

SHIRIN NESHAT'S WOMEN OF ALLAH: PHOTOGRAPHY AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNSPEAKABLE

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In this paper I'm going to analyze Shirin Neshat's photographic series *Women of Allah*, a work started by the artist when she came back to Iran after she had spent twelve years abroad, to find her country completely changed by the Islamic revolution of 1979. Through Neshat's work, I will try to explore the condition of estrangement of women in exile by analyzing the main themes the artist deals with in *Women of Allah* – that is the body, the veil and the written text – and I'll conclude with a very brief personal consideration on photography.

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The Body

Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographic series seem to echo (obviously unintentionally) Helen Cixous's essay *The Laugh of Medusa*, which dates back to the late 1970s but is still absolutely relevant. Cixous writes:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. [1]

Although there are thousands of differences between the time and the cultural environment in which Hélène Cixous wrote her essay and that in which Shirin Neshat created *Women of Allah*, they share a common ground. They both deal with 'writing' and the female body, they both denounce the expropriation operated on women by their societies; the fact that they've been deprived of their own bodies and their own voices (Cixous talks about a theft) [2] and, as it seems by looking at Neshat's women, their firm will of defending what belongs to them (the weapons can be symbols of defense, in addition to being symbols of violence and submission). For both Cixous and Neshat, writing seems to be the most important step towards freedom.

As Neshat and Cixous demonstrate, the female body is a crucial theme for feminist discourse.

Sidonie Smith explains it in such an eloquent way when, in her work *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, she (like other feminists) speaks about 'embodiment.' [3] A woman is embodied when she accomplishes all the duties society assigns to her, which means to be a mother and to be devoted to domestic life.

This is such an effective expression because it stresses on the fact that society strongly reflects on women's bodies, not only morally, but also physically. Neshat's choice to write directly on women's bodies, to show and hide their shapes at the same time, makes me think about how a woman's body can be modified by a society's rules, and at the same time how it can be turned into a means of subversion.

The Veil

All the women portrayed in the *Women of Allah* series wear a veil (usually black, but also white in some photographs). Neshat, in her interview with Scott MacDonald, describes the veil as: "[...] extremely controversial, which have been considered both a symbol of repression and a symbol of liberation – resistance against the Western influence." [4]

The strong feelings Neshat's works convey make me think about Edward Said's essay *Reflections on Exile*, especially where he affirms that "exile is a jealous state." [5] Neshat's veils that completely hide women's bodies, and the weapons her *Women of Allah* hold, seem to be symbols of defense of Neshat's culture and heritage. She is 'jealous' of her culture, which has been stolen both by the Islamic revolution and by Western culture, with its mutilating interpretations of the Middle East. Furthermore, as far as her personal experience is concerned, part of her heritage has been stolen by twelve years far away from home.

Moreover, Julia Kristeva talks about the indifference and incomprehension a foreigner has to face, by stressing on how hard it is for the 'others' to penetrate his innermost feelings. [6] The 'others' can't understand that corner in the foreigner's soul, where memories are hidden, hidden with care and jealousy (or with anger sometimes), that corner in which the mother-tongue lays buried, [7] in which memories and dreams swim together, ending up being the same thing.

Kristeva describes her relation with her mother tongue by using these powerful words:

I have not forgotten my mother tongue. It comes back to me, – with more and more difficulty, I admit – in dreams. Or when I hear my mother talking: then, after twenty-four hours' immersion in that now distant sea, I find I can swim in it quite well. [8]

There is an unreachable place in the exiled soul, which can be both a source of solitude and of pride, a sort of loophole from which one can look outwards without being seen, penetrated, understood, with an ancestral awareness that empowers the gaze.

That is why I like to compare the exiled gaze to those peculiar windows called 'jealousies.'

Thanks to this kind of window, you can see outwards without being seen from the outside. You're invisible, but you can observe the others: invisible like any outsider in a society, but therefore able to look at the other in such a singular way they will never experiment.

Jealousy windows make me think about that 'double vision' every 'hyphenated identity' is endowed with, that ability of observing the world both from the perspective of 'others' and of himself / herself: to learn the gaze of the other, to think in two languages, to be drenched into two cultures.

This concept is expressed with such an eloquence and relevance by William E. B. Du Bois; in this famous quotation taken from *The Soul of Black Folk* he represents the distance between himself and the world that surrounded him by using the metaphor of the veil:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. [9]

In some photographs, Neshat's veils seem to defend women from the world and from society, to preserve a culture threatened by the West; that seems to crush on a black veil whenever it tries to penetrate and understand the Middle East. It is the symbol of a distance, of a defense, and also of a double vision that makes Iranian women aware of what they want to conquer (emancipation) but without losing what is behind (and in) that veil, their culture and their heritage.

The Written Text

All the women portrayed in *Women of Allah* are covered with calligraphy in Farsi, added by Shirin Neshat directly on the photographs.

When Scott MacDonald asked Neshat why she had chosen to write in Farsi, she answered that, since she wasn't famous at the time, she didn't think about the audience, but she did the photographs for herself. [10] Moreover, when MacDonald asked her whether or not Iranians could understand those texts, she replied:

Yes, of course. Iranians not only could read and understand the meaning of the poetry but are also very familiar with the history and place of the writers in relation to Iranian society – something that would be impossible to translate to Westerners. [11]

The problem of language and translation is crucial to exiled people (or simply to foreigners), and obviously, even though one can be a master in speaking the 'other(s)' language, there are some things that can never be translated and that will represent a frontier forever (it can be surpassed, one can pass from one side to the other but can never erase it).

In her essay *The Other Language or the Condition of Being Alive* Kristeva says:

Immediately, but also fundamentally, the foreigner differs from someone who is not, because he speaks another language. Looked at more closely, this fact is less trivial than it appears; it reveals an extravagant destiny: a tragedy as much as a choice. Tragedy, because the human being is a speaking being, and he naturally speaks the language of his group, the national language. Changing languages is tantamount to losing something natural, betraying one's mother tongue or, at very least, translating it. A foreigner is, in essence, a translator. He may reach a point where he blends in perfectly with his host language, or only partially. In most cases, however, he is regarded as a foreigner precisely because his translation, however perfect it may be, betrays a melody or a mentality that is not entirely in tune with the identity of the host. [12]

Shirin Neshat proves to be deeply aware of frontiers, of those existing between languages, but also between the East and the West, between Women and Men. Her work very often represents a division between different 'universes' which cannot be surmounted (for example the barrier between men and

women in *Women without Men*). In an interview with John LeKay she affirms: “I see everything in the form of duality – paradoxical - in the inevitable cycle of life/death, good/evil, beauty/violence.” [13]

Sometimes, as in the case of those language frontiers, there is no chance to pull them down. The veil, the guns, the writings in Farsi are there to defend and to be defended against foreign invasion. Obviously, the West can (and must) try to have a look on the other side of the frontier, try to understand and never judge what it finds, but there is no hope to pull down the wall, and any kind of invasion will be punished.

When I think of *Women of Allah*, I am not surprised by the fact that Neshat used her mother tongue instead of English. After twelve years far away from home, to write all over her photographs (and, in a certain way, all over herself) the letters, which are so familiar to her, were a natural reconciliation. Moreover, it would have been useless to translate those poems. A Westerner wouldn't have understood: he/she would lack the cultural background.

Why Photography

When dealing with exile, with feelings estrangement and pain, I am always attracted to those artists who use photography to convey their feelings. Obviously, to express the unspeakable, it is easier to use images, as in Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. [14] In the book, the main characters, after many painful adventures, bump into a castle and enter the building in order to find shelter. Since they are overwhelmed by the feelings of pain deriving from their tough experiences, they find themselves speechless. They have no words and choose to tell their stories by using images (tarot cards) instead of speaking.

In the case of photography, the result can be even more powerful. To take a photograph means to keep something that was once there and 'alive' and to capture it forever in the realm of stillness, from which can arise a feeling not that different from what the romantics called 'the sublime.' Photography is something that belongs to ghosts [15] and to mystery, as Susan Sontag writes: “Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up and thicken the environment we recognize as modern.” [16]

I think I can compare the effect photography can have on the spectators to that of masks. Masks are face-shaped objects deprived of what gives life to a face – the eyes, and the movement: that is why they are sometimes disturbing. They have the shape of something supposed to be alive, but are without 'life,' like zombies.

In my opinion, a photograph can be as impressive as masks and sometimes even disturbing: neither alive nor dead, the image depicted in a photograph contains itself the essence of the inexpressible, that capacity of awakening feelings of astonishment and anxiety able to arrive straight to the heart of the spectator

References and Notes:

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2. *Ibid.*, 887

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4. Scott MacDonald, "Between Two Worlds: Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 628.
5. Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 178.
6. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1 – 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 20.
8. Julia Kristeva, "The Other Language or the Condition of Being Alive," 2nd International Conference on Translation and Interpretation, October, 2008, <http://translation.hau.gr/telamon/files/Kristeva's%20speech.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2011).
9. William E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of The Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A.A. McClurg & CO., 1903), 10.
10. Scott MacDonald, "Between Two Worlds: Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 629.
11. *Ibid.*, 630.
12. Julia Kristeva, "The Other Language or the Condition of Being Alive," 2nd International Conference on Translation and Interpretation, <http://translation.hau.gr/telamon/files/Kristeva's%20speech.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2011).
13. John Le Kay, "Shirin Neshat: Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Heyoka Magazine*, <http://www.heyokamagazine.com/HEYOKA.4.FOTOS.ShirinNeshat.htm> (accessed March 16, 2011).
14. Italo Calvino, *Il Castello dei Destini Incrociati* (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2010).
15. Franco Vaccari, *Fotografia e Inconscio Tecnologico* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011), 13.
16. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2009), 3.