

Mary Turner Lane Award

The Mary Turner Lane Award is a student paper competition established in honor of the late Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women's studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The competition is open to any currently enrolled female LAU student. The award, consisting of \$500 and a certificate, will go to the best research paper on women/gender studies or original piece of writing such as personal or argumentative essay, (possibly but not necessarily) completed as one of the requirements of a class taken at LAU (literature, language, social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy, education etc.). Below are the two winning papers.

Winning Undergraduate Essay

Shirin Neshat: At the Intersection of Overlapping Identities

Yara Nahle

Shirin Neshat's art is not a documentation of Iranian reality, nor is it about challenging the political and social status quo in Iran. Instead, her art simply stands at the intersection of the overlapping identities that characterize an Iranian female artist living in exile. Its main focus is the exploration of female identities in relation to politics.

This paper is about Shirin Neshat, an Iranian visual artist who devotes her work to Iranian notions of femininity in relation to the prevailing political and religious structures. She does so by illustrating gender roles in fundamentalist Islamic Iran. Her main focus is on portraits of veiled women (usually wearing a *chador*), with Persian calligraphy covering their faces, and parts of their bodies. The women in the photographs are sometimes holding weapons and depicted as soldiers, which not only conveys religious, political, and gender notions, but also explores the relationship between the East and the West, and between Islamic post-revolution Iran (the black veil) and pre-revolution Iran (Persian calligraphy). Neshat's depiction of Iranian women is far from stereotypical. Rather, it recognizes the complexity of the social and intellectual structures for women in a country like Iran.

This paper will analyze the motives behind Neshat's work, and the depiction of women in her art. It will answer questions related to the objectivity and subjectivity of her work, delve into notions of body politics and power relations, and touch on the conflict between the different multi-cultural identities of the artist and their influence on her work.

Background

"I will tell you the story of my challenge as an Iranian artist, as an Iranian woman artist, as an Iranian woman artist living in exile" (Neshat, 2010).

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian visual artist who was born in 1957 in Iran. She left in 1975, before the Islamic Revolution, to study painting at the University of California, Berkeley, and returned in 1990 to witness the transformation that Iran had undergone. At that time, she had finished her studies and was pursuing other vocations, but visiting Iran gave her the inspiration she needed as an artist to create innovative multimedia works that are not only aesthetic but full of compelling content that is mostly political in nature.

Surprisingly, despite having studied painting in college, her medium became photography, and later film. She started taking photographs of Iranian women wearing the *chador*, with Persian calligraphy inscribed on the few body parts they are allowed to show (feet, hands, and face). Many of the photos are self-portraits. In her photos, she explores the dynamics of gender roles and their relation to the political structures in an ideologically-based country. Her work portrays aspects of a woman's presence in an Islamic country, and its collocation to violence and a certain dress code, along with defined social roles. Her art is deeply political, but it surpasses the borders of Iran to explore political concepts with a universal character, such as freedom, authority, and constructed identities.

Neshat was eventually banned from entering Iran, so most of her representation of the country was done from an outsider's point of view. This raises questions about objectivity and subjectivity, along with truth and realism. In this paper, I intend to show that Neshat's work is not about the reproduction or representation of reality in Iran, but rather about highlighting the complexity of Iranian society in terms of various overlapping identities.

First, I will show photos by Neshat that demonstrate how much her art is based on opposites. Through her photos we see how she puts contradictory elements together, such as Iran and Persia on the one hand, and erotic poetry and the *chador* on the other. I will also explore her use of space, landscape, and color to express paradox.

Secondly, I will focus on the fact that Neshat shows gender roles in a binary composition. By analyzing her video, *Turbulent*, gender oppositions will be identified, along with what they have to say in terms of power relations.

Thirdly, I will discuss whether Neshat's work is an accurate or biased representation of Iran. I will examine whether Neshat's art adheres to the theory of Orientalism and whether it breaks with or conforms to the stereotypes of women in Islam.

Binaries in Neshat's Work

Shirin Neshat's work heavily relies on opposites. Her photos are mainly black and white, with rare exceptions, like the color red, which renders the contradiction between black and white (and between the photograph's focus and the color) more apparent.



Left: "I Am It's Secret" (1993) from the "Women of Allah" series,
Centre: Untitled.
Right: "Unveiling" (1993) from the "Women of Allah" series.

These are three photos from Neshat's "Women of Allah" series. The women are veiled, wear the *chador*, and have Persian calligraphy inscribed on their hands and faces. Because women are forced to wear a veil in Iran to hide their "sexually attractive parts," the veil can be viewed as a tool of suppression. By contrast, the text in the above photos are verses of a poem by Forough Farokhzad, a feminist poet who lived during the Shah's rule and whose poetry was considered radical because it expresses a woman's sensual desires and her longing for freedom; notions that no other woman at that time dared to articulate (Darznik, 2010).

Here's an extract of the poem "I Will Greet the Sun Again," by Farokhzad that Neshat used in her photos:

I will greet my mother who lived in the mirror
And was the image of my old age;
And I will also greet the earth whose burning womb
Is filled with green seeds by the passion she has
For reproducing me (Coates, 2010).

Neshat plays on the idea of opposites by covering part one of a woman's body with an Islamic veil and another part with inscriptions that contradict the cultural and ideological notions associated with the veil, to the extent of rebelling against them.

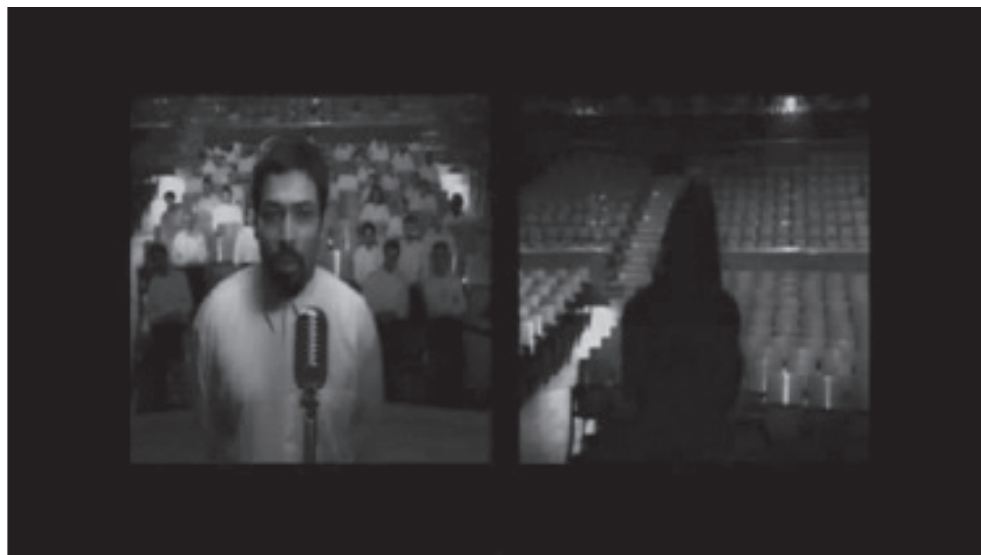
Sexuality is clearly manifested in the second photo: the woman's lips are closed in a suggestive way, allowing her to communicate to the viewer without saying a word. Alongside sexual repression, Neshat seems to be highlighting government censorship,

imposed on all works of art, which forces artists in Iran to look for alternative ways to relay their messages.

Moreover, her use of Persian calligraphy draws upon contradictions between Iran and Persia, the modern and the traditional, the historical and the present. By using it, she explores the dynamics between the Iran of today and the Iran of the past; especially that Persia was one of the most prominent historical civilizations. It is clear that she is experimenting with identities and the impact of historical and political events on them, especially given that she left Iran in its pre-revolution phase and returned to find its identity completely transformed (Heartney, 2007).

Gender Roles

The system of binary categorization that Neshat uses in her work is inspired by the realities endured by men and women in Iran. *Turbulent* is a video installation she produced in 1998, in which she splits the screen in two. In the first half, a man sings to an audience who applauds for him when he finishes. In the other half, a woman sings to empty chairs. As she sings, she draws the man's attention who listens to her with an astonished look.



From Shirin Neshat's video installation "Turbulent" (1998)

In this video, Neshat's separation process is overt. She even uses physical space to bring attention to the differences. This is called the "gendering of spaces"; a pattern she uses repeatedly (Heartney, 2007).

Another tool Neshat uses to emphasize contrast is minimal composition, so that only the subjects of interests are highlighted, rather than the entire scene. In *Turbulent*, the man sings a normal song with clear lyrics while the woman sings an abstract song with incomprehensible sounds and ecstatic cries that convey passionate emotions, probably suffering. The absence of spectators during the woman's performance

conveys notions of the public and the private. The man has the freedom to perform in public places in front of people, while the woman is confined to the private space and is above all not allowed to sing. The woman here breaks all the rules and conventions even if this was just in her head or in her dreams, while the man remains very realistic and conforms to the social and musical norms.

Neshat also sets two categories of women according to two models. Although physically they all look the same with the black *chador*, the difference is in the Persian text. While some texts contain feminist poetry, others are by a fundamentalist Iranian poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh. Saffarzadeh's poems express her faith in Islam, in wearing the *chador*, and her conviction that the veil is a tool for women's empowerment because it prevents women from being sexual objects. Her poems also perpetuate the principles of the Islamic Revolution (Sheybani, 1999).

In other photos, Neshat depicts women holding guns. They look strong, decisive, and determined; they are women who have chosen the path to a violent revolution. However, in other instances, her characters are roaming souls who are always trying to escape their fate but have no final destination.



Left: "Allegiance with Wakefulness" (1994).

Right: "Seeking martyrdom" (1995) from the "Women of Allah" series



Neshat and the Orientalist Question

Neshat has been criticized for being an Orientalist artist who perpetuates a negative image of the East, and repeating stereotypes the West has fabricated or exaggerated. Such stereotypes include violence, sexual oppression, and enslavement of women. As Mojgan Khosravi (2011) explains, "the persistent and repetitive use of visual elements that perpetuate the stereotype of the Middle Eastern woman as violent and archaic situates Neshat within the discourse of Orientalism. [She] continues to portray the Orientals as the inferior other" (p.1).

However, repetitive patterns of violence used by Neshat serve a purpose that is contradictory to the the idea of Orientalism. One of those patterns is the portrayal

of veiled women holding weapons, especially in her series “Women of Allah.” These photos refer to the Islamic Revolution, in which Iranian women played a key role. Furthermore, as mentioned above, she uses writings by an Iranian poet who was in favor of the Revolution, and of the empowerment of women by means of wearing the *chador*, along with bold, sexually oriented poems. These texts, written in Farsi, are incomprehensible to the Western audience who may not read the language and, therefore, may misread the image.

Thus, the politics employed in these photos by the use of rifles and the allusions to violence are not simplistic. Those who cannot understand the Farsi text will interpret that the use of the rifles and the veil are intended to depict Iran, the East and Islam as violent, primitive, oppressive, and patriarchal. Although these elements are present in Neshat’s photos, her work suggests more than mere stereotypes. An understanding of the text can change one’s perception of the photos. Whether it is the sensual feminist poems, or the Islamic-oriented poems, the result is the same. Both are radical and revolutionary, and both poets consider themselves feminists. And here lies the irony of contradictions, and the key to understanding Neshat’s art.



Shirin Neshat’s debut feature film (with Shoja Azari) “Women without Men” (2009).

For a Western viewer, this photo could represent the manifestation of the inferior, archaic, and cruel East. It includes all the components deemed barbaric by the West: oppressed women, fully covered bodies, the weapons, and other aspects Neshat does not deny: “If you’re living in Iran, you’re faced with censorship, harassment, arrest, torture, and in times, execution” (Neshat, 2010).

Neshat proposes another story of violence and women in Iran. Here, women are holding rifles, an act traditionally reserved for men. They are thus empowered by violence, and not silenced by it. Neshat calls into question the contradiction between faith and the love of God (martyrdom) on the one hand, and violence on the other.

Likewise, she represents a different approach to the veil. Khosravi explains that, as described in Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poems used by Neshat, the *chador* is a tool used by Iranian women to resist the West, and stand in solidarity with one another. It is the manifestation and embodiment of the Iranian Revolution, which emerged as a reaction to the old regime's class struggle. It becomes a revolutionary act to wear the *chador*, a rejection of the West's control and tyranny over Iran. This piece of traditional clothing thus becomes emblematic of liberty. Historically, the *chador* was the conventional dress of poor women in the rural areas, so urban women decided to wear it in order to make a statement about their modesty and solidarity with poorer women, in order to end the class struggle. Regardless of Neshat's convictions about Islam, the veil, and violence, she romanticizes the image of women in a revolutionary society. In her TED Talk, Neshat (2010) says that her people fight two battles: one against the "West's perception about our identity," and the other against "our regime, our atrocious government that has done every crime to remain in power." Her work aims to visualize these two battles.

Conclusion

On the surface, Neshat's art might seem to decry women's oppression, her characters might seem weak and silenced, but there is more to it. She uses binary representation to show that the end result is anything but binary. "Part of me has always resisted the Western clichéd [sic] image of Muslim women, depicting them as nothing more than silent victims," she said. "My art, without denying 'repression,' is a testimony to unspoken female power and the continuing protest in Islamic culture." Her art is iconographic; not only by being feminist, but also by putting everything in a political context from which it cannot be detached. "Every Iranian artist," she said during a TED Talk (2010), "is in one form or another, political."

Her approach to dissecting Iranian society is not simplistic; and this is the key to her success. A place like Iran is flooded with contrasts, making it a paradise for artists. Neshat's work is complex, as it shows multiple components of Iranian society. It is also extremely personal. She did not start making art until she witnessed these societal contradictions herself. She is the artist of the East, living in the West, depicting aspects of her traditional and modern culture. Highlighting the veil and the deliberating poetry, she often depicts herself running from place to place without ever reaching a final destination, a home. Shirin Neshat is thus the artist whose identity is always under contest and construction, in a constant flux, a target for so many contradictions. She is the artist whose exile from her country shaped her art. Her work is personal because her deprivation of a home contributed to her art and in return this art deprived her of ever having a home. Her home is the intersection of the personal and the political, the private and the public, the modern and the traditional, the Western and the Eastern, all wrapped with a feminist perspective.

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