
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Post Islamic Revolution and Women in Iran: Interrogating Identity through Photography

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran brought drastic changes in the lives and identities of Iranian women. Women who participated in the rebellion against the Shah's rule for the sake of safeguarding their religion found their voices unheard. The public space which they occupied during the revolution soon turned into an alien space to them. The 'chador', the traditional loose garment that covered one from head to toe, which they wore in defiance of Shah's westernizing tendencies, became a compulsory dress code for women in public spaces after the revolution. Hence, the post Islamic revolutionary period witnessed Tehran losing its hues and colours, with women in public spaces made invisible through a compulsory dress code. Shirin Neshat, the Iranian visual artist living in America as an exile, could sense this betrayal meted out on women by the state when she returned to her native land after a long period of twelve years. She left Iran and went to the USA for higher studies when she was a teenager but could not return to her native land after her studies because of the Islamic revolution and the war with Iraq which followed soon. Both incidents had a horrifying impact on the land and its people. The war torn Iran could not keep its promise to its women who were active participants in the rebellion. As an artist, Neshat's response to this drastic change in Iranian women's identity was materialized in the photographic series titled *Unveiling* and *Women of Allah*. The photographs presented the self portraits of the artist herself with lines from famous Iranian poets inscribed in Farsi script upon the face and fingers. The present paper is an attempt to study the photographs from these series to analyze how Neshat surfaced the process of identity formation in the context of the post Islamic revolutionary period in Iran.

KEYWORDS

Islamic revolution, Shirin Neshat, Photography, Identity, Unveiling, and Women of Allah.

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1. Introduction

Shirin Neshat, the visual artist from Iran who left her native land at an early stage in her life in order to pursue higher education in the United States of America, found her native city devastated and war-torn with the women folk almost disappearing in the compulsory veil and dress code imposed upon them by the new regime under Ayatollah Khomeini when she returned to her country after a period of seventeen years. It was the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran that brought conservative rule in Iran. Women had actively participated in the revolution in order to resist the westernization tendencies of Shah's regime and they fought to protect their religious and cultural identities. They dreamt of a post-revolution period in Iran where women would find their voices heard but they found themselves in a more rigid system of suppression and control.

The word, 'Identity' as Webster's dictionary notes, may connote two contradictory ideas. 'Identity' is synonymous with individuality but at the same time, it stands for the sameness or likeness to what is regarded as general characteristics of someone or something. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity#related-phrases>) These contradictory notions within the concept of identity are what Shirin Neshat seems to explicate through her visual arts. The Muslim Women identity conforms to the set notions on Muslim women in the Western world view as well as the individuality which interrogates this conventional world view. The series of photographs titled, *Women of Allah*, which was brought out soon after her visiting her

native land present her own self portraits in black and white where she is dressed in chador, the traditional Iranian cloak like attire that covers one from head to toe with only the palms and face visible. These photographs present the Muslim women in conventional dress code thereby conforming to the stereotypes associated with the identity of Muslim women. At the same time, the gaze and the manner in which the women in the photographs are placed within the framework of the photographs reveal the individuality and peculiarities of Muslim women in Iran which surpass all sorts of generalisations regarding Muslim women. These self portraits include lines from some revolutionary feminist Iranian poets like Forough Farrokhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh inscribed on the visible parts like face and arms. These lines too have to be analyzed along with other aspects of the photographs presented in the series. The present study tries to analyze two photographs namely, *The Rebellious Silence* and *Faceless* from the *Women of Allah* series created in 1994 soon after her short visit to her native land.

Neshat made her first visit to Iran after a long interval in 1991 when she encountered a totally different landscape from what she remembered in her childhood. She found the land as a war torn one as the war with Iraq which followed the Islamic revolution of 1979 affected it drastically. Another major difference she noticed was with reference to women who were prohibited from entering public spaces without wearing the chador which covered the entire body except the face and palms. The capital city, Tehran, lost its multitudes of women moving about in their attires of their own choice. Women who were active participants of the Islamic revolution in Iran found themselves voiceless after the revolution with such controls imposed upon their visibility and movement in the post Islamic revolutionary period. Neshat could sense this contradiction with reference to the active involvement of women in the revolution and the passivity they are pushed into in the post revolutionary period. This paradox she tried to relate to the stereotypes associated with Muslim women and the unconventional roles they played during the Islamic revolution in Iran. She visualized this dichotomy through the photographic series, *Women of Allah* which she released soon after her return to the US where she remained as an exile.

The two photographs under study are from the *Women of Allah* series and have some elements in common. In both, Neshat appears in black chador, lines in Farsi script are inscribed on the face and hands and a gun is present in the hands of the woman in the portrait. Veiled woman, poetry, gun, and gaze seem to be the recurrent elements in her photographs. The *Rebellious Women* presents a woman dressed in a black chador holding a gun against her face in such a way that the gun stands in the middle intersecting her face. The lines from the revolutionary poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poem "*Allegiance with Wakefulness*" are inscribed into the face which is the only visible part of the portrait. The gun in the hands of the woman presents the militant nature of the Islamic revolution where women too were the warriors fighting along with men for their religious rights. The portrait in this sense acts as challenging the stereotypical image of women who are represented in the popular media as meek and submissive. The role of women as warriors of the revolution is problematically presented in the title as rebellion failed to articulate particular women's issue. When Neshat visited Iran after the war in 1990 she found the capital city devastated and women not allowed outside their domestic space without covering themselves in long black traditional cloth called chador. She found the city lost its hues and luster which as an artist she presented through the black and white portraits of veiled women. "The public appearance of women was different from what she remembered, due to compulsory veiling. Women now wore either traditional veiling (a top to toe veil called chador) or the headscarf that covers the hair along with the manteau (an oversized shirt dress)" (Dabashi, 1997). Peter Chelkowski in "The Literary Genres in Modern Iran," claims that it is because of the Iranian poetic tradition that, "despite the total commitment of Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah to bring Iran into the community of the world's advanced modern nations, the Arabic script of the Persian language has not been replaced by the Latin one as has been the case with Turkish" (Dabashi, 1997).

But the silence gets voice through the text that is inscribed on the face in black ink. The lines by the revolutionary poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh from her poem *Allegiance with Wakefulness* in Babaie's translation stand for the woman's offer to support the martyr of the revolution and to rise hand in hand beyond the earthly limitations and attain heavenly bliss.

O, you martyr,
hold my hands
With your hands
Cut from earthly means
Hold my hands,
I am your poet.
(qtd. in Zahara, 2021)

The piercing gaze of the woman in the portrait supports the heroic fervor of the lines thereby voicing the silence to which the women though rebellious have fallen into after the revolution.

Here Neshat seems to suggest through these lines how women are abandoned even by the movement or revolution for which they fought for. Neshat by not providing the translation of these lines leaves the viewers to ponder over the beauty of the tattooed hands and their exotic connotations associated with oriental women. The portrait is monumental for those who can understand the Farsi script and those who do not. The former may realize the cruelty and violence with which women's cause was left unaddressed in such national risings and the latter find the tradition of tattooing with henna in the oriental culture immortalized through the portrait.

Throughout the *Women of Allah* series, Shirin Neshat employs the use of direct calligraphic text on her photographs to create a pure, sensual visual presence and a material ornament that indicates meaning. Westerners who do not read Farsi may understand the calligraphy as an aesthetic signifier, a reference to the importance of text in the long history of Islamic art. (Dabashi, 1991)

The photograph presents the cultural shock that Neshat had gone through in her return to her native land after the Islamic revolution and war with Iraq. The place she remembered as her home lost its grandeur and presented the devastation of war. The loss was personal as well as social; physical like economical as well as psychological. The place that she left as a teenager vanished and presented itself as a war torn disfigured entity.

She returned to a place devastated by the eight-year war, where every corner of the capital, Tehran, told the story of an uneasy time. The city was especially bombarded during the last months of the Iran-Iraq war. Tehran was covered with murals of the eight-year war martyrs, ayatollahs, and "paradisal promises delivered in thick Arabic phrases," the city that had once been likened to Paris, was not Paris anymore. (Nejad, 2009)

The second photograph chosen for study is titled, *Faceless* in which the gun is directed towards the camera, and the woman in the portrait who is Neshat herself is presented as looking defiantly at the onlookers. The woman's face and hand are inscribed with lines from Persian poems in Farsi script. For the texts inscribed in the portraits, Neshat has depended on feminist revolutionary poets of Iran like Forough Farrokhzad and *Tahereh Saffarzadeh*. The texts will communicate to only Iranian readers while the western viewers of these photographs can only appreciate the visual aspect of the calligraphy in which the lines are inscribed. These photographs were exhibited in galleries in the United States thereby limiting the potential viewers to western. Neshat has not included the translation of the lines present in the portraits which compels the western viewers to focus on the visual elements rather than their literary parts. The onlookers have to confront the defiance in the woman's gaze and the gun directed towards the viewers reinforces this element of defiance on the part of the woman. Here the stereotypical framework of the woman in veils stands in contrast to the gaze which is defiant. Hence the conventional image of the Muslim women is interrogated in these portraits with the gaze directed towards the viewers.

Like the *Rebellious Silence*, *Faceless* too includes lines from Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poems. In fact, Neshat has chosen Saffarzadeh's poems for portraits with guns as she was a revolutionary feminist poet writing during the period of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Her revolutionary fervor is brought into the framework of the portrait through the lines inscribed on the face and hands. The words in bold may be translated as 'Silence...beautiful remains.' As the lines suggest, the portrait is a clear indicator of the role played by the Iranian women in the 1979 revolution in which they participated with the aim of getting their voices heard and their needs fulfilled. The revolution was regarded by some Iranian women as liberating them from the westernizing tendencies under the Shah's regime. Both the portraits include lines from Saffarzadeh's poems which Neshat might have included to reveal the revolutionary zeal of the Iranian women. But these lines communicate to only those who can read Farsi script. These photographs were exhibited in the West where few people could read Farsi and those who can read it were not able to view them as these photographs were not exhibited in Iran. Those who can read the lines and those who could not read it may be categorized into two types of viewers with their own distinct perspectives on the portraits and regarding the identity of the women depicted in those photographs. For westerners, the women in the portraits present the replica of those images popularized by the colonialists as the exotic Orientals who are viewed as objects of desire and the lines inscribed on the face and hands of women in the photographs may be taken as tattoos and the art of calligraphy may be praised. This superficial understanding without looking into the deeper meanings by analyzing the lines might have been the basis of the origin of various stereotypical images of Muslim women which got spread in the world. Neshat might have deliberately avoided giving the translations of those lines along with the photographs to reveal how superficial readings may lead to unrealistic identity formation based on the understanding of only what meet the eyes.

The photographs under study may instill a rude shock to such set notions on identity as these photographs place women in the conservative framework of veils and chadors but the gaze and their postures with weapons in their hands may lead to thoughts beyond the veils and calligraphic ornamentations. But the insiders from the Iranian culture can well read into the deeper

meanings of the given photographs as they can read and understand the lines from the famous poems in Farsi script inscribed on the visible parts of the women in the image which enables them to relate the text with the image and develop an understanding about the veiled women in the photographs in a more realistic way realizing the individuality and peculiarities of experience in which they are placed in the particular historical contexts which resists the formation of identities in a homogenized setting. The lines from poems by various Iranian poets never appear to the Iranian viewers of the photographs as mere ornamental works in calligraphy; rather they may be drawn more to the photographs because of those lines as poetry seems to have been a cementing force in the collective consciousness of the people of Iran. Peter Chelkowski has observed that the Iranians give importance to their poetic tradition which made their otherwise western oriented rulers like Mohammed Reza Shah not to ban Arabic script which revealed his affinity towards Persian poetic tradition which included such stalwarts like Omer Kayyam, Jalaludheen Rumi, and so on. "Despite the total commitment of Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah to bring Iran into the community of the world's advanced modern nations, the Arabic script of the Persian language has not been replaced by the Latin one as has been the case with Turkish" (Chelkowski, 1978)

Hence Neshat seems to have placed the possibilities of identity formation in the case of Muslim women whose veil and dress code may travel faster than their individuality in determining their identity. By presenting the photographs with verbal texts inscribed on them and placing those photographs away from the geographical and hence cultural contexts of the subjects in the photographs, she is, perhaps, exposing the ways of how identity gets evolved according to the nature and level of understanding of the agents who operate in creating such identities. Hamid Naficy, a scholar of Iranian Studies and of diasporic Iranian cinema, media, and Iranian culture remarks on the importance of poetry in the lives of the people of Iran in his essay, "The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile". He says, "suffused by poetry and shaped by the citation of canonical, classical (and at times contemporary) poets in daily life; rich and poor can and do cite Ferdowsi, Sa'adi, Hafez, Rumi, and Khayyam." (Naficy, 1991). This rich tradition steeped in Persian poetry might have inspired Neshat to include lines from Iranian poems inscribed in the photographs. Only insiders from such a culture can understand the significance of it and relate it to the visual image leading to a better understanding of the latter.

With the limited knowledge and available resources about the Orient, the Westerners formed an image of the East, its people including women who with their better systems of communication and as the representatives of the main stream knowledge source, could spread this image of the Orient as their real identity which gradually got such currency as to lead even the Orient to internalize this myth about them. But when the verbal texts are read and understood by those who are the insiders of that culture, the subjects in the photographs attain altogether different identity which is formed by relating them to the cultural and historical realities of their land rather than understanding them from the viewers' limited knowledge about the latter.

Hence there emerges a great shift in the perspective in which one understands the formation of identities. Neshat demonstrates this process of identity formation in the context of Muslim Women of Iran and puts forward a series of photographs in which she presents herself dressed in a chador, the traditional dress of Iranian women that covers one from head to toe. This traditional at the same time conservative attire in tune with the dogmatic religious rules is a framework to present the otherwise unconventional gaze and posture in which she places herself within this framework. Here the framework fails to frame the identity which moves beyond the conventional understandings of it. The present study of the two photographs from Neshat's photographic series, *Women of Allah* helps to reveal the process of identity formation and representation in contexts and cultures variant from those which engendered it thereby surfacing the politics of identity formation and the power structures operating within the process.

Statement & Declaration

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