Visual Discourses of (Un)veiling: Revisiting Women of Allah

Esmaeil Zeiny
Introduction

Islam and Muslims have always been attracting major attention in the West and continue to be the limelight of many political controversies. In this, Muslim women seem to have become one of the main focuses of debate for the past two centuries. Many in the West believe that veiled Muslim women are victims of religious bias and always oppressed and silent. At the outset of this chapter, it is important to note that it is incontrovertible that some conservative interpretations of Islamic religious scripts are misogynist and in favor of patriarchy but as it has already been noted by many scholars, a great number of Muslims are staunch supporter of women’s right and there are countless numbers of articulate veiled women in the Muslim world. However, in Western discourses on Muslims, historically, women have been narrowly constructed as weak, inferior and victims of religious and patriarchal rules. This engineered and institutional mode of Muslim women’s representation seems to have accelerated since 9/11; Muslim women are represented as gendered slave in dire need of “saving” by the West. For instance, the war in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 was partly based on a feminist cause as President Bush campaigned frequently to gather support for saving Afghan women from the brutalities of patriarchy and religion. This is indicative of the fact that Muslim women are used as the war propaganda against Islam. Muslim women’s rights are used as an alibi to legitimize their colonial presence in the shape of neo-conservatism. Race, gender and religion are discourses that have scripted the terms of involvement in the ‘war on terror.’ The Western systematic representation of Islamic extremism and backward, oppressed and politically immature Muslim women is the revitalization of Orientalist tropes to create Islamophobia. Triggered by 9/11, the colonial motifs of Muslim women have
regained alarming currency in the western discourses as they have been soaked in images of veiled Muslim women and stories of their victimhood in an Islamic society.

Soon after 9/11, visual discourses about Muslim women appeared and flooded not only the media but also the art and literary markets. Based on Western ideology of Muslim women, these images are so powerful that they easily affect and change the public's perceptions about Muslim women. This stereotypical visual representation of women which relates to a wider geopolitical discourse has served to bolster the images of Muslim society as the cultural, political, and moral “other” of the West. The Western cultural and visual media do not portray voiceless images of Muslim veiled women in vacuousness, rather these Islamophobic misogynist portrayals suggest how the west positions Muslim women which feed dehumanization and appropriation in popular culture of the West. As a continuing legacy of colonialism and as a modern version of Orientalism, neo-conservatism has found that the efficient way to make Westerners believe that Muslim women are being victimized in their societies is through the narratives of Muslim women themselves. Since then many diasporic Muslim women have been creating discourses that reiterate and consolidate the stereotypical images of Muslim women. However, there are works that tend to challenge these clichés such as Shirin Neshat’s Women of Allah (1993-97). As an Iranian artist in exile, Shirin Neshat's black and white photography of Women of Allah, which deals directly with the visual representation of Muslim women, is also often misunderstood as reinforcing the misogynist stereotypes but the postcolonial critics’ reading of her photography makes Westerners re-examine their pre-packaged assumptions about Muslim women. Drawing upon Hamid Naficy's the exile culture of “here and there,” Neshat is a culturally hybrid artist who simultaneously shatters and challenges the Islamophobic misogynist stereotypes while questioning the patriarchal and confining rules upon women in Iran.

Although produced in the 1990s, one cannot deny the immediacy and relevancy of this series of photographs to our present world. That this series of photographs is still on exhibitions around the world such as the 2016 She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World at National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, justifies its relevancy two decades after its production. Her Women of Allah series will never get old and is always relevant and current with the continuing anti-Muslim sentiment and hate crimes in the West. The immediacy and relevancy of these
photographs emanate from our anxieties and uncertainties of the present day rather than the conditions of its original production. Recent years and days have witnessed ugly episodes of racist Islamophobic attack against Muslims in the West. The latest major episode of anti-Muslim violence occurred on 26th May, 2017 in Portland, Oregon on a train when an American man started yelling and screaming obscenities and anti-Muslim slurs at two Muslim teenage girls, one of whom was wearing *hijab*. He stabbed two people to death and seriously injured a third one who had come forward to calm him down and prevent him to harm the two girls (ABC). Another instance is the December 2016 hate crime attack in London where a Muslim woman has been dragged along the sidewalk by her *hijab* (The Independent). Neshat’s *Women of Allah* possesses a pedagogical and dialogical function that can phase out the centuries-old stereotypes of Muslim women and simultaneously questions the Iranian government’s confining rules on women such as the mandatory dress code. Contrary to what the title of this chapter conjures up, this article is not only a review of Neshat’s *Women of Allah*. While underscoring the series’ dialogical and pedagogical functions, I reveal murals and posters of Muslim women and argue that they have been Neshat’s specific source of inspiration. Produced in Iran, these images promote *hijab* and the role of Iranian *hijabi* women in war which also possess both dialogical and pedagogical function.

**Islamophobia and the Veil**

‘Whether cradling her baby, carrying an assault rifle, or walking ten feet behind her oppressor husband, the stereotypical images of a usually fully veiled Muslim woman are burned deep into Western consciousness’ (Yvonne Haddad et al, 2006, p. 40).

Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon as the world has witnessed annals of religious and racial intolerance under a different terminology. The intolerance in the US, for instance, began prior to her encounter with the Muslim world. From the conquest of the Americas and the subjugation of the indigenous to the slave trades and treating of the Japanese diaspora during the Second World War, the United States of America has a record of infringing the human rights and freedoms of the racialised groups (Bakali, 2016). Islamophobia is a novel term for an old fear which has portrayed Islam as a menace to the West and has emerged in genocides, wars and crusades over the centuries. This fear and
mistrust towards the Muslim ‘Other’ have roots in Europe and North America. As Weller notes, “Islamophobia is undeniably rooted in the historical inheritance of a conflictual relationship that has developed over many centuries involving the overlap of religion, politics and warfare” (2001, p.8). It became an international spotlight after the events of 9/11. There has been a remarkable increase in hostility and abhorrence towards Muslims since 9/11 (Allen & Nielson, 2002). Many countries in the West have, indeed, reinforced increased anxieties towards their Muslim residents and Islam in light of terrorist attacks. This rapid increase in violence and hatred developed into discrimination and racism which serves as the basic ideology of Islamophobia (Fiore, 2010). According to Allen (2010), Islamophobia, as an ideology, bears similarity with racism and other related phenomena that “sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar way to that which it has historically... inform[ed] and construct[ed] thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other” (p. 193). This description brings to light the historical roots of Islamophobia and elucidates that it is a phenomenon which has been impacted over the centuries by many different strains of thoughts and ideologies that considered Muslims and their societies as the ‘Other.’

This ideological formation has been produced by a culture that deploys a fixed set of beliefs, analysis, and representation which informs the policies of the governments, and creates a particular set of political and media discourses along with social beliefs and practices. As Lean (2012) mentions, “anti-Muslim sentiment [is] not just a feeling among certain segments of the population. It [is] state-sponsored praxis that aim[s]...to reinstate the heyday of white Christian...” (p. 171). The anti-Muslim prejudice has been disseminated and normalized in the Western context through the supports of the governments. Thus, Islamophobia is “discrimination, dehumanization, and misrepresentations of Muslims, those of Muslim heritage, and a systematic miseducation about Islam itself” (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010, p. x). What has contributed to the propagation of Islamophobia has been the negative depiction of Muslims in media. Whether it is a news report or a film about Islam, “the picture drawn is a unanimous one. ‘Islam’ means the end of civilization as ‘we’ know it. Islam is anti-human, antidemocratic, anti-Semitic and antirational” (Said, 1980, p. 5). The Western media have achieved creating a common understanding amongst westerners that misogyny and oppression of women is the shared feature of the Muslim world. Resulting from these images, Islamophobia is a
common phenomenon in many parts of the Western world. In the United States, it is the renunciation of establishing an Islamic Cultural Center near Ground Zero, and in Europe, it is the banning of veils or hijab in schools and public places. What Said (1994, p. 282) describes as a “legacy of connections” between the colonial past and the imperial present can best be epitomized by the images of veiled women in the Western discourses.

Thus it can be argued that the depiction of veiled women being victimized under patriarchy and Islamic despotism in western discourses is an instance of continued Orientalist discourse and typology under the current guise of Islamophobia (Bordeaux, 2007). The portrayals of the veil and the oppression of Muslim women have been one of the most frequent stereotypes in the media and popular culture of the west to publicize Islamophobia. Since the nineteenth century, the veil has symbolized Muslim women’s inferiority for the West and it still is a powerful symbol used to reinforce the so-called binary of the progressive West and the digressive East. Western visual discourses are fraught with images of veiled women as static, unchanging, inferior, backward and illiterate. Emanated from the perpetual bombardment of these negative depictions of Muslim women is the stereotype that became a “system of ideas...unchanged as teachable wisdom...a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (Said, 1978, p. 7). In the post 9/11 climate of Islamophobia, Muslim women are portrayed with no variations; whether it be in Saudi Arabia, Iran or Malaysia, Muslim women are depicted as exotic and oppressed “other” in most of the western visual discourses. One may never repudiate the fact that women have been experiencing discrimination and oppression in some Islamic societies; as noted by Moghissi (1999, p. 2) “From Afghanistan to Algeria to Sudan, Pakistan and ...[Saudi Arabia] – indeed, everywhere in the Islamic societies women are systematically brutalised and caught in a deadly crossfire between the secular and fundamentalist forces.” However, violence against women is not an Islamic phenomenon, rather it is present almost everywhere in the world. In her study of 230 media photos, Wilkins (1997) argues that the occidental media has been loaded with Orientalized stereotypes of Muslim women as an insignia of “collectivistic” conventional society which could be as the opposite of Western individualism.

The image of Muslim women is produced from colonial discourses in order to generate a colonial subject which is a social production hinged on ‘difference.’ This depiction has been utilized to
differentiate and devalue the Muslim women as “other” from the Westerners. Therefore, the “veiled female body is central in the construction of discourses on the difference of the Muslim as ‘other’ with the non-Muslim ‘self’” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269). Veiling has been one of the tools that mark the difference between the East and the West. There are several reasons why a Muslim woman wears the veil but in the light of Islamophobia, many Western scholars perpetuate to diminish this issue to a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression. Islamic societies in these discourses are depicted as a single community following a single ideology of women’s oppression. Such presentation of these images insinuates the notion that Muslim women are homogenized regardless of their background. Whether they embrace the ideology of veiling or not, there are many active Muslim women who have been trying to enhance their socio-economic position in the Islamic societies but whose work usually go unnoticed for many Western scholars. Therefore, Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which dissimilarities are preserved and extended. It is the reintroduction and reaffirmation of ideologies of Orientalism because veiled women have been the symbol of difference for the Westerners from the early days of Orientalism. Kahf (1999, p. 8) notes:

When the Orient was Orientalized (to paraphrase Edward Said), when a vast and complex body of knowledge about the Islamic Other developed simultaneously with Western subjugation of that world, the image of the Muslim woman most familiar in the West today emerged.

These images formed derogative stereotypes about Islam which caused an Islamophobic attitude in the minds of many westerners. Stereotypical representation is never used to show an accurate depiction of colonial subjects, but rather to simply ensure their inferiority. These stereotypes are “current episodes in a series of subjugations” (Foucault cited in Bouchard, 1977, p. 148). These images are the production of racist and misogynistic constructs of women of non-Western culture. Islamophobia spreads the idea that veil is inherently oppressive and its removal equals freedom of Muslim women. Most scholars in the West ignore the fact that there are many Muslim women who choose to wear the veil as for them, the veil is a “source of respect, virtue, and pride;” it is a symbol of “passage from childhood to adulthood” (Milani, 1992, p. 35). For a considerable number of Muslim women the veil is deemed as a ‘second skin’ as it is passed down from past generations. It is also a sign
of resistance when worn at times of revolution to resist the Westernization of culture. Veiling should not be considered as intrinsically a sign of oppression unless it is forced. The obsession of Islamophobia to unveil Muslim women can be associated with elements of coercion. Both forced veiling and unveiling make women’s body into a ground of contention where ideals of resistance and westernization are acted upon. Akin to forced veiling, unveiling in the light of Islamophobia has a dramatic impact upon Muslim women. For instance, the Unveiling Act of 1936 in Iran as an agenda to Westernize the country had serious ramifications. Hoodfar (1993, p. 261) writes:

For many women it was such an embarrassing situation that they just stayed home. Many independent women became dependent on men, while those who did not have a male present in the household suffered most because they had to beg favors from their neighbors... Women became even more dependent on men since they now had to ask for man’s collaboration in order to perform activities they had previously performed independently. This gave men a degree of control over women they had never before possessed. It also reinforced the idea that households without adult men were odd and abnormal.

The Islamophobic discourses are so dominant and ubiquitous that leave no place for apparent realities, such as the earlier-noted fact that many Muslim women wear the veil of their own volition and they feel liberated, not suppressed. The prevalence of these sorts of discourse is so overwhelming that the public in the West developed an antipathy towards veiled women. This level of antipathy which still exists in the West transmogrified the veiled women residing in the West into an object of hatred and discrimination. The lofty discourse of saving women from the male chauvinism and Islamic patriarchy has given its place to misogyny towards veiled Muslim women. The impact of Islamophobia is the erasure of multiple meanings of veil where only a single meaning stands out which is a symbol of gender inequality and oppression. These clichés about the veil as an insignia of oppression coupled with the assumption of Muslim women’s subservience make veiled women ideal subjects against whom anti-Muslim hostilities are enacted. Therefore, as a negative behavior towards Islam and Muslims, Islamophobia includes “hostility, violence, rejection, exclusion and domination” (Dekker & Van Noll, 2009, p. 3). The systematic representations of the veiled women in visual discourses of the West
metamorphose the Western public perception of a woman living in Islamic societies. A review of Nehshat’s *Women of Allah* and the critics’ take on her work will confirm the dialogical and pedagogical function of her work, and affirms its potentiality to reconcile and bridge the two cultures of the East and West.

**Women of Allah (1993-97) & the West**

‘All cultures are located in place and time. Exile culture is located at the intersection and in the interstices of other cultures. Physically placed outside its original homeland, it is mentally and emotionally both here and there, and as a result, it is both local and global.’ Hamid Naficy (1993, p. 2)

Over the past two decades, the Iranian diaspora communities have grown considerably. This growth is not just an increase in numbers because the majority of Iranians residing abroad settled in their “homes in exile” over thirty years ago; rather it is the growth of the community as a community and as a segment of the society that has been attracting attention during the past twenty years. This community awareness within the Iranian diaspora communities has led to the production of a myriad of discourses that have brought the Iranian diaspora experience to the realm of popular culture. Iranians in exile have been creating a work engaged with what have become the most propitious topics of the day for Western readers: immigration, exile, Islamic fundamentalism and women’s right. One of the most striking features of this emerging work is its obsession with reversing the distorted images of Iranian Muslim women as they are much misunderstood outside of Iran. While the Western media is somewhat more sophisticated in their depiction of Iran than they were three decades ago, Said’s critique of media coverage of Iran in that era still holds true today. Iran is still “no more than a poorly defined and badly misunderstood abstraction” (Said, 1981, 83). The 1979 Iranian Revolution, the mandatory dress code of women and the disputed 2009 presidential election trigger dismal images of agonized people, especially black *chador*-cladded women under a highly theocratic political system with a deep-seated antagonism towards the West. Many of these sentiments might be true but it is by no means a proper understanding of Iran and Iranian Muslim women.

Undoubtedly, Iranian diaspora communities can debunk these stereotypical images and create a better sentiment through their creative work. Although many in doing so reinforce the stereotypes
and therefore exacerbate the image of Iranian Muslim women, there are diasporic works that can challenge the centuries-old Muslim women stereotypes. The modern Iranian diaspora is the by-product of various trends of emigrations, expedited by the incident of 1979 Iranian Revolution, the subsequent Iran-Iraq war and the resulting recent severe transmutations of the Iranian society. Shirin Neshat, an Iranian artist residing in America, left the country before the 1979 Iranian Revolution but cites a return trip to Iran as a seminal moment in her creative production. Born in Qazvin, Iran in 1957, Shirin Neshat was raised in a ‘well-to-do family.’ As a physician, her father was a staunch supporter of the Shah and his westernization policies. In an interview with Suzie Mackenzie (2000, p. 1), Neshat states that her father “fantasized about the west, romanticized the west, and slowly rejected all of his own values; both my parents did. What happened, I think, was that their identity slowly dissolved, they exchanged it for comfort. It served their class.” Like many supporters of the Shah who engaged in sending their children abroad for higher education, Shirin Neshat’s father sent both his sons and daughters to pursue their studies in England and the United States of America.

At the age of 17, Shirin Neshat was sent to America to continue her education. In 1982, she has received her Master’s degree in fine arts at the University of California, Berkeley. She was still in America when the Iranian Revolution of 1979 happened and did not return to her homeland until 1990. Her first visit back was both a painful and an exhilarating experience. It was painful because the sociopolitical situations had changed post-1979 Revolution. She explains that “the difference between what I had remembered from Iranian culture and what I was witnessing was enormous. The change was both frightening and exciting. I had never been in a country that was so ideologically based” (Bertucci, 1997, p. 84). However, this first trip back to Iran after twelve years of absence became the inspiration that fuels her artwork; she returned to the United States loaded with ideas for her work. As returning to Iran gives her the status of eyewitness to the issues she is representing, she employs meta-narrative in her work quite effectively. Meta-narrative is “telling a story about something that happened to one’s self in the first person [and] establishes a special kind of relationship with one’s audience” (Babcock, 1984, p. 64). Therefore, encapsulated within the metaphors of Neshat’s chador are the meta-narrative of gender, culture, religion and exile. Since she enjoys the status of being insider/outsider in creating her work, the
The work discussed in this chapter is positioned in the liminal space of “here and there,” Iran and the West as Naficy observes in regard to exile culture.

Upon returning to America, she has started to incorporate her experiences into her creative work and worked on her first series of photographs Women of Allah (1993-97). Resulting from the trip back to Iran and the exposure to the daily stereotypes of Muslim women in the West, Iranian women became the theme and subject matter of her artwork. These photographs show a woman, usually the artist herself, in long black chador whose hands, feet and face are oftentimes decorated with Persian scripts. In some of these photographs, the woman bears a gun. Much of the Western art criticism of Neshat’s work exhibits that she is reaffirming the dichotomies of East/West, Tradition/Modernity, and Oppression/Freedom which are the hallmark of Orientalist myth. In discussing Neshat’s Women of Allah (1993-97), Western art critics argue that her work is highlighting the repression and seclusion of Muslim women. People in the West who have been fed stereotypical media images of Muslim women think of the veiled women in Neshat’s work as poor and voiceless women (Baily Jones, 2007). At first glance, Neshat’s artwork carries stereotypes of sexualized, voiceless and exoticized femininity. A great number of western art critics regard her work as a bolstering of all they already know about Muslim women.

The Western assumption that Iranian Muslim woman is a unitary subject conveys the idea that these women cannot be a driving force for any action rather they are considered as an object controlled by the state. This Western perception of a voicelessness, passivity and similarity of all Muslim women, especially Iranian women, was influenced by Hollywood clichés and stereotypes about Muslims, and it was exacerbated by memoirs such as Betty Mahmoodi’s Not without My Daughter (1987) and Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003). As soon as one sees an image of Muslim woman in the West, one “fills in all the blanks regarding the subject’s ideology, background and intent” (Walker Parker, 2005, p. 52). This filling in comes from the mainstream Western media which has been portraying Muslim women in need of liberation. What today’s Western ‘liberators’ have in common with the 19th century colonialism is the exploitation of western feminist idiom to legitimize their violence. On a speech made by the then First Lady Laura Bush, Lughod (2003, p. 78) writes:
Laura Bush’s radio address on November 17 revealed the political work such mobilization accomplished . . . There was a blurring of the very separate causes in Afghanistan of women’s continuing malnutrition, poverty, and ill health and their more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish. On the other hand, her speech reinforced chiasmic divides, primarily between the “civilized people throughout the world” whose hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan and the terrorist-and-the-Taliban, the cultural monsters who want to, as she put it, “impose their world on the rest of us.” Most revealingly, the speech enlisted women to justify American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan and the “War on Terrorism” to which it was coupled. As Laura Bush said, “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”

Obviously, Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series depict images of Iranian women clad in *chador* rather than Afghan women with their face covered with *burkas*. However, many people in the West, under the influence of Islamophobia, paint all Muslim women with the same passive brush of oppression as if veil is inherently a sign of oppression. To most Western observer of Neshat’s artwork, the veil is a sign of “unadulterated women’s oppression—a symbolic wall dividing Iran from the rest of modern society” (Camhi, 2000, p. 150). Many Westerners believe that veiling is “an obstacle that bars [women] from social interaction and individual expression” (Cichoski, 2004, p. 4). Art critic, Reid (1996, p. 105) states that Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series are indeed “contradictions—seductive feminine beauty and religious circumspection, Western conceptual art practice and traditional Islamic craft, not to mention ‘submissive’ Islamic women with large guns—(that) provide an irresistible intellectual and visual frisson.” It is apparent that the notion of submission of veiled women is prevalent in the west. Dabashi (2005, p. 47) opines that the presupposition that Muslim women, be it Iranians or Arabs or Indians, have sat home and been “secluded to ‘feminine private’ quarters, while the public domain is left to men, is an Oriental lunacy...” He critiques western art critics and argues that these critics interpret Shirin Neshat’s work through the distorted Eurocentric lenses:
Through the intermediary of a body of interpretive essays and articles, the reception of Shirin Neshat’s work is today almost inseparable from the body of work itself— to the point where the body of work itself is no longer distinguishable from the way that it has been received, the interpretive apparatus that has been generated around it. (2005, p. 33)

Being exposed to Western media representation of Muslim women and knowing of the Iranian women’s situation in Iran, Neshat builds her artwork upon this history. She is familiar with the Western culture and media on the one hand and one the other hand she is an Iranian who is well-aware of the fact that veiling has different layers of meaning for Iranian women. The fact that her photography is mostly self-portrayed wearing the veil and chador bears an important message. As an American-Iranian who does not practice hijab in the day-to-day life in the West, putting on chador for the purpose of her photography indicates practicing Iranian tradition. She demonstrates implicitly that it is quite an easy task to “create’ various identities and work on people’s perception of them” (Machowski, 2009, p. 3). In fact, what seems to be an image of oppressed and silent woman is “rather an artistic expression of a fundamental democratic right to choose your identity” (Machowski, 2009, p. 1). By donning the chador on herself, she is accentuating the fact that veiling should not be always frowned upon rather it should be respected in the context of voluntary veiling, as no one has forced Neshat to wear the chador. She is demonstrating to the Western general audience that there are women in Iran who wear chador but are present and articulate like herself. Neshat is one of the many Muslim women in the West who has been trying to prove that voluntary veiling is empowering. Within this collection in the essay entitled ‘World Hijab Day’: Positioning the Hijabi in Cyberspace,’ Raihanah also points out how Muslims and non-Muslim women are donning hijab and putting up their photos in social media to raise awareness on voluntary veiling, promote presence, and tackle the misrepresentation of Muslim women.

Neshat’s frequent depiction of the veil in her photography also helps her process the drastic change that took place in Iran in her absence. She was keen to figure out how the 1979 Revolution transformed people’s lives, especially women. She admits that Women of Allah series “has evolved around my personal interest in coming to terms with the ‘new’ Iran to understand ideas, behind Islamic fundamentalism, and to reconnect with my lost past” (Bertucci, 1997, p.84-87). While challenging the Western stereotypes of silent Muslim women, her photography questions and criticizes the patriarchal
and confining Islamic rules upon Iranian women as well. For instance, her *Untitled* (1996) which depicts a hand graced with Persian calligraphy resting on a woman’s parted lips whose face is cropped indicate the silencing of women in the Islamic Republic. Curator Fereshteh Daftari (2006) agrees that the image of two fingers placed on the lips suggests the disagreement from within by silencing herself. By cropping her face, Neshat is implying that the Iranian governments have been trying to repress women’s voice or identity. However, the text over the hand functions as a voice which implies that Iranian women have a voice despite the coercion to be silent. Neshat has been reviled for pandering to Western viewers by confirming this assumption about Muslim women but her photography bears a complexity of social and religious identity for Iran that many western viewers fail to understand. Most of Neshat’s Western audience sees her photographs as either ratification of terrorism or a feminist accusation of Iranian culture (Devine, 2011). On the surface, Neshat’s photography seems to comprehensively match the Iranian legitimate constrictions concerning the public exhibition of women’s body in contemporary Iran. It is true that Neshat is criticizing the forced dress code through her *Women of Allah* series but this should not be taken as the totalizing and holistic reading of her work.

Part of this sort of misreading can be attributed to the fact that diasporic images generate several meanings and associations. According to Mirzoeff (2000, p. 7) diasporic images, from a certain starting point, can “create multiple visual and intellectual associations both within and beyond the intent of the producer of that image.” What Mirzoeff (2000, p. 7) calls “intervisuality” is apparently the problem in this kind of reading. He believes that the “diasporic visual image is necessarily intertextual” which makes the audience “to bring extratextual information to bear on what is seen within the frame” to fully understand the meaning of it. However, it should be noted that “in the visual image, intertextuality is not simply a matter of interlocking texts but of interacting and interdependent modes of visuality that I shall call intervisuality.” The intervisuality here is the perception and the meaning of the veil that a Western viewer picks from the Western media representation of Muslim women. The ambiguity of the images is also capable of adding to the misreading of Neshat’s images. By “seeming to strictly conform to Islamic-Iranian codes of public conduct, Neshat denies the viewer an immediate and simplistic reading of equating freedom with unveiling” (Dadi, 2008, p. 130). Rather than reading Neshat’s photographs as simply endorsing orientalist portrayals of harem interior and veiled women or
as just documentary recounting the real condition of Iranian Muslim women, one should enhance his/her knowledge of veiling and women in the context of Iran as they have complex meanings. Neshat makes her own body the subject and object of her work. She writes on the photographs of her own face, hands, and feet. She uses her body in the photograph as a canvas to write. As a Muslim woman's body is a site of contention, she is utilizing her body as a metaphor; the body of a woman is the most odd ‘thing,’ for “it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing. . . . Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively” (Grosz, 1994, p. xi).

The bodies in Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series are usually tattooed with Persian calligraphy. The Western audience of Neshat's photography takes up this Persian inscription as Islamic pronouncements delineating women's behavior in an Islamic country (Jacqueline Larson, 1997). The sight of a *chador* cladded woman surrounded in the seemingly Islamic texts conjures up the stereotypical representation of veiled and oppressed Muslim women for Westerners. The non-Muslim viewers assume that the texts are derived from the Quran. The Persian calligraphy within the photographs is suggestive of a more verbal expression through writing. Through the inclusion of Persian calligraphy over the images, Neshat “creates a pure, sensual, visual presence, and a material ornament that indicates meaning but hides it from most Western audiences who will, in most cases, be unable to read or understand it” (Zabel, 2001, p.22). It is precisely “the emptiness of meaning that makes room for stereotypes” (Zabel, 2001, p.22). Although the veiled woman of the photographs looks silent, there is a revolutionary potential in the written words that empowers her. The Persian calligraphy in the photographs of the series of *Women of Allah* is the poetry of the radical Iranian women poets who wrote of resistance and agency.

The two poets are Forough Farraokhzad (1935-1967) and Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008). Farrokhzad was famous for her sensuality and eroticism in her feminist poems and Saffarzadeh was known for her religious fervor and respect for martyrdom. Utilizing the poems by the two poets is symptomatic of the plurality of voices of women in Iran. As Farrokhzad wrote about taboo subjects such as love, women's emotion and sexual desire in a patriarchal society, her verses are used in Neshat's photography to demonstrate the existence of Iranian women who are unhappy with the state's
discrimination against women and resist the stringent patriarchal rules. Therefore, they have a voice in articulating their uneasiness with the restrictive Islamic rules. In an interview with Sheybani (1999, p. 208), Neshat admits “No other women before [Farrokhzad] had ever dared to speak so freely on the subjects of female emotional and sexual desires.” While shattering the stereotypes that Muslim/Iranian women have no voice, the poetry is also indicative of Neshat’s questioning the Iranian regime on women’s right such as the mandatory hijab. Since Farrokhzad’s poetry is fraught with a melancholic tone expressing dissatisfaction with the state, her texts overlaid Neshat’s images of veiled woman may also suggest that those women who wear hijab are not necessarily pious and religious but rather Iranian women must wear hijab irrespective of their belief which is what Neshat is protesting against.

Saffarzadeh’s poetry, on the other hand, is used to exhibit the revolutionary and religious sentiment of Iranian women. She was known as a true fundamentalist who was a staunch supporter of Khomeini and his ideologies, and in the meantime she was insistent on preserving women’s right. Her poetry ratifies the universal character of Islam and demonstrates the active presence of Iranian women in the society. Her texts over the photos of Neshat suggest the presence of militant Muslim women who supported Ayatollah Khomeini in defending the country against the Shah and the foreign intervention. The verses, which make the western viewer uncomfortable reading the images, are “the literal and symbolic voice of women whose sexuality and individualism have been obliterated by the chador or the veil” (Sheybani, 1999, p.207). The poetry overlaid different parts of the women’s body functions as a voice against the stereotypically negative portrayals of Muslim women. This sentiment can be confirmed by Cichoki (2004, p.) arguing that by using “the radically self-revelatory feminist poetry of Farrokhzad and the prerevolutionary neotraditionalist poetry of Saffarzadeh,” Shirin Neshat addresses “issues that are dear to...women who sat at two opposite positions within the spectrum of women’s experiences. The poetry provides these women with a voice ... and its divergent content deny any totalizing claim on the experience of Muslim women.” By employing the two poets’ texts in her photography, Neshat is shattering the stereotype of Muslim women being a unitary subject. She shows how veiled Iranian women embody different roles and she is highlighting the presence of articulate and puissant women who are not submissive as well. In an interview with Lila Azam Zanganeh, Neshat states:
Westerners have this sense that Iranian women are submissive victims. But they're not victims, and they're certainly not submissive. … through their resistance and strength, Iranian women have had a voice in Iranian society, and they continue to have a voice, perhaps more so today than ever before. … Because women are under so much pressure, they end up being more innovative about dealing with crises and devising ways out. They become more subversive (2006, p.47).

Through Persian calligraphy, Neshat is also subverting the stereotypical and neo-orientalist images of Muslim women in her photography. Either intentionally or unintentionally, she is highlighting the fundamental lack of knowledge of Iranian cultural tradition on the part of Western viewership. Her photographs become subversive only if one reads the texts inscribed over the photos otherwise they replicate the stereotypes. Thereby, the ability to read the Persian poems inscribed on the photos could alter the expected readings of the work. Another element which evokes Islamic terrorism in Neshat’s photography is the existence of guns. Black chador-clad woman sometimes carries a rifle in the photographs. Many Western viewers take the images of Muslim women with rifle in their hands as an artistic depiction of terrorism (Machowski, 2009). The first glance at the images will give the impression of militancy and Islamic extremism. Cichocki admits that “When I first saw Neshat’s photographs at the 1995 Transculture exhibition in Venice, I immediately thought that I recognized the represented person: I knew I was looking at an Islamic terrorist” (2004, p. 11). However, Neshat uses guns to suggest women’s activism and also resistance against intervention. It is a symbol of defending the country. The woman in the image stands for the Iranian women involved in the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq war. By portraying this image, Neshat denies that Iranian women are reduced to oppressed women who have no control on their being. Iranian women have been constantly active in the country’s political culture from the 1906 Constitution Revolution through the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement of the protested presidential election. They proved that they are not silent and passive subjects of a patriarchal society.

As one of the woman-with-the-gun photos, Speechless (1996) contains a woman’s portrait, cut off along the nose scripted with calligraphy. Next to her cheek right at the height of her ear emerges a gun from under her chador. Although the gun is indicative of violence, the perfect positioning of it at
the place of an earring cannot be overlooked as a coincidence. Neshat states that the “gun placed beside
the woman's cheek is at once a warning and an object of beauty. Both are divided in terms of their
purpose- their combined statement is deliberately puzzling” (Goodman, 1998, p. 53). Therefore, she uses
the gun to convey that “what can be threatening can also be very beautiful” (Neshat in an interview with
Enright & Walsh, 2009, p.26). The veil is also portrayed with the same subtlety; it can be a symbol of
oppression and also stands for independence and freedom. The juxtaposition of Persian calligraphy,
guns and veil is the communicative capacity of the Women of Allah photos (McDonald, 2004). The
combination of these three elements might bring up the notion of Islamic terrorism for the western
viewers but the presence of these elements in the photography of Shirin Neshat is indicative of the
existence of different facets of Iranian women. Like Persian calligraphy, the images of the gun in her
photographs confer agency and resistance to Muslim women. What is highlighted in her work is her
hybrid identity which offers a potent amalgamation of personal, cultural and cross-cultural elements.
Her photography exhibits the experience of coexisting in different spheres. Hence, she is always keen
to patch up the so-called differences between the West and East in her work.

The complexity of these elements makes it difficult for the Western viewers to understand the
images. However, what makes her photography complex and ambiguous is her own contradictions and
struggles in coming to term with the Iran she no longer recognizes after the Iranian Revolution. The
work that she creates is not only the production of her constant exposure to the stereotypes but also it
is the result of her rupture upon return to Iran which revolves around female resistance, action and
agency despite the fact that the women in her work are veiled. Not only does she struggle to challenge
the Western notion of Muslim women, but also she tries to display her disapproval of forced veiling
delicately. There is a sense of duality in her work. What she creates “is always in critical dialogue with
both Iran and the West” (Navab, 2008, p. 51). Moreover, Neshat's series speaks to the need for a
transcultural dialogue that contains the voice and expression of Muslim women. It is also in dialogue
with the viewers because art creates dialogues and is dialogical in nature. Her Women of Allah engages
the viewers into its web of meanings and recognizes the viewers as active subjects in a process of vitality
and reciprocity with the work. The figures in Women of Allah communicate with the viewers through
their postures, scripts and the return gaze. Neshat uses this return gaze also to free the female body
from the ‘male gaze’ and break free from centuries of subservience stereotype to male or Western desire. The frontal postures, gazing back, *chador*, and the Persian calligraphy are collectively the means of making conversation with the viewers. Extending Mikhail Bakhtin’s *dialogic* on the role of words in verbal discourses to Neshat’s photography, *Women of Allah* can be taken as dialogical works. Bakhtin (1981) argues “every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates” (p. 280). In a similar vein, Neshat’s *Women of Allah* awaits responses by the viewers and expects them to get rid of their presuppositions about Iranian women.

It is Neshat’s hybrid identity of Iranian-American that makes her “capable of seeing each through the assumptions of the other” (Wallach, 2001, p. 137). Her in-between place cements her authority in breaking the stereotypical binaries of East/West and Freedom/Oppression as well. In reference to the existence of duality in her work, Neshat (2002, p. 51) explains that she is not approving or promoting any sense of oppression of all the dark side of Iranian culture, but rather “giving it a fair chance to speak of its very complex situation. And in that way, I think my work has all these elements of duality in it.” It is this ambivalent position which lets her be “not quite the Same, not quite the Other…” (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1995, p.5). She knows well that photography is an effective medium to subvert the existing media imagery of Muslim women. She takes the Orientalist stereotypes and inverts them, thereby challenging the western observers’ perception of Muslim women. Her opinions are “informed concomitantly by the role of gender in the political and social structure of her birth culture and by the American media’s representative images of that culture” (Devine, 2011, p. 59). She sabotages the media stereotypes that use the images to portray a passive and repressed woman with no or little education; the “dissident woman who sees “fundamentalism” as a passage to non-Western identity and domination; and, finally, the fanatical terrorist” (Devine, 2011, pp. 59-60). Although Neshat was caught saying “I’m not an activist, but an artist,” she puts a lot of effort in her photography to empower women while understanding the imposed patriarchal rules in Iran. She states:

I’m an artist so I’m not an activist. I don’t have an agenda. I am creating work simply to entice a dialogue and that’s all. I do intend to show the stereotype head on and then break it down. There’s the stereotype about the women—they’re all victims and submissive—
and they’re not. Slowly, I subvert that image by showing in the most subtle and candid way how strong these women are (Horsburgh, 2000, pp. 44-45).

Her photography makes Westerners aware of “the constructed, artificial nature” (Zabel, 2001, p.17.) of images of veiled women in the west. Following Naficy’s argument on artists in exile, Neshat is moving in between the different social collectives and artistic approaches where she can question and criticize the accepted values and practices at both her homeland and her adopted country. Her images of veiled women question and rely upon the implications of veil in Iran and the west as she resists the stereotypes and protests against the imposed stringent and restrictive rules upon women. She is well-aware of the fact that veiling is not inherently an insignia of oppression. There are women who embrace the practice and there are others who still think of the Veiling Act of 1983 as an oppressive means to subjugate and segregate women. Unfortunately, this scope of perspectives within Iran is little noticed in the west. Her photography does not fall in the ‘poornographic’ thematic images loop where images of veiled women invoke “cry for us because our fates are so bad” (Azimi, 2006, p.105). While not denying them, she is, indeed, against these poor, repressed and worth-your-sympathy stereotypes and tries to show other facets of veiled women. The next section locates Shirin Neshat’s source of inspiration in Iran for her Women of Allah series of photography.

**Women of Allah and the Post-Revolutionary Iran**

Neshat cites a return trip to Iran in early 1990s as a significant moment for her creative production of the Women of Allah series of photography but never mentions the specific source of her inspiration. This series of photography which contains a set of four components such as the veil, the gun, the gaze and the text bears uncanny resemblance with the murals and posters of the 1980s and early 90s Iran. Given that Iran has then just weathered the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), one would expect to see images of Ayatollah Khomeini as the father of the Revolution, the heroic battle scenes of the war, traditional Islamic imagery, portraits of the war martyrs, and Ayatollah Khamenei. Moreover, there were images of Iranian religious women (or women of Allah) veiled and *chador*-cladded women carrying guns everywhere in the country. These images which would appear on the walls and posters across the country entered a public discourse and “represent a genre of public portraiture that stresses
both the Islamic Republic Shi'i-Persian identity and governance and the duty of all Muslims, both at home and abroad, to sacrifice themselves to a greater cause by fighting and dying in war” (Gruber, 2013, p. 3). Touching upon issues of tradition, religion, identity and belonging, the murals and posters have graced and given meaning to the state’s ideologies. They became the canvas for the post-revolutionary Iranian government to promote its messages and instill their ideologies. These political murals and posters in public spaces were also set to mobilize or inspire people (Rolston, 1991).

One of the most conspicuous symbols of cultural change in Iran has been the mandatory dress code in public for all women. Unlike Mohammad Reza Shah’s era, women were no longer free to opt either to veil or not to veil. Irrespective of the differences in religion, ethnicity and class, veiling became a must. While for many veiling was empowering and like ‘second skin’ to them, many opposed the forced Veiling Act of 1983 and had found it difficult to comply. However, the government believed that the practice of veiling is a “facilitator for a professional workspace, where women could do their job with no fear of sexual harassment” (Zeiny, 2013, p. 70). It was upon the advent of the 1983 Veiling Act that Ayatollah Khomeini stated: “what we don't want and what Islam doesn’t want, is to make a woman as an object, a puppet in the hands of men” (quoted in Ramazani, 1980, p. 30). Consequently in the years following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, one of the most common murals was the image of chador-cladded women to promote hijab and modesty. Paintings of veiled women gazing down or looking straight with the ‘pearl in shell’ theme were abundant across the country (figures 1, 2, 3). The ‘pearl in shell’ not only symbolizes the outer cover and veiling of the body but also, according to Karimi (2013, p. 45), it alludes to a “woman's virginity and a protective enclosure...” Therefore, while the outer veiling and modesty is the obvious message of these paintings, the latent message could be taking care of the virginity until marriage.
Figure 7.1: A mural of 1980s & 90s in Iran. Hijab: A shell for a pearl. From author's collection of murals on hijab.

Figure 7.2: A mural of 80s & 90s. "The graceful and the pure is an angle of the angles. A woman in Hijab is like a pearl inside a shell." From author's collection of murals on hijab.
Figure 7. 3: A poster mounted on a wall. “A woman in Hijab is like a pearl in a shell.” From author's collection of murals on hijab.

All these large and gigantic images were reproduced to foster dialogue about hijab on a greater scale. They were meant to encourage women to wear chador as the government was of the idea that chador is a sign of resistance and a better means to hijab. Although both veiled and unveiled women had an active role in toppling the Shah and the 1979 Revolution, unveiled women now had no choice but to don hijab; the ideal hijab was, of course, wearing the chador. For these chador-cladded women images to be available to the mobilized masses, these paintings had to be enormous. A country where its paintings were mostly of the miniature scale (Grabar, 2000) now produced huge murals and posters. The large-scale murals and posters were, indeed, propaganda paintings in “support of radical change” (Chehabi & Christia, 2008, p. 2). These paintings and posters became more organized and instructed in the spirit of war. According to Varzi, “it was the war that ultimately defined the Islamic republic as an
image machine” (2006, p. 26). Halfway through the war, the Office of Propaganda in the Artistic and Cultural Bureau of the Qom Seminary distributed a set of detailed instructions and guidelines for muralists and painters of the public art. These instructions highlighted the important role of murals and posters as a propaganda medium:

Under all circumstances the effectiveness of the revolutionary mural must be kept clearly in mind. Vague, indirect and superfluous paintings should be avoided at all cost. ‘What is significant is to consider what a passer-by (sic) can take away in his memory and mind.’ The artist must study religious texts as seriously as he examines the techniques of other artists. Murals with a theme or a scene are preferable to portraits with no specific message. Revolutionary posters should not be merely copied. Every artist must let go of his unique imagination and create something unique. The location of the murals must be selected carefully so that a passerby can clearly see the complete picture. But the ultimate objective should be brevity of message, deliberate and emphatic brush strokes, clear cut shapes and brilliant colors. Every mural should be framed by solid colors, selected from one of the dominant colors of the picture. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1991, p. 291)

Women’s active role was once again recognized as the Iranian government asked them to defend the country at the outset of the Islamic Republic and later to participate in the war. This message appeared in visual forms such as photography and paintings. ‘A Young Girl Carrying Rifle’ (1979) is one such visual representation that shows a young girl in chador holding a rifle with a flower inserted into its muzzle (figure 4). The caption which quotes Ayatollah Taleqani reads: “Our army does not belong only to our brothers in the armed forces. Men and women, young and old in our country are the members of the Islamic army, and guardian of Islam.” This sort of images tended to emphasize the contribution of every Iranian both men and women, and young and old in defending the country. The war front was no longer a domain of men, and women were welcome to fight in the war. Now it was time to produce images of religious and warrior women. The earlier images would have depictions of women along with men defending the country. A painting that best illustrates this is Khusrawjirdi’s 1981 ‘Mullah, Mother, and Soldiers’ (figure 5). This painting shows a clergy man, a soldier, and a woman defending the country. The woman carries an infant in one arm and has a red tulip in another. The
infant represents the role of women as a mother and the tulip suggests her willingness to sacrifice herself for the country. Another painting that shows the participation of women in the war is Palangi’s 1980 ‘A Woman Holding a Rifle’ (figure 6). Having spent three years on the front, Palangi witnessed many women taking weapons and joining soldiers to defend their hometown. This painting is black and white sketches of a woman he had seen carrying a rifle and heading towards the front to fight. Farangis Heidarpour is one of these women whose mural was painted in her hometown, Kermanshah, to commemorate her bravery during the Iran-Iraq war (figure 7). Known as a woman with an ax; Farangis’ statue was also erected in Kermanshah. She was 18 years old when she confronted two Iraqi soldiers in her hometown on her way back home from the funeral of 8 members of her family. She had killed one soldier with the ax and arrested the other one.
Figure 7.5: Mullah, Mother, and Soldiers, 1981
Husayn Khusrawjirdi
Middle Eastern Posters Collection
Box 3, Poster 72
Special Collections Research Center
The University of Chicago Library
Figure 7.6: A Woman Holding a Rifle, ca. 1980
Nasser Palangi
Middle Eastern Posters Collection
Box 3, Poster 65
Special Collections Research Center
The University of Chicago Library

Figure 7.7: A woman with an ax. Farangis Heidarpour's mural in Kermanshah. From author's collection of murals on hijab.
These murals, paintings and photography are just few examples of many visual representations that were deployed by the government to stimulate the public and encourage military enlistment in support of the war. The muralists and painters made sure that their paintings enjoy the presence of some strong visual cues of the Shi’a faith and belief (Chehabi & Christia, 2008). The Shrine of Imam Hossein in Karbala, geometric shapes and designs, calligraphy, curvilinear patterns, and red flowers such as rose and tulip combined with some particular signs and symbols such as the hand whose five fingers symbolize Prophet Mohammad, Imam Ali and his wife Fatimah, Imam Hassan and Imam Hossein are the most common visual components in these visual discourses. These are the specific source of Neshat’s inspiration for her *Women of Allah* (1993-97). This work is arguably heavily influenced by these 1980s and 90s murals, paintings and photography in Iran in terms of containing the same elements of veil, gun, red flowers, hands, and calligraphy. Neshat is brilliantly borrowing these elements from these works to strike and question the Iranian state's control of the Iranian women's body while correcting the orientalist assumptions. Neshat’s *Women of Allah* and the 1980s and 90s women of Allah in murals, paintings and posters also merit comparison for a number of other significant reasons: both have continued their presence in the public discourses. Although Iran has now shifted towards a different theme in murals, posters and paintings for public spaces through its Beautification Organization,¹ the veiled women (or women of Allah) have a strong presence in the murals and posters. Plus, both of them possess pedagogical and dialogical functions too. After all, even when visual culture is consumed to be entertained, it functions on both pedagogical and dialogical level.

**Conclusion**

While reviewing Neshat’s *Women of Allah* (1993-97) and emphasizing its dialogical and pedagogical function, this paper concludes that Neshat is dramatically influenced and inspired by the 1980s and 90s murals, paintings and posters in Iran for creating her first series of photography. The presence of the *chador*, gun, hand, gaze, bloodstain and calligraphy in her work is symptomatic of Neshat’s close

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¹ For a detailed discussion on the evolution of post-1979 Revolution murals in Iran, see Christiane Gruber, “The Message is on the Wall: Murals in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Persica*, 22, pp. 15-46.
relationship with the Iranian post-revolutionary murals, paintings and photography produced in the 1980s and early 90s. It is exactly this borrowing and incorporating of these elements that help her confront and challenge the stereotypes of passive and voiceless Iranian Muslim women in the west and question the rights of women in Iran. Produced by the object of orientalist art and the Islamic patriarchy, i.e. women, Neshat’s series is a visual expression that creates a visual form of dialogue for questioning the stereotypical codes in both her homeland and hostland. If the political discourses take the real and distort it in tandem with the political agendas of enemy-making, in particular Islamophobia, or twist it in alignment with the ideology of the state such as the discriminatory laws against women in Iran, the artistic can do the reverse, unearth and promote the real into the beautiful. Its dialogical and pedagogical functions assist the western viewers to let go of their preconceived notions about Muslim women and better understand the complexity of her photography. Many of her images are endowed with a sense of empowerment which subverts the western notion of gender roles and power in Iran and other Muslim societies in a broader perspective. By combining the elements of veil, gun and Persian calligraphy, she overrides the stereotypes to exhibit that Muslim women have power and agency. This understanding will hopefully diminish the hate crimes against Muslims and Muslim women in the West. Through the Persian calligraphy scripted over the photographs, the women speak despite the compulsion to remain silent. Neshat’s insider/outsider position helps her in better framing the issues for her Western audiences. Knowing the Western culture and media and being an Iranian gives her the privilege to both shatter the stereotypes and question the Islamic restrictive rules on women.

References


