

Displacement, Belonging, Photography: Gender and Iranian Identity in Shirin
Neshat's *The Women of Allah* (1993-7) and *The Book of Kings* (2012)

by

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ABSTRACT

Shirin Neshat is recognized as the most prominent artist of the Iranian diaspora. Her two photographic series, *Women of Allah* (1993-97) and *The Book of Kings* (2012), are both reactions to the socio-political events and the change of female identity in Iran. The search for Iranian identity has a long tradition in Iranian photography. Neshat's figures, with their penetrating gazes, heavy draperies, and body postures, make reference to nineteenth-century Qajar photography. Through various cultural elements in her artworks, Neshat critiques oppression in Iranian society. Neshat employs and inscribes Persian poetry to communicate contradiction within Iranian culture.

To read Neshat's photography, it is crucial to register her use of Persian language and historical poetry. Although the reading and understanding of the Persian texts Neshat inscribes on her photographs plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of her work, Neshat's artworks are not entirely conceptual. The lack of translation of these included texts in Neshat's exhibitions indicates a decorative use of Persian calligraphy. The Western eye can aesthetically explore this exotic Eastern decorative calligraphy. The formal qualities of Neshat's photographs remain, even if the viewer is unable to read or understand the Persian texts.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my supportive and loving parents, Nasser and Forough Bokharachi, who have pushed me to go through anything and everthing. I realize that these last few years have been anything but easy for you, and I would not be where I am today if it weren't for your patience and unconditional love. I would like to sincerely thank you for being my first and best role models in life.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary artist Shirin Neshat is one of the most celebrated female artists of the Iranian diaspora. Neshat's photographs received recognition in the U.S. and western Europe since 1995. She has been the subject of countless essays and articles in the western countries. She has been featured in many major exhibitions, both solo and group, along with a number of significant Biennales like the 10th Biennale of Sydney (1996), Venice Biennale (1995 and 1999), and Whitney Biennale (2000).¹ However, Neshat was not fully identified and celebrated as an artist in Iran until a decade later. Although trained as a painter, Neshat became fascinated with the sense of reality and immediacy that photography carries.² Neshat's work is a reaction to the socio-political events in Iran and focuses on the complex role of Iranian women in the post-revolutionary period. In her photographs, Neshat investigates change of Iranian identity, especially female identity, through cultural elements. As she put it, "my work in many ways, like many other Iranian artists, embodies that deep conflict that we sense as people divided between our Persian history and current political Islamic history."³

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 made drastic cultural and religious changes that specifically affected the lives of Iranian women. According to Neshat, "You can study the culture by studying the women: the way they dress, the way their own society changes, the way they have to wear the *chador*."⁴ Unlike men who create the rules, women wear the rules."⁵ Neshat's Iranian cultural study has developed over the years. In *The Book of Kings*, she portrays the collapse of boundaries between male and female roles and public and private spheres. Her photography is a reflection on the tension between those who have power and those who are deprived of it.⁶ Neshat investigates gender,

space, and segregation within the Islamic society. The evolution of her perspective on nomadic identity and diaspora can be seen in her photographic series, *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings*.

In 1990, almost a decade after the Islamic Revolution's victory, Neshat visited Iran. She witnessed Iran's cultural identity change from a secular to a religious, fundamentalist, and ideology-based country. All women, regardless of their status, wore the similar-looking black *chador*. This black textile eliminated Iranian women's individuality. Due to the political implications of the *chador*, women who refused to wear it were seen as promoters of Western values; the *chador* came to represent decency and honor. All colors were slowly banned from women's clothing in public. Ayatollah Khomeini recognized the black *chador* as superior clothing for women. Neshat's use of black-and-white film references this sudden identity change.⁷ Neshat uses the intrinsic contrast of black-and-white photographs to depict the paradoxes and contradictions in Iranian society.

The Islamic Revolution was not the only tremendous event that Neshat witnessed. The 2009 presidential election once again heightened Iran's internal conflict around national identity. After the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic theocratic state crushed the diverse culture of Iran and enforced an Islamicization of various fields, for example, education, nation's identity, and politics.⁸ In 2009, after four years of oppression and international humiliation for Iranians, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (b. 1942), the former Prime Minister of Iran, declared his candidacy for presidency. Mousavi was absent for almost twenty years from public politics. He was instead focused on designing, painting, and teaching. Since both he and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard (b. 1945), were avant-garde

artists, he soon became the ideal candidate in the eyes of the art communities.⁹ Although Iranian millennials vigorously supported Mousavi, the Islamic regime disregarded the people's vote, which led to the series of uprisings that were recognized as the Green Movement.¹⁰ Neshat uses eleventh-century and twentieth-century Persian poetry to broach contemporary issues of Iran. She reaches for these famous poets like Forough Farokhzad (1935-1967) and Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000) to associate herself with her past and Iranian culture.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SHIRIN NESHAT IN DIASPORA

In the first chapter of my thesis, I examine how art historians have discussed Neshat in contemporary art discourse, along with how Neshat shaped her own construction. There is a dispute between scholars in the art historical construction of Neshat. While she is seen as the most prominent female artist of Iranian diaspora, some critics believe that she uses the *hijab* to exploit her culture. In his book, *Shirin Neshat-Women of Allah*, Hamid Dabashi explores Neshat's work within the discourse of diaspora and socio-political events in Iran. He opines that the political events of Iran affected Iranian lives regardless of their country of residency. According to Dabashi, Neshat was heavily impacted by these events.¹¹ Octavio Zaya also agrees that Neshat is significantly affected by Iran's cultural events. In his essay, "An Exteriority of the Inward" Zaya explains that in spite of Neshat's Western education, she had a strong desire to remain connected with her native culture.¹² While Dabashi and Zaya believe that Neshat's work is "authentic," Ana Finel Honigman accuses her of self-exoticizing. She believes Neshat's highly politicized work is taking advantage of her culture.

Furthermore, I will discuss the term diaspora and its importance in understanding

Neshat's art. Neshat started and developed creating art in diaspora. For more than twenty years she has created art outside of her native country. The term diaspora is fairly new, and it has been developed by a number of scholars including Edward Said. Diaspora is most simply defined as "the dispersal of a people from its original homeland."¹³ The term diaspora became popular after the 1980s. It first was limited to describing the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion. However, it now encompasses a broader meaning and includes immigrants, expatriates, refugees, overseas-communities, and exile-communities.¹⁴ Neshat's life in diaspora shares the condition of being distanced from a people and a place with which she identifies. Neshat's work creates a common ground for both Iranian women who are oppressed within the country as well as those who do not want to be defined by the Islamic rules and are forced to stay in diaspora.

Neshat witnessed the formation of a new Iranian identity after the Revolution. Change of identity has previously occurred in the nineteenth-century in Iran. Shortly after the camera's invention, the leaders of England and Russia gave the first daguerreotype camera to Iran during the last years of the third Qajar monarch, Mohammad Shah (1808-1848). When photographers started to represent Iran for the first time through the lens of the camera, a new identity formed. Among the first Iranian photographers was Mohammad Shah's son, Nassir Al-Din (1831- 1896), who learned photography at the age of thirteen, and promoted it when he became king.¹⁵ Iranian photographers of the nineteenth century first found it difficult to find inspirational sources, since they did not have a rich naturalistic pictorial tradition on which to rely. They therefore explored prototype photographs and paintings of Iran, usually made by Europeans.¹⁶ Later, taking photos of women of *harem* became one of the most popular subjects, which gradually

formed a new Iranian identity. The erotic poses and gazes were dictated to women. Neshat's *Women of Allah* is a reference to the new expectations from Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution. She refers to the formation of a new female identity after the 1979 Revolution with her use of body postures and direct gazes that is reminiscent of Qajar photography.

SHIRIN NESHAT: *WOMEN OF ALLAH*

The second chapter of this thesis explores Neshat's first photographic series, *Women of Allah* (1993-7). I examine Neshat's use of color and revolutionary elements in her black-and-white photographs. In the fanatical atmosphere of the post-revolutionary era, the Islamic theocratic government pervasively advertised martyrdom and sacrifice in the forms of posters and cultural artifacts. As a result, Neshat's *Women of Allah* consistently depicts veils, weapons, and revolutionary symbols. I further explain the *hijab*'s function in Iranian history and its political imposition within the Iranian culture. Through the element of heavy drapery in her photographs in *Women of Allah*, Neshat critiques the Islamic imposition of the *chador*. Her black-and-white photographs refer to the black *chador* that became pervasive in the streets of Iran by the Islamic regime's demand.¹⁷ In this chapter, I study three photographs of the *Women of Allah* series in depth.

Additionally, I study the cultural elements in the *Women of Allah* including calligraphy, Persian poetry, and tulips. In her series, Neshat employs Persian poetry to investigate the Iranian identity. Through poetry, Neshat communicates multiple interpretations and contradictions within the culture. Neshat chooses two female Iranian feminist poets with contradictory voices. While one celebrated her gender and questioned

traditional morality connected to Iranian women, the other invited women to fight for the goals of the Islamic Revolution. Neshat inscribes Persian poetry on her face, hands, and feet. Neshat's use of calligraphy has a dual aspect that I elaborate upon in this chapter. While her selected poetry is chosen with much care, she wisely guides her audience to read her work through the visual elements in her photographs.

SHIRIN NESHAT: *THE BOOK OF KINGS*

The third chapter of this thesis discusses Neshat's more recent body of work, *The Book of Kings* (2012). The shift in representation of women in this photographic series suggests a new look at the role and situation of women in Iranian society. Neshat's investigation of Iranian identity and inclusion of Persian poetry takes on a grander scale in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat metaphorically divides her work into three sections: the "Patriots", the "Masses", and the "Villains."¹⁸ While the first two sections encompass both genders as subjects, the last section consists of only male figures. In this third chapter, I examine the evolution of Neshat's quest for Iranian identity through poetry and illustrations. Neshat borrows the title of this photographic installation from the well-known national epic poem book by Ferdowsi.¹⁹ *Shahnameh* —in English *The Book of Kings*— is packed with historical and mythical stories of upheavals and resistance against cruelty and injustice. *Shahnameh*, thus, is the quest for social justice and a collective and personal identity that portrays the formation of a Persian identity and culture.

One fundamental difference between the *Women of Allah* and this new photographic series is the importance of group installation in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat displays her portraits in this series individually and as a group installation. Therefore, I study Neshat's work from both perspectives. *The Book of Kings* features poems of three

female and two male poets on the bodies of the figures identified as “Patriots.” The inscribed text on the faces of the “Masses” are correspondence written by political prisoners during the Green Movement. In this chapter, I argue that although understanding the poetry and its cultural context allows for a much deeper interpretation of Neshat’s work, the decorative aspect of Persian calligraphy is prominent in *The Book of Kings*.

Finally, I study the “Villains” and the illustrations on their torsos featuring narrative images of battle scenes found in an early twentieth-century illustrated edition of the *Shahnameh*.²⁰ The “Villains” consist of three images of grave and masculine men. Their serious and insistent gaze to the camera confronts the viewer. By removing language and adding illustration, Neshat differentiates the “Villains” from the other two parts of *The Book of Kings*. Her reference to the Arab Spring addresses her recent concern about ethics and humanity worldwide. While her work is heavily connected to Iran, she raises issues that are global in scale.

¹ Abdee Kalantari, *Shirin Neshat the book of kings* (Paris: Jerome Noirmont, 2012), 158-167.

² Gerald Matt, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” in *Shirin Neshat*, ed. Gerald Matt et al. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000), 21.

³ Shirin Neshat in conversation with Nico Dawsani:
<https://agenda.weforum.org/podcast/shirin-neshat-iran-political-art-podcast/>

⁴ The *chador* is a long garment that covers the female body.

⁵ Francine Birbragher, “Shirin Neshat,” *ArtNexus2* (September 2003): 91.

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, and Octavio Zaya, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 23.

⁷ Nina Cichocki, "Veils, Poems, Guns and Martyrs: Four Themes of Muslim Women Experiences in Shirin Neshat Photographic Work," *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture* 4 (July 16, 2008): 5.

⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, ed. Navid Nikzadfar (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 4.

⁹ Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (Reaktion Books, 2014), 244.

¹⁰ Mousavi's major supporters were college and graduate students, artists, and academic people.

¹¹ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 35.

¹² Octavio Zaya, "An Exteriority of the Inward," in *The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 15-29.

¹³ Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10 (2001), 189.

¹⁴ Khachig Tölölyan, "The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1991), 4-5.

¹⁵ Yayar Zoka, "The History of Photography and Pioneer Photographers in Iran," *Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publishing* 1 (1997), 26.

¹⁶ Staci Gem Scheiwiller, *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 23-6.

¹⁷ Shadi Sheybani, "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (spring, 1999): 207.

¹⁸ Manya Saadi-Nejad, "Mythological themes in Iranian culture and art: traditional and contemporary perspectives," *Iranian Studies* 42 (2009): 234.

¹⁹ *Shahnameh* (in English *Book of Kings*) by Ferdowsi, the 11th century poet, narrates mythical stories and historical happenings of Iran from the creation of the world to the conquest of Persia in the 7th century.

²⁰ Sussan Babaie, Rebecca R. Hart, and Nancy Princenthal, *Shirin Neshat* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013), 160.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SHIRIN NESHAT IN DIASPORA

Shirin Neshat is recognized as the most prominent artist of the Iranian diaspora. Her two photographic series, *Women of Allah* (1993-97) and *The Book of Kings* (2012), are both reactions to the socio-political events and the change of female identity in Iran. The formation of a new cultural identity and Neshat's complex understanding of the role of women in post-revolutionary Iran is illustrated in Neshat's first photographic series, *Women of Allah*. Neshat's depiction of a gun in the hands of a veiled woman, with poetry written on her face, explores the issues surrounding Islamic identity and particularly the subject of Islamic women. According to Amei Wallach, the image of the veiled Neshat may be seen as "a meditation on the social and political changes that The Revolution triggered in the lives of women."¹

In this first chapter, I examine Neshat's self-construction as a female artist of the Iranian diaspora, along with the issues and problems that come with it. Neshat weaves the formation of her own identity into her work. The social and historical events within her home country constantly effected her. The content of her work is, arguably, her quest for her personal and collective identity. I also review the most important literature on Neshat. Some critics admire Neshat's art and discuss her evolution as an artist. Others, however, accuse her of using the *hijab* to exploit and exoticize her culture as a means to advance in the art world. I analyze these arguments about Neshat's photography, her use of Iranian cultural elements, and her open-ended dialogue with her audience and the Islamic regime.

I, then, consider how the discourse on the phenomenon of diaspora is relevant to understanding Neshat's photography. There is a wide literature on the notion of diaspora

developed by a number of scholars, including Edward Said. The term diaspora is fairly new. It became popular after 1980, so it needs to be defined and discussed. What are understood as the characteristics of diaspora? In her art, Neshat thinks about and articulates the characteristics and problems that are unique to the late twentieth-century Iranian diaspora. In her investigation of the Iranian diaspora, Neshat draws upon the long tradition and history of Iranian photography, which I also outline in this chapter. Her series both refer to Qajar dynasty photography and strongly evoke nineteenth-century portraits of women of the *harem*.

After the 1979 Revolution, the erosion of a female Iranian identity and the perpetuation of an Islamic one became the Islamic government's goal. The 2009 presidential election again heightened Iran's internal conflict around the notion of national identity. Neshat made note of the young female protesters of the Green Movement and of the Arab Spring in 2010; she produced a photographic series of black-and-white, portraits, some life-sized, of Iranian and Arab men and women, with models chosen mainly from her circle of friends and acquaintances. She borrows the title of her photographic installation of sixty works, *The Book of Kings*, from the well-known national epic poem book by Hakim Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi (940-1020).² In it, Neshat offers a new look at the role and situation of women in Iran. *The Book of Kings*, in Farsi *Shahnameh*, is packed with historical and mythical stories of the upheavals against cruelty and injustice. *Shahnameh* is about the quest for social justice and collective and personal identity. It also portrays the formation of Persian identity and culture before the forced acceptance of the Muslim faith in Iran prior to the seventh century.

Neshat challenges the new and regressive Islamic Iranian identity after the Revolution. Neshat's quest to find her roots, define her home, and become affiliated with the U.S., her host country, identify her as a diasporic artist. Diasporic art usually underlines the complicated search for rootedness and the quest for a home by displaced artists. The idea of home and of belonging is a very common theme in the works of diasporic artists. Often times, many people in diaspora experience hardship in trying to obtain a sense of belonging. They feel misunderstood by the people of their host country and disconnected from their native country. In trying to cope with the trauma of being detached from the center, many artists dwell in the past.³ As a result, they become nostalgic about their ancestral past. Then, they begin to develop hybrid identity, or even in some cases recreate their identity.⁴ Art also becomes a useful means for diasporic artists to construct and represent their native culture to their host country.

Furthermore, the experience of diaspora affects artists' work in a way that they have to change priorities from "me" to "us." This means that artists not only have to know and reflect their home country's cultural values; they also have to consider tastes, merits, and beliefs of their host country. When the past is not approachable anymore, many artists instead focus on contemporary popular culture. They form complicated styles. In her identity based conceptual photographs, Neshat visualizes and critiques the restricted roles that were assigned to Iranian women. The limited roles of women in Iranian society shaped her social commentary.

Readings of Neshat

Critics like Hamid Dabashi and Eleanor Heartney and curators like Octavio Zaya praised Neshat for criticizing the role of women in contemporary Iran without falling into the stereotypical representations of the Islamic world. In the book *Shirin Neshat-Women of Allah*, Dabashi, one of the major writers on Neshat, describes Neshat's work within the discourse of diaspora and socio-political events in Iran. Neshat left her native country at the age of seventeen to attend college in the United States. Just a few years later, a massive social uprising against the Shah's government erupted and ousted his monarchy.⁵ During the Revolution, the *hijab* became an element of resistance and many highly educated women began to don it. Prior to that point, it was disappearing from Iranian society. However, *hijab* became more ideological when it came to be mandatory under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) and women once again started to resist their restricted lifestyle.⁶

The *chador*, a long garment that covers the body, later appeared as a major theme in Neshat's work. Dabashi argues that studying the history of Iranian women's use of the veil as a cultural element and a sign of resistance is crucial in reading Neshat's photographs. Dabashi declares that not only did political events affect Neshat's work, but that the circumstances of the regime's behavior outside of the country also had a strong impact on the artist's oeuvre. He believes that pressure was increased on Iranian expatriates in the U.S. due to two events: the U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-80) and the devastating war between Iran and Iraq which lasted for eight years (1980-1988). These events resulted in a decade and a half of crisis that affected Iranians' lives both inside of the country as well as expatriates who had to face the consequences of the Islamic

theocratic state's behavior.⁷ Dabashi opines that the resentment toward Iranians in the U.S. during the Hostage Crisis made an impression on the young Neshat, who was a student in California.⁸

In his essay "Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography," Dabashi studies the CIA-sponsored coup d'état of August 1953 that ousted the democratically elected government of prime minister Mohammad Musaddiq (1880-1967), who soon became a key figure in Iranian history. The coup d'état returned Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980) to power.⁹ Dabashi describes this historical event as "one of the most traumatic events in Iranian history. This coup has had a lasting effect on generations of Iranians that were born thereafter- no matter what class, gender, or ideology defined or limited their horizons."¹⁰ Neshat, who was born only four years after this coup, was among the generation that experienced this bitter national event. Dabashi considers Neshat's film, *Women Without Men* (2009), in connection with this coup.¹¹

Zaya in his essay "An Exteriority of the Inward" agrees that Neshat's work is a tentative reflection of questions that she began to formulate upon visiting Iran. For almost a decade Neshat had no desire to make art.¹² However, she entered in her second stage of education by living in New York as an ideal place to be exposed to contemporary art. Zaya explains that in spite of Neshat's Western education, she had a strong familiarity and affiliation with her native culture. In 1990, she decided to visit her home country to reconnect to her heritage.¹³ This visit and the shock of witnessing a dramatically transformed society, resulted in Neshat's first black-and-white silver gelatin series, *Women of Allah*, and set the stage for Neshat's recent body of work, *The Book of Kings*.

Other scholars, including those who are Muslim, have accused Neshat of exoticizing her culture by using traditional Iranian elements, such as the *chador*, rather than in taking a firm stand on important socio-political issues. Ana Finel Honigman, in her article “Against the Exotic,” discusses Neshat’s highly politicized work, but suggests that to avoid exploitation many other female artists of the diaspora do not engage in politics or the conditions related to their native countries.¹⁴

I disagree with Honigman’s claim that female artists of the diaspora should not engage in politics. There are many other well-known female artists in diaspora like Mona Hatoum (b. 1952), Emily Jacir (b. 1970), and Zineb Sedira (b. 1963) who make profound political works without exploiting their cultures. Neshat’s work is not an attempt to exoticize her native culture. Arguably, Neshat is the first female Iranian artist who examined the *chador* as a major theme in her work. She was first to raise questions in visual art about the position of women after the Islamic Revolution. Neshat’s work follows the traditions of Western body art and performance, and investigates identity. Her use of Persian poetry gives a deeper meaning to her photographs. After Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series, many artists followed her and also used the *hijab* as a theme in their work. However, few created as conceptual, layered, and complex photographs as Neshat did. None of these scholars and critics thoroughly engages the theme of diaspora in Neshat’s photography or traces the links between her work and diasporic photographic practices in Iran, as I will do in this thesis.

Diaspora

Neshat has created art in diaspora for more than twenty years. She expresses her sense of belonging to her ancestral land and culture without becoming an ethnographic

artist. As she put it, her main challenge is to figure out “how an artist who comes from and remains interested in the resources of another culture can make work that contributes to a broader dialogue.”¹⁵ In order to discuss Neshat’s works within the discourse of diaspora, I will define the term and review the literature on the notion of diaspora.

The term “diaspora” has become popular since 1980. Diaspora is most simply defined as “the dispersal of a people from its original homeland.”¹⁶ Diasporic people often have strong economic, political, and social networks within their native country. Most form connections with their country of origin through return or in participating in political affairs outside of their homeland.¹⁷

The term diaspora first described the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion. However, it now encompasses a broader meaning and includes immigrants, expatriates, refugees, overseas-communities, and exile-communities. This larger semantic domain is shared by countries and adjacent maps and histories.¹⁸ The difference between exile and diaspora has been explained: “Diasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a lingering separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement on future.”¹⁹ Diaspora usually encompasses an entire community of immigrants belonging to one nation. While diaspora is referred to the dispersion of people from their home, exile is defined as the state of being barred from one’s native country.²⁰ Edward Said posits that exile works in opposition to nationalism: “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and, by doing so, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages.”²¹ Diaspora, at first, was perceived a state as undesirable as exile. One is caught in a space between belonging and not-belonging, as Said explains: “And

just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is to where in a primitive time people were banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons."²²

Said's "territory of not belonging" is perceived differently by other scholars. Homi Bhabha calls it "third space" or the "in-between space:" "These 'in-between spaces' provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood, singular and communal, that initiate new signs of identity and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea itself."²³ Makarand Paranjape also calls the very same state the "third space of the diaspora: a hybrid location of antagonism perpetual tension and pregnant chaos."²⁴ The third space derives from the condition of being in a place that simultaneously is and is not one's home. In it, new cultural identities are formed. Neshat's work is an attempt to forge a hybrid cultural identity. Her works explore the effects of displacement, diaspora, alienation, and hybridity. Neshat creates a cross-cultural discussion in her art between the actual and the psychological world.

James Clifford believes that history of dispersal, memory of the homeland, and the alienation in the host country are aspects of diaspora. Furthermore, he identifies diasporic people's continuous support of their homeland, desire for return, and the collective identity that they build with other fellow diasporic people from their home country as additional characteristics.²⁵ In contrast, other scholars believe that the term diaspora remains ambiguous. While diaspora denotes communities of people dislocated from their land of origin through situations like exile, immigration, and war, it etymologically suggests "the more positive fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds."²⁶ Khachig Tololyan also states that the term diaspora comes from

dispersion which was used until the 1960s. After that, it transformed into diaspora to mean "citizens of one country who also think of themselves as members of a transnational political and cultural community, sometimes even a transnational nation or transnation."²⁷

Dabashi agrees with Tololyan's transnation definition. He sees that Neshat's thematic content after the *Women of Allah* has entered a whole new more global phase. As he put it, "Neshat's art has now become integral and definitive to a manner of transaesthetics, of globalized predisposition to define what is beautiful and sublime, liberating and emancipatory."²⁸ Neshat's questioning of the position of Muslim women in *The Book of Kings* goes on this grander scale. However, her art still encompasses Iranian diaspora, the problems it brings for Iranians and specifically for the position of Iranian women.²⁹

Neshat and other Iranian expatriates need first to digest the geographical distance and time difference between Iran and the U.S. In Neshat's work, questions of identity, of self and others, come to the surface. She also examines the geographical context. Neshat uses cultural elements such as the veil and Persian poetry along with her Middle-Eastern-looking models to question fundamentalist ideology. She thereby formulates a familiar environment and visual experience for Iranians in diaspora. We create our identity by our surroundings and possessions. Immigration is not solely about dislocation. It is also about the loss of a familiar environment and a set of relationships. In the process of immigration, individuals find themselves in a new place where they are classified in contrast with the new people that surround them. The new country usually offers a completely different set of values from the immigrant's native country.³⁰ By

creating a familiar environment in her photographs, Neshat fabricates a community for émigré Iranian women and a common ground to discuss and express their new identities.

Stuart Hall defines the diaspora experience: "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity."³¹ Some scholars believe that diaspora affects artists' work even if they don't intend it to. Ronald Kitaj believes that "Diasporism... is an un-settled mode of art life, performed by a painter who feels out of place much of the time."³² Because of their unsettled condition, these artists are concerned with their own position in history. He even goes further and states that the artists who avoid including their identity in their work practice a form of diasporism, or "committing diasporism."³³

The formation of Iranian diaspora in the U.S. started in the Pahlavi period. The first generation of Iranian artists who left the country in the late Pahlavi era as a result of the political limitations prompted the early discussion of identity and of immigration. This wave of immigration began the Iranian diaspora, particularly to North America and western Europe.³⁴ In 1978, approximately 200,000 Iranians were enrolled in Western institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the post-revolutionary period strengthened the formation of art communities across the Iranian diaspora. Many of the acclaimed diasporic artists, such as Shirazeh Houshiary (b. 1955), Malakeh Nayini (b. 1958), and Mahmoud Hamdani (b. 1958) were students at the time of the Revolution. They never returned home, and instead joined the artistic environment of their host countries.³⁵ Since these artists, Neshat included, are not explicitly refused permission to return, they are considered in a self-imposed exile. As a

result, these artists are studied within a diasporic community rather than the exilic one. Neshat left Iran before the Islamic Revolution to study art in the U. S. She completed her studies at the University of California Berkeley in 1983 and moved to New York; there, conceptual artists had already established the artistic use of language and photography. In the late 1960s, photographic image and text, employed separately or together, had become an alternative to previous pictorial and sculptural conventions. Therefore, Neshat's visual language, which she had strengthened by the use of black-and-white and textual inscriptions, had a great resonance in New York.

The familiarity of New Yorkers, who had been already introduced to modern Iranian art in the 60s, also helped Neshat to establish herself in both the Iranian diaspora and New York's artistic environment. In 1962, the Grey Collection had toured the "Exhibition of Iranian Contemporary Painting" to New York, Chicago, Washington, DC, and other cities. In 1968, Ehsan Yarshater, Professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, organized the exhibition of "Modern Iranian Art." Ergo, New York became an ideal place for Neshat to live and work.³⁶

Neshat's life in diaspora shares the condition of being distanced from a people and a place with which she identifies. In both *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings*, Neshat examines the domestic expectations of Islam from women and the limitations it brings for them.³⁷ Iranian women in diaspora had hardship to understand the cultural identity after the Revolution. They raised a set of challenging questions that were specific to the case of Iran: Who is the Iranian woman? How can she be represented, veiled or unveiled? What are the new characteristics of the Islamic Iranian collective identity?

Neshat deals with issues of identity and homeland in her art. Almost a decade

after the Revolution of 1979, Neshat visited Iran to regain her cultural connections. Upon returning to New York, she questioned the role of women in an Islamic society. In several of her black-and-white photographs, poetic calligraphy covers female figures' hands, feet and face. From the seventh century, calligraphy has been associated with the Qur'an.³⁸ Neshat's use of calligraphy points to the fundamentalist nature of Islamic Iran. In this new Islamic culture, everything is at the service of ideology. To convey this notion, Neshat uses Persian calligraphy in the shape of a *Niqab*, to refer to the oppressed situation of women.

Neshat's employing Persian calligraphy is repeated on a grander scale in *The Book of Kings*. The first section of *The Book of Kings*, titled "Masses," intentionally overwhelms the viewer with its scale and repetition. Neshat's positioning of male and female portraits next to one another suggests that both genders are repressed under Islamic rule. Similar to the *Women of Allah*, *Book of Kings* foregrounds Neshat's continued concern with the loss of traditions that fall outside the Islamic endorsements of cultural production. She also deals with cultural identity and the change of it after the Islamic Revolution.

There are at least two different ways of defining cultural identity. These two ways are the most related ones to the discussion of Iranian diaspora. The first way is to think about it as a collective identity, which is defined as one shared culture that a people with a mutual heritage and ancestry hold in common. This position defines cultural identity in terms of one people. There is, however, another related but different way of defining cultural identity which studies the change in people of a country and deals with what they have become over the time. No culture remains without transformation. In this

sense cultural identity is also the matter of becoming as well as of being. It also belongs to the future as much as to the past and history.³⁹ Neshat's life in diaspora began with uprooting and loss. While she left her country for education, she had to permanently live in a foreign country as a consequence of the Islamic Revolution. Neshat, in her host country, worked to maintain community and to recover her heritage and to adapt the new customs.⁴⁰ As a result, heritage and homeland became inseparable elements in her work. Neshat's work gives voice to both Iranian women who are oppressed within the country as well as those who do not want to be defined by the Islamic rules and are forced to stay in diaspora.

Diasporic Photography

Photography's realism and its capacity to engage its viewer both critically and expressively, makes it one of the most widely used mediums of diasporic artists. In studying Iranian traditions of photography one can understand how Iranians wrote themselves into historical narratives of nation and culture. Nineteenth-century Iranian photography offers an alternate historical account to that of photojournalism. Photographers recorded different aspects of life in the palace and of ordinary people outside the court. These photos were taken by both Iranian and European photographers from varied perspectives. They shaped different representations of the country. The photographs led to the formation of a new Iranian identity. As a result, the search for Iranian identity has a long tradition in Iranian photography.

Neshat witnessed the formation of the new Iranian identity after the Revolution. Qajar photography distinguished between public and private. Neshat refers to this tradition in her *Women of Allah* series. Although women of the *harem* posed half-nude

for the photos, they had to be veiled in public. This dichotomy of representation between private and public provided a precedent for Neshat in the photographic depiction of the duality of female identity that was formed after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Neshat's figures, with their penetrating gaze, heavy draperies, and body postures, make reference to this history of representation in nineteenth-century Qajar photography.

Early photographers in Iran began to form a new Iranian identity a few years after the camera first arrived in Iran. At the outset, Qajar photographers were to take photos of monuments and historical places in order to provide educational materials for Europeans. Therefore, immediately after the invention of the camera, Orientalist institutions such as the Egyptian Institute were equipped with daguerreotype apparatuses. This technology was to provide a more accurate image-repertoire from Eastern countries for European scholars. Historical places, particularly archaeological sites and religious monuments, became some of the earliest sites for the practice of photography. However, photos that featured Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East soon received more attention. As a result, documentary representations became less popular.⁴¹ An Orientalist perception of the region was gradually formed and perpetuated by early European photographers who represented the Middle East by means of stereotypes, such as women posed in traditional dress in the *harem*, dervishes, people in the bazaar, and village life.⁴²

Shortly after the camera's invention, the leaders of England and Russia gave the first daguerreotype camera to Iran during the last years of the third Qajar monarch, Mohammad Shah (1808- 1848). Although the first photographic apparatuses were given to Iran sometime between 1839 and 1842 by Queen Victoria and Emperor Nicolas I, they were not used until a French educator, Jules Richard, came to Iran in 1844. Mohammad

Shah's son, Nassir Al-Din (1831- 1896), was arguably the second Iranian, after Malek Ghasem Mirza, who was trained at the age of thirteen to become a photographer. Nassir Al-Din promoted photography when he became king.⁴³ Unlike his grandfather, Fath Ali Shah (1772-1834), who supported portrait painting in his court, Nassir al-Din Shah encouraged and supported photography. He produced the means and conditions for the development of photography in Iran. The propagandistic purpose that the medium of painting had for Fath Ali Shah was now transferred to photography. Nassir al-Din Shah became interested in photography at an early age and explored different functions of the medium. He gave his portraits to his dignitaries as tokens of his dynastic power.⁴⁴ The new art of photography in Iran was referred to as “a new kind of painting.”⁴⁵ The term was based on the Persian word *aks* (reflection), which was used earlier to describe stencils. The verb *aks andakhtan* literally means “to throw someone’s reflection.” The term means “to have one’s photograph taken.”⁴⁶

As a result of Nassir al-Din Shah’s enthusiasm, a professional French photographer was hired in 1859 to introduce Iranians to the art of photography. Carlliance, who was little known at the time, trained Iranians and sold photographic equipment.⁴⁷ He was also a private mentor of the king and taught him to take photos and develop negatives. Unfortunately, only two of Carlliance photos have survived. They are kept today in the Golestan Palace archive.⁴⁸ Carlliance’s European perspective, and his interest in exoticizing Eastern culture, affected his student, Nassir al-Din Shah, and also his approach to photography.

After a short period of time, the shah, who was interested in taking photos of the women of his *harem*, began training a young boy, Ghulam Hussain Khan, to become a

personal assistant and to take private photos of him and his wives. His cat, hunted birds, and servants of the palace, became intriguing subjects for Nassir al-Din Shah. In order to develop his negatives, the first photographic institution, *Akkas-Khanah-i Mubarak-I Humayuni* (The Royal Photography Atelier) was opened in 1858 by direct order of Nassir Al-Din Shah in one of the buildings of his Palace. After this point, all the royal activities in the palace were documented. The Shah soon assembled more than 20,000 photographs with subjects as diverse as landscape, architecture, the women of his *harem*, hunting, and even political prisoners. The Shah later expanded his royal collection with photos from Iranian and European photographers, along with adventurous travelers. By then, more than 150 native, and 30 European photographers, were active in Iran.⁴⁹ Years later, the royal collection became an inspirational source for Iranian scholars and photographers. Arguably, Neshat was the first female artist to use this style of photography and to create photographs that referred to the subjects of this royal collection. She was the first to make reference to Qajar photography in order to raise the question of female identity in post-revolutionary Iran.

Iranian photographers of the nineteenth-century first found it difficult to find inspirational sources, since they did not have a rich naturalistic pictorial tradition on which to rely. They therefore explored prototype photographs and paintings of Iran, usually made by Europeans. These prototypes became the “fictional Orientalist construction of the Middle East.”⁵⁰ European photographers such as Antion Sevruguin, an independent and resident photographer in nineteenth-century Iran, offered their European audience a large archive of exotic, erotic, and picturesque images. Both veiled and erotic poses of women of the *harem* were among the most popular representations of

Orientalist travelers, painters, and photographers. Women's open-legged poses and exposed bodies with mostly direct gazes invited the viewer to fantasize an erotic encounter. Also, the theme of Sevrugin's photo of a Kurdish woman recalls Renaissance-era Western paintings of the nude. However, the woman is dressed in traditional Kurdish dress, and her direct seductive gaze echoes similar erotic poses in Western paintings.⁵¹

The absence of men from these images emphasized women's role as voyeuristic object and pleasure for men. On the other hand, Sevrugin's photography contains an ethnographic interest, and could be classified as documentary. Much nineteenth-century photography would fall into this category.⁵² Unlike in European painting, nudity was never a visual tradition in Iran. The erotic depiction of Iranian women was not acceptable in public. Unfortunately, neither Nassir al-Din Shah nor Sevrugin depicted "the complexities and contradictions of a multi-cultural society."⁵³ The Iran they depict mostly remained "a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these," as Said puts it.⁵⁴ Nassir al-Din Shah "self-orientalized" Iran and promoted the exoticizing trend that had already been initiated by European photographers. Eventually, these experiments formed a new Iranian identity.⁵⁵

The use of women by the ruler and his court photographers gradually became a common theme in Qajar photography. Although women were forced to be veiled in public, the depiction of *harem* women as sexual objects was a strong statement about the situation of women during the Qajar period. Women were not appreciated as individuals.

They could only take on domestic roles; they were understood only within the context of their families as wives and mothers. After the Qajar period, however, Pahlavi kings (1925-1979) eliminated these limitations and engaged women in more aspects of society. Especially during Mohammad Reza Shah's period (1919-1980), women achieved high status in Iranian society. After the Islamic Revolution, all the progress toward women's rights that was made during the Pahlavi period was pushed back. Women once again had to be veiled and kept away from outdoor activities. Therefore, Neshat engages a similar theme.

Although Nassir al-Din Shah's photography did not intend to comment on the situation of Iranian women, his photography shed light on women's roles during the Qajar period. Women of Nassir al-Din Shah's *harem* were not free to expose their bodies in public. They were staged in those photographs to respond to men's desires. With their staged poses, Neshat's figures in the *Women of Allah* series similarly depict what the Islamic theocratic state expects from women: dependent characters who need to be defined by men. In the fanatical atmosphere of the post-revolutionary period, the Islamic government advertised notions of martyrdom and sacrifice. Neshat challenges this "new" regressive position of women in Iranian society by means of her direct gaze into the camera, in placing controversial poetry on women's faces, and in including the symbols of martyrdom—which were now part of their everyday lives—in her hands. Neshat criticizes Islamic law which forces women to wear the hijab and marginalizes them in society. Yet they are expected to participate in different aspects of the war, shoulder to shoulder, with men.⁵⁶

In addition to *Women of Allah* series, Neshat has many other references to Qajar

photography in her work. In *The Book of Kings*, Neshat once again refers to this photographic tradition. In the second section of her series, called "Patriots," young men and women are depicted with their hands over their hearts, a symbol of nationalistic devotion. There are no *hijabs* depicted in this series of photographs. Neshat's figures, regardless of their gender, are covered in poetry. On a grander scale, *The Book of Kings* illustrates the historic oppression of Iranian women, and criticizes the oppressive force that exploits ordinary civilians. By means of the black-and-white figures, with their penetrating gaze and body posture in these photographs, Neshat makes reference to nineteenth-century Qajar photography.

¹ Amei Wallach, "Shirin Neshat: Islamic Counterpoints," *Art in America* 89 (October 2001): 136.

² *Shahnameh*, in English Book of Kings, by Ferdowsi, the 11th century poet narrates mythical stories and historical happenings of Iran from the creation of the world to the conquest of Persia in the 7th century.

³ Hamid Keshmirshekan, *Amidst Shadow and Light* (Hong Kong: Liaoning Creative Press LTD, 2014), 142-3.

⁴ Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian, "Armenian-Americans: Art and Diasporic Identity in Los Angeles" (PhD diss., University of California, 2009), 24.

⁵ Hamid Dabashi, and Octavio Zaya, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 35.

⁶ Eleanor Heartney et al., *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art--Revised and Expanded Edition* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 233.

⁷ From November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981, Ted Koppel in the ABC Evening News counted the number of days lapsed since the U. S. diplomatic corps was held hostage in Iran.

⁸ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 35-6.

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- ⁹ Hamid Dabashi, "Shirin Neshat: Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography," in *The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 33-4.
- ¹⁰ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 33.
- ¹¹ *Women Without Men* based on Shahrnush Parsipur's novel, profiles the lives of four women living in Tehran in 1953, during the American-backed coup that returned Mohammad Reza Shah to power.
- ¹² See Shirin Neshat's interview with Scott MacDonald in *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 325.
- ¹³ Octavio Zaya, "An Exteriority of the Inward," in *The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 15-29.
- ¹⁴ Ana Finel Honigman, "Against the Exotic," *ArtReview* (September 2005), 96- 9.
- ¹⁵ Leslie Camhi, "Lifting the Veil: Shirin Neshat Uses Video and Photographs to Explore the Status of Women in Islam," *Artnews* 99 (2000), 151.
- ¹⁶ Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10 (2001), 189.
- ¹⁷ Steven Vertovec, "Three Meanings of "Diaspora", Exemplified Among South Asian Religions," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* (1997), 5-7.
- ¹⁸ Khachig Tölölyan, "The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1991), 4-5.
- ¹⁹ James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994), 304.
- ²⁰ Tölölyan, "The Nation-State and Its Others," 25-6.
- ²¹ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 176.
- ²² *Ibid*, 177.
- ²³ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-2.
- ²⁴ Makarand R. Paranjape, *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2001), 17.

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- ²⁵ Clifford, "Diasporas," 247.
- ²⁶ Jana Evans Braziel, and Anita Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 4.
- ²⁷ Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora (s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5 (1996), 19.
- ²⁸ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 59.
- ²⁹ Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and United States* (New York: Nova Science Publication Inc, 2002), 97.
- ³⁰ Donald Woods Winnicott, *Maturational Processes & the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1985), 42-3.
- ³¹ Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 235.
- ³² Ronald Brooks Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto: With 60 Illustrations* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 21.
- ³³ Ibid, 22.
- ³⁴ Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 163.
- ³⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 52-3.
- ³⁶ Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 164.
- ³⁷ In Islam, women are expected to be obedient wives and dedicated mothers and devote their lives to their household members.
- ³⁸ Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Way of Looking* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 11.
- ³⁹ Staci Gem Scheiwiller, *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 175-6.
- ⁴⁰ Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win*, 25-6.

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- ⁴¹ Ali Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran," *Iranian Studies* 34 (2001): 142-3.
- ⁴² Ibid, 144.
- ⁴³ Yayar Zoka, "The History of Photography and Pioneer Photographers in Iran," *Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publishing* 1 (1997), 26.
- ⁴⁴ Layla S. Diba, and Maryam Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785-1925* (New York: IB Tauris, 1998), 31-33.
- ⁴⁵ Marta Weiss, *Light from the Middle East: New Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl V&A, 2012), 121-2.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, 122.
- ⁴⁷ It appears that like Nadar, Carlliance was also known by his surname.
- ⁴⁸ Yahya Zoka, *The History of Photography and Pioneer Photographers in Iran* (Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publishing, 1997), 24-6.
- ⁴⁹ Scheiwiller, *Performing the Iranian State*, 22-4.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 23-6.
- ⁵¹ Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography," 146.
- ⁵² Samar Mohammad Bush, "Complicating the Veiled Iranian Woman: The Work of Shirin Neshat and Shadi Ghadirian" (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2008), 4.
- ⁵³ Frederick Nathaniel Bohrer, *Sevruguin and the Persian Image: Photographs of Iran, 1870-1930* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 33.
- ⁵⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 177.
- ⁵⁵ Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography," 148.
- ⁵⁶ Shadi Sheybani, "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1999), 207.

CHAPTER 2

SHIRIN NESHAT: *WOMEN OF ALLAH*

In Neshat's black-and-white self-portrait, *Rebellious Silence*, the artist is depicted with black veil concealing her body. The plain white background brings the female in focus. Text in Persian script covers precisely those parts of her face that remain uncovered by the *chador*. Neshat's photograph is highly symmetrical, which draws the viewer's attention to her own direct gaze toward the camera. The number of repeated lines on her veil is the next part that the eye visually explores. Neshat's use of black-and-white film heightens the sense of drama in *Rebellious Silence*. The gun she holds in front of her, and her seriousness of expression create a threatening presence. Within the photograph, three elements are distinctive: gleam of the gun's metal, and the blackness of the *chador* contrast with the softness of the veil's fabric and the young woman's skin. These contrasts deliver a paradoxical message.

Rebellious Silence (1994) is one of the early photographs of the *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997). While Neshat occasionally guides her audience with selected titles, some of her self-portraits in this series remain untitled. Neshat challenges the viewer to investigate cultural elements such as calligraphy and the veil. The poetic content in this series of a veiled woman is profound and complex. A self-portrait direct gaze and the fact that this figure is armed, addresses the role of post-revolutionary Iranian women in the public sphere. In the inscribed photographs of *Women of Allah* series Neshat examines the female body as a battleground after the Islamic Revolution. The series, varied in scale, challenges notions of concealment and exposure, masculine and feminine, and sacred and profane.¹ Neshat's photographs expose the central contradiction of post-

revolutionary Iran: that women remained subservient to men while they were expected to fully participate in war.

In this second chapter I study three selected photographs of this series in depth. I examine Neshat's use of color and revolutionary elements in the *Women of Allah* series. In the fanatical atmosphere of the post-revolutionary era, Iran's Islamic government pervasively advertised martyrdom and sacrifice. In this series, veils, weapons, and revolutionary symbols are consistent elements; within the black-and-white silver gelatin photographs, the symbols of blood and tulips are the only elements that she depicts in color.²

Neshat uses Persian poetry in her investigation of the Iranian identity. She thereby communicates multiple interpretations and contradictions within Iranian culture. I discuss the importance of poetry in Iranian culture and its relation to Iranian identity. Furthermore, I focus on two female poets with paradoxical ideologies that Neshat takes up in *Women of Allah*. While one poet expressed her femininity candidly and rejected patriarchal society, the second echoed the concerns of militant Muslim women with themes of devotion and sacrifice.

I conclude with a discussion of Neshat's use of text and language, which is sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary to her photographs. The complexity of this poetry is only comprehensible for Persian-language readers. Neshat does not provide direct translations in any of her exhibitions. Neshat's use of text is not only representational; it also interprets Iran's cultural contradictions, which reached their zenith in the post-revolutionary period. To read Neshat's photography, it is crucial to register her use of Persian language and historical poetry. While a command of Persian

language allows viewers a deeper understanding of her art, her photographs are completely independent from the language that she employs. I argue that in Neshat's photographs Persian calligraphy is simultaneously profoundly meaningful, and decorative.

The *Hijab* in Iran

Neshat's visit to Iran took place exactly one year after the death of the charismatic and authoritarian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. His government functioned as the theocratic regime of the clergy for a decade.³ Neshat described her visit as one of the most shocking experiences of her life: "The difference between what I had remembered from the 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. Most noticeable, of course, was the change in people's physical appearance and public behavior."⁴

After the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy, the *hijab* became mandatory. Prior to that point, it was disappearing from Iranian society. Wearing the *hijab* changed the face of Iranian society, and it gradually changed Iranian identity. In the Pahlavi era (1925- 1979) modern Iranian national identity evolved into a homogenized nationalistic narrative. A sense of Iranian superiority, and resentment toward the seventh century Arab conquest and imposition of Islam as an outside religion, which was imposed upon Persians, formed during the Pahlavi era. In contrast, after the 1979 Revolution, Iranian identity eroded. The Islamic government's goal from the outset was to perpetuate an Islamic identity.⁵ Once proud of the 2500 years of Persian monarchy, the country changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran which was to sanctify it from an impure secular kingdom. As a result,

both Iranian men and women were expected to be modestly dressed after the Revolution.

The compulsory *hijab* law was the fastest way for the Islamic theocratic state to assert itself. Women, of course, were under more pressure to cover themselves. Due to the political implications of the *chador*, women who refused to wear it were seen as promoters of Western values; the *chador* came to represent decency and honor. All colors were slowly banned from women's clothing in public. Ayatollah Khomeini recognized the black *chador* as superior clothing for women. Neshat's use of black-and-white film references this sudden identity change.⁶

Neshat witnessed Iran's cultural identity change from a secular to a religious, fundamentalist, and ideology-based country. In her eyes, these major shifts in Iranian society shed light on the dramatic change in the status of women after the Islamic Revolution. Neshat, was also struggling to find a sense of belonging with Western culture. Eventually she found a lost context for her work. Her complex cultural heritage and crisis of identity, another result of the 1979 Revolution, established the foundation of her art. Upon her return to the United States, Neshat addressed the fraught situation of Iranian women in her art. In her series of photographic self-portraits, *Women of Allah*, she is depicted as heavily-veiled, gun-toting woman. These images, partly obscured by text, consider the role of women in post-revolutionary Iran. Neshat's images acknowledge social contradictions and paradoxes which I will discuss.⁷

Through the element of heavy drapery in her photographs in *Women of Allah*, Neshat critiques the Islamic imposition of the *chador*. In them, the only exposed parts of her body are her hands, feet, and face, which is allowed under Iranian Islamic law. She in fact covers these body parts either with poems—which can be interpreted as the other

way of covering a woman's body— or with symbols of the Iranian Revolution and war.

Revolutionary Elements in Neshat's Photographs

The series features repetitive imagery of Neshat with weapons, tulips, and veils, all recognized as revolutionary symbols in Iran's history and literature. The *chador* has been identified as a religious element as well as one of resistance, an objection to the westernizing of the country during the Pahlavi era. In 1936, Reza Shah (1878- 1944) banned wearing the *hijab* in public. While many the upper class women embraced unveiling, other women resisted it in different ways. Some refused to take off their *chadors*; some chose to stay at home rather than confront the police; and some wore hats instead. According to Vanessa Martin, Reza Shah's "dream of a secular state and like his contemporary Ataturk, he perceived religion as retrogressive and *ulama* [clergymen] as backward-looking obstacles to progress."⁸ Reza Shah opened the schools for women and permitted them to work. Yet removing the *hijab* was among his first modernizing acts in Iran. Years later, when protests began against Mohammad Reza Shah, the *hijab*, which was disappearing from society, once again appeared in public. Women used the traditional element of the *chador* to reject the Pahlavis' act of modernization.⁹

Khomeini's compulsory hijab law promptly changed the appearance of the country. Neshat's *Women of Allah* reacts to this suppression of the female gender. Both Reza Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini used the *hijab* to demonstrate that they had enough power to impose their plan on women.¹⁰ Removing or reinstating the *hijab* allowed Iranian leaders to assert their authority. Ergo, the *hijab*'s function in Iranian history has been more political than ideological. It first served as a barrier to female liberation during the Pahlavi reign. Then it became an "artifact of repression" after the Revolution.¹¹

Neshat's use of the veil references to this back-and-forth historical struggle. She is critical of Iranian patriarchal structures that usurp power in the veiling and unveiling of women.

In addition to the veil and weapons, tulips are another revolutionary element in Neshat's series. Tulips have appeared in Iranian literature as far back as ancient times. In a well-known legend, a jealous rival of Farhad, a young sculptor, spread a false death rumor about Shirin, an Armenian princess and Farhad's great love. Farhad was so overcome with grief that he threw himself off a mountaintop. As a result, tulips grew where his blood had been shed. Tulips have ever since been associated with eternal love, sacrifice, and death resulting from injustice.¹² This acclaimed legend has been narrated by different renowned Iranian poets including Ferdowsi (940- 1020), whose poems inspired the theme of Neshat's *Book of Kings* (2012).

After Ayatollah Khomeini's victory, the Islamic theocratic state used tulips as a propagandistic tool. They emphasized the aspects of sacrifice and injustice far more than eternal love. Neshat's blood and tulips, the only colored elements of the series reference this use of tulips as a revolutionary element. After the Islamic Revolution, opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah, and the act of participating in the war, were seen as the ultimate sacrifices in the name of justice. Anyone killed during the Revolution or war became recognized as a martyr who had fought against injustice. As the most common symbol of martyrdom, tulips appeared on coins, postage stamps, billboards, and parks and hotels were named after them. The post-revolutionary Iranian flag also features the word *Allah* in a shape of a red tulip in the center to commemorate the revolution's martyrs.¹³ Later, the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini was decorated with 72 stained glass tulips. The flowers

represent the 72 martyrs who fought to their death with Hussein, the third Shi'a Imam, in the Karbala plain in Iraq.

In one of her photographs, called *Untitled*, Neshat, covered in a black veil and holding a colored tulip in her hands, stares directly into the camera. Her impassive gaze is empty of life. The self-portrait questions the actual role of women in Iranian society. What is the standing of women in post-revolutionary Iran? Neshat's series is a reaction to the changing status of women in Iran. While women were socially marginalized, they were used as propaganda to manifest Islamic Iran as a country that regards women as being equal to men. During the war years, artists in Iran depicted energized and powerful women in the black *chador* to support the idea that "the veil does not hamper a woman's activities, it only emphasizes her chastity."¹⁴ For example, Iraj Eskandari (b. 1956) is among the artists who made contribution to the goals of Revolution. The propagandistic idea was to evidence that Muslim women could be involved in different aspects of society. In reality, military participation was the only area in which women could be equals. The ultimate salvation would be to sacrifice one's life for Islamic society. In Neshat's hands the symbols of martyrdom, now part of everyday life in Iran, refer to the Islamic theocratic state's expectation for women to sacrifice their lives. This sacrifice could take place in war or by devoting their lives to their families as wives and mothers. Neshat, therefore, challenges the notion of women as inferior. She criticizes Islamic law, which paradoxically forces women to wear the hijab and secludes them in society, and expects them to participate in different aspects of war, shoulder to shoulder, with men.¹⁵

In *Rebellious Silence* and *Untitled* (holding gun with tulip), Neshat depicts the female characteristics that the Islamic theocratic state desired: dependence and a

brainwashed personage. Historically, Iranian artists have been male, and “men have traditionally controlled and generated the gaze; women are the objects of that gaze; and thus vision is a socially constructed tool that given men power and denies it to women.”¹⁶ Neshat confronts this tradition and allows a woman to control the gaze. Otherwise, her whole body, excluding hands and face, is covered with a black *chador*, while she holds a gun. Although she seems active and independent, her gaze seems mesmerized. The Islamic Republic’s mission, from the outset, was to promote martyrdom and the rejection of the material world, self-sacrifice, and life after death. *Rebellious Silence* suggests that the imposed veil covers women’s true self, creating a uniformity that destroys their individuality. The Islamic theocratic state attempted to construct a new identity according to the Islamic definition of righteous women as obedient wives and mothers.¹⁷ *Women of Allah*, by repeating the same figure as the only model, masterfully manifests the Islamic theocratic state’s intention to destroy female subjectivity and construct a uniform Islamic identity. In *Rebellious Silence* and *Untitled* (holding gun with tulip), Neshat represents both the women oppressed by the imposed *hijab*, and those who accepted to be covered. Neshat is critical of a society that objectifies women. On the one hand, the Islamic theocratic state covers women and takes away their decision-making power. On the other, they manipulate women giving them the sense of authority and independence in the situation of war. Neshat depicts this overwrought situation of Iranian women. Regardless of their ideology, are all objectified by Islamists who intend to conceal women’s individuality and unify them according to their own ideals.

Neshat’s arrangement of these two photographs also help the viewer to read each photograph differently. By means of her use of war elements, cultural symbols, and her

own direct gaze, *Women of Allah* reveals violence and oppression of women. These are women who are expected to remain silent. Therefore, Neshat's manipulation of poetry is literal and symbolic voice of these women. Neshat employs poetic language to give voice to Iranian women, whose sexuality and individualism has been eliminated by the *chador*. She furthermore articulates a political and feminist critique of the Islamic government by means of her careful selection of poets. Neshat explains the importance of poetry in Iranian culture:

“Iranians relate to poetry philosophically; in a way, it can easily be said that poetry becomes an expression of their existential angst, a way to cope and transcend the reality—the perpetual political oppression that they seem to endure by one dictatorship or another. In formulation of my art, I too seem to be constantly infusing important specific political themes with a poetic language that is timeless and universal.”¹⁸

Allegory and Poetry in *Women of Allah*

Art has played a critical role in Iran, and in its many abrupt changes of dynasties and religions. In passing down their traditional and heroic stories to other generations, poets were significantly involved in saving the Iranian language and preserving culture. These narrating mostly had to do with kings and their dynasties, battles, court parties, and love. All of these topics were accepted in the restricted Islamic culture of the time, except for love. In the controlled artistic environment, the only possible way to discuss sensual subjects was through spiritualism and mysticism. As a result, mystical poems on the subject of the love of God provided a good excuse for poets to have some relative freedom to talk about romantic scenes.¹⁹

This tradition was later extended to include political objections by the greatest Iranian poets. Counted among the greatest Iranian poets is Hafez (1300-1388) who criticize the hypocrisy and deceit that exists among preachers. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Safavid dynasty (1501- 1736) ruled, some poets migrated from Persia to India. Others were separated from the court as a result of the Safavid kings' disapproval of poetry. Poets stopped describing majestic scenes and began to observe the lives of ordinary people with all their daily problems. Soon, poets established the people's suffering and social problems as common themes in their poems. This separation of poetry from the court established it as an independent, popular art. Since then, Iranian poets have used allegory to criticize the dictatorship in Iran.²⁰

Neshat makes reference to the poetry of Forough Farokhzad (1935- 1967). She is one of the most influential feminist poets of the twentieth century in Iran. Although Farokhzad is not the first Iranian female poet, she is the first to achieve fame without the support of a prominent male figure. In a culture that valued classical poetic forms, Farokhzad became one of Iran's best modernist poets. She divorced her husband to dedicate herself to poetry; she also began to analyze herself as a woman. Throughout her short life, Farokhzad questioned and challenged traditional morality connected to Iranian women; she stressed her femininity and discussed her body and desires.²¹ Neshat inscribes one of Farokhzad's most well known poems, *I Feel Sorry for the Garden*, on *Untitled* (1996) and the *Offered Eyes*. According to Farzaneh Milani, Farokhzad's poem "reveals the problems of a modern Iranian women with all her conflicts, painful oscillations, and contradictions. It enriches the world of Persian poetry with its depiction

of the tension and frequent paralysis touching the lives of those women who seek self-impression and social options in a culture not entirely accustomed to them.”²²

Farokhzad’s poems were condemned after the Islamic Revolution because of their alleged immorality and banned for more than a decade. Farokhzad’s poetry expresses women’s freedom in Persian literature. Her poems embody the entanglement of old and new, Western and Iranian, and masculine and feminine. As a result, Neshat empathized with Farokhzad’s expression of her own desires and with her objections to the patriarchal structure of Iranian society.²³ In including Farokhzad’s poetry in her images, Neshat could represent Iranian women who opposed the compulsory hijab law and other public limitations. Neshat employs Farokhzad’s words not only as a form of communication but also to symbolize the Iranian women’s oppression.²⁴

While Farokhzad’s poems are modern in form, she makes use of several dominant tropes of classical Persian poetry, including the paradisiacal garden. In the twentieth-century, the term “garden” was widely used to denote the Iranian nation. Neshat uses Farokhzad’s poem, *I Feel Sorry for the Garden*, on *Untitled* (1996) to stage a dialogue between the image and text and between the past and the present. In this poem a young girl observes the ruins of her family’s garden. She is saddened by the indifference of her family members. If the garden reads as a metaphor for Iran, Farokhzad here seems to be the only person who is concerned about the social aspects of her country. Neshat places herself in the position of the poet in using Farokhzad’s poem. Neshat denounces the destruction of her country and marginalization of women after the Revolution through Farokhzad’s poetry. Farokhzad’s poem begins:

No one is thinking about the flowers,
No one is thinking about the fish,
No one wants to believe the garden is dying,
That the garden's heart has swollen under the sun,
That the garden is slowly being drained of green memories²⁵

Onto her extended hand, Neshat inscribes Farokhzad's poem in *Untitled* (1996). The poem has long been read for its political symbolism.²⁶ In the center of her hand, in the photograph, Neshat places a religious utterance. There is no sign of war or violence in this photograph. Gesture of silence is symbolized by the placement of the hand on the lips. Neshat uses the poetic language to refer to the historical repression of women in Iran. She criticizes the patriarchal structure of the society that invites silence and obedience. Iranian women have been in constant battle with their oppressors, from Reza Shah's dictated unveiling act to Ayatollah Khomeini's compulsory *hijab* law. Neshat refers to this continuing battle between Iranian women and the Islamic theocratic state by means of the ajar lips. The hand gesture of silence is expected to be accompanied with the shut lips. However, the slightly opened lips in *Untitled* (1996) refer to Iranian women's disapproval of obligatory hijab law. Although women are subjugated by the Islamic theocratic state, they resist and confront imposed silence and obedience.

Neshat also inscribes the same poem on a close-up shot of her eye in the *Offered Eyes*. She purposefully focuses on the eye since eyes are the most expressive part of the body. The two photographs shares aspects of the similar message. While they both offer silence, the half-shut lips and the poetry inscribed on the eye encourage the viewer to investigate more deeply, indicating the photographs have more to offer. Neshat challenges her audience and raises the question of identity. Neshat refers to a sensuous

and Oriental role of a Middle Eastern women. Neshat uses Farokhzad's poetry to foreground the long-suppressed voice of feminism and human rights in contemporary Iran. Her black-and-white photographs invites the viewer to think about violence and silence. Neshat stages a visual dialogue between public and private. Farokhzad had used these themes in her poems to shed light on the political situation of Iran in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁷

Farokhzad's poetry is not the only Persian literature that Neshat uses in her *Women of Allah* series. Another prominent Iranian female poet is Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936- 2008). Contrary to Farokhzad, Saffarzadeh is a very ideologically-driven writer and immensely sympathetic to the aims of the Revolution. Saffarzadeh is well known for her support of the Islamic Revolution. Her poems are a militant call for women's participation in the Imposed War.²⁸ In them, she explored the ideological confrontation between the Islamic world and Western imperialism. She sanctifies martyrdom for women and encourages them to defend their Islamic identity. Neshat's inclusion of Saffarzadeh's poetry gives voice to a different group of women. Neshat opens her art to the concerns of militant Muslim women about the formation and protection of Islamic identity by employing Saffarzadeh's poetry.²⁹

Neshat inscribes one of the most renowned poems of Saffarzadeh, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, on her photographs. The compositional arrangement of the photographs with Saffarzadeh's poetry is significantly different from the photographs that feature Farokhzad's poems. Both the *Untitled* (1994) photographs that utilize Saffarzadeh's text are partially in color. In them the text does not cover the woman's face. The text is in a

larger font, and covers the background which is reminiscent of Islamic posters advertising violence and fundamentalism. Saffarzadeh introduces herself as an active Muslim in her poetry. She advocated the superiority of Islamic identity and rejected the separation of Iranian identity from an Islamic one. Neshat explores Iranian women who defend Islam and accept the expectation of being the righteous woman in using Saffarzadeh's ideological poetry.³⁰

Neshat's juxtaposition of Saffarzadeh's poetry in her portraits gives a different experience to the viewer than those that include Farokhzadeh's poetry. In the *Untitled* (1994) and the *Rebellious Silence* the text is either employed on the background or, when on the body, Neshat accompanies it with revolutionary symbols. In her poem, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, Saffarzadeh praises martyrs and encourages women to choose eternal life after death over the mundane life. Saffarzadeh's poem begins:

O, you martyr
Hold my hands
With your hands
Cut from earthly means,
Hold my hands,
I am your poet,
with an inflicted body,
I've come to be with you
and on the promised day,
we shall rise again³¹

In her poem, Saffarzadeh refers to the revolutionary guard and the martyr as "the light of the eye."³² In Iranian literature this phrase is used in addressing a loved individual.

Neshat places the poem on her face in *Rebellious Silence*. This confident, direct gaze seems to imply that the poem is part of the woman's identity and belief. While no gun is

aimed at the viewer, her cold, serious face warns the viewer that the figure guards something important. The woman is ready for sacrifice. *Rebellious Silence* also references the act of rifle holding by *Imams* during the *Jumma* (in English Friday) prayers in Iran. This gesture is a symbol of resistance against satanic power, even at the time of prayer.

Neshat's work engages with identity-based conceptual photography. Her interest in photography and the camera began when she became fascinated with photojournalism and the sense of reality and immediacy that photography carries.³³ In her photographs, Neshat gives priority to the text both for its meaning and for its decorative aspects. Therefore, Neshat's text cannot exclusively be categorized as conceptual art. Neshat stages *Women of Allah* which is mostly taken by her photographer friends.³⁴ Although her use of text is in part conceptual, it also seems decorative. Both Farokhzad's and Saffarzadeh's poetry, which is written with ink with much patience and care by Neshat on the surface of her photographs, is unreadable for non-Persian readers. Neshat does not provide translations with her photographs. Her text is perceived very differently by viewers. On the one hand, a Persian reader can grasp Neshat's photographs within their cultural context. They understand the relation between these photographs with Persian calligraphy and poetry. On the other, non-Persian readers comprehend a more decorative aspect of Neshat's use of text in her photographs.

Neshat's Texts

Unlike that of most conceptual artists, Neshat's use of text has different dimensions. Although the reading and understanding of the Persian texts inscribed on her

photographs plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of her work, Neshat's artworks are not entirely conceptual. The emergence of text-based art works from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s celebrated ideas over the formal components of art works. Conceptual artists main claim, that the "articulation of an artistic idea suffices as a work of art," was a rejection of notions such as the aesthetics, expression, and skill by which art was usually judged.³⁵ In "Art after Philosophy," Joseph Kosuth stresses the difference between the conceptual and presentation.³⁶ He argues that it is essential to challenge the nature of art and to focus on the concept rather than its elements. Neshat does not entirely dedicate her art to this established American artistic convention. Neshat's language is not indifferent; it adds a deeper layer of interpretation to her work. In fact, as is the case in Lawrence Weiner's work, the language Neshat explores in her art is sufficient by itself for the production of visual form and meaning.³⁷ Through the poetry she quotes, Neshat criticizes the structure of the Islamic regime and the social marginalization of Iranian women. She gives voice to Iranian women who were both pro *hijab* and critical of the compulsory hijab law. As I have argued, one understands Neshat's work differently in knowing Persian language as well as the cultural importance of the Persian poetry. Nevertheless, non-Persian readers can still grasp Neshat's artworks because of her thoughtful use of Persian calligraphy.

The Persian language is Indo-European and fundamentally different from Arabic. After the conquest of Persia by Arabs in the early seventh century, the ancient Persian alphabet, Pahlavi, was gradually forgotten and replaced by an altered form of the Arabic alphabet.³⁸ The fact that these two distinct languages share the same alphabet causes confusion for a Western audience, which seeks to identify them. Unlike Persian

calligraphy, which usually does not carry any precise historical context for a Western viewer, Arabic calligraphy immediately brings Quranic texts into the viewer's mind. Arguably, the calligraphy that Neshat chooses in these artworks visually proposes Arabic, rather than Persian, language.

The use of vowels is a basic difference between Persian and Arabic writing. Unlike Arabic, it is very uncommon to include vowels in Persian calligraphy. Neshat's inclusion of vowels strengthens the similarity to the Quranic texts. According to Fereshteh Daftari, "calligraphy through its ancient association with the Quran, holds a privileged position in the aesthetic traditions of the Islamic world."³⁹ Since Arabic language brings the Quranic concept into the Western viewer's mind, Neshat employs the Arabic style of writing. With inclusion of vowels, Neshat's inscription manipulates non-Persian readers to read the text as Arabic rather than Persian. Although Neshat's texts are not explicitly Quranic, the religious appearance of the veiled Neshat, and the symbols of revolution and war she includes, reminds the viewer of the Quran. Arguably, Neshat invites the viewer to read these subjects through the visual rhetoric of veiling and war.

Furthermore, the lack of translations for these included texts in Neshat's exhibitions reinforces the argument that she values the decorative aspect of calligraphy as well as its meanings. The Western eye can explore exotic Eastern decorative calligraphy aesthetically. The black letters, applied by hand by Neshat to the photographs, appear as a counterpoint to the black veils and the weapons depicted. Also, the right-left visual orientation of the Persian language, which looks strange to the Western eye, and the circle of letters that are connected to each other, lend a more decorative aspect to

Neshat's texts. As a result, the viewer's inability to read or understand the Persian texts in Neshat's photographs does not damage or affect the formal qualities or the aesthetic of her work. Neshat wisely guides her viewers to notice the decorative aspect of Persian calligraphy in her work in choosing the title *Rebellious Silence* for one of the main photographs in the series. Although the poetry speaks on behalf of the woman, this photograph is indeed silent for non-Persian viewers.

¹ Amei Wallach, "Shirin Neshat: Islamic Counterpoints," *Art in America* 89 (October 2001): 130.

² Shadi Sheybani, "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (spring, 1999): 207.

³ Hamid Dabashi, and Octavio Zaya, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 15-6.

⁴ Linda Weintraub, *In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Art* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2003), 214.

⁵ Abbas Amanat, and Farzin Vejdani, *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 194-5.

⁶ Nina Cichocki, "Veils, Poems, Guns and Martyrs: Four Themes of Muslim Women Experiences in Shirin Neshat Photographic Work," *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture* 4 (July 16, 2008): 5.

⁷ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 37-8.

⁸ Vanessa Martin, *Creating An Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 9.

⁹ *Ibid*, 10-11.

¹⁰ Although both Reza Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini made some restrictions on men's clothing, the constraints on women were more intense.

¹¹ Wallach, "Shirin Neshat: Islamic Counterpoints," 139.

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- ¹² Basharat Peer, *Curfewed Night: One Kashmiri Journalist's Frontline Account of Life, Love, and War in His Homeland* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 6.
- ¹³ Annabelle Sreberny, and Massoumeh Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 154.
- ¹⁴ Peter Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2002), 218.
- ¹⁵ Sheybani, "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," 207.
- ¹⁶ D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 3.
- ¹⁷ Haleh Afshar, "Islam and feminism: an analysis of political strategies," *Feminism and Islam: Legal and literary perspectives* (1996): 200-2.
- ¹⁸ Rebecca R. Hart et al., *Shirin Neshat*, First edition (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013), 40.
- ¹⁹ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2012), 25-7.
- ²⁰ Mahmud Kianush, *Modern Persian Poetry* (London: Rockingham Press, 1996), 7-8.
- ²¹ Bert Cardullo, "Still Life", *The Hudson Review* 55 (July 2002): 277–285.
- ²² Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 137.
- ²³ Cardullo, "Still Life," 277–285.
- ²⁴ Heyam Dannawi, *Women in Black: Shirin Neshat's Images of Veiled Revolutionaries* (Ann Arbor, ProQuest, 2008), 31.
- ²⁵ Arthur Danto, and Marina Abramovic, *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 42.
- ²⁶ J Darznik, "Forough Goes West: The Legacy of Forough Farrokhzad in Iranian Diasporic Art and Literature," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, (2010): 108-9.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 110.

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- ²⁸ Since Iraq began the war against Iran, this war is also called the Imposed War in Iran.
- ²⁹ Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word*, 19-21.
- ³⁰ Hanna Wallinger, *Transitions: Race, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change* (London: LIT Verlag, 2006), 115.
- ³¹ Arthur Danto, and Marina Abramovic, *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 38- 39.
- ³² Dannawi, *Women in Black*, 27-8.
- ³³ Gerald Matt, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” in *Shirin Neshat*, ed. Gerald Matt et al. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000), 21.
- ³⁴ Caroline Luce, who works with Shirin Neshat in Gladstone Gallery, explained this fact to me in a conversation at the gallery in November 2014.
- ³⁵ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2011), 36.
- ³⁶ Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy (1969),” in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 13–32.
- ³⁷ Anne Rorimer, “Photography-Langugae-Context: Prelude to the 1980s,” in *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, ed. Catherine Gudis (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press: Los Angles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989) Exhibition catalogue, 137-8.
- ³⁸ Kianush, *Modern Persian Poetry*, 7.
- ³⁹ Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 11.

CHAPTER 3

SHIRIN NESHAT: *THE BOOK OF KINGS*

The shift in representation of women in *The Book of Kings* (2012) suggests Neshat's new look at the role and situation of women in Iranian society. This series is Neshat's reaction to the political events of the Green Movement (2009) and of the Arab Spring (2010-2011).¹ Neshat's photographic installation of sixty works returns to the photographic format that Neshat first employed for the *Women of Allah* series. While Neshat again addresses her cultural heritage and Iranian identity through the gaze, inscribed texts, and body language in the series, *The Book of Kings* is a departure from her earlier works. On a grander scale, Neshat's photographic concept emphasizes global ethics in this series. Her portrayal of women is not sexualized. The staged, confrontational gaze of Neshat's female sitters projects a distinct and revised perspective on the role of women in Iran.

Neshat metaphorically divides her work into three sections: the "Patriots," the "Masses," and the "Villains."² While the first two sections encompass both genders as subjects, the last section consists of only male figures. All of the portraits are titled after the subjects' given names. Neshat includes surnames only when a particular forename is repeated. She selects these subjects from her circle of friends and acquaintances. Some of them, like Nikzad Nojoomi (b. 1941), Sara Khaki, and Sherief Elkatsha, are New York-based Middle Eastern artists.³ While many of these subjects were affected by the Islamic theocratic state, they are not all direct participants of the Green Movement or the Arab Spring.⁴ In this third chapter, I examine the evolution of Neshat's continuing quest for Iranian identity through poetry and illustrations in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat borrows the

title of this photographic installation from the well-known national epic poem by Ferdowsi.⁵ *Shahnameh* —in English *The Book of Kings*— is packed with historical and mythical stories of upheaval and resistance against cruelty and injustice. The poem *Shahnameh*, has to do with the quest for social justice and the forming of collective and personal identity within Persian culture.

Neshat displays her portraits in *The Book of Kings* individually and as a group installation. I will discuss the sections “Patriots” and “Masses” examining a selected photograph of each section in depth. *The Book of Kings* features poems of three female and two male poets depicted on the bodies of the figures identified as “Patriots.” The inscribed texts on the faces of the “Masses” are also correspondence written by political prisoners during the Green Movement. Finally, I study the “Villains” and the images Neshat features on their torsos. These are images of battle scenes taken from an early twentieth-century illustrated edition of the *Shahnameh*.⁶ The “Villains” consist of three images of grave, masculine men. Their serious and intent gazes confront the viewer. By removing text as an element from this section, Neshat differentiates the “Villains” from the other parts of *The Book of Kings*.

The *Shahnameh* and the Green Movement

Much of the change has come out of education, women are very different people than they were before...Just by looking at images of contemporary women, by looking at the photojournalism and images of women protesting that came out of the Green movement, and then going back and looking at images of women on the streets in 1979, it is a very different narrative.⁷

Neshat in an interview explains the differences between Iranian women’s roles in the 1979 Revolution and the Green Movement. Iranian national identity remains disputed.

The 2009 presidential election again heightened Iran's internal conflict around national identity. After the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic theocratic state crushed Iran's diverse cultures and forced an Islamicization of education, national identity, and politics.⁸ The presidential election of 2009 also produced the Green Movement. This grassroots uprising garnered international media attention. Neshat clearly empathizes with millennials who supported the reformist politician Mir-Hossein Mousavi (b. 1942). Renowned artists like Ramin Parchami (b. 1973) and Leila Hatami (b. 1972), as well as those in diaspora supported Mousavi. A group of painters, photographers, and graphic designers created his advertising campaigns.⁹ Their poster designs expressed Mousavi's support of modern Iranian identity. This reference to Iran's modern history and to Western art, including to Neshat's own photographs, brought Mousavi extensive support of the millennials. Mousavi's distinctive campaign posters, created by artists, carried this concise statement: "Our vote: Architect [*mohandes*] Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The architect of tomorrow."¹⁰ The term "the architect of tomorrow" is a propagandistic slogan that goes as far back as the Pahlavi period. Both Mohammad Reza Shah and Empress Farah identified themselves as the "architects" of Iran's future. The recycling of this slogan hinted at Iran's modernizing history period during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹

This reference to Iran's modernization past was not the only visual tactic of Mousavi's campaign, with which Neshat was familiar. His campaign banners and posters expressed awareness of Western art. Neshat's inclusion of illustrations, in addition to text of *The Book of Kings* refers to the appearance of these Western references in Mousavi's campaign, which included, among other elements: Mousavi's head on the walls of Tehran in a repetitive, Andy-Warhol style; and a banner that refers to Michelangelo's Sistine

Chapel fresco, the *Creation of Adam*. In this Mousavi poster, the hands of God and Adam are replaced by two female hands with green wristbands. The text reads, “Youth, come aboard.”¹² The placement of female hands at the center of this banner foregrounds women, and emphasizes new aspect of Iranian identity. Additionally, through inclusion of text on women’s headbands and masks Mousavi’s supporters mention Neshat’s criticism of women’s limited role in the post-revolutionary era. These masks and green headbands that promote Mousavi are reminiscent of Neshat’s inscribed Persian language on women’s faces in *Women of Allah*. Text is then used to speak on behalf of women in both Neshat’s photographs and in the campaign. Neshat’s bold calligraphy on the foreheads of the “Patriots” references the millennials’ reference to her art during the Green Movement.

After the hope for change through a democratically and non-violent process had vanished, groups of rioters and protesters took to the streets shouting “Where is my vote?” or “Give my vote back.”¹³ Women protesters’ use of language on their bodies on the Silent Protest Day, June 15th 2009, delivers a profound and clear message to the world. Neshat appears to note of the young female protesters of the Green Movement.

Neshat noticed the parallels between the Green Movement and the stories of the *Shahnameh*. Conceptually, the *Shahnameh*’s ideas laid the foundation for the young generation leading a revolution for change.¹⁴ All the characters of the *Shahnameh* are classified into three groups: the ordinary people, the heroes, and the cruel authorities. Ferdowsi’s poem book is packed with heroics and stories about uprisings against injustice. In the poem, people fight for their national identity. Neshat relates the protests in contemporary Iran to the stories of *Shahnameh*. The millennials made a statement in

opposing the replacement of Persian identity with an Islamic one.

The *Shahnameh* consists of 60,000 verses. It begins by praising God as the Lord of wisdom. The human soul, the incomprehensibility of God's purposes, and the nature of wisdom, are the main concerns of the *Shahnameh*. While Ferdowsi's poem narrates the reign of forty-seven kings and three queens in Persia, its main theme remains ethics and the transience of human existence. Ferdowsi emphasizes the concept of the good man and the good hero.¹⁵ According to the legends of the *Shahnameh*, one should avoid cruelty and strive for justice. Ferdowsi narrates Persian history and culture prior to the seventh-century invasion by the Muslims. He also avoids adopted Arabic terms in his chronicle poem. As a result, the *Shahnameh* is recognized as a touchstone of Iranian pride, and the most important national epic poem book for Iranians. Pahlavi kings, as the promoters of the 2500 years of Persian monarchy and civilization, honored the *Shahnameh* and its devotion to Iranian identity. Neshat, who attended school during the Pahlavi period, became familiar with the *Shahnameh* and memorized some of its verses from an early age.¹⁶ Her intimacy with the stories of the *Shahnameh* resulted in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat examines Iranian identity, honesty, valor, and truth in *The Book of Kings* by means of the themes of the *Shahnameh*.

The Book of Kings: The "Patriots"

The "Patriots" includes ten black-and-white three-quarter length portraits. Where the *Women of Allah* focused on women as subjects, the "Patriots" encompasses both genders. This is a series of carefully constructed studio portraits in which the photographer controls the intensity and direction of light.¹⁷ Neshat's manipulation of light at times merges her female figures' black attire with the background. The unornamented

clothing and background positions the female figures' faces and bodies as a main focus. The male figures' clothes reflect more light. Therefore, their bodies stand out more than the female bodies. Standing straight, the "Patriots" keep their right hands over their hearts. The black inscriptions on their faces and chests are divided into three columns. Bolder calligraphy appears on the faces of "Patriots." These texts are written in columns, formatted like the verses in a folio of a traditional *Shahnameh*. The inscriptions are thick and large on their forehead. The size of the text gets smaller when it continues on the figures' bodies. It is minuscule on their fingers.

The *Book of Kings*' "Patriots" features young men and women. They seem to reference the Iranian young generation of the Green Movement who fought to the death for justice. The "Patriots'" pose, of the hand on the heart, is reminiscent of the nationalistic gesture of devotion and sacrifice. With their penetrating gazes and body postures, Neshat's subjects refer to Qajar photography. A nineteenth-century group photograph, with the figures' hands over their hearts, seems to envision a collective force that is necessary for change. While Neshat does not group the "Patriots" similarly, in one photograph, she positions her portraits next to each other when she exhibits them, which emphasizes a similar conviction. By portraying each subject individually, Neshat foregrounds the "Patriots" as heroes of the *Shahnameh*. Neshat's inclusion of female heroes incorporates a major change in Iranian society after the Green Movement. The period prior to Iran's 2009 presidential election was charged with empowerment and hope for change. The millennials, humiliated internationally and oppressed by the president of the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956), found a chance to redefine their Iranian identity. In supporting Mousavi the young generation sent a message to the world.

Mousavi's campaign slogans vowed to fight against corruption and injustice. Mousavi's ethics and his commitment to Iranian rather than Islamic identity made him a good hero of the *Shahnameh*.¹⁸

This hope for change did not last long. Only two hours after ballot stations officially closed, Ahmadinejad was announced as the leading candidate with 63% of the votes. To the shock of millions of Iranians, within less than twenty-four hours, he was declared the winner. The cultural sense of euphoria and hope turned into anger and defiance. Neshat's portraits in the "Patriots" are a diligent study of such socio-political events. Her photographs manifest a range of emotions: hope, determination, devotion, and anxiety. These sentiments correspond to those described by the inscribed poetry on the subjects' faces and bodies. The verses convey objection, depression, fear, and hope. The females' confrontational gazes are different from those in the *Women of Allah*. Neither mesmerized nor violent or brainwashed, Neshat's female figure, *Nida*, seems conscious of her surroundings. She personifies young women with high hopes. Her male counterpart, *Kouross*, has a similar confrontational gaze. Although they are both posed similarly, *Kouross*' attire is not entirely invisible. He seems more physically present. As a result, the criticalness of inscription on his face and body is balanced with his body posture and clothes.

In *The Book of Kings* series, Neshat addresses the role of Iranian women in the Green Movement. Women are not portrayed as propagandistic tools. They are not objectified: neither veiled nor sexualized. Neshat represents young women as independent and strong individuals. Neshat has selected the verses she includes in *The Book of Kings* from three female and two male contemporary Persian revolutionaries and

outspoken poets: Forough Farukhzad, Tahereh Saffarzadeh, Simin Behbahani (1927-2014), Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000), and Mehdi Akhavan Sales (1928-1990). Neshat's use of Persian poetry in *The Book of Kings* is more complex than in her earlier work. She offers a new interpretation of the poems by repeatedly inscribing a few selected lines by each of her poets on all of the portraits. Neshat places verses on the faces, necks, and hands of her subjects. Unlike the inscribed poetry in *Women of Allah*, there are no polarizing voices in *The Book of Kings*. She is furthermore consistent in her selection of language: the selected verses praise freedom, condemns Iran's overwrought political situation, and honor martyrs of the Green Movement.

Neshat's inscription of Saffarzadeh's poetry has a different purpose in *The Book of Kings*. Martyrdom no longer has to do with the victims of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Inscribed texts on the clothing of Green Movement protesters in the streets glorified martyrs. For example, one reads, "my martyred brother, I will take back your vote." Neshat's incomplete lines of poetry in the "Patriots" portraits echo the statement fragments on the protesters' clothes. Neshat's persistence in choosing paralleled voices in poetry points to the unified voice of a young generation of Iranians who erupted without a sense of leadership. Although Mousavi and Mahdi Karoubi (b. 1937), another moderate candidate, conducted some of the protest events, the absence of a single representative made uprising anonymous. Furthermore, the executions of some protestors like Neda Aghasoltan (1983- 2009) and Sohrab Aarabi (1990- 2009), neither of whom were politically active prior to the presidential election of 2009, strengthened this anonymity of the Green Movement. The lack of leadership added a new aspect to both the movement and for the Iranian millennials. As Neshat puts it:

The absence of leadership is part of the identity of all these recent movements. So the faces of patriotism become more anonymous, and I think that's a very important part of the identity of these historical uprisings across these different countries, which had a few things in common: they were non-ideological, driven by the youth, and had an absence of leadership. So it's interesting that not one face as has emerged as representative.¹⁹

Along with Farokhzad's *I Feel Sorry for the Garden* and Saffarzadeh's *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, Neshat inscribes Shamlou's *Fairies* in this series. Shamlou is another influential twentieth-century Iranian poet. He began his career in the Pahlavi period and criticized a fading Iranian identity that resulted from fast modernization by the Pahlavi kings. A few years after the Revolution, he chose to live a secluded life due to the harsh political situation. Throughout his poetry, Shamlou refers to the strong discourse of oppression and monotony. Shamlou's poems have long been read for their political symbolism.²⁰ In the *Fairies*, he celebrates the achievement of freedom, which results from warding off the cruel devil. His poem begins:

Our city is celebrating tonight
For the Devil's house has been overthrown
There is no place for Devils to run now
For them, the forests will be barren
For them, the jungles will be desert
It is different here in our city
Oh Fairies! You have no idea
How things have changed²¹

Although Farokhzad and Shamlou were controversial modern poets and iconoclasts, Behbahani and Akhavan Sales embraced traditional forms. They borrowed the style of the old masters, but not their content.²² Behbahani, an advocate for women's rights, published most of her poems on her website as the Islamic theocratic state outlawed her poems years after the Revolution. Behbahani's poem *Angel of Freedom* makes reference

to Neda's unfair execution. After her death, Behbahani dedicated a few lines to her memory:

You are neither dead, nor will you die
You will always remain alive
You have an eternal existence.
You are the voice of the people of Iran²³

Neshat also employs the poetry of Akhavan in her photographs. Like Ferdowsi, Akhavan's forte, is epic poetry. While he followed Ferdowsi's path, Akhavan developed his own complicated style of Persian poetry. Akhavan indirectly criticized Iran's government. He questioned some of the socio-political problems of the country in the context of ancient myths narrated by Ferdowsi.²⁴ Neshat inscribes one of Akhavan's most famous poems. *A Cry* has been employed by artists like Mohammad Reza Shajarian (b. 1940) to support the uprising during the Green Movement. The poem begins:

My house is on fire, soul burning,
Ablaze in every direction.
Carpets and curtains threaded to dust.
Within the smoke of this raging fire
I sob, run to each corner
Shout, scream, yelp
With the voice of a sad howl and bitter laughter.

...And the fire keeps on raging,
burning all memories, books and manuscripts,
all landscapes and views.
Putting out the fire with my blistering hands,
I pass out with its roar.
As the fire rages from yet another
direction circled in smoke.
Who will ever know as my being turns into the non
being by the sunrise.²⁵

Modern Persian poetry is associated with oppressive forces and the continuous

persecution of revolutionary poets. Neshat borrows the theme of the *Shahnameh* to address the contemporary issues of Iran. Neshat's use of calligraphy has a dual aspect. A viewer's understanding of the poetry and its cultural context allows for a deeper interpretation of these photographs. However, the decorative aspect of Persian calligraphy is prominent in *The Book of Kings*. First, Neshat does not choose well-known poems. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to immediately recognize many of the verses and their poets that she includes. Second, Neshat leaves most of the lines incomplete. As a result, the literal meaning of the terms in the fragmented sentences give a Persian-reader a level of comprehension. Neshat refers to the Iranian decorative use of calligraphy. This tradition began in sixth-century Iran, when artists started to explore the graphic elements of the language. The decorative potential of Persian calligraphy was also explored in Iran in 1960s and 1970s.²⁶

Furthermore, there is another possible frame of interpretation for the calligraphy that Neshat includes in these artworks. The text is quite large on the forehead of the depicted subjects, and nearly illegible on their hands. Arguably, the small size of this text suggests that it is not meant to be read. Words as internal thoughts are powerful, but when they become actions, they lose their effectiveness. Neshat refers to the dictatorial structure of Iranian society which did not allow the young generation to act. The Green Movement and the student uprising of 1999 was a public protest against the totalitarian regime. Although the millennials gave voice to their objections by protesting in the streets of Iran, the Islamic theocratic state oppressed them and did not allow them to accomplish their thoughts and goals. Therefore, Neshat employs miniscule text on the hands of her "Patriots" to refer to Iranian millennials' inability to achieve their desires.

The Book of Kings: The “Masses”

Neshat’s black-and-white photographic portrait of a middle-aged woman, *Fahimeh*, is visually balanced. Her plain black shirt harmonizes with the dark background and draws the viewer’s attention to the subject’s gaze. Her face and chest are inscribed with miniscule text. Within the photograph, a female’s headshot occupies the limited space. *Fahimeh* is intimately close to the viewer. The tight image elicits sympathy from the spectator.

The “Masses” section of the series consists of forty-five individual portraits encompassing both genders of different ages.²⁷ All the figures of the “Patriots” are repeated with the theme and body posture of the “Masses.” Neshat refers to the *Shahnameh*’s stories in which the heroes rise from the heart of society.²⁸ The *Masses* are portrayed in smaller scale than the “Patriots;” they do not pose or gesture. The texts inscribed across the “Masses”’ faces and bodies consist of poetry and correspondence written by political prisoners. Neshat takes these texts from the internet.²⁹ By including political texts, Neshat compares ordinary civilians’ fate to that of the detainees, who have little control over their destinies. The size of the text Neshat inscribes on the “Masses” is small, giving the impression that these words, similar to those on the hands of the “Patriots,” are not to be read. Neshat uses language as a metaphor for the people’s voice, which is also nearly impossible to hear. Arguably, Neshat refers to the election in which the Islamic theocratic state disregarded the people’s votes. Voting is a democratic process and expression of people’s needs and desires. Iran’s presidential election of 2009 squelched the aspirations of the people. Neshat’s incomplete sentences, along with the tiny size of that text that covers the “Masses”’ faces and bodies, refers to this

traumatizing incident.

Once again, certain detectable texts indicate the turmoil of the “Masses.” The words on their faces describe a range of emotions: anxiety, defiance, and fear. For example, the term *khasokhaashaak* in English, mulch or decayed leaves or debris, which Neshat repeats on the “Masses” faces, refers to Ahmadinejad’s post-election speech. In celebration of his victory, Ahmadinejad denounced the protesters as a minor population of “mulches.”

Although Neshat dignifies the “Masses” in portraying them individually, in grouping their portraits in this section, she implies that civilians are not seen as independent individuals. The large number of portraits Neshat includes affects the viewer, making it hard to focus on each figure individually. The repetitive visual qualities of the wall covered with portraits also emphasize the anonymity of individuals within the revolutionary movement. Neshat’s wall covered by forty-five confrontational portraits gives the impression that you are being watched. Viewers feel themselves to be in the presence of the people.

Ferdowsi’s epic poem is packed with stories of dignitaries. He scarcely mentions the effect of a war or an uprising on the public.³⁰ However, Neshat’s “Masses” balance *Shahnameh*’s voice in addressing the impact of political turmoil on the suffering but silent public. In a way, Neshat rewrites the conventional Iranian storytelling in including people’s voices. Neshat addresses Iranian identity in using legendary themes. Mythology, along with culture is an element of identity formation. From prehistoric times, mythology was a way for people to find reasons for things that they did not understand, such as the mysteries of natural phenomena. Mythology is used to define and explain a value system

and customs.³¹ Through traditions ethics, Neshat employs Persian mythology to address female Iranian identity.

Neshat goes on a grander scale in *The Book of Kings*. Her inclusion of both Iranian and Arab subjects refers to the uprisings that resulted in the Green Movement and the Arab Spring. *The Book of Kings* is then not only about Iranian identity. It also rejects cruelty and injustice, the same injustice that Iranian and Arab revolutionaries fought. Neshat employs the moral standards of the *Shahnameh* to foreground acts of valor by Iranian and Arab millennials who strived against cruelty. Hamid Dabashi argues that after the *Women of Allah* Neshat's thematic content became globalized. As he puts it, "Neshat's art has now become integral and definitive to a manner of transaesthetics, of globalized predisposition to define what is beautiful and sublime, liberating and emancipatory."³²

The Book of Kings: The "Villains"

A life-size black-and-white portrait of a shirtless man, *Sherief*, who gazes confidently into the camera is threatening. Since there is no reflection off his trousers, his legs blend with the dark background. The photograph of *Sherief* is fragmentary, giving the impression that the subject's torso floats above his feet. He looks distant and in control. His posture projects power. There is no inscribed poetry on this subject. He has a black illustration on his body that depicts a beheading. The only color in this illustration is red, or blood.

The "Villains" in the series are three life-sized, full-body images of individuals. Neshat's "Villains" encompass a wide age range. Neshat borrows the projected illustrations on the "Villains" from an early twentieth-century illustrated folio of the

Shahnameh.³³ The folio portrays battle scenes from the *Shahnameh*. *Sherief*'s body illustration depicts two unfairly matched men at war.³⁴ While one wears armor and is on horseback, the other is unprotected. The blood of a beheaded person drips off the persecutor's sword and the fallen head. Neshat, once again, includes blood as an element of resistance and violence. She refers to the destruction and brutality of the Green Movement. The trajectory of Neshat's work from *Women of Allah* to *The Book of Kings* takes on more historical context. She also uses less overt religious elements. Neshat employs themes of the *Shahnameh* and invites her viewers to read her photographs through illustrated scenes, body postures, and confrontational gazes.

Neshat connects the portraits of the "Villains" to each other. *Sherief* is the youngest subject in the three life-sized portraits. The depicted warrior on *Sherief*'s body shares facial similarities with the oldest "Villain." *Bahram*'s body posture is reminiscent of the majesty of kings seated on their thrones. *Bahram* stares into the camera without emotion. His proud posture recalls old court photographs of the Qajar era such as photographs of Nassir Al-Din Shah. Neshat places *Bahram* in the middle of her installation, while *Sherief* and *Amir* stand on his left and right respectively. In the *Shahnameh*, the person who is placed at the right side of the king is the second in power. Neshat gives *Amir*, who looks middle-aged and older than *Sherief*, this position in the "Villains." Both *Amir* and *Sherief*, who are guarding *Bahram*, have violent illustrations on their bodies. However, *Bahram*'s body illustration, however, does not portray a direct involvement in executions. Power and strength are implied in the depiction of an army.

Neshat's included illustrations point to Iranian visual narratives. This tradition, which was popular in the Qajar period, paved a path to many of Iran's pivotal moments:

religious murals in the post-revolutionary era, and political depictions in the streets during the Green Movement, are some examples. Reading the illustrated version of *Shahnameh* is a performative practice; turning pages, looking at images, and reciting text aloud, is a tradition that has been practiced for centuries in the coffeehouses and bazaars of Iran.³⁵ Men were the only participants of these storytelling events. The dominance of men in Neshat's "Villains" refers to this patriarchal tradition. She also references the fact that in Iran's power structure, women do not have an important role. They cannot get elected to serve at the highest levels of society. Women are subjugated by men. Neshat condemns the brutality of the Islamic authorities, and she challenges the notion of female inferiority. She questions the absence of women at the decision-making levels of Iranian society.

Neshat addresses uprisings of Iranian history. She expresses her poetic vision with deeply-rooted historical elements. Neshat meticulously studies Iran's change in cultural identity through the aspirations of Iranian youth. She borrows the themes of Iran's national epic poem to comment critically on Iran's present historical and political situation.

¹ Sussan Babaie, Rebecca R. Hart, and Nancy Princenthal, *Shirin Neshat* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013), 161.

² Manya Saadi-Nejad, "Mythological themes in Iranian culture and art: traditional and contemporary perspectives," *Iranian Studies* 42 (2009): 234.

³ Since the name Sara is repeated among the figures of Neshat's *The Book of Kings*, she has included Sara's surname. I identified Nikzad Nojoomi for he is an established artist. Sherief Elkatsha is an emerging artist in New York that I was able to track.

⁴ Both Nikzad Nojoomi and Sara Khaki were outside of Iran prior to the Green Movement.

⁵ *Shahnameh* (in English *Book of Kings*) by Ferdowsi, the 11th century poet, narrates mythical stories and historical happenings of Iran from the creation of the world to the conquest of Persia by Muslims in the 7th century.

⁶ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 160.

⁷ Azadeh Moaveni in an interview with Shirin Neshat, “The Book of Kings, as Told by Shirin Neshat,” <http://en.iranwire.com/features/2378/>.

⁸ Hamid Dabashi, and Navid Nikzadfar, *The Green Movement in Iran* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 4.

⁹ Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 245- 246.

¹⁰ Ibid, 245.

¹¹ Ibid, 244-245.

¹² Ibid, 249.

¹³ Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, 35.

¹⁴ Azadeh Moaveni in an interview with Shirin Neshat, “The Book of Kings, as Told by Shirin Neshat,” <http://en.iranwire.com/features/2378/>.

¹⁵ Abdee Kalantari, *Shirin Neshat the book of kings* (Paris: Jerome Noirmont, 2012), 12.

¹⁶ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 30.

¹⁷ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22.

¹⁸ Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, 42.

¹⁹ Azadeh Moaveni in an interview with Shirin Neshat, “The Book of Kings, as Told by Shirin Neshat,” <http://en.iranwire.com/features/2378/>.

²⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 285.

²¹ Kalantari, *Shirin Neshat the book of kings*, 23.

²² Simin Behbahani, Farzaneh Milani, and Kaveh Safa, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 136.

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- ²³ David McGee in an interview with Simin Behbahani
<http://www.thebluegrassspecial.com/archive/2009/july2009/nedafeaturejuly09.php>
- ²⁴ Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 826.
- ²⁵ Rob Simms, Amir Koushkani, *Mohammad Reza Shajarian's Avaz in Iran and Beyond, 1979-2010* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2012), 117.
- ²⁶ Shahram Karimi, Octavio Zayas, and Shirin Neshat, *Written on the body* (Madrid: La Fábrica/Fundación Telefónica, 2013), 62.
- ²⁷ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 160.
- ²⁸ Dick Davis, *Sunset of Empire: Stories from the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi* (Maryland: Mage Publishers, 2003), 10.
- ²⁹ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 160.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 161.
- ³¹ Manya Saadi-Nejad, "Mythological themes in Iranian culture and art: traditional and contemporary perspectives," *Iranian Studies* 42 (2009): 234.
- ³² Hamid Dabashi, and Octavio Zaya, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word* (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 59.
- ³³ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 160.
- ³⁴ Based on my research, one of Neshat's friends has possibly drawn the illustrations on the bodies of the "Villains." I contacted Caroline Luce from the Gladstone Gallery. She responded that the illustrations are not by Neshat, but she did not explain further. I found one of the subjects, Sherief Elkatsha, in the "Villains" section and contacted him. He was not certain, but he believed that the drawings are by either Neshat or a friend of her.
- ³⁵ Babaie, *ShirinNeshat*, 34-35.

CONCLUSION

Shirin Neshat's art deals with gender issues and notion of collective and individual Iranian identity. Her quest for Iranian identity can be seen in her two series of photographs: *The Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings*. Through cultural elements like the *chador* and tulips, Neshat critiques the condition of Iranian women in the post-revolutionary era. Neshat uses color and revolutionary elements in her *Women of Allah* series. I have discussed the importance of poetry in Iran, and its relation to Iranian identity. Poetic language plays a critical role in the cultural history of Iran. Through metaphor, poets express the people's suffering and social problems. Specifically, twentieth-century poetry in Iran is used to criticize the dictatorship.¹ Neshat employs Persian poetry to question the role of women in Iran. She praises Farokhzad's freedom of expression while challenging Saffarzadeh's militant call for Iranian women. Neshat's inscribed calligraphy not only gives a deeper meaning to her identity-based conceptual photographs, but it also plays a decorative role. Neshat invites her viewers to read her photographs through the visual rhetoric of calligraphy, heavy drapery, and poetry.

Neshat examines Iranian identity through poetry and illustration in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat borrows the theme of the *Shahnameh* to refer to Persian traditions and contemporary concepts of identity and individuality. She alludes to the ethics of the *Shahnameh* in considering Iranian identity through Iran's ancient traditions. In this series, Neshat metaphorically divides her portraits into three sections: the "Patriots," the "Masses," and the "Villains."² In the *Shahnameh*, all characters are classified into one of three groups: the heroes, the ordinary people, and the cruel authorities. The poet Ferdowsi scarcely mentions the effects of conflict between heroes and kings in his poetry. As a

result, Neshat's inclusion of the "Masses" balances *Shahnameh*'s voice. I studied Neshat's portraits individually and as a group installation in *The Book of Kings*. Although Neshat's *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings* have strong similarities in form and concept, they also differ.

In the *Women of Allah*, Neshat's use of the veil conceals women's true self and sexuality. On the one hand, Neshat symbolically refers to the silence and invisibility that the Islamic theocratic state expects from women in society. On the other, she inscribes calligraphy on her face, hands, and feet to give a voice to women. Historically, both the *chador* and poetry have been elements of resistance among Iranians. Rulers, poets, and ordinary people used these two cultural elements in their own favor. While kings commissioned panegyric poems to be praised by people, poets employed metaphorical language to articulate the fraught political situation of the country. Poets also used poetry to express prohibited feelings like love and sexual attraction.³ The *hijab* had a similar function. Although it has been an ideological tool for Iranian authorities, people used it to reject forced the Pahlavi kings' westernization.⁴ Neshat employs both of these cultural elements to explore the female Iranian identity. She denounces the marginalization of Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution. Neshat analyzes notions of femininity in relation to Islamic fundamentalism in poetic language. She stages a visual dialogue between public and private realms. Neshat's use of contradictory voices in *Women of Allah* and the dual aspect of calligraphy in her photography points to the multiple interpretations and contradictions of the culture.

In *The Book of Kings*, Neshat covers her figures with poetry and illustration. She makes a profound statement not including the *hijab*. *The Book of Kings* does not objectify

women. It neither veils them nor depicts them as objects of desire. *The Book of Kings* still employs the similar elements in analyzing gender issues and female identity. Neshat studies roles and identity of Iranian women across two distinct generations through body postures, cultural elements, the confrontational gaze, and poetry. Both the *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings* series explore changes in Iranian society due to socio-political events. Although the *Women of Allah* investigates the role of Iranian women in Islamic society, *The Book of Kings* does so on a grander scale that includes both genders. While women were socially marginalized in the post-revolutionary era, they were used as propaganda to manifest Islamic Iran as a country that regards women as equals to men. On the contrary, in 2009, the Islamic regime concealed the spontaneous involvement of women in the Green Movement. However, their bravery was recognized internationally. In *The Book of Kings*, Neshat investigates the role of women afresh. She reveals women as equals to men and as pioneers of the Green Movement. *The Book of Kings* addresses the courage and the importance of the millennials, especially women, both in the Green Movement and the Arab Spring.

Neshat studies the situation of two generations of Iranian women in a transformed society. While many cultural symbols are similar in her two series, there are no revolutionary elements in *The Book of Kings*. Neshat invites the viewer to read the subjects of her portraits through body posture, calligraphy, and their gaze. She selects inscribed verses from male and female poets. The voices of poets are unified in *The Book of Kings*. Anger, defiance, sorrow, anxiety, and tension can be read from the poetry and from the faces of the figures.

One of the fundamental differences between the *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings* is Neshat's use of illustration. In the latter series, Neshat takes the drawings from the early twentieth-century folio of an illustrated version of the *Shahnameh*.⁵ These themes depicted on the bodies of Neshat's subjects, are restricted to beheading and wars. Neshat is consistent with the use of color in her black-and-white silver gelatin series. Ironically, she only depicts symbols of death, like tulips and blood, in color. In her references to Qajar photography, Neshat hints at the formation of a new Iranian identity. Neshat points to the dichotomy of representation in both private and public spheres within nineteenth-century, and later in post-revolutionary, Iran. In her photographs, she depicts the duality of the female identity.

My thesis brings up topics for further development and research. Neshat's use of portraiture confronts the prohibition of figure painting in Islamic art.⁶ To understand Neshat's critical tone, one does not need to interpret her photographs. By using human portraiture, Neshat challenges female oppression in post-revolutionary Iran. It is important to study Neshat's photographs within the context of Islamic art. Furthermore, calligraphy was first used in modern Iranian art in the early 1960s. The *Saqqakhaneh* school, a neo-traditional movement, integrated Iranian folk art and popular symbols of Shi'a Muslim culture in art.⁷ Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), Charles Hossein Zendehtroudi (b. 1937), and Faramarz Pilaram (1938-1983), are recognized as the pioneers of this movement.⁸ *Saqqakhaneh* first encompassed painting and sculpture. Later, it embraced arts that involved traditional decorative elements.⁹ Neshat is arguably the first Iranian artist to inscribe calligraphy on photographs. Similar to *Saqqakhaneh* artists, Neshat also explores Western artistic styles fused with Iranian context.

Another topic for further discussion is Neshat's growing interest in portraiture. Neshat has two other series of portraits photographs that deal with socio-political events in different societies. *My House is on Fire* (2013) features twenty-three large-scale photographs of isolated faces, hands, and feet inscribed with Persian poetry.¹⁰ The subjects, all of whom have been affected by the Arab Spring, are chosen from an older generation in Egypt. In this series, Neshat studies the aftermath of the 2010 revolution in Egypt for ordinary people. These portraits, resemble the "Masses" in *The Book of Kings*.

Neshat's most recent body of work, *The Home of My Eyes* (2015), consists of fifty-five portraits of Azerbaijani people of distinct ethnic background. While covered with inscriptions on their faces, necks, and hands, they point to a "portrait of a country".¹¹ The language on these photographs is each person's response to the notion of home and homeland. Neshat employs the body posture that is reminiscent of the "Patriots" in her 2012 series. Arguably, Neshat not only examines but also records the historical and political events of different nations through photographing their people and inscribing their bodies with metaphorical narratives. The trauma of war, stories of bravery, and ethnic diversity, are all depicted in Neshat's identity-based conceptual photographs. Why would Neshat, who is mostly known as a video artist, choose studio portraiture to study socio-political events? How has the notion of identity evolved in her photographs? I believe it would be worthwhile to consider the evolution of Neshat's photographic series—especially *The Book of Kings*, *My House is on Fire*, and *The Home of My Eyes*—as a new mode of historiography.

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- ¹ Mahmud Kianush, *Modern Persian Poetry* (London: Rockingham Press, 1996), 7-8.
- ² Manya Saadi-Nejad, "Mythological themes in Iranian culture and art: traditional and contemporary perspectives," *Iranian Studies* 42 (2009): 234.
- ³ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2012), 25-7.
- ⁴ Amei Wallach, "Shirin Neshat: Islamic Counterpoints," *Art in America* 89 (October 2001): 139.
- ⁵ Sussan Babaie, Rebecca R. Hart, and Nancy Princenthal, *Shirin Neshat* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013), 160.
- ⁶ Jeld Von. Folsach, *For the Privileged Few: Islamic Miniature Painting from the David Collection* (New York: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 9.
- ⁷ Fereshteh Daftari, and Layla S. Diba, *Iran Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 29.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 29-30.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 29.
- ¹⁰ See Shirin Neshat's interview with Art Radar in <http://artradarjournal.com/2014/03/01/iranian-artist-shirin-neshat-on-art-can-change-the-world-interview/>
- ¹¹ See Shirin Neshat's interview in http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/The-Home-of-My-Eyes--An-Interview-with-S/F816E4D46DBB868D?utm_source=newsletter_b&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=nl_artfocus

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