversion. Through mimicry, women demonstrate their capacity to reclaim, redefine, and exist beyond the confines of the roles and expectations that have historically constrained them (Irigaray 1985: 76).

Marsha Meskimmon's perspective on feminist renegotiation of tradition, similarly, emphasises a nuanced approach that involves utilising mimesis as a tool for transformation, while avoiding complete assimilation into the object of imitation. This stance signifies a strategic engagement with mimesis and mimicry that transcends the notion of speaking from an absolute position of truth or authority. In the context of feminist discourse, the concept of mimesis represents a process of imitation, wherein traditional aspects are not simply replicated, but rather transformed through the lens of contemporary feminist perspectives. This process of mimesis becomes a means to renegotiate the narratives of tradition. However, what sets this approach apart is the intention to not be entirely absorbed by the object being imitated. Hence, feminists engage with mimesis and mimicry as dynamic processes rather than attempting to assume an unproblematic position of ultimate truth or unwavering authority. In other words, the feminist renegotiation of tradition does not seek to replace one fixed authority with another, but instead aims to reshape and challenge the very structures that have been historically exclusionary or oppressive. By utilising mimesis and mimicry as models of process, feminists acknowledge the difficulties and multiplicity inherent in tradition. They recognise that tradition is not a monolithic entity but rather a dynamic tapestry of narratives and practices. The transformative potential of mimesis lies in its ability to highlight the gaps, contradictions, and silences within tradition, thereby providing a platform for re-evaluation and reinterpretation. This approach avoids the pitfalls of attempting to speak from an absolute position of truth or fixed authority, which can inadvertently perpetuate exclusionary narratives. Instead, feminists employ mimesis and mimicry as tools to engage in dialogue with tradition while questioning and reshaping its underlying assumptions. Through this process, tradition becomes a terrain for negotiation,

contestation, and empowerment, as feminist perspectives are interwoven with and challenge the existing narratives (Meskimmon 1996: 98).

In the context of Iranian female artists, the adoption of mimicry holds a multifaceted and subversive role, serving both offensive and defensive purposes. These artists wield mimicry as a potent tool to challenge the rhetoric propagated by the State, subverting its messages and ideologies. This offensive use involves employing mimicry to expose the contradictions, hypocrisies, and manipulations present within the state-driven narratives. By mirroring and imitating the State's discourses, these artists reveal the inherent power dynamics and underlying agendas at play, thus dismantling the apparent coherence and legitimacy of official narratives. Simultaneously, mimicry serves a defensive role by enabling artists to navigate the restrictions and censorship imposed by the State. Through mimicry, they can present their work publicly while concealing its true subversive intentions. This defensive mimicry allows them to operate within the boundaries defined by the State while creating a subtextual layer of meaning that may elude direct surveillance and censorship. The approach to mimicry by Iranian female artists aligns with the notion of a dynamic process rather than an absolute, fixed authority. By embracing mimicry as a dynamic process, these artists can sidestep the pitfalls of reductive binary positions and challenge the oppressive discourse imposed upon them. Their mimicry is not an attempt to establish an alternative authoritative stance but rather a means to dismantle and question existing power structures, fostering a nuanced and multi-perspective dialogue.

5.2.1 Mimicking the Language of the State

Shadi Ghadirian, who lives and works in Iran relies on mimicry as a tool to highlight the situation of women since by mimicking the rhetoric of the state and society in their expectation of women, she can question and subvert them. This strategy can be found in many of her works such as the *Like Everyday* series (2000-2001) (**Fig.24,184**), which was inspired by the gifts she received when she married. Ghadirian has admitted that prior to her marriage she had never had any domestic responsibilities; she had lived with her parents and her mother had always taken care of those tasks (Issa 2011: 44). Therefore, the abundance of household items she received as wedding presents came as a surprise. Historically, such presents have been given to brides in Iran as symbols of society's expectations for them to become perfect housewives. To this end, the traditional term used for wives, "*manzel*", literally means "the home", emphasising this societal framing. This linguistic association underscores the historical perception of women primarily as guardians and caretakers of the household, reinforcing their role within the private realm. The term encapsulates a broader understanding of a woman's identity – one that is intricately intertwined with her responsibilities in maintaining and nurturing the household, encapsulating the notion that a woman's worth is closely linked to her ability to fulfil domestic duties and create an ideal home environment (Sedghi 2007: 26). The gendered association between women and the domestic sphere is, of course, not unique to Iran. As Rita Felski has observed, throughout history women have often been regarded as "the personification of home and even its literal embodiment" (Felski 2000: 86). In post-Revolution Iran, this gender stereotype became even more entrenched, with women being primarily encouraged to be wives and mothers, confining them to the home. This ideology was deeply ingrained in young minds, as primary school textbooks portrayed women solely in traditional domestic roles (Mehran 2002: 238). The Islamic Republic went further by attempting to coerce women into unpaid domestic labour by limiting their employment opportunities and urging employers to favour male candidates, as well as pressuring women to give up their jobs so that men could take their place.

Ghadirian portrays these expectations and the loss of women's identities by depicting a veiled figure in a classical pyramidal composition placed in the centre of the image, against a neutral white background, with her face masked by household utensils such as an iron, broom, colander, or grater. Ghadirian uses these masks (the symbolic attributes of the housewife)

ironically to demonstrate that, true to their literal function, these items, figuratively, iron out, sweep away, cut, drain, and grate these women, who are no longer recognisable, becoming objects themselves – automatons to wield these other objects, giving new meaning to the phrase "objectifying women". They thus become what Mehrangiz Kar refers to as the "ideal woman" for the regime: a woman without "eyes to see, a tongue to speak, and legs to run away" (Kar 2006: 35).

The only variety found between these images is the pattern/colour of the *chador* and the domestic items, but this is eradicated by the over-riding anonymity and interchangeability inferred by the uniformity of the pictures and the repetitive nature of the series. Conversely, the veil and the domestic items can also be seen as equalisers, since they eliminate the physical characteristics by which women are judged, such as beauty and age. However, along with these traits, identity and character are also effaced. Nonetheless, despite the *chador* signifier, the issues Ghadirian raises are universal ones, exemplified by the fact that the domestic items she uses, are both universal and timeless, demonstrating that women's situation has not changed, and that society still has the same expectations of them in terms of domesticity. As Henri Lefebvre discerns: everyday life weighs "heaviest" on women since they are both its "subject" and its "victims or objects and substitutes" (Lefebvre 2010: 73).

Additionally, by using patterned and colourful *chadors* usually worn "indoor", instead of the black "outdoor" ones (which Ghadirian eschews in all her representations), Ghadirian takes us into these women's interior spaces, blurring the line between "public" and "private" and further emphasising these women's relegation to the house. Hence, as Meskimmon perceives, the dynamics of domesticity exist at the intersection of the public and the private, encompassing both the social and individual realms. This underscores the need for a nuanced approach when examining the politics of domesticity, acknowledging that its implications extend beyond the confines of the household to influence broader societal dynamics. By recognising the relationship between the public and the private, Meskimmon challenges conventional models of politics that tend to limit political discussions to the realm of the public sphere. She emphasises that a comprehensive analysis of the politics of domesticity must transcend such limitations and encompass the complex interactions that occur at the crossroads of these seemingly distinct domains. Issues related to gender, power dynamics, and societal norms are not confined to a specific domain but manifest in both the private and the public spheres. Consequently, a comprehensive exploration of the politics of domesticity necessitates an

acknowledgment of this complexity and an interrogation of how societal structures permeate and shape intimate spaces. This recalibration of our understanding allows for a more inclusive analysis of women's roles and experiences, both within the household and in the broader context of society (Meskimmon 1996: 162).

These images are, therefore, a social commentary about (Iranian) women who are bound to the house and domestic labour and in this manner, politicise domesticity to reveal the injustices in society. Ghadirian believes that a major cause of psychological troubles experienced by women is the repetitive nature of housework, an occupation that repeats itself day after day, to the point of becoming an "integrated part" of women's lives and their appearance (Scheiwiller 2011: 105). As such, Ghadirian seems aligned with a feminist standpoint, since understanding the politics of domesticity has been one of the main focuses of feminism. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the position of women in society, it is crucial to critically examine the gendered division of labour perpetuated by patriarchal control. This system assigns women to domestic roles while systematically denying these roles any social recognition or value. Hence, Felski argues that feminism has traditionally conceived itself as a politics of everyday life, deploying "a hermeneutics of suspicion vis-à-vis the everyday showing how the most mundane, taken-for-granted activities…serve to reinforce patriarchal norms" (Felski 2000: 93).

While these images may not overtly breach the representational rules of the Islamic Republic, they stand out as perhaps Ghadirian's most provocative work. By manipulating ordinary images and materials, Ghadirian engages in a discourse of mimicry that calls attention to the intricacies of women's lives in a changing cultural landscape. This mimicry highlights the underlying tension between prescribed roles and personal aspirations, infusing domesticity with political significance – a move that strikes at the core of the Islamic regime and its foundational principles. Ghadirian herself recognises the series as a mode of protest, an act that led to substantial backlash. Although feminist groups embraced these images on their promotional materials, they were met with criticism from men, and she faced accusations of "offending" women (Aznavourian 2015: 15). The ongoing divisiveness and intensity of discussions surrounding this series reflect its enduring impact and the intricate relationship between art, politics, and societal perceptions.

Ghadirian likewise uses mimicry in her *West by East* series (2004) (**Fig.109**), as a powerful means of criticism, addressing the practices of looking and the contrasting censorship of

women's bodies in Western and Eastern societies. In this series, Ghadirian intricately weaves together dual acts of mimicry to convey a nuanced commentary. Initially, she utilises mimicry by staging her friends and family in poses reminiscent of models depicted in Western fashion magazines. This act mirrors the mimicry of idealised Western beauty standards that these magazines often promote. However, Ghadirian’s mimicry goes beyond mere imitation; she adds a layer of glass over the subjects, on which she paints black markings that mimic the censoring marks employed by the Iranian regime. This dual mimicry encapsulates the tension between two contrasting realms: the allure of Western imagery and the restrictive censorship policies in Iran.

In the first layer of mimicry, Ghadirian critiques the objectification of women in Western media and the commodification of their bodies. By replicating the poses of fashion models, she underscores society’s obsession with Western ideals of beauty, youth, and perfection, highlighting the impact of such visual representation on cultural perceptions. Simultaneously, the second layer of mimicry addresses the censoring practices in Iran that attempt to erase and control women’s bodies and expressions. By superimposing the censoring marks onto her subjects’ bodies, Ghadirian challenges the authority of these censoring mechanisms and comments on the broader suppression of women’s agency within Iranian society. Through the intricate interplay of mimicry, Ghadirian creates a space for critical reflection on the convergence of objectification, censorship, and gender dynamics in both Western and Eastern contexts.

Leila Pazooki likewise uses dual mimicry in *The Aesthetics of Censorship* (2009) (**Fig.110**). In this series Pazooki presents a collection of framed reproductions of well-known Western artworks featuring the female form, such as Cabanel’s *Birth of Ven*us and Edouard Manet’s *Dejeuner Sur L'herbe* and *Olympia*. These reproductions are taken from actual art history books found in the library of the University of Fine Arts in Tehran, where Pazooki studied painting, which had been subjected to censorship in the form of a black marker, which obliterates the figures of the women. Hence Pazooki, literally mimics these images by reproducing them. Accompanying the images is also a sound piece in which Pazooki provides a voice for an authorised censor, revealing the ideological motivations and aesthetic choices behind these subjective “reworkings”, further mimicking the ideology of the state. Additionally, by framing these “reworked” images in the same way as the original works found in museums worldwide, Pazooki further challenges Western art-historical practices, particularly those related to the

representation of the nude female figure and the male gaze. Moreover, the displacement of these images from their original context calls into question their status, challenging museum conventions and the notion of originality in art.

Swiss-born Iranian photographer, Laurence Rasti (1990) uses mimicry to examine and expose the Iranian regime's stance towards homosexuality and gender, in her series *There are no homosexuals in Iran* (2014-2016) (**Fig.185**). The title of this series itself mimics the words spoken by President Ahmadinejad in a speech on 24th September 2007 at Columbia University where he declared: "In Iran, we do not have homosexuals like in your country". Rasti's work, which was turned into a book published by Edition Patrick Frey, was shortlisted for the Paris Photo Aperture First Photobook Award and the Author Book Award of the Rencontres d'Arles. It was also nominated as one of the ten best photobooks of 2017 by the New York Times Magazine. The series was shot over a few years while Rasti visited Denizli in Turkey to meet with and photograph a community of gay Iranian refugees who had fled their country, where homosexuality is punishable by death, in search of freedom from persecution. Despite the persecution of homosexuals, transgender individuals are officially recognised by the government and allowed to undergo sex reassignment surgery, since homosexuality is considered a "disease" or a "disability". As of 2008, Iran carried out more sex change operations than any other nation in the world except Thailand, with the government providing up to half the cost for those needing financial assistance and recognising the sex change on the birth certificate. The rationale behind this seemingly incongruous approach is due to a lack of acceptance towards nonbinary genders and non-heterosexuality. The government seeks to classify all citizens as either male or female and therefore appropriates funds for sex reassignment surgeries to enforce this rigid binary categorisation.

Rasti's series provides a visual representation of the covert nature of homosexuality in Iran, as well as the government's attempts to sweep the issue under the rug: as an Islamic patriarchy, it cannot tolerate any "deviations" from its citizens. By using imagery such as flowers and balloons to camouflage the identities of her subjects, Rasti highlights the regime's desire to conceal homosexuality while also showcasing the genuine love that exists between her subjects. In doing so, she questions the fragile nature of identity and gender concepts, inviting viewers to consider the complexities of gender and sexual identity in a society that seeks to enforce strict binary classifications. Rasti maintains that while the anonymity of her subjects was the most effective means of safeguarding them amidst the prevailing ambiguity, she

nonetheless endeavoured to restore to them "a face that their country has temporarily stolen" (https://laurencerasti.ch/works/there-are-no-homosexuals-in-iran). Therefore, in these works, Rasti seeks to offer a voice and identity to those who have been marginalised by society and to provide a counter-narrative to the government's attempts to suppress and silence them. By doing so, she imbues her subjects with a sense of dignity and agency that had been denied to them, thereby empowering them to reclaim their identities in a society that seeks to erase them.

5.2.2 Orientalist Mimicry

Another use of mimicry by Iranian female artists, is that of Orientalist mimicry, whereby the Orientalist images of Iranian/Eastern women are reproduced to question and contest them. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and corresponding to the height of Colonialism, came the West's increasing curiosity for all things Oriental, resulting in artists travelling to the region to paint, and, later with the introduction of the daguerreotype, to photograph its people and sites. Thus, the first understanding and impression of the region were shaped, to a large extent by the paintings, photographs, and writings of the Orientalists, who presented a biased view of the East as an exotic and mysterious "other" often shaped by cultural biases, colonial agendas, and artistic imagination. This Orientalist lens heavily influenced how the Western world perceived and depicted women from the Middle East. Orientalist images and paintings played a significant role in creating and perpetuating these distorted representations. These works frequently depicted Middle Eastern women through a Eurocentric gaze, emphasising their perceived differences and exotic qualities. The images often romanticised the women as alluring and sensuous, reflecting the Western fascination with the unfamiliar and the desire to capture the essence of a distant and mystical "Orient". Orientalist artworks often lacked cultural accuracy and understanding, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that distorted the reality of Middle Eastern women's lives and experiences. These portrayals influenced popular perceptions, shaping how these women were viewed, understood, and even interacted with by the Western world.

In Iran, this Orientalist sensibility became prominent in the 19th century, during the Qajar period, with Iran's encounter with the West and its image of itself, particularly in the photographs of the time. Iran was the first country in the region to take up photography (around 1842) shortly after its introduction in Europe, with the first daguerreotypes being given to the Qajar Muhammad Shah, between 1839 and 1842 by the two colonial powers in Iran, England and Russia, and it was used extensively by Nasser al-Din Shah who was a passionate amateur photographer. These images, as well as those by professional photographers working in Iran such as Antoin Sevruguin (1851-1933) (**Fig.7**) who produced images for both an Iranian and European audience, assumed and catered to a male gaze and erotic fantasy, and an Orientalist perspective of the harem. As such, they often reinforced the very same Orientalist tropes that the West had imposed. Consequently, as Ali Behdad notes, from the beginning, photography

in Iran was intertwined with Europe's Orientalist vision of the Middle East and its colonial interests in the region and these early photographs were not "natural" or "objective" representations, but rather reproduced, and reinforced Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East and its "backward" people and "exotic" cultures, which provided the ideological rationale for colonising the region (Behdad 2001: 143). Behdad asserts that these early photographs with their "(self)-orientalising" and "(self)-eroticising" were indebted to, and mimetic of, Orientalism's aesthetic values and ideological assumptions more than to Iranian traditional and/or Islamic traditions (Behdad 2001: 145-147). These Orientalist ideals, thus, led Iranians to view themselves through Western eyes.

This mimetic self-orientalising and exoticisation is taken up by some contemporary Iranian artists such as Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974), with her *Qajar* series (1998) (**Figs.6,144,145**), where she reproduces witty pastiches of the original Qajar photographs but adds anachronistic element to mirror this orientalising in contemporary Iran. For example, in *Qajar #3* (1998) (**Fig.144**), the model holds a Boom Box nonchalantly on her shoulder in the manner of teenagers playing music in the streets of many Western cities, but very much out of place with the staged studio setting and the Qajar accoutrements. Here, we can draw a direct comparison with the Qajar photograph of Anis Al-Dowleh (**Fig.146**), the favourite wife of Nasser al-Din Shah, posing in front of a piano, another Western musical instrument, thus juxtaposing the "Oriental" appearance of the Iranian woman with the "Occidental" musical instruments and sensibilities. Ghadirian thus simultaneously mimics this Orientalist imagery whilst illustrating the multifaceted evolution of Iranian women's lives, marked by the convergence of technological progress and shifting cultural inclinations.

The association with the Orientalist imagery of the Qajar period was, according to Samine Tabatabaei, a major contributor to the enthusiastic reception of Ghadirian's series in the West, since the Qajars were the last Iranian dynasty to fulfil the "desirable Oriental fantasy of the West" (Tabatabaei 2011: 162). However, the original images were intended for the sole viewing pleasure of the Shah, whereas Ghadirian, by replacing the King behind the lens and exhibiting her images, makes them public, thus, not only giving the viewers a voyeuristic view into these private spaces, but also making them subversive by portraying women with objects or performing acts that are/were not allowed in the public spaces of the IRI/Qajar Iran. Consequently, despite the harem setting and Oriental clothing, Ghadirian's women do not fit the Orientalist tropes and fantasies fulfilled by the original photographs. Ghadirian's Oriental

mimicry and images, instead, challenge the gaze, not only of the patriarchal regime, but also a colonial gaze, contradicting Western preconceptions, both of an "exotic other" and of an "oppressed" Muslim woman. Thus

In a similar vein, Rabee Baghshani engages directly with Orientalist images, where she digitally manipulates old, often Orientalist images, to modernise them and bring them into the contemporary world. In *Janan* (2022) (**Fig.186**) Baghshani has engaged with two separate paintings from the Qajar period, Isma'il Jalayir's *Ladies Around a Samovar* (1860-75), which she has taken a segment of and made monochrome, so that it blends into the background like wallpaper (**Fig.187**), and, for the foreground, *The Woman at the Window* (19th century) (**Fig.188**), with its very "Orientalist" pose, which she has turned on its axis, made more vibrant and added anachronistic elements to, such as red Ray-Ban sunglasses and a Coca Cola bottle. She has arranged this new hybrid image as a Vogue cover, further adding an anachronistic element. Additionally, the women in the background are veiled and mostly staring at the viewer, unlike the foreground figure who is unveiled but whose eyes are masked by the sunglasses, thus avoiding the direct gaze of the viewer. By incorporating Western symbols into her work, she orchestrates a clever reversal, turning the gaze back onto the West and exposing how its long-standing fascination with Orientalism continues to colour its views. This subversive mimicry not only deconstructs established stereotypes but also offers a fresh perspective on how they are replicated and perpetuated within the present day. Additionally, the Western symbols introduced by Baghshani (whose target audience is the West) serve as a deliberate divergence from the expected Orientalist imagery, revealing how the "other" can be transformed through nuanced mimicry. This metamorphosis challenges viewers to confront their own preconceptions and confront the complexities inherent in the representation of Middle Eastern women and prompting a re-evaluation of deeply ingrained perceptions and the enduring persistence of entrenched stereotypes. By merging Western symbols with traditional Orientalist imagery, she blurs the lines between the familiar and the subverted, inviting viewers to re-examine not only the historical roots of these representations but also their continued relevance in contemporary society. Through this transformative process, Baghshani's art becomes a mirror that reflects both the historical legacy of Orientalism and its ongoing impact on the portrayal of Middle Eastern women.

Another artist who engages with this oriental mimicry is Afshan Ketabchi in her homoerotic images from the *Harem* series (**Fig.189**). In these images Ketabchi directly satirises Orientalist

tropes and images by parodying them and showing their limitations, as well as defying the regime's expectations of docile Muslim women in the harem. The evocative poses in these images play into the Orientalist fantasies of Eastern women and harems, however by blatantly staging the scenes and introducing modern erotic items such as push-up bras and playboy bunny ears, Ketabchi is highlighting the fact that these women are in fact enacting this fantasy, which was for the sake of a Western male audience and was not the true representation of harems in Iran or elsewhere, much like women were/are used to fulfil male fantasies elsewhere. Ketabchi's use of Orientalist mimicry, therefore, serves as a form of artistic critique, exposing the constructed nature of the fantasies that were propagated by (Western) artists and patrons during the colonial period, revealing their superficiality and inaccuracy. Through her work, she not only reclaims agency over the representation of the "Oriental" women but also exposes the underlying power dynamics and intentions that shaped Orientalist depictions and dismantles and challenges the Orientalist gaze while also highlighting the universal patterns of objectification and male desire that transcend historical and geographical contexts.

Mimicry, therefore, emerges as a transformative tool in the arsenal of contemporary Iranian female artists. These artists harness the power of mimicry to subvert, question, and reimagine established norms and identities, offering a nuanced perspective on issues such as gender, politics, and societal expectations. Through their art, they blur the lines between reality and imitation, inviting viewers to critically examine the constructed nature of cultural and gender identities. By mimicking and reinterpreting iconic symbols, archetypes, or historical narratives, these artists challenge the status quo and provoke thoughtful engagement with the evolving dynamics of Iranian society.

5.3 Subversive Spaces

Given the heavily monitored and regulated nature of spaces (both public and virtual), following the Revolution, many Iranians have resorted to finding alternative spaces for self-expression and more subtle forms of defiance to resist the State's strictures. This has been the case for both Iranians living in the country and those in the diaspora who have needed to carve their own spaces of resistance. The process of manipulating and reinterpreting existing spaces to convey alternative identities and systems of belief involves a transformative approach to space usage. Instead of accepting spaces at face value, individuals or groups imbue them with new meanings, often divergent from their original purpose or conventional associations. This practice is a manifestation of the power of space as a social construct and a platform for communication. By repurposing and reconfiguring available spaces, people can communicate their unique perspectives, challenge prevailing norms, and express their identity or beliefs. This manipulation may involve altering the physical appearance of a space, using symbolic elements, or adopting unconventional uses that diverge from their original design or function. Through this process, the space becomes a canvas for articulating personal or collective narratives, often in response to social, cultural, or political contexts.

This practice is particularly significant for marginalised or oppressed groups seeking to assert their presence, reclaim their agency, or challenge dominant narratives. By repurposing spaces, they can carve out visibility, validate their existence, and create an environment that resonates with their values or aspirations. This phenomenon is observed across various forms of art, protest, and activism, where spaces are transformed into platforms for dissent, cultural expression, and community building. Hence, the act of manipulating and reinterpreting spaces is an act of reclamation and creative resistance. It empowers individuals and communities to challenge the status quo, redefine the boundaries of what is possible, and communicate alternative perspectives to a wider audience. This process underscores the dynamic interplay between physical environments and human agency, demonstrating the potential for spaces to be vessels of change, meaning, and expression.

5.3.1 Sites of Resistance: Public Spaces

Despite the challenges imposed by the regime, Iranian women have refused to be confined to the home and remain mobile, defying stereotypes of subservient docility. Additionally (unlike Saudi Arabia until recently), Iranian women have never been forbidden from driving. As a result, they use this mode of transport not only to move around the city, but also to engage in "cruising" – an activity in which they exchange contact information with members of the opposite sex who are similarly cruising the streets. This practice is particularly popular among middle-class youth, who are often targeted by the "morality police" and must be increasingly inventive in their dating rituals and choice of venues. By utilising the act of "cruising", Iranian women subvert limitations placed upon their social interactions and express their desires for connection and companionship. This practice reveals the resilience and adaptability of many Iranians within the constraints of their societal context, demonstrating their ability to create alternative spaces for engagement and self-expression despite restrictive circumstances.

In the series *Girls in Cars* (2005) (**Fig.190**), Shirin Aliabadi captures the youthful exuberance of a group of young women as they ride together in a car. Despite the restrictions placed upon them by society, these young women appear carefree, with their makeup expertly applied and their scarves stylishly pushed back. The journalistic style of photography employed by Aliabadi adds an element of spontaneity and authenticity to the scenes. This choice of style captures the essence of these moments, underscoring the women's willingness to embrace the present and seize opportunities for enjoyment. The candid nature of the images highlights the determination and resilience with which these young Iranian women navigate their lives in a society marked by restrictions and expectations. By presenting these young women in moments of camaraderie and joy, the artist challenges prevailing stereotypes and emphasises the multidimensional nature of their experiences.

Aliabadi's *Girls in Cars* thus utilises space to convey a complex narrative of Iranian women's resilience and defiance within a society constrained by various limitations and societal expectations. The physical space within the images is characterised by the presence of the car itself. In a society where women's mobility is often restricted, the car takes on a profound significance. It becomes a symbol of freedom and autonomy, offering a private, mobile space where these women can gather, converse, and assert themselves within the public realm –

serving as a conduit for both their physical movement and their social engagement. Beyond its physical attributes, the car also functions as a metaphorical space of rebellion and resistance. It represents a realm of freedom and self-expression within a society that may attempt to confine women to specific roles and appearances. By occupying this space, the women not only exercise their right to control their own destinies but also assert their agency in making choices about how they present themselves to the world. Aliabadi's photographs further challenge traditional gendered spaces by depicting women in a car, a traditionally male-associated domain in many cultures. The act of driving and navigating through the cityscape subverts conventional notions of women as passive and confined to domestic spaces. This reclamation of traditionally male spaces within the urban landscape is a powerful statement of empowerment. The juxtaposition of the private space of the car with the public space of the city streets, highlights the dual lives that Iranian women often lead. In public, they may be subject to public scrutiny and expectations, conforming to societal norms. However, the car becomes a private refuge where they can be themselves and connect with others, often in defiance of these societal norms. Furthermore, the photographs engage with the cultural and social spaces inhabited by these women. Their makeup, hairstyles, and the way they present themselves reflect their agency in negotiating and expressing their individuality within the confines of societal expectations. The visual contrast between their appearance and the backdrop of the cityscape symbolises their negotiation of identity within the broader cultural and social context. Hence, Aliabadi, through her skilful use of space, both physical and symbolic, tells a compelling story of Iranian women who defy constraints, reclaim agency, and celebrate their individuality.

Young people also use the many newly built sites such as shopping malls, cafes, and parks but even public events organised by the regime, such as the Ashura processions, where many young girls and boys exchange numbers so they can arrange to meet later. This speaks to the resourcefulness and ingenuity of Iranian youth in navigating the constraints of their society and carving out spaces for themselves in which they can freely socialise and interact. In Iran, shopping malls and cafes often strive to emulate Western-style decor and merchandise offerings. For many young Iranians, these venues provide an outlet for exploring their interests in a more globalised (and Western-influenced) culture, while simultaneously resisting the regime's efforts to impose an Islamic sensibility and aesthetic. By engaging with Westernised

spaces and consumer goods, Iranian youth can express their individuality and reject the strictures of the dominant ideology, while also connecting with a broader global community.

In the painting *Tehran Shopping Malls* (2008) (**Fig.27**), Saghar Daeeri (b.1985) employs the use of space to provide a satirical commentary on the consumerist frenzy prevalent in Iranian shopping malls and how women in these spaces enact alternative narratives that go beyond mere shopping. At first glance, the painting presents a crowded and chaotic scene within a bustling shopping mall. The physical space of the mall is filled with a throng of women, each meticulously depicted with their characteristic bouffant hairdos, pushed-back scarves, and tell-tale signs of recent nose jobs. This attention to detail captures the visual markers of a particular societal ideal – an emulation of Western aesthetics that has gained prominence among a segment of Iranian society.

The women are depicted as absorbed in their pursuit of the latest Western goods, navigating the mall's environment in a frenzy for consumer gratification. This depiction highlights the palpable influence of consumerism and the allure of Western products within Iranian society. The crowded and bustling mall environment serves as a microcosm of the larger societal obsession with materialism and the desire for Western products. However, it is not just the physical space of the mall that Daeeri explores; it is also the psychological and social space that these women occupy. Despite the chaotic shopping scene, the women are shown taking selfies and posing in the mall's cafes. These moments of self-documentation emphasise the performative nature of consumerism and its intersection with self-expression in the digital age. The act of taking selfies signifies a desire to not only consume but also to project a certain image, further complicating the narrative.

The sign across the painting reads "*Haraj*" (Sale) in Persian – we are left to wonder what exactly is on sale here; just goods or an alternative lifestyle altogether and whether by emulating a Western aesthetic they are also pushing for Western freedoms. The juxtaposition of the Persian script with Western-style consumerism underscores the tension between tradition and modernity, suggesting that the mall is not just a space for shopping but a site of cultural negotiation and aspiration. Daeeri therefore utilises the space of the mall to offer a nuanced and satirical commentary on the complex interplay between consumerism, identity, and societal values in contemporary Iran. The physical and psychological spaces within the artwork

come together to depict a multi-layered narrative, inviting viewers to ponder the motivations and aspirations of the women in the mall, as well as the broader implications of their pursuit of a Western-inspired lifestyle.

5.3.2 Sites of Resistance: The Internet

In addition to the physical spaces commonly utilised by Iranians, the internet has risen as a prominent domain for social interaction, garnering substantial attention, particularly among marginalised demographic groups within society, including women and the youth. The regime has also recognised the internet as a useful tool for reaching the population and has been quick to exploit it to further its agenda, especially with the youth. Consequently, many senior figures have their own blogs and websites, even participating in Facebook and Twitter, which are officially banned in Iran. On the other hand, the regime also recognises the potential for dissent on the internet, with Ayatollah Jannati (b.1927), the chairman of both the Assembly of Experts and the Guardian Council, likening the internet, to a "Trojan horse carrying enemy soldiers in its belly" (Alavi 2005: 265). As a result, the Iranian regime runs one of the most sophisticated internet filtering systems in the world, blocking many sites, leading to the use of *filter-shekan* (literally meaning "filter breaker") by Iranians wishing to bypass these measures. Iran was also the first country to ever imprison a blogger, Sina Motallebi, in 2003. This early case underscores the regime's deep-seated apprehension about the internet and its potential to challenge its authority and control over information dissemination.

Despite the opportunity for political dissent on the internet, the most powerful form of resistance continues to be in its ordinary use for personal and individualistic expression, which defies the state-sanctioned model of "Islamist selfhood" (Rahimi 2008: 50). With the heavy incursion of the State in all aspects of Iranians' political and familial lives and its control of media and public spaces, coupled with Iran's young population, the internet has become vital for many Iranians as a means of communicating with the world and expressing themselves. Additionally, by severely controlling the public spaces of the country, the regime has pushed a lot of activities into private spaces, which are harder to control and has resulted in a post-revolutionary generation that is very digitally adept (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010: 116).

The internet has also significantly empowered contemporary Iranian artists by providing them with a versatile platform that transcends geographical boundaries, offering them global visibility. Platforms like personal websites, social media, and virtual galleries connect them with collectors, art enthusiasts, and galleries worldwide. The internet grants artistic freedom, allowing them to tackle sensitive topics and challenge norms without censorship concerns. It

provides access to diverse influences, stimulating creativity and enabling experimentation with new forms. Economically, it transforms the art market, fostering direct artist-buyer interactions and independence. Online platforms aid art education and cross-cultural exchange, enriching artists' perspectives. They can also leverage art for activism, advocating for social issues. Consequently, the internet is a transformative force, enabling Iranian artists to share their visions, connect globally, and shape their narratives.

In *Ctrl+Alt+Del* (2006) (**Figs.26,191**), Shadi Ghadirian delves into the complex realm of the internet, portraying it as a multifaceted space that offers both all-encompassing experiences and a shield of anonymity. In this series, Ghadirian works in layers, with an underlying black-and-white image of a woman in a black bodysuit, melding into a black background, showing only pale face, hands and feet which pop out from the black surrounding. The woman often poses in a contrived manner, looking cramped as though in a small, enclosed space, intimating the restriction imposed by the regime. On top of this image is super-imposed another layer, this time in colour, of icons found on Ghadirian's computer, such as "MSN", "Internet" and "Windows", which contrast with the black background, like the "Access Denied" sign (**Fig.192**) encountered by Iranians when trying to access many websites blocked by the regime. At times the icons engulf the woman following the contours of her body, allowing us glimpses of her forbidden curves, at other times she embraces them, hides from them, or pushes them away, manifesting the love/hate relationship, as well as the various possibilities for expression available on the internet. The woman's ease in manipulating the icons highlights the Iranian people's adaptability and digital fluency (as well as Ghadirian's who uses digital technology in her images). This digital literacy allows them to navigate the internet's alternative space, making it a potent tool for dissent, expression, and resistance.

With the internet, we also see the emergence of a new "virtual" public space, providing an alternative forum for the formation of identity and discourse amongst groups that have been excluded from the public sphere in Iran, such as women and the youth. For them these virtual spaces can be more real and are a tool for empowerment, which involves redefining the notion of the self. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi notes that these displaced groups believe their "real/true" identities have been "lost/repressed/hidden" in the "real/physical" (public) spaces of the country and so these alternative spaces have more "qualitative" than "quantitative" importance for Iranians, allowing for a truer and more accurate representation of themselves (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004).

Away from the watchful eyes of both the regime and their own families and society, the possibility for anonymity and the blurred private/public divide, the web has allowed a space for exploring and forging new identities, resulting in the appearance of many women on these sites. Like the woman in *Ctrl+Alt+Del*, whose body has dissolved into the background, blurring the boundaries between her and her surrounding, the disappearance of the body on the internet, has been a large factor in the elimination of the boundaries between the private and public discourse that occurs on its sites. The internet's role as a virtual public space represents a remarkable shift in the dynamics of gender and public participation within the country, providing women with the means to access these spaces from their private realms, where they can construct identities and engage in discourses that have been historically denied or suppressed in the country's physical public spaces. This digital empowerment allows women to express themselves authentically, challenge traditional norms, and actively participate in shaping the future of their society.

5.3.3 Sites of Resistance: Exile

Displacement and exile have inflicted profound and enduring traumas upon numerous Iranians in the wake of the Revolution. Beyond the evident physical and psychological toll of separation from their homeland, there emerged the compelling necessity to reconstruct their lives and identities. This challenge was compounded by the fact that, following the Revolution, Iran became a pariah country around the world (particularly in the US, with the hostage situation which transpired shortly thereafter). Consequently, many Iranians found themselves compelled to assert their distinctiveness from the regime that had taken hold in their homeland. To achieve this, they adopted a range of strategies, including altering their names to more Westernised ones, transforming their physical appearances, and preferring to identify as "Persian" rather than "Iranian".

Yet, the ordeal of immigration itself bore its own harrowing experiences. Many Iranians had to escape their homeland through clandestine means, often resorting to perilous journeys across land borders. Upon arriving in foreign lands, they frequently found themselves caught in a state of liminality and profound uncertainty. Obtaining visas to secure their stay in countries that seemed reluctant to embrace them became yet another formidable challenge. Subsequently, the Iranian diaspora has endured not only the physical upheaval of displacement but also the intricate and multifaceted process of rebuilding their lives, identities, and futures. The trauma of exile, marked by loss and separation, underscores the remarkable resilience and adaptability of those who have been forced to navigate such complex and trying circumstances.

The concept of a hybrid and fragmented self, stemming from the experience of displacement, carries profound emotional implications for artists living abroad. This phenomenon evokes an intricate interplay of emotions, including anxiety, nostalgia, and a fear of losing one's identity. Iranian artists of the diaspora often grapple with a unique set of challenges, marked by a cultural disconnection and the yearning to reconcile their dual identities. In response to these challenges, these artists frequently turn to Iranian cultural references as a means of expression. These cultural touchstones serve as powerful tools for them to communicate their deep-seated nostalgia, as well as their apprehensions about the potential erosion of their cultural roots. By incorporating these references into their work, they forge a link between their present reality

and their past, attempting to bridge the gap between their physical location and their emotional connection to Iran.

A salient feature of the artistic expressions of these diaspora artists is their fetishization of the idea of returning home. The yearning to reunite with their homeland becomes a central motif in their work, reflecting their desire to recreate Iran through artistic means. This creative process is not merely a pursuit of aesthetic endeavours but an attempt to rekindle a connection severed by distance and displacement. Embedded within this longing for a return home lies a complex emotional landscape that encompasses both loss and a search for belonging. The act of leaving one's homeland engenders a sense of loss, not just of physical proximity but of an intangible connection to the cultural, social, and emotional facets that define one's identity. This sense of loss can provoke a persistent search for belonging, as artists struggle to find their place within a new context while safeguarding the fragments of their original identity. Consequently, the artistic expressions of those living in the diaspora often encapsulate a multifaceted narrative, one that navigates the tension between displacement and the desire for connection.

In *Borders* (2005-6), Mitra Tabrizian (b.1964) captures the face of many post-Revolutionary Iranians who left the country and were caught in a space of liminality and uncertainty. In *A Long Wait* (**Fig.193**) from this series, Tabrizian portrays a middle-aged Iranian woman wearing the pre-requisite uniform of overcoat and scarf, sitting on an armchair near a door with a suitcase poised at her side, indicating travel but it is not sure if she is coming or going. The doorway, likewise, indicates the in-between spaces of liminality and transition – the same as borders which it represents. The closed door highlights how, as an immigrant, the woman is an outsider, shut out from many of the possibilities afforded to non-immigrants, whilst the missing doorknob suggests the impossibility of return, and the fact that migration is a one-way ticket. The woman's stoic expression, nonetheless, expresses her resignation to the status quo, whilst at the same time expressing the hardships that she has endured on this journey.

Ghazel's ongoing series titled *Wanted* (1997-2007) also delves into the intricate issue of immigration, offering a multifaceted exploration of the challenges faced by individuals seeking residency in foreign lands. The series takes the form of diverse flyers that function as both artistic expression and social commentary. Initially, the series centres around Ghazel's personal pursuit of finding a husband for a "white wedding", a union intended to secure her residency

in France (**Fig.194**). Subsequently, after obtaining her residency papers, the focus shifts as she advertises herself (**Fig.38**) for arranged marriages, extending the same opportunity to others in need of legal residency. This evolving narrative serves as a poignant reflection of the experiences and aspirations of immigrants.

The impetus for this series emerged from Ghazel's own encounters as an immigrant in Montpellier, France, in 1997. Following her receipt of an expulsion letter, which conveyed the denial of an extension to her residence permit, Ghazel found herself grappling with an unfamiliar sense of vulnerability and displacement – feeling, in her words, "clandestine" and devoid of official documentation for the first time in her life. It was this experience that inspired her to create the *Wanted* posters, initially seeking a partnership to secure citizenship papers. The series took on different iterations until 2002, when Ghazel obtained a ten-year residence permit. In a reversal of perspective, she shifted the focus of her advertisements, now promoting marriages to individuals in need of securing residency permits (correspondence with author). This shift not only highlights the shared struggles of immigrants but also underscores the resourcefulness and determination of individuals navigating complex legal systems. With this shift, there is also a variation in symbolism: in the initial posters, the covered face with exposed eyes reflects a cultural tradition observed in some Muslim societies. Subsequent versions reveal an uncovering of the face and hair, while the eyes are veiled – a gesture that appears to convey the trade-offs and internal conflicts inherent in the pursuit of legal residency. This interplay of concealment and revelation symbolically mirrors the dual nature of the immigration experience – gains in terms of freedom and residency rights juxtaposed with losses and sacrifices. Although deeply rooted in Ghazel's personal journey, *Wanted* transcends individual narratives to encompass a universal scope. The artist acknowledges the prevalence of displaced individuals across the globe, each seeking a place to call home. By intricately weaving personal experiences with broader societal themes, Ghazel's series provides a thought-provoking window into the challenges, aspirations, and enduring human spirit of those who venture across borders in pursuit of a better life.

5.4 Resisting Stereotypes

While many artists have employed the strategies discussed in this chapter, some have deliberately opted to steer clear of these conventions and associated signifiers. This decision is born out of a concern that Western interpretations, at times inclined to oversimplify and thereby diminish the inherent complexity of their artistic endeavours, can inadvertently undercut the intended depth and nuanced message of their creations. Such interpretations can unintentionally perpetuate a sense of "othering" and promote a form of "self-exoticism". This shift in approach reflects a critical awareness of the intricacies surrounding the representation of cultural identity and the inherent dangers of perpetuating stereotypes. Hamid Keshmirshekan brings to light the phenomenon wherein the preoccupation with cultural differences is progressively gaining institutional endorsement, giving rise to what he terms the "postcolonial other", a construct that permits individuals to express themselves only insofar as they emphasise their own distinct "otherness". However, this trajectory has inadvertently resulted in the perpetuation of stereotypical narratives and even self-exoticisation within the works of many artists (Keshmirshekan 2014: 152).

In response to this complex landscape, some artists have chosen alternative avenues for creative expression. One notable example is Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979), whose artistic approach diverges from representational practices in favour of abstraction. By sidestepping the use of overt signifiers of "Iranian-ness", Hedayat's work resists the narrative of marginalisation and the reductive lens that often characterises the representation of cultural identities. This deliberate departure from direct representation highlights the artist's refusal to be confined within a framework that could inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes and limited perceptions she seeks to challenge. This development becomes apparent when one compares Hedayat's video *Untitled* (2005) (**Fig.194**), with her ensuing video *Eve's Apple* (2006) (**Fig.195**). In *Untitled* (2005), the artist portrays herself staring into the camera without blinking to the point where tears start cascading down her face. Notably, some critics accused Hedayat of "self-exoticism" because of her veiled appearance in this video, even though, in Iran, this was the only way she could show a representation of herself in public. In contrast, *Eve's Apple* (2006) presents a close-up view of the artist's larynx, devoid of any indicators of her ethnic background or geographical origin. Foad Torshizi believes that this use of abstraction on Hedayat's part is a method of resistance to the "translation" that occurs when "easily

recognizable signifiers stand in for 'the Orient' in a Western-dominated art market" and that by moving towards abstraction, and away from such "easily decodable visual signifiers of Iran," she aims to resist a "localized" narrative for her work (Torshizi 2012: 555).

Simin Keramati, is another artist who blatantly calls out these identifications in her video, *I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist* (2014) (**Fig.39**). The title of this work is inspired by Jean-Michel Basquiat's declaration that he was not a black artist, he was an artist. Likewise, Keramati's artistic endeavour embodies a quest for authentic self-expression, unburdened by the weight of external judgments that tend to categorise artists based on their ethnic and gender identities. Her aim is to be recognised on her own terms, not solely as a representation of her cultural background or gender, but primarily as an artist with a unique voice and perspective.

In this video that runs for nearly 16 minutes, Keramati has filmed herself, from the bust up, without clothes, having a nosebleed which starts from almost the first minute into the video and continues to the end, running down her face and into her mouth, as she occasionally wipes the blood away. In the background of the video, we hear sounds from Keramati's life, such as the red alert siren that would be played during the Iran-Iraq war, the mini military marches, the stories from the front lines and other events that were important in Keramati's life until she left Iran to settle in Canada. Through the selective emphasis on the audio elements, Keramati highlights the sounds of her background and history. The inclusion of these auditory cues immerses the viewer in a sonic landscape that references her lived experiences and the historical context that shaped her identity. By incorporating these sounds, Keramati establishes a visceral connection to her personal history, inviting viewers to contemplate the deep-rooted trauma and emotional resonance embedded within the audio.

Conversely, the visual component of the video presents a contrasting narrative. Keramati's decision to depict herself without clothes, with a nosebleed, and in a state of vulnerability serves to detach her physical presence from the unfolding audio. This deliberate disconnection serves to challenge the viewer's expectations and assumptions, encouraging them to explore the disjuncture between what they hear and what they see. This juxtaposition of the visual and auditory elements not only engages the viewer in an active process of interpretation but also underscores Keramati's resistance to presenting her identity and experiences as a simplistic, cohesive whole. Furthermore, the visual representation of a nosebleed carries a layered

symbolism: by showcasing a physical act that is universally relatable, Keramati emphasises the shared humanity that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. The depiction of her blood as the same colour as any other person's challenges the notions of "otherness" often associated with the Middle Eastern identity. Through the symbolic act of portraying herself with a nosebleed, Keramati connects her art to lived experiences and invokes a sense of shared history. This serves as a potent reminder that the struggles of Middle Eastern women are not just abstract notions but have tangible roots in lived realities, and their identities are shaped by intricate layers of personal and historical events. This subtle yet impactful visual gesture dismantles the notion of essential differences, emphasising the commonality of human experiences.

By omitting translations and subtitles, Keramati shapes the experience of her video in a way that mirrors the intricacies of cross-cultural communication. The lack of linguistic context can be seen as a metaphor for the challenges faced by individuals trying to connect across linguistic and cultural barriers. It underscores the notion that meaning is not always readily accessible to those who lack familiarity with a specific language or cultural references. This artistic choice is significant in several ways. First, it forces viewers, particularly non-Iranian audiences, to confront their limitations in understanding the full spectrum of the audio elements. This experience aligns with Keramati's broader intention of shifting the focus away from stereotypical expectations and directing attention to her identity as an artist. Second, the absence of translation underscores the inherent difficulties of communicating across cultures, suggesting that understanding is not solely dependent on linguistic translation but also on the ability to perceive emotional undertones and shared human experiences. Moreover, this decision encourages viewers to engage in a deeper level of contemplation and empathy. The lack of subtitles invites viewers to consider their position as outsiders to the linguistic and cultural context, prompting questions about how one perceives and interprets unfamiliar experiences. This contemplation bridges the gap between the specific experience Keramati conveys and the broader theme of cultural exchange and miscommunication. Hence, by forgoing translations and subtitles, Keramati intentionally introduces an element of alienation for certain viewers, which serves as a deliberate commentary on the complexities of cultural translation, empathy, and the nuanced ways in which meanings can be lost or misconstrued. This artistic strategy enhances the layers of meaning within her work and reflects her nuanced approach to addressing the intricate relationship between identity, communication, and understanding.

Keramati has professed that she finds it offensive when professional art writers look at her as an "exotic product of the Middle East" since her gender and nationality are not the "museum" in which her art should be seen (Keramati 2018). Through this work, Keramati confronts the potential objectification and stereotyping that can arise when Middle Eastern women are viewed through an Orientalist lens within a dominant white cultural context. Her refusal to conform to such exoticizing expectations is a powerful act of agency. By challenging the tendency to reduce Middle Eastern women to mere cultural artifacts for Western consumption, she resists the reduction of her identity to a preconceived narrative that denies her individuality and nuanced experiences. This resistance, in turn, represents a larger struggle against the perpetuation of colonial and Orientalist perspectives that have historically misrepresented and marginalised Middle Eastern individuals and cultures. Keramati's resistance to being defined by the traumatic events she has lived through and the stereotypes that have emerged in their wake underscores her determination to transcend limiting narratives. Her art becomes a platform for self-assertion, allowing her to shape her identity beyond the confines of external labels. This assertion not only counters the reductive portrayals that are often perpetuated but also contributes to a broader discourse on representation, identity, and the nuanced complexities of Middle Eastern women's experiences.

Iranian female artists have, therefore, demonstrated remarkable creativity and resourcefulness in conveying their messages through their art, which resonates not only with the sensibilities of their Iranian context but also with a global audience. Their strategies are diverse and draw inspiration from a wide array of sources, reflecting a rich tapestry of influences that have shaped their artistic expressions. This innovative approach has enabled these artists to navigate uncharted territories within Iranian art, establishing themselves as prominent voices and artists.

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

> "We're fighting two battles on different grounds. We're being critical of the West, the perception of the West about our identity – about the image that is constructed about us, about our women, about our politics, about our religion. We are there to take pride and insist on respect. And at the same time, we're fighting another battle. That is our regime, our government."
> (Neshat 2010)

This research endeavoured to take a step towards the recognition and appreciation of the distinct experiences and creative expressions of Iranian female artists. While this study has explored the works and concerns of a select group of artists, it is important to acknowledge that the rich tapestry of their stories and contributions is just the beginning. The limitations of time and research scope have inevitably led to selectivity, leaving a wealth of untold stories and creative contributions that await exploration. My earnest hope is that this research will serve as a catalyst, sparking further exploration and enquiry into the realm of Iranian female artists. There is a pressing need to continue shedding light on their voices, perspectives, and artistic endeavours, as they represent a vital and often overlooked segment of the art world. By broadening the visibility of their work and narratives, we can make substantive contributions to the enrichment and deepening of our understanding of the multifaceted art scene not only within the boundaries of Iran but also within the broader global context.

The core objective of this thesis has been to discern how contemporary Iranian female artists employ their creative endeavours to forge feminine identities that challenge the directives of the Iranian regime as well as Western preconceptions and stereotypes. In pursuit of this objective, the research has sought to uncover the underlying dynamics propelling the notable increase in the number and activity of female artists during the post-Revolutionary period, both within Iran and on the international stage. Concurrently, this study has aimed to explore the

intricate and ever-evolving nature of the expanding artistic landscape, characterised by a substantial surge in women's participation in the arts. The catalysts for this surge were diverse, encompassing personal motivations and broader socio-political influences. This upsurge in women's artistic engagement serves as a testament to the enduring commitment of Iranian women to artistic expression and socio-political dialogue, which is vividly reflected in their creative outputs.

By examining the artistic contributions of contemporary Iranian women, this study further aimed to elucidate how their creative expression intersects with identity formation. The goal was to reveal how these artists navigate the limitations and challenges they face, effectively reshaping the perception of femininity in both the Iranian and global contexts. A related aim was to highlight the impactful role of their art as a means of resistance, showcasing the determined spirit of Iranian women who navigate complex societal expectations and political constraints while leaving a lasting impact on the artistic and cultural landscape.

The rationale behind my focus on female artists emanated from several compelling considerations. Foremost among them was the marked underrepresentation of female artists in the Iranian artistic sphere, a situation mirrored in many regions around the world. In response, it became paramount for me to attempt to redress the balance by embarking on an art historical study that would cast a spotlight on those marginalised within the prevailing discourse. Moreover, it was imperative to delve into the concept of gender disparity, particularly in the context of Iran's patriarchal state and society, where entrenched gender norms and hierarchical structures shape the experiences of female artists. Instead of sidestepping these pertinent issues, my intention was to acknowledge and underscore them. This was especially important given that female artists themselves are acutely cognizant of this reality and address it directly through their artwork. Accordingly, this thesis strives to make a feminist intervention within the established domains of knowledge and perception, which have historically been dominated by masculine and Western perspectives. By concentrating exclusively on the artistic contributions of Iranian women, I sought to challenge these ingrained structures and provide a platform for a more profound comprehension of both the artists and their creations. The various motivations behind this research thus encompassed the broader objectives of rectifying underrepresentation, examining the dynamics of gender within Iran's social framework, and establishing a feminist position within established paradigms of knowledge. Through this

concentration on Iranian female artists, I endeavoured to not only amplify their voices but also contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced art historical narrative.

The process of composing this thesis was not without its difficulties. Against the background of the Covid pandemic and several uprising, the UK government advised against travel to the country, effectively rendering it impossible for me to undertake the originally envisaged field trip to Iran. However, the unwavering goodwill of the artists central to this study proved to be a decisive factor in enabling me to overcome these limitations. Their readiness to participate in interviews and engage in ongoing dialogues compensated for the impossibility of conducting all the face-to-face interactions that I would have liked. The virtues of modern communication technology enabled me to engage with them remotely, conducting interviews and addressing queries seamlessly, transcending geographical boundaries. In retrospect, the artists' generosity of spirit was instrumental in surmounting the challenges posed by the circumstances and ultimately ensuring the validity of the research. Their willingness to share their insights, perspectives, and experiences laid a sturdy foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the themes explored within this thesis.

The unfolding events during the period of my research, notably the emergence of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement following the tragic death of Mahsa Jhina Amini in September 2022, provided compelling validation for the significance of this research. It underscored the pressing need to shed light on the intricate challenges Iranian women grapple with, both within their artistic expressions and in their broader lives. The rallying of female artists to this movement further underscored the inextricable link between these issues and their identities as well as their creative output. Given more expansive timelines, I would have eagerly delved into the artistic outcomes stemming from this uprising. The art generated during this period holds the potential to be a rich subject for further research, inviting deeper analysis into its themes, narratives, and societal implications.

With the aim of delving deeper into the intricate concepts of identity that best resonated with the creations of contemporary Iranian artists, specifically the notions of hybrid identity, displacement, and the sense of "otherness", I investigated the historical influences that have indelibly moulded the identities and artistic expressions of contemporary Iranian female artists. In addition, a scrutiny of their interpretive approach to historical narratives was undertaken, with an emphasis on their role in constructing alternative histories and identities.

This enquiry focused on understanding the pivotal role that history, both at the collective and personal levels, plays in the formulation and articulation of identities. This analytical approach was rooted in the understanding that identities are inherently dynamic, constantly undergoing transformations in response to various influences. It also recognised that histories are multifaceted narratives, subject to manipulations not solely by the state and society in the forging of collective identities, but also by individuals who actively engage in shaping historical accounts to construct their own personal identities.

Within this framework, I explored the resonance of socio-political developments spanning the 19th to 20th centuries, highlighting how these historical currents have significantly impacted the trajectory of contemporary Iranian artistic practices. Additionally, the exploration extended to the echoes of historical Iranian art forms, such as miniature painting and calligraphy, alongside the influence of seminal literary works like the Shahnameh and the literary contributions of figures like Forough Farrokhzad. I further scrutinised how contemporary Iranian female artists are repurposing traditional media, such as carpets, in innovative and novel ways, thus underscoring their dynamic reinterpretation of heritage in the context of modern expressions. These explorations have revealed the profound role of historical memories and personal narratives in shaping the artistic works of these artists, emphasising the power of these narratives in the creation, preservation, and perpetuation of identity within their artistic endeavours. This multifaceted investigation sought to enrich the understanding of the intricate interplay between history, heritage, and contemporary artistic expressions in the lives of Iranian female artists.

Following this historical overview, I delved into an analysis of the relationship between political, social, and artistic dynamics that were catalysed by the seismic Iranian Revolution and the ensuing establishment of the Islamic Republic. The profound ramifications of these events permeate the very fabric of Iranian identity and societal structure, resonating both within the nation's borders and far beyond. The post-Revolution landscape, characterised by the imposition of Sharia law and a stringent array of regulations, witnessed the emergence of a multitude of transformative changes, particularly concerning women's roles and freedoms. Central to this chapter was an exploration of the regime's policies and their tangible impact on the lives of Iranians, particularly women. The enforcement of veiling, gender segregation, and censorship reshaped public and private spaces, dictating the parameters of personal expression

and creativity. This chapter embarked on a comprehensive journey into the profound repercussions of these strictures on the trajectory of contemporary Iranian art.

As a corollary to the Revolution itself, the narrative expanded to encompass a constellation of internal and external factors that continue to reverberate across Iranian society. The Iran-Iraq War, the surges of dissent manifesting in the Green Movement, and the more recent emergence of movements advocating themes such as "Woman, Life, Freedom" emerged as crucial forces shaping the contemporary Iranian experience. Moreover, the backdrop of international tensions, sanctions, and diplomatic isolations cast a distinct shadow, redefining Iran's engagement with the world, particularly with the West. These factors led to the dispersion of Iranians across the globe, engendering a profound diaspora experience. The purpose of this exploration was to highlight the intricate threads connecting these multifarious forces to the artistic realm. A central enquiry pertained to understanding how the cumulative influence of these circumstances provided female artists with a wide spectrum of experiences from which they could derive inspiration. These varied encounters then became instrumental in imbuing their artistic creations with a rich tapestry of perspectives and individual narratives. Through their art, these women navigated the intricate nexus of politics, society, and artistic expression, casting a powerful spotlight on the transformative evolution of Iranian identity in the wake of the Revolution. Through an analytical lens, this enquiry provided a comprehensive portrayal of the forces that propelled female artists to become harbingers of transformation, adeptly manoeuvring within the complex terrain that unites art, society, and politics.

The ramification of these events also led to intricate binaries that shape the dynamics of Iranian women and society, which I further explored. The focal point was the examination of how female artists navigate and respond to the nuanced concept of the "other". This encompassed not only the state's perception of the "other" but also the multifaceted Western or non-Iranian "other", including the impositions of representation and expectations upon Iranian women by both these entities. The dialectics of self and other take on a pronounced significance, extending beyond mere discourse to manifest in the lived experiences of Iranian women. This theme was explored through the lens of the dichotomy between private/female/interior (*andaruni*) spaces and public/male/exterior (*biruni*) domains in Iran. Historically, these demarcations have delineated the boundaries between the feminine self and the masculine other, threading through Iranian culture for more than a century. However, globalisation coupled with the seismic shifts

triggered by the Revolution, has added new challenges to these binary tensions rendering them more intricate and multifarious.

I also delved into the intricate dynamics of the East-West binaries, where the battlegrounds were often women's bodies. The East-West dichotomy has, for centuries, been a fertile ground for the cultivation of stereotypes. Women's bodies often become symbolic representations of entire cultures and societies, bearing the weight of expectations, misconceptions, and prejudices. These stereotypes paint a limited and often skewed picture of women's identities and roles, reducing them to one-dimensional caricatures that fail to capture the complexities of their lives. This exploration allowed me to uncover the intricate interplay of cultural, societal, and gendered forces that have historically shaped and contested the perceptions and roles of women within these contrasting contexts. Of paramount importance, I scrutinised the paradoxes that arise within these seemingly distinct spheres and how they fundamentally challenge the conventional concept of the "self". This in turn engenders a fragmentation of identity, one emblematic of the profound transformations coursing through Iranian society, catalysed by the evolving role of women and their redefined relationship with the traditional boundaries that once confined them. By weaving together threads of tradition, modernity, and the complexities of post-revolutionary Iran, I have attempted to provide a panorama of the shifting landscape of Iranian women's lives and their artistic responses to the intricate dance of binaries.

Finally, I investigated the ways in which Iranian female artists defy the boundaries of preconceived identities, exploring alternative realms of self-definition and practices. A central crux of contention, resonating not only with these artists but also across Iranian women at large, is the battle over the perception and control of their own bodies. Situated within the context of Shi'i orthodoxy, the female body emerges as a historically contested terrain – a battleground where the struggles for male dominance have unfolded. The State's intrusive emphasis on women's bodies has further compounded the difficulty of this terrain, presenting female artists with a multi-dimensional challenge. By embracing self-representation, these women confront not only externally imposed norms but also narratives prescribed by the Western world. This dual resistance serves as a vessel for critiquing the constructed identities imposed from both sides, reasserting their agency over their bodies and, by extension, their artistic expressions. Through the interplay of personal narratives and collective experiences, these women carve out identities that transcend conventional norms.

Furthermore, I examined the multi-layered landscape of female artists' creative resistance, focusing particularly on the deployment of powerful metaphors, such as the female body, the veil, and hair. These elements become conduits through which artists express their defiance and challenge deeply ingrained societal norms. Moreover, the strategy of mimicry emerges as a potent tool for subversion – a means to navigate the conflicting currents of external expectation and individual expression. This enquiry, likewise, delved into the concept of the subversive use of space, encompassing physical, virtual, and psychological dimensions. The manipulation and reimagining of space emerge as potent tools of resistance, enabling artists to challenge and disrupt established norms while amplifying the resonance of their voices.

Moreover, I examined how some female artists are resisting stereotypes by eschewing Iranian signifiers and associations, in a quest to be recognised as artists in their own rights and not as Iranian/Middle-Eastern/Women artists. The subversive journey of these artists not only encapsulates their defiance against external pressures but ultimately portrays their agency in shaping narratives that defy categorisation. Through these manifold acts of resistance, these artists redefine the contours of artistic identity, inspiring a new dimension of discourse in the broader landscape of art and feminism.

By critiquing prescribed identities enforced by the State or Western influences, the female artists discussed in this thesis carve out their own paths, offering a powerful resistance and reclamation of agency. Their artistic endeavours serve to challenge societal norms, redefine notions of femininity, and explore the multifaceted dimensions of their own existence. In doing so they are reaffirming the importance of engaging in the act of (self) representation as an endeavour to rewrite history in a way that includes those who have been marginalised by the dominant discourse. These artists engage in critical interventions within art practice and interpretation, which are both destabilising and pluralising, consciously acknowledging the significance of gender differences. Instead of offering a singular, unified subject that claims to represent an absolute truth or reality, they strive to produce novel ways of defining the self that allow for fluidity and multiplicity of meaning. They have thus undertaken a transformative process, redefining the representation of the self and its contextual framework to unlock new possibilities. However, this transformative journey has necessitated a challenge to prevailing models that rely on complete and comprehensible subjects, as well as singular modes of understanding.

What unites these artists, regardless of their diverse geographic locations, is a shared preoccupation with the semiotics of society, gender, and identity. They are bound by a collective compulsion to convey their experiences and document the often-overlooked narratives of Iranian women. This preoccupation stems from the need to safeguard a female identity which came increasingly under threat, after the Revolution, and reveals a self-awareness that arises through profound and unflinching self-examination. Through their works, these artists insist on a critical re-examination of the traditional portrayal of women and the feminine, away from the patriarchal centre and the Western periphery. They expose the gender binary entrenched in the conventional visual economy, revealing it to be an artificial construct. Consequently, their works serve as models of embodied knowledge or as crucial steppingstones toward the development of new paradigms by which to understand and interpret such feminine imagery. The resulting art is fundamentally ontological, expressing doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity regarding knowledge and history. By scrutinising and resisting prescribed narratives and deconstructing conventional interpretations, these artists compel us to question the authenticity of historical epistemological structures and accounts. In their place, they offer a fresh understanding and narrative of the Iranian woman, where the feminine reclaims its distinctive voice and is consecrated as the repository of society's memories.

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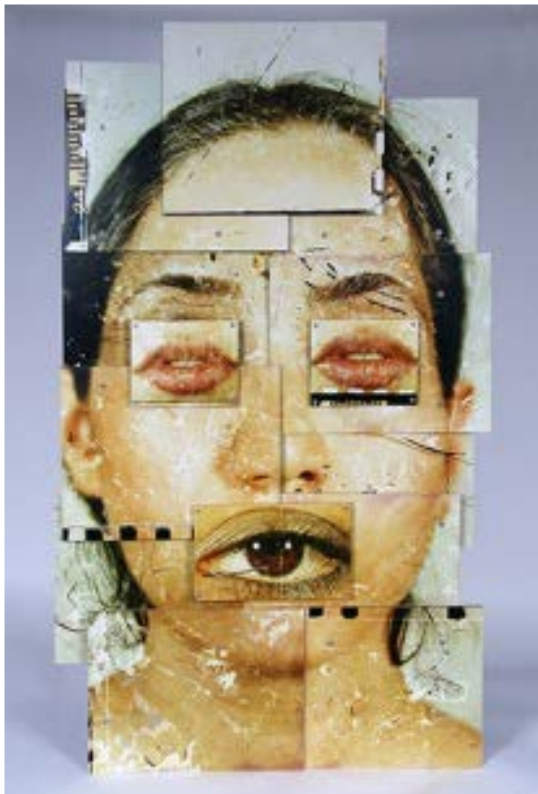

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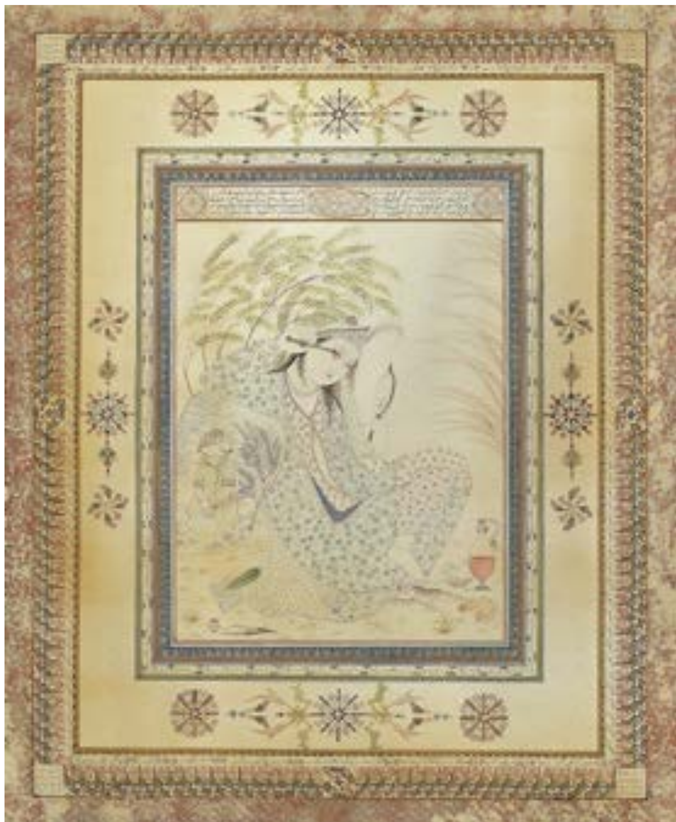

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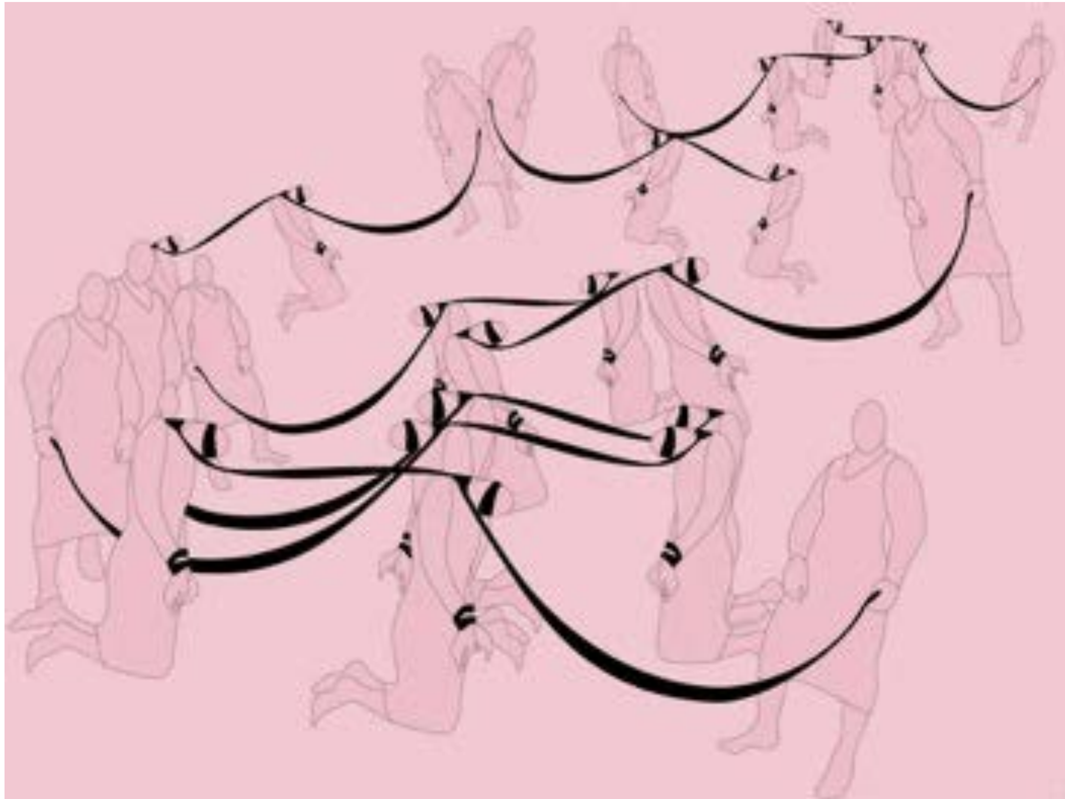

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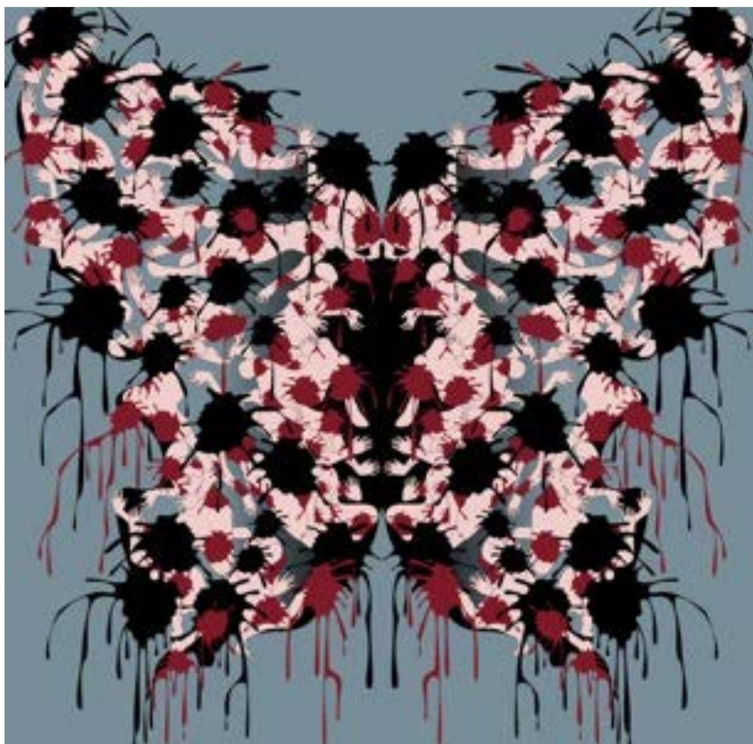

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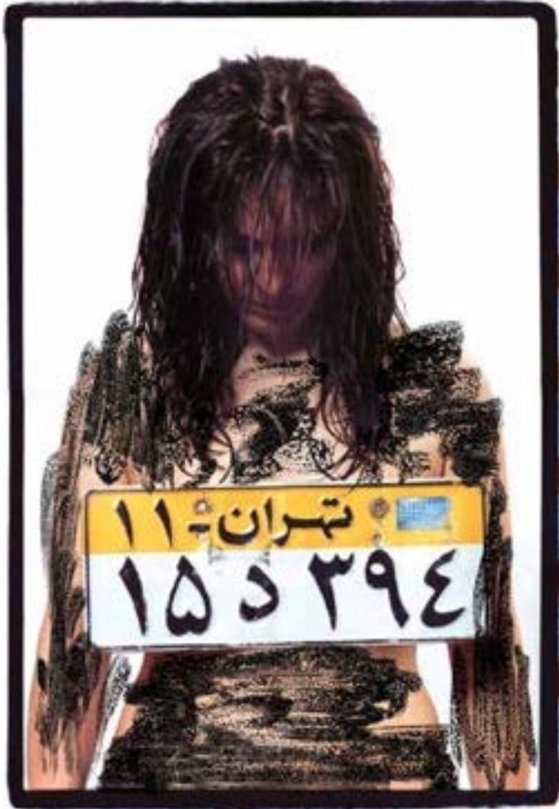

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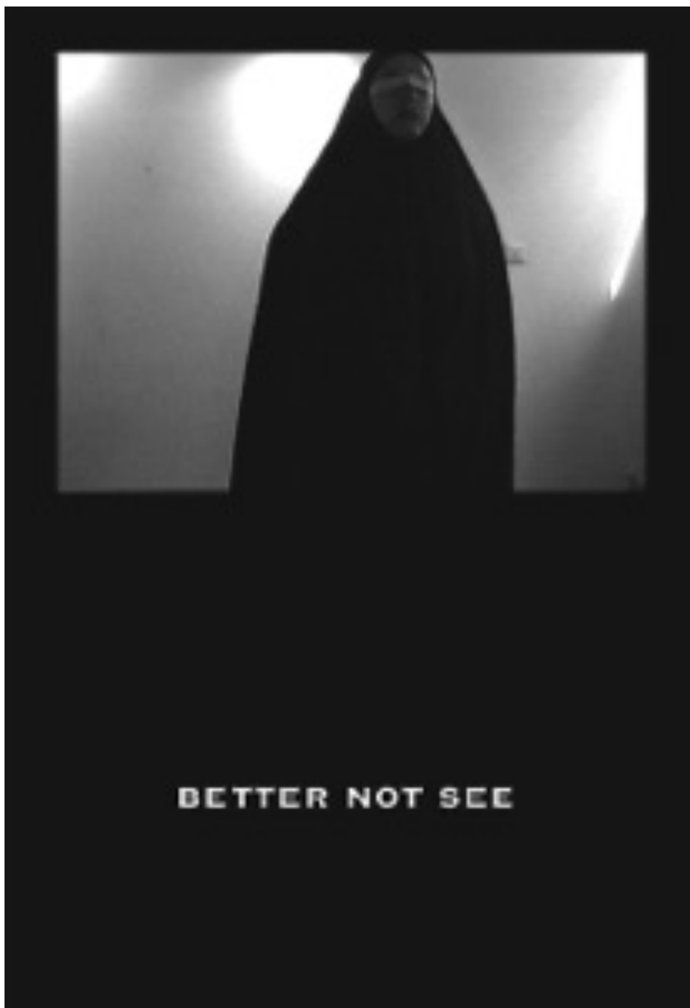

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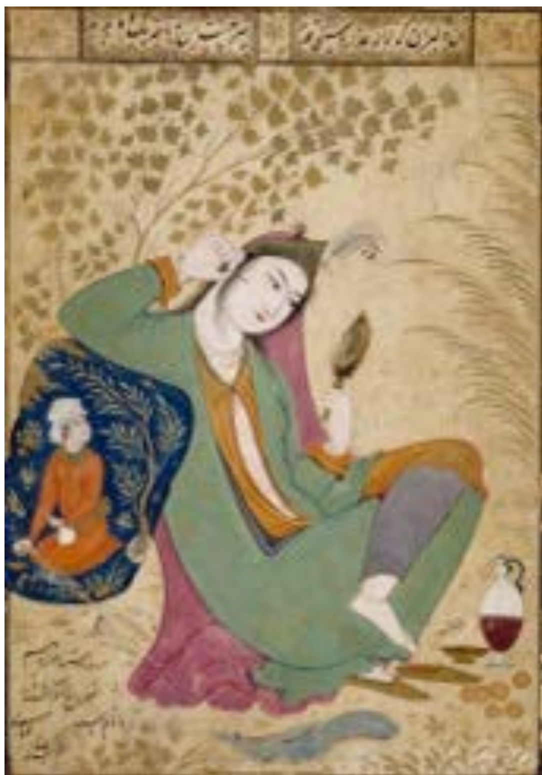

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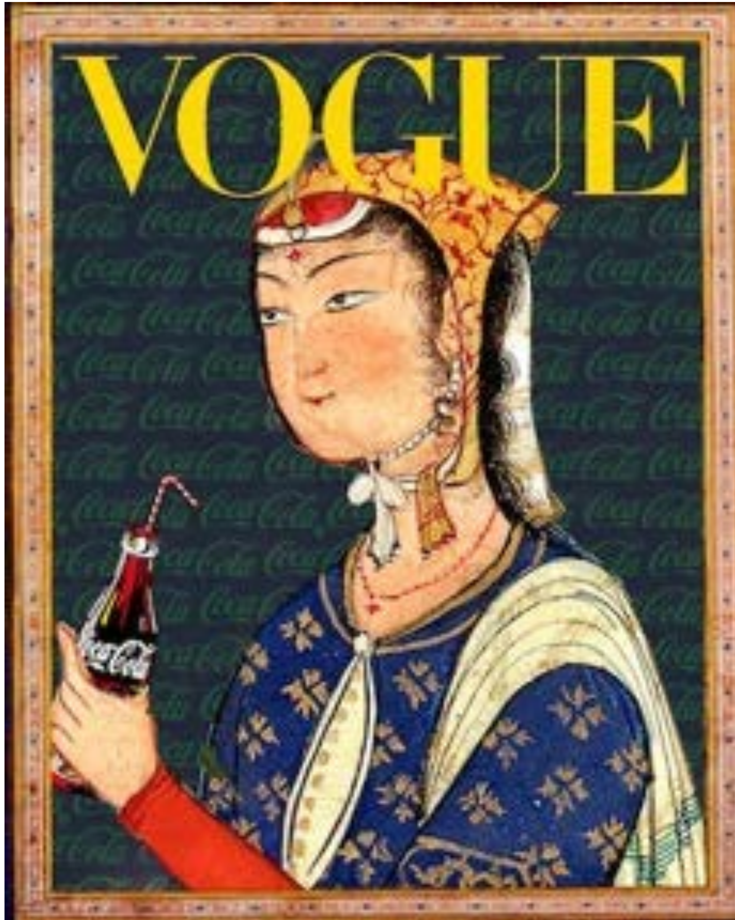

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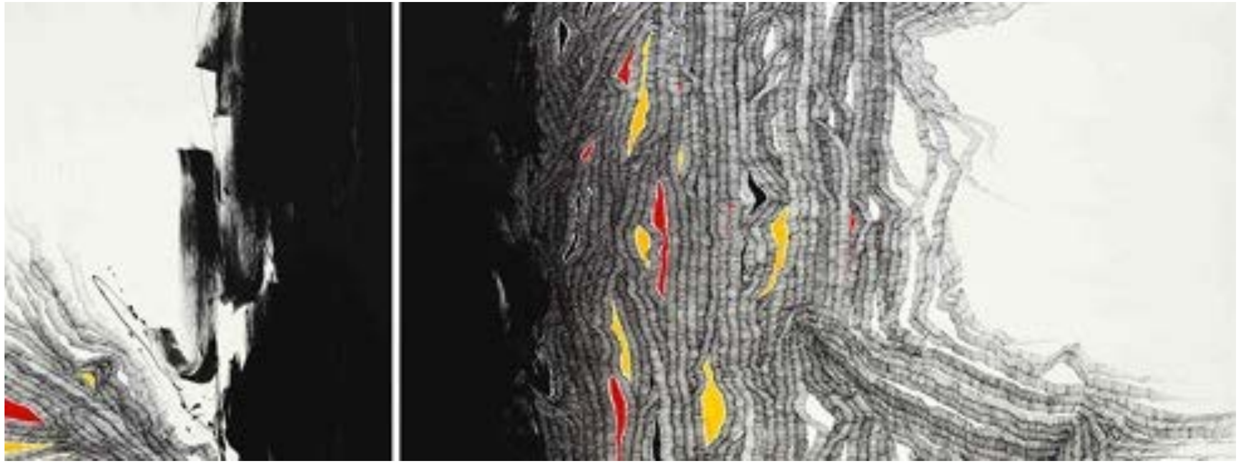

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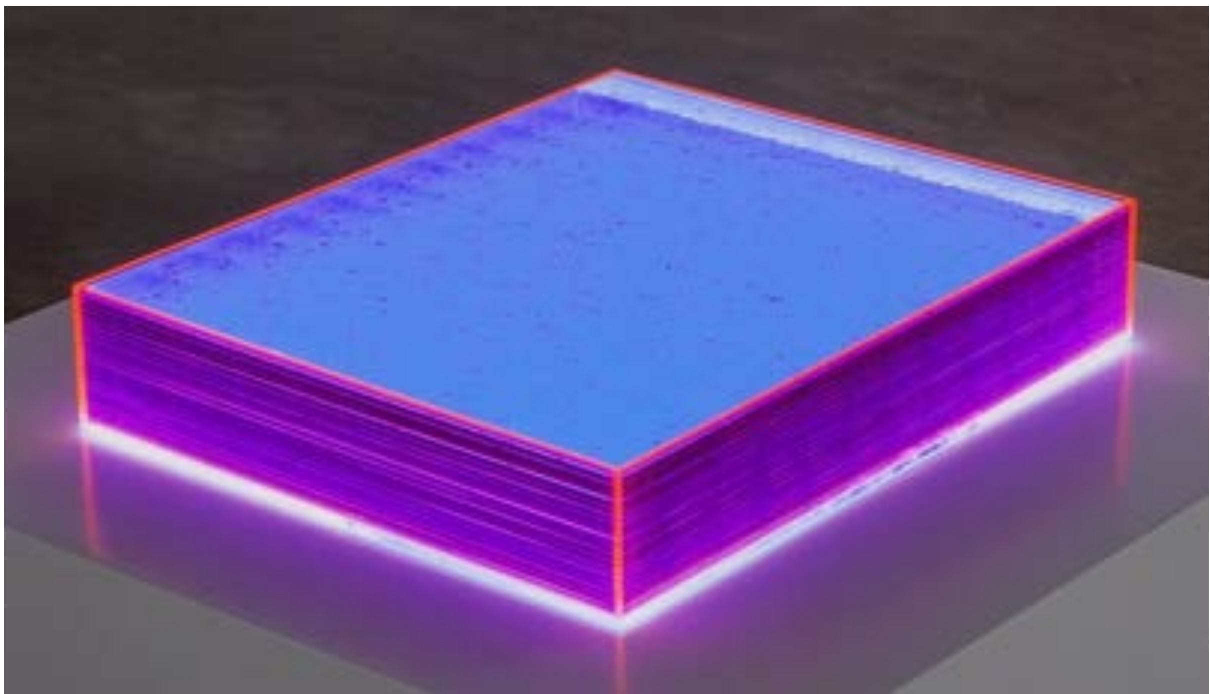

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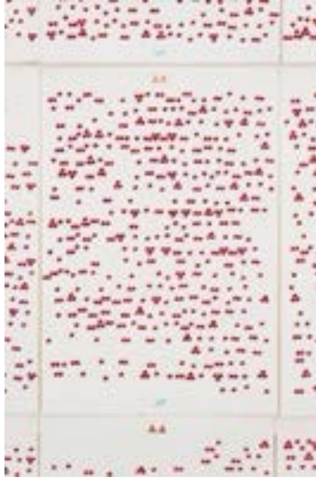

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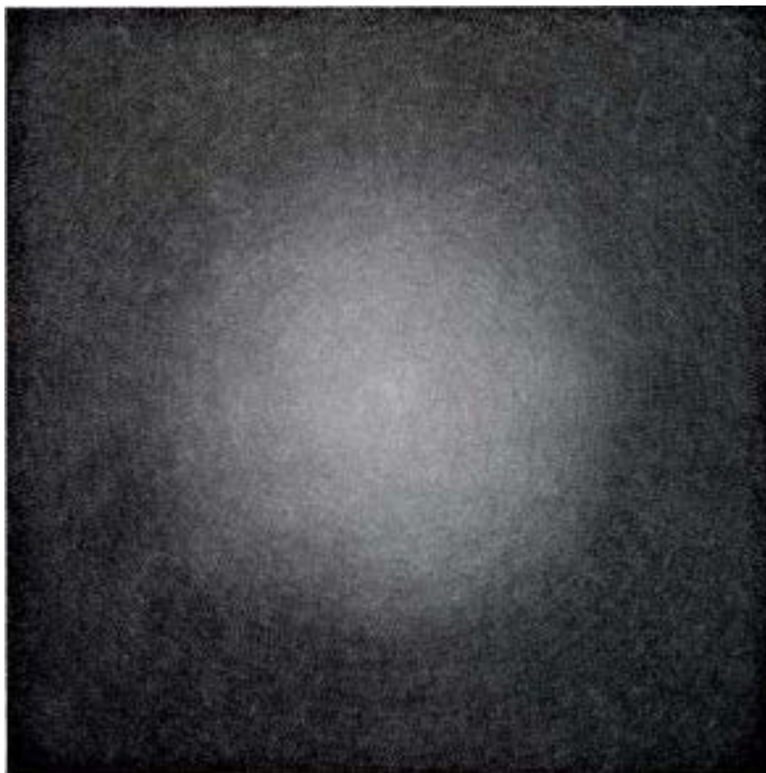

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Detail

Figure 58:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Alphabet of Silence, 2000
Twenty-four 8 x 8 wood panels and sixteen tear shaped ceramic sculptures.
Image Source: https://www.taranehhemami.com/alphabet-of-slence

Figure 59:
Brass amulet inscribed in reverse with handle.
19th Century, Qajar Dynasty.
Dimensions: 3.5 centimetres diameter.
British Museum.
Image Source:
http://britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=765128&partId=1&searchText=Iran+magic&page=1

Figure 60:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Silent Tears, 2011
Ceramic, wax, paint and paper
Image Source: V & A
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1194700/silent-tears-ceramic-hemami-taraneh/

Figure 61:
Farah Ossouli (b.1953)
Love and Death (from the *Shahnameh* series), 2007
Gouache on cardboard
Dimensions: 109 x 74 cm
Image Source: http://www.farahossouli.com/?gallery_type=international-modern-and-contemporary-art-auctions

Figure 62:
Yasmin Sinai (b. 1969)
The Act of Gurdafarid, the Female Warrior, 2015
Sculpture: Cardboard, paper and glue
Dimensions: 183 × 117 × 55 cm
Image Source: LACMA Collection https://collections.lacma.org/node/2256428

Figure 63:
Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955)
A Ruin from the Past (*Traveling Demons* series)
Print on board
Dimensions: 80x120 cm
Image Source:
https://malekeh.com/traveling-demons/

Figure 64:
Taravat Talepasand (b.1979)
White Div I (White Devil), 2019
Glair on sanctioned Iranian currency with LSD
Dimensions: 33 x 25 inches
Image Source:
http://www.taravattalepasand.com/new-gallery-5/1lvh75vknecjmpk259urezy3mm5zcc

Figure 65:
Golnaz Fathi (b.1972)
Untitled 3, (*Falling Leaves* series), 2012
Medium: Acrylic on Canvas
Dimensions: 150 x 200 cm
Image Source: http://caspianartsfoundation.blogspot.com/2013/01/golnaz-fathi-third-line.html

Figure 66:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
"Sharif" *Villains*, (From The Book of Kings series), 2012
Ink on gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 251.5 x 125.7 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Image Source:
https://publicdelivery.org/shirin-neshat-the-book-of-kings/

Figure 67:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
"Neda," *Patriots* (From *The Book of Kings* series), 2012.
Ink on LE gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 152.4 x 114.3 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Image Source:
https://publicdelivery.org/shirin-neshat-the-book-of-kings/

Figure 68:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
"Muhammad," *Patriots* (From *The Book of Kings* series), 2012.
Ink of LE gelatin silver print,
Dimensions: 152.4 x 114.3 cm.
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Image Source:
https://publicdelivery.org/shirin-neshat-the-book-of-kings/

Figure 69:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
"Mana," *Masses* (From *The Book of Kings*
series, 2012.
Ink on gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 101.6 x 76.2 cm.
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Image Source:
https://publicdelivery.org/shirin-neshat-the-book-of-kings/

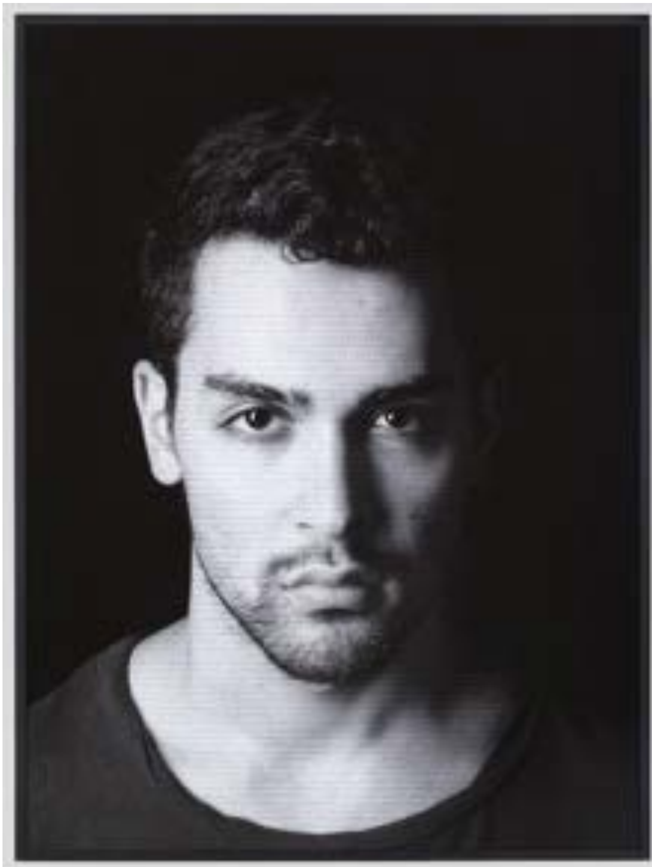


Figure 70:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
"Salah," *Masses,* (From *The Book of Kings* series), 2012.
Ink on gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 101.6 x 76.2 cm.
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Image Source:
https://publicdelivery.org/shirin-neshat-the-book-of-kings/

Figure 71:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
Offered Eyes, 1993
Ink on RC print (photo taken by Plauto)
Dimensions: 133 x 92.1 cm
Copyright Shirin Neshat.
Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.
Image Source:
https://www.khtt.net/en/page/25145/at-shirin-neshat-offered-eyes

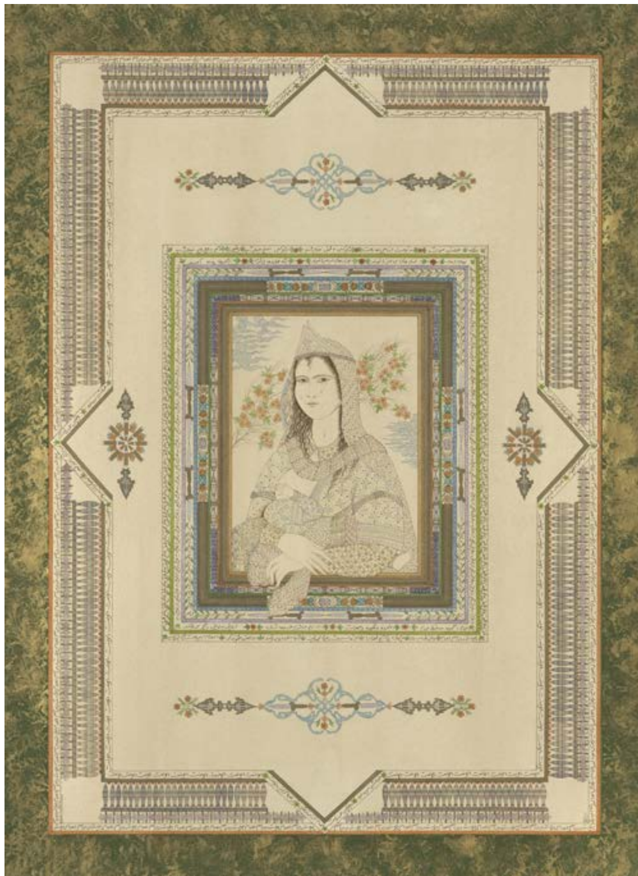


Figure 72:
Farah Ossouli (b.1953)
Leonardo, Forough and I (*Wounded Virtue* series), 2012
Gouache on Arches Paperboard
Dimensions: 75x55 cm
Image Source:
https://dastan.gallery/exhibitions/72/works/image4221/

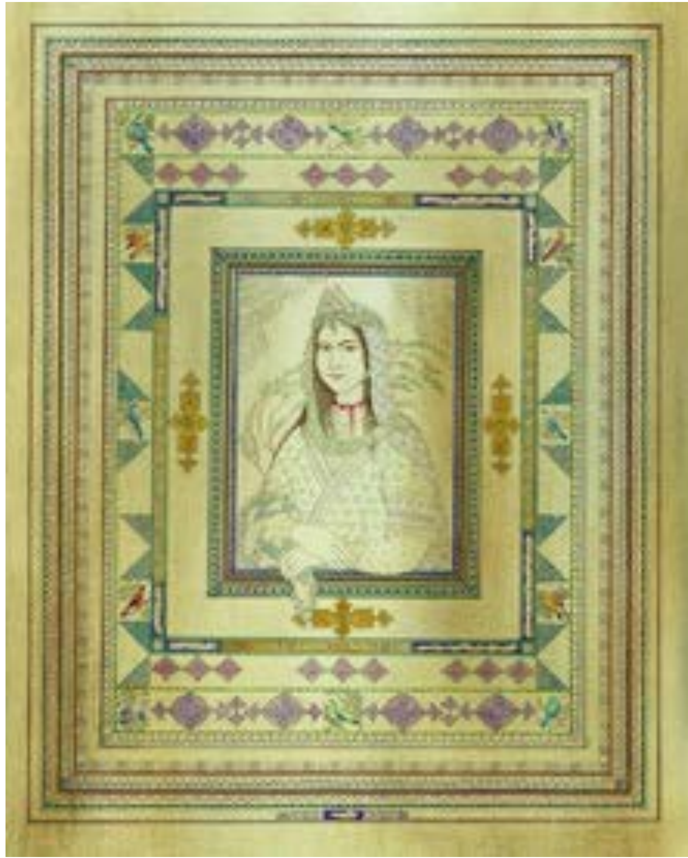


Figure 73:
Farah Ossouli (b.1953)
Monalisa (*Ars Poetica* series), 2009
Gouache on cardboard
Dimensions: 65 x 55 cm
Image Source:
http://www.farahossouli.com/?gallery_type=ars-poetica

Figure 74:
Hadieh Shafie (b.1969)
Forugh 7 (diptych), 2014
Ink, acrylic, and paper with printed and handwritten Persian text
Dimensions: 31.7 x 47.6 cm
Image courtesy of Leila Heller gallery
Image Source: https://www.designboom.com/art/hadieh-shafie-art-dubai-leila-heller-gallery-03-26-2015/

Figure 75:
Pouran Jinchi (b.1959)
Untitled 6 (from *Forough* series), 2008
Ink and acrylic on canvas
Dimensions: 60 x 48 in
Image Source:
https://www.pouranjinchi.com/portfolio#/forough/

Figure76:
Afsoon (b.1960)
Forough, 2009
Mixed Media
Dimensions: 42 x 59 cm
Image Source: https://afsoon.co.uk/fairytale-icons/

Figure 77:
Soheila Sokhanvari (b.1964)
Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad), 2022
Egg tempera on calf vellum
Dimensions: 12.99 x 15.46 cms
Image Source: Courtesy of Artist

Figure 78:
Nazgol Ansarinia (b.1979)
Carpet, 2006
Video (4 minutes, 25 seconds)
Image Source: Abraj Capital Art Prize Catalogue, 2009

Figure 79:
Nazgol Ansarinia (b.1979)
Mendings (carpet), 2010
Mixed media
Dimensions: 203 x 88.9 cm
Image Sourece: Green Art Gallery
https://www.gagallery.com/exhibitions/statue-of-limitation/works?view=slider#3

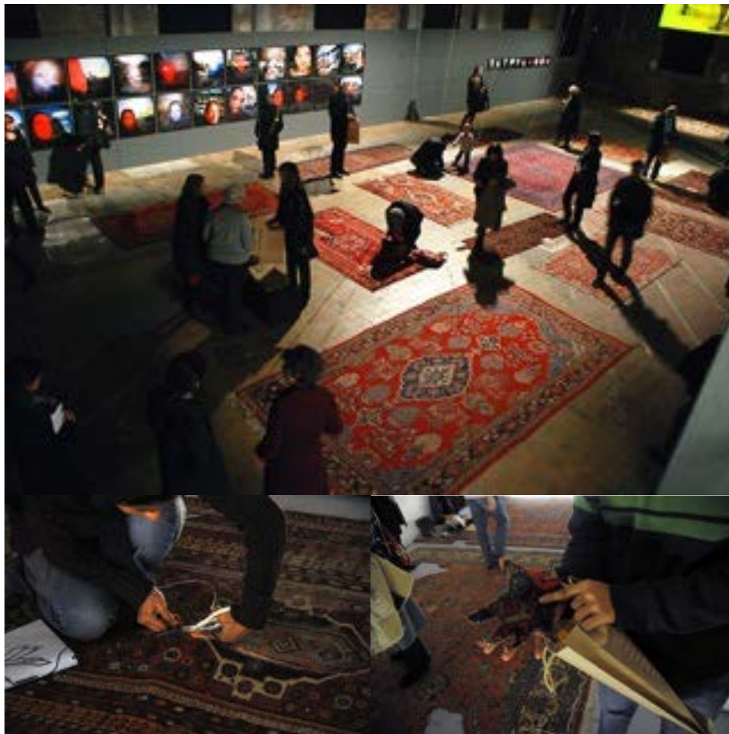


Figure 80:
Neda Razavipour (b.1969)
*Self Servi*ce, 2009
Installation
Image Source:
http://www.nedarazavipour.com/2009--self-service.html

*Self Servi*ce, details

Figure 81:
Bita Ghezelayagh (b.1966)
The Letter that Never Arrived, ("*Namey-i ke hargez naressid*"), 2013
Woven carpets, embroidery and pen nibs
Dimensions: 112 x 110 cm
Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects
Image Source:
http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/the_letter_that_never_arrived_by_iranian_artist_bita_ghezelayagh/

Figure 82:
Shirana Shahbazi (b.1974)
Farsh-01-2004, 2004
Wool on silk, hand-knotted rug
Dimensions: 90 x 55 cm
Image source:
https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/-Farsh-03-2004-/278B0074B409768A

Figure 83:
Shirana Shahbazi (b.1974)
Woman-02-2003, 2003
C-print on aluminium
Dimensions: 150 x 120 cm
Image source:
Daftari, Fereshteh. *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking,* p. 56. *New* York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

Figure 84:
Negar Ahkami (b.1971)
After Winter Must Come Spring (2018)
Mixed Media Sculpture: Acrylic, Wood, Translucent Films, Colour Lighting Gel Filters, Tapes, Spray Paint, Enamel Latex Paint, China Marker, Sharpie, LED Colour Lights, Rayon Fringe
Dimensions: 203.20 x 121.92 x 20.32 cm
Image Source: https://www.negarahkami.com/new-gallery/byc7t88j4lbih6vboliin5l4d1lsah

Figure 85:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Mirror Assemblages, (*Hall of Reflection* series, 2000-)
Image Source:
https://www.taranehhemami.com/glass-assembledges

Figure 86:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Ruins (*Hall of Reflection* series), 2003
Image Source: https://www.taranehhemami.com/hall-of-reflections

Figure 87:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Relics (*Hall of Reflection* series), 2017
Image Source : https://www.taranehhemami.com/relics-hallofreflections

Figure 88:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Absence (*Hall of Reflection* series), 2013-2016
Image Source: https://www.taranehhemami.com/absence

Figure 89:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Cutouts (*Hall of Reflection* series), 2002-2012
Collage, oil and wax on wood panel,
Dimensions: 36 x 4x 48 cm
https://www.taranehhemami.com/hall-of-reflections-2000-present

Figure 90:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Albums and Letters (*Hall of Reflections* series), 2002-2006
Wax on digital transparencies and oil paint,
Dimensions: 98" x 78" in
Image Source:
https://www.taranehhemami.com/hall-of-reflections-2000-present

Figure 91:
Taraneh Hemami (b.1960)
Missing (Hall of Reflections series), 2002
Acrylic on wood panels
Dimensions: 20" x 20" each
Image Source:
https://www.taranehhemami.com/hall-of-reflections-2000-present

Figure 92:
Samira Alikhanzadeh (b.1967)
Family Album, 2008
Acrylic and mirror fragments on printed board
Dimensions: 100 x 150 cm
Image Source: http://samiraalikhanzadeh.com/base/en/gallery/

Figure 93:
Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955)
Observations (Triptych), 1999
Digital Print
Dimensions: Large Central panel: 47” x 33” side panels: 34” x 25”
(9 images each)
Image Source: https://malekeh.com/observations/

Figure 94:
Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955)
Three uncles (*Updating a Family Album* series), 1997/1998
Digital C Print
Dimensions: 42 x 29.50 cms
Image Source :
https://malekeh.com/updating-a-family-album/

Figure 95:
Malekeh Nayiny (b.1955)
Traces, 2000
Dimensions: 43.4 x 32 inches each (Diptych)
Image Source: https://malekeh.com/traces/

Figure 96:
Sonia Balassanian (b.1942)
The Other Side, 1992
Sculpture Center, New York
Image Source:
https://www.soniabalassanian.com/en/the-other-side-1992-sculpture-center

Figure 97:
Sonia Balassanian (b.1942)
Shadows of My Sisters, 1993,
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Image Source: https://www.soniabalassanian.com/en/shadows-of-my-sisters-1993-secca-museum

Figure 98:
Haleh Niazmand (b.1962)
From Far Away:
Veiled, 1996
Joseph Gross Gallery,
University of Arizona, Tucson
Image Source: https://www.halehniazmand.info/from-far-away

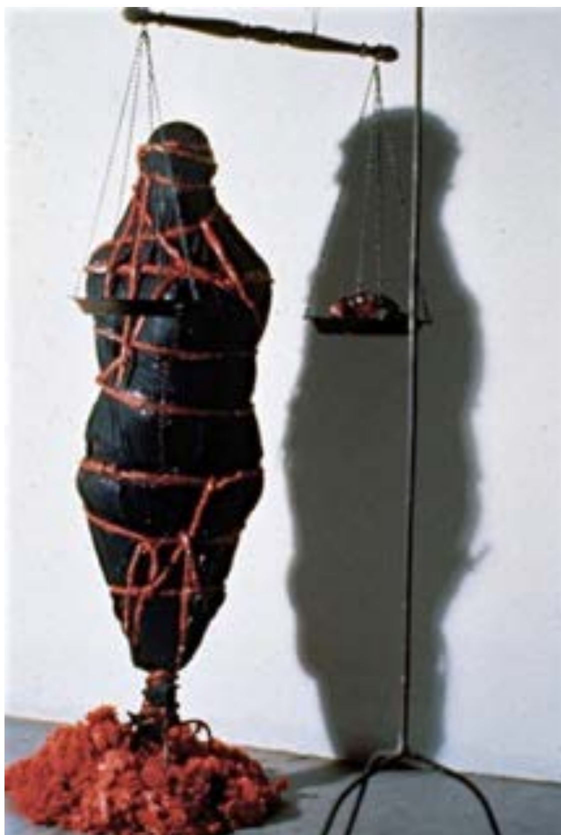


Figure 99:
Haleh Niazmand (b.1962)
From Far Away:
All Men Created Equal, 1996
Joseph Gross Gallery,
University of Arizona, Tucson
Image Source:
https://www.halehniazmand.info/from-far-away

Figure 100:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Signes, 2007
Dimensions: 50 x 50 cm
Image Source : http://www.payvand.com/news/10/oct/1022.html

Figure 101:
Farzaneh Khademian (b.1972)
Inside the Bus, 2010-2012
Image Source:
http://www.farzanehkhademian.com/en/image/230

Figure 102:
Farzaneh Khademian (b.1972)
Padina, 2010-2012
Image Source: http://www.farzanehkhademian.com/en/image/126

Figure 103:
Farzaneh Khademian (b.1972)
Padina, 2010-2012
Image Source: http://www.farzanehkhademian.com/en/image/118

Figure 104:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Funeral, 2003
Ikea office chairs, “Ashura” banners, cardboard, cotton wadding
Image Source : https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/funeral/

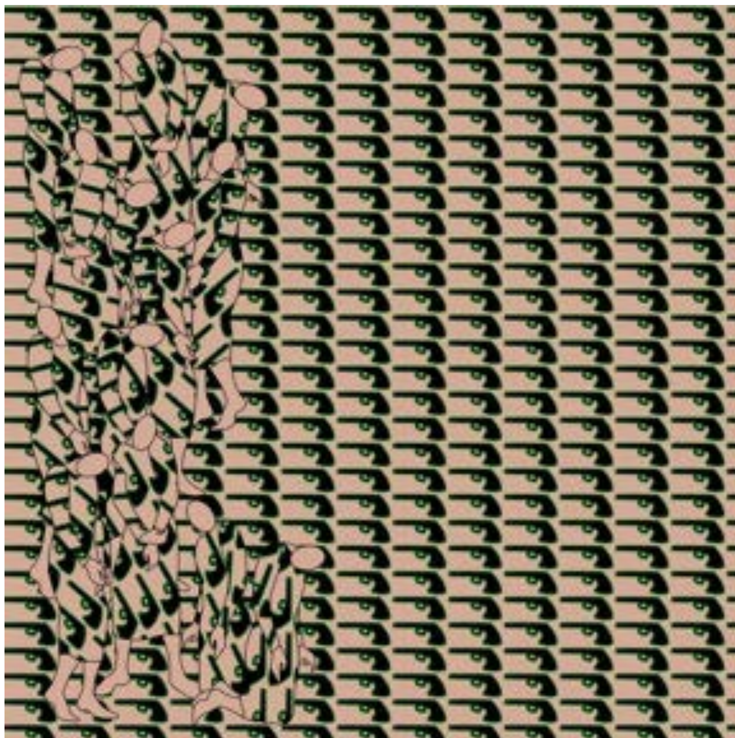


Figure 105:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Red is My Name, Green is My Name I, 2007
Digital print on Photo Rag Dimensions: 40 x 40 cm
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/red-is-my-name-green-is-my-name/

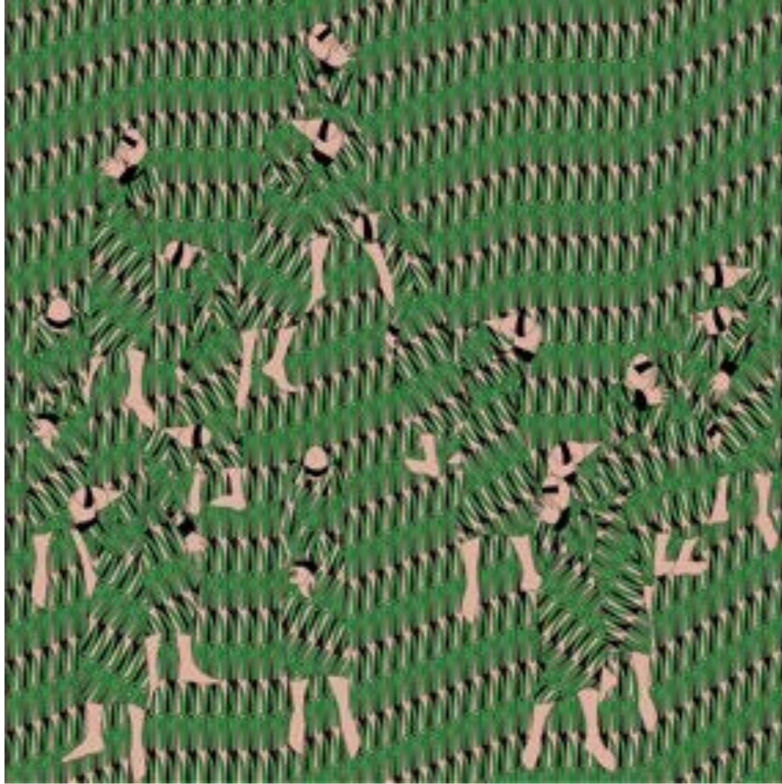


Figure 106:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Red is My Name, Green is My Name II, 2009
Digital print on Photo Rag
Dimensions: 40 x 40 cm
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/red-is-my-name-green-is-my-name/

Figure 107:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Red is My Name, Green is My Name III, 2016
Digital print on Photo Rag
Dimensions: 40 x 40 cm
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/red-is-my-name-green-is-my-name/

Figure 108:
West by East #10, 2004
C-Print
Dimensions: 60 x 90 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=15#item-10

لوفوکونیـه، ممکن اسـت
موازنه‌ای را با زنان آبتنی کننده ایجاد می کند نیز اسـتفاده کرده
باشـد تا به تنوع پیشرفت‌های ماشینی و اجتماعی در تصویرش
اشاره کند.

پل سزان، پنج آبتنی‌کننده، ۱۸۹۳_۱۸۹۲

Figure 109:
Page from a pirated Taschen edition of western art, published in Iran, depicting Paul Cezanne's, *Five Bathers*.
Image Source:
Collection of Kourosh ValaNejad,
p. 167 - Harcourt, Glenn. *The Artist, the Censor, and the Nude: A Tale of Morality and Appropriation*. DoppelHouse Press, 2017.

Figure 110:
Leila Pazooki (b.1977)
The Aesthetic of Censorship, 2009
Installation with framed photographs
http://nadour.org/collection/the-aesthetic-of-censorship/

Figure 111:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
*Turbulen*t, 1998
Black and white photograph (diptych)
Dimensions: 101.6 x 61 cm
Image Source: http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/untitled-turbulent-series-diptych-4eAOB6AXzGPKhli_EE2l4A2

Figure 112:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Listen, 2010
6 channel video installations
(8 min. loop)
6 photographs, Inkjet on Epson paper affixed to aluminium plate, 105 x 130cm
Image Source: http://www.beikey.net/mrs-deane/?p=5653

Figure 113:
Farideh Shahsavarani (b.1955)
I Wrote, You Read, 2006.
Former headquarters of the Ettela'at Newspaper in Tehran.
Image Source:
Courtesy of Farideh Shahsavarani
(Karami 2022: 76)

Figure 114:
Hussain Khosrowjerdi (b.1957)
Companions of Qods (Hamsangaraneh Qods), 1980
Image Source:
http://tajasomi.ir/fa/pages/artist Profile/491/حسین-خسروجردی

Figure 115:
Kazem Chalipa (b.1957)
Guardians of the Light, 1980
(*Negahbananeh Noor*)
Dimensions: 70 x 200 cm
Image Source:
http://tajasomi.ir/fa/pages/artistProfile/495/كاظم-چليپا

Figure 116:
Kazem Chalipa (b.1957)
Ithar (Self-Sacrifice), 1981
Painting which was made into first large-scale mural created after the start of the War depicting a mother holding the body of her dead soldier son, which transforms into a tulip (symbol of martyrdom).
Dimensions: 200 x 300 cm
Image Source:
http://tajasomi.ir/fa/pages/artistProfile/495/كاظم-چليپا

Figure 117:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
Seeking Martyrdom #2, 1995
Women of Allah series (1993-1997)
Ink on gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 102 x 141 cm
Image Source:
https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Seeki ng-Martyrdom--2/37E9CA61C0B4BBA7

Figure 118:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
Untitled, 1996
Women of Allah series (1993-1997)
Ink on gelatin silver print
Dimensions: 107 x 149 cm
Image Source:
https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/-Untitled-/99907CE3EEF43695

Figure 119:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Mothers of Martyrs series, 2006
Digital C-type print
Dimensions: 76 x 50 cm
Image Source: Victoria & Albert museum:
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1159913/mothers-of-martyrs-photograph-tavakolian-newsha/

Figure 120:
Gohar Dashti (b.1980)
Today's Life and War, 2008
Chromogenic Print
Dimensions: 105 x 70 cm
Image Source: http://gohardashti.com/work/todays-life-and-war/

Figure 121:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Nil Nil #1, 2008
C-Print
Dimensions: 76 x 76 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=17#item-1

Figure 122:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Nil Nil #5, 2008
C-Print
Dimensions: 76 x 114 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=17#item-5

Figure 123:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Nil Nil #10, 2008
C-Print
Dimensions:114 x 76 cm
Image Source: http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=17#item-10

Figure 124:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
White Square #1, 2009
C-Print
Dimensions: 76 x 76 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=18#item-1

Figure 125:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
White Square #6, 2009
C-Print
Dimensions: 76 x 76 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=18#item-6

Figure 126:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Miss Butterfly #9, 2011
Digital Print
Dimensions: 150 x 100 cm
Image Source: http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=19#item-9

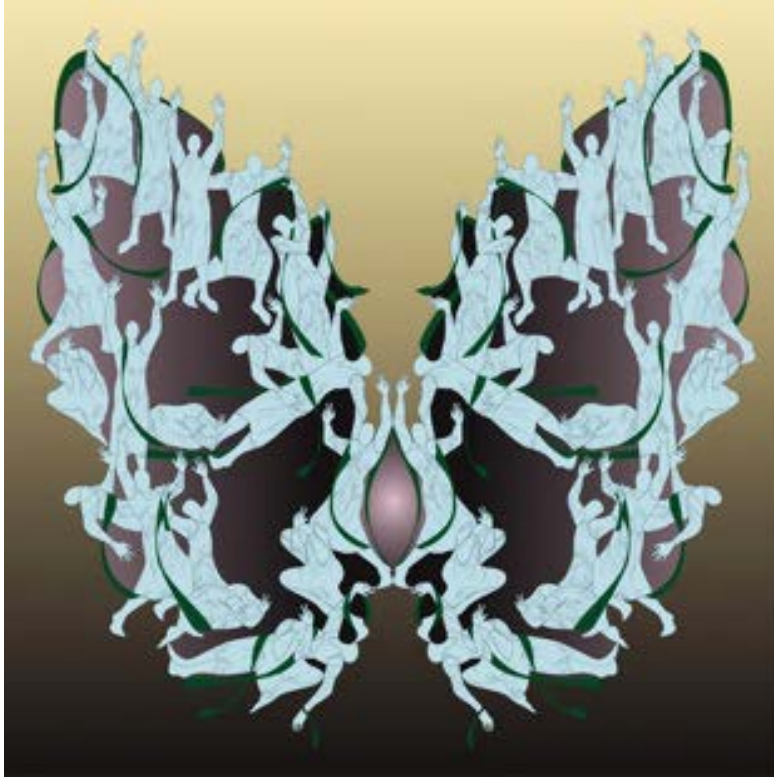


Figure 127:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Green Times (*Papillon* series), 2010-2015
Digital print on Glossy or Turner paper
Dimensions: 100 x 100 or 35 x 35 cm
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/papillon-collection-2/

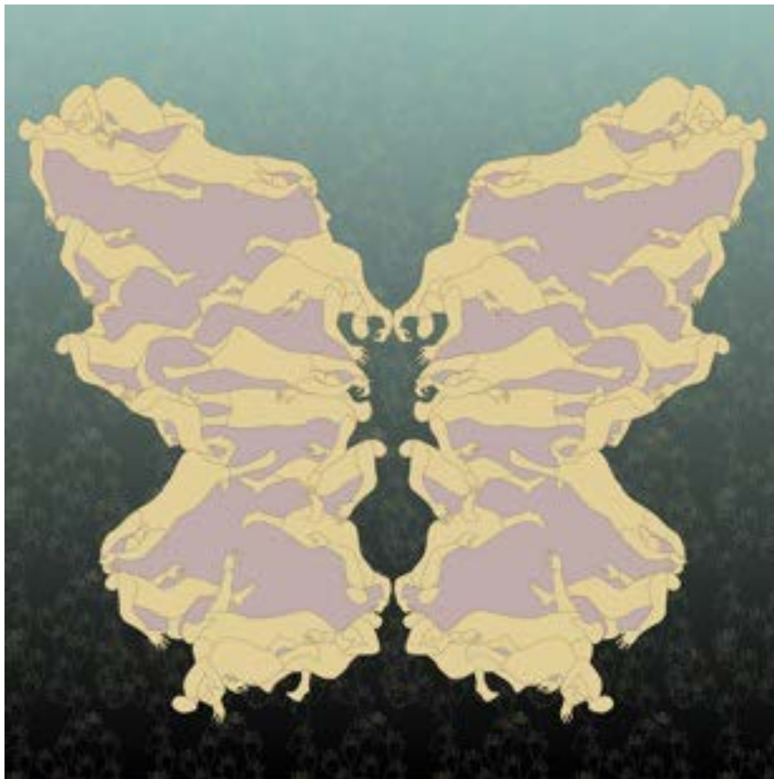


Figure 128:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Khavaran Cemetery (*Papillon* series), 2010-2015
Digital print on Glossy or Turner paper
Dimensions: 100 x 100 or 35 x 35 cm
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/papillon-collection-2/

Figure 129:
Mandana Moghaddam (b.1962)
Sara's Paradise, 2009
Installation
Image Source: http://www.mandana-moghaddam.com

Figure 130:
Leila Pazooki (b.1977)
This is not Green, 2009
Neon Light, Art in public Space, Brot Kunst Halle, Gallery Enrst Hilger, Vienna
Image Source: http://framerframed.nl/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/The-Promise-of-Loss.pdf

Figure 131:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
Woman, Life, Freedom, 2022
Giclèe Print on Hahnemüle Museum Etching
Dimensions: 297mm x 117mm
Image Source: https://circa.art/products/shirin-neshat/

Figure 132:
Roshi Rouzbehani (b.1985)
Woman Life Freedom (*Zan Zendegi Azadi*), 2022
Illustration for The New Yorker
Image Source: https://www.roshirouzbehani.com/#/women-of-irans-protestsnew-yorker/

Figure 133:
Ghazal Foroutan (b.1994)
Revolutionary Rosie the Riveter, 2022
Graphic design poster
Image Source:
https://policy.futureswithoutviolence.org/resource_center/how-women-girls-are-leading-the-protests-in-iran/

Figure 134:
J. Howard Miller (1918-2004)
We Can Do It! 1943
Poster
Image Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Can_Do_It!

Figure 135:
Samira Eskandarfar (b.1980)
I am not me, 2013
Acrylic Painting on Canvas
Dimensions: 120 x 200 cm
Image Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAqASBMgbaR/

Figure 136:
Nastaran Safaie (b.1984)
High Heels, 2017
Video
Image Source:
https://www.nastaransafaei.c
om/High%20Heels/920/

Figure 137:
Nastaran Safaie (b.1984)
In Tehran, 2017-18
Video
Image Source:https://www.nastaransafaei.com/In%20Tehran/921/

Figure 138:
Jinoos Taghizadeh (b.1971)
Titus Andronicus. 2015
Snapshot from reading and walking in Behesht Zahra Cemetery. Tehran.
Video capture by Jinoos Taghizadeh (Karimi 2022: 183)

Figure 139:
Elham Puriya Mehr (b.1979)
My Own Privacy Policy, 2013
Social Art Project
Image Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F9z0ypFR4U

Figure 140:
Satrapi, Marjane (b.1969)
The Complete Persepolis, p.344.
New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.

Figure 141:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Look, 2013
Inkjet Print
Dimensions: 41 x 55 in
Image Source: https://www.newshatavakolian.com/look

Figure 142:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Look, 2013
Video installation – screen mounted on window
Image Source:
https://www.newshatavakolian.com/look

Figure 143:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Portrait of Somayyeh (*Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album*), 2015
Image Source: https://www.newshatavakolian.com/blank-pages-of-an-iranian-photo-album

Figure 144:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Qajar #3, 1998
C-Print
Dimensions: 60 x 90 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=ph
otogra phy&id=9#item-3

Figure 145:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Qajar #5, 1998
C-Print
Dimensions: 60 x 90 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=9#item-5

Figure 146:
Anis al-Dowleh, wife of Nasser al-Din Shah
Image Source:
https://www.pinterest.co.uk/offsite/?token=820-585&url=https%3A%2F%2Fi.pinimg.com%2Foriginals%2F3f%2F12%2F11%2F3f121101e424b1ea062f9b1bdb94def5.jpg&pin=559783428657226196&client_tracking_params=CwABAAAADDMzMjMwOTE5Nzg4NAA~0

Figure 147:
Qajar woman on a bicycle.
Image Source:
https://cdn.mashreghnews.ir/old/files/fa/news/1393/6/5/696814_763.jpg

Figure 148:
Katayoun Karami (b.1967)
Me and My Mother (Stamp series), 2005
Dimensions: 28 x 23 cm x 2
Image Source: http://mopcap.com/artist/2009-katayoun/

Figure 149:
Rabee Baghshani (b.1982)
Rokhsareh II, 2017
Digital Print on Canvas
Dimensions: 100 × 70 cm
Image Source:
https://emergeast.com/product/rokhsareh-ii/

Figure 150:
Soody Sharifi (b.1955)
Blades (*Persian Delights* series), 2007
Medium: Archival inkjet print
Dimensions: 31.75 x 31.75 cm
Image Source: https://anyatishgallery.com/art/blades-by-soody-sharifi

Figure 151:
Newsha Tavakolian (b.1981)
Women in the Axis of Evil, 2006
Image Source:
http://www.payvand.com/news/06/sep/1295.html

Figure 152:
Sara Rahbar (b.1976)
Love Arrived and How Red, 2008
Dimensions: 60 x 40 inches each
Image Source:
https://www.sararahbar.com/love-arrived-how-red

Figure 153:
Haleh Anvari (b.1962)
Chador Dadar series, 2007
C-Print
Dimensions: 40 x 60 cm
Image Source: http://www.kashyahildebrand.org/new_site/artists/anvari/anvari011.html

Figure 154:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Swan Rider, 2004
Digital print on Aluminium Dibond
Dimensions: 80 x 80 cms
Image Source:
https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/swanrider/

Figure 155:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Flashing, 2009
Digital print on Alu Dibond
Dimenstions: 47 x 70 cm
Image Source : https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/flashing/

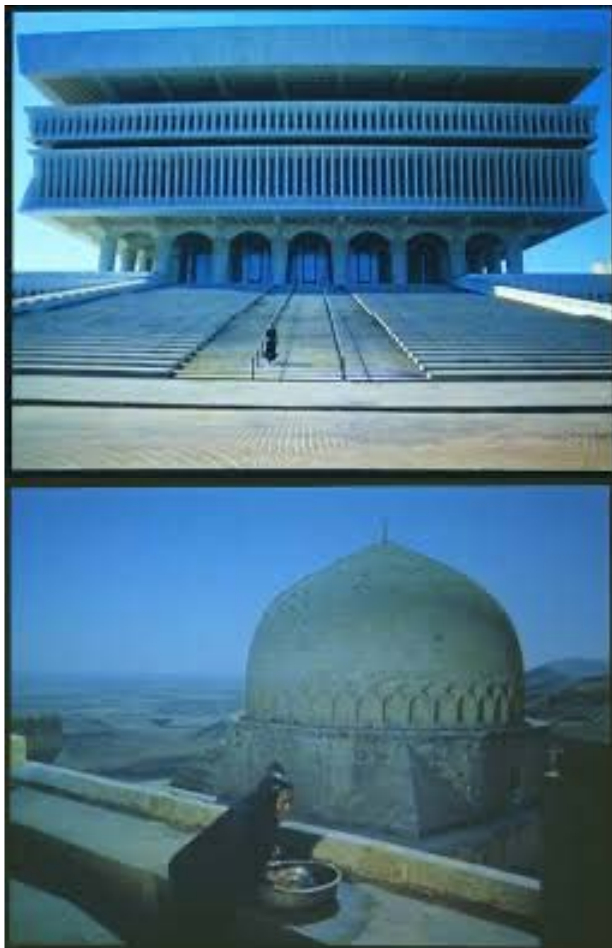
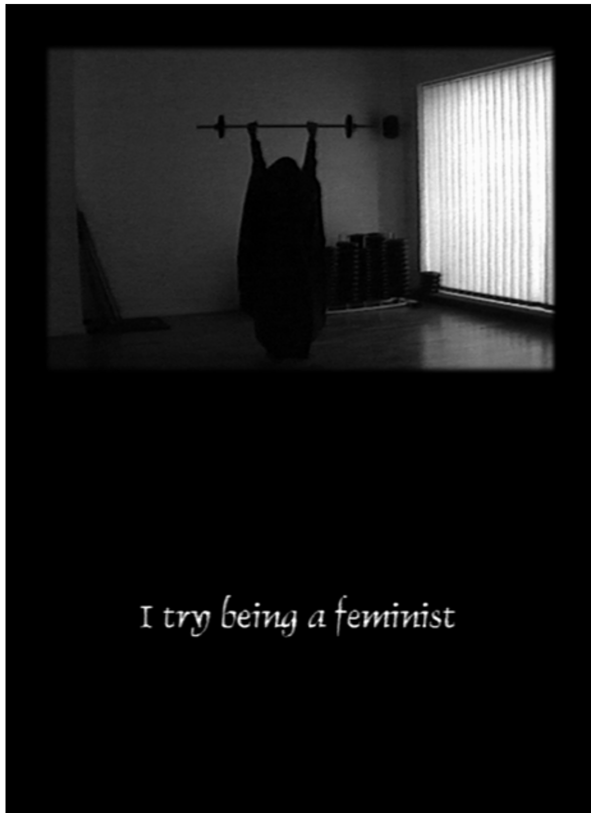


Figure 156:
Shirin Neshat (b.1957)
Soliloquy, 1999
16 mm, video, 2 projections, colour and sound (stereo)
Image Source:
https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/neshat-soliloquy-t07970



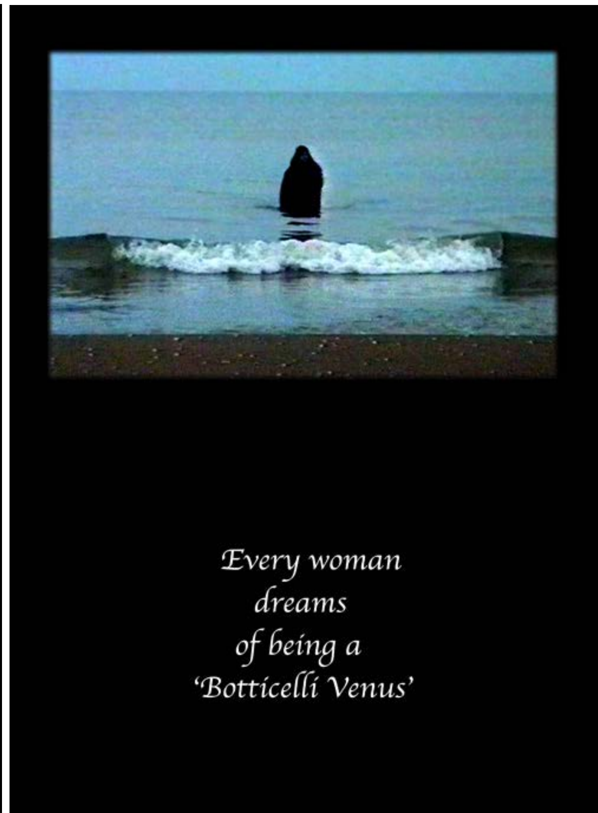


Figure 157:
Ghazel (b.1966)
Me series. 1997-2000
Image Source:
Courtesy of the Artist.

Figure 158:
Elizabeth Taylor outside the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz.
Photography by Firooz Zahedi, 1976.
Image Source:
https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/photos/2011/02/zahedi-lacma-slide-show-201102

Figure 159:
Mitra Tabrizian (b.1964)
Surveillance, 1988-89
Monochrome digital print on aluminium
Dimensions : 36 x 120 cm
Image Source : http://mitratabrizian.com/surveillance.php

Figure 160:
Katayoun Karami (b.1967)
Resurrected, 2009
Digital print, mixed media
Image Source:
https://katayounkarami.com/
2009-resurrected--رستاخیز
۱۳۸۸/

Figure 161:
Mandana Moghaddam (b.1962)
Manijeh, 2008
C-Print, 59” x 43”
Image Source:
https://www.mandana-moghaddam.com

Figure 162:
Simin Keramati (b.1970)
Self portrait, 2007-2008
Video, 7’:19”
Image Source: https://siminkeramati.com/portfolio-posts/self-portrait/

Figure 163:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
Contact from the series *The Strand and the Skin*, 2008
Scratched C print
Dimensions: 7 x 6 cm
Image Source:
https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/voir-et-sentir-lhaptique-un-regard-incarne-sur-les-oeuvres-de-ghazaleh-hedayat/

Figure 164:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
Untitled from the *Repetition* series, 2019
Scratched C print
Dimenstions: 98 x 68 cm
Image Source:
https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/voir-et-sentir-lhaptique-un-regard-incarne-sur-les-oeuvres-de-ghazaleh-hedayat/

Figure 165:
Woman in front of the former US Embassy, Tehran.
Image Source :
https://soultravelblog.com/why-travel-to- iran/

Figure 166:
Parastou Forouhar (b.1962)
Blind Spot, 2001
Digital print on Alu Dibond
Dimenstions : 45 x 60 cm
Image Source: https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/blind-spot/

Figure 167:
Mr Hempher, the British Spy writes:
"Their women have strong veils which prevents their corruption. We have to divest Muslim women from the Islamic veil in any way possible and to make unveiling popular we have to fool them into believing that the veil in the guise of the chador or abba is not related to Islam."
Image Source: https://hawzah.net/fa/LifeStyle/View/56988/منشاء-بی-حجابی-

Figure 168:
Protection or…?
Image Source:
http://banovan-maz.blogfa.com/post/2

Figure 169:
My sister…! Truthfully which one would you like to be?
Image Source:
http://iqna.ir/fa/news/1392231/میزان-تأثیر-تابلو-های-دستوری-حجاب-چه-قدر-است

Figure 170:
Imam Sadeq:
For the Muslim woman it is not correct to wear a scarf or clothing than do not cover her body.
Image Source:
http://nidamat.com/30498/20--دلیل-محکم-بانوان-محجبه-برای-رعایت-حجا/

Figure 171:
Cartoon by Sajjad Jaffari.
Image Source:
http://reihaneh1269.blogfa.com/category/1

Figure 172:
Billboard
Hejab = Protection
Hejab is Protection not Limitation.
Image Source:
http://iqna.ir/fa/news/1392231/-میزان-تأثیر-تابلو‌های-دستوری-حجاب-چه-قدر-است

Figure 173:
I am amazed by the man who, to protect his car from scratches, draws a chador on it BUT! Lets his daughter and wife out into the streets without a chador.
Image Source:
http://www.sarkhat.com/fa/group/gxbaiq/

Figure 174:
The pearl in the oyster.
Ladies and their covering in the eyes of Islam.
Sheikh Mohammad Taqi Seifi.
Image Source:
http://old.ido.ir/n.aspx?n=13911019545

Figure 175:
Hejab, a door to Heaven.
Image Source:
https://sahebnews.ir/960165/بد-الگویی-یکی-از-دلایل-عدم-رعایت-حجاب.htm

Figure 176:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Be Colourful #2, 2002
C-Print
Dimensions: 60 x 90 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=12#item-2

Figure 177:
Mandana Moghaddam (b.1962)
Chelgis I, 2005
Installation – hair under plexiglass
Image Source:
http://www.mandana-moghaddam.com

Figure 178:
Mandana Moghaddam (b.1962)
Chelgis II, 2005
Installation – concrete slab hung from four braids of hair
Image Source:
http://www.mandana-moghaddam.com

Figure 179:
Mandana Moghaddam (b.1962)
Chelgis III, 2007
Video
Image Source: http://www.mandana-moghaddam.com

Figure 180:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
Hair Stored in Wooden Drawers (*Keshohayeh Choobi ba Moo*), 2008
Dimensions: 100 x 100 cm
Image Source: Daneshvari, Abbas. *Amazingly Original: Contemporary Iranian Art at Crossroads*. Mazda, 2014, p. 100.

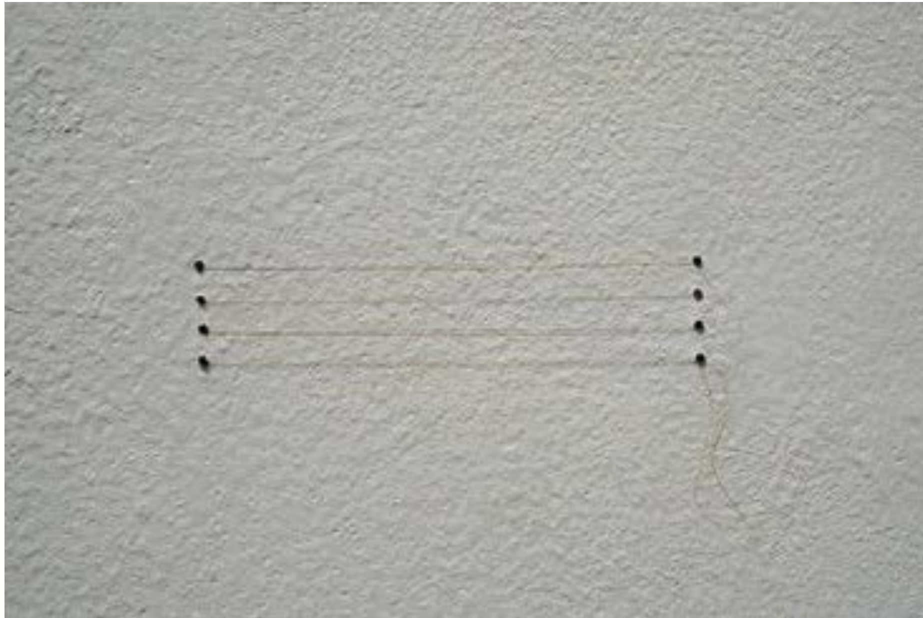


Figure 181:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
The Sound of My Hair, 2010
Human hair and iron nails on wall
Image Source: https://medium.com/@dafneirisgotink/body-politics-in-iranian-art-8e3d91a4da64

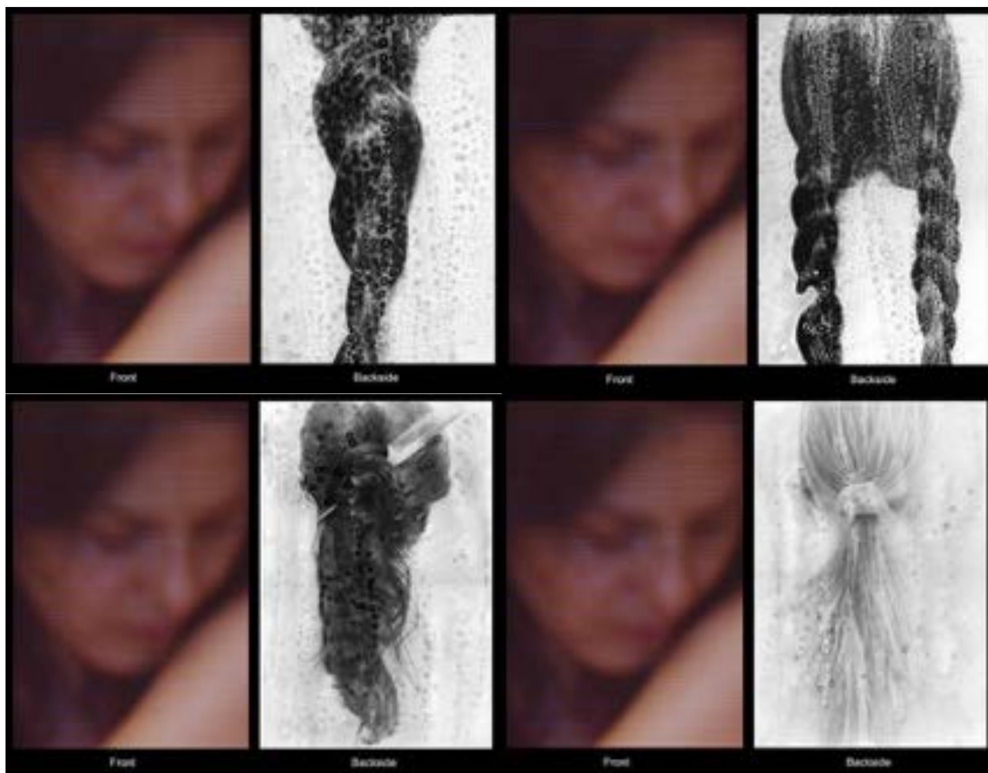


Figure 182:
Katayoun Karami (b.1966)
The Other Side, 2007
C-print photograph with handmade black and white silver gelatin on back side.
Dimensions: 9 framed double photos, each 43 x 31 cm.
Image Source: https://katayounkarami.com/2007-1386-the-other-side/

Figure183:
Anahita Rezvani-Rad (b.1978)
After Farangis, 2022
Oil on Board
Dimensions: 20x30 cm
Image Source: https://anahitarezvani-rad.com

Figure 184:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Like EveryDay #2, 2000
C-Print
Dimensions: 50 x 50 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=11#item-2

Figure 185:
Laurence Rasti (b.1990)
There are no homosexuals in Iran, 2014-16
Image Source:
https://laurencerasti.ch/works/there-are-no-homosexuals-in-iran/

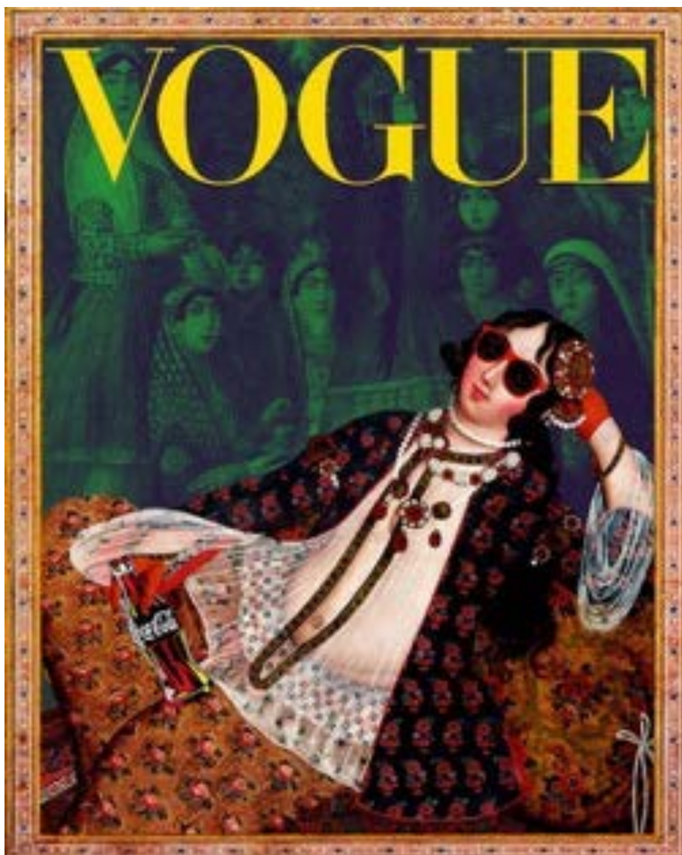


Figure 186:
Rabee Baghshani (b.1982)
Janan, 2022
Digital print.
Dimensions: 50 x 40 cm
Image Source:
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/rabee-baghshani-janan

Figure 187:
Isma'il Jalayir
Ladies Around a Samovar, 1860-75
Oil Painting
Dimensions: 156.5 x213 cm
Image Source:
https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O81784/ladies-around-a-samovar-oil-painting-jalayir-ismail/

Figure 188:
Attributed to Mohammad Sadegh
(active 1740s-1790s)
The Woman at the Window, late
18th century, Iran.
Moscow State Museum of Oriental
Art
Image Source:
https://easteast.world/en/posts/414

Figure 189:
Afshan Ketabchi (b.1966)
Untitled (*Harem s*eries), 2008
Digital print on canvas in a gilt-wood frame
Image Source: https://www.invaluable.com/artist/ketabchi-afshan-kusgw1286u/sold-at-auction-prices/

Figure 190:
Shirin Aliabadi (b.1973-2018)
Girls in Cars 2, 2005
Lambda print
Dimensions: 70 x 100 cm
Image Source: https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/12106/girls-in-car-1-4

Figure 191:
Shadi Ghadirian (b.1974)
Ctrl+Alt+Del #9, 2006
C-Print
Dimensions: 40 x 60 cm
Image Source:
http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=16#item-9

Figure 192:
Iranian internet warning: “Access to this site is denied” according to the laws and authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Image Source:
http://www.twotierinternet.com/iran-the-first-country-in-2012-to-start-blocking-websites-as-internet-censorship-tightens-92493

Figure 193:
Mitra Tabrizian (b.1954)
A Long Wait (*Border* series), 2005-2006
Chromogenic print
Image source: Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art: https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/mitra-tabrizian/

Figure 194:
Ghazel (b.1966)
Wanted (Urgent), 1997-2017
Posters and flyers
Image Source:
Courtesy of the Artist

Figure 195:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
Untitled, 2005
Still fromVideo
Image Source:
https://www.taranehhemami.com/ghazaleh-hedayat2

Figure 196:
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b.1979)
Eve's Apple, 2006
Still from video
Image Source:
Torshizi, Foad: "The Unveiled Apple: Ethnicity, Gender, and the Limits of Inter-Discursive Interpretation of Iranian Contemporary Art" p.565.