

Visual and Textual Representations and Interpretations of Iranian Women in the Works of
Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi

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Abstract

Beliefs and assumptions about different groups of people are shaped through the representations provided through public discourses and the institutions that reproduce them, including but certainly not limited to educational institutions, mass media and the works of art and literature. As an Iranian researcher living in Canada, I am particularly interested in understanding the representations of Iranian women that saturate the consciousness of western audiences and influence public perceptions of Iranian culture, politics and experiences. I focus on works by diasporic Iranian artists and authors who have been widely published and/or exhibited in the one-third world. Using feminist intersectionality, I explore the ways in which selected and often pain-centred narratives by Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, and Azar Nafisi have rendered partial accounts of the lives of Iranian women and have been taken up in the west in ways that reinforce Orientalist views of Iran, and broader politically motivated projections involving Middle Eastern cultures more generally.

Key Terms: cultural representations, feminist intersectional framework, pain-centred narrative, transnational solidarity

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Chapter 1

Charting the Problem: Representations of Iranian Women in Western Contexts

If you don't raise your voice, there will always be those who will speak uninvited on our behalf as part of 'us.' It becomes clear to you that what they call 'we' does not have a position for you. (Shih 108)

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to my immigration, my knowledge of Canada could be summarized into two categories: hockey and maple syrup. My perceptions about my home country of Iran, its people and its various cultures were similarly simplistic and one-dimensional, mostly shaped by the messages from the Iranian media as well as my first-hand experiences. I was particularly fond of videos that showed Asian and European tourists in Iran being amazed at the beautiful historic sights and even more so at the hospitality and kindness of Iranians. Not by any stretch of the imagination could I have predicted that I would come to learn how those who were unfamiliar with Iran and Iranians would have very different views about us, lumped together. It was after coming to Canada that I perceived nuanced experiences of Canadians that significantly surpass hockey and maple syrup, and that I realized through my interactions with many people from around the world that there were particular assumptions about Iran, especially about Iranian women. Iranian women, I was told, wear burkas, are not allowed to attend school, cannot vote, need a man to accompany them wherever they go, and many other similar preconceptions. Through preliminary research I found that mass media and works of art and literature seem to be the major sources of such misconceptions and stereotypes.

I was surprised to find out that almost all of my Canadian classmates had read Marjane Satrapi's graphic autobiography, *Persepolis* (2000). Looking more closely, I realized that *Persepolis* has long been included in the syllabus of Introductory Women's and Gender Studies courses offered at the University of Saskatchewan. Although I have always been a bookworm,

I had never seen *Persepolis* in Iran, not even in the book black market. Similarly, I became familiar with the work of Shirin Neshat when I spotted her name in the syllabus of a course on cultural representations. Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) was also recommended to me by an Australian friend, which was not available to the public in Iran. Despite the huge black market of banned books in Iran, the works of these three Iranian diasporic activists do not circulate in the country.

Before discussing the main objectives of this thesis, it is important for me to provide a brief description of my background and positionality in relation to this research project. I come from Iran's capital, Tehran, and have lived there for over three decades. As one of several members from an educated family, I have enjoyed the privilege of reading from a very early age. I was admitted to high-ranking Iranian universities in the 2000's. I also had the privilege to live my adult life in Tehran, where the majority of prestigious universities are located and where almost all nationally significant cultural events are held, including international book fairs, great art exhibitions, international film festivals, and theatrical performances. As I grew up enjoying all of these benefits, I am considered a member of the Iranian cultural elite. I have travelled to many cities across Iran and have visited two major Muslim countries: Saudi Arabia and Turkey. I believe that my understanding of the dynamics of social relations and issues in Muslim societies is based on a wealth of first-hand experiences.

In this thesis, I explore the methods of representation in selected photographs and films by Neshat, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (*RLT* hereafter). The selected works span a range of materials including photographs, movie stills, films, images together with text (graphic autobiography), and text (memoir). All of these works are mainly available to English-speaking audiences and have been widely published and/or exhibited in first-world countries, fitting into the limited archive of works about women in the two-thirds world.

In the context of potentially reductive representations of different social groups, the availability of particular representative texts, images, and ideas can become contested territory. Individuals and institutions with access to the means of mass production and circulation can turn into inadvertent spokespersons, deemed to speak 'for' all members of a group. For instance, when Iranian women are represented by a few artists and authors in the Global North, whose works are readily available for English-speaking audiences, they may become dominant. The popular assumption that a few intellectuals (artists and writers) may serve as the spokespersons of an entire group is not usually reassessed, if informed critical engagement with those works is limited.

The selected works contribute in substantive ways to an archive of Iranian women's pain, "designating damage" as described by Eve Tuck (Tuck 412). The notions of damage and pain are multifaceted and can be viewed from different angles. These include: the pain and suffering of the 'third-world woman' as represented in the west, the hegemonic self-reinforcing pain-centered story that western audiences are accustomed to find about members of two-thirds world cultures, and the pain of being misrepresented. The first two kinds of pain align with one another, but the pain of misrepresentation felt by two-thirds-world women is rarely recognized, validated, or researched.

From each of the texts, I have chosen the most salient symbolic markers of that pain, as delineated in critical reception in the west. These works amply recount the consequences of the 1979 Revolution in gendered terms. As elaborated in the literature review in Chapter 2, western critics of these works highlight depictions of, for instance, "pious Islamic modes of embodiment" (Rounthwaite 166), "growing awareness of turmoil" (Chute 100), Iranian state "dull[ing] the imagination of its people" (Clemens 589), and in a nutshell, "the regime's coercive homogenization of [young women] through their gender" (Flint 511).

1.2. SUMMARY OF THE SELECTED WORKS

The following is an overview of the selected cultural works by three contemporary Iranian women who are members of the Iranian diaspora. The selection includes Shirin Neshat's photographic works and films (1999-2003), Marjane Satrapi's graphic autobiography, *Persepolis* (2003), and Azar Nafisi's memoir *RLT* (2003)

Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) is a photo-based series, each composed of approximately a hundred black-and-white photographs. Many of the subjects in the photographs have calligraphic inscriptions on their body: eyes, face, chest, hands, and/or feet. Loud jarring music accompanies photographs as they move on a slideshow in recorded files of the installations.

Neshat's *Rapture* (1999) is a thirteen-minute long video installation with two corresponding black-and-white films projected on opposing walls in a gallery. One film projection shows a large group of men in western style white shirts and black slacks, standing inside a huge fortress by the sea. The opposing screen shows a group of women in black chadors, wandering outside the fortress. The women eventually walk towards an empty sea, and six of them climb aboard a boat and drift away while the men stay put and wave at them. Another work of Neshat, *Fervor* (2000), is a ten-minute long two-channel video and audio installation that simultaneously shows a man and a woman in the same mosque, where women

and men are separated by a curtain. Even without seeing one another, the characters sense each other's presence. Attraction and tension between them mounts to the extent that the woman grows restless and leaves the crowd.

Co-directed by Neshat and her husband, Shoja Azari, *Women without Men* (2009), is a feature film based on Shahrnush Parsipur's 2004 novel entitled, *Women without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran*. The film narrates the interwoven stories of four women who live in Tehran during the 1953 coup that returned the king of Iran to power. Munis is a young, politically conscious woman who is detained at home by her brother. The domestic violence that she has to endure escalates to such an extent that she commits suicide. Faezeh is and remains a conservative, devout Muslim girl until she loses her virginity in a rape attempt. Zarrin is a troubled sex worker, and Fakhri is a middle-aged intellectual who can no longer tolerate her husband's bossing her around. Fakhri leaves her husband to settle in a deserted country house, where Zarrin, Faezeh, and later Munis' soul join her. In this house of refuge, the four women finally gain the consolation and independence they have craved.

Persepolis (2003) is Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel, first published in French in 2000 followed by its translation to English in 2003. This coming-of-age story is told from Marji's point of view (Satrapi's literary persona), and mainly involves the tragic events that Marji and her family witness and/or experience in post-revolutionary Islamicized Iran. Using a first-person narrator, Satrapi's work reflects the viewpoint of the young, middle-class Marji and highlights the downside of the theocratic government of Iran, bringing to the fore the emerging contradictions between people's personal and public lives. After tolerating many devastating incidents, Marji's parents eventually decide that the only viable way to invest in Marji's future is by providing an education that entails leaving the country, so they send her to Vienna, Austria, promising to visit her soon.

RLT is the story of Azar Nafisi's secret book club with seven of her female students—Mahshid, Yassi, Mitra, Nassrin, Azin, Sanaz and Manna—held in her apartment in Tehran, Iran. They read works by Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. The personal stories of Nafisi and her students become intertwined with those they read in their weekly gatherings, which last for two years from 1995 to 1997. At times, they identify with the characters in the works they are reading, and every so often they envy some of those characters. The memoir ends with Nafisi leaving Iran for the United States, never to return. *RLT* highlights Iranian people's hardships in the Islamic Republic of Iran and emphasizes the emancipatory power of imagination gained through reading great works of English literature.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

My thesis moves away from analyzing the selected works with a focus on Muslim/Iranian women's oppression as its crucial axis, and examines the ways in which these works have been structured and taken up in the west to reduce, summarize, or erase the multidimensionality of the everyday experiences of many Iranian women. What I will focus on is the obfuscation of temporal and spatial positioning of the subjects portrayed in these works of art and literature. On the one hand, as is common in overdetermined constructions of two-thirds world lives, the social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and political histories of Iranian women are neglected and individual characters or those represented in visual culture can be interpreted as frozen in time, as if their life conditions have remained the same for centuries; on the other hand, the complexity of local contexts seems to be peripheral, if not completely ignored. Employing discourse analysis and visual analysis, I plan to elaborate on how these works can contribute to Anglo-centric stereotypes of Iranian women in the Global North, even as they attempt to dispel them.

Through the analysis of the selected works, I attempt to answer the following questions:

- What aspects of Iranian women's lives are predominantly emphasized in the works of Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, and Azar Nafisi?
- What is missing from or de-emphasized in the representations of Iranian women in these works?
- What are the consequences to transnational solidarities that arise when western academics rely on so few representative voices as "speaking for" Iranian women?
- In what ways have the biographical backgrounds of Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi affected the circulation of their perspective in the one-third world?
- How has the critical reception of these works shaped their trajectories in producing public discourse in the west?

Since critical contributions from the west may also provide innovative approaches to engaging with these works, I aim to provide western feminists with some cautionary actions they can take to resist overdetermined readings of diasporic works by Iranian women. While these selected visual and textual materials may be interpreted in numerous ways, my work engages some of the most noticeable gendered signs of Islamic practices, and the ways they can be read and misread by different audiences. I have chosen fairly obvious examples; other scholars may wish to examine other illustrative cases, or to delve more deeply into individual

works.

1.4. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 outlines the background of this research project, selection criteria for the materials, objectives of the study, a brief summary of selected materials, followed by research questions.

Chapter 2 encompasses a review of related literature on the concept of ‘stereotype,’ feminist intersectionality as the theoretical framework of this thesis, the mainly academic and artistic reception of selected works, and the rationale behind the necessity of developing a non-western framework of scholarly research and feminist activism in general.

In Chapter 3, I describe my epistemological stance, elaborate visual and textual methods of research that I use in the two analytical chapters, and conclude the chapter with an explanation of reflexivity.

The visual analysis of selected works by Neshat and Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003) is included in the fourth chapter. Some of the most important aspects of these materials are analyzed, including the issue of mandatory hijab in Iran, the portrayal of Iranian women as obedient and submissive, and the separation of women and men in public spaces. Finally, I discuss neglected intersections of Iranian women’s identities as evident in the materials studied in this chapter.

Chapter 5 encompasses textual discourse analysis of *Persepolis* (2003) and *RLT* (2003). I examine the ways in which women in Iran are portrayed in these works as trapped victims in the Islamic society, and how it is conveyed that liberation and emancipation of ‘the Iranian woman’ is attainable through adopting western values and imitating western lifestyles. Similar to Chapter 4, I present a brief argument about the relevance and importance of intersectionality in discussions about these representative works.

Chapter 6 concludes this thesis with an argument on the ways in which the materials analyzed in this thesis have been received in the Global North, and also about the implications of their reception by western audiences. In addition, areas where further academic research could be conducted are laid out.

Chapter 2

Literature Review/ Theoretical Framework

Intersections of Gender, Race and Class

2.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework informing my analysis. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's concept of 'othering' and Edward Said's discussions of 'Orientalism,' I elaborate how the notion of 'difference' has been deployed, both to establish structures of oppression and to critique them, and how "difference" remains central to feminist intersectionality. Chandra T. Mohanty, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Saba Mahmood, and Marnia Lazreg are among the scholars whose works have influenced my examination of intersectionality as an analytical tool. I also review the critical literature on the works of Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, and Azar Nafisi, with particular focus on critical responses written on the specific works selected for my project. The selected materials are peer-reviewed to ensure the quality and reliability of sources which have already been scrutinized by experts in the field. I conclude that a non-western feminist framework of analysis is vital to challenging Orientalist narratives about Iranian women.

2.2. STEREOTYPES AND MUSLIM WOMEN

Stereotyping happens when almost all members of a group are attributed with rationally unsupported, generalized characteristics. Stereotypical images and messages may become so ubiquitous as to put people's identities and experiences under public erasure (Berlyne, Vinacke, and Sternberg, n.p.). Categories, classifications, and stereotypes are in fact "authentic instruments of inequality, and they are static and hard to move. But they are the ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies, not the dynamic that creates them" (MacKinnon 1023). The so-called Third World woman is, for instance, often stereotyped as racialized, backward, and oppressed (Mohanty 272; Shih 92). Similarly, the hijab-wearing Muslim woman has come to endure certain disprivileges due to the stereotypic assumptions attached to her garments and presumptions about her social positioning, particularly in western contexts. As the hijab is the most recognized emblem of Muslim

women and the most visible departure from western women's dress codes, it is probably the most common sign to which stereotypes about Muslim women have become attached. Although "equating dress code with religion" obscures the fact that "clothing worn by Muslims is as varied and culturally specific as clothes worn by Jews, Buddhists, or atheists" (Shaheed 303), wearing a head-cover of any kind has come to mean that the wearer is assumed to be Muslim. For instance, popular culture is full of examples of mistaken identity attributable to mis-readings of head-covers. One such account involves an American non-Muslim woman who was harassed by a man who had mistaken her for a Muslim because she had been wearing a headscarf while running in the rain (Nevett, n.p.). Similarly, "[a] Toronto woman's efforts to stay warm ended up giving her a chilling glimpse into Islamophobia after she was assaulted by a man who mistook her scarf for a hijab... she had wrapped her scarf around her head to keep her ears warm" (Haines, n.p.). Seemingly, wearing a headscarf invoked Islamophobia in both cases, with disturbing results. The fact that both non-Muslim women were assaulted by non-Muslim men reveals the sexist and aggressive targeting that pervades the treatment of Muslim women as members of a marked category on North American streets. When academic feminists find themselves following suit in their critical analyses of the works of diasporic Iranian women, it is important to challenge their capitulation to such stereotypes, and their complicity with larger political processes, whether performed consciously or unconsciously.

Among all Muslim majority countries, Iran is the only one in which the hijab is state-mandated for all women, regardless of their religion and nationality. Thus, it is unsurprising that those who have never travelled to Iran might begin to imagine Iranian women as figures in burkas, covered in black from head to toe. The history of enforced Islamic dress codes in Iran is a little more complicated, however, than is understood in popular western imagination.

Iranian women's use of the hijab has been the object of state legislation twice during the twentieth century. In 1936, Reza Shah—then king of Iran—banned women's wearing the hijab under his 'unveiling' policy. The strict enforcement of women's unveiling, which banned wearing both the chador and the long scarf in public, was supposed to contribute to the westernization endorsed by the Pahlavi government and its triumph over the clergy (Mir-Hosseini 14; Sedghi 2, 38). Imposed unveiling was abandoned in 1941, yet its impact persisted until the outbreak of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In response to the former unveiling policy, Islamic dress code became obligatory for all women in Iran in April 1983 (Milani, *Veils and Words* 37-8). Hijab was then believed by the male-dominated government to guarantee women's involvement in society (Mir-Hosseini 14); that is, modest clothing was intended, according to those in power, to protect women from the possibility of being seen and treated

as sex objects by men (Mir-Hosseini 1), and to promote more equitable distribution of opportunities for women.

In both years, 1936 and 1983, the Iranian female population was divided on the topic of state-mandated dress: In 1936 when the ‘unveiling’ policy was implemented, millions of Iranian women were angered and preferred to stay home, rather than going outside without a headscarf (Shirazi-Mahajan 61) and in 1983, many women living in urban areas, mostly those with secular worldviews, joined demonstrations and protests (www.bahejab.com) against enforced adoption of the hijab. To help unpack these disparate views, it is important to keep in mind that observing Islamic rules and codes of conduct, including modest clothing, not drinking alcoholic beverages, and fasting during Ramadan, has often been linked to class and economic status in Iranian society. One cannot possibly (over)generalize that “Iranian women” as a homogeneous category have always or have never upheld or refused Islamic mandates, or lack thereof. The Iranian working class, similar to many other working-class populations around the world (Miller, n.p.), tend to be more religious, while the middle- or upper-middle class populations are less likely to adhere to religious teachings. Therefore, the construction of monolithic categories for analysis of Iranian women’s choices has never been viable since, despite our shared identities as Iranian or Muslim women, our lived experiences have neither been identical nor one-dimensional.

The “compartmentalized” world, as Frantz Fanon describes it, consists of a binary model where the privileged side is very often white, rich, and powerful, neighbouring the racialized, poor, and alienated world of the ‘other’ (Fanon 3; 5). Such social dichotomies reinforce structures and processes that target particular people and places with situated privileges and disprivileges. Edward Said argues that western knowledge projects about the East systematically use Orientalist frameworks as accepted tools to translate the Orient for western consciousness (Said 14). “The Oriental,” Said maintains, is constructed as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different;’ thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 48). In Said’s view, the Oriental world has been attributed identity and intelligibility through a “complex series of knowledgeable manipulations... by the West” (Said 48). Fanon’s and Said’s arguments were presented to the scholarly world between the 1960’s and 1980’s, yet “the discourse of Orientalism persists into the present, particularly in the West’s relationship with ‘Islam,’ as is evidenced in its study, its reporting in the media, its representation in general” (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 168). Contemporary Orientalist rubrics and rhetorics, based on abstract notions of ‘the East’ or ‘Asia,’ have lumped diverse groups of people together in the western imagination, and have dismantled responsible and respectful

appreciation of profound cultural, linguistic, and religious differences in those countries where they are “applied self-ascriptively in ways not dissimilar to the Orientalist discourses of the colonial period” (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 169). Within and across borders, the ‘othered’ Eastern or Asian individual and the ethnic communities they inhabit thus become marginalized, “identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’” (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 170).

Fanon asserts that “[t]he oppressed will always believe the worst about themselves” (Schulman 19), yet he proposes that it is in this limited “conceptualization that space for emancipation or ‘disalienation’ emerges” (Kane 358). For Fanon, racial equality and emancipation from the continued impact of various colonialisms can be achieved, in part, by rejecting essentialized racial categories. Dismantling such practices of essentialism requires targeted individuals to “remain in the world to which power has assigned [them]” (Kane 358), moving with agency and awareness within the compartmentalized structures in which they find themselves, and between categories and spaces of ‘white’ and ‘othered.’ That is, Fanon sees a need to recognize and understand the constructed nature of these worlds of difference through “authentic communication” (Kane 358) and informed understanding of them to move toward empowered responses.

While Fanon’s and Said’s works mainly focus on constructed racial differences and related forms of discrimination, feminist scholarship and debates embrace the critical importance of parsing the distribution of social power along multiple dimensions of identity politics and difference, including but not limited to class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and ethnicity. Some feminist scholars maintain that “difference is [at] the root of female identity,” arguing, in step with Fanon, that differences among women help pave the way for female empowerment (Shih 101). The complex and interwoven socially constructed differences that remain a serious concern within diverse feminist circles and scholarly works are addressed through the critical framework of intersectionality (Davis 70). Acknowledging the many socially constructed differences that transect diversely-situated groups of women is, however, intersectionality’s *starting point*, leading to much more nuanced analyses of the operations of power in a wide range of contexts (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 788). Most feminist scholars recognize that social life is too irreducibly complex—overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures—to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences... there is now great skepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way” (McCall 1773). This point is crucial to my own arguments in this thesis, as

illustrated in two brief examples outlined below.

In the practice of Orientalism, race, for example, is perceived and commodified as an icon of difference (Shih 113). The notion of difference is used to render the racialized woman as too difficult and *time-consuming* to be known and understood (Shih 95). Shu-Mei Shih, Asian Languages and Cultures professor at UCLA, has examined common representations of Chinese culture in the United States. She points out that Chinese women who can present their works in English in the United States too easily become “representatives” of all Chinese women, because western scholars often attend to stories of “Chineseness” that affirm western self-constructions. “Ethnicization,” Shih suggests, is the “unspoken procedure that buttresses the West’s willful reductionism and ignorance of non-Western and ethnicized Others” (Shih 112). To illustrate, she reviews the critical reception of the autobiography of Anchee Min, a Chinese artist whose work of creative non-fiction about her early life presented in English, *Red Azalea*, details the hardships she faced in the context of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. That riveting narrative, which represents Min’s experiences as she navigated a specific set of time and space-bound conditions, has earned her such “accolades as ‘courageous,’ ‘honest’ [and] ‘brave’” (111). While such praise may very well be deserved, a single autobiography cannot possibly be expected to account for the experiences of all Chinese women at that time or since. Shih deplores the tendency of American audiences to conceive of China as a “primitive, raw, and brutal arena,” and to praise Min’s autobiography (which retells the painful stories of just one Chinese woman in Maoist China) as a book “of deep honesty and morality” (111) because it simultaneously reinforces American political aspirations and ideologies. Shih concludes that by holding themselves accountable for respecting the multidimensionality of Chineseness, western feminists may avoid homogenizing the shifting and complex determinations of Chinese identity (115; 117), by refusing to interpret single works as representative, or in ways that reinforce existing power relations among specific social groups and nations.

If utilizing single experiential accounts to stand in for entire groups of women is absurd, so is the tendency to homogenize women from wide geographic regions into single identity categories, in ways that fortify uneven international power structures. Marnia Lazreg argues that one-sided discourses on the differences of women in “peripheral states” would be considered grotesque if the argument were reversed—for instance, if one were to suggest that European and North American women should all be referred to as Christian women. In fact, “the label ‘Middle Eastern women,’ when counter-posed with the label ‘European women,’ reveals its unwarranted generality” (Lazreg 88). The Middle East, Lazreg adds, as a geographical area, covers approximately twenty countries that exhibit many more differences

than similarities (Lazreg 88). One size of categorization does not fit all. As one of the numerous countries associated with the Middle East, Iran is characterized by its own language, governance structures, national history, multiple religious affiliations, diverse ethnicities, social classes and feminist and other political aspirations.

2.3. FEMINIST INTERSECTIONALITY

Individual and state identities are constituted through complex interactions among cultures, classes, religions, variable forms of gender expression, age, ability, sexual orientations and so on. The wide range of experiences that inform the diversity and complexity of human institutions and identities are, however, too often overlooked for the sake of simplifying and condensing them for consumption in variously constituted publics. This seemingly ordinary and habitual process of over-simplification and the inevitable consequence of homogenization “leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality” (McCall 1777). In relation to Iranian women, these are the very tendencies I wish to challenge in my thesis.

Although the term ‘intersectionality’ was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” the premises and ideas underpinning feminist intersectionality were formed in the 1970s when members of the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization in Boston, Massachusetts published their key statement entitled, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1979). This statement was informed by the realization that white middle-class women experience a different form of oppression than Black poor women, so white middle-class feminists could not provide an accurate representation of all the members of feminist movement. “A Black Feminist Statement” highlighted the key role of social structures in determining the life conditions of “racially and economically marginalized women” (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 797). Asserting that “major systems of oppression are interlocking,” the members of the Combahee River Collective committed, in their statement, to actively struggle against “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” (Combahee River Collective 6) and to challenge the structures that reinforce these forms of oppression. Having realized that the “process of categorization is itself an exercise of power,” (Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins” 1297) intersectional feminist and critical race theorists have attempted to account for widely variable ‘lived experiences’ at “neglected points of intersection” (McCall 1780).

Leslie McCall defines intersectionality as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall 1771). According to Catharine A. MacKinnon, intersectionality remains “grounded in the experiences of classes of people within hierarchical relations ‘where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge’” (MacKinnon 1020). Feminist scholars have been shaping, theorizing, and drawing on concepts arising from theories of intersectionality to account for manifold axes of difference, not only class, gender and race, but citizenship, immigration status, sexual orientation, disability and religion. They have also employed intersectionality to also “analyze a range of complex social processes—classism, homophobia, xenophobia, nativism, ageism, ableism, and Islamophobia” (Carbado 814-5), moving well beyond “anti-Black racism and sexism” (Carbado 815) as primary sites of investigation into complex power relations. Various types of discrimination interact to shape socially constructed categories of identity and the institutions that feed on them, and they also overlap. Therefore, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection” 140). The analysis of overlapping structures of subordination reveals how targeted groups of women are made vulnerable to abuse and are subject to inadequate institutional interventions that fail to take into account the structural dimensions of their subalterned contexts (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 797).

Chandra T. Mohanty is one of the first scholars writing in the west to call attention to the transnational, imperial, and colonial dimensions of white feminisms. She maintains that considering all or indeed any group of ‘women’ as a homogeneous category, appropriates and colonizes the “pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks,” robbing them of due appreciation of their political agency (Mohanty 271). Yet, there is usually an “uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination” (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection” 150) that persists. The most disappointing feature of such uncritical acceptance of dominant patterns of thought is that any discourse of resistance is apparently also always, already, being shaped by the structures of domination (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection” 150).

As a theoretical framework, intersectionality makes the coercions and possibilities of everyday life visible (Davis 70), as it is not merely “categorically, spatially, or temporally rooted in specific relations or superficially preoccupied with ‘difference’” (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 788). Critical intersectionality frameworks seek to go deeper, unpacking first the over-simplifications (Spivak 27-8), and then the potentials that are undermined as a result.

Emphasizing Iranian women's experiences as a site of difference from those of western women may affirm and reinforce under-informed western perspectives while undervaluing differences among Iranian women. Shu-Mei Shih (2002) discusses such "imperial fantasies of difference" (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 806) or what she calls "Western (mis)uses of difference," maintaining that 'difference' is being misemployed in such cases to encode specific "values of time/space, ethnicity, and gender subjectivity" (Shih 92) central to the dominant frame of reference, with all of its attendant justifications for aggressions along multiple registers. The Othered woman, Shih asserts, is "frozen in absolute difference" (Shih 95), for reasons that do not reflect her own interests, needs or aspirations. In the next section, I will reflect on these socio-cultural structural influences and effects in preparation for analyzing the works I have selected in my efforts to advance a more nuanced and inclusive framework for feminist analysis.

2.4. CONTEXTUALIZING SELECTED WORKS IN RELATION TO THEIR CRITICAL RECEPTION

In this section, I examine important debates shaping the critical reception of selected works by Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, and Azar Nafisi. In terms of selection criteria, all of these works have been widely published and/or exhibited in the Global North. They fit into the limited archive of cultural materials provided by diasporic one-third world Iranian-born women and are primarily available to English-speaking audiences. What follows is an examination of dominant perspectives informing the critical literature available in English on the specific works analyzed in this thesis.

Lila Azam Zanganeh's 2006 anthology, *My Sister, Guard Your Veil, My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*, is a collection of essays and interviews by globally acknowledged Iranian authors and artists living in or outside Iran. Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi are among the artists and writers selected as contributors to the anthology, owing to their predominance as representative Iranian voices who have received broad critical attention in the west. In her interview, Shirin Neshat highlights the idea of an intersection of violence and religion in Iran, maintaining that her photographs in the *Women of Allah (1993-1997)* series explore "what it means ideologically, philosophically, and even aesthetically to be a Muslim woman, a militant, and a martyr" (Azam Zanganeh 45). Asserting that Iranian women have always resisted oppressive theocracy, Neshat suggests that Iranian women's strength to resist Islamic oppression has enabled them to gain their own unique voices (47). Neshat argues that her works aim to dispel clichés about Iranian women as passive victims of Islamic patriarchy,

showing them as more powerful today than ever before (52). Meanwhile, in her short article in the same volume, Marjane Satrapi argues that talking about ‘Muslim countries’ generally means defining them in terms of religion and thus shrinking a dozen countries to a single abstract concept. Satrapi states that “Iran has an actual identity, an actual history – and above all, actual people” (22-3). In Nafisi’s contribution to the anthology, she discusses the Iranian state’s imposition of “one interpretation of religion” upon all Iranian citizens (5) and maintains that after the 1979 revolution, men and women began to feel the intervention of the state in their most private affairs (6), depriving them of ordinary pleasures of life (7). According to Nafisi, Iranians can save themselves from despair and liberate themselves by rescuing their confiscated identities (7), a practice only made possible by believing in and using the power of imagination. She reminds readers that it is “in the storied details of who we are, what we fear, and what we wish for, that the imagination thrives” (11).

2.5. CONTEXTUALIZING AND INTERPRETING NESHAT’S REPRESENTATIONS OF IRANIAN WOMEN

Iftikhar Dadi writes that Neshat has arguably become “the most significant visual interpreter of the status of Muslim women universally” (Dadi 130). Dadi argues that Neshat’s photographic works largely focus on the Iranian female “figure as representation” in the public sphere (129-30). Rejecting the idea that Neshat’s works simply engage with Orientalist depictions of veiled women, Dadi asserts that Neshat’s art can be perceived as allegorical, rather than as documentary portrayals of the actual conditions of Muslim women (128). In Dadi’s view, Neshat interrogates the media representations of Iranian revolutionary women and mars the image of the massed silhouette; she “moves precisely in the opposite direction, from the mass subject back to the singular—from depiction of a non[-]individuated collective toward the representation of an individual, decontextualized and reframed in a studio setting” (144).

Adair Rounthwaite criticizes reductive analyses of Neshat’s art, arguing that interpretations of her work are polarized by the “readings of Islam and women’s agency as fundamentally incompatible, and the possibility of female subjects whose agency is grounded in and who aspire to Islamic values” (Rounthwaite 165). Rounthwaite refers to the theory of non-liberatory agency and suggests that Neshat’s videos might depict pious Islamic modes of embodiment, and may also offer a way of thinking about Muslim women’s agency that is not placed in the binary opposition of religious oppression versus liberal freedom, a binary which many of Neshat’s critics frequently employ (166). Referring to some interpretations of

Neshat's art as "dangerously Orientalizing," Rounthwaite suggests that before forming any judgment, it is important to first interrogate the models of agency upon which such critical readings are based (179). According to Rounthwaite, it is possible to move away from viewing "the works as either representationally responsible or irresponsible, towards a consideration of how they might be seen to address a whole realm of agency and religious experience whose existence the West often seems too scared to even start to imagine" (179).

Despite the critical acclaim that Neshat's works have received, there are some critics who have viewed her subjects as exotic and unknowable, and therefore difficult to identify with. Lauren Collins, an award-winning writer at *The New Yorker*, states that there are critics who "have scoffed at [Neshat's] tendency toward...melodramatically picturesque" (Collins 86) visualizations, that Neshat lacks a viewpoint, and that "[a]ll that a viewer gets is a generalized mood, a kind of artsier MTV" (86). Some even argue that such an archive for American audiences "trained by CNN, MTV, and Hollywood...does nothing but confirm what they already 'know': the superiority of their own cultural values" (Hay 19).

Drawing on Edward Said's theories, Mojgan Khosravi asserts that Neshat's art perpetuates Orientalism, "which allocates the Oriental to an inferior position vis-à-vis his Occidental counterpart" (Khosravi 2). Neshat's gloomy portrayals of Iranian women wearing hijab, Khosravi argues, represent them as a subordinate group within an archaic society (22), even though many contemporary women in all walks of Iranian life continue to wear hijab, voluntarily. In addition to her emphasis on Iranian women cloaked in black chadors, Neshat's consistent use of guns in her photographs and films implies degeneracy and violence in Islam (22). Contrary to Dadi's positive take on Neshat's singular, decontextualized depictions of women, Khosravi believes that Neshat renders misinformed, reductive and outdated depictions of Iranian women, freezing them in time and space by placing them in bleak surroundings (58). This practice of visual representation can invoke the cultural imperialist dream of rescuing brown women from their "harsh" and "traditional" contexts among brown men.

2.6. CONTEXTUALIZING AND INTERPRETING SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS* (2003)

Hillary Chute refers to *Persepolis* (2003) as the story of the trials and misfortunes of precocious Marjane, a young Iranian woman nicknamed Marji (Chute 96). Marji's resistance against the oppressive Iranian regime and her dangerous outspokenness force her fearful parents to send her out of the country at age fourteen (96-7). Chute points out that the force of Satrapi's narrative comes from the disjuncture between the often-gorgeous minimalism of her drawings and the complicated traumatic events that they depict, including "harassment, torture,

execution, bombings, mass murder” (99). *Persepolis*, Chute writes, is about imagining and witnessing violence (99). Satrapi highlights the mandatory adoption of the hijab in post-revolution Iran by showing unsmiling schoolgirls covered with chest-length veils (95). As Chute states, “[w]e do in fact, clearly, ‘see’ [Marji]—just not all of her—but her self-presentation as fragmented, cut, disembodied, and divided between frames indicat[ing] the psychological condition suggested by the chapter’s title, ‘The Veil’” (96). Satrapi’s graphic novel, Chute adds, calls our attention to “what we as readers ‘see’ and do not see of the subject;” the legibility of the subject as a literal, readable being, open to encounter (96).

Joseph Darda discusses how Satrapi introduces the readers of her autobiography to Marji, her childhood self: She is sitting next to four girls, all wearing identical headscarves. The caption reads: “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me” (Darda 38). Darda argues that Marji’s simultaneous presence and potential absence would prevent her from becoming “grievable” in “the imagination of the Western audience because she is not there in the first place” (38). According to Darda, *Persepolis* offers an accurate historical account of the lives of Iranian women and girls, but more importantly, that it interrogates the limits of what can be understood about the imagined ‘Other,’ reminding readers that, “even those called ‘Other’ are never never that” (48-9).

Typhaine Leservot argues that Satrapi’s aim is to help western audiences view “Iranians as simply human beings rather than condemned exotic others” (Leservot 115). In Leservot’s view, despite the Iranian government’s censorship and dictatorship, Satrapi’s book highlights how westernized Iranians use western products, listen to popular western music, wear western-style clothes, and go to parties (115). Leservot challenges Nima Naghibi’s arguments (discussed below) about the “dialectical relationship of East and West” in *Persepolis*, stating that Naghibi has taken Satrapi’s images of the west at face value (115). Leservot concludes that Satrapi’s characters “use western paraphernalia as tools for resisting the dominant paradigm of Islamic rule” (127). This reading not so subtly reaffirms the west as liberatory resource.

Nima Naghibi remarks upon a wave of Iranian memoirs written by a generation of authors whose childhood was interrupted by the 1979 revolution. As Naghibi notes, these memoirs are intensely bound up with nostalgia for a lost pre-revolution Iran and a lost childhood (Naghibi, “Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia” 80). Raising objections to the claim that activist writers such as Satrapi render an accurate account of Iranian women’s lives, Naghibi maintains that these memoirists belong to “the therapy-driven ‘culture of confession’ and the culture of testimony in which we currently live” (82). Naghibi adds, “[t]he genre of the

Middle Eastern woman's memoir has become a highly marketable commodity, particularly in the post - 9/11 context" (81). Autobiography, Naghibi concludes, may convey the fullness of the voices and the presence of those denied their rights; nevertheless, it can also be employed as "a soft weapon because it is easily co-opted into propaganda" (81). In the following chapters, I will examine this critical question of situated interpretations of selected texts, and the ways their content may interpellate western affirmations.

2.7 CONTEXTUALIZING AND INTERPRETING NAFISI'S *READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN* (2003)

According to Colleen Clemens, Azar Nafisi's *RLT* essentializes the gendered experiences of Iranian citizens (Clemens 584). This memoir is more than a simple text, as Clemens notes, the volume is "one with a complex understanding of women and their ability to resist - a text invested in a certain ideology aligned with western ideas of freedom and capital" (585). Referring to Nafisi's public interviews, Clemens affirms that the Islamic state of Iran has always attempted to dull the imagination of its people by showing the images of western people suffering, so that Iranians cannot imagine a different life for themselves (589). Thus, she argues, Nafisi portrays Iranian women who look for models of empowerment in the face of oppressive theocracy and demonstrates that reading and imagination have become the most powerful tools of resistance for these women (585; 588). Clemens rejects the idea that *RLT* plays to the American desire to Orientalize Middle Eastern countries so as to justify military action. Nafisi, Clemens adds, is not the mouthpiece of an entire country, and her memoir is about one woman's experience, rather than a handbook for understanding all things Iranian (585; 593).

Kate Flint acknowledges Nafisi's emphasis on imagination as a significant basis for liberatory power, gained through reading (524). Flint states that in Nafisi's opinion, books play "a crucial role in the determination of an individual life," (513) and reading is a route into the formation of defining one's womanhood according to conventional and unconventional dictates, a path through which to resist multiple expectations (533). *RLT* shows "the regime's coercive homogenization of [young women] through their gender" alongside the tensions between the individualities of her young students, and their symbolic rebellions through reading western literature and wearing western clothes and make up (511). Flint explains that reading great books of literature allowed Nafisi's reading group to defy the repressive reality outside Nafisi's apartment, to avenge themselves on those who controlled their lives and to discuss their pains and joys, their personal inhibitions and weaknesses, articulating all that

happened to them in their own words and seeing themselves, for once, in their own image (533). Flint recognizes *RLT* as a compelling piece that lends new eyes to the people from first world countries who take the reading privileges of a western democracy for granted (512).

Christine Grogan argues that *RLT* successfully provides “Western readers an insider’s view of the cruel patriarchal practices many Muslim women experience” (Grogan 53). In Grogan’s opinion, for Nafisi, literature is a refuge from politics; therefore, reading literature and writing are a means of self-preservation and acts of survival (68-9). Ironically, Grogan states, this memoir has become “the topic of a highly politicized debate about neoconservatives and pro-war propaganda” (69), perhaps most tellingly, in the United States. Nafisi draws our attention to the post-revolutionary trauma of Iranians and maintains that social change does not come from violence but from learning about the humanity of others, lessons that are found in the great works of literature (69), [although not necessarily in Iranian literature, which lingers in obscurity in her discussion.] Grogan asserts that even though Nafisi does not mention Nabokov’s voyeuristic emphasis on Lolita’s body, she recurrently discusses the ways in which Iranian women’s bodies are greatly emphasized in the local culture, and how the veil is intended to render them invisible (59). Thus, the ‘veil’ (hijab) is interpreted from without, in keeping with western views, rather than from within, by more directly engaging the views of Iranian women. That Lolita, as a character, disappears behind Nabakov’s nihilistic construction of her sexual vulnerabilities to a pair of variously cultured pedophilic men, offers a parallel critique of western patriarchal libidinal economies and their manipulative aggressions. Patriarchal constructions of gendered visibilities and invisibilities with their mutually constituting sexualizing substructures appear unexamined in a text that emphasizes oppressions in Tehran over portrayed pedophilic predations in Ramsdale, New Hampshire.

Siti Adenan argues that Nafisi subverts traditional views and social expectations of Iranian community and promotes western ideals and values by using European and American literature for her reading group; her story seems to position “the West as the icon of progress and civilisation for Iranian women and society to emulate” (Adenan 40, 43). Nafisi’s narrative, Adenan states, reflects Iranian cultural trauma and hardly offers “balanced portrayals of the Islamic Republic” (43). Adenan points out Nafisi’s consistent rejection and criticism of Iranian state policies while overlooking positive changes brought about by the Islamic Republic, and concludes that “Nafisi’s sweeping generalizations of [the] Muslim society” of Iran reinforce Orientalist stereotypes about the society and depict the Islamic republic as oppressive of Iranians, especially women (43).

John Rowe interprets Nafisi's book as a form of insider American testimony to the widespread corruption of the ideals of the Islamic revolution, as well as the tyranny under which many people suffer in contemporary Iran (Rowe 256-7). Nevertheless, referring to the "generous grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation" at Johns Hopkins University that Nafisi received to finish writing *RLT*, Rowe states that this memoir promotes the idea of western civilization, especially the British and the American variants, as being "the universal model for democratic individualism" (271). Questioning whether Nafisi's book and her reading project have accomplished their goals, Rowe asserts that the intense privacy of Nafisi's reading group initiates no measurable change in Iranian politics. Further, *RLT* has been published in the United States, for English-speaking readers, so it mainly focuses on English audiences within or proximal to the United States (258); as such, a highly selective audience is exposed to her message.

The critical literature on the works of Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi that are written by European and North American scholars, as briefly sampled above, reflects a generally positive attitude to these works while their shortcomings are mainly addressed by Iranian academics and critics. This is no small matter. Western critics' admiration and Iranian scholars' disapproval of the representational positioning of these works draws attention to the idea of what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang term a "growing archive of pain," arguing that the 'subaltern' is told that, "*you had better find something that is worth saying, and pain and humiliation are worth saying*" (emphasis in the original) (813). Seemingly, it is the stories of pain and humiliation of the 'subaltern' that would become bestsellers in the Global North as they align conveniently with American foreign policies and thus receive the support necessary for their wide circulation and success.

2.8. THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING A NON-WESTERN FRAMEWORK

According to Saba Mahmood, western feminist scholarship has a greater tendency to emphasize subversive forms of agency and to ignore "other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 153). Regarding Muslim women's experiences, Amina Jamal (2015) argues that in the diverse but mutually informing contexts of diasporic, secular and devout Islamic cultures and practices, a strategy has emerged that entails:

alternative modes of subjectivity and agency for Muslim women, thereby questioning the secular trajectory of transgression/resistance as self-

determination by contrasting it with the self-affirming potential of the communitarian and the religious. Muslim women's devotion to their families, community, and Islam; their willing adoption of practices such as the hijab and niqab; and their self-defined ideas about honor, freedom, and respect are proffered to challenge imperialist narratives of their victimization. (Jamal 56)

Contemporary readings of Muslim practices of hijab in feminist scholarship suggest that a Muslim woman's head-cover is not a marker of her submissiveness. It is conceivable to imagine the "possibility of consent" when interrogating Muslim veiling as a form of submission to Islamic patriarchy (Chapman 238). Chandra T. Mohanty asserts that studies on the lives of marginalized women tend to be ahistorical. She states that all Arab and Muslim women are seen to "constitute a homogeneous oppressed group... Arabs and Muslims [,] it appears, don't change at all. Their patriarchal family is carried over from the times of the prophet Mohammed [570 CE-632 CE.] They exist, as it were, 'outside history'" (Mohanty 263). Similarly, the meaning or the message of the hijab, as the most noticeable gendered sign of Muslim piety, is normatively considered to be unvarying at all times. Analyzing western feminist texts that portray women in third world countries, Mohanty interrogates "the analytic leap from 'veiling' to 'an assertion of its general significance in controlling women'" (Mohanty 267). She compares the practice of veiling in Iran and in Saudi Arabia, explaining that the meaning attached to the practice varies greatly in different locations. She further reasserts that not only location but also time would affect the meaning of a certain practice. For instance, Iranian women's veiling used to be an oppositional gesture during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, while the same practice is seen as a coercive, institutional mandate today (268). Mohanty highlights how assuming veiling practice to be *the* indicator of the "universal oppression of women through sexual segregation is reductive and useless when it's about oppositional political strategy" (268). Sometimes, the preferred tool of resistance can be "an item that, in the past as well as in contemporary Saudi Arabia and Iran, has functioned as the symbol of oppression... looked down upon as an archaic custom linked to poverty and class stigma" (Betz-Bornstein 89) or read from afar as a symbol of backwardness.

It is undeniable that considerable damage has been done, over and over, in the name of the world's major religions. The resulting manipulations and misuses of religious scriptures have led to social injustice, tragic events, and great losses: from detainment of physically ill

“suspects” (e.g. Homa Hoodfar¹ and Narges Mohammadi²) to jihadi activities and terrorist attacks on innocent civilians (e.g. Paris attack and Istanbul airport bombing) to genocidal wars and colonialist abuses; all have been done in the name of religion. However, the experiences of Muslims, like those of any other community, are varied and multiple and not reducible to religious practices or punishments. As Saba Mahmood points out, we might have “lost the capacity to hear the voices of Muslim women that do not come packaged in the form of Ayaan Hirsi Ali³, Azar Nafisi, and Irshad Manji⁴” (Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire” 211). To learn about the lived experiences of other groups, geographically and culturally distant audiences inevitably rely on the stories that are available to them, and they may remain oblivious to the fact that alternative narratives, available in English, exist, even if they may not outnumber the already popular accounts. This is unfortunate, especially when western feminist audiences—at the very least according to my own experience presenting my work across Canada—are potentially open to more nuanced positions.

In my thesis, I examine the ways in which the content of these works has reduced, summarized, or erased the multidimensionality of the everyday experiences of many Iranian women. Using discourse and visual analysis, I discuss how engaging such works in isolation may perpetuate Anglo-centric stereotypes of Iranian women. I will also employ an alternative method of reading that moves beyond hegemonic modes of interpretation toward a more respectful, critical and accountable approach to diasporic cultural materials that reference Iran. My approach recognizes that moving across time, space, and uneven global flows of power and related access to the means of production shapes the construction of informed and misinformed publics.

¹ Iranian-Canadian professor emerita of Anthropology at Concordia University, who was detained during her trip to Iran for 112 days due to suspicions about her research in Tehran. Because of a neurological disease, Hoodfar was hospitalized at one point during her detainment (www.cbc.ca).

² Iranian human rights activist who has been in intermittent custody because of accusations of conspiracy against the Iranian government. Mohammadi suffers from a periodic loss of muscle control (Saul, www.independent.co.uk).

³ Somali-Dutch-American feminist activist, scholar, former Dutch politician, and founder of AHA organization that advocates women’s rights (www.theahafoundation.org).

⁴ Canadian author, Muslim activist, and founder of Moral Courage TV (<http://irshadmanji.com>).

Chapter 3
Methodology
Textual and Visual Discourse Analysis

3.1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE

The works of Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, and Azar Nafisi that I have selected for this study span a range of media and genres: from films and photographs, to graphic autobiography, to memoir. The nature of my analysis, explained further in this chapter, necessitates an emphasis on *meaning* and *significance*, both of which are central to qualitative methods (Rose 3). Qualitative methods of research are deemed most appropriate for my analysis, as I believe that concentrating on the meaning and significance of the staging and composition of the photographs and the structures used and reproduced in the texts will afford more specificity and, therefore, rigour to my analysis. Having examined different qualitative research methods and reviewed the related literature, I have tailored the methodology for my study as a blend of discursive and visual methods, which can best serve to provide answers to the key questions of my research project. Since I agree that there is no eternal reality or an absolute truth out there to be uncovered, I do not engage in critical realism and will base my analysis on a constructionist epistemology. Examining the function of discourses across time and space is vital in my analysis, so the major focus of my work will be on the performative and constructive aspects of visual and textual discourses. Context will be treated as a partial determinant of meaning and significance that needs to be analyzed (McMullen 206), and since I do not aim to adopt an empirical approach, my claims will be made with contextual caveats that unpack multiple ideological influences.

Visual and discursive methods of analysis will help to shed light on the different ways in which the works analyzed in this research project have represented Iranian women and their capacities, to reinforce one-dimensional understandings, depending upon context. Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi might have aimed to dispel stereotypes about Iranian women, yet their works have also contributed to and perpetuated those stereotypes.

3.2. VISUAL METHOD

Many writers argue that the visual is key in the cultural construction of modern societies (Rose 6). Photographs are often perceived to provide an incontrovertible version of the world as it is (Sturken and Cartwright 17), as though images were mechanical records of our lives (Berger 10). Roland Barthes uses the term *myth* to address cultural meanings and values expressed through images. A myth embodies covert rules and conventions that make meanings—specific to certain groups—seem universal (Sturken and Cartwright 19).

Concepts informing visual culture have histories and carry cultural attitudes that guide the production and consumption of images for humanistic or scientific knowledge (Drucker 18-9). In fact, through their various media of representation, images give form to abstract ideas such as structures of power or the workings of ideologies (Drucker 65). As such, visual culture contributes to the creation of “categories of the normal and the exotic” (Cartwright and Sturken 102-3), so that, for example, photographic subjects may not necessarily be treated solely as individuals, but rather may come to represent a specific category of people, established as different, as *other*. In such contexts, the other can neither speak, nor has control over how they are represented (Cartwright and Sturken 103). Although binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, white/black, or culture/nature have long been used to establish meaning, they offer reductive ways to view the complexities of difference. Photographs as well as other tools of representation can play a pivotal role in the ways in which Eastern cultures are Orientalized (Cartwright and Sturken 104). My task in this project is to uncover the constructed binaries and oversimplified representations of a large, heterogeneous group—Iranian women, in selected works by Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi.

How images look and what they represent matter, but it is equally important to understand how images are composed, staged, and seen, and in what contexts. Images “work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite” (Rose 12). A photographer’s way of seeing is reflected when they select a specific site among numerous possible sites. Even though each photographic image reveals the photographer’s way of seeing the subject, the viewer’s perception of the work can be varied as it is dependent on their *own* way of seeing (Berger 10). My analysis of the visual aspects of the works I have selected is informed by this aspect of the social life of images, which is embedded in both the production and reception of images.

I consider two modalities that are central to the critical appreciation of images in context: ‘social’ and ‘compositional.’ The social aspect of an image refers to the range of social, economic, and political relations, practices, and institutions that surround images and through

which they are seen and used (Rose 17). Compositionality of images entails the works' content and construction, or what images actually show; 'colour,' that is the actual colours used as well as value that is conveyed in the darkness or lightness of the colours; 'spatial organization,' which entails the arrangement of objects in relation to one another, and how staging offers a kind of viewing position to its spectators (Rose 40).

I also consider the "expressive content" of images, which entails the combined effect of visual form and subject matter or what critics have called "the 'feel' of an image" (Rose 46). In my analysis of the selected photographs, I will include a discussion of the expressive content of each of the works.

My first step to analyze the photographs I have selected is to devise categories for coding. Coding the photographs entails first assigning a descriptive label to each one. The labels should be *exhaustive*: that is, every aspect of a photograph is categorized under a single label. Descriptive categories should also be *exclusive*, not overlapping with one another. In addition, categories should allow for a breakdown of photographic descriptors that is coherent and analytically interesting. Devising categories is followed by coding the photographs. Then, the analysis of the materials is carried out (Rose 60). In order to analyze the photographs, two levels of signification are considered: denotative and connotative. The denotation of photographs involves identifying the elements of each work (Barthes 89-90) by specifying the visual constituents of photographs and cataloguing the literal, descriptive, and contextual meanings of each of them (Penn 232). Exploring the connotative level of signification entails engaging the associations that each photograph brings to mind. Some of the important questions that should be answered at this stage are:

- How are the elements of the photograph related to each other?
- What historical and cultural knowledges are required to carry out a well-informed analysis of each photograph?
- What has been emphasized (postures, colours, clothing, objects, background, and so forth)?
- In what ways are the captions and other signs associated with or contained within the photographs related to the images? (Penn 234; 244)

The interpretation of a work is made in a complex relationship among three sites: the site(s) of production, the site of the photograph itself, and the site(s) where it is received

(Sturken and Cartwright 56; Rose 16), or viewed. As for the production of photographs, it is important to consider when and where the photograph has been made, and what the social status of the artist and of the subject is.

Regarding the photographs themselves, the questions that I attempt to answer throughout my analysis include but are not limited to the following:

- What objects, unique details, individuals are being shown in the photograph?
- How are the components of the photograph arranged?
- Is there a discernable location?
- Is the photograph part of a series? If yes, how would this particular photograph fit in the series?
- Where is the viewer's eye drawn to, and what are some possible implications?
- What do the different constituents of the photograph signify?
- Whose knowledges are included in/excluded from this depiction?

The reception of photographs is the other side of the interpretation of visual works, and some of the most important questions about it are:

- Who is the likely audience for this photograph?
- How is the photograph circulated?
- How does the presentation of the photograph establish the relational dynamics between the photograph and its viewers?
- How have the technologies of circulation affected the potential audiences and critical reception of this work?
- Could diverse audience members interpret the work in multiple ways?
- How would the interpretation(s) of the work be affected by the audiences' gender, race, class, and so on? (Rose 188-90)

My analysis of films is aided by the visual method of photographic analysis elaborated above; in addition, two more features will be considered as I have found them to be greatly important in my work: *mise-en-scène* and sound. *Mise-en-scène*, that is the spatial organization of a film, involves moving images as shots. Shot distance refers to how much of a figure is shown by a particular shot; it can be a close-up, head and shoulders, medium, full, long shot,

and an extremely long shot. For instance, long shots may imply emptiness and alienation while repeated use of extreme close-ups may create a sense of claustrophobia (Rose 48-9). Angle of the camera is also an important factor, which can be overhead, high-angle, eye-level, or low-angle (Rose 49). Sound in movies can include ambient environmental sound, speech, and music. I discuss how each sound category—environmental, speech, and music—creates an effect for its audiences, and how sounds in the selected films contribute to the overall messages of each production.

3.3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Discourse is a specific knowledge about the world that gives shape to how the world is thought (Rose 136). The term ‘discourse’ not only refers to all forms of texts (Gill 174), but also to visuality (Rose 137). Discourse analysts examine not only the content of texts and their organization (Gill 175); they also treat discourses as *social practices* that do not form in a social vacuum. Considering discourses as social practices or ways of doing things, discourse analysts draw on Austin’s theory of speech acts, which views utterances as bearers of meaning; that is, discourses refer to events, people, or states, but they also possess the force of doing things (Wood and Kroger 4). Utterances, discourse analysts suggest, have three features: (a) locutionary: what discourses are about; (b) illocutionary: what utterers do with discourses; (c) prelocutionary: the effects of discourses on audiences (Wood and Kroger 5). Discourses have the power to influence and persuade audiences and to produce *effects of truth* (Rose 164); thus, some discourse analysts draw on Habermas’ view of discourse as “a medium of domination” (Wodak 2), in part, because discourses include not only messages, but their means of production and reproduction. Indeed, they are inextricably tied to the institutions that contain and produce them.

Discourse analysts commit to analyzing discourses as “texts” that are interwoven with social practices and therefore, also treat discursive events through an “analysis of what people do” (Potter 146). Therefore, the ‘function’ of discourse is key in discursive analysis since function entails a motivational relationship with what people do when they talk or write, whether through the use of words or connecting them to speech acts which convey attitude, meaning, and enable the communication of ideas (Wood and Kroger 7-8). Considering these nuances in meaning making processes, discourse analysts avoid the assumption that discursive fragments have expected functions, so each fragment is analyzed in terms of the context surrounding it (Wood and Kroger 8). The focus of discourse analysis is on the content and organization of texts, along with highlighting their *situatedness*. All discourses are occasioned,

or located in time and space, which makes this method appropriate for my work, as I attempt to study these cultural texts in order to consider their potential to support reductive narratives about a subalterned group. Discursive methods of analysis will give my arguments about multiple truths and intersectional visibility and invisibility (as elaborated in previous chapters) a broad base of support.

Since power relations are central to my analysis, I was influenced by Michel Foucault's discourse theory which draws attention to the ways power structures shape positions and perceived possibilities, and by the close discursive analysis of questions arising from discursive psychology. Bringing these two models together, I attempted to understand better how an individual story of pain could be mobilized and appropriated by nation states and related social structures for their own purposes. The fundamental questions that need to be addressed are: "How is X constructed?"; "What is being done and how is it being done?" and "What are the functions and consequences of what is being done?" (McMullen 208). In my analysis, I also consider the following questions:

- What knowledges (valid at a specific time and place) are included in this discourse?
- How does this knowledge evolve, and how is it passed on?
- What kind of understanding/s of society underlies this discourse?
- How does this discourse function to constitute subjects and shape the society or societies in which it operates? (Jäger 53)

Interpreting visual and textual materials in the light of discourse analysis involves the following main steps. First is the process of skeptically reading and interrogating the selected text. Then, excerpts should be selected according to a rubric germane to the study and should be allocated to a superior theme; in other words, each should be coded. It is useful to list the themes addressed and make note of their frequency of appearance throughout the text. Textual 'surfaces' are also important in a discursive study: graphic layouts including pictures and graphs as well as headings and subheadings should be carefully studied. Rhetorical devices are also key. These include forms of argumentation or argumentation strategies, implications and insinuations, vocabulary and style, pronominal structures, idioms and sayings, and symbolism or 'figurativeness' (Jäger 55).

Most of the questions about the three sites informing the interpretation of the visuals are valid to issues that must be addressed in the analysis of textual materials, too. As for the

production of texts, it is important to pay attention to some key questions: Who has written the text? When was it written? Where was it written? What is the social stance of the author and the subject(s) in the text?

In addition to the production of texts, the following questions should be answered regarding the text itself:

- How are the constituents of the text arranged?
- Where is the reader's attention drawn, and what are some possible implications?
- What do the different constituents of the text signify?
- Whose knowledge is included in/excluded from this narration?

Readership is another aspect of the interpretation of texts. Audiences are never passive recipients in their relationship to texts (Wodak 6), so some of the most important points about readership that need to be considered are:

- Who are the readers of this text?
- How is the book circulated?
- In what ways are the technologies of circulation influential in the audiences' reception of this text?
- Is more than one interpretation of this work possible? If yes, are all the interpretations equally valid?
- How would the readers' gender, class, and race affect the interpretation(s) of the text? (Rose 188-90)

Answering these questions will lead to forming hypotheses, which will be followed by the final step of writing up the findings (Jäger 53).

3.4. REFLEXIVITY

Since ways of reading images and texts are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific, no reading is neutral or natural. Indeed, there is no single answer to the question: 'What does this image or text mean?' and no guarantee that a word has one 'true' or fixed meaning. Analysts' language, similar to the various discourses they engage as objects of study,

is interpretative and constructive, and various interpretations of a work might be equally plausible. Thus, it is necessary to use concrete examples and try to justify one's interpretation in relation to the actual practices of signification (Hall 9; Gill 188). Throughout my analysis, I will draw on evidence in the discourses and from the lives of Iranian women to support my argument and to justify my readings of the selected works.

I have elaborated on the rationale behind my selection of the works for this project and acknowledge that the act of selecting discourse fragments is part of my data analysis (Wertz et al. 62). I admit that the selected discourse fragments are representative of the phenomena informing my own interests (Wood and Kroger 78). The assumptions behind my analysis of the selected works concern the effects of constructing narratives that can contribute to reductive perspectives, access to the ownership of the means of production, political support for the production and circulation of certain works, and the intersectional invisibility of subaltern groups who may also be affected by the practices of representation adopted. I assume that every narrative or archive can be limited in scope and thus be reductive, as each story often mirrors a particular perspective or perspectives. The means of production has also never been evenly distributed; the members of the middle or upper classes have easier access to the means of production, and opportunities to present their ideas are more readily available to them, as they can afford to publish or present their works widely.

Furthermore, I believe that works such as those analyzed in my project, highlighting themes that reinforce western imperial views on subaltern groups, receive greater financial support from institutions in the Global North and have a wider platform upon which to present their perspectives. Another assumption behind my analysis is that neglecting the intersections of gender, class, and race shapes the discursive impacts of particular works. The subjects portrayed in these works are often placed in a relative social vacuum. Such narratives may fail to account for the complex experiences of individuals at the intersections of these three axes of identity. My final point has to do with where, when and in what relation to the daily realities of Iran are each of the selected works produced and taken up. Notably, all of the artistic works of Shirin Neshat are based on second-hand stories, since she has produced all of them in diaspora; thus, she inevitably relies on what she hears *about* what is happening in Iranian women's lives. Marjane Satrapi and Azar Nafisi have also left Iran, never to return, and have written their works from outside Iran, but their works are based on their own experiences while they were still residing in Iran.

I consider the established quality indicators within qualitative research (Brantlinger et al. 202), and elaborate the rationale behind the selection of the specific archival materials. The

findings of the research will be reported, and sufficient reasons will be provided for what has (or has not) been included in the analysis. My own personal position and perspectives have also been provided. Conclusions will be validated by documentation and inspection, and finally, through connections with related research.

Using this methodology to analyze the selected textual and visual materials helps me provide evidence to support my emerging claims. This methodology has brought to light elements of the images and texts that would not have been visible to me in a casual reading. Furthermore, it enables me to read the selected works and their role in western archives about Iranian lives, in ways that allow me to challenge misinformed readings of these works. My analysis will make a forceful, ethical intervention in the ways in which these works are received and appreciated in the One-Third world, in order to invite a practice of accountability for one's interpretations of representational materials about cultures with which one is not, or perhaps is no longer, familiar.

Chapter 4

Lost and Found in the Politics of Inter-Cultural Translation: Visual Discourse Analysis

4.1. INTRODUCTION

My objective in this chapter is to analyze a representative selection of Shirin Neshat's photographs and films as well as related sections from Marjane Satrapi's autobiographic novel, *Persepolis* (2003). The direction of this chapter is to explore the accounts of the lives of Iranian women provided in relation to delimited archives of pain, as elaborated in the introductory chapter. From among the entire publically available works of Neshat, I have selected some of the iconic photographs from the *Women of Allah (1993-1997)* series and fragments from three of her films: *Rapture* (1999), *Fervor* (2000), and *Women without Men* (2009). I use a visual discourse analysis situated within a feminist intersectionality framework to analyze the selected materials. As described in the previous chapter, coding individual photographs consists of: vantage—the point from which the camera captures the figures, group size, gender(s) depicted, age of the subjects, woman/man/child nudity, western/local dress style, (not) smiling in the photograph, camera gaze of the subjects, wealth indicators, activity level of the main figures, aggressive activity or weapons shown, the surroundings, colours used, urban/rural setting, and technologies used. I analyze the visuals using these codes and will use my analysis to answer the research questions spelled out in Chapter 1.

4.2. MANDATORY HIJAB IN IRAN

The differentiation between the hijab and the veil is key in discussions about the issue of hijab as the two terms have frequently been used interchangeably. Whereas a veil is a piece of clothing intended to cover the face and may not be restricted to Islamic practices, the hijab is an umbrella term for a wide range of clothes worn by Muslim women as a religious practice. Thus, depending on the geo-cultural context, burka, abayah, niqab, jellabah, dishdasha, or jilbab can all be referred to as the hijab (Guindi 7).

Mandatory hijab has frequently been a center of attention for activists who advocate

for the rights of women in Iran, either those who are pro hijab or those who challenge or question it. The issue of hijab is undoubtedly one of the key themes in the works of Neshat and Satrapi. Out of 33 photographs in one of the series of Neshat's *Women of Allah*, 23 of them present women in chadors. The front cover of *Persepolis* shows Marji wearing a headscarf, and its first chapter is titled, "The Veil," which is significant and contributes to the first impression on the readers.

Upon her visit to Iran after twelve years of living in the United States, Neshat felt stunned by how "ideological" the country had become. She has stated in different interviews that, "[i]t was shocking. Everyone had gone through this major identity crisis. Before I left they were Iranian-Persians, and now they were strict Muslims. Visually everything was black and white, and women had to be in dark clothes" (Ravenal 52). Neshat's art reveals a tendency to tie together faith and the choice of clothing colour; that is, Iranian women are typically portrayed in dark coloured clothes, most notably the black chador. In a slideshow of some of the photographs from *Women of Allah*, which is available online, twenty-three out of the total of thirty-three photographs depict a woman or a group of women wearing a black chador or a veil. What is at stake, in my view, is the need to avoid referring to religious, traditional, or revolutionary practices interchangeably. Take Iranian women's hijab, for example. The hijab has long been part and parcel of Iranian culture, yet at one point in contemporary history, it served as an oppositional gesture during the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Mohanty 268).

Iranian women's choice to use dark colours in clothing represents "a continuation of pre-Islamic custom" (Čādor (2), n.p.), which dates back to the 4th century (solar calendar). "The veiling of women was common in pre-Islamic Iran," where "women were allowed to go out only at night, wearing black clothes" (Čādor (2), n.p.). The colour black in clothing stood for "modesty and simplicity. The natural result of the absence of light, its monochromatic use in clothing can elicit an understated humility which downplays the physical, in favour of the spiritual" (Vann, n.p.). There is evidence that Iranian women continued the use of black chadors in the 18th century. In her description of Persian/Iranian clothing of women, the author of *World Clothing and Fashion: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Social Influence* states that, "[t]he enveloping black chador, a full-body cloak, typified women's dress in the 1790s" (Snodgrass 451). Women in Iran wore black chadors long before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, on account of their traditional mindset, rooted in cultural heritage and practices. It is thus plausible that many women wore dark colours before and during the period of transition between a monarchical regime and a theocratic government.

The eye level close-shot of the female subject in Figure 4-1 is an iconic work in *Women of Allah*. The staged photograph shows half of a woman's face, with the rest being covered with the black chador. The woman's wide-open eyes gaze at the camera. Persian calligraphy in black and red is inscribed on her face, at least on the parts visible to the viewer. The calligraphic text is part of the poem, "I Will Say Hello to the Sun Again" (1962), by Iranian female poet, Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967). What follows is my translation from Persian:

I will say hello to the sun again
 And to the rivers that were flowing in me
 And to the clouds that were my long thoughts.
 To the painful growth of poplar trees of the
 garden that with me
 Were moving past dry seasons.
 To the flocks of crows
 That would bring me as a gift
 The scent of nightly farms.
 To my mother, who lived in the mirror
 And resembled my aged face. (Farrokhzad 319)

Figure 4-1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. *I Am Its Secret (Women of Allah series, 1993)* Original source: <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/shirin-neshat-women-of-allah/>

The caption reads: "I Am Its Secret." Precisely what the "its" refers to is left for the viewer to decide, but certainly, one reading could be that the woman depicted is the secret of the chador or the poem, if one is able to decipher the Persian text. Very little of the background can be seen in this tight framing, but it appears to be a plain wall. The context in which this woman is wearing the hijab is missing from the photograph. The style of her hijab—holding the chador over her lips—is only common among very religious women in Iran. Iranian women who wear the chador typically let their whole face be shown. As stated in the *Qur'an*, practicing Muslim women should "guard their modesty... they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof" (Nur: 31). The phrase, 'what must ordinarily appear' is commonly interpreted as face and hands, as "the majority of scholars or... *jumhūr* most agreed that women are only allowed to reveal their faces and hands" (Binti Ramli and Elatrash 126). The viewer of this photograph may associate the female subject with a very pious Muslim woman who goes the extra mile to keep herself covered, or one might be reminded of a situation where the individual is coerced into covering herself more than the Islam law and social Muslim conventions would normally require. Her hidden lips could have

a smile on, could be sealed, or could be opened slightly as if she wanted to speak, but any possibility remains unverified as her lips remain thickly veiled.

Do western audience members engage the image with or without the English translation? That is a critical question. One's interpretation of this work (Figure 4-1) can be considerably impacted by their (lack of) knowledge of the Persian language. The viewer who can read the Persian calligraphy may see the subject in this photograph as a woman with agency, a woman who will not surrender, regardless of circumstances. In other words, with as much as she can reveal (half of her face), she greets the sun and the beauties around her. The darkness is haunting her, as is her love for her mother, and her awareness of her losses, yet she envisions a bright future. Nonetheless, the calligraphy is in Persian and thus indecipherable to most westerners, who comprise the majority of Neshat's audiences. While the illegible words may suggest that a western viewer does not know enough to decipher Iranian culture, the words inscribed on the woman's face may add to the exoticism of this work. Without translation of the script that circles on her forehead, she seems exotically secretive, and mysteriously inscribed by the text on her face, a claim reaffirmed by the caption of the photograph: "I Am Its Secret." This is a subject with whom most western viewers are not likely to identify, for the motivating force behind her portrayal of strict hijab and the words on her face remain incomprehensible to non-Persian audiences.

In addition, the background of the *Women of Allah* series has a noteworthy feature that deserves attention. The loud disquieting music played throughout recorded documentations of the installations heightens the effect of her works on the audiences. Fast tempo pieces are performed by percussion instruments, accompanied by mostly unintelligible mourning voices with a piercing shriek. Here and there, one can hear the Islamic call to prayer (adhan), and the name of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussain ibn Ali. Since he was ruthlessly martyred in the tragic Battle of Karbala, Shiite Muslims mourn his death every year. And as Iran has the largest number of Shiite Muslims, the annual mourning rituals are particularly important to many Iranians. Neshat's choice of music and chants adds a religious charge to the photographic elements and carries implications about the Islamic context in which her subjects are situated. However, many western audiences may not be able to distinguish the sound of adhan and the mourning voices.

In another photograph from *Women of Allah*, a completely naked boy and a fully covered woman are facing the camera. The two subjects, likely mother and son, are standing in front of a plain wall, and the specific framing has cut off other details of the larger context

(Figure 4-2). The child, whose body is overlaid with floral patterns, is gazing at the camera. The henna tattoo on his body is displaced, twice. First, painting a body with henna is common in Arab cultures but not among Persian communities (Scott, n.p.). As Neshat's husband, Shoja Azari, notes, henna tattooing on the bodies of the subjects "is an artistic intervention on Neshat's part, for such practices of ritual body decoration do not exist in Iranian society" (Azari 115).

Figure 4-2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Untitled (Women of Allah series, 1996) Original source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEuFwsc1yL0>

Given that this photograph is from the *Women of Allah* series, a photographic collocation which focuses on Iranian women, one may assume that the subjects in this photograph are Iranians. However, the henna tattoo design on the supposedly Iranian male subject's skin demonstrates a displacement of the cultural practice of henna tattooing. Second, in both Iranian and Arab cultures, women are more likely to decorate their bodies in comparison to men; thus, the patterns in Figure 4-2 have been shifted from the adult female to male child's body. This redistribution of female body decorations is presumably not accidental. The female figure in a burka, restricted by notions of morality and honour, has lent her adornments to the child male figure, utilizing his body as a proxy. The boy displays how his mother looks in the privacy of their home, where she is not required to cover all of her body with the burka. The male body, then, is marked by the feminine through his connection to his mother.

The woman's body is fully covered, except where she clasps her son's left hand in her right. Only that part of her body which is at his service is exposed. Note the sharp contrast of black and white and the juxtaposition of a veiled and a naked body. Encumbered by her burka, the woman is deprived of the boy's apparent freedom. This work can symbolically suggest that the levels of discrimination against Muslim women in the theocratic society of Iran also mark impressionable males. Without the availability of any contextual positioning, since this photograph is staged in a studio, one might argue that the woman's limitations are rooted in tradition rather than in religion. Unfortunately, however, injustices and sociopolitical corruptions that prevail across the globe are often blamed on religion. British-Tunisian writer, Soumaya Ghannoushi, states that "if I got a penny for every time I was told that religion is the cause of all trouble, I'd be a rich woman by now" (Ghannoushi, n.p.). This is not to deny religious structures' accountability, but only that other factors such as misunderstandings or misuses of religion, conservatism, or lack of good education are no less important in this

debate. It may be argued that in the Iranian society, traditional for centuries but Islamic for decades, women have been more likely to be targets of manipulation due to traditional and cultural mandates rather than religious chauvinism.

Neshat's short film, *Rapture* (1999), also addresses the issue of the hijab and portrays female characters wearing chadors. When shown in a gallery setting, a group of women are seen on one screen and a group of men in another on the opposite wall: women's black chadors and men's white shirts create a sharp visual contrast throughout the film. It is important to note that in Iranian culture, all-black attire is often worn in funerals whereas the colour white is associated with joyous occasions. The colour of subjects' clothing could symbolically indicate the position of each group within the religious setting. The female subjects' supposedly less favourable position is marked by their black garments and vice versa.

In the climactic scene of *Rapture* (video still in Figure 4-3), a large group of women are walking towards the sea. The long shot shows the dispersed crowd from behind, so that all one can see is a mass of figures in black, some barefoot, approaching an empty sea. The black and white landscape is captured in the daytime, when the women could perhaps be swimming or sunbathing. The image of fully covered women stepping down to the water's edge can somehow confound the viewer's expectations. The figures do move towards the sea but are fully clothed, each taking a slightly different path as though heading for different destinations. The high-angle camera shot accentuates their isolation. Dense contrasts of black and white, the absence of lively colours, and the isolation of the individuals contribute to the bleak, gloomy atmosphere. *Rapture* was filmed in 1999, when many Iranian women who had been wearing the chador were gradually opting for a more comfortable clothing style i.e. manteau and headscarf. Neshat's film portrays characters who, in real life, corresponded to more conservative women in that period of Iran's history. Some westerners have regarded these women as figures "swooping along the beach in their chadors like crows" (Boucher, n.p.), with their chadors being described as "black cloths flap[ping] in the desert wind like the flapping wings of a flock of crows" (Weintraub, n.p.). This image resembles many other works by Neshat, where subjects are portrayed in groups, standing in contrast to Iftikhar Dadi's assertion that Neshat's art "mars the image of the masses silhouette" and moves "from the mass subject back to the singular" (Dadi 144).

Figure 4-3 has been removed
due to copyright restrictions.

Untitled (Rapture, 1999)

Original source:

<https://vimeo.com/65972620>

Neither the image of a scattered, yet non-individuated group of women who are rushing to an unspecified destination, nor the image of women metamorphosed into a throng of birds fluttering by the sea, is necessarily a positive or illuminating portrayal. Even if this image were viewed as surreal, its overall valence may, possibly, convey the unhappiness of the subjects captured in its frame.

The issue of hijab—referred to as the veil—opens Satrapi’s book. The first chapter of *Persepolis* is titled, “The Veil” (Figure 4-4). Next to the title is an icon of a woman’s eye, captured in profile on a black background. The black mass surrounding the eye suggests the veil in accordance with the title. In Iranian culture, the image of the one eye that is showing resembles the traditional image of thieves and villains. Using such imagery in an Iranian

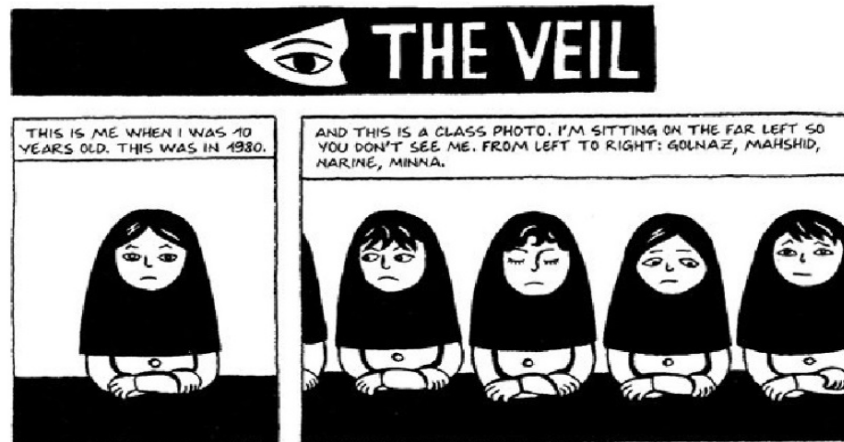


Figure 4-4 *Persepolis* 2003

context, where women rarely cover their face, can create dark, negative associations about the hijab. In addition, Marji’s unhappy facial expression, and those of her classmates, appear under the chapter heading, “The Veil,” which could potentially link the female subjects’ unhappiness to the Islamic hijab.

The narrator says: “This is a class photo” (Satrapi 3). Marji is positioned in a separate frame from her classmates. Instead of a convivial atmosphere with school age children playing and enjoying their time in school, Marji’s school seems a lifeless place where very young schoolgirls appear to be regimented, divided and dispirited. Right beneath the title, “The Veil,” we see the unhappy schoolgirls, as though the scarf on their head has put a cap on their enthusiasm. The story of *Persepolis* takes place in Tehran in the 1980s, when the chador was the dominant form of the hijab. The 1980s was a decade in which many Iranians were still very enthusiastic about the new governing system, and religious aspirations were at a peak. The Iran-Iraq war had also created a religiously charged atmosphere since fighting in the imposed war with Iraq (1980-1988) was believed to be fighting to protect “Islam” from the invasion of

a country that was supported by the United States. During those years, many Iranian women voluntarily opted for modest clothing, especially the chador. It was only common among high- or middle-class Iranians to choose flamboyant outfits and expose some of their hair. Marji's descriptions of her life indicate her high social status. She resides in the Tavanir neighbourhood in Tehran (Satrapi 138), where only wealthy families can afford to live. Her school is probably in Tavanir, or in its immediate vicinity. Thus, the girls in Figure 4-4 are likely from well-to-do families, a minority that often tends to be less religious than the majority. Iranian girls shown in this image represent a small portion of the female population of Iran, but they have come to take a broader representational role for western audiences whose cultural knowledge about Iran is limited. In the following chapter, I will further discuss the ways in which Marji articulates generalized descriptions to speak on behalf of "Iranian girls."

4.3. THE SUBMISSIVE MUSLIM WOMAN

Another theme that Neshat and Satrapi's works highlight is the issue of submissive women in Islamic contexts. The photograph in Figure 4-5, from the *Women of Allah* series is a close-up of an unsmiling subject in a black head cover. Only the lower part of the subject's face, from chin to just above the top lip, is visible to the viewers. Persian and Arabic calligraphy is inscribed on the subject's hand. The Persian calligraphy is another excerpt from one of Forugh Farrokhzad's poems titled, "I Pity the Garden" (1963). The following is my translation of it from Persian:

I pity the garden.
 No one is thinking about the flowers,
 No one is thinking about the fish,
 No one wants
 To believe that the garden is dying,
 That the garden's heart
 Has swollen under the sun. (Farrokhzad 351)

Figure 4-5 has been removed
 due to copyright restrictions.
Untitled (Women of Allah
series, 1996) Original source:
<https://gladstonegallery.com/artist/shirin-neshat/#&panel1-16>

The Arabic calligraphy includes an Islamic motto with the name of Hussain ibn Ali's (mentioned above) half-brother, Al-Abbās ibn Ali (1226-1259), also called Qamar Banī Hashim. He is one of the prominent figures in Shiite Muslim history. Al-Abbās ibn Ali was martyred in the Battle of Karbala, while trying to provide water for women and children. These three stories are thus tied together: the thirsty women and children in the Battle of Karbala, the

dying garden in Farrokhzad's poem, and the woman in Figure 4-5. They share a similar fate. They all lack vitality, and their chances of survival are slim. The subject in this photograph is keeping her fingers on her mouth, a gesture that conveys silence and obedience, or perhaps thirst, yet her unuttered words appear to have been transferred from her mouth onto her hand in the form of a dark tattoo. The medium has changed, but the woman is still communicating with the viewer. The tattoo on her hand presents a visual sign of despair, for those who can read it, and the limitation of her speech has been partially compensated for through choosing a poem by a female poet. However, none of this may be entirely apparent to a western viewer.

In the religious context constructed by the Islamic henna tattoo and the hijab, the subject in Figure 4-5 appears to be communicating to western audiences the hopelessness of a Muslim woman who has submitted to Islamic patriarchal rules and codes of conduct, including wearing a headscarf and remaining silent in obedience. This photograph can be analyzed in more than one way. If the audience members have the cultural knowledge required to interpret the elements of this photograph, especially the calligraphy and its overtones, they may view this work as a visualization or manifestation of women's oppression in an Islamic society. Deprived of the right to speak, the hijabi Muslim woman is compelled to inscribe her words on her hand. Her pain and grief is reflected through a tragic poem by a female poet that remains inaccessible to most western viewers. Note that Farrokhzad wrote this piece in 1963, when Iran was still a secular country. Farrokhzad's work alludes to issues regarding the position of women in the then secular society of Iran, when women were not necessarily struggling with religious mandates. Neshat's use of this poem may indicate that the concerns of Iranian female activists transcend time, regimes, and religious faith. Perhaps, there is some continuity between the concerns of secular and theocratic Iran.

Another way of interpreting this photograph involves how audiences with limited cultural knowledge about Iran might view this work: a photograph of a woman who is wearing a head-cover and is keeping her lips closed with a hand that is overlaid with illegible words. The indecipherable language can have a distancing effect for culturally uninformed audiences, who are not likely able to comprehend the written message. For them, the words remain a pattern; thus, the subject's gesture becomes potentially more meaningful than the words. Western audiences miss the combined message of the Persian and the Arabic calligraphy. Given that Neshat's works circulate among non-Persian speakers, the second interpretation is perhaps a more common reading of this work.

The photograph in Figure 4-6, which has also appeared in the *Women of Allah* series, is similar to the previous photograph—an eye-level, medium shot of a subject, this time

wearing a light-coloured floral chador. She is covering her lips, nose, chin and neck with her right hand, which is tattooed with Islamic patterns and a few disjointed Persian syllables. Her neutral gaze is fixed on the viewer. Unlike the black chador which is Iranian women's outdoor clothing, the white chador is worn when they pray indoors. In isolation as in many of Neshat's works, this subject is placed in a decontextualized frame. The cropped out surrounding makes it impossible for the audience to guess under what circumstances this woman is covering her face. She appears to be submissive or shocked, as she is holding her hand over her face. The restriction on her speech can be associated with her clothing and gesture, and the chador and the Islamic henna tattoo with her silence and the ideological forces around her. Supposedly, the religious structures that have objectified her—coercing her into wearing the chador to hide her physical beauty—converse with the western viewer through the woman's neutral gaze at the camera, her hand gesture, and her hijab.

Note the caption in Figure 4-6. "Birthmark" brings to one's attention the marks on the subjects' skin. Considering that for her calligraphic works, Neshat inscribes words and patterns on developed photographs (Vroom, n.p.), the caption "Birthmark" can create irony, perhaps indicating that the Muslim woman's body is inscribed upon birth, with Islamic words and patterns. This may convey the idea that this woman's life is predetermined, and so are her choices. However, it is important to consider what type of representation has been offered to different audiences.

This particular technical construction of images—Neshat's inscription on developed photographs—is itself an act of over-imposition on the female subject's body, subordinating the subject whose body continues to be "a battlefield, a physical and discursive site of power struggles," (Dong 79). In fact, staging the subject mediates, and the calligraphic inscription re-mediates, the subject before being displayed. Earlier I mentioned one of Neshat's interviews where she comments on her trip to Iran in 1990, highlighting a "major identity crisis. Before I left they were Iranian-Persians, and now they were strict Muslims. Visually everything was black and white, and women had to be in dark clothes" (Ravenal 52).

In the *Women without Men* (2009) feature film, Munis, one of the four main female characters living in the women's retreat space described earlier in this chapter, is constantly being detained by her brother. The

Figure 4-6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Birthmark (Women of Allah series, 1995) Original source:

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/s-hirin-neshat/birthmark-from-women-of-allah-vDINbv5H4pt94IZuYSYooA2>

movie still in Figure 4-7 shows Munis and her brother while he is wagging a finger at her. They are standing at the door of their house, just as Munis is heading to her friend's house. Her brother aggressively takes Munis' chador off and shouts: "You won't go anywhere; that's that!" The Islamic call to prayer (adhan) is heard in the background throughout the scene. Adhan continues until Munis steps onto the rooftop and commits suicide. The

Figure 4-7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Women without Men, 2009

Original source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpidiAlJpyA>

sound of adhan creates a powerful effect on audiences who are familiar with it, especially because this particular performance of adhan that Neshat uses is the most popular among Iranians and has been frequently used in various Iranian movies and TV series to create a spiritual atmosphere (www.musicairanian.ir).

Neshat's film practically reverses the effect of this adhan performance. It assigns a key role to religion in the aggressive encounter between two siblings. The sound of adhan suggests the role of religious belief as the root cause of the gendered domestic violence in this household. Furthermore, comparing the film with the novel reveals a divergence between the two. Neshat's *Women without Men* is a film adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur's novel, *Women without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran* (2004). Studied simultaneously, one cannot fail to notice that the film has more scenes in which Munis' brother says Muslim prayers. His piety is emphasized, and the relevance of 'Islam' to the tragic death of his sister is highlighted. Munis' eventual death happens amidst this pious atmosphere, in a house where the dominant male figure frequently says prayers—perhaps more than required—while the adhan lurks in the background.

Similarly, in *Persepolis*, the female character is targeted by radical Muslim practices, indirectly through her mother. Marji reports, "[i]t wasn't only the government that changed. Ordinary people changed too" (Satrapi 75). She finds herself in a conflict among people who appear to be hypocrites. Looking out the window, Marji's mother comments on their neighbour's outfit: "Look at her! Last year she was wearing a miniskirt, showing off her beefy thighs to the whole neighborhood. And now Madame is wearing a chador" (75). When Marji tells her mother that the neighbour's son says that he prays every day, her mother panics (Figure 4-8) and wagging a finger, she warns Marji that if she ever gets asked, she must say she prays (75). Apparently, her mother's wagging finger is a response to the



Figure 4- 8 *Persepolis* 2003

imposed Islamic rules. Marji has to obey the rule of hypocrisy and pretend that she prays while she evidently does not. When the majority of the population in Iran were practicing Muslims, the minority who were not felt the need to conform or at least pretend that they also observed the Islamic laws.

Having to accept the mandatory hijab, pretending to say prayers, avoiding all-night parties, and many other impositions accumulate to build up Marji's frustration with the Islamic regime. When under pressure, she knows her "own way of calming down," which is locking herself in her room and listening to western music: "♪ We're the kids in America WHOAO ♪" (Satrapi 134). She imagines the sense of freedom that American teenagers supposedly enjoy. Her parents' dream of her liberation from the new regime does not come true until the end of the story, when she leaves Iran for Austria without them.

There are many points of departure in Marji's story from the lived experiences of many ordinary Iranian girls, which is perhaps the reason why *Persepolis* has not been circulating widely in Iran, even in this day and age where circulation of external materials is easier to achieve than ever. Although Satrapi's autobiography appeals to western audiences and has been a best-seller in the one-third world, Marji's story may fail to resonate with Iranian audiences, the very people for whom Satrapi has supposedly become a representational voice.

4.4. SEPARATION OF WOMEN AND MEN

Sex segregation in public spaces, as a form of social control, is not in the foreground in many of Neshat's works or in Satrapi's graphic autobiographical novel, yet when it is discussed, it occupies an important space in their works. Neshat's short film, *Fervor* (2000) and Satrapi's book chapter, "The Veil," are the main pieces from those I have selected in which the issue of sex segregation is highlighted.

Fervor mainly concerns a few encounters between a woman and a man in public spaces. Figure 4-9 shows a series of movie stills from the film, showing the two characters on a country road where their paths cross. In this black and white long shot, the man is wearing a western

suit while the woman is wearing local dress: the chador. Although the man is free to wear western style clothes—indicating his relative freedom compared to the woman—religious mandates still prevent him from communicating with her in public, as a western man would normally do. The woman and the man are equally affected by the Islamic practice of separating women and men. The long shot shows a deserted crossroad, and as much as the viewers can

Figure 4-9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fervor, 2000 Original source:
<https://vimeo.com/77076334>

see, there is no one in sight except the two figures. The camera angle accentuates their presence as isolated in the landscape. No visible controlling force from outside exists, yet they avoid any contact with one another. As they walk past each other, a mutual gaze is conveyed when their bodies turn in each other's direction. They exchange a brief glance but make no further contact and proceed.

Later they incidentally attend the same religious gathering, where women and men are separated by a curtain (Figure 4-10). Although the curtain divides the mosque lengthwise and thus blocks their view of one another, the woman and the man each seem to feel the

presence of the other behind the curtain. The monochrome medium reflects the dense contrast of women and men; all the women are covered in black chadors while the men are wearing white shirts. As mentioned earlier, in the Iranian culture, black is usually worn on sad occasions, such as funerals, while white is associated with feasts and ceremonies. The stark contrast can symbolically suggest the situation of Iranian women to be dismal and tragic, and of men to be privileged.

The preacher narrates a story from the Muslims' holy book, the *Qur'an*. He recounts the story of Prophet Joseph, when a married woman is trying to seduce him, but he resists this temptation and escapes. The preacher concludes by warning the audience to be constantly alert to the tricks and traps of Satan, one of them being the urge to commit adultery. As his speech continues with great fervor, the woman's attraction to the man and her sense of discomfort simultaneously increase, to the extent that she can no longer tolerate the situation and leaves the gathering. *Fervor* is a framed narrative with a corresponding story within the main story. Joseph's tale relates to the plot of the main narrative. The preacher has chosen a story that, in fact, speaks to the dilemma that the two main characters are facing. The choice of Joseph's story among all *Qur'anic* stories is no coincidence; it reinforces the restrictions on women and men in a Muslim society. A religious gathering has been chosen to highlight sex segregation. The installation view of *Fervor* (Figure 4-11) which shows captivating images that surpass life-size dimensions, helps to

Figure 4-10 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. *Fervor*, 2000
Original source:
<https://vimeo.com/77076334>



Figure 4-11 www.artspace.kcai.edu

maximize the emotional effect of the work. The two-channel installation of this film renders the female-male division even more emphatic.

The theme of separation of women and men appears in *Persepolis*, too. Marji mentions that shortly after the Islamic Revolution, she was separated from her friends because co-ed schools were changing to single sex institutions. A frowning officer (guardian of revolution) divides girls and boys at school (Figure 4-12), and Marji's reaction to



Figure 4-12 *Persepolis* 2003

the imposed separation from her male friends is summarized in one sentence, “[a]nd that was that” (Satrapi 4). Marji's face shows her disappointment about the new law, but she surrenders, as she does in many other situations throughout the book.

Iranian schools (up to grade 12) are single sex, and women and men are separated when in mosques and religious gatherings, but the people of Iran have relentlessly resisted the Iranian regime's tendency to limit women and men's interactions. It is also important to note that gendered allocation of space is not specific to one religion or culture. Many cultures limit women's mobility. Purdah in Hindu culture and foot binding in Chinese culture hampered millions of women over the course of centuries. Glass ceilings continue to be facts of life in all cultures today (Milani, “The Visual Poetry of Shirin Neshat” 9). In 1980, Iran abolished coeducational system for schools up to grade 12, and it has not produced adverse effects on the students' educational performance. Noora AlSindi has examined mathematics achievement in single-sex schooling systems in the Middle East, using statistics from Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Oman. The findings show that the largest gap between the obtained math scores of students in mixed and single-sex schools, “which is in favor of segregated schools, is in Iran. Students in segregated schools outperform their mixed school counterparts by 5.695 points. The difference is statistically significant” (AlSindi 30).

In addition to the establishment of single-sex schools, other laws and regulations enacted after the Islamic Revolution, such as Islamization of school curricula, which involved increasing weekly time allocation to Theology and the study of the *Qur'an*, mandatory hijab, and hiring more female teachers to teach girls, have caused a remarkable increase in Iranian girls' admission to schools, since more conservative families are thereby encouraged to enroll their daughters. Research on the trend of post-revolutionary education in Iran shows that a “[n]inety-three percent net female enrollment rate at the primary school level in Iran far

exceeds the Middle East and North Africa regional average” (Mehran 285-6). In conclusion, any liberatory action is not one size fits all. In particular contexts, such as Iran for instance, sex segregation has not necessarily been disadvantageous. In the case of educational access, it has supported the education of girls.

4.5. OBSCURED INTERSECTIONS AND HIDDEN AGENDAS

Spatial and temporal organization of images is not innocent (Rose 45) as it determines where viewers should stand; thus, “we see what they choose to reveal” (Holly 9). The critical study of visual images demands careful consideration of the ways in which images exhibit social categories including gender, class, and race.

Success of a work, or lack thereof, is highly affected by the site of reception. Neshat’s art exhibitions are mainly hosted in the one-third world. Her mostly Caucasian audiences are wealthy enough to afford (often expensive) gallery tickets. She is also fluent in English and can promote her works among wide audiences in one-third world countries. Neshat benefits from high-tech screening systems for her photographic and video installations, which is one of the reasons why her audiences are deeply moved by her art. Similarly, Satrapi’s decision to translate her autobiographic novel from French to English enormously expanded its reach, making it accessible to a wide audience in the Global North. Her audiences are literate and have the privilege of reading, including the received English literary canon. Both Neshat and Satrapi have privileges that pave the way for successful reception of their works in western contexts.

Furthermore, important to note is the social status of each artist/writer, since their location within society is a determining factor in whether their works are likely to become more prominent than others. Neshat critiques mandatory hijab in post-revolution Iran, women’s submission to men in an ideological society, and sex segregation in the public sphere; she problematizes these issues as an Iranian ‘middle-class’ woman. In the 1960s when economic growth was not a high priority for Iranian policymakers (Salehi Esfahani 3) and the country was struggling, Neshat’s family could afford to enroll her in a Catholic boarding school in Tehran and then to send her to the United States so that she could pursue higher education in prestigious universities. As a privileged Iranian woman without strict Muslim upbringing, Neshat views religious mandates such as enforced hijab or sex segregation as highly problematic. However, many working class Iranians, who comprise a large proportion of the population and who are generally more religious (Miller, n.p.), follow Islamic rules with consent.

Similar to Neshat, Satrapi has enjoyed class privileges since her childhood. Her literary persona, Marji, lives in Tavanir neighbourhood in Tehran (Satrapi 138), which is one of the richest neighbourhoods of the capital city. She can have quick access to the black market of western audiotapes on Gandhi Avenue (Satrapi 132), another rich neighbourhood in Tehran. She goes to French school in the 1980s (Satrapi 4), considered luxurious in Iran even today. Her parents buy many books for her. She comments, “[t]o enlighten me they bought books. I knew everything about the children of Palestine. About Fidel Castro. About the young Vietnamese killed by the Americans. About the revolutionaries of my country” (Satrapi 12). Marji enjoys the privilege of reading beyond schoolbooks, an opportunity that not many teenage students in Iran had in the 1980s.

Marji occupies a privileged position in Iranian society and is a member of the cultural elite; therefore, it is imaginable that her preoccupations and challenges in a country that was transforming from secular into theocratic were significantly different from most working class people. In the 1980s when US-backed Iraq imposed war on Iran (Harris and Aid, n.p.), and Iranians were religiously inspired to fight against Iraq to support their newly established Islamic government, Marji was preoccupied with listening to Michael Jackson’s songs. She felt dejected to find that wearing her western style clothes was assumed to be a deviation from the norms of a society in which religious conservatism was gaining power in response to the former government’s westernization policies. Religious leaders targeted the west as the principal enemy while, by incorporating modern concepts, they presented Islam as a progressive and activist religion able to enjoin social change and deal with the question of social justice.

Considering the iconography in Neshat’s art, the chador proves to be one of the key elements of her works. The chador has been and continues to be the main choice of outdoor clothing for a considerable proportion of pious Iranian women. However, one should note Iran’s varied population including different ethnic groups, each with their own tradition, language, dialect, and clothes. The chador comes in different shapes and colours, as does the headscarf, worn by those women who choose not to wear the chador. What we are invited to see in Neshat’s works is one of the many varying forms of the hijab, and in appearance, the most conservative one. Audiences with limited knowledge of the different hijab practices may possibly imagine the chador to be the only form of Iranian women’s clothing, if Neshat’s works are their most accessible referent. A vein of disapproval of the hijab also runs through *Persepolis*, brought to the fore from the first page of the graphic text. The narrator presents the viewpoint of the people who were critical of the Islamic regime as opposed to its avid

supporters. The nuances of Iranian people's experiences are not reflected in the works that I have analyzed in this chapter.

Why are particular narratives brought into the public spotlight? What political and social arrangements reward specific statements? Which modes of description and argument are praised and valued, and which are treated as peripheral? My discussion suggests the critical importance of systemic analysis in transnational feminist projects. Engaging cultural works out of context and in isolation, while assigning a representational role to them lays a precarious basis for interpretation. When structures of power and domination support the production and circulation of works that are potentially beneficial and contribute to the power-seeking tendencies of those with political control, it is vital for scholars to claim our curiosity about other groups; their actual lived experiences should become a matter of extensive debate and investigation. Viewed from an intersectional perspective, the "we" that one may use to make critical claims does not have room for millions of other women whose identities are constructed by differently articulated social elements of class, ethnicity, and religious belief, those who for reasons of piety or respect for tradition, simply resist new, commercialized and westernized ways of being, particularly if they come with international coercion and misrepresentational shaming.

Chapter 5

Part Two: Analysis of Textual Materials

5.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will analyze Marjane Satrapi's autobiographic novel, *Persepolis* (2003), and Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) (*RLT*). I decided to conduct the analysis of Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel and Nafisi's memoir side by side as they exhibit similarities: They are both post-9/11 works (publication of *Persepolis* in French was in 2000 and in English in 2003); both books are written by upper-middle class Iranian women who live and work in diaspora; they each encompass a slice of the author's life in Iran; and they narrate excoriating, and damage-centred stories unfolding during/after the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Iran-Iraq war that spanned 1980-88. Using discourse analysis and feminist intersectionality theory, I examine the ways in which *Persepolis* and *RLT* have portrayed women in Iran and discuss the textual elements that contribute to narrow representations of Iranian women.

Coding the selected excerpts involves attending to vocabulary and style, pronominal structures, figures of speech, gender depicted, western/local dress style, and wealth indicators (as they represent one's social status). I also take into account as many elements of the works as possible: Front cover, title, foreword, preface, and epilogue. Based on the analysis of the coded data and the findings, I aim to answer the research questions listed in Chapter 1.

5.2. OUR PRESENT TRAPPED SITUATION AS WOMEN

The title of Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, sets the tone for her work. The title communicates the extraordinary nature of reading *Lolita* (1955) in the Iranian city of Tehran. Nafisi imagines herself and her students

reading *Lolita* in a deceptively sunny room in Tehran... imagine us... in
the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music,

falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. If I write about Nabokov today, it is to celebrate our reading of Nabokov in Tehran, against all odds. (Nafisi 6)

Reading *Lolita* in Tehran is listed among “the most extraordinarily ordinary” activities, ordinary and extraordinary at once. One possible interpretation could be that although the act of reading is supposedly ordinary, it becomes unusual when it comes to western books. In the context of *RLT*—an archive of cruelty and pain in an Islamic country—it might be assumable that the extraordinary nature of reading *Lolita* is due to the dictatorship of the ‘religious authorities’ that ban the circulation of western works of literature. However, given the Islamicized climate of Iran, it could have been extraordinary to read a work with taboo themes of rape, pedophilia, and incest.

It is also important to note the narrator’s description of the room in the above excerpt: A sunny room that could otherwise be possibly described as beautiful or delightful is referred to as “deceptive.” The word choice reflects a negative attitude towards the particular experience described in this quote. Similarly, at the very beginning of *RLT* we read a description of Nafisi’s apartment. “[C]urtainless windows” is a part of her description of a house in “an Islamic country.” These were parts of the house, she states, that “needed to be dressed” (Nafisi 7). By personifying the windows in a way that suggests female bodies that need to be covered, the narrator links the imperative of hanging curtains to female dress codes in the Islamic country of Iran.

Satrapi also addresses the issue of Islamic dress codes in post-revolution Iran. The narrator, Marji, comments:

Let’s be fair. If women faced prison when they refused to wear the veil, it was also forbidden for men to wear neckties (that dreaded symbol of the west). And if women’s hair got men excited, the same thing could be said of men’s bare arms. And so, wearing short-sleeved shirts was also forbidden... There was a kind of justice, after all. (Satrapi 75)

Marji is commenting on the Islamic dress codes toward which she has shown great disapproval, from the first page of the book. Considering that this theme is reinforced throughout

her story, words such as “fair” and “justice” in her comment could be interpreted as ironic, intended to convey the idea that the practice of enforcing Islamic dress codes was unjust.

On the first page of *Persepolis*, Marji uses the pronoun ‘we’ in her statements about Iranian schoolgirls’ disapproval of mandatory hijab: “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (Satrapi 3). The referent of the pronoun ‘we’ is not made clear to the reader. Thus, it can be interpreted by culturally distant audiences that ‘we’ in Marji’s sentence refers to all Iranian schoolgirls. This presentation ignores how the majority of the country joined forces to bring mullahs to power as they were tired of anti-religious gestures of the Pahlavi government. It was, in fact, not surprising that women willingly adopted the hijab, which both showcased their piety and indicated their anti-western sentiments (Milani, *Veils and Words* 37-8). It would appear that Marji includes like-minded girls, many of whom would likely share her class position in Iranian society.

RLT refers to pressure that was brought to bear so that Iranian women began to wear the hijab. The narrator says, “women’s overwhelming objection to the laws” was the cause of “the government enforce[ing] the new rule first in the workplaces and later in shops” (Nafisi 167). By citing “women’s overwhelming objection” to the new rule of the hijab, the “possibility of consent” (Chapman 238) is obscured, constructing Islamic hijab as a form of submission to Islamic patriarchal systems. In the 1983 demonstrations against mandatory hijab (www.bahejab.com), women living in urban areas, those with secular worldviews, comprised the majority of protesters. Nafisi’s statement seemingly reflects the viewpoint of the protesters in those demonstrations, yet phrased in a way to imply this view to be that of the majority.

In addition to the Islamic government of Iran being condemned throughout *RLT*, Muslims are heavily criticized. The majority of pious Muslim male characters are portrayed as hypocrites. As an example, one of Nafisi’s students, Nassrin, recounts her story of being sexually abused, “when she was barely eleven years old” (Nafisi 48), by her uncle who pretends to be a pious Muslim. Nassrin describes how her uncle “used to say that he wanted to keep himself chaste and pure for his future wife and refused friendships with women on that count. Chaste and pure, she mockingly repeated” (Nafisi 48). Nassrin’s uncle helps her with Arabic and mathematics “three times a week for over a year.” As they sit side by side at her desk, his hands wander over her body, as he repeats the Arabic tenses (Nafisi 48). Nassrin was continuously sexually harassed, so was Lolita. The Muslim man’s self-righteousness, juxtaposed with his sexual abuse of an eleven-year-old girl, is described in the same chapter where the narrator appreciates Nabakov’s novel as “hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life, ordinary everyday life” (Nafisi 33). The sexualization of international politics, which uses gender as a political lever, means

that there is an uncritical focus on pedophilia in Tehran, without recognizing that sexual violence is a site where “the culture I grew up in has its flesh and blood just like yours. It has good and bad things just like every culture” (Keshavarz, n.p.). The above comment on beauty demonstrates how a focus on aesthetics can submerge the larger political analysis of the social consequences of intimate and global conflicts.

Iranian Muslim women’s behaviour is also reflected upon as morally reprehensible. One of the characters in *RLT* named, Miss Ruhi, has a notorious “affair with one of the big shots in the Muslim Students’ Association” (Nafisi 332). To better understand the implication of this excerpt, it is necessary to note the significance of names in *RLT*. As the author states at the very beginning, the characters are not called by their real names. For instance, all her loyal students have classic Persian names, as opposed to many Iranians who have Arabic names rooted in centuries-old Muslim-Arab influence. All the ‘othered’ individuals are called only by their last names. Miss Ruhi’s name is a telling example. We know Miss Ruhi by her last name because she is affiliated with the Muslim Students’ Association, and thus she is an othered outsider; she is one of ‘them.’ Also, the meaning of the word “Ruhi” reveals a paradox. “Ruh” in Arabic and Persian means spirit and the final “i” in Persian creates a semantic association; that is, Ruhi means related to or associated with ‘ruh’/spirit, while ironically Miss Ruhi has an affair with a man, which is subject to disapproval in religious terms. A character who is supposed to be spiritual (suggested through her name) seeks bodily pleasure rather than pursuing spiritual salvation. Nafisi explains how she learns about rumors: “Nassrin was always bringing these rumors to my attention, trying to prove how hypocritical ‘these people were’” (Nafisi 332). The examples I discuss are only a few among many similar cases. Through the lens of *RLT*, the reader only witnesses those Muslims who show immoral behaviour. Of note is how the narrator stresses that she keeps her distance from seemingly pious Muslims, at one point objectifying them as “these people” (Nafisi 332), and later leverages this knowledge to advance her criticism of Muslims in Iran.

Persepolis, too, shows the Guardians of Revolution accepting bribes. Marji’s father comments, “[t]heir faith has nothing to do with ideology! A few bills were all he needed to forget the whole thing” (Satrapi 110). In addition, other Guardians of Revolution and Muslim male figures in authority whom Marji introduces ruthlessly torture prisoners (Satrapi 51), suffocate an innocent woman in her house because she was a suspect’s sister (Satrapi 66), stab a woman in the thigh due to her protest to the mandatory hijab (Satrapi 76), and “recruit... children for the front” (Satrapi 101) of Iran-Iraq war. These representations create an overall negative image of Muslim male figures in Iran, especially for distant audiences with limited or

no first-hand encounters with this group, who do not often have access to counter-narratives about them.

Marji acknowledges that the day on which the Shah of Iran left the country for exile in January 1979, “the country had the biggest celebration of its entire history” (Satrapi 42). She admits that “the country” celebrated the end of the Persian monarchy, yet when she tells her uncle that “[o]n TV they say that 99.99% of the population voted for the Islamic Republic, she accepts her uncle’s claim about fraudulent election results: “Do you realize how ignorant our people are? The elections were faked and they believed the results: 99.99%!! As for me, I don’t know a single person who voted for the Islamic Republic. Where did that figure come from? From their asses, that’s where” (Satrapi 62)! Landslide victory for the Islamic Republic was announced by 98% of the votes (Khan 69) and Marji adds another 1.99%, extending it to nearly 100%. The focus is on the election’s fake results and the ignorance of, apparently, anyone who believed the results. As mentioned earlier, it was known to everyone that the opposition party was led by a mullah, and the majority enthusiastically supported him. There was not a strong opposition who protested against the election results. Even the BBC, which has never favoured the Islamic government, has not questioned the 1979 referendum results (“Aims of 1979 Vote for Islamic Republic in Iran not Achieved-Outgoing MP,” www.bbc.com). The real tension is, in fact, between the people Marji knows (the opposing minority) and those who supported the change in Iran. The elite who had benefitted from Iran’s westernization by the Pahlavi regime objected to and critiqued the Islamic government and its policies.

One of the techniques used in both books is placing catchy phrases and strong opinions and statements at either the beginning or the end of a chapter or section. One of the chapters in *RLT* starts with this sentence: “Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe” (Nafisi 329). This is Nafisi’s comment after receiving a folder from Nassrin, who no longer comes to their reading gatherings. The folder reads: “*Be Seeing You in Fabulous Florida. Things Go Better with Sunshine*” (Nafisi 329)! Since Nafisi has told the students in her reading group about her immigration plans, her husband says, “[a]s for your most eloquent analogy, your girls must resent the fact that while you’re leaving this guy behind, they have to keep sleeping with him” (Nafisi 330). Iran is referred to as “the Islamic Republic” and the rest of the name of the country—of Iran—is omitted. The narrator’s word choice places emphasis on the “Islamic Republic,” to link all incidents to the country’s dominant religion. The narrator does not say that, for instance, *my* life in this country resembles a continuous rape, thus facilitating the assumption that the description applies to the experiences of every individual

in Iran. Such generalized statements can be found throughout the book. One of Nafisi's students, Mahshid, says, "everyday life does not have fewer horrors than prison" (Nafisi 13). An important question to ask is: Whose everyday life is being considered?

Another technique that is recurrently deployed in these works is the use of hyperbolic language, which is not uncommon in literary texts. However, in works such as a biographical novel and a memoir that have taken a representational role in the west, hyperbolic references may readily be understood as literal. For instance, Marji recounts the difficulties of wartime, saying that "our currency had lost all its value" (Satrapi 138). What is missing is in this excerpt is the context of the US-backed imposed war on Iran and its significant impact on the country's economy. In addition, following the Revolution, Iran's "trade was diverted away from the United States," resulting in "real depreciation of the [Iranian] rial," and thus "sharply higher costs of business and trade in Iran... Indeed, in the early 1980s, non-oil goods exports had dropped to well below one-percent Iran's non-oil GDP" (Esfahani and Pesaran 197). Certainly, this context repositions the intense tragic effect of Marji's statement.

In 1980, the Cultural Revolution of Iran was announced, which envisioned the removal of non-Islamic elements from school curricula. It thus led to a two-year closure of all universities across the country. Hearing the news, Marji's mother tells her father: "You'll see. Soon they're actually going to force us to wear the veil and you, you'll have to trade your car for a camel. God, what a backward policy" (Satrapi 73). She tends to equate the Cultural Revolution with moving backward in time, reinforcing the already established idea—in the minds of many culturally distant readers—of the 'hijab' as a symbol of backward thinking, including the use of camel as a means of transportation.

Persepolis is 153 pages long, with 19 chapters. Statistically speaking, almost half of the book is dedicated to negative incidents; to be exact, 79 pages of the book have scenes in which Marji is bitterly disappointed, or is scared, beaten, harassed, or terrified. The rest is a foreshadowing of upcoming disasters. The book in its entirety does not show any lasting happy experience. Upon the Shah's escape from Iran, "the country had the biggest celebration of its entire history;" (Satrapi 42) however, Marji's father sees no point in celebrating their "new freedom" (Satrapi 43) and warns that "as long as there is oil in the Middle East we will never have peace" (Satrapi 43). Marji and her family enjoy a trip to Italy and Spain but once they arrive home, they learn about a war starting with Iraq (Satrapi 77-9), without mentioning that Iraq had initiated the war. The narrator also describes a party which ends with Marji and her grandmother flushing wine down the toilet so that the Guardians of Revolution would not catch her father and threaten him with jail (Satrapi 106-10). The list of happy occasions which turn

into tragedy can go on and on. We see Marji joyful, but only momentarily. Satrapi's agonizing experiences during her childhood and part of her teenage years, spent during the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), have resulted in the seemingly selective memory that informs her narration, such that even if there were a typical or a happy day in her entire childhood and adolescence, those are not mentioned anywhere in her autobiographical work.

5.3. THE ROAD TO EMANCIPATION

In the epilogue of *RLT*, Nafisi writes, "I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me. Much has changed in appearance since Bijan and I left. There is more defiance in Manna's gait and those of other women; their scarves are more colorful and their robes much shorter" (Nafisi 341). The phrase "in appearance" suggests an overlooking of Iranian women's fight for their rights, in this example, for their right to dress however they please. She acknowledges these changes as superficial. The epilogue that serves as the author's final comment reduces Iranian women's agency by regarding their constant resistance as acts which only create trivial changes. As Saba Mahmood points out,

RLT gives a singularly excoriating account of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with no consideration for the shifting position of women since the 1979 revolution, in order to buttress the impression already deeply entrenched among its Euro-American audiences that Islam is an incurably misogynist, sexist, and life-squelching religion whose reform must begin with liberating its women. (Mahmood, "Retooling Democracy and Freedom" 119)

The same is partially true about *Persepolis*, which condemns the new Islamic regime as narrow, glorifies the west as open, and above all portrays women and girls in an Islamic country as victims whose best pathway of liberation involves taking refuge in the west or in western cultural ways. Similar to Nafisi, Satrapi shows her lack of hope for any improvements in people's living conditions in Iran. She constructs narratives that imply universal facts and experiences in ways that reinforce her negative view. For example, when she is at the airport to leave for Vienna, she says: "There was a huge line. Lots of people were leaving the country" (Satrapi 151). On the one hand, being surrounded by adults such as her parents and uncle who completely disrespect the Islamic government, and focusing on the traumatic experiences of her childhood on the other hand, have seemingly influenced Marji's point of view to the extent

that, for instance, a common sight such as long security lines at the airport appears to her in a negative light, creating the assumption in her mind that a lot of people were fleeing Iran, while, in fact, not everyone had that privilege.

Before immigrating to the United States, Nafisi encourages the girls in her reading group to take refuge in the world of literature, which is equated with the world of imagination. While reassuring her students that “great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women,” (Nafisi 19) she exposes them only to western literary works. They gradually internalize Nafisi’s message, so when Mahshid and Mitra talk about *Daisy Miller*⁵, Mitra says that “she envied Daisy’s courage” (Nafisi 200). Also, Miss Ruhi, who is described as a Muslim hard-liner, eventually confesses that “I want my daughter to be what I never was—like Daisy. You know, courageous” (Nafisi 333). Regardless of their social status, Iranian female characters are rendered as vulnerable and lacking courage, looking up to western literary characters as role models.

A paradox is created when Nafisi offers a solution by inviting her students to indulge themselves in literature and the realm of imagination; at the same time, she deems Iranians complicit in the injustices that they supposedly suffer. Note how the narrator mocks people’s mourning for Ayatollah Khomeini’s death and writes:

What they mourned after a well-timed death—for after the defeat in the war and the disenchantment, all he could do was die—was the death of a dream. Like all great mythmakers, he had tried to fashion reality out of his dream, and in the end... he had managed to destroy both reality and his dream. Added to the crimes, to the murders and tortures, we would now face this last indignity—the murder of our dreams. Yet he had done this with our full compliance, our complete assent and complicity. (Nafisi 246)

According to Guinness World Records, Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral broke the record of “largest percentage of population to attend a funeral” with a turnout of “10,200,000 people, that is one-sixth of the population of Iran” (www.guinnessworldrecords.com). The unprecedented turnout signifies Ayatollah Khomeini’s continued popularity among Iranians. In the above excerpt, Iranians are deemed guilty of participating in their own oppression, perhaps due to their support for the Islamic regime and its supreme leader; the majority of

⁵ Female protagonist of Henry James’ novella, *Daisy Miller* (1879). She defies conventionally accepted standards of morality and behaviour.

Iranians made the Islamic Revolution happen and also supported the government during the Iran-Iraq war. Arguments based on blaming people certainly fail to account for the role that larger political structures play in such discourses. An alternative way of looking at the events in Iran would involve examining the ways in which international politics contribute to the difficulties in the country. Perhaps, lack of an attempt to shift the blame for Iran's social ills onto western structures of power and domination is an important reason why a story such as *RLT* has very little currency in Iran.

In the absence of any acknowledgement of their resistance and resilience, Iranian women seem to have a share of the blame for the injustices that afflict their lives. Note how Nafisi strengthens the effect of her arguments by creating a metaphor, comparing Iran to a jail, Iranian officials to jailers, and Iranian women to prisoners, and comments that “[d]ancing with your jailer, participating in your own execution, that is an act of utmost brutality.” In Nafisi's words, her students “enacted it every time they went out into the streets dressed as they were told to dress” (Nafisi 76). That is, Iranian women wearing the hijab, which is literally all women in Iran, are complicit in oppressive practices. Importantly enough, the possibility of women's willing or resistant adoption of the hijab needs to be considered. In addition, studying the evolution of Iranian women's clothing styles reveals that those who disapprove of mandatory hijab have relentlessly resisted it. Although they have covered their heads, they have constantly challenged state-mandated norms of the hijab and have loosened their scarves, exposing their hair more and more.

Figure 5-1 demonstrates the changes in Iranian women's clothing over the past decades. The second photograph shows how average Iranian woman dressed in the 1990s, about the same time period that Nafisi's story spans: 1995 to 1997. It is evident that women's clothing had changed since the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The gradual changes demonstrate agency and the great strength of Iranian women, as they have stood up for their rights in ways appropriate to their temporal and spatial positioning. They have demonstrated that they actually do not ‘dress as they were told to.’ In addition, a woman does not necessarily need to deny local cultural norms and to dress similar to a western woman in order to be liberated, emancipated.



Figure 5-1 Taub, <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/21/8078025/iran-style-century>

5.4. INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY

Genres such as autobiography (*Persepolis*) and memoir (*RLT*) can potentially create in the mind of the reader the idea of representational accuracy. Such works may easily turn into handbooks of a whole nation. Looking through a feminist intersectional lens, my analysis concerns accounting for the widely variable ‘lived experiences’ of Iranian women at neglected intersections of gender, race, and class. The picture that these selected works show of Iran is carefully cropped, its edges being cut to fit the space of their works. I have discussed the authors’ social

status, their wealthy families and faded religious beliefs, very essential factors that are not laid out in ways that might assist culturally distant readers to notice the unique positioning of Satrapi and Nafisi as members of a select elite of Iranian society.

The front cover of *RLT* published by Random House (Figure 5-2) features two young Iranian students, looking at or reading something which is outside the photograph frame, thus invisible to the viewers. In fact, this is a cropped photograph taken from the Iranian press. Figure 5-3 shows the photograph in its original format, with the students holding a newspaper in their hands (Dabashi, n.p.). Cropping the photograph has created

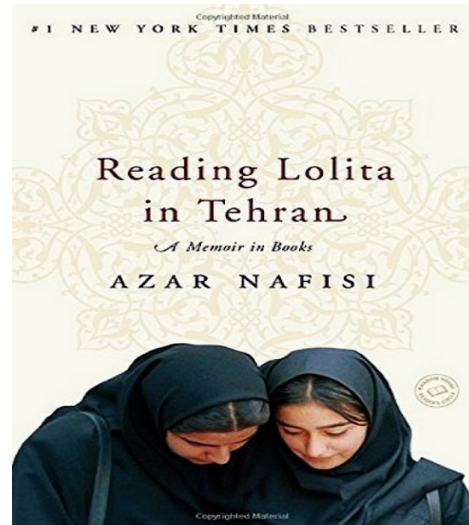


Figure 5-2 *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003)



Figure 5-3 www.weekly.ahram.org.eg

the illusion that they are “Reading Lolita” --with the scarves of the two teenagers doing the task of “in Tehran.” In the original picture the two young students are obviously on a college campus, reading a newspaper that is reporting the latest results of a major parliamentary election in their country. Cropping the newspaper, their classmates behind them, and a perfectly visible photograph of President Khatami--the iconic representation of the reformist movement--out of the picture and suggesting that the two young women are reading “Lolita” strips them of their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland. (Dabashi, n.p.)

Even if Nafisi or the publisher chose the original photograph randomly, in a figurative sense this editing speaks volumes. The cropped photograph is symptomatic of a cropped narrative. Young Iranian women's political awareness and the picture of Iran's greatest icon of political reform are removed, as they would have been irrelevant to the purpose of the book, which is partly to impart the idea that the Islamic regime robs individuals of their agency and limits their freedom by, for instance, banning western works of literature. *Persepolis* and *RLT* present narrow archives, detailing the experiences of a few members of the middle-class elite of Iran, amidst the most difficult periods in its contemporary history, during the Islamic Revolution (1979) and Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).

References to the authors' middle-class background, their western-oriented upbringing, and their western cultural preferences permeate both *Persepolis* and *RLT*. Satrapi went to "a French non-religious school" in Tehran until 1979 (Satrapi 4) and Nafisi went to a boarding school in Switzerland. Nafisi's father was "the youngest mayor in Tehran's history" (Nafisi 45); he had a photograph with General de Gaulle in *Paris Match*, "it was just Father and the General... the General had taken a special liking to him after my father's welcoming speech, which was delivered in French and filled with allusions to great French writers such as Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo. De Gaulle chose to reward him with the Legion of Honor" (Nafisi 45). Nafisi has had a privileged position as the child of a prominent mayor, who could speak French (a rare phenomenon in Iran even today) and was the recipient of the French Legion of Honour. During the 1980s and 1990s when Iranians were visibly poorer than today, Nafisi had the privilege of hiring "Tahereh Khanoom" (Mrs Tahereh) to help her with house chores (Nafisi 51), but the readers are not informed of the extraordinary position of an Iranian woman who could afford a maid at that time. Recognizing the privileged position of these authors, it becomes imaginable how such narratives could have been shaped differently, should they have been written by a writer with a different social positioning.

Western cultural references in both works are worth noting. Coffee is a simple but good example in *RLT*. Tea has been the most popular drink in Iran since the country became a target for the tea market of Great Britain in 1880s (Matthee 230). Today, "Iran is one of the world's great tea-drinking nations" (Matthee 200), with 10.1% of coffee consumption against 89.9% of tea (www.campus.hesge.ch). Coffee in contemporary Iran, like in the early modern era in the western hemisphere, embodies "the rational spirit of the Enlightenment and capitalist enterprise ... the mood of an emerging bourgeois milieu" (Matthee 200). References to 'coffee' 59 times and to 'café glacé' three times throughout 347 pages of the memoir reveals a connection to this westernized capitalist discourse. Although drinking coffee may be taken for

granted by a western reader—who perhaps drinks coffee several times a day—*RLT*’s frequent references to it would serve as a marker of the writer’s social status, when read through the lens of an Iranian insider. In most instances, Nafisi herself is the person ordering or making coffee, an imagery that can distance her from tea drinkers, that is, the majority of Iranians.

Another instance of the narrator’s social distance from ordinary people of Iran reveals itself when Nafisi recalls the screening of Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice* (1986) in Tehran in 1988. She recounts this experience, stating that the amazing feature of that day was “the crowd in front of the movie house. It looked like a protest rally. There were intellectuals, office workers, housewives, some with their small children in tow, a young mullah standing uncomfortably to the side... an audience most of whom would not have known how to spell his name” (Nafisi 206). The likely valid assumption that most of those audiences could not spell Tarkovsky’s name is a marker of the gap between the narrator and the people she addresses.

In a similar vein, we see Marji in *Persepolis* buying American music tapes in the black market. The tape sellers do not know the singers and whisper in Marji’s ear, “Estevie Vonder... Jikael Mackson” (Satrapi 132), trying to sell Stevie Wonder’s and Michael Jackson’s tapes. Marji who comes from a distinguished, wealthy family has easy access to western products, as opposed to the majority of Iranians who were then oblivious to western cultural trends and had to wait for a decade or two to gain access to satellite television and the Internet.

Satrapi’s wearing Nike sneakers *and* a headscarf, and Nafisi’s reading Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James, and Austen *in* Tehran depict the authors as Iranians who are still largely familiar with a western audience’s imagination. They are both foreign and familiar at once, thus easy to sympathize with. This reminds me of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s agenda of colonial education: To “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Chandra 213). Though Iranian in blood, Nafisi speaks glowingly about human beings’ unalienable rights of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” as outlined in the United States’ Declaration of Independence (Nafisi 42, 281, 341, 362). She blames her students for glorifying the west and writes: “They tend to look at the West too uncritically; they have a rosy picture of the West, thanks to the Islamic Republic. All that is good in their eyes comes from America or Europe, from chocolates and chewing gum to Austen and the Declaration of Independence” (Nafisi 312). Ironically, the model of liberation in *RLT* is based on a western agenda. Nafisi writes, “I was thinking about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, about the fact that my girls are not happy. What I mean is that they feel doomed to be unhappy” (Nafisi 281). Although this topic is not pivotal to Nafisi’s arguments,

it is important to mention briefly that many Iranians who have nationalist tendencies—those who shun the ideals of the Islamic government—would gravitate to Zoroastrian⁶ morality, mainly based on the triad of “good thoughts, good speech and good deeds.” Nafisi, instead, opts for the triad of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

5.4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Persepolis and *RLT* mainly focus on tragic events in post-revolution Iran. From a myriad of one’s experiences—positive and negative—it seems that the two authors have mainly brought to the fore the unfavourable ones, hardly offering “balanced portrayals of the Islamic Republic” (Adenan 43). That these narratives mark a point of departure from the lived experiences of many women in Iran may explain the particularly critical reception of Iranian scholars as reviewed in Chapter 2, and as well, the lack of circulation of these works in Iran. These accounts reflect the perspectives of upper-middle class women, who comprise a small portion of Iranian society; therefore, one can argue that such narratives are the products of larger systems that benefit from and thus encourage the reproduction of poverty and the divide between rich and poor.

Although an individual writer cannot possibly serve as the mouthpiece of an entire nation, when authors such as Satrapi and Nafisi use an insider tone—customary in genres including autobiography and memoir—an illusion would be created that they provide “non-Iranians, particularly those in the West, with a more accurate perspective on Iran” (Abedinifard 83). In an interview published online in *Monthly Review*, Iranian scholar Fatemeh Keshavarz criticizes Nafisi’s memoir, asserting that, “[T]his picture is full of holes! That is not about me! The culture I grew up in has its flesh and blood just like yours. It has good and bad things just like every culture” (Keshavarz, n.p.). Unnuanced narration of Iranian women’s lives and erasure of the complexity and richness of their local cultures show all the more need for critical encounter with such works. My analysis unmask the complicity of selected texts in Orientalist projects which feed off the pain and miseries of the ‘other.’

Given their social background, Nafisi and Satrapi might show a thinly disguised contempt for the theocratic government of Iran, but it becomes problematic when they both take a representational positioning in their narratives. A responsible reading of these works acknowledges the one-sided nature of such texts and their silencing potential to keep the voices of nationally and globally subalterned groups unheard, rendering the vulnerable even more

⁶ Zoroastrians were the oldest religious community in Persia (modern-day Iran), prior to Muslim conquest (est. 651 BC)

vulnerable. When works written by “native informers” (Dabashi, n.p.) are utilized in ways to serve the United States’ imperial purposes, boosting “efforts to alter Iranian policy... to deny Iran arms, technology, and income through sanctions and other means,” they indirectly impose “opportunity costs on Iran, whose economy would be more productive and whose military would be more... powerful without such restrictions” (Clawson and Eisenstadt 102-2). The effect of such texts can be leveraged to justify military action, “whose benefits, we are told, will be most deeply felt by the most oppressed population of the region, namely, Muslim women” (Mahmood, “Retooling Democracy and Freedom 119). Having in mind the foreign support that both works have received to be circulated in the west, it is relevant to mention Hamid Dabashi’s comment in this regard:

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, comprador native intellectuals were actively recruited to perform a critical function for the militant ideologues of the US Empire. Their task is to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge and thus to inform the US public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, by way of justifying the imperial designs of the US as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs. (Dabashi, n.p.)

The invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. allies exemplifies the materialization of such political intents. Saving Afghan women from the Taliban was a pretext for the U.S. military intervention and a justification of armed confrontations in 2001 (Cooke 485). With the U.S. empire ruling, politics seems to disappear “behind the veil of women’s victimization” (Cooke 485), by using gendered and sexualized metaphors to do that work.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Toward More Nuanced Ways of Understanding the Perspectives of Iranian Women in Western Contexts

In a world where information circulates through access to mass reproducibility, it is possible for beliefs about diverse groups to be formulated in the context of very limited exposure to or understanding about their actual lived experiences, cultures or practices. Therefore, intellectuals, artists, and activists with access to the means of mass production and circulation can become inadvertent spokespersons, deemed to speak ‘for’ all members of a group. Some might reasonably argue that such works are simply narratives of personal experience; however, “because many outsiders benefit from depicting communities as damaged” (Tuck 412), such stories could be enormously costly for the whole nation. Indeed, they are damage-centred *and* damaging. Supposedly innocent life narratives that document loss and pain are usually the ones that receive attention and support by structures that seek “to obtain particular political or material gains” (Tuck 413). This kind of representation is allowed and actually encouraged among communities of colour, poor communities, native communities, and disenfranchised communities, with “an implicit and sometimes explicit assurance that stories of damage pay off in material, sovereign, and political wins” (Tuck 414). Damage storytellers from Muslim countries inadvertently become pawns, at the service of the “West in its fight against the horrors of an imaginary Islam” (Keshavarz 119). However, “are the wins worth the long-term costs of *thinking of ourselves as damaged*” (Tuck 414-5)?

This thesis has been a journey to examine the possibility of using feminist intersectionality as a lens to explore and critique select famous works of art and literature by Iranian diasporic activists. Using an intersectionality framework has been successful in providing fresh, valuable insights into these works, helping to go deeper, unpacking first the over-simplifications (Spivak 27-8), and then the potentials that are undermined as a result. One of the major contributions of this thesis is the use of intersectionality to explore the unique selection of works of art and literature in popular circulation far from the site of representation. Feminist intersectionality enabled me to discuss the ways in which these works both simplify and reduce the multidimensional lived experiences of women in Iran.

When ‘Iranian women’ are reduced to signifiers of marginalized ethnicity, as characterized by a select few “representative” spokespersons, the complex ethnic, class, and gender dimensions of their identities and lives become homogenized and regulated from elsewhere. Broad “generalizations of Muslim society” of Iran in the works of Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi reinforce Orientalist stereotypes about Muslims and depict the Islamic government of Iran as oppressive of Iranians, especially women (Adenan 43). Attending to shifts occurring in representational politics in time and space helps address how accounts of individual experiences can have unintended political consequences, contributing to a climate where targeting and marginalizing othered groups becomes normalized, and audiences, especially feminist scholars, need to remain sensitive to this.

I have also emphasized that these cultural works show a tendency to ignore “other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion” (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 153). Therefore, if the Iranian woman chooses to follow Islamic rules, she is viewed as a victim of oppressive Islamic structures, and her agency would most likely be unacknowledged in such works.

In *The Politics of Women’s Rights in Iran* (2009), Arzoo Osanloo invites the readers to move beyond the stereotypical image of Muslim women as passive victims of state laws and presents Iranian women as “rights-bearing subjects” (Osanloo 120) who have thrived in the post-revolutionary state of Iran and its changing discourses on rights. As the UN high commissioner, Alaa Murabit points out, “women’s rights and religion are not mutually exclusive” (Murabit, n.p.), and this is evident in Iran’s contemporary history. Osanloo argues that the Iranian state has created a hybrid discourse which comprises both Islamic ideals and liberal individualism. Significant positive changes have occurred since the Islamic Republic emerged, most importantly through its efforts to narrow “the gap in the literacy rate between Iranian men and women, the increasing number of women in the professional fields and its initiatives to be independent of foreign capitalism” (Adenan 43). On 14 March 2017, Shahindokht Molaverdi, Iranian vice president of Women and Family Affairs announced that the percentage of social participation of Iranian women has reached its peak based on recorded Iran’s history (Molaverdi, n.p.). The 1997 election of Iran’s fifth president, Mohammad Khatami, brought about more tolerance and created a relatively liberal atmosphere. Khatami supported “relative openness, advocating greater freedom, flexibility, care for the youth, women’s rights, social welfare, and economic rehabilitation” (Menashri 23). The story of *RLT* spans three years, from 1995 to 1997, which was during Iran’s fourth president’s (Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) term. However, Nafisi’s book was not published until 2003, that is, by

the middle of Khatami's second term as president. In the epilogue of *RLT*, Nafisi writes, "Much has changed in appearance since Bijan and I left. There is more defiance in Manna's gait and those of other women; their scarves are more colorful and their robes much shorter" (Nafisi 341), yet the deeper changes and improvements in the Iranian society and in the lives of people of Iran are not reflected in this concluding section. Things have changed for the better, yet Neshat, Satrapi, and Nafisi have not published or exhibited new works to reflect the improved situations of people in Iran. Interestingly, Neshat, who gave a talk at the University of Guelph on March 8, 2017, said that after 2009 she "finally moved on" as she has reached a point where her narratives can transcend Iran (Gerges, n.p.); she has been recently filming a project in Morocco that engages the Arab Spring.

Some might argue that the works of an artist or author may not be "representationally responsible or irresponsible" (Rounthwaite 179), or that an individual author is not the mouthpiece of an entire nation (Clemens 585), yet certain overstatements and understatement about the conditions of Iranian women's lives, even in the name of literary or artistic license, have lasting, undeniable 'residual effects' on audiences in the Global North, as well as material consequences in the lives and aspirations of Iranian women. Certain ramifications are inevitable, such as political consequences that include waging wars in the name of "saving brown women from brown men" (Abu-Lughod 784), or economic sanctions influencing health, education, and industry sectors, and these are but a few obvious examples.

Due to limitations of space in this master's thesis, the analysis is restricted to a selection of particular images and photographs, films, and textual excerpts, explored within the framework of feminist intersectionality. The arguments in this study are a sampling of various ways in which these works could be engaged, and undoubtedly, there is more work to be done in this area.

6.1. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The Iranian artist and authors whose works I have examined in this thesis belong to a generation of diasporic Iranians whose works are shaped in a "space of revolutionary trauma and loss, telling and retelling the stories of both personal and public traumas" (Naghibi, *Women Write Iran* 105). Regarding autobiographies specifically, Naghibi highlights a paradoxical feature of contemporary life narratives by diasporic Iranian women:

On the one hand, as Gillian Whitlock (2007) has argued, the proliferation of Muslim women's testimonials in the West, with their repetitive message of

women's oppression in Muslim societies, reveal their possible co-optation as "soft weapons," illustrating how "the war on terror ripples in and through life narrative" (9). On the other hand, these narratives "can also be used to describe experiences of unbearable oppression and violence across a cultural divide" (55). In other words, while these autobiographical accounts sometimes participate in perpetuating negative representations of, in this case, Iran and Iranian women, these texts can also create possibilities for empathic connections, and for a humanization of a people and a place that has been vilified, in recent decades, in Western popular culture. (Naghibi, *Women Write Iran* 105)

In-depth exploration of how trauma may have influenced the production of these works would be very helpful. Further critical trauma research might compare, for example, the different ways in which revolutionary trauma and loss might emerge in the works of differently positioned authors and artists, with particular local and transnational political effects.

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Appendix A

Visual Discourse Analysis
<p>Exploring the connotation of signification entails engaging the associations that each photograph brings to mind. Some of the important questions that need to be considered are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are the elements of the photograph related to each other? - What historical and cultural knowledges are required to carry out a well-informed analysis of each photograph? - What has been emphasized (postures, colours, clothing, objects, background, and so forth)? - In what ways are the captions and other signs associated with or contained within the photographs related to the images? (Penn 234; 244)
<p>The interpretation of a work is made in a complex relationship among three sites:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the site(s) of production - the site of the photograph itself - the site(s) where it is received (Sturken and Cartwright 56; Rose 16)
The Site(s) of Production
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When was the photograph made? - Where was it made? - Who made it? - What is the social stance of the artist and of the subject in the photograph?
The Site of the Photograph Itself
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What objects, unique details, individuals are being shown in the photograph? - How are the components of the photograph arranged? - Is there a discernable location? - Is the photograph part of a series? If yes, how would this particular photograph fit in the series? - Where is the viewer's eye drawn to, and what are some possible implications? - What do the different constituents of the photograph signify? - Whose knowledges are included in/excluded from this depiction?
The Site(s) of Reception
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who is the intended audience for this photograph? - How is the photograph circulated? - How does the presentation of the photograph establish the relational dynamics between the photograph and its viewers?

- How have the technologies of circulation affected the potential audiences and critical reception of this work?
- Could diverse audience members interpret the work in multiple ways?
- How would the interpretation(s) of the work be affected by the audiences' gender, race, class, and so on? (Rose 188-90)

Additional Elements for Analysis of Films

- mise-en-scène
 - close-up
 - head and shoulders
 - shot
 - medium
 - full
 - long shot
 - extremely long
 - angle of the camera
 - overhead
 - high-angle
 - eye-level
 - low-angle
- sound
 - ambient environmental sound
 - speech
 - music (Rose 48-9)

Textual Discourse Analysis

Three fundamental questions that need to be addressed are:

- How is X constructed?
- What is being done and how is it being done?
- What are the functions and consequences of what is being done? (McMullen 208)

Utterances have three main features:

- locutionary: what discourses are about
- illocutionary: what utterers do with discourses

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - prelocutionary: the effects of discourses on audiences (Wood and Kroger 5)
<p>Michel Foucault's discourse theory involves consideration of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What knowledges (valid at a specific time and place) are included in this discourse? - How does this knowledge evolve, and how is it passed on? - What kind of understanding/s of society underlies this discourse? - How does this discourse function to constitute subjects and shape the society or societies in which it operates? (Jäger 53)
The Site(s) of Production
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who has written the text? - When was it written? - Where was it written? - What is the social stance of the author and the subject(s) in the text?
The Site of the Book Itself
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are the constituents of the text arranged? - Where is the reader's attention drawn to, and what are some possible implications? - What do the different constituents of the text signify? - Whose knowledge is included in/excluded from this narration?
Readership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who are the potential readers of this text? - How is the book circulated? - In what ways are the technologies of circulation influential in the audiences' reception of this text? - Is more than one interpretation of this work possible? If yes, are all the interpretations equally valid? - How would the readers' gender, class, and race affect the interpretation(s) of the text? (Rose 188-90)