

## Shirin Neshat (b.1957), *Rebellious Silence*, 1994



Digital image courtesy of Shirin Neshat / Photo: Cynthia Preston

Date: 1994

Size: 142 x 98 cm (55.9 x 38.6 in.)

Medium: Black and white RC (resin coated) print, and ink calligraphy

Location: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

### 1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: 'Rebellious Silence' is one of the 'Women of Allah' series (1993-97) of black and white figurative photographs. It is a highly staged self-portrait of the artist wearing a *chador*. A *chador* is an outer garment of a large piece of cloth, often black, that is wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed. It is worn by some Muslim women, especially in Iran, according to an interpretation of the guidelines laid down in the Quran. The photograph is inscribed on the forehead and from below the open made-up eyes with horizontal rows of writing from a contemporary poem in *Farsi* (the language spoken in Persia/Iran, using the Persian alphabet). It is written and read from right to left for the viewer, and crosses the closed, and hence silenced, mouth. This script acts like a *niqab* (a veil that covers the face leaving a small opening for the eyes, a

form of headwear and facial covering which is not mentioned in the Quran). This image does not include Quranic text, nor does it include a 'veil' as such (i.e. something that covers the face) though this term is currently often used as a visual marker to differentiate Muslim women from western liberal individuals.<sup>1</sup> The self-portrait is not a self-portrait as an artist, but Neshat uses herself to comment on the representation of Muslim women in Iran. In other words this is a 'negotiated self' (Sussan Babaie).

Visual analysis: The static black and white photographic portrait is frontal, with an intense unemotional outward gaze and a strong central axis created by the long vertical barrel of a gun. The gun is passively held by the seated woman and it touches her face. This static, symmetrical composition lit from the right side highlights the hard metal of the gun, while leaving the left side in shadow. The simple forms, sparse environment without props or temporal clues, strong outline silhouette and contrast of light set up a series of binaries, which link directly to the possible meanings.

Orientalism: When approaching Neshat's images it is important to read them in relation to the long tradition of Orientalism (see Edward Said Orientalism 1978). The Orient is the area associated with the Ottoman Empire, namely the Middle East and North Africa, described by Europeans since Emperor Napoleon's colonial invasion of Egypt in 1789, and often used as an aesthetic category. It is a European vision of the 'other', a fantasy rather than a documentary record. *"The Orient was almost a European invention, ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."* (Said p. 1)

This is not a patriarchal image of a submissive Islamic woman but an image of a supporter of the Iranian revolution of 1979, an image of militarised Islam. Hence it engages with issues of femininity and feminism, as well as what it means to be an Iranian American after the revolution.

Text: To a western audience the text cannot be read, so is mainly decorative, aesthetically pleasing, and a reference to the long history of calligraphy in Islamic art. It functions rather like an ornamental screen. It is also reminiscent of henna and other tattoos. Neshat says *"The written text is the voice of the photograph, it breaks the silence of the still woman in the portrait"* (Dabashi p.78). The words are from 'Allegiance with Wakefulness', a collection of poems from 1980 by Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008). The excerpt below illustrates how Neshat honours the conviction and bravery of martyrdom:

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<sup>1</sup> Iftikhar Dadi 'Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Post-Colonial Allegories' *Signs* Vol. 34, No. 1 2008

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

(Babaie p.52)

Mass Media: This black and white photographic image directly addresses the media stereotype of Islamic women from 1979 as well as more contemporary portrayals; it therefore offers multiple readings. It raises the issue of political propaganda alongside aesthetic considerations. There is no temporal or narrative link between the c. 36 photographs in the series (only some of which are untitled, and only some of which are self-portraits). However, Neshat describes the series as *"conceptual narratives on the subject of female warriors during the Iranian Revolution of 1979"*.

## **2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS**

Shirin Neshat was born into a privileged family in Qazvin, Iran in 1957 and studied at a Catholic school where she gained an education in Iranian and European cultural history, before leaving to study in California, four years before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. She now lives and works in New York and identifies herself as an Iranian American, part of the Iranian diaspora.

Persia has a long and highly respected tradition of the visual arts, crafts and poetry, particularly manifested in miniature paintings, together with calligraphy, known as the 'art of the book'. This developed over many centuries, peaking in Mughal India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Shah (king) Mohammed Reza Pahlavi took power in Iran (the name for Persia since 1935) in 1941 and modernised the country along Western lines, favouring the urban intelligentsia and giving women the vote in 1963. His authoritarian rule was supported by western powers due to the

country's oil wealth; however, he was kept in power by SAVAK (the secret police). His undemocratic repression of political and religious freedoms led to the revolution of 1979. Religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in France to rule Iran as a theocracy, a new Islamic Republic, from April 1979.

Initially many Iranians supported the revolution, including women from all classes, but Khomeini changed social conventions and began severely curtailing women's rights. Family Protection Law was repealed; female government workers were forced to observe Islamic dress code; women were barred from becoming judges; beaches and sports were gender-segregated; the legal age of marriage for girls was reduced to 9 (later raised to 14); and married women were barred from attending regular schools. The Islamic revolution was ideologically committed to inequality for women in inheritance and other areas of the civil code; and committed to segregation of the sexes. Wearing the hijab (headscarf) was made compulsory in 1985. This had previously been simply a cultural choice often linked to class and region, with urban intellectuals rejecting it while many rural Iranians had always worn a head covering. Neshat was not in Iran during this period of change and only experienced these changes from media representations in the USA. Women protested against these policies and not all women in Iran were silenced, some continued to find strategies by which to live purposeful lives. For example, the lawyer Shirin Ebadi who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003.

### **3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES**

Despite training as a painter - and receiving a Masters in Fine Art in California, Neshat decided photography was more appropriate for this work as it links with photojournalism and documentation. The works refer to traditions of realism and self-portraiture, but also significantly to Orientalist and ethnographic photography by European photographers of the colonial nineteenth century. Professional photographers took the photographs, but Neshat curates the images. During colonial times photography was considered by Muslims to be a violation of the individual, believed to capture the soul. The camera 'shoots' the image. Here the gun represents power, yet it is shown passively, only as a potential threat to the viewer and to the woman herself if she is dedicated to religious and/or revolutionary martyrdom. *"As the artist, I took on the role of performer, posing for the photographs. These photographs became iconic portraits of wilfully armed Muslim women."*

In contrast to the mechanical reproduction of photographic techniques, Neshat uses ink and brush to inscribe the text by hand on the large-scale developed photographic print. This hand-writing compares unfavourably to professional calligraphers to remind the viewer of allegorical meanings rather than pure skill, yet it still references the rich tradition of the Mughal art of the book and illuminated manuscripts. Text and title are significant in determining meaning.

#### 4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Neshat's first return visit to Iran was in 1991 (aged 35) after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the release by the US of Iranians' assets. The visit prompted this series of works. As she had spent the majority of her life in the USA, her representations engage with the traditions of Western representations of Muslim women, for a western audience, hence their beauty. She is the most prominent woman artist from a Muslim culture exhibiting internationally.

These photographic works were first shown in a small private gallery in Lower Manhattan but soon gained fame and have become her 'signature work'. This is how she described them:

*'In 1993-97, I produced my first body of work, a series of stark black-and-white photographs entitled Women of Allah, conceptual narratives on the subject of female warriors during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. On each photograph, I inscribed calligraphic Farsi text on the female body (eyes, face, hands, feet, and chest); the text is poetry by contemporary Iranian women poets who had written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the Revolution. As the artist, I took on the role of performer, posing for the photographs. These photographs became iconic portraits of wilfully armed Muslim women. Yet every image, every woman's submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical reality behind the surface.'* (Third Text)

When exhibited in London at the Serpentine Gallery in 2000, the catalogue read:

*'On one hand she offers the stereotypical reassuring image of Middle Eastern women: beautiful, exotic and seductive. On the other, wielding guns and covered, through Neshat's calligraphy in her native tongue Farsi – by Iranian feminist poet, the 'Women of Allah' are also knowing, hateful and threatening. Among the contradictions of contemporary Iran is a woman's day-to-day powerlessness and inferiority in contrast to her equal status in war, when she is allowed to strap a rifle across the back of her chador and fight side-by-side with the men. The women Neshat depicts are strange and inscrutable beings, more sculptural than real – like the heavily draped figures of the Parthenon frieze. Often the artist herself poses for the pictures ...but these are hardly self-portraits. The 'Women of Allah' are symbolic, female forms literally marked by their culture ...In the West we are accustomed for the avant-garde artist to assume a transgressive role – to push the boundaries of what is allowed, what is revealed, what is exposed. The difference in Neshat's work lies in her unusual decision – and skill – to maintain, rather than transgress, heavily restrictive social codes: to keep the female body covered, to maintain the division between the men and the women. Without literally "lifting the veil", Neshat penetrates to the heart of a hidden and distant Other, ... East or West, near or far.'* (Gilda Williams)

Since September 11th 2001 (9/11) and the US-led 'global war on terror' the readings and meanings of these images has changed. 'Islam' became conflated with 'terrorism' for many members of the western public. Indeed back in 1986 post-modernist Frederic Jameson controversially claimed "*all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories*"<sup>2</sup> rather than specific personal works. Hence Neshat becomes a token artist responsible for the 'burden of representation' of Iranian women as 'other'.

Western dealers, critics and the media have contributed to the works being reduced to 'iconic' images symbolic of oppressed Islamic women in Iran. Neshat has even been accused of 'self-orientalising' herself. (See Barbad Golshiri's article.)

Neshat is "*able to mediate the image of Muslim womanhood in the West by means of her powerful aesthetic representations... Neshat initially does refer directly to the media image of the revolutionary Iranian woman, this functions only as a point of departure to a less literal, more complex trajectory of meaning.*" She is the "*most significant visual interpreter of the status of Muslim women universally.*" (Dadi 2008)



Left Standing woman Persian miniature, 18th century, pen and black ink, brush and opaque watercolour and gold, 31.7 x 20.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of Ely Jacques Kahn (1962-225-9)

Centre Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, from the *Women of Allah* series, 1996, gelatin silver print, ink, 167.64 x 133.35 cm. Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2012.60). Digital image courtesy of Shirin Neshat / Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels / Museum Associates / LACMA

Right Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Revisited #1*, 2009, chromogenic print mounted to aluminum and protected with Mactac lustre laminate, 101.6 x 76.1 cm. Digital image courtesy of Lalla Essaydi / Sotheby's

<sup>2</sup> James, F. 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' *Social Text* 15, 1986.

## **FURTHER READING AND LINKS**

- Hart, Rebecca R, Babair, Sussan & Princenthal, Nancy *Shirin Neshat* (2013) AbeBooks, Detroit Institute of Art
- <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/08/61377/for-they-know-what-they-do-know/> (Barbad Golshiri)
- [http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin\\_neshat\\_art\\_in\\_exile?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin_neshat_art_in_exile?language=en)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pySlgzyDvKk>
- <http://www.photorientalist.org/about/orientalist-photography/>
- <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/8/461/htm> the veiling issues in C20th Iran

## **Student workbook**

What is happening in Iran at the moment, specifically in relation to women[’s rights]/the position of women?

What is the relationship of Iran to the UK and USA at the moment and why?

Can you describe a recent image you have seen in the media of Iranian women?

## **Orientalism**

To what extent is this image a cliché of a Muslim woman (compare with works you know such as Delacroix’s ‘Women of Algiers’ and ‘Death of Sardanapalus’)?

To what extent is this a misconception of Iranian women as they were in 1979?

Is this image from 1994 an accurate image of Iranian women now?

What does the Quran say about ‘veiling’?

To what extent might Iranian Muslim women's identity be related to the wearing of the chador?

To what extent does Islam in Iran limit women's rights and freedoms?

Are these images literal and didactic?

Is there a place for political propaganda in art?

Think about how Neshat's image negotiates the traditions of Orientalism and modernity. To organise your views, fill in the gaps and complete the third/final column. Then write up your overview.

<b>Traditional women under patriarchy (including Orientalism)</b>	<b>Modernity for women</b>	<b>'Rebellious Silence'</b>
Repression/oppression	Freedom	
Powerless	Powerful	
Subservient	Liberated	
Piety	Secularism	
Sexualised object of desire	Desirous subject	
Sinful	Sinless	
Ashamed	Confident	
'Veil'	Face visible	



Passive	Active	
Silent	Vocal	
Peaceful	Violent	
East	West	
Global South	Global North (spatial and temporal)	
Beauty/symmetry	Beauty	
Harem interiors	Exterior world	
Closed	Open	
Domestic	Worldly	
Child-like	Mature	
Uneducated	Educated	
Inscrutable	Open	
Private	Public	
Religious	Secular	
Fictional	Realistic (?)	

How does this image express the gender identity of Neshat? (6 marks)

How does this image express the ethnic identity of Neshat? (6 marks)