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Art and Islam in Dialogue: A Breakdown of Preconceived Notions as Seen in the Art of Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi

Sara Elbanna

Abstract

Given Islam's supposed strict limitations on the use of figurative art, how can modern-day Muslim artists create art that displays their critical views towards their religion, while simultaneously embodying aspects of their faith? Through a linguistic and etymological analysis of the Qur'an and the hadith, a breakdown of the supposed limitations on art will occur. To demonstrate how implicitly religious art can be critiqued in an Islamic context, one must look to the work of modern Islamic female artists, namely Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi, whose art comprises figurative images that comment on women in Islam and the duality of the veil through classic forms of calligraphy. Through the breakdown of the presupposed restrictions on religious art, and—namely—Islamic art, the analysis of such work will be more permissive and result in the demonstration of personalized religious art that coincides with Islamic faith, while simultaneously critiquing other aspects of the religion.

Introduction

The past few years have been plagued by instances of violence in response to art deemed inappropriate, insulting, and disrespectful to religion. Following the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, questions about freedom of speech filled the global atmosphere, but the question of art and religion's historic—and often contentious—relationship was neglected. A single look at the Vatican's intricate divine artistry and Al-Andalus' adorned mosques suffices to confirm art as the

long-standing champion of religion. On the other hand, cartoons of the Prophet, and Broadway shows like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, attempt to critique religion, often from an outsider's perspective. However, is it possible for certain forms of art to be both an expression and a critique of religion? Given Islam's supposed strict limitations on the use of figurative art, how can modern day Muslim artists create art that displays their views on their religion, while simultaneously embodying aspects of their faith? This paper aims to demonstrate that the prohibition on figural representation is largely unfounded, and stems from the issue of potential competition to God's role as the Creator. By revealing the flaws in such an argument, the supposed limitations on art will be broken down, allowing for an analysis of modern Islamic art. Before analyzing such art, it is important to justify why the artists Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi have been chosen to the exclusion of others. Although many modern artists identify as Muslim, many choose to focus on societal implications of being a Muslim in the West. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to analyze art that demonstrates an explicit representation of Islam and the artist's relationship with Islam, as well as aspects of criticism. Neshat and Essaydi critique aspects of Islam that they believe may be repressive and laud the ability of their religion to be simultaneously empowering. They express their relationship to Islam, while being critical of its role in their Muslim societies, and the reality it imposes on them. Secondly, they both invoke the use of calligraphy; incorporating the powerful relationship Islam has with calligraphy, and invoking a divine presence, thus further expressing Islam. Thirdly, they both utilize photography, which allows them to supersede the presupposed opposition towards figural art. Therefore, they allow a consideration of their work as not merely art by Muslims, but modern Islamic art.

Question of Representation

The Qur'an

To comprehend the restrictions and regulations of Islam, one must first look to the most fundamental text in Islam: the Qur'an. Within the Qur'an there is no explicit mention of opposition towards painting or photos that depict humans in the name of art. In Ahmed Muhammad Isa's Al-Azhar study, titled *Muslims and Taswir*, he states, "no one can say that the Quran has either

explicitly or implicitly provided for the prohibition of *taswir*” (Isa & Glidden, 1995). Even religious leaders, such as Muhammad Abduh, are unable to find what can be considered as “any canonical rule in the holy texts that forbids figurative representation absolutely” (Puerta-Vilchez, 2017, p. 71). However, by looking at the central message of the Qur’an, and the etymology of certain names of Allah, an understanding of Islam’s position on representation can be extracted. Seen among surahs like that of *al-shuraa*, God is depicted as the fashioner of the universe and the creator of the real (Gocer, 1999, p. 690). Thus, his creativity and power are lauded in his name *al-Mussawir*. The Qur’an says, “he shaped you and he shaped you well,” with use of the verb *sawarra*. He is *al-Mussawir* because he produced the form. The names *al-Mussawir* and *al-khaliq* imply that God is the creator of all things because he creates out of nothing and gives existence to his creations. These existences, because they ultimately come from God, are considered perfect and flawless, the ideal in both the notions of esthetics and ethics (Puerta-Vilchez, 2017, p. 58). When the name is taken out of the context of its divinity and applied to human beings, Persian theologian al-Ghazali states that the word then holds a figurative meaning, and not a literal one:

Mankind receives talent from God and directs them toward his arts, political affairs, worship, etc.; with his efforts he can invent something that did not exist before and so be termed a creator, but only metaphorically, because his level is far below that of the true creator. (Puerta-Vilchez, 2017, p. 58)

Attempts to imitate God’s creations are considered the most immoral, on the grounds of deception and vanity, because they can lead to the wrongful admiration of human creativity (Gocer, 1999, p. 690).

In this passage, it is emphasized that God himself is who gives and creates the value of a representation. The representation of the bird is significant because life has been given to it (Gocer, 1999, p. 690). Only God can give *ruh*, or spirit, to a form or image (Puerta-Vilchez, 2017, p. 73). To attempt to strip God of his role by creating lifeless interpretation is what is often seen as punishable; indeed, such disdain for the creators themselves is later reiterated in the hadith. Titus Burckhardt states that:

Strictly speaking, the forbidding of images in Islam refers only to images of the Divinity; it is thus situated in the perspective of the Decalogue, or more exactly of Abrahamic

monotheism, which Islam renews: in its last as in its first manifestation, this monotheism is directly opposed to idolatrous polytheism...The denial of idols, and even more so their destruction, is a translation into concrete terms of the fundamental testimony of Islam, the formula *lā ilaha illā 'Llāh* (there is no divinity apart from God). (Burckhardt, 1970, para. 1)

The rhetoric that the Qur'an is against the representation of images, leading to the emergence of aniconism, is often based within suras that address the representation of idols. The words *al-ansab* and *al-ansam* are often considered to imply representation and address the worship of idols and paintings. In passage 5.92, it is said "O'Believers, wine and arrow-shufflings, idols (*ansab*) and divining arrows are an abomination, some of Satan's work; so avoid it haply so you will prosper" (Grabar, 1987, p. 79). As well as Q6.74, which states, "And when Abraham said to his father Azar, 'Takest thou idols (*ansam*) for gods? I see thee, and thy people, in manifest error.'" Both these suras are directed towards representations and depictions of idols and the worship of images in the place of God, yet make no reference to other forms of art. Qur'anic commentators, such as al-Nasafi, al-Zamakhshari, and al-Qurtubi determined that the word *ansab* is not the same as *tamthil* or *sura*, words that do mean representation and picture. Instead, the use of *ansab* implies the prohibition of cults that would provide substitutes to Allah through the presence of idols. As the Qur'an provides no precise statement on whether figurative images are to be considered haram, Muslims have looked to hadith to develop their decisions.

Among Hadith

As the Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam differ in their hadith, they have developed contrary positions to the issue, highlighting the considerable room for interpretation caused by ambiguity. These dissonant positions are highlighted in the backgrounds of artists Neshat and Essaydi, with Neshat growing up in a predominantly Shi'a culture, and Essaydi among Sunnis. According to Rudi Paret, the Shi'a hadith do not condemn the making of images, but instead focus on the use of images. The hadith advise that images should not distract one from prayers, and that during a prayer, believers should cover an image so it does not come between the devotee and

the *qiblah*. The Shi'a mullahs also recognize that prohibition of the use of images is only present in the Qur'an in the context of idolatry, thus images are allowed so long as they are not used as objects for adoration (Flaskerud, 2010, p. 193). This can be seen in Shi'a mosques, particularly those in Lebanon adorned with pictures of Fadlallah, but which remain unworshipped. There is some belief among Shi'a scholars that any prohibition of images mentioned in the hadiths or the Qur'an would be directed towards members of the early Muslim community during the time of *jahiliyya*, also known as ignorance, and that, today, Muslims fully grasp the doctrine of *tawhid*, which emphasizes the unicity of God. Present day Muslims understand the importance of the exclusion of images from a context of prayer, thus the creation of images does not pose a threat to Islamic monotheism (Flaskerud, 2010, p. 194). This logic stems from a comparison of ideas about the Qur'an's position on poetry. In surat *Ash-shu'ara* 26:221–227, The Poets, it is stated:

Shall I inform you upon whom descend the satans? Descend they on every lying sinful one, lend they their ears, and most of them are liars, And the poets, follow them the erring ones, see thou not that they, in every valley, they wander bewildered? And that they say what they (themselves) do not do. Save those who believe and do good, and remember God much, and defend themselves after they are oppressed. And soon shall know those who deal unjustly, what an (evil) turning they shall be turned unto!" (Flaskerud, 2010, p. 194)

During the time of the Prophet, poetry was used to praise idols and to condemn the enemies of idolaters; therefore, the sura warns people not to follow the poets. However, many scholars, including those in the Qum, believe that poetry is permissible in the service of Islam because it was only condemned when it was used against Islam. By drawing parallels between the artforms of poetry and images, scholars believe, therefore, that images may also be used in the service of Islam (Flaskerud, 2010, p. 195). This leniency sets the context for Neshat's work. Having grown up in Iran, a predominantly Shi'a country, Neshat's artwork is not seen as contradictory to Islam in terms of figural representation—a presumption that would, perhaps, be more prominent if the art were perceived through a Sunni lens. However, instead, it is the messages she aims to portray and the political implications, positioned in a politically charged country, which stir controversy.

Among Sunni hadith, there are more explicit condemnations of figural representation. In many of the hadith compiled in Sahih al-Bukhari, it is noted that the Prophet condemns the creator of images, the most famous of which is Aicha's cushion:

I bought a cushion with pictures on it. When Allah's Messenger saw it, he kept standing at the door and did not enter the house. I noticed the sign of disgust on his face, so I said, "O, Allah's Messenger! I repent to Allah and His Messenger. [Please let me know] what sin I have done." Allah's Messenger said, "What about this cushion?" I replied, "I bought it for you to sit and recline on." Allah's Messenger said, "The painters [i.e. owners] of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection. It will be said to them, "Put life in what you have created." (Al-Bukhari, 1994, p. 472)

In another hadith, upon seeing a curtain with pictures on it, Aicha is told by the Prophet that, "The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creations" (Al-Bukhari, 1994, p. 472). In another, narrated by Said bin Abu Al-Hassan, he states that he heard the Prophet say, "Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it." Hearing this, the man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. Ibn 'Abbas said to him, "What a pity! If you insist on making pictures, I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other unanimated objects" (Al-Bukhari, 1994). The hadith implies a disapproval of images along the lines that they are imitations of God's creations, which can never be genuine because only God can give them life (a direct connection to God's role as *al-Mussawir*). It is therefore the act, and not the product itself, which is frowned upon (Grabar, 1973, p. 83). To grapple with such condemnation, scholars have addressed the issue of creation, and have sought an exit in the concept of photography. Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi believes that the prohibition and punishment of figure-makers does not apply to photography, because photos only capture the image of a real object through art—they do not attempt to recreate it (al-Qaradawi, 1960, p. 64). As long as such photos are not used for worship, or depict obscene things considered *haram* as directed in the Qur'an, then they do not face the same condemnation present among the hadith. This is important to consider because

Essaydi uses photography as her medium, thus avoiding any potential interpretations that may cast her work as inherently sinful.

Modern Art

Thus, Islamic art emerged within the context of said prohibition, and coincided with the linguistic culture of the Islamic world and the region's logical affinity. Asli Gocer states:

The most original Islamic contribution to art, geometrical design, arabesque, and patterned surface art, often consists in the complex design of an interlocking system of rotating polygons and stars within circles. As it is for Plato, circle is the governing basis of all geometrical shapes for the Muslim, followed by hexagon, triangle, and square in depicting the fundamental shapes of the geometric universe. Coupled with a sense of rhythm, these shapes are considered by some sects of Islam to evoke infinity, which is a symbol of the divine presence. (Gocer, 1999, p. 691)

Muslims considered that geometric patterns allow them to be drawn out of the distractions of the physical world and into a world of pure, simplistic forms. This is also seen beyond geometry and in the art of calligraphy. "Islamic calligraphy combines verticality and horizontality in a proportionate mixture of static and flowing figures, thereby represents, in geometric design, God's presence in language."



Note. Essaydi, 2016

Members of the literate middle class viewed the texts of Islamic culture as art and rejected the folk cultures that viewed images as "magic" and the aristocratic culture that saw images as "luxury" (Gocer, 1999, p. 691). This attitude of the *umma* led to the pursuit of calligraphy and arabesque in Islamic art. It further explains the lack of iconography and the prosperity of

aniconism, thus leading to today's widespread belief that figurative art in the name of Islam is inherently impossible and contradictory. However, such contradiction is present in the works of Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat, who manage to combine both elements.

Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat are both Muslim artists who express their views on their own religion through their works of art. Neshat describes her upbringing as one in which her “whole family was Muslim. I grew up in a strictly Muslim family—even my mother and father were Muslim” (Grabar, 1973, p. 97). This upbringing is clear in the art of both artists, as they incorporate classic Islamic esthetic principles. While Essaydi reclaims the sacred art of calligraphy in the name of feminism, Neshat views her employment of such principles as second nature, owing to her background in Persian visual tradition. Mirroring Gocer's statement, Neshat finds harmony in the geometry and the symmetry of text with design (Saccoccia, 2013). While also being an expression, their art complies with interpretations of the permissibility of figural depictions, which both Shi'a and Sunni scholars follow. Both artists use photography, so they make no attempt to recreate the creation of God; rather, they capture *al-Mussawir's* creations in their moment and beauty. Not being an attempt at recreation, photos do not clash with the opposition to representation often associated with Islam. Thus, through the examination of such work, it is evident that art forms—even those that articulate Islamic faith—can be simultaneously a personal critique and an expression of a religion.

Lalla A. Essaydi

Essaydi is a Moroccan artist whose work has been featured in numerous collections. It combines Islamic calligraphy with representations of the female body. Her work is a reflection on her upbringing in Morocco, and the reality of Arab female identity in relation to the veil—an aspect of Islam that is often seen as both liberating and patronizing (Essaydi, 2016). As mentioned previously by Crumlin, Essaydi's form of art—although personal—remains abstract enough in meaning and symbolism to allow the audience to invoke their own opinions on how religion is being depicted. Essaydi states, “My work documents my own experience growing up as an Arab



Note. *The Favorite* (Essaydi, 2008)

woman within Islamic culture, seen now from a very different perspective” (Essaydi, n.d.). Essaydi’s work focuses on Arab women, often capturing them in their private spaces or homes. The work above, titled “Les Femmes du Maroc: Grande Odalisque 2,” features a woman lounging on what appears to be a bed or couch. Calligraphy is visible throughout the photograph; however, it is darkest and clearest on the exposed parts of her body. Perhaps this suggests that calligraphy is a more powerful and prominent form of veiling than the cloth or veil itself. Although the subject’s face is turned towards the viewer, the viewer’s eyes are immediately drawn to the subject’s feet. The feet are darkened, as if from dirt, and are also slightly red—perhaps bloodied. This may be a reference to hardships faced by Moroccan women; providing a less glamorous and harsher image of reality. Although Essaydi attempts to showcase the realities of Moroccan women through her work, this is perhaps one of her more explicit attempts. The eyes of the viewer move upwards from the feet, across the body of the subject to her face, where it seems as if the

subject is looking right at the viewer intruding her private space. Similarly, in the second image, titled *The Favorite* the subject’s dark hair provides a stark contrast to the lighter, cream-colored background, thus drawing the viewer’s eyes to the face of the subject and her righteous glare. By capturing women in vulnerable moments, either barely veiled or in their homes, as in her collection *Harem Revisited*, Essaydi shifts the private to the public. This references the social and political context that Moroccan women lived within and are now fighting against. Merely a few decades ago, public space in Morocco was largely male dominated, and women had to be chaperoned to “trespass into the men’s universe on the traditional visits to the hammam and the

tomb of the local saint.” The private space was seen as the woman’s rightful place; a standard imposed by the patriarch, and which utilizes certain interpretations of religion as a support. Essaydi’s work attempts to bridge this divide and empower women as she helps to reclaim public spaces. Through the use of calligraphic writing, Essaydi incorporates what is often considered to be a sacred Islamic art that is inaccessible to women. By applying it as henna, often used only by women, she thus creates what she considers to be a “subversive twist” on gender roles.

She also prescribes the calligraphy to a veil-like sentiment; therefore, by combining the expressive intent of calligraphy, she is interweaving the two, commenting on how the veil—in her eyes – is not entirely oppressive, but mainly expressive as well (Saccoccia, 2013). As Gocer states, the presence of calligraphy is symbolic to the presence of the divine. The use of calligraphy—how it surrounds the women and is displayed on their bodies—signifies the all-consuming and constant presence of the divine. Although these women are within their private spaces, partially covered, the divine is still with them.

Essaydi also employs the calligraphic veil as a protection from the Orientalist gaze of the west. Consequently, she is commenting on the western assumption of the oppressiveness of the veil, and turns the object of such perception into one of protection. According to the Qur’an, 33:59, a veiled woman is protected from the male gaze, and they will be “known and not be abused” (Surah Al-Ahzaab 33:59). Essaydi is commenting on such a message, as seen in the images displayed, in which both women are not entirely veiled, and their bare skin is enveloped in sacred calligraphic words. Although they are considered to be unprotected, their protection and power comes both from their words and the divine’s presence, and therefore is not inherent to “covering up.” These words are extremely layered, such that the messages are often unreadable, removing the meaning of the words and focusing on the sacristy of the patterns and forms of calligraphy that were noted by Gocer. This allows a more visual connection with the calligraphy, drawing meaning from the esthetics that can be



Note. Faceless (Neshat, 1994a)

triggered from any viewer, regardless of whether they speak Arabic or identify as Muslim. Essaydi utilizes this method to enhance the expressivity of the image (Saccoccia, 2013).

Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat Neshat was born in 1957 in a shah-ruled Iran, yet when she moved to study art in the USA in 1974, she was exiled by the Islamic revolution, unable to return until 1990. By then, everything had changed in Neshat's eyes, and she recognized a more potent Islamic identity than a Persian one (Horsburgh, 2001). Neshat's works of art tackle the role of Muslim women within the various contradictions that Islam imposes on them. In her series, *Women of Allah*, Neshat depicts women holding guns to demonstrate her belief that, "we cannot separate ideas of religion and spirituality from politics and violence. A typical martyr stands on the border of faith and love of God on one hand, and cruelty and violence on the other" (Horsburgh, 2001, para. 4). Her photos tackle the concept of *shahadat* (martyrdom) and juxtapose the concepts of femininity and violence. The centering of the guns in the photographs align with the dark eyes of the subject. Thus, when drawn to the most aggressive aspect of the images, the viewer finds themselves also captured by the soft eyes of the subject, materializing the contrast between femininity and violence. Neshat attempts to depict, "the traditionally feminine traits, such as beauty and innocence on one hand, and cruelty, violence, and hatred on the other [which] coexist within the complex structure of Islam itself" (Sheybani, 1999, para. 15). The women's crimes in these photos are that they love God, and their love leads them to violence.



Note. *Rebellious Silence* (Neshat, 1994b)

Tahereh Saffarzadeh’s poetry, which details the conviction that Iranian women share for Islam that leads them to such violence, is adorned on the women’s bodies in calligraphy. Through these poems, women claim that Islam allows them to be equal to men, and the chador prevents them from becoming sexual objects. In this case, the chador empowers them, allowing them to fight

or their faith and follow it full-heartedly. Neshat states that, “there is a great deal of self-contradiction in strong and proud women, participating in the revolutionary process, willing to go to war with rifles across their backs, and yet still endure the laws of the harem” (Sheybani, 1999, para. 19). In her series entitled *Unveiling*, Neshat concentrates on the chador’s role in relation to the female body, and how—although its role is to conceal—it often draws attention to it. The poems in this series are written by Forough Farukhzad, and speak on the subjects of female emotional and sexual desires (Sheybani, 1999). The poetry serves as the voice of the women who believe that their sexuality and individualism has been eradicated by the veil, thus highlighting its oppressive elements (Sheybani, 1999).

In the photos entitled *Faceless* and *Rebellious Silence*, only the subject’s faces are visible, with the calligraphy especially darkened and potent on their faces, thus allowing nothing other than their faces and weapons to be visible. However, in the third image below, the subject is more “revealed,” with some of her bare skin showing. The subject’s body no longer shows full Arabic words or calligraphy, but merely letters, as if the words have been cut off. The aspects of imagery in these letters contrast with that of the calligraphy on the subject’s face in that it is rawer, less delicate, larger, and imperfect. This gives the sense that what is hidden underneath the chador, beneath the imposed veiling, can contrast with how women in Iran present themselves, or rather—at times—how they are forced to present themselves.

Similar to Essaydi, Neshat points out that her work remains abstract to trigger a dialogue, and a wide variety of responses to the issues she is attempting to tackle.

The nature of my work is ambiguous, so it draws a wide range of responses. How a viewer, Iranian or Westerner, perceives the work depends to a great extent on his or her personal background and experience with Islam and Islamic cultures. The work often touches on the most controversial, most delicate issues. (Sheybani, 1999, para. 35)

Essaydi and Neshat's work therefore highlights the personal nature of the relationships one can have with both religion and art. They tackle the presence of Islam in their societies—a presence that is, often, quite imposing and problematic, but that may be simultaneously empowering. Their use of calligraphy, a classic Islamic tradition, allows them to further pull from their religion and their personal relationship with Islam, and incorporate it non-traditional ways. Their work epitomizes the controversial relationship between art and religion by both expressing their viewpoints and critiquing certain elements.



Note. *Unveiling* (Neshat, n.d.)

Conclusion

In tracking the connection between art and religion, it is often assumed that art can only serve either the purpose of critical commentary, or that of lauded expression. This assumption is caused by misconceptions of the intrinsic relationship between art and religion, and the boundaries imposed on art by some institutionalized religions. Yet, many of these preconceived notions are faulted because, over time, art has developed into an expression of implicit religion, allowing for indefinite, more abstract, symbolism that makes way for interpretations rooted in personal faith and spirituality. Such impressionistic depictions result in dialogues that allow critical expression of the artist's personal religion. This is apparent in the modern day works of Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi, whose use of

calligraphy and veiled women lends itself to a simultaneous interpretation and critique of the messages implied in their religion. Their art, although critical, falls into the lines drawn around Islam's relationship with art. Although widely believed to be a relationship bounded by the disapproval of figurative representation, various interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith deem otherwise. In essence, this repression is wrongly founded in Islam's denunciation of idolatry, and its reverence for God as not only the only God, but as the only creator. Therefore, through the practice of photography, both Neshat and Essaydi avoid being cast as competitors to God, and rather as those who momentarily capture his creations and embellish them through traditional forms of Islamic esthetic. Their work criticizes certain aspects of Islam that facilitate the repression they face in their Islamic societies, while showcasing the duality of veiling and the private versus the public sphere. One can consider Neshat and Essaydi's work as both personal, and inherently political and religious, serving proof that art may be inherently an expression and critique. This realization, in future, might open the door for more respectful critiques of faith than those we have seen in the past.

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