

The Representation of the Veil in Iranian Contemporary Arts

Hisae Oba

Introduction

The body has been crucial to post-colonial discourse as a site for gendered reading of subjectivity: the body is a text, that is, a space in which conflicting discourse can be written and read (Aschcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 184). And the concept of 'veiling' the body in the construction of discourse of women in Islamic communities has stressed its complexity, because recent critical discussion on the concept of veil has called the oversimplified understanding into question.¹⁾ What the recent discussion has made an issue of is the Western ideological gaze on the veiled body. The veil still remains "an icon of the Otherness of Islam," as Helen Watson points out (Watson 142). Based on the Qur'anic concept of modesty, the veil has been used as a garment to preserve modesty and conceal the shame of nakedness, in other words, a cover for female sexuality. In these terms, the Western onlookers have regarded the veil as a symbol of the Muslim women's oppression and have thought that they can see the 'truth' of women behind their veil. That is why the image of women taking off their veil has been considered as the promise of liberation and politics of hope.²⁾ The Western onlookers who do not belong to the Islamic community can take pleasure when they see Muslim women's unveiling. And the Western onlookers' obsessive hope for 'unveiling' indicates their sexual desires. Fadwa El Guindi says that "the veil has come to replace the earlier obsession with "harems" and "the veil now [evokes] a public sexual energy that early Christianity, puritanist Western culture ... have not been able to term with" (El Guindi 10). Allison Donnell has pointed out that "the erotic and exotic dimensions of the veil were not lost to the colonial imagination" (Donnell 1999: 490). The veil has been a site for exoticism and western fantasies.

The recent discussion on the veil demonstrates the need to examine specific historical moments and locations in which the veil roots. Watson points out that veiling is "practiced, understood and experienced in [a] socio-cultural and political context" (Watson 146).³⁾ It is not one single truth that the veil signifies. Women who wear or take off the veil have their specific reasons. For example, some women return to the veil in consideration of the general view of religious modesty, while some women wear the veil to empower themselves through desexualization. They wear the veil by choice.

In this essay I will explore the representation of the veil in Iranian contemporary arts, and show

how Iranian women's narrative of identity are created in those art works. Firstly, I will examine Shirin Neshat's art works because she is exploring the possibility of the representation of 'an' Islamic woman. Through the veiled bodies in her works, we can access specific experiences of Islamic women. Secondly, I will examine two Iranian films, Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Tress* and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Moment of Innocence*. The aim of this paper is thus to explore as Shahla Haeri puts it, "the dynamic relationship that exists between veiling and vision" (qtd. Naficy 140). The variety of female characters indicates the multiplicity of women's roles and situations. And the eyes of the veiled characters indicate the directors' challenges to the relationship between the onlooker and its object. And it is also important that these two films are stories about making films. By exploring the relationships of cinema and the audience, and of the private lives of subjects in films and public, those films try to show the process of story-making and creation of narrative.

I

Working in photography and video installation, Shirin Neshat is exploring the representation of the body and trying to show the crisis behind the veiled body. In this chapter I will examine how the body speaks, how Neshat makes the invisible visible in her art works.

Shirin Neshat has been regarded as a migrant artist who uses recognizable symbols, such as the veil or chador in order to show the social, cultural, and religious codes of Iranian society. She left Iran for Los Angeles in 1974 where she studied art and now lives and works in New York. According to Homi Bhabha, Neshat's 'hybrid' cultural identity that emerges from the 'in-between' space empowers her as an artist. Yet, she has been criticized for taking advantage of this 'Third World' status, and reinforcing the existing stereotypes of Muslim women.⁴⁾ On a personal level, however, she seems to have suffered from the obsessive sense of the "impossible homecoming,"⁵⁾ which might explain why she is forever returning to the problem of female representation in Islam. John McLeod points out the impossibility for migrants to return 'home'-home, which tells us where we originated from and where we belong, is *imagined* in diaspora communities and "the imagination becomes more and more the primary location of home" (McLeod 210-211). Under pressure from the feeling of isolation from her native land, Neshat seems to try to return home in her imagination. And it is through her works that she travels to her native land.

What Neshat wants to show, however, is not her imagined home country, but rather the individual experiences of women in Islam. She claims that her photographic work is not about her or her opinion on the subject, and that her position is that of "no position":

The main question and curiosity was simply being a woman in Islam. I then decided to put the trust in those women's words who had lived and experienced the life of a woman behind a veil. So each time I inscribed a specific women's writing on my photographs, the work took a new direction. (qtd. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros 34-35)

This is her response to the question about her thought on women and the veil. Her works aim to represent the ordinary and real experiences of Islamic women, rather than challenge the cultural

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and religious code of Iranian society by generalizing women's situations. Not to invent radical female images but to show the multiple histories of Muslim women becomes for Neshat a reconstruction of her home through the imagination.

And as she says above, Arabic calligraphy on the body is highly significant in her photographic works. Put in writing, the body becomes a text to be read. It suggests the potential articulateness of the body and shows that the body can be an agent that conveys an urgent message from Muslim women. But as Giorgio Verzotti points out, what makes the body in her works ambiguous is that it does not lend itself easily to translation. Because the handwritten texts in the photographs are Arabic, they are incomprehensible except to Arabic-speaking people. But such audiences are rare, as her works have not been exhibited in Iran. To her Western audience, which makes up the vast majority, the writings remain incomprehensible without supplementary information (Verzotti 76). Hence, the writings become just a kind of elegant decoration. Some audiences easily appreciate the 'exotic' beauty of the Muslim women. Also apart from the exoticism, the body gives the audience frustrated feeling that they cannot understand the core meaning of the representation. This complexity of the body-being articulate, yet indecipherable-challenges not only the exoticism of the Muslims by Western onlookers, but also the relationship between art and its audience.

Some of her works address how the body speaks and what it says to us. In the photograph "Whisper" (1997), a black veil of a young woman covers more than half the image's space. We barely see the side view of her face appearing from the veil, and beyond her face, the gaze of a man turns to it. The man's scrutiny indicates his objectification of her body. Here the veil functions as a screen to prevent the woman from his sexual desire. In several photographs from the *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997), man's sexual desire for women is even more apparent. Several pictures feature women whose heads are covered by the Islamic chador and whose body parts are covered in calligraphy, beside which appears either a bare-chested man or a naked young boy. The nudity of these men stands in contrast to the covered body of the women. And it also seems to represent male sexual desire. The veiled bodies of the women suggest the oppression of female sexuality, as their bodies are covered, in juxtaposition with the men. As Donnell points out, however, the veil sometimes functions to remove women's bodies from male scrutiny and from the social judgments of beauty and sexuality (Donnell:2003 132). By contrasting covered bodies of women with naked bodies of men, Nesaht suggests one alternative meaning of the veil.

The rifles accompanied with the bodies are also significant in her works. In one the photographs from *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (1994), the bottom of a woman's feet appears in full view. The feet are covered in calligraphy, and a rifle projects from the space between her feet. This sign of violence indicates the urgent danger facing this woman, and the urgent necessity to fight against her enemy. This figure seems to be suggesting that the body has memory. Even if the woman does not remember in her mind the crucial incident in the past, her body remembers it and drives her into taking up arms. Beyond the feet we see her whole body veiled in a black garment (being dim because of the perspective). Although she seems to be modest-having the veil that covers the visi-

ble parts of her body--she keeps her hidden impulses under the bottom of her feet. Neshat highlights the trauma of the Muslim woman by showing the only part the veil cannot cover.

Neshat's film suggests yet another experience of the veiled woman. The film *The Show Under the Web* is an installation of four separate, simultaneous projections, one on each wall, constantly shifting perspective in space and time.⁶ It deals with the issue of displacement. Throughout the work, a veiled woman (Neshat) runs through four different sites, from a pre-Islamic space to a mosque, to contemporary public and residential spaces. In a sense, the work takes into question spatial boundaries between genders--the woman cannot find her place in 'male' public space nor in 'female' private space. She also cannot find her place in the past nor in the present. By exploring how she can locate herself, the figure indicates the destiny of Neshat, the diaspora artist forever in exile.

As we have seen, Shirin Neshat is an artist who explores the extent to which the veiled body can show the multiple histories of Muslim women.

II

In this chapter I will look at Iranian Cinema to examine the multiple possibilities of the veiled women. According to Hamid Dabashi, Iranian cinema is the most significant cultural medium in post-revolutionary Iran.⁷ Iranian cinema is becoming universally recognized by critics since some directors, like Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, have received prizes from international film festivals in the 1990s, it still has a close connection with Iran's ordinary people. Those directors have started to shoot their works before the revolution in 1979 and they have been popular among many of the ordinary people. Moreover some Iranian films even deal with the ordinary people's enthusiastic adoration for film directors.⁸ Cinema itself is the object of admiration for ordinary people. Also, ordinary people often participate in making films in Iran. Different from any other country in the world, we can see the very close relationship between cinema and ordinary people. Therefore, while there is certainly universal meaning to be found in Iranian films, they also speak directly to an Iranian audience. Being freed from the 'exoticizing' of Western audiences, these films show the real experiences of Iranian people, from an Iranian perspective.

In these Iranian films there is the possibilities of finding, in Donnell's terms, "women's own creative and differing response to the veil" (Donnell 132). The veils in those films do not always suggest the same functions. Female actresses (sometimes they are not actresses but rather ordinary women) do not represent the stereotypical Muslim woman, but instead play out their own particular stories. Some women play significant roles as staff in the making of films, while others are the objects of ardent male courtship. Since each woman has her own reason for wearing it, the veil represents a different aspect of each woman in each film.

Now I shall focus especially on the gaze in these films. Each gaze of each woman in Iranian films suggests an alternative role in Iranian society or a new relationship between men and women. The gaze of the onlookers also should be considered, along with that of male characters, of the film directors, and of the audience. By examining how the women respond in front of the gaze of the on-

lookers, we can see their creative presentation of themselves.

Now I shall address Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A moment of Innocence* (1996). In these films the eyes of the female characters have important meanings, as they suggest alternative roles of women in post-revolutionary Iran. And the most significant similarity between these two films is that they are films about film-making. By showing real difficulties the director faces in making a film (the problem of weather, location, non-professional actors/actresses, and so on), these films suggest the struggle involved in story-telling and the issue of authority in the creation of narrative. And the ordinary people's involvement in film-making indicates the issue of the ambiguous spatial boundary between private and public life. By focusing on the gaze of people who are involved in making these films, and on the process of film-making itself, I will examine how these films show the creation of the narrative of identity.

Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Tress* begins with a film director telling his audience beyond the screen (that is, us) that he is an actor playing the role of a film director, and that this fictional director is going to shoot a film about a village after a big earthquake. In talking to us, this director makes us understand that this is fiction, and that we are going to see a work of fiction that is about the process of making a film. A staff of the film interrupts his talk and calls him in to start the audition. When he turns to the audition set, we enter a fictional space, where unravels a story about film-making. The most significant difference of *Through the Olive Tress* from other Kiarostami films is that women appear as main characters.⁹ As Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa points out, the long-shot at the end of this film, in which the man follows his beloved woman along an endless path surrounded by olive trees, suggests Kiarostami's new idea about male-female relationship (Saeed-Vafa 206), while the veiled women's behavior in this film shows the multiple roles and characters of post-revolutionary Iranian women. And not only because of the highly impressive gaze of women actresses, but also because of this meta-fictional structure of this film, the question of viewpoint—who are we looking at, and by whom are we being watched?—is a crucial point throughout this film. Now I am going to examine some specific points of the gaze and what they indicate.

Siva, a female production assistant in the film, plays an exceptionally strong role, as the staff who calls the director back in to the film's fictional space. What her strong, almost dominant gaze indicates is the worship for cinema itself. She covers her head with a black veil and wears a dark gray cloth. Surrounded by other male film staff, she is the only female member. However, her role as an assistant is not limited to the conventional female role, and she undertakes any and every works to make the film—from teaching actors/actresses their lines, to collecting properties for the film, etc. In her case, the veil removes her from sexualization and enables her to work as a transgender individual. The importance of her eyes is obvious because in the early scene the film develops from her physical point of view. Kiarostami's camera fixes on her viewpoint, and what we see in the screen is what Siva is simultaneously looking at. Through the camera, we enter the veiled body and share the view. Her strict attitude toward other people shows how much she values the film. When Tahereh, the heroin of the film, shows the cloth that she prepares for the film, Silva does

not allow Tahereh to wear it because such a colorful cloth does not suit either the director's or Siva's concept of the film. Tahereh's taste represents that of the ordinary Iranian girl. In this sense Siva aims to complete her ideal creative work rather than sticking to reality. Siva, who attempts to accomplish her worship for art, is also an alternative example of the veiled woman.

We can see the "latitude in how [women] present themselves" to the male onlookers within in Tahereh's gaze (Hamid Naficy 140). Hussein's never-abandoning courtship for Tahereh, which is embodied in the extremely long shot in the end, is brought about by her gaze toward him. Because her grandmother does not allow them to marry, Tahereh does not accept him. She cannot accept nor refuse any man at her discretion. Obeying her grandmother's decision, Tahereh does not speak with him nor does she even look at him often. But since she has turned her gaze to him without saying anything, he has believed that she, too, has fallen love with him. Although she cannot obviously express her feelings in words, her gaze flashes and fascinates him all the more. Tahereh flirts. On the surface, the veil seems to be a cover to conceal her feelings, but it has a great function to bring out the courtship from her beloved. Here we can see the creative use of the veil in elevating the relationship between man and woman. And Tahereh's figure in the last shot, in which she continues walking stubbornly and is followed by Hussein, is entirely different from the female figure of Shirin Neshat's film in which the woman, having lost all sense of direction, wanders about aimlessly.

The director's gaze is also important and raises many issues. In the first scene, the audition, the camera is fixed from the director's viewpoint, and we see many veiled young girls through his eyes. In order to find a woman for the role of the heroin, he looks (as do we) at the girls intensively. Here, the girls are the subjects of his quest for artistic accomplishment. However, we suddenly notice that he is also the object of those girls' curious gaze. This suggests that the object of each gaze always replaces the subject of the gaze: we gaze at the veiled body, and, at the same time, the veiled body gazes at us. And it is also important that the director's gaze is that of the anthropologist. Because he comes from Tehran and does not know first-hand the experiences of people in the small village, he talks to them and lets them tell us of their situation and feelings. For example, when he casually speaks with a female group of nomads, we see their colorful clothes, which are quite different from village women, and we also know that young nomadic women cannot tell their name to strange men. We confront their reality through the director's eye. When he asks them their address in order to later contact them, the old nomadic woman tells him that they have no address, and that "behind the tree" is the only way to explain their residence.

His point of view also takes into question the relationship between author and audience. When the cinema crew takes a break from shooting, the director talks to a group of children watching the shooting from behind a partition rope. He tells them they are not allowed to overcome the partition to enter the set, then asks whether he can cross and join them. Children welcome him and they begin to talk. This indicates his attempt to have a dialogue with his audience. Here, he challenges the physical impossibility of the audience joining the artwork, and cuts into the spatial

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boundary between author and audience. As we have seen, he has entered into the space of the veiled schoolgirls in order to hold the audition, and later into the nomads' space as an onlooker. It is through his gaze that he is able to move into the space of 'the other.'

Hussein's gaze at Tahereh suggests his crisis of identity. Being Enchanted by her, he gazes longingly at her and offers again and again his hand in marriage. On the surface, his gaze shows his sexual desire for her, but it seems that his gaze indicates the urgency of his desperate "homelessness." When he speaks with the director, Hussein tells him that he has been engaged in constructing houses as a brick carrier since he was 11 year old, but that he has never had his own house. He confesses that he did not feel sorry for rich people who lost their houses due to the earthquake, and he even takes some pleasure in the thought that the rich and poor will now live more equally. But what he finds is that many new houses are already under construction for these wealthy people. He was underestimated by Tahereh's grandmother because of his homelessness and illiteracy. His never-ending gaze toward Tahereh indicates his quest for a geographical and intellectual home. The veiled woman is a leader of Hussein's endless journey.

As we have seen, in *Through the Olive Tress*, the point of view of the gaze is significant. Who is watching at the veiled body? And by whom is the veiled body being watched? There are multiple possibilities of the meaning of the veil, depending on the viewpoint. This can be applied to the ending scene as well. The director's gaze is leveled at Tahereh and Hussein endlessly walking in the open area. And the director is also inspired for a another new film about Tahereh and Hussein. The veiled body provides the onlookers with endless possibilities.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A moment of Innocence* is also a film about filmmaking. This film is based on Makhmalbaf's real experience as an activist in the past.¹⁰⁾ In *A moment of Innocence*, the police officer who was attacked by Makhmalbaf in 1974 appears as an enthusiastic fan of his, and Makhmalbaf immediately decides to shoot a film about the attack. He holds an audition to find young actors to play the roles of Makhmalbaf and the police officer. Makhmalbaf divides these people into two groups—one is the Makhmalbaf group, the other is the group of police officers. Each group starts to practice and shoot separately. And finally, at the bazaar where Makhmalbaf attacked the police officer in the past, both groups mingle with each other. This structurally complicated story abruptly ends with the gaze of a veiled girl, with a great impact. I will now examine the significance of this girl's role in this film.

This film emphasizes the invisibility of women. There are many women who participate in the film, but we cannot see their bodies. From the very beginning of this film, we confront the invisibility. A woman film assistant introduces the basic information (actors/actresses, directors, main staffs and so on) of the film, but we can only hear her narration and see her hand holding the board.

We, like this woman, cannot see the figures of the fully veiled old woman who tells the police officer the way to the Makhmalbaf's house, nor of the woman beyond the door who gives the police officer a soup. Nor can we see the most important woman of this film: the cousin of Makhmalbaf, who has cooperated with him in attacking the police officer. And the police officer's love for her makes

the story all the more complicated. But we can only hear her voice. The invisibility of these significant women is a distinguishing characteristic of the young girl's existence.

The function of the girl's veil is exceptional in comparison to other women in this film. She is selected to play the role of the Makhmalbaf's cousin. Her way of using the veil is creative. For example, when she and the young boy who plays the role of Makhmalbaf walk together and practice their lines, she does not notice that they have taken different ways at the crossroad, and she continues practicing because she cannot see him due to her veil. The veil obstructs her view and nearly causes her to lose her beloved. But in other sense, she can concentrate her artistic world because the veil prevents her from men's sexual interruption.

The gaze of the girl witnesses the dramatic solution to the strained situation between Makhmalbaf and the police officer. In Makhmalbaf's attack on the police officer, the Makhmalbaf's cousin's role was to distract the officer's attention from his job. Since the officer, who had fallen love with her, has noticed her real role in the process of making the film, the situation becomes more strained due to his mortification. Makhmalbaf still persists in reproducing the attack, and the police officer is about to kill the girl to carry out his revenge. Under this pressure, the shooting proceeds. The two boy actors playing the roles of Makhmalbaf and the police officer reach an acute crisis. The girl immediately understands that she is now in the space between the gun of the police officer and the Makhmalbaf's knife. And the last frame of *A Moment of Innocence*, in Dabashi's words, "freezes with the camera gazing at the open face of a woman in love, with a piece of bread and a flower pot substituting for a potential gun and a knife" (Dabashi 2003). Makhmalbaf shows us one still picture consisting of a piece of bread, a pot, and the gaze of a veiled woman, as an alternative solution to the post-revolutionary Iranian society. Makhmalbaf suggests a counter possibility against the oversimplified understanding of the veil.

Conclusion

As we have seen, contemporary Iranian artists suggest multiple possibilities of the functions, values, and meanings of the veil. By showing numerous histories and experiences of Muslim women under the veil, these works challenge the Western liberalistic motive for unveiling. In these works, the veiled women do not speak so much (or even at all); yet, confronting these veiled bodies, we must understand what it is each veiled body is saying to us. Like Neshat endlessly wandering endlessly to locate herself in her film work, like Tahereh who roams about in the huge open area, or like the girl who, walking through the bazaar, suddenly freezes without any explanation, our understanding of the veil, too, is free to the roaming of various interpretations.

Notes

- 1) *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* by Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, refers to Kadiatu Kanneh who has brought the oversimplified understanding of the issue of veiling into question.
- 2) It is needless to say that the most fitting case of this image is the one of women in Afghanistan af-

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- ter the 11th September in 2001. Allison Donnell questions whether such a image equates with a new just politics and gender equality in Afghanistan and insists the urgent necessity to acknowledge the multiple function and values of the veil in *Veil* (Donnell:2003 121-135).
- 3) Examining Qur'anic concept, Watson says, the veil may be viewed as "a robe of piety" which signals the wear's modesty and religiosity, but the wearing of the veil does not provide an automatic guarantee of piety.
 - 4) See *Shirin Neshat*.
 - 5) Iain Chamber points out, quoting Martin Heidegger's words, "Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world" (Chamber 1), 'home' is mythic space for all of us in this postmodern world. And migrant people's situation is the most fitting metaphor of the postmodern (Chamber 27).
 - 6) See *Shirin Neshat* pp.93-95.
 - 7) Hamid Dabashi points out that cinema was effectively replacing poetry, plays, short stories, and novels (Dabashi 71).
 - 8) Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990) is the most fitting example of this. It is a story about one Iranian young man who admires the film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf so much that he finally pretends that he himself is Makhmalbaf.
 - 9) Subjects of his films usually are children or men.
 - 10) Makhmalbaf had been jailed because of the attack to the policeman until the accomplishment of the Iranian revolution.

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