Otherwise, The Gap: Performing Identities in Iranian Contemporary Art and Performance

By

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Abstract

Otherwise, the Gap: Performing Identities in Iranian Contemporary Art and Performance explores the intersections between race, performance, and politics within and without the so-called Middle Eastern region. I use theories of race, gender, performance, and ritual to investigate the performativity of what I call *strategic acts of repair* in the context of four case studies: Shadi Ghadirian's *Like EveryDay* photo collection; 84Theatre Company's productions of *Endless Monologue* and *Mountain Language*; and the underground Iranian instrumental and electronic music movement. Through the framework of strategic acts of repair, I intend to theorize the performativity of constant attempts made by Iranian artist-activists in raising awareness as well as facilitating a platform for addressing the political violence imposed on Iranian identity on its legal top-down and everyday bottom-up level, domestically and internationally. I argue these artworks from theatre, performance, visual and sonic art are vital sites capable of articulating and resisting the exclusion that Muslims encounter in the Middle East as well as the United States of America. By interrogating these artworks produced in the spaces of the theatre, Internet, and underground performance venues in the Muslim diaspora, I am able to analyze scenographic, performative, and architectural strategies used by contemporary artists to build new artistic vocabularies of resistance. I argue that these artists and their works orchestrate interactions between the oppositional fronts, e.g., official and unofficial sectors, and provide spaces where people can better understand and interpret their collective and individualistic identities within and beyond the Middle Eastern official narrative.

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Chapter 1

Introducing the Gap

There exist two kinds of histories in Iran: an official history and an unofficial one. While the official history is produced, practiced, and valued by governmental agencies, the unofficial history is recorded and preserved by people who, in the eyes of the hegemonic regime, do not officially exist. Throughout the past thirty-two years of the Islamic Republic reign over Iran, the unofficial history has come full circle from considering "the official narrative" as a repressive agent to viewing it as an indispensable part of its existence. These two histories—one constructed by the government and the alternate lived by the people—are intertwined, with the legitimacy of one dependent on the other. Despite such dysfunctional co-dependence, especially after the 2009 presidential election, a gap between these two histories was created: a gap where artists are using stages, screens, and the worldwide web to challenge both historical narratives.[i]

"Otherwise, the Gap: Performing Identities in Iranian Contemporary Art and Performance" investigates this gap within and outside Iran—a gap that is neither official nor unofficial but rather a mix of both. To use Performance Studies scholar Richard Schechner's rhetoric, this gap is not official/unofficial and not not official/unofficial but something in between.[ii] As an Iranian artist scholar working in the diaspora, I study this gap as an intersection where alternate Iranian identities are shaped and practiced. Moreover, this gap is in direct conversation with how Iranianness is constructed and stereotyped not only through the Islamic rhetoric of Iran's clerical regime but

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[i]On 12 June 2009 Ahmadinejad was re-elected as the seventh president of Iran. The controversy around the election made people to go to the streets and request the recount. Due to the clamped down, people's protests turned into violent street battles. As a reaction, artists started to create spaces capable of criticizing and condemning Ahmadinejad and his power structure through visual and performing art.

[ii]For further reading please refer to Richard Schechner's book, Between Theatre and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 123.

also through the supposedly democratic and secularist power structures of the Western world. This gap speaks to the exclusion that progressive Iranian artists and activists encounter inside and outside the country: Inside Iran, advocates of reforming and modernizing Islam are suppressed, detained, and exiled under the justification of being "westoxicated"[iii]; outside the country, they are marginalized in the context of the black/white racial binary. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and President George W. Bush's State of the Union address calling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea an "axis of evil," it became obvious that Iranians, as well as Arabs, regardless of their political and ideological standpoints, were going to be categorized as national threats and radical Islamists in the United States. Therefore, this gap that I investigate is situated at the intersection of such stereotyping and essentialism; while this gap challenges Iran's regime for its sometimes intolerance toward internal change, it reacts to the racial policies that target Iranians as immigrants of color and radical Muslims and that thus justify their marginalization.

Within this gap, I identify artworks from theatre, visual art, and electronic music as sites capable of articulating and resisting the exclusion that Iranians encounter within and without the country. The artists of these art forms, by putting everything on the line, sacrifice their freedom to problematize the shortcomings associated with the essentialist rhetoric of the hegemonic powers. This interdisciplinary and intertextual dissertation takes for its objects of study works produced in the spaces of the Internet, in underground venues, and throughout the Iranian diaspora to analyze the scenographic, performative, and architectural strategies that are used to build new artistic vocabularies of resistance. I ask how do these artists and their works orchestrate interactions between the oppositional fronts while creating spaces where people can better understand and interpret their collective and individualistic identities inside and outside official narratives? Also, how can

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[iii]The push to modernize and westernize the cultural hegemony in Iran started during Reza Shah Pahlavi, who became ruler of Iran in 1941. However, this push was so sudden that it caused a backlash among a group of Iranian intellectuals including Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Daryush Shayegan, and Reza Davari. By labeling the West as the 'Other,' these intellectuals believed such a process of westernizing the country was to put an end to the authentic Iranian culture and its political and economical sovereignty in the Middle East. By calling those in favor of the change "westoxicated," they encouraged Iranian people and elites to preserve their cultural identity. From early 1960s onwards, the ideas and theories of this group of elites dominated the Iranian outlook towards the West. The gap created between period of westernization of the country followed by a strong anti-western ideology of Islamic Republic regime radically affected the ways Iranian identity got perceived and practiced not only by Iranian themselves but also by the "others."

we better understand the intertextual and interdisciplinary role that progressive artworks play in shaping what I call the gap, or the liminal space between essentialist official narratives of Iranianness and alternative counter representations? How do the selected artists maintain a dialogue between oppositional fronts and in the lived, visual, and sonic representations of Iranianness both in Iran and in the diaspora? I use theories of race, gender, performance, and ritual to investigate the performativity of what I call *strategic acts of repair* in the context of four case studies: Shadi Ghadirian's *Like EveryDay* photo collection; 84Theatre Company's productions of *Endless Monologue* and *Mountain Language*; and the underground Iranian instrumental and electronic music movement.

Subjects of Study: Forbidden Identities in the Gap

The first case study that this dissertation investigates is *Like EveryDay* by Shadi Ghadirian. As one of the most progressive female photographers of the late 20th and 21st century in Iran, Ghadirian was born in Tehran during the Islamic revolution. Experiencing the tumultuous transition of power from Pahlavi's monarchy to the clerical regime, followed by the (imposed) war with Iraq,[iv] led Ghadirian to focus solely on the role that Iranian women were limited to playing within the Islamic and patriarchal cultural hegemony of the country.[v] Her most notable collections are *Qajar* (1998), *Like EveryDay* (2001–2002), *White Square* (2009), and *West by East* (2004).

[iv]In 1979 after two years of continuous protests and street battles, Iranian people, under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrew the Pahlavi's monarchy and established a republic regime centered on Islamic ideology and clerical authority. Following the revolution and in order to show the new regime's independence from the West, on November 4, 1979, Basij (military force) invaded the US embassy and took sixty-five American diplomats as hostage for 444 days. Following the invasion, the United States closed its embassy in Tehran and ended its diplomatic relationship with the clerical regime. Parallel to the deterioration of Iran's relationship with the West, in September 1980, the imposed war on Iran by the Western supported and equipped Iraqi army started. As Melani McAlister, in *Staging the American Century, Race, Gender, and Nation in the U.S Representation of the Middle East, 1945 – 1992*, argues, US provided "military and logistical support for Iraq" during the war. The Iran-Iraq war continued for eight years during which significant damages were done to the country, especially to the Southern cities. Against all the odds, Iran, through the countless sacrificial acts of its soldiers, won the war in 1988. Also, Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, in preface to *Iran Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, have talked about this imposed war too.

[v]Iran's cultural discourse is a mixture of Islamic rules promoted by the power structure and traditional values practiced and memorialized by the masses. In both cases, patriarchy is valued as a normative way of hierarchization.

Like EveryDay depicts women who are completely veiled in chador[vi] with a domestic object such as an iron, a pan, a cup, or a large knife in place of their faces. Ghadirian created this collection after her marriage to Peyman Hooshmanzadeh,[vii] a notable Iranian writer and photographer, to criticize women's position within the cultural hegemony of Iran. Banned from displaying this series inside Iran, she featured it in a gallery in London; this provided her with international recognition.

Figure 1.1: Shadi Ghadirian, Like EveryDay #1, 2000-1, 50x50 Cm, Artist's Website

The second case study is a performance piece titled *Endless Monologue*, produced by Ali Akbar Alizad, the founder of 84Theatre Company,[viii] who was born in Tehran in 1973, five years before the Islamic revolution. After receiving his bachelor's degree in acting and master's degree in cinematic studies, he started his career as the co-director of the Aeein and Leev theater groups

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[vi]Chador is a large one-piece of cloth that Muslim women wear to cover their hair and bodies with only letting their faces to be seen. The signature color for chador is black, however, white or blue navy are common colors among elderly women.

[vii]For more information please refer to `http://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/peyman-hooshmandzadeh-memories/`

[viii]Alizad found 84Theatre Company in 2006 in Tehran with the goal of staging works written by famous playwrights such as Beckett, Chekov, Sara Kane and Harold Pinter. The group is mostly comprised of Alizad's past and current students from the Art University of Tehran where he teaches acting and playwriting. For more information please refer to `http://84theater.com`

in Tehran.[ix] As a practitioner and scholar, Alizad is known for his ongoing experimentation with methods of directing and actor training. After forming his own company, Alizad started to stage works capable of articulating the problems associated with Iran's political structure. Some of the past performances by the group include productions such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (2004), *Oleanna* by David Mamet (2006), *Anniversary Celebration* and *Swan Song* by Anton Chekhov (2007), *Five Fragments* by Samuel Beckett (2008), *Endless Monologue* by 84Theatre Company (2011), *House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca (2014) and *Mountain Language* by Harold Pinter (2016). Despite these works being written by Western playwrights and reinforcing binary oppositions such as Occident/Orient and civility/barbarity, in the context of Iran's political discourse, these plays assisted Alizad in criticizing some of the cultural and political issues caused by Ahmadinejad's domestic and foreign policies and the Western World's, especially the United States', harsh response to them.

Endless Monologue was a performance piece that Alizad produced upon his return from London, where he witnessed a very powerful verbatim performance piece.[x] Considering verbatim theater as a politically charged theatrical form for criticizing the sociopolitical issues of Iran, Alizad started interviewing people whose stories he believed needed to be (re)told and documented. Among six interviews, Alizad selected three that were capable of articulating the exclusionary rhetoric that Iranians encountered inside and outside the country. However, to protect the interviewees' safety, their identities were never disclosed during the course of the performance. The first interview was with Hamid, a homosexual doctoral student who talked about his experience living as a gay person in Iran and its highly heterosexual and traditional culture. His story was a detailed description of his rape in the outskirts of Tehran by four men and his coping mechanism afterward. The second interview was with Setareh, whose father was executed under the accusation of being a political activist.[xi] The third and final interview narrated the story of Vida, who, with the hope of

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[ix]Both Aeein and Leev theatre groups formed in Tehran in the late 1990s with the goal of focusing on the role of the audience as an active rather than passive member of a theatrical production. In order to avoid surveillance and censorship, both of these groups rejected governmental funding and were self-funded.

[x]Verbatim theatre is a docudrama where true stories and interviews become the subject of the piece that form the text.

[xi]The identity of her father was never disclosed for the sake of Setareh's and her family's safety.

finding independence and resisting her father's autocracy, went through a series of traumatic experiences such as abortion and a failed attempt to flee the country. All three interviews capitalized on the flaws associated with Iran's cultural discourse. Through staging this performance, Alizad also intended to subvert the West's insistence on projecting a barbaric and homophobic attitude on all Iranians.

To criticize the judicial and militarized political violence imposed on Iranians within and without Middle Eastern region, Alizad chose *Mountain Language*, written by Harold Pinter, as his next project. Pinter wrote this play in 1988 as a critique of Turkey's oppressive policies toward the Kurdish population. Alizad, by capitalizing on Pinter's critique and incorporating the torture scenes in *Mountain Language*, presented a chilling demonstration of the condition of tortured brown bodies trapped in jails.

The final case study that I explore is the underground electronic music movement in Iran developed during the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency and was subsequently internationally recognized after his reelection in 2009. By challenging what is counted as "permissible" music, this movement not only sought to subvert governmental censorship but also tended to build a more inclusive sonic space where imagining different individual and collective identities becomes possible. Rejected by domestic labels, the electronic musicians were courted by international labels who showed interest in producing their works. Within the chapter I argue while the nontraditional form of the electronic music movement in Iran promotes and mobilizes the emancipatory hopes for reconfiguring Iran's cultural domain, its appeal to the Western world can be endemic in reification of old bifurcations such as Orient/Occident.[xii]

[xii]For Further reading please refer to *Orientalism*, written by Edward Said in 1979.

Figure 1.2: Day 3 of Set Festival 2015, Idlefon performing with Nyla, Tehran, Iran, 2015. Photo by A Minor Music

Methodologically, "Otherwise, the Gap: Performing Identities in Iranian Contemporary Art and Performance" utilizes archival research as well as analysis of live and recorded performances, photographs and music video. By adapting theories of race, gender, performance, and ritual, this project theorizes the performativity of its case studies in relation to (re)formation of the Iranian identity within and without the Middle Eastern region. Race and gender theory, especially those formulated by Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and Daniel Martinez Hosang, is incorporated in this project as a way of thinking critically about the lack of available discourse to discuss the racial formation of so-called Middle Eastern subjects within the region as well as within the U.S. black-/white racial binary. Performance theories allow this project to explore the performativity of these artworks in the context of their domestic and international political and cultural discourses. Ritual theories are applied as a way of reframing the strategies employed by Iranian artists to subvert the oppression imposed on Muslims by and because of essentialist interpretations of Islamic religion.

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Literature Review

<u>Race and Gender</u>

The main theories that I incorporate to talk about race and gender in the context of my case studies are derived from the following works: Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*, Daniel Martinez Hosang's *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi's *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, and Pamela Karimi's *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era*. Because the discourse on the racialization of Islamic subjects is limited and often uses Western historical contexts, I supplement U.S. based racial formation theories attempting to challenge hegemonic norms and racial projects with works by Iranian Studies scholars who address the vacillation of Iranianness in the United States' racial imaginary.

In their groundbreaking book *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant state,

> There is a continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete, and objective. And there is also an opposite temptation: to imagine race as a mere *illusion*, a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate.[1]

To overcome such essentialism, they propose the idea of understanding race as an "unstable" and "decentered" social structure subjected to constant change and rearticulation. As they contend, "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interest by referring to different types of human bodies."[2] Since the Islamic revolution, Iranians have been represented domestically and internationally in complex and contradictory ways. Domestically, following the revolution, those who fostered the idea of Islamic reign and facilitated the necessary platform for overturning the Pahlavi regime were excluded from the power structure through either exile or house arrest. While the marginalization of oppositional voices was pursued under accusations such as westoxication or the advocacy of Western democracy and secularism, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Iranians were harassed internationally as well. The Western countries, despite declaring their interest in cultural pluralism, constantly singled out and represented Islam as a problematic

and dangerous religion. Such troubling assumptions and reductionism were projected on all Iranians and Arabs and used as an advantageous strategy for the Western countries who found themselves in need of preserving their supremacy over the Middle East and its oil resources. This is where Omi and Winant's argument falls short and Hosang's *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* intervenes. As Hosang suggests, Omi and Winant left a number of questions unanswered:

> How is the gendered and sexual basis of racial formation most productively theorized? How do theories about the biological basis of race continue to shape assumptions about the social and political construction of race? How might racial formation theory effectively engage issues of indigeneity, war making, and settler colonialism? *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* explores these and other questions, building on twenty-five years of scholarship since Omi and Winant's generative insights first came to light.[3]

While contributors to Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century embrace Omi and Winant's definition of race (a centerpiece of all social and political structures in the United States), by posing critical questions, they explore the limitations of such a definition.

Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, in *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, provide a rich and comprehensive study of the genealogy of the Islamic ideology among Iranians. Their study starts with an investigation of the sociopolitical and economic policies of the Shah's regime and the cause of their failure. An attempt for the secularization and modernization of the country was the centerpiece of the Shah's reformative project. However, as Farsoun and Mashayekhi argue,

> The progress of secularization was most evident in state institutions, it failed to encompass the political culture of the society at large or advance the institutions of civil society. As a result Iranian political culture during the period of the monarchy remained fragmented and incoherent.[4]

The push for modernization caused a backlash among various groups of people including socialists, liberal-nationalists, students, elites, and clerical leaders. By focusing on the westoxicated nature of the project, all these movements shared a longing for nationalism, populism, and social justice. The backlash, under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, turned into an unstoppable

uproar and finally ended in a revolution. After the revolution, bolstering the Islamic ideology was pursued further by writing a new constitution and revising "the content of education and the style, character and terrain of political action."[5] The goal of revisions, however, was not only to overhaul the social system of the country but also to destabilize populism and to bolster the sovereignty of the clerical power structure.

In *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran*, Pamela Karimi presents a thorough examination of the impact of the Islamic regime's radical revisions on the quotidian lives of people, most notably those of women. She believes the Shah's mistake was his attempt to turn the country into a market for foreign corporations and leaving the domestic businesses on the brink of bankruptcy. She explains,

> In 1964, the American President Lyndon B. Johnson said, "What is going on in Iran, is about the best thing going on anywhere in the world," and his ambassador to Tehran chimed in, "The Shah (Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi) is making Iran (a) showcase of modernization in this part of the world."[6]

Clerical leaders, by pursuing an anti-Western and an anti-Eastern agenda, isolated Iran from the rest of the region and started to criticize the westoxicated nature of the cultural, sociopolitical, and economic discourses of the country. After the revolution, by labeling the widely used American commodities as *haram* (illicit), the public and private lives of Iranians began to get Islamized. One of the outcomes of this Islamization was the gender segregation of public spaces. Karimi asserts, "The spatial segregation of the sexes was forcefully implemented in public spaces. Most government institutions, staircases, and corridors became gender segregated. On university campuses, in sport stadiums, and on public transportation, new rules either limited or barred inter-gender interactions."[7] She continues, "Bars in buses separated the spaces for women at the back of the bus from that of men at the front. Meanwhile, workplaces and other public institutions upheld sex segregation and instituted daily collective prayers."[8] The push for rearranging public places based on a gendered specific agenda forced Iranian people, specifically women, to hide their true identities in public. The segregation and the inevitable appearance of dichotomies such as public/private, westoxication/Islamization, and permissible (halal)/illicit (haram) became a vehicle for the Islamic

government to regulate and discipline the bodies and minds of the Iranian people.

In this dissertation, I investigate how Iranian artists use visual art and performance as sites of resistance against the exclusionary rhetoric that Iranians encounter inside and outside the country. Through this project, I am determined to show how these artworks and their artists (re)negotiate the dominancy of the Islamic regime. I also demonstrate how, through creating alternative spaces, these artists challenge and problematize the West's, especially the United States', tendency to stereotype Iranians as radical Muslims and terrorists.

Performance Studies

This field explores the performativity of the alternative spaces that Iranian artists create to challenge the cultural hegemony inside and outside Iran. Through these spaces, artists, by empowering those who have been cast out of the normative and heterosexual cultural discourses of both Iran and the West, question and problematize the limitation of race and gender binaries. The main texts that support my argument in this area are Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings, Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*; Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: Politics and Performance*; and Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. I also incorporate writings and blog posts by Bavand Behpoor, an Iranian art theorist and art critic based in Chicago, to criticize the limitations of so-called Iranian contemporary art and its appeal within the Western cultural discourse. As Behpoor puts it, "It seems as if we can no longer talk of the East and the West, but the West and the rest."[9] It is precisely this "rest," especially the Middle Eastern region, that has been strategically left out of the current conversation in the popular cultural discourse and its scholarly works; this dissertation will expose the cause of this exclusion through its case studies.

Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings, Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, investigates and criticizes the limitations of traditional archives and their resistance in recording and preserving marginalized voices. For her, trauma becomes a means of intervening in traditional archives, as it "puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, [gives] rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics."[10]

Since in Iran, the official recording of history is subjected to official revision, art in general and performance in particular have become alternative means of preserving history. By focusing on the traumatic experiences of marginalized people, mostly women and homosexuals, art has started to (re)tell and archive narratives that fall outside the established and patriarchal cultural discourse of the country. However, due to the hegemonic culture's tendency in eliminating whatever digresses from its main line of ideology, these archives are condemned to be ephemeral. Spectators, while gathering to witness testimonies, interviews, or performances, try to identify their own stories and memories with those presented on stage. It is through this act of exchange that the spectators shape and share a new sort of history, an ephemeral and unofficial one filled with intimate and intense emotional encounters. The decision of not recording the history of minorities is a political act charged with the idea of accentuating the importance of ephemerality and disappearance in the context of the country's power structure. As Cvetkovich argues, "For this reason and others, the archive of feelings lives not just in museums, libraries, and other institutions but in more personal and intimate spaces, and significantly, also within cultural genres."[11]

Peggy Phelan thoroughly explores the problems associated with recording and preserving ephemeral events in her groundbreaking book *Unmarked: Politics and Performance*. As she contends, "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[12] The efficacy of performance, for Phelan, is in its disappearance and its consumption by the spectators. She states, "Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control."[13] In countries where everything is subjected to official revision, invisibility sometimes becomes a political act, a sort of resistance to visibility desired by military intelligence and police force. The capability of being efficacious through ephemerality empowers works such as *Endless Monologue* in constituting alternative ways of narrating the stories of marginalized groups.

Although writing about a performance piece with the hope of accurate preservation is asso-

ciated with failure, Phelan contends that its role in "reimagining of the social bond" is undeniable. The ability of critical writing to problematize the exclusionary rhetoric of the Islamic regime becomes significant in the context of what Muslim scholars and artists tend to do in diaspora. Through their cultural activism, these artists and scholars not only challenge the political structure of their regimes, but also seek to rearticulate the imposition of dichotomies such as legal/illegal, citizen/noncitizen, and alien/permanent resident within their host(ile) countries' immigration laws. As Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*,

> Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor surpass inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined. This is not to argue that cultural struggle can ever be the exclusive site for practice.[14]

Lowe, in her comprehensive study of the immigration laws in the United States, positions culture as a viable means for immigrants to surmount the exclusionary rhetoric and the simulacrum of inclusion within their host(ile) country. Within this dissertation, I combine Lowe's theorization of immigrants' performativity with Hamid Naficy's conceptualization of exilic art. In *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*, Naficy investigates the ways that the Iranian community negotiates its position in relation to the cultural hegemony of the United States. He argues, "exile is a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete."[15] This dissertation investigates the performativity and importance of this liminal stage regarding the formation of Iranianness inside and outside the country. In addition, through the theories of performance, this project explores the strategic ways employed by Ghadirian, Alizad, and electronic music artists to document and commemorate the experience of those cast out by the hegemonic power of cultural discourses both inside and outside the country.

The impact of Islam on defining and marking Iranian identity is an undeniable fact. While inside Iran loyalty to Islam is a necessity, in abroad it is a sign of radicalism and barbarism. As a result, this field, on the one hand, demonstrates how artists attempt to secularize cultural venues of the country through showing the possible flexibility of Islam as a viable political and ideological system. On the other hand, this field, by showcasing the cultural achievements of Iranian artists, tends to problematize the West essentialist outlook towards Islam. The major texts that support the argument proposed in this section are Catherin Bell's *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice* in which she has formulated the theory of ritualization and ritualized body, Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play* and Ronald Grimes's *Readings in Ritual Studies*.

Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice by Catherin Bell studies the genealogy of ritual studies in relation to long held binaries such as theory/practice and thought/action. By problematizing such dichotomies, Bell seeks to propose ritual as a viable theoretical framework for the better understanding of the interdependent relationship between religion and culture. In order to do so, she starts her examination by categorizing the history of ritual studies into three parts; ritual as a way of exploring religion, ritual as a way of analyzing social phenomenon, and ritual as a catalyst for exploring 'culture'. Exploring ritual as a possible framework of cultural studies led Bell to suggest the theory of ritualization, which, as she describes it, is a way of "[describing] the strategies of the ritualized act by deconstructing some of the intricacies of its cultural logic."[16] The ritual knowledge and mastery that come with ritualization enable its agent to understand and interpret the reality of her/his redemptive hegemonic order more efficiently. As Bell proposes, ritualization is not a new theory; it is a new framework for reworking old questions related to ritualistic performances within a "rightful" context.

In *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*, Victor Turner elaborates a theory which he labels as "social drama". This theory, Turner explains, is a "dramas of living", and it "can be aptly studied as having four phases. These I label: breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism."[17] Turner's theory of social drama is based on Van Gennep's idea of rite

of passage which he distinguishes three phases for it: separation, transition, and incorporation. One of Van Gennep's greatest contributions to Turner's theory is his definition of "limen", a phase when

> the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.[18]

Tuner, by contextualizing the definition of "limen" in his theory of social drama, believes that the redressive mood is a liminal stage where not only a reversal of familiar elements happens but also an anti-structure or a "communitas," is developed as a strategic way of coping with crisis.[xiii] Thus, it is through this third phase and its liminal characteristic that a feedback on crisis is provided and the reintegration or recognition of a schism becomes possible. Within this dissertation, I argue that most of the Iranian artworks happen in this liminal space where they reflect on the sociopolitical and cultural discourses of the country in order to redress the various governmental infringements.

Readings in Ritual by Ronald Grimes is a collection of various essays by ritual and performance scholars. Most notable among them is an essay by Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," who criticizes Victor Turner' theory of social drama. Walker Bynum believes that Turner, by isolating the role of women to a liminal phase, "looks at women" instead of "looking with them." She argues that Turner "stands with the dominant group (males) and sees women (both as symbol and as fact) as liminal to men."[19] In the other words, Turner positions women in the liminal stage in order to use them as a reversed image of the dominant male group. This image of women is constantly exploited as a way of reification of men's pride, domination, and ambition. Due to the marginal status of women throughout the history, Walker Bynum argues, the narratives of women (which are frequently told by male biographers) are less climactic and processual and unable to fit into a social drama theory.

> The women are thus, to the men, a retreat from the world into inner, often mystical repose. What she says (and her rhetoric is sometimes strident) and what she is, is a

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[xiii]For further reading refer to *Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*, Victor Turner, p. 44.

> criticism of male power and an alternative to it. Contact with her is, for the male, an escape from the world; after recourse to her he returns to that world girded with information and consolation.[20]

Thus, as Walker Bynum concludes, social drama theory is an approach suitable for male storytellers to reify and impose the gender binary. She concludes that if we shift our perspective, what we will witness is a miserable failing of social drama theory in retelling women's stories. In my dissertation, I argue that within a totalitarian power structure, where reaching a social and political climax is equated with getting arrested, such a limitation works in benefit of women instead of against them.

Chapter Description

Chapter 1, "Monologues of Resistance, Art, and Performance in Iran," starts with offering comprehensive research on the sociopolitical history of Iran within the past fifty years that leave visual, literary and sonic traces in the works of the artists explored later in the chapter. Beside Iran, the sociopolitical and cultural impacts of the United States' intervention in Middle East, specifically in Iran during Pahlavi regime, is also investigated. In its second half, the chapter examines the importance and performativity of Shadi Ghadirian's *Like EveryDay* photo collection and 84Theatre Company production of *Endless Monologue* within the delineated sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

Investigating the outcomes of the U.S. imperial proclivities in the Middle East, Chapter 2, "Bewildered They Stood, Like An Empty Oath, Like a Solemn Kurd: Mountain Language and Its Plea for Justice," demonstrates the fallacies associated with whitewashed ideologies supporting the invasion of the Middle Eastern countries under the justification of the "War on Terror."[xiv] This chapter further argues that the Middle Eastern countries, including Iran as one of the most stable states in the region, are not in the need of intervention by imperialist powers to fix their "problems." To examine these arguments, this chapter analyzes the production of *Mountain Language*, written

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[xiv]"War on Terror" was a term used by George W. Bush following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack.

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by Harold Pinter and staged by Ali Akbar Alizad, the head of 84Theatre Company, in Tehran, Iran. This production specifically focused on the political violence imposed on the political prisoners within the country as well as without. It also criticizes the race-based discrimination and political exclusion that brown bodies encounter in the West, especially in the United States.

Chapter 3, "She's Red & Black, Circling Round, I Jumped So Hard, I Died, There, She Was,"[xv] investigates the underground electronic music movement in Iran alongside of its bold presence in international scene. Though domestically this movement was limited to hold their concerts and gigs in warehouses and art galleries, various international labels have invested their sources and interests in distributing the works of these artists. While the chapter explores the performativity of the Iranian electronic music movement in promoting and mobilizing the emancipatory hopes for reconfiguring the cultural domain of the country, it argues that the movement's appeal within the Western capitalistic market can become somewhat problematic and an extra racial tool in reification of old paradigms such Orient/Occident binary.

Finally, Chapter 4, "Em-Bracing the Liminal rather than Nostalgia," by acknowledging the positionality of the author as an Iranian, female, scholar based in the United States, reflects on the argument proposed throughout the dissertation. This chapter also proposes questions that remain unanswered and the further research and scholarly works that needs to be done in the field of Middle Eastern Art and Performance.

[xv]This is the title of Nima Pourkarimi's new song. For listening his track please visit: `https://soundcloud.com/umchunga`

ENDNOTES

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2 Ibid, 55.

3 *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Daniel Martinez Hosang and et al., (London: University of California Press, 2012), P 1.

4 *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, ed. Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi (London: Routledge, 1992), P 8.

5 Ibid, 23.

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7 Ibid, 155.

8 Ibid.

9 Bavand Behpoor, "No Belief, No Homeland," *Bavand Behpoor*, accessed April 11, 2015. `http://www.behpoor.com/?p=773#more-773`

10 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings, Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), P 7.

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12 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), P146.

13 Ibid, 148.

14 Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts, On Asian American Cultural politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), P 22.

15 Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures, Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), P 8.

16 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1992), P 80.

17 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Art Journal Publication, 1982), P 68.

[18] Ibid, 24.

[19] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), P 75.

[20] Ibid, 76.

Chapter 2

Monologues of Resistance, Art, and Performance in Iran

Figure 2.1: Mohammad Hossein Zarqam, From *Self-Destruction* Series, 2012

In 2012, Mohammad Hossein Zarqam, a young Iranian artist, burned his birth certificate in front of a camera as part of his performance piece, entitled *Self-Destruction*. "The photograph appeared online, was admired by 117 other people of his generation and was finally sold to another young artist for less than 100 Euros. It would cost him much more and would take him months to get a second copy of his birth certificate if he intends to do so."[1] Zarqam's symbolic act of burning his birth certificate criticized the ways that Iranian identity is perceived and practiced within and

without the country. As a young artist in Iran, Zarqam is looked upon as a westoxicated person[i] obsessed with the ideology of secularism and devoid of any respect for the Islamic values of the 1979 revolution. While Zarqam is excluded and marginalized in his own country, outside Iran, due to his Iranianness, he is categorized as an (radical) Islamist supporting terrorism and the abolition of the Western civilization.[ii] Thus, not only does his performance indicate a political violence directed at his identity inside Iran but more importantly it exposes the fallacies of the essentialist narratives perpetuated by the United States aiming toward substituting group-based behavior for his individuality. Such a group-based behavior is exemplified in the U.S post 9/11 racial and political rhetoric where the interchangeable use of Arabs and Muslims has become a strategic means for waging and continuing "War on Terror." One of the notable examples is Saxby Chambliss, "a republican congressional representative and future senator of Georgia, [who] informed a group of law enforcement officers that the best antiterrorist measure for his district would be to "turn loose" the local sheriff and "let him arrest every Muslim that crosses the state line."[2] Such representation of Muslims were backed by other Republican Representatives including John Cooksey who in his interview with a talk show host asserted, ""someone who comes in that's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around that diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over.""[3] Situated within such biased representations, Iranians found themselves in a newly formed identity negotiation where the rejection or practice of Iranianness would have brought serious repercussions for its subject.

Zarqam's subversive performance piece addresses such a dual attitude toward Iranianness where a complex cultural formation of a whole nation is being retooled based upon sociopolitical

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[i]The push to modernize and westernize the cultural hegemony in Iran started during Reza Shah Pahlavi, who became ruler of Iran in 1941. However, this push was so sudden that it caused a backlash among a group of Iranian intellectuals including Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Daryush Shayegan, and Reza Davari. By labeling the West as the 'Other,' these intellectuals believed such a process of westernizing the country was to put an end to the authentic Iranian culture and its political and economic sovereignty in the Middle East. By calling those in favor of the change "westoxicated," they encouraged Iranian people and elites to preserve their cultural identity. From early 1960s onwards, the ideas and theories of this group of elites dominated the Iranian outlook towards the West. The gap created between period of westernization of the country followed by a strong anti-western ideology of Islamic Republic regime radically affected the ways Iranian identity got perceived and practiced not only by Iranian themselves but also by the "others."

[ii]Though such an essential outlook toward Iranianness gained currency through political rhetoric employed by colonizer countries such as Britain and France, here the discussion is focused on the United States, especially post 9/11, when the stigmatization of Muslims was pursued under the justification of "war on terror."

conditions defined by hegemonic powers. Thus, in what follows, first, I ask how does the status of Iranian identity, particularly during the post 9/11 era, is understood within its domestic as well as U.S. contexts. To answer this question, I investigate the status of Iranianness by exploring its transition over the past fifty years and within three eras: pre-revolutionary (1925-1979), post-revolutionary (1979-2009), and the Green Movement (2009-2010). Second, I demonstrate how within such repetitive pattern of (mis)representation of Iranian identity, both inside and outside the country, the contemporary art scene has become the battleground where new definitions of Iranianness are being constructed and practiced. In order to do so, I employ two case studies, a photo collection by Shadi Ghadirian, *Like EveryDay*, and a performance piece by 84Theatre Company, *Endless Monologue*, where recording the voice of minorities become a means of resisting the stereotypes associated with Iranianness.

Part I: Iranianness and U.S. Racial Discourse

Within the rationale of the Western cultural hegemony, in general, and the United States, in particular, Islamic states have always been reduced to generalized labels such as backward and barbaric countries or oil suppliers who benefit from the global petro-aggression. In case of Iran, the negative stereotypes, e.g., religious fanatics, barbaric nation, and radical Islamists, have become an indispensable feature of introducing the whole nation into the U.S. mainstream culture. As Edward W. Said, in *Covering Islam, How the Media and Expert Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, argues,

> Whatever Iranians or Muslims say about their sense of justice, their history of oppression, their vision of their own societies, seems irrelevant; what counts for the United States instead is what the "Islamic revolution" is doing right now, how many people have been executed by the Komitehs, how many bizarre outrages the Ayatollah, in the name of Islam, has ordered. Of course no one has equated the Jonestown massacre or the destructive frenzy produced at the Who concert in Cincinnati or the devastation of Indochina with Christianity, or with Western or American culture at large; that sort of equation has been reserved for Islam.[4]

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Ignoring countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, and India, homes to the world's majority Muslim populations, the Western mainstream media has succeeded in re-presenting Islam within the stereotyped frameworks such as the on-going Israel – Palestine conflict, Iranian aggressive policy towards the United States, or the Syrian refugee crisis as a possible future hub for terrorists. The interchangeable use of terms such as "Muslim," "Islamists," "radical terrorists," "Iranians," and "Arabs" has provided a platform for labeling any Middle Eastern country with whom the West, especially the United States, finds incompatibilities with. In *Militant Islam Reaches America*, the historian Daniel Pipes, nominated by President George W. Bush for serving on the board of the United States Institute of Peace, describes Muslims, by lumping them all together, as "Islamists," "anti-moderate," "anti-Semitic," "unwilling to coexist," and barbarians who are "revolutionary in their outlook, extremists in their behavior, and totalitarian in their ambition."[5] The hallmark of such a radical and charged rhetoric was the travel ban imposed by President Donald Trump on seven Muslim majority countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia on January 27th, 2017. Though President Trump repeatedly stated that his executive order was not a "Muslim ban," but a ban on countries that impose serious threats to the safety of the United States, his rhetorical use of the word "ban" and his ideology toward Islam proved otherwise. President Trump's ban, considered by many as one of the most radical orders issued on the topic of the Muslim immigration and "War on Terror," bears with it a great history of hostility toward Islam in the United States and follows a tradition of demonizing Muslims as dangerous foreign enemies and the "Others" within the American racial hierarchy.

Parallel to the closing stage of the Cold War, the United States found itself faced with a void or a lack of purpose for pursuing and imposing its global hegemony and leadership. Such a political vacuum materialized itself in the ideology of the rogue state introduced by the Reagan administration:

> Throughout the Cold War, the atheism of Communism served Americans as one of the primary measures of difference with the United States. Americans came to treat Communism as a type of "perverted faith" that supplanted the proper values of individualism and freedom promoted by true religions. Perhaps this notion informed

President Ronald Ragan's famous description of the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire." It is also significant that, two decades later, President George W. Bush defined another realm of malevolence when he declared North Korea, Iraq, and Iran an "Axis of Evil." By associating two Muslim-majority nations with the evil of Communist North Korea, Bush suggested that Islam was replacing Communism as the ideology of perennial conflict in America's foreign affairs and perpetual fear in domestic life.[6]

The substitution of the fear of Communism with a rogue state ideology provided former President Ronald Reagan's administration an opportunity to launch an air raid on Libya in 1986 and to encourage Iraq to invade Iran. After President Reagan, President George H. W. Bush identified Iran and Iraq as ambitious states equipped with ballistic missiles adequate to jeopardize the geopolitical stability of the U.S. and its economic interests in the Middle East. Based on the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,[iii] which was leaked and printed in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the general U.S. policy within the Middle Eastern region was designed mostly to prevent "any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power."[7] By putting Iran, Iraq, and North Korea on top of that list, the Bush administration started to accuse these countries of developing weapons of mass destruction to justify the need for militaristic intervention in the region. After President George H. W. Bush, President Clinton adopted a more moderate approach "by coming close to offering Iran their much-desired apology for past American actions when he accepted that Tehran had been the subject of 'abuse from various Western nations' and had 'right to be angry' at [the U.S.]."[8] Clinton, as Alex Miles, in *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rogue State Doctrine*, asserts, "in remarks quite possibly aimed at Congress and pro-Israeli pressure groups, asserted that the U.S. could not afford to remain in 'total denial' when in conversation with adversaries."[9] Fed up with Clinton's diplomatic approach, Republicans were anxious to find a reason to reinforce their tough stance on the rogue states. A most notable example is Republican senators including Sam Brownback who, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, started to accuse Iran for its plan of developing weapon of mass destruction and becoming the hegemonic power in the Middle East through waging wars

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[iii] 1992 Defense Planning Guidance was a pre-emptive plan designed to suppress the formation of any hegemonic power within the Middle Eastern region provided by Secretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowits.

on the U.S. allies.[10] Such labeling happened in spite of Iran's cooperation with the U.S. on the issue of Afghanistan when the Iranian government proposed the U.S. with an opportunity to join its coalition against Taliban. During the meeting in Geneva in the Fall of 2001, with the presence of countries such as Iran, the United States, India, Russia, and Germany, a plan for the next Afghan government was set to be discussed and mapped out. As Trita Parsi, in *A Single Roll of the Dice*, describes,

> On the last night of the conference, an interim constitution had been agreed upon and all other issues had been resolved except the toughest: who was to govern Afghanistan? The Northern Alliance insisted that, as the winner of the war, the spoils should be theirs. Though they represented about 40 percent of the country, they wanted to occupy eighteen of the twenty-four ministries. At around two o'clock in the morning, Dobbins brought together the Afghan parties, the Iranians, the Russians, the Indians, the Germans, and Lakhdar Brahimi of the UN to resolve this final point. For two hours, the various delegations took turns trying to convince the representative of the Northern Alliance to accept a lower number of ministries, to no avail. Finally, the Iranian representative took him aside and began whispering to him in Persian. A few minutes later, they returned to the table and the Afghan conceded. "Okay, I give up," he said. "The other factions can have two more ministries," the next morning, the historic Bonn agreement was signed, American had not only won the war, but, with the help of Iran, it had also won the peace. For the Iranians, this was a moment of triumph.[11]

Despite Iran's cooperation, George W. Bush on January 29, 2002, in his first State of the Union address called Iran, alongside of Iraq and North Korea as "Axis of Evil." Iranian government, who were shocked by the Bush's administration take on their cooperation, called the label a total disgrace and an instigator of the U.S. undesirability of diplomatic relationship with Tehran.

Following the 9/11, the United States' tough stance on Muslims initiated domestically by launching programs such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), designed to stigmatize the Muslim communities within the cultural hegemony of the country.[iv] By repeatedly stating, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorist," President Bush not only

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[iv]The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) was only one example among many that was implemented by Bush administration as a means of racially profiling Muslims. Based upon NSEERS program, all the non-immigrant males over the age of sixteen and descend from selected countries register at the moment of crossing the U.S. borders. Such orders and programs imply that those who pose threats to the U.S. national security are always not American as they are foreigners, from Islamic faith and are only from few countries within the Middle Eastern region.

revitalized racial binaries such as us/them but also situated Muslims in the place of the "Other" where Americans could identify themselves, their vulnerability, and their immediate need for militarized protection. Through such rationalization, the "War on Terror" becomes a pre-emptive strategy necessary for preserving America's domestic safety.

By introducing Islam as an inherently radical ideology, the practicing of which automatically poses threats to the safety of the Western world, the Western cultural hegemony started to antagonize Islam full-forcibly. For instance, instead of introducing Islam as an anticolonial rise formed around a religious ideology, Islam started to get (re)articulated as a political ideology aiming to radicalize its followers. A case in point is the U.S. coverage of the Egyptian uprising in 2011 and the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the then U.S. backed president of Egypt and a renowned violator of human rights in the region. After the 2011 uprising in Egypt, despite U.S.' attempts, Mubarak resigned and the Muslim Brotherhood came to power by winning the popular vote in a freely held election. The Obama administration decided to give the Muslim Brotherhood the benefit of the doubt and hoped that the new regime would prevent the spread of anti-American sentiment among masses. Following such a general policy, the American mainstream media started to portray Mohammad Morsi, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a moderate leader, alumni of the University of California and an avid fan of the American football.[12] What went unaddressed among such strategic reportage was the U.S.' undeniable role in the rise and fall of Mubarak alongside his dysfunctional socio-economic model which was endemic in creating a massive inequality among the Egyptians.[v]

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[v]As Stephen Maher in, "The Political Economy of the Egyptian Uprising," contends, "Since the death of nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser thirty years ago, Egypt has embarked on a process of neoliberalization, largely at Western instigation. In bringing Egypt out of colonialism and feudalism, Nasser created an authoritarian and highly centralized economy. After Egypt's crushing defeat by Israel in 1967, his successor, Anwar Sadat, signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1978 with Washington's sponsorship, opening the door to Egypt's inclusion within the U.S. imperial system. U.S. aid to the Egyptian regime grew rapidly, while Sadat commenced a policy of *infitah* (or openness) that set in motion Egypt's neoliberal transformation and tied its economy to international capital, a process accelerated by Mubarak after Sadat's assassination in 1981. When the Egyptian debt crisis of 1982–90 forced it to go to the multinational Paris Club to restructure its debt, the IMF imposed a neoliberal structural adjustment program as a condition for continuing the flow of credit. The IMF conditions forced the government to cut spending on social services, relax price controls, cut subsidies, deregulate and privatize industries, target inflation, and liberalize capital flows. This program would break the powerful Arab Nationalist regional solidarity of the Nasser years and consolidate the power of a ruling class linked to global capital, with whatever disastrous consequences that entailed for the lower classes.

Fed up with preserving the interests of Western businesses, Egyptians trusted the Muslim Brotherhood to bring the power back to local businesses and to solve the economic and social shortcomings of their country. Once Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated that they were incapable of fulfilling its initial promises, its capitalistic and colonized nature became evident and Egyptians once again flooded the streets to show their frustrations with the Western intervention in their country's affairs. The Egyptian demonstration revived the U.S. nightmare "in which the people of the Middle East might begin to free themselves from the vested interests of pro-Western business and military classes,"[13] causing the total dismantlement of capitalistic ideology within the economic system. After losing faith in Muslim Brotherhood's ability in preserving free-market principle, the United States restored its old stance on Islam as an inadequate political system and reverted to a militaristic coup as the approach deemed to embrace people's unfulfilled demands. Thus, as Arun Kundnani, in *Muslims are Coming, Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*, argues,

> When the military began its brutal crackdown on dissent – killing hundreds of unarmed protesters – it knew it did so with the support of the US government. A token and temporary reduction in US aid to the Egyptian military did not alter their underlying strategic partnership. And with the generals once again monopolizing power, the US media's brief flirtation with Morsi ended.[14]

Any crisis in the Middle East such as the 2009 Iranian protests, the Arab Spring, Egyptian uprising, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the rise of ISIS, have always been framed within the context of the United States' concern for the violation of the human rights in the region or the incapability or undesirability of Islam in spreading democracy. If human right was among the U.S.' concerns, why, then, the crimes committed by Saudi Arabia in countries such as Yemen were never adequately reported in any of the American top news agencies? Why did the ISIS imposed genocide

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This transformation had wide-ranging implications for social relations in Egypt, including growing inequality, poverty, and social insecurity for the lower classes, as well as the violent exclusion of the millions who were condemned to abject misery. The neoliberal state dismantled social protections, gutting and privatizing Egypt's health care system and other social services along with many of the state-owned industries. During Mubarak's rule alone, food subsidies were reduced by more than 50 percent, while privatization frequently meant "less job stability, longer hours, and a lower standard of social services for workers," as a recent report by the Solidarity Center indicates; "this was a rather effective means for disciplining the labor force." For further reading please refer to *Monthly Review*, Volume 63, Issue 06 (November), 2011.

on religious minorities such as the Yazidis[vi], who, due to President Trump's travel ban, could get trapped inside Iraq, receive little, if any, media coverage in the United States? Why are countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates excluded, without any logical reasons, from the list of the possible threats to the United States when fifteen of the nineteen hijackers in the 9/11 terrorist attacks were from these countries? Why is Iran constantly being demonized for its nuclear activity while U.S.' allies are free to add to their already massive nuclear artillery? Though it is important to pay attention to the general hostility and passionate rage exercised towards Muslims specifically within the United States' mainstream culture, it is crucial to separate Iranians from Arabs, Arabs from Kurds, and Kurds from Turks. The tendency to lump all Muslims together should not become an additional racial tool for the United States to hide its nuanced policies toward Muslim majority countries capable of destabilizing the growing hegemony of countries such as Saudi or Israel in the region.

Part II: Iranianness and domestic transformation

The pre-revolutionary era in Iran started with Reza Shah Pahlavi[vii] overthrowing the last shah of Qajar, Ahmad Shah. Reza Shah reigned from 1925 to 1941 within which he attempted to modernize Iran and its traditional cultural hegemony to align it with those in the Western world.[viii] As Mansour Farhang in *Iran and The Prism of Political Culture explains*, "Pahlavi's official ideology was formed out of a loose combination of selective aspects of Western cultural values and ethos (increasingly American), and a romantic view of the ancient, pre-Islamic Persian civilization."[15] The noticeable fact about the Pahlavi's regime was its dualistic attitude towards the national (Ira-

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[vi]The Yazidi religious minority, whose beliefs are derived from Zoroastriansm, Christianity and Islam were subjected to what the United Nations classified as genocide when ISIS militants overran their homes in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, killing and enslaving thousands of women and girls.

[vii]Reza Shah Pahlavi is the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty who was appointed as a monarch of Iran through the majority of Iran's constituent assembly votes. His (controversial) dynasty was overthrown in 1979 and by Islamic revolution.

[viii]The hallmark of modernizing Iran was to turn the country into a consumer of Western commodities. Importing foreign goods resulted in the disappearance of small and local businesses who did not have the power to compete with Western corporation. For further reading please refer to Pamela Karimi's book titled *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran, Interior revolutions of the Modern era.*

nian) identity. On the one hand, Reza Shah tried to westernize Iran expeditiously; on the other hand, as the country's monarch, he "demanded that Iran be used instead of Persia"[16] to accentuate the country's new attitude and determination in becoming independent from other cultures. While Reza Shah insisted on the usage of "Iran," wherever it was beneficial, he incorporated the rich and extravagant history of "Persian" culture to elevate the status of the country in the international scene. "Persia," as Mostafa Vaziri, in *Iran as Imagined Nation*, explains, "was an obscure term that hardly explained the multiethnic population and did not correspond to anything in a general scale of identity that the local inhabitant would refer to."[17] The interchangeable use of "Persia" and "Iran," thus, became a strategic means for the Pahlavi's regime to disguise its political ambition in becoming the hegemonic power of the region with the help of Western states such as Britain and the United States.[ix]

Simultaneous to Reza Shah's sociopolitical modernization of Iran, the cultural face of the country underwent a radical transformation as well. Establishing Tehran University as "a center for scientific and cultural modernism"[18] in 1934 was "a key part of the modernization program."[19] Shortly after, the College of Fine Arts was founded in conjunction with the Tehran University and was based upon the model of the École des Beaux-Arts of Paris. "The college established three branches of art education: painting, architecture and sculpture. André Godard, its first director, was in charge of arranging a curriculum for instruction and employing the teaching staff."[20] The College of Fine Arts and its faculty, many of whom were educated in the Western world, played a key role in introducing the Iranian public to the idea of modernism and culture of consumerism. For instance, Parvaneh Etemadi, a famous Iranian painter, followed the steps of Andy Warhol in creating and showcasing works that depict key American commodities such as Coca Cola bottles. Outside of academia, too, several magazines, pamphlets, independent artists, and galleries facilitated a platform for the general public to get acquainted with the modernist ideology. As Maryam

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[ix]Today, particularly in the diaspora, some Iranians take advantage of the confusion between "Iran" and "Persia" only to separate themselves from the Islamic Republic regime of Iran. By calling themselves Persians, they create an impression that either Iran is inside the Persia or Persia is a civilized version of Iran or that they are Persians and of Aryan descent, thus different from those currently ruling the country. As Bavand Behpoor, an Iranian artist and art theorist based in Chicago argues "It is not about being somebody, it is about not being someone else," and it is not about being an Irano-Islamist identifying with the dogmatic clerical regime dominating Iran.

Ekhtiar and Marika Sardar argue "The 1949 opening of the Apadana gallery in Tehran, and the emergence of artists like Marcos Grigorian (born 1925) in the 1950s, signaled a commitment to the creation of a form of modern art grounded in Iran."[21] Thus, the Iranian art scene experienced a period of collaboration with the Western world "as local artists participated in art fairs, founded galleries, and courted foreign collectors."[22] The opening of the Tehran Museum of Modern Art, with its attempt to bring together a "collection of both Western and Iranian artists,"[23] counted as one of the foremost achievements of this period. So, through the Pahlavi's strategic cultural overhaul, Iran slowly evolved into an unofficial colonized territory and a marketplace of Western powers such as Britain and the United States. And "Once the Islamic revolution had taken place, the reality of this "Westoxification" – to use a term popular at the time – continued to raise the ire of the post-revolutionary elite."[24]

The fast pace of transforming the cultural discourse of the country from its traditional status to a more modernized and Western-based version caused a backlash among key Iranian intellectuals and proponents of decolonizing Iran, most notable among them Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Daryush Shayegan, and Reza Davari. By calling the West the "Other," these intellectuals believed that such a process of westoxication[x] was to put an end to the authentic Iranian culture and its political and economic sovereignty in the Middle East. By accentuating the authenticity of the Islamo-Iranian identity, devoid of any trace of Western capitalistic culture, they "warned Asian intellectuals to safeguard their cultural identity, ethnic memories and heritage in the face of the intellectuals' assault of Western thought."[25] Starting in the early 1960s, the anti-westoxication ideology advocated by Al-e Ahmad and Daryush Shayegan, debunked the government's attempts to transform the country into a platform for sociopolitical and economical abuse by the First World countries.

While the anti-Western movement was struggling to gain a momentum necessary for challenging the authority of Pahlavi's regime, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, who at the time was in exile, introduced himself on the world stage as a charismatic leader capable of coordinating and mobiliz-

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[x]"Or Gharbzadegi [which] the genesis of this discourse is based on two interrelated issues which have confronted Iranian intellectuals since the nineteenth century: the issue of self-identity, and that of the encounter with Western civilization." For Further Reading please refer to *Iran Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, edited by Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi.

ing multiple oppositional groups. Basically, "Khomeini, who had previously challenged the Shah's authority and was thus exiled to Turkey and Iraq, provided the missing link [among the multiple oppositional groups]."[26] And as Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, in *Iran Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, argue, "In a patrimonial political culture such as Iran's, charismatic patriarchal authorities are usually welcomed and emerge as lightning rods of socio-political mobilization."[27] By constructing a strong political culture, Khomeini united all the social classes and oppositional voices within an Islamic movement and toppled the Pahlavi regime in 1979. After the revolution, however, the continuity of the extant populist ideology and its effectiveness came under question as it "could spell potential instability and conflict for the post-revolutionary regime. Thus, populism had to be controlled, redirected and passed into service of the Islamic Republic."[28] Upon reconstruction of the revolution's core ideology and with the hope of becoming the region hegemonic power, the Islamic regime adopted an anti-East/anti-West agenda and blocked the influence of the world powers on the country.

Figure 2.2: Abbas Kowsari, *Women's Police Academi*, 2005, Profession: Artist Magazine

To show the new regime's independence from the West, on November 4th 1979, the Basij (Iran's military force) invaded the U.S. embassy and took sixty-five American diplomats hostage for four hundred forty four days. Following the invasion, the United States closed its embassy in Tehran and ended its diplomatic relationship with Iran. Parallel to the deterioration of Iran's relationship with the West, in September of 1980, the Iraqi army, supported and equipped by the Western states, invaded Iran.[xi] The Iran-Iraq war continued for eight years during which significant damage was done to Iran, particularly to its southern parts. Against all odds, Iran, through countless sacrifices of its soldiers and unarmed citizens, successfully ceased the war in 1988.

The Islamic government resistance against Iraq's invasion proved Iran's determination in not only asserting the country's newly constructed independent identity but also in ending the signifi-

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[xi]Melani McAlister, in *Staging the American Century, Race, Gender, and Nation in the U.S Representation of the Middle East, 1945 – 1992*, explores the U.S. diplomacy toward the Iran-Iraq war and argues that throughout the war U.S. provided "military and logistical support for Iraq" during the war.

cant influence of countries such as U.S. and Britannia on the geopolitics of Middle Eastern states. The process of decolonization of the country started right after the war as the sociopolitical, economical, and cultural discourses of the country went through a severe transformation. Among all, however, the cultural scene became the most radical manifestation of the country's revisionist attitude; the segregation of the public spaces and imposition of a restrict gender policy, based upon the regime's interpretation of Shi'i ideology, became the symbol of the country's departure from Pahlavi's westoxicated values. One of the offshoots of these changes was a departure of many Iranians, including artists and business owners who found the new regulations impossible to adopt, from the country to abroad, especially to the United States.[xii]

The process of transformation and implementation of the anti-East and anti-West agenda continued until 1997 and the rise of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who advocated for the Islamic democracy and restoration of diplomatic relations with the international world, particularly the United States. During his eight years of presidency (1997-2005) Iran experienced a period of relaxation in its regulations of economy and cultural discourses. As Hamid Keshmirshekan, in Contemporary Iranian Art, argues, Khatami's presidential period "led to the emergence of generation of artists whose main preoccupation was the idea of contemporaneity."[29] He, then, continues, "Although no comprehensive study is available, the majority of the emergent artists were young, educated and middle class. They also belonged mostly to the 'third generation' born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution."[30]

[xii]The years from 1980 through 1991, as Hamid Naficy, in *The Making of Exile Cultures*, argues, marks "the largest Iranian emigration into the United States." These years are "marked by extreme political polarization and antagonism between the United States and Iran." And, as Pamela Karimi explains, "Artists like Husseini were barred from displaying their "capitalistic works" in local museums. Islamic revolutionaries drew a sharp distinction between local and imported goods. Joint Iranian-Western production (the so-called "montage") was considered haram (unlawful/forbidden by God) – as described in early post-revolutionary books such as *Montage factories, Economic Priorities of Iran: The Sinful Economy*." For further reading on Karimi's argument please refer to her book titles *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran.*
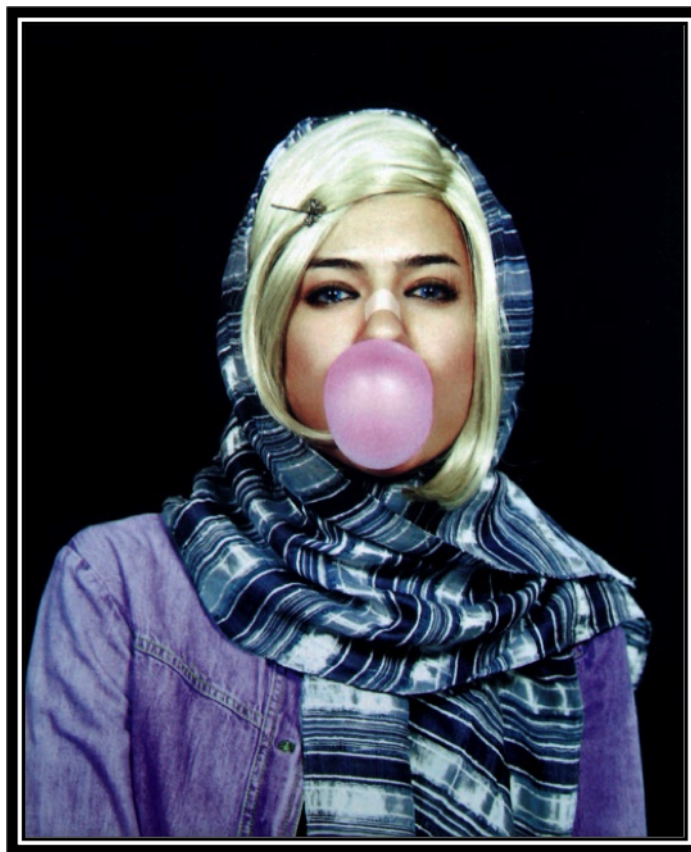
Figure 2.3: Shirin Aliabadi, *Miss Hybrid #3*, 2006, Profession: Artist Magazine

The growing ideological gap between the 'third generation' and the conservative first and second generations evoked the fundamentalists, belonged to the Right Political Party and advocates of backtracking the country to the core value of the revolution, to revolt against Khatami and to call him a westoxicated politician. Parallel to these domestic troubles, the betrayal of George W. Bush's administration and inclusion of Iran within "Axis of Evil" ideology mounted the pressure on Khatami and his cabinet.[xiii] As Trita Parsi, the founder and president of the National Iranian

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[xiii]After 9/11 attacks, Khatami's administration saw the perfect opportunity to demonstrate Iran's tough stand against terrorism by aiding the U.S. with the conflict in Afghanistan. Iran invited U.S. to join its coalition with Afghanistan in order to strategize a solution for unsettling the stability of Taliban. Iran's aid would include, as Trita Parsi argues, "to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American pilots; they served as a bridge between the Northern Alliance and the U.S. in the campaign against the Taliban; and they even used information provided by American forces to find and kill fleeing al-Qaeda leaders." During the Bonn Conference of December 2001, the representatives of Iran, Afghanistan, U.S. and few European countries gathered to decide the feasibility of the project as well as the future administration for the Afghanistan. Parsi explains, "The Northern Alliance insisted that, as the winner of the war, the spoils should be theirs. Though they represented about 40 percent of the country, they wanted to occupy eighteen of the twenty-four ministries. At around two o'clock in the morning, Dobbins brought together the Afghan parties, the Iranians, the Russians, the Indians, the Germans, and Lakhdar Brahimi of the UN to resolve this final

American Council, argues,

> 'Axis of Evil' was a fiasco for the Khatami government, said Farideh Farhi, an Iran expert at the University of Hawaii. "It was used by hard-liners, who said: 'if you give in, if you help from a position of weakness, then you get negative results." Hard-liners argued that Iran should not have offered the U.S. any help without exacting a price beforehand. Some Iranian diplomats involved in the Afghan talks were later forced to pay for the calamity with their careers, making others think twice before extending a hand of friendship to the U.S.[31]

While Khatami was healing the broken relationship between Iran and the United States and was democratizing the country's political rhetoric, by being labeled as a traitor and anti-Islamist American object, the fundamentalists took significant steps towards overturning his government.

In 2005, the fundamentalist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the national election to become the sixth president of the Islamic Republic regime. He remained in power until 2013. During his eight years of presidency, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy and crude diplomacy provoked the international world under the pressure of the United States to launch numerous economical and political sanctions on Iran, most notably on its banking system and importing and exporting commodities to and from the country. As his first term of presidency ended with a massive wave of criticism domestically and internationally, the controversy over his re-election in 2009 caused uproar nationwide. After being announced the seventh president of Iran through a landslide victory, his opponents, most notably Mir Hussein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, backed by their supporters, formed the Green Movement and demanded a recount. As the uprising intensified, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, asked the protesters to end their street battles, suggesting that such unrest would leave the country a divided nation. After Supreme Leader's speech, the Ahmadinejad's government suppressed the uprising and jailed all the Green Movement activists, including its promi-

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point. For two hours, the various delegations took turns trying to convince the representative of the Northern Alliance to accept a lower number of ministries, to no avail. Finally, the Iranian representative took him aside and began whispering to him in Persian. A few minutes later, they returned to the table and the Afghan conceded. "Okay, I give up," he said. "The other factions can have two more ministries," the nest morning, the historic Bonn agreement was signed, American had not only won the war, but, with the help of Iran, it had also won the peace." Iran through its collaboration proved that it can be a reliable ally to the U.S. when it comes to the war on terror, as Taliban was counted Iran's enemy too. Despite Iran's positive attitude, on January 29, 2002, George W Bush, counted Iran as one of the "Axis of Evil." This inclusion came as a shocked for the Khatami's administration which was already under a tremendous amount of pressure by the hard-liners inside the country.

nent leaders, Moussavi and Karroubi. In the subsequent four years, due to the conservative and sometimes hostile nature of the Ahmadinejad's policies, the way that Iranianness was perceived within and without the country changed radically. While domestically Iranians encountered a massive pushback from the new administration on reformative policies of Khatami, internationally, too, they saw their identities being stereotyped within the context of radical Islamist rhetoric.

One of the safest battlegrounds for building new vocabularies of resistance and defining the meaning of Iranianness, domestically and internationally, has been through artistic exchange between the so-called Middle East and the West. Within this chapter, this artistic exchange is examined in the context of two case studies, a photo collection by Shadi Ghadirian, *Like Everyday*, and a performance piece by 84Theatre Company, *Endless Monologue*. By recording and re-presenting the voice of minorities, both Ghadirian and Alizad create a gap capable of resisting, decoding, and rearticulating the stereotypes associated with Iranianness. The works of these artists facilitate a platform for revisiting issues such as racial discrimination, gender (un)performativity and identity crisis among Iranians. Thus, what both of these artworks, *Like EveryDay* and *Endless Monologue*, have in common is the performativity of identity within an environment dominated by censorship, misrepresentation of the truth, and the lack of visibility for Iranians, nationally and internationally. These artworks strategically utilize and transcend the invisibility and its performativity to problematize the censorship practiced inside the country. Also, these artworks resist and upset the Western States tendency in categorizing Iran as a backward, fundamentalist, and barbaric country. Questions associated with these artworks are contextualized within Daniel Martinez Hosang's racial formation theory, Hamid Naficy's definition of exilic art, Pamela Karimi's theorization of gendered space, and Judith Butler's gender performativity.

I. Shadi Ghadirian

Like EveryDay

Figure 2.4: Shadi Ghadirian, *Like EveryDay*, 2001-2, Artist's Website

Shadi Ghadirian, one of the most progressive female photographers of the late 20th and 21st century in Iran, was born in Tehran during the Islamic revolution. A graduate of the Azad University of Tehran in photography, her work "explores contemporary life in post-revolutionary Iranian society with a focus on the role of women of her generation."[32] Ghadirian's recognition as an emerging female artist started with her first major photo collection, entitled *Qajar* (1998). This collection exhibits thirty-three women posing in Qajar's traditional costumes and carrying one modern object "that in 1998 was either 'forbidden' or restricted, ranging from a Pepsi can to a boom box, and including bicycles, musical instruments, books, makeup."[33] This photo series, which was also her thesis project at the Azad University of Tehran, caused a great controversy among professors of visual Art Department. After a long debate, the committee members rejected her project the first time around. It was, however, due to this controversy and rejection that Ghadirian, among all the other graduating students, was able to build a reputation for herself.

Figure 2.5: Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar*, 1998, Artist's Website

Like EveryDay (2001-2002), a series that Ghadirian created after her marriage and experiencing the banal life of a housewife in a traditional country such as Iran,[xiv] depicts women veiled in chador with domestic objects such as iron, pan, cup, or a large knife covering the place of their faces. Banned from displaying this series inside Iran, she featured them in a gallery in London where her works attracted the attention of the Western curators.[xv]

The importance of Ghadirian's *Like EveryDay* photo collection rests in its commentary on

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[xiv]Within the traditional cultural hegemony of Iran, women were encouraged to not take the role of the breadwinner of household and only support their spouses in fulfilling the financial needs of the family.

[xv]On view from April 8 to July 31, 2016, Ghadirian's works was also included in the National Museum of Women in the Art exhibition, entitled *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographer from Iran and the Arab World* in Washington D.C. This exhibition was organized with the goal of probing the stereotypes within which the cultural hegemony of the Middle Eastern countries is defined and realized. For further reading please visit `https://nmwa.org/exhibitions/she-who-tells-story`.

how the female body is (re)presented within Middle Eastern and the Western cultural hegemonies. In Iran, the public (re)presentation of a female body is entangled with the dress codes advocated by the State.[xvi] As an offshoot of the clerical regime's initiative for promulgating the Islamic ideology, the imposition of dress code was pursued with the hope of cleansing the country from Pahlavi's extravagant attempts to westernize Iran. To do so, the Islamic regime followed a strict gender biased agenda targeting the segregation of males from females in public spaces. Based upon this goal, the public spaces of the country started to get rearranged to the point that most of the women considered the privacy of their homes as the best option for practicing and expressing their true identities. As Pamela Karimi, in Domesticity and *Consumer Culture, Interior Revolution of the Modern Era*, argues "The spatial segregation of the sexes was forcefully implemented in public spaces. Most government institutions, staircases, and corridors became gender segregated."[34] She then continues, "Bars in buses separated the spaces for women at the back of the bus from that of men at the front. Meanwhile, workplaces and other public institutions upheld sex segregation and instituted daily collective prayers."[35]

The restrictions associated with (re)presenting a female body is a common practice in most Middle Eastern countries where the female image is a permanent point of reference for "creating metaphors for the loss of individualism, national rights, and political suppression."[36] In Egypt, for instance, the Islamization process has changed the image of female performers from the respected individuals to being read at large as the fallen ones. Fatna A. Sabbah, in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, argues, "Muslim culture has a built-in ideological blindness to the economic dimension of women, who are ordinarily perceived, conceived, and defined as exclusively sexual objects."[37] Thus the Islamic regimes, by eroticizing the female body, push women to either comply with the dress codes or stay home. In the context of such an essentialist ideology, chador[xvii] becomes a

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[xvi]The formal dress code for women includes using a non-translucent hijab for covering hair and body. Quite contrary to the general assumption in the West, while using chador is introduced as an ideal form of hijab, wearing it, at least in Iran, is not compulsory.

[xvii]Chador, a one-piece cloth covering from head to toe, veil, a mask covering the face, and hijab, a general term indicating the necessity of covering female's hair and body, are all terms referring to different forms of dress codes in Islamic countries. For instance following the revolution, chador was considered as a standard dress code. However, during the thirty years of Islamic reign and due to the relaxation implemented by reformist, the use of chador is not compulsory. The interchangeable usage of chador and veil causes confusion about what is standard dress code in

nuanced phenomenon signifying the women's oppression as well as their courageous resistance. However, if the goal is to exclude women from sociopolitical discourse or at least, to exclude those who refuse to comply with the hegemonic ideology, then wearing chador/hijab becomes a strategic means for countering the pressure and staying present for women. Encountered with the total domination of the Islamic regime where an open resistance and rebellious act can become costly for both protesters and the government, the renegotiation of the existing rules is the only viable solution for fostering meaningful changes. It is this multilayered role of the chador/ hijab that goes beyond the grasp of Western theorization of feminist movement which sees chador as a symbol of the subjugated and backward Muslim women.

Considering chador as a nuanced phenomenon inspires different readings of Ghadirian's photos, one that may remain unnoticed within the Western definition of women liberation. In these photos, chador becomes a means for providing these women with a privacy that is almost impossible to intrude. These women use their wrapped and hidden bodies as sites capable of bringing personal space into political resistance. The intersectional nature of the Iranian women's resistance has its roots in the political and religious history. This history is explored by Homa Hoodfar who in "More Than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy" argues,

> Prior to the nineteenth century, the veil was never viewed as a symbol of Muslim culture; the practice of the veiling and seclusion of women is in fact pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arabic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies. The first reference to veiling dates to an Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century BC, which restricted the practice to "respectable" women and forbade prostitutes from veiling. Historically, veiling – especially when accompanied by seclusion – was a sign of status and was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires. Muslims subsequently adopted the veil and seclusion. And today it is widely recognized, by Muslims and non-Muslims, as an Islamic phenomenon, presumably sanctioned by the Qur'an.[38]

During the Pahlavi dynasty and due to the attempts to modernize and secularize Iran, de-veiling laws were imposed on women who resisted adapting themselves to the Western way of clothing. De-veiling, then, became the symbol of colonized Iran and its subjugation to the Western hege-

different Middle Eastern countries. Unfortunately, while a majority of women chose to wear chador, this outfit has become the symbol of an oppressed Middle Eastern women.

monic powers, specifically the United States and Britain. During the 1978-79 revolution, women, who were tired of being denied from practicing the basics of freedom of choice and expression, joined the protesters and demanded the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime. The black chador, worn by Iranian women during the massive uprising of 1978-79, signified the thirst for decolonization of Iran and its liberation from Western manipulations. After the revolution, the regime, by understanding the power of symbols such as black chador in showcasing the Iranian's determination for independence, started to practice the compulsory veiling through new legislations. Veiling and de-veiling, thus, bear a great history of political and personal resistance stereotyping of which within narrow concepts of barbarity and backwardness is not only problematic but also aligned with the essentialist and biased outlook of the Western cultural hegemonies. Ghadirian understands this history and by avoiding any open denunciation of the State's sensitivity on the issue of (re)presenting the female image within Islamic ideology, finds a strategic way to renegotiate it. As Julia Allerstorfer argues "Ghadirian therefore reiterates a common and official praxis of editorial control, which is emphasized through the image's isolation and ironized through its presentation as an "artwork.""[39] *Like EveryDay* is a radically non-white feminist statement by Middle Eastern women who may become invisible but they never disappear.[xviii] Their invisible presence is performative as these women, including Ghadirian, while are limited by the banality of domestic life and marriage in the patrimonial cultural hegemony of Iran, never stop challenging the mediocracy of the system. This performativity "is not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm

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[xviii]This invisibility stands in sharp contrast with the depiction of a Muslim women in West, most notably, Hollywood movies or U.S. mainstream media. On the one hand, as Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, in *Gender and Politics in Contemporary Art, Arab Women Empower the Image*, argues, "In the last two hundred years, the West has disseminated a picture of Arab women as exotic, bondaged, romantic, distant, and mysterious. From the early nineteenth century to the latest Hollywood images of the 1990s, the West has been the purveyor of this image. On the other hand, as Sajida Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough, in *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*, contend, "Clearly, for many Muslims, veiling signifies their piety and spirituality, and they are unhappy with both the wider society's demonization of the veil as a symbol of oppression, and the elevation by some Muslims of the veil as a symbol of Muslim identity, resistance, and even *jihad*. As well, there are women who have adopted the veil for personal reasons stemming from their particular social contexts. Some wish to prevent alienation from their parents and community as they engage in "unconventional" pursuits such as higher education and careers, which may entail mingling with men, living alone and traveling to distant places. Other women are using Islam, including practices such as veiling, to help break away from certain practices of their community's patriarchal cultural traditions, such as arrange marriages, which they find unacceptable. In short, for some women veiling can be empowering and in some contexts even subversive."

or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires as act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition."[40]

While Ghadirian's use of chador is performative and nuanced, there are artists who incorporate chador/veil as a social marker set to exoticize their art works. Most notable among them is Shirin Neshat, a renowned Iranian artist based in the United States. Born in 1957 in Qazvin, Neshat left the country shortly after the revolution and resided in the U.S. with the goal of attaining a degree in Fine Arts. In 1990 and upon her visit to Iran, Neshat was surprised and perplexed by the radically changed and Islamicized cultural and political discourses of the country. After witnessing the brutal restrictions imposed on Iranian women in public places, Neshat created one of her best-known photo collections, *Women of Allah* (1993-97).

Figure 2.6: Shirin Neshat, *Women of Allah*, 1993-7
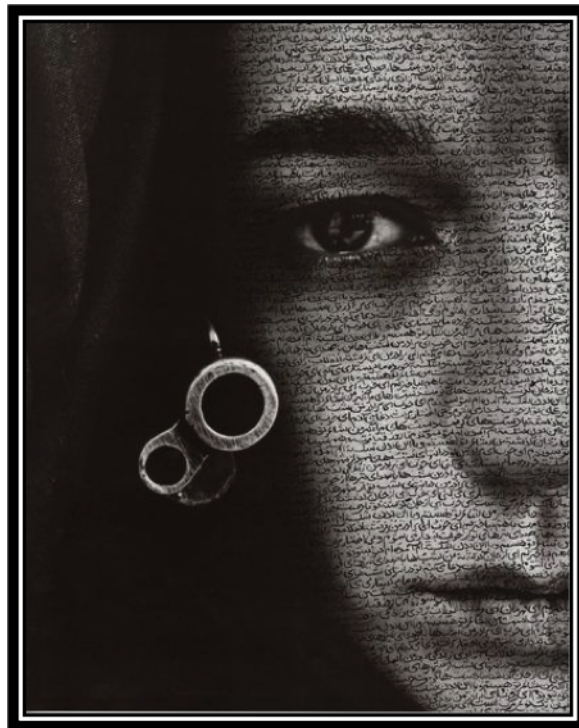
Photographing Iranian women covered with a veil embossed with Farsi words and embellished with weapon-shaped jewelries, Neshat "challenged the perceptions of Iran's social, cultural and religious codes by depicting militant Muslim women in whom she infuses the idea of martyrdom."[41] After Women of Allah, Neshat started to experiment with the medium of video installation. *Tur-*

bulent, one of her most notable video arts, is a split-screen video art depicting male and female performers singing one of the traditional Iranian hymns on the stage of a public auditorium.[xix] While the male performance is watched and applauded by a crowded audience, the female singer performs in front of an empty house. By limiting the female performance to kind of a private gig, Neshat capitalizes on issues associated with dichotomies of man/woman and public/private within the cultural hegemony of Iran. In addition to probing the gender-biased rhetoric of the Islamic regime, Neshat also criticizes the hegemonic power of the patriarchy and taboos associated with female's performance within Iran's traditional cultural discourse. As result of her "brave" commentary on Iranian women's condition, Neshat won the Lion d'Or in Venice Biennale in 1999 for *Turbulent*.

Although Neshat's commentary on the condition of the Muslim women in the Middle Eastern countries is important, the appeal of her works within the Western mainstream culture is problematic as they are seemingly aligned with American stereotyped perceptions of Muslim identity. Incorporating marketable objects such as (black) chador and Persian calligraphy aides Neshat to identify herself as an exotic female artist based in the Muslim Diaspora. Her works reify the credibility of the "Occidental" outlook towards the so-called "Oriental" nations with backwardness, barbarism, and traditionalism as their defining characteristic. Such depiction of Middle Eastern culture is not only dated and mundane but also reiterates the ideology of "orientalism, which anchors war."[42] The logic of orientalism functions based on the idea of the West identifying itself as the superior nation to the exotic and inferior Oriental people. The logic of this pillar is the anchor for war as it works through demarcating a group of colored immigrants, most notably Iranians and Arabs, as not white, however, white enough to pose a threat to the West. Andrea Smith, in "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy," unpacks the racialization of Arab/Muslim from the point of view of the U.S white supremacy by contending, "Three primary logics of white supremacy are (1) slaveability/anti-Black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) Genocide, which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war."[43] That first pillar, slaveability/anti-

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[xix]For viewing Turbulent please visit: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2DNMG2s_00`

Black racism, tends to look at black people as state property, a group of people whose labor is commodified by the market and for the benefit of the capitalist hegemony. The second pillar focuses on strategies utilized by nonindigenous people for the occupation of indigenous people's lands and property. As Smith puts it, "Through this logic of genocide, non-native peoples become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous-land, resources, indigenous spirituality, and culture."[44] The third pillar, orientalism, functions based upon the idea of the West identifying itself as the superior nation to the exotic and inferior Oriental people. The process of demonizing these not white/not-not white nations starts with capitalization of their fundamentality, their totalitarian political structures, and their religious dogmatism. Within such a context, chador, consequently, becomes the most accessible symbol of oppression and barbarity signifying the hostility of Muslims toward the democratic values of the West. Categorizing Muslims, especially those who practice their religion, as socially incompetent nations and threats to the Western democracies extends the capacity to wage war.

> Regarded as inherently fanatical and prone to violence, the figure of the Muslim/Arab shows that the strictly biological basis of race is accompanied by the notion that "the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics of which skin color and other physical attributes provide only the most obvious, and in some respect the lost superficial indicators."[45]

Depictions of completely veiled, oppressed, and semi-militant Muslim women in the Middle Eastern countries, such as those in Neshat's photos, then becomes a reification of the post 9/11 racial ideology centered on introducing Islam as a daily traumatic experience for Westerners.[xx]

Recognizing forceful veiling as a symbol of a country's backwardness and barbarity is as problematic as marking de-veiling as a sign of modernization and secularization. Between such essentialist and biased interpretations, there exists variation of beliefs and ideologies that are seldom discussed in a U.S. context. Thus, narrowing the discussions down to the role of the chador

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[xx]After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush, in his State of the Union Address, called Iran, Iraq, and North Korea an "axis of evil" and declared the launch of the "war on terror" in the Middle East. Although it became clear that none of these countries had supported the attacks, these three nations began to get racialized in a very specific way. Iranians and Iraqis were labeled radical Muslims and terrorists; thus, their marginalization, harassment, and discrimination in the international scene became necessary under the justification of preserving national security.

and veiling as the baseline of oppression for Muslim women prevents the possibility of addressing the multitude of problems encountered by all Muslims around the world. I offer the consideration the idea that Iranian women wear hijab not because they are desperately oppressed but as an adaptive strategy to reform the culture from within. While artists such as Ghadirian are strategically challenging the dogmatic nature of the Islamic ideology, imposed mostly from outside and by the United States, artists such as Neshat are taking advantage of the appeal of objects such as chador, militant Islam, and barbaric Muslim women within the Muslim Diaspora to find a market for their artworks. Clearly, the most obvious outcome of such reification of the stereotypical assumption about Muslim will support the West's, specifically the United States', quest for waging unlawful wars on a selected number of Muslim majority countries in Middle East. Neshat's photos, due to their naïve and natural look turn into symbols signifying everything that is wrong with the Islamic culture, e.g., its barbarism, fundamentalism, repressive nature, and the naiveté of the so called Third World countries. In other words, these photos should not be looked upon as bare facts representing the lives of Muslim women in the Middle Eastern region; when produced by an artist based in the Muslim diaspora, they are cultural objects within a clear-cut sociopolitical context proposing very specific sorts of readings. Pretending otherwise is a sign of either ignorance or naiveté.

II. 84Theatre Company

Endless Monologue

Figure 2.7: 84Theatre Company, *Endless Monologue*, performed in a café in Tehran, 2011, Courtesy of the artist.

David Román, in *Performance in America*, defines performance as "a cultural practice that does more than illustrate the social and historical context in which it is embedded."[46] He believes, "[performance] shapes and transforms the way we understand and experience our lives."[47] By bringing past and present together, in one singular moment, performance becomes a liminal space where, free of presupposed rules and regulation, the exploration and reevaluation of sociopolitical and cultural norms of a society become possible.[xxi] Reflexivity, singular or plural, is then the

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[xxi]The argument of liminality is investigated in great detail by Victory Turner in his seminal book, *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*. Labeling it theory of "social drama," Turner identifies four phase of breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism as its characteristics. Tuner, by contextualizing the definition of "limen" in the theory of social drama, believes that the redressive mood is a liminal stage where not only a reversal of familiar elements happens but also an anti-structure or a "communitas" is developed as a strategy to cope with crisis. Thus, it is through this third phase, with its liminal characteristic, that a feedback on crisis is provided and a reintegration or recognition of a schism becomes possible. Turner's nuanced approach to ritual is foregrounded in his examination of the circumcision ritual practiced among Ndembu Mukanda tribe. As Bell, in *Ritual: Perspective and Dimensions*, asserts "Turner provided a very detailed description of the Mukanda as he observed it among the Ndembu in 1953, while also using other ethnographic accounts for comparison and amplification. His description makes explicit use of the theoretical views of other interpreters, notably van Gennep and Gluckman." (P 52) The Mukanda of the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia enacts circumcision rite in order to turn boys into men. This rite has three stages corresponding to the van Gennep's tripartite theory of rite of passage; the first stage of van Gennep's

foremost feature of performance art; a feature that enables the community to see itself anew. This ability to suspend the normative rules temporarily only to create alternative ways of looking (back) at life becomes a necessity in countries where the hegemonic power has a total domination on various aspects of its citizens' lives. A notable example of such a subversive quality of this art form is a performance piece produced by 84Theatre Company, entitled *Endless Monologue*, in *Ist* gallery in Tehran, Iran, in 2011. As one of the few active performance groups in Tehran, 84Theatre Company, under the direction of Ali Akbar Alizad,[xxii] focuses on alternative approaches in retelling and memorializing marginalized stories of women, sexual assault survivors, and communities within the patrimonial political and cultural discourses of the country.

During his trip to England, Alizad saw a verbatim performance piece in London.[xxiii] Considering verbatim theater a powerful means for exploring the sociopolitical issues of Iran, Alizad started interviewing people whose stories he believed needed to be told. After interviewing six people, Alizad chose three; the first interview was with Hamid, a homosexual doctoral student who talked about his experience living as a gay person in Iran. His story was a detailed description of his rape in the outskirts of Tehran by four men and his coping mechanism afterwards. He also described some of his childhood memories and the humiliations that he had endured during his school years because of his sexual orientation. As a Ph.D. student, fluent in seven languages, Hamid has experienced a constant discrimination and marginalization not only in public but also in

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formula is separation known among the Mukanda as *kwing'ija* ("causing to enter"). At this preliminary stage, boys are separated from their mother and their quotidian way of life and relocated into the bush. The second stage is known as transitional or liminal phase identified by the Mukanda as *kung'ula* ("at the circumcision edge"). Within this phase, boys are settled in a special sort of structure built for the enactment of the circumcision rituals. The final phase, known by the Mukanda as *kwidisha* ("to take outside"), is when the young men's are returned to their community. Turner argues that the circumcision ritual of the Mukanda of the Ndembu demonstrates the internal conflict that exists between the matrilineal and patrilocal relationship. The whole ritual, by separating the boys from their mother, circumcising them and returning them instead to their fathers, is designed to affirm the supremacy of the patriarchy within the tribe.

[xxii]As the head of 84Theatre Company, Alizad, in addition of teaching script analysis and playwriting at the Art University of Tehran, "engaged in theater since 1991; from that time his central interest focused on directing, but he had many experiences in other theatrical fields such as writing and acting." Considering theatre as a powerful means for social change "he also works with Children Worker, women, and Afghan people." Alizad founded the 84Theatre Company based on the idea of staging the works of foreign playwrights such as Chekhov, Beckett, Pinter, and Mamet. Most group members are students or alumnus from the Cinema and Theater Department at the Art University. Some of the past performances by the group include productions *Waiting for Godot* (2004), *Oleanna* (2006), *Two Latin American Play by Ventura & Carbaeido* (2006), *Anniversary Celebration and Swan Song* by Anton Chekhov (2007), and *Five Fragments* by Samuel Beckett (2008). For further reading please visit `www.84theatre.com`

[xxiii]Verbatim is a documentary form of theatre where true stories and interviews become the subject of the piece.

private settings and gatherings. As a result, Hamid has always been faced with a constant struggle in defeating his depression and loneliness forced upon him since childhood. "The attitude of this country toward homosexuality is problematic. That's why stories of individuals like Hamid are in need of retelling and memorializing,"[48] Alizad explained.

The second interview was with Setareh, whose father was executed under the accusation of being a political activist. Setareh described her family's shock after hearing the news of her father's unexpected execution and their vein attempts in seeking further justification and transparency. Shortly after this traumatic event, her mother married a man who used to be the inmate of Setareh's father in prison. As she grew older, Setareh started to further question the death of her father, particularly considering the no conviction verdict for her stepfather. Not knowing her father's burial place, Setareh explained that she continually struggles with the trauma of her loss. The third and final interview narrated the story of Vida, who with the hope of finding independence and resisting her father's autocracy, went through a series of traumatic experiences such as abortion followed by a failed attempt to flee the country. Devastated by her experience abroad, she finally chose to return home. After a while, she left the country for the second time without ever returning. Unable and reluctant to talk about their traumatic experiences publicly, the interviewees agreed to work with Alizad who believed these stories bear enough momentum to foster awareness around the issues associated with the oppressive nature of Iran's traditional cultural discourse. Since the interviewees insisted on remaining anonymous, Alizad recorded the interviews and edited them in a nonlinear manner. During the performance, the performers, without mimicking the interviewees, simply listened to the pre-recorded voices of Hamid, Setareh, and Vida, through their headsets, and retold the audiences what exactly they had heard. At the beginning of each performance, the performer, however, mentioned that the interviewees are present and anonymously are watching their stories being (re)told.

By acknowledging the invisible presence of the interviewees, *Endless Monologue* complicated the consumption mechanism of a performance piece by the spectators. Encountered with a performance piece, the spectator usually is the one who remains invisible and unidentified in

relation to the visible performer(s). In *Endless Monologue* the situation was reversed; the audience looked at the performers while both the audience and the performers were looked at by the interviewees (Hamid, Setareh, and Vida). Thus, if in a normal situation the spectators attempt to identify themselves in relation to the performers (the Other), in *Endless Monologue* the spectators are in between and betwixt two representational economies; one that is visible and fictional and the other that is invisible and factual. As Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked*, contends "Identity is perceptible only through a relation to another – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other."[49] She then continues, "In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being."[50] While the stories are being told, the audiences constantly look around, and, through their gazes, they ask of one another 'is this your story?' It is this gaze, this inquiry, this need for securing oneself from merging with these odd "Others" that makes the invisibility of the interviewees performative. Butler asserts, "To the extent that the "I" is secured by its sexed position, this "I" and its "position" can be secured only by being repeatedly assumed, whereby "assumption" is not a singular act or event, but, rather, an iterable practice."[51]

The performativity of *Endless Monologue* and its capability in facilitating new ways of constructing and perceiving Iranianness should be investigated domestically and internationally. Within the country, due to the monolithic and traditional nature of the sociopolitical and cultural discourses, producing subversive performance art is crucial as it provides the community with an opportunity to look at itself afresh. By retelling the stories of marginalized groups, Iranian artists challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic system that decides whose stories should become visible and whose should remain invisible or in the margin. While becoming visible is prone to censorship, performance art, due to its ephemerality and irreproducibility, is an ideal medium for Iranian artists to foster new ways of intervening in the system. Without leaving any trace, performance pushes the spectators to their limits only to encourage them to substitute their own stories with those of the others and to build their own survival memories. It is through the act of witnessing others'

testimonies and mixing fictional with factual truths that the audiences become a communitas with a shared critical outlook towards the violence of the mainstream and patriarchal cultural discourse; a discourse that its oppressive power is exposed and materialized in the subjective narrative/experience of each of the audiences. These narratives, and by extension the subversive culture, due to their ephemerality, escape the surveillance and censorship and challenge the simulacrum of inclusion and equality promulgated by the governmental agencies. As Lisa Low, in *Immigrant Acts, On Asian American Cultural Politics*, contends "[Culture] is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state."[52]

Internationally, *Endless Monologue* is performative as it challenges the essentialist outlook toward Iranians as a backward and homophobic nation. It is due to such a biased attitude that the Western states justify their superiority and the legitimacy of their hegemonic control over the Third World countries. A case in point, regarding the Westerners' manipulation of news coming out of the Middle Eastern region, is the 2005 public execution of two Iranian teenagers, Mahmood Asgari and Ayaz Marhooni, accused of raping a thirteen-year-old boy in the holy city of Mashhad. This execution caused a huge backlash around the world and among LGBT organizations, condemning the fundamentalist Islamic government of Iran for their shameless act of killing homosexuals. Despite all the evidence presented by the Iran's judicial system asserting that the execution was due to the act of rape and not homosexuality, the West insisted on projecting a homophobic attitude on the execution. The biased attacks on the execution made it impossible for civil lawyers inside the country to question the existence of death penalty, e.g. public hanging, within the judicial system of Iran. The execution of these two teenagers is thus an example that "inadvertently highlights the place of the figures of the executed "gay Iranians" in today's Western secular imagination as referencing instances when outrage at Islam is completely justified."[53] *Endless Monologue* stands at the intersection of such essentialist and biased assumptions toward Iran. The importance of this performance piece is in its ability to not only unsettle the heteronormative cultural hegemony of

Iran but also to destabilize the foundation established by the West for justifying its attacks on the so-called barbaric Muslim countries. It is undeniable that the hegemonic power of Iran has a built-in blindness toward homosexuals and women's potentials in constructing the future of the country. However, the very existence of this performance piece proves that, quite contrary to the Western-ers' assumptions, there exists some tolerance within the Islamic hegemony to initiate and propose the re-articulation and reformation of some of the restrictions. *Endless Monologue*, by staging these stories, condemns both the Iranian regime for oppressing and stigmatizing homosexuals and the Western world who insists on portraying Iran as a place where homosexuals, due to their ab-jectness, are publicly executed. Thus, *Endless Monologue* not only problematizes the oppressive nature of the heteronormative cultural discourse of Iran but also mocks the most liberal countries who practically have failed to provide equality for their homosexual citizens. For instance, as of February 22nd 2017, the Trump administration rolled back the rule protecting transgender students to use the public-school restrooms that match their sexual identity. Such orders only promulgate hatred toward the LGBTQ community who is already marginalized and isolated in the United States. These discriminatory acts are done under the name of democracy and freedom of choice. So, if this is democracy, what is totalitarianism?

At its core, *Endless Monologue* exposes the uncomfortable truth that both Iran and the Western states refuse to accept; domestically, acknowledging the rights of homosexuals is intertwined with an official call for re-articulation of the Islamic laws and ideology. Internationally, recognizing the unofficial tolerance of the Iranian regime toward homosexuality and marginalized groups requires the re-articulation of the biased outlook feeding into depicting Iran as a barbaric, backward, and militant Islamic state. These stories are strategically staged to show, challenge, and further repair the abjectness associated with simulacrum of democracy, inclusivity, and equality that Iranians are trapped within, domestically and internationally. Herein, *Endless Monologue* becomes metaphor of a performative gap where not only countering the essentialist representations of Iranianness becomes possible but also imagining alternative (individual and collective) identities is promoted and practiced.

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Chapter 3

Bewildered They Stood, Like An Empty Oath, Like a Solemn Kurd: Mountain Language and Its Plea for Justice

Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, a fourteen-year old Iraqi girl, was raped and shot three times in the head in her house near Baghdad by American soldiers on March 12th, 2006. Via subsequent investigations, five U.S. soldiers, including Specialist James Barker, Pte. Jesse Spielman, Sgt. Paul Cortez, Pts. Bryan Howard and Steven Green, were charged for planning, carrying out, and covering up the rape and killing of Abeer and her whole family. Green, a nineteen-year-old soldier from Midland Texas, convicted of the rape, was described by "prosecutors as predisposed to killing Iraqis. Defense attorneys acknowledged he participated in the killings but argued he was suffering combat stress after the death of close colleagues and did not know friend from foe."[1]

Figure 3.1: Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi at the age of seven, Photographer unknown.

Green, alongside four other soldiers, after drinking whiskey and playing cards at checkpoint, invaded Abeer's house, locked up her parents and her five-year old sister in the bedroom and took turn raping Abeer. After a while, Green went to the bedroom and shot Abeer's mother in the chest, her father in the head, and her little sister in the face. He then raped Abeer and shot her three times in the head. As the epilogue to their gruesome crime, the soldiers burnt Abeer's body from the waist up to cover the rape. "Instead of outrage," As Hamid Dabashi in *Islamic Liberation Theology, Resisting the Empire*, argues, "the leading US legal and human rights activists and intellectuals – Alan Dershowitz and Michael Ignatieff chief among them – openly, publicly, eloquently, and with detailed analysis supported, endorsed, rationalized, theorized and sought to legalize the systematic torturing of people – "the lesser evil," they called it. Their civilization, they argued, was in danger, and they had to defend it against barbarians."[2]

A year before the gruesome rape of Abeer, on November 19th, 2005, a roadside bomb went off in Haditha, northwest of Baghdad, and killed "20-year-old Lance Corp Miguel ("TJ") Terrazas, driving one of the four Humvee vehicles on patrol, injuring two other marines."[3] In a statement, the U.S. military reported the incident mentioning the death of a U.S. marine alongside of fifteen other civilians. While the UN and the international journalists took the U.S. military statement as a matter of fact, a local journalist, Taher Thabet al-Hadithi, went to the scene and shot footage contradicting the U.S. military statement. Mr. Hidithi's footage captures women and children brutally shot and murdered in their own homes, not because of a "blasted roadside bomb" but by direct bullets. Following further investigations, it became apparent that a band of U.S. marines went on a killing rampage, moving from one home to another, to shoot and kill civilians without a legitimate reason; civilians who were supposed to be liberated from the tyranny of their dictator, Saddam Hussein, by the U.S.- led war on terror.

Figure 3.2: Iraqi Civilians who were shot on 19 November, 2005 during the Haditha Massacre, Courtesy of The New York Times, taken by Lucian Read

As Dabashi contends,

> Iraqi eyewitnesses of the massacre reported to Iraqi authorities the details of how the US troops entered their houses and began indiscriminately killing entire families. "They knocked at our front door," one eyewitness reported, "and my father went to open it. They shot him dead from behind the door and then they shot him again. Then one American soldier came in and shot at us all. I pretended to be dead and he didn't notice me." Children as young as two years and as old as 14 were among the victims of the massacre. In an adjacent house yet another child and his 70-year-old grandfather were shot dead. Four brothers in the same family, aged from 24 to 41 were shot dead. "Eyewitnesses said they were forced into a wardrobe and shot." This is not all: "Outside in the street, US troops are said to have gunned down four students and a taxi driver they had stopped at a roadblock set up after the bombing." Colonel Stewart Navarre of the US army finally admitted on December 21, 2006, that "the reporting of the incident up the chain command was inaccurate and untimely."[4]

The repetitive appearance of images depicting Muslims' lifeless bodies has become one of the signatures of the "War on Terror;" a war that did everything except emancipating Iraqi, Afghan, Kurd, Turk, and Syrian civilians from the dictatorship of their leaders and the humanistic threat imposed on their states by so called radical "Islamist" terrorist groups. The attempts by the First

World countries to spread democracy and human rights in the Middle East have historically been proven to be no more than an excuse for further war crimes in the region; a region that was never officially conquered by any of the white colonizers and consequently stood as a strong enough geopolitical power (capable of) endangering the hegemonic presence of the West, especially that of the United States. Herein, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Islam, as Edward Said, in *Covering Islam, How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, argues, significantly became a discourse which "For the right, [represented] barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism."[5] Perpetuating such racially charged outlooks in masterminding tactics such as the launch of "War on Terror" or issuing sanctions on countries like Iran, depict Muslims as citizens incapable of acting individually and secularly. In other words, Muslims will always be Muslims identified and categorized as a single community prone to radicalization and a posing threat to Western civilization.[i] Thus, post 9/11, and in the context of "War on Terror," the images of lifeless Muslim bodies in media outlets never was used to represent individuals whose lives have been taken violently; they were represented as an image of a dangerous foe whose annihilation is the United States humanistic duty.

It is almost impossible to look at what has happened in Haditha and not think of "PinkVile," Vietnam where Lt. William L. Calley Jr., known as "Rusty," in March of 1968 deliberately murdered at least one hundred and nine Vietnamese civilians. Instead of an outrage, "Colonel George S. Patton III – son of *the* Patton – sent out a Christmas card reading "Peace on Earth" with pho-

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[i]Such an outlook stands in sharp contrast with how calamities such as the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City is depicted and discussed in the United States. As JonathanK. Stubbsl, in *Bottom Rung of America's Race Ladder*, argues, "governmental law enforcement personnel did not create a racial profile of individuals like Timothy McVeigh, and engage in widespread arrests of disgruntled white males who perceived themselves to have axes to grind with the American government. Professor Leti Volpp described the situation well: The Timothy McVeigh analogy helps clarify the strangeness of the present moment. Under the logic of profiling all people who look like terrorists under the "Middle Eastern" stereotype, all whites should have been subjected to stops, detentions, and searches after the Oklahoma City bombing and the identification of McVeigh as the prime suspect. This did not happen because Timothy McVeigh did not produce a discourse about good whites and bad whites, because we think of him as an individual deviant, a bad actor. We do not think of his actions as representative of an entire racial group. This is part and parcel of how racial subordination functions, to understand nonwhites as directed by group-based determinism but whites as individuals. Racial profiling also did not happen because, as a white man, Timothy McVeigh was seen by many as one of "us"—as the New York Times editorialized at that time, there was "sickening evidence that the enemy was not some foreign power, but one within ourselves." For further reading please refer to *Bottom Rung of America's Race Ladder*, After the September 1 Catastrophe are American Muslims Becoming America's New N. . . s? *Journal of Law & Religion*, Vol. *XIX*, 19 J. L. & Religion 115 2003-2004 by JonathanK. Stubbsl.

tographs of "dismembered Viet Cong soldiers stacked in a neat pile.""[6] And, it is also very difficult to look at the bodies of Viet Cong soldiers piled upon one another and not to remember the Abu Ghraib photos where naked Iraqi inmates were stacked on top of each other in the form of a pyramid.[ii] Again, instead of an outrage, Rumsfeld, on May 4th, 2004, when asked about the photos, contended, ""Oh, I'm not one for instant history.""[7] This is not an instant history; othering, torturing, and cold bloodedly killing those who have tried to de-colonize and to free themselves from the grip of U.S. imperialist adventurism is a longstanding and arduous tradition.

Investigating the outcomes of the U.S. imperial proclivities in the Middle East, this chapter demonstrates the fallacies associated with whitewashed ideologies supporting the invasion of the Middle Eastern countries under the justification of the "War on Terror."[iii] This chapter further argues that the Middle Eastern countries, including Iran as one of the most stable states in the region, are not in the need of intervention by imperialist powers to fix their "problems." While it is imperative to criticize the shortcomings of Islamic regimes' policies such as Iran, it is also crucial to examine the U.S. neoconservative approach to the calamities of the Islamic states. If the "War on Terror" was launched to defeat and block warmongering of a few radical "Islamic" groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS, then why did a vast majority of Muslim nations, including Iranians, became the United States' most dangerous nemesis and new global enemies?[iv] Equating all Muslims to a

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[ii]Seymour M. Hersh in *Chain of Command, The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, chronicles the events leading to the publication of Abu Ghraib photos. In one detailed description, he asserts, "In one photograph, Private England, a cigarettes dangling from her mouth, is giving a jaunty thumbs-up sign and pointing at the genitals of a young Iraqi, who is naked except for a sandbag over his head, as he masturbates. Three other hooded and naked Iraqi prisoners are shown, hands reflexively crossed over their genitals. A fifth prisoner has his hand at his sides. In another, England stands arm in arm with Specialist Graner; both are grinning and giving the thumbs-up behind a cluster of perhaps seven naked Iraqis, knees bent, piled clumsily on top of each other in a pyramid. There is another photograph of a cluster of naked prisoners, again piled in a pyramid. Near them stands Graner, smiling, his arms crossed; Specialist Sabrina Harman stands in front of him, bending over, and she, too, is smiling. Then, there is another cluster of hooded bodies, with a female soldier standing in front, taking photographs. Yet another photograph shows a kneeling, naked, unhooded male prisoner, head momentarily turned away from the camera, posed to make it appear that he is performing oral sex on another male prisoner, who is naked and hooded." (P. 23)

[iii]"War on Terror" was a term used by George W. Bush following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack.

[iv]It is of paramount important that the U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East in general and Iran in particular gets investigated in the context of the long history of U.S-Iran hostile relationship started with CIA engineered coup in 1953. In February of 1949, Shah, with justification of surviving an assassination plot, closed all the newspapers critical of his domestic and foreign policies. He also detained, prisoned, and exiled most of the oppositional voices. His clampdowns resulted in a severe backlash and led clerical, secular, and elitist leaderships to start playing a key role in structuring the protests against the government's suppressive actions. The formation of National Front headed by Mohammad Mosaddeq and Ayatollah Kashani was one of the outcomes of such attempts. National Front represented

few radical terrorists who have taken Islam hostage will criminalize and depoliticize the uprising of groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and reformist party in Iran who are resisting the further colonization of their countries. Parallel to restoring and safeguarding their states independence, countries like Iran are heavily involved in stopping the development of radical Islamic groups including ISIS in Syria and Iraq. However, broadcasting such anti-terrorist attempts initiated and carried by Iran is counter-intuitive to a Western, whitewashed, perception of the country's clerical regime.[v]

To examine these questions, this chapter uses a production of *Mountain Language*, written by Harold Pinter and staged by Ali Akbar Alizad, the head of 84Theatre Company, in Tehran,

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"predominantly bazaar middle class, and a variety of secular, nationalistic, and social democratic parties, articulating mainly the interest of the salaried middle class." What made the formation of National Front significant, in addition to the presence of the clerical leadership in the political scene, was the success of Mosaddeq and Kashani in mobilizing the university students and elites to push for free press and independent oil industry. As the protests continued, Shah with the hope of easing the oppositional front's high temper, appointed Mosaddeq as his prime minister. This appointment had multiple consequences. On the one hand, Mosaddeq nationalized Iran's oil and cut out the Britannia's domination on the industry, an act that greatly damaged Shah's international status. On the other hand, due to Mosaddeq's growing power and popularity, religious leaders notably Ayatollah Kashani, withdrew their supports for Mosaddeq and for National Front with the perception that Mosaddeq was pursuing a socialist revolution. Shah, by taking advantage of this division in National Front, found a perfect opportunity for removal of Mosaddeq from the office. Eventually in 1953, with the help of CIA, Shah planned a coup d'etat and overthrew Mosaddeq. At first glance, it may appear that the overthrowing of Mosaddeq worked in favor of the Shah, however, a closer consideration makes it obvious that the winner of this power struggle was actually a clerical front who, by fracturing National Front, provided a platform for itself to emerge as a sole savior of Iran's crippling sociopolitical condition. The Coup and its aftermath clamped down climaxed in the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution that, As Dabashi in *Brown Skin, White Masks* argues, "became a thorn in the side of American and Israeli militarism, with the potential for spreading its ideology like wildfire. During the Reagan administration (1981–89), the United States and its European and regional allies (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Israel in particular) created bumper zones on either side of the Islamic Republic, overseen by the Wahabi-inspired Taliban to its east and Saddam Hussein to its west. The Taliban succeeded in expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan and in preventing the spread of the Shi'i-inspired Iranian revolution to Central Asia. Saddam Hussein did the same (likewise heavily supported by the US and its allies) by engaging Iran in a war that lasted eight terrible years (1980–88), with Muslims murdering Muslims by the tens of thousands, much to the satisfaction of such observers as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who quipped, "It's a pity both sides can't lose". The two Frankensteins the US created—Mullah Omar in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq—succeeded at their assigned tasks, but they came back to haunt their creators. Saddam Hussein had scarcely finished battling Iran when he turned the same weapons and intelligence that the US and its allies had put at his disposal on Kuwait; the Taliban that the Reagan administration had trained (through Pakistan) and financed (through Saudi Arabia) became the host of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, whose wave of reported terrorist attacks (there is no way to verify the charges) against the United States and its interests ranged from Nairobi, Kenya (1998) and Dar as-Salam, Tanzania (1998), to the World Trade Center (1993 and 2001).

[v]During the month of November, 2017, the president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, and Iraqi Prime Minister both declared the total defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Among the silence of mainstream media, only a handful of news outlets such as *Business Insider* or *Huffington Post* ran an article regarding such an important victory in the Middle Eastern region. For further reading please visit, `http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-military-defeat-iraq-syria-2017-11`.

Iran. This production demonstrates one of the moments where the "Orient" comes to terms with the image that is projected upon it not only by its own governmental agencies but also by the imperialist powers. I argue that a subversive theatre production such as *Mountain Language* can de-initiate its spectators through the reenactment of torture and violence. The process of initiation and de-initiation of spectators during the production of *Mountain Language* is examined within concepts such as disposability of Muslim body, the materiality of wounding, the use of torture as a complex political practice, and self-(de)regulation through memory. Alizad's staging of Mountain Language is based upon the bare display of torture, its prevalent use within the country, and its normalcy within Muslims' collective memory. It is important to examine the performativity of this production not only within the country, where the fear of torture is deeply enmeshed in the collective memory of Iranians, but also from outside, where the Muslim body has become a regular site for imperialists to cite and mark their hegemonic superiority.

Daniel Martinez HoSang, in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, proposes a critical and less explored question regarding Omi and Winant's racial formation theory by asking "How might racial formation theory effectively engage issues of indigeneity, war making, and settler colonialism?"[8] In response, by criticizing the ideology of neoliberal and U.S.'s Left towards the issue of racism, HoSang contends that the Left political party has a built-in blindness towards the mechanism of new racial discourse and as a result it is unable to mount an effective anti-racist campaign.[9] When applying racial formation theory as adapted by HoSang to the perspective of how Iranians are racialized from a U.S. standpoint, one finds that examples of blindness, war making, and settler colonialism are ample; after a launch of "War on Terror" and creating a political vacuum in the region, endemic in empowering radical groups such as ISIS, the Obama administration was faced with a threat labeled as "nuclear Iran." While the Obama administration insisted on Iran's tendency to violate human rights, under the pressure of Israeli and Saudi lobbyists, the administration pressed the Iranian government to give up their nuclear exploration. In the face of sanctions' failure, the Obama administration renewed its attempts to open diplomatic negotiations with Iranian representatives. Parallel to this negotiation, a crisis in Syria climaxed with interna-

tional claims of Bashar Assad's genocide against his own people. The United States, a country that has always introduced itself as a watchdog of human rights in the region, with the fear of annoying the Iranian government and consequently losing the opportunity of reaching a diplomatic agreement on the U.S.-Iran nuclear standoff, did not say or do anything about Assad's war crime against his own people. If the clerical regime of Iran is being counted as a foremost supporter of terrorism in the region, then why were diplomatic negotiation prioritized to calamities of Syria? And if the U.S. claims of focusing its attempt on relieving the plight of people living under dictatorship, such as Asad's regime, then why did not a single person in the Obama administration utter a word regarding the Syrian genocide during Iran's negotiation? And why did the International world close its doors to the Syrian refugees who escaped their country as their only viable way of living?

Omi and Winant in their landmark book, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*, argue that racial formation should be understood "as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle."[10] As HoSang builds on their argument to consider war making as a contingent factor that limits U.S. anti-racist practice, one can deduct that the United States' concern has never been the violation of human rights by Islamic states or the so-called development of weapons of mass destruction by its leaders. The issue provoking the most concern and action by the United States has always been who is going to be the hegemonic power in the region and how the geopolitical situation of the U.S. allies is going to be impacted by potential power shifts in the region.[vi] In other words, in order for U.S. allies to safeguard their superior status in the region, the rest of the Muslim nations easily and without offering any explanation can become the new U.S./global nemesis. That is why Iraqi civilians get locked up in Abu Ghraib, Iranians get banned from entering the U.S. and Palestinians are colonized by Israeli army without being allowed to fight back.

[vi]As Daniel Pipes, who was nominated by the president George W Bush for the board of directors of the U.S. Institute of Peace, argues, "Troublemaking by Islamists on U.S. territory pales, however, in comparison to the danger they pose in the Middle East; their seizure of power in just a few cantons there would likely create a new political order in the region, with disastrous consequences. Israel would probably face a return to its unhappy condition of days past, beleaguered by terrorism and surrounded by enemy states. Civil unrest in oil-producing regions could lead to a dramatic run-up in the cost of energy. Rogue states, already numerous in the Middle East(Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya), would multiply, leading to arms races, more international terrorism, and wars, lots of wars." For further reading please refer to *Militant Islam Reaches America* published by W. W. Norton & Company in 2002.

In the context of such a complex political climate in the Middle Eastern region, there are questions needed to be asked including but not limited to: When any resistance of Middle East against imperialist adventurism and warmongering of the West is going to be used as a proof of criminality and barbarity of Muslims, then how the de-colonization of the region is possible? While the photos of naked Iraqi inmates is strategically circulated only for Muslims to internalize their inferiority, what can one do to resist the degeneration and desubjection of his/her/their identity? While there exists a myriad of ways of answering these questions, Alizad proposed one of the most effective when he staged the production of *Mountain Language* with its emphatic display of torture and its role in (re)shaping the Iranians' collective perception of their identity. By restoring faith in its spectators, *Mountain Language* attempts to undo years of de-subjection that Iranians has suffered due to the oxymoronic sociopolitical conditions within and without the country. Thus, in what follows, this chapter first investigates the chain of events leading up to the production of *Mountain Language* at the Molavi Theatre, in Tehran Iran, in October 2016. Further, this chapter explores the performativity of staging torture in de-initiating its audience from the habit of self-regulation.

While this chapter fully acknowledged the problems of documenting a performance piece by referring to Peggy Phelan definition of performance as "representation without reproduction," it offers a two-fold argument: on one hand, this chapter argues that a subversive theatre movement focused on the theme of torture and the misusing of power does exist in Iran and its performativity is quite effective among the audience. On the other hand, it reveals the West's wrong depiction of Muslims as violent and barbaric and devoid of any knowledge and intelligence. Thus, while this chapter addresses the problems of documenting a performance, it argues that, in the context of Muslim resistance movement, such documentation is a necessity as it can become a political means for self-(de) regulation and de-initiation of already ritualized and demarcated brown bodies. Catherin Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* contends, "The body is always conditioned by and responsive to a specific context. Hence, ritualization, as the production of a ritualized agent via the interaction of a body within a structured and structuring environment, always takes place

within a larger and very immediate sociocultural situation."[11] As I argue in the introduction, if the Islamic power structure and Western imperialism have constructed a societal environment within which people unconsciously start to internalize censorship and oppression, the contemporary art movement seeks to deconstruct such an environment and then reconstruct it again. Such a process is possible only by de-initiating audiences from the habit of thinking of oneself as an oppressed and inferior. This is what ritualized bodies do which is producing wholly new conscious bodies capable of passing through the liminal stage and restructuring the world anew.

Mountain Language and Its Plea for Justice

Figure 3.3: *The Police*, Production Photo by Rana Esfandiary, the Black Box theatre of the Film and Theatre Department, Art University of Tehran, Iran, December 12, 2009.

Prior to staging *The Mountain Language*, Alizad had started to think of representing violence as a communicative means for signifying the existence of oppression and censorship within the Middle Eastern countries including Iran. Such a process started with the production of *The Police*, written by Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek in 1958 and adapted by Alizad for its first premier in Iran in 2009. *The Police* narrates the story of the last political prisoner who abandons his opposition to the regime and declares his readiness to join and serve the government and the country's beloved Infant King and his Uncle the Regent. The Chief of Police, while suspicious, accepts the prisoner's redemption and set him free after ten years of interrogation and torture. Upon releasing the last prisoner, the Chief of Police, out of pure boredom, decides to recruit one of his own sergeants to play the role of a democracy-seeking revolutionary. He chooses his most loyal rank, the Police Sergeant who had been tirelessly serving the government and its Infant King. In order

to convince the public of the sergeant's change of heart, the chief of police persuades him to throw a bomb at the General. Manipulated by the Chief of Police and the Generals' aid-de-camp, the Sergeant encounters an identity crisis and by the end of the play he turns into a true rebel and an advocate of freedom.

Daniel Gerould, in *The Mrozek Reader*, contends "[Mrozek's] stories and plays gave audiences a way of laughing both at the regime and at themselves as victims of the system. It was the self-ironic shared laughter of the abused acknowledging their own comical helplessness and loss of dignity in the face of the daily absurdity of their lives."[12] Mrozek's sharp criticism of the false and absurd nature of totalitarianism practiced in his own country as well as the East Europe, attracted the attention of the head of the 84 Theatre Company, Ali Akbar Alizad who in addition to teaching script analysis and playwriting in Art University of Tehran was engaged in theater as a director and dramaturge since 1991. Finding the play an appropriate means for articulating and criticizing the sociopolitical issues of the country, Alizad staged the show for the first time, as part of the 12th International Student Festival, in Tehran, Iran, in May of 2009. "We were a month away from the presidential election and I didn't have any hopes for staging *The Police* due to its highly political nature,"[13] Alizad explains. To his surprise, however, permission was issued by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to mount the show at the festival. "The audiences' feedback was both overwhelmingly thrilling and frightening. They decoded the production in a highly political manner, which was above and beyond my expectations."[14]

The production of *The Police* coincided with the disputed 2009 presidential election in Iran when criticism of Ahmadinejad's administration reached its highest level. Upon declaring Ahmadinejad as the projected winner of the election, supporters of Mir Hussein Moussavi, a candidate who had openly opposed and publicly criticized Ahmadinejad during campaign period, spilled into the streets and requested a recount. The more the regime tried to bring the situation under its control, the more rumors regarding the use of torture and sexual abuse within the juridical system intensified. Fact or fiction, such narratives regarding the existence of torture materialized the hegemonic power of the regime and "becomes part of the public image of the state."[15] Alizad's

production of *The Police* tapped into the sensitive issue of open secrecy of torture and its suppos-edly prevalent use within the judiciary system where prisoners were said to be water boarded or sexually abused only to give a desirable confession. Through re-enactment of torture, e.g., water boarding a political prisoner at the opening of the show and in the bare view of audiences, Alizad sought to problematize the promulgation and the consumption of political violence as a normative approach to regulate the communal behavior of the society. Alizad believed that witnessing such a shockingly open and poignant staging of torture could be an effective means in forcing the com-munity to see itself as a social body; a community that is (secretly) marked by the violence of the hegemonic power and has lost its individual and collective identity.

Figure 3.4: *The Police*, Production Photo by Rana Esfandiary, the Black Box theatre of the Film and Theatre Depart-ment, Art University of Tehran, Iran, December 12, 2009.

Since too many direct displays of torture indicative of promulgating of torture within the society would become costly for Alizad and his company, he astutely incorporated the language of

ritual, e.g. Taziyeh's passion play, as a communicative means to signify "the hidden links between culture and power."[16] Taziyeh is a signature ritual of the month of Muharram and it commemorates the battle of Karbala where Imam Hussein, Prophet Muhammad's grandson, and his seventy-two comrades were brutally slaughtered as they refused to take the oath of allegiance with Yazid, a Sunni caliphate.[vii] As Catherin Bell, in *Ritual Perspective and Dimension*, contends,

> Unlike the Sunni majority, festivals are very important among the Shi'ah, particularly those of Muharram that commemorate the death of Husayn. In shi'i communities in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India, men and women observe this mourning period by wearing dark, unornamented clothing and attending services. Processions of devotees beat their breasts, weeping and wailing, to evoke the sufferings of Husayn and his mother, Fatima. Passion plays (*taziya*) dramatically reenact the Karbala' battle itself with unusual intensity. Indeed, for the Shi'ah such ceremonies of "remembrance and mourning" are thought to atone for one's sins, earn entry into paradise, and ultimately bring about the final rectification of history.[17]

Alizad used the ritual of Taziyeh not only to criticize the misuse of power as a regulatory means but also to historicize the existence of torture practiced by the country's hegemonic powers (especially during Pahlavi and Qajar dynasty and their following regimes) and the West within the Iranians' collective memory for the past 200 years. Through the use of Taziyeh, Alizad staged torture as a practice that "rests on a bed of quotidian ritualizations that utilize physical pain, verbal abuse, humiliation, and abjection, not only to demonstrate but also to inscribe power relations."[18] In order to make this statement grounded, Alizad incorporated various key elements of Taziyeh including its colored symbolism and costume tradition.[viii] For the character of the General, a sexist, brainless, and clownish high rank military individual, Alizad, instead of attiring the actor in a military uniform, chose the traditional Tazieh's red costume. As Alizad contends, "I was looking

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[vii]For Shi'i minority, Karbala is as important as Mecca since it symbolizes the rightful succession of power from Prophet Muhammad to his grandson rather than to a Sunni Caliph. Ta'ziyeh, as Hamid Dabashi in "Tazieyeh as Theatre of Protest," argues, "remembers and reenacts a doomed battle between a small band of revolutionaries and an entrenched and deeply corrupt political power. There is a universality to the battle of Karbala that can easily be extrapolated to include any small band of revolutionaries fighting against any entrenched political power. Ta'ziyeh, in effect, provides revolutionaries across time and space with the opportunity to change the course of history, as it was unjustly determined in the battle of Karbala." For Further reading please refer to *Tazieyeh as Theatre of Protest*, published by *TDR* (1988-) Vol. 49, No. 4.

[viii]Taziyeh is a passion play through which the battle of Karbala is being retold. Simplicity and color symbolism is among its foremost signatures where Hussein and his comrades always wear green and Yazid's army wears red.

for something that could help audiences to immediately recognize the personality of the General as a dictator and ruthless character. I was not able to use contemporary costume since it would become too revealing."[19] Also, during his 2009 presidential campaign, Ahmadinejad had chosen red as his signature campaign color, so, without directly mentioning it, the whole violence and conspiracy embedded in the production of *The Police* was contextualized within the country's political turmoil.

Figure 3.5: *The Police*, Production Photo by Rana Esfandiary, the Black Box theatre of the Film and Theatre Department, Art University of Tehran, Iran, December 12, 2009.

However, glancing over the General's costume made it obvious that the director finally decided to incorporate contemporary elements as he combined the traditional Taziyeh attire with modern props. "I wanted to show that our country had suffered from similar false ideology for at least the past two hundred years. That is why I decided to use Tazieh's costume with modern accessories such as contemporary black military boots or medals."[20] The production of *The Police* was canceled by the Art University administration office only after two performances and Alizad never got the chance to revisit it in the subsequent years.

After *The Police*, Alizad staged *Mountain Language* at Tehran's Molavi Hall, a venue known for its less commercially oriented productions, in May of 2010 and as part of the 13ᵗʰ International University Theatre Festival. *Mountain Language* narrated the story of a group of women waiting outside the state's prison to visit their loved ones. Forbidden to speak their native language, the sergeant reminds the women that their language is dead and that they are obliged to speak the language of the capital. Before letting these women into the prison, by calling their sons, husbands, and fathers 'shithouses,' the Sergeant and the Officer keep abusing the women sexually, physically, and mentally. While inside the prison, an old mother who does not know the language of the capital, thrilled by seeing her son, starts to speak with him in their forbidden language. The guards, furious by her disobedience, beat and kill the mother and the son both.

In order to simulate the Iranian society's turmoil after the 2009 presidential election on the stage, "Alizad's production [opened] with a group of women dressed in black, each carrying an umbrella, walking at snail's pace to reach the prison walls where they wait in silence to visit their sons, brother, fathers, and husbands."[21] The scene was a reminder of May 17ᵗʰ, 2010, when the families of the political prisoners gathered outside of the Evin prison, located on the northwestern of Tehran, and signed a statement asserting,

> For years we believed that the judiciary system is a place where the oppressed can turn to for justice and where the ruthless are brought to justice. However, with the passing of time, our disappointments in the judiciary system have risen and now our only hope and refuge is in God.[22]

The image of women in black repeated itself at the conclusion of *Mountain Language* where Alizad choreographed them to gather around the son's and the mother's bloody bodies and to lift their heads slowly and to face the audience directly until the lights gradually fades out.[23] The lasting image of women staring at the audience could potentially be interpreted as a necessity of acknowledging and addressing the existence of torture and its effect in regulating the society and the community's collective identity.

The 2010 staging of *Mountain Language* was limited to only few performances within the International University Theatre Festival. A six-year gap was the break that Alizad took before

going back to *Mountain Language* as he thought the timing in 2016 was suitable for re-staging the play and depicting the violence, torture, and terror enmeshed with and intensified in Iranians' psyches.

Figure 3.6: *Mountain Language*, Production Photo courtesy of Iran Theatre Website, Molavi Theatre, Tehran, Iran, October, 2016.

For the second staging of *Mountain Language* in October of 2016, Alizad coupled Pinter's play with the third episode of Martine Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, "Faith in ourselves," only to emphasize the peculiar relationship between language, (in)audibility, and power hierarchy within the society. While choosing the works of notable European playwrights such as Crimp and Pinter could potentially contradict and undermine Alizad's intention in criticizing the political violence imposed on Iranians from within and without the country, not overtly political nature of these plays assisted him to surmount the difficulty of obtaining permission and escaping further censorship for staging his production. In order to fully realize his concept within these plays, Alizad utilized a directing style that he had developed during the rehearsals of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, staged at Tehran's Entezami Theatre in 2013. Regarding his directing style as Alizad explained himself,

We would start rehearsing a scene by a cold reading from the text. Then the process of

realizing and visualizing the scene through images would start. We narrated the scene with bodies, facial expressions, movements, and gestures. We would keep repeating the process many times until I could ensure that the silent images were capable of narrating the story without the need for words.[24]

It was only after ensuring a visual effectiveness for each scene that Alizad would start adding dialogue to his work. For building visually and compositionally appealing scenes during the *Mountain Language* rehearsal process, Alizad centered his inspiration on German paintings, particularly those etching by Käthe Kollwitz.[ix] By doing so, Alizad attempted to aestheticize the culture of torture and stage it as a series of appealing moments. As Tobin Siebers, in *The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age*, argues:

> However, trauma art pushes these insights one step further by insisting that violence is readable increasingly as a signifier not only of culture but of aesthetic culture. The aesthetic representation of violence replays the idea of culture with an added dimension, serving both as the principal sign of the "cultural" and as a way of transforming what "culture" means.[25]

[ix]A technique in printmaking which is etching on the surface of a metal sensitive to acid.

Figure 3.7: *Mountain Language*, photographer unknown, Production Photo courtesy of Alizad Molavi Theatre, Tehran, Iran, October, 2016.

In his interview with *Tasnim News*, the Iranian online news agency, Alizad contends, "Today is not a time to talk about politics with irony; there is no irony in politics, not anymore."[26] Following such an ideology, the re-enactment of torture and violence in *Mountain Language* turns into a strategic means to foreground the political statement of the production which was/is the imbalanced power relation between the oppressor and the oppressed. From the opening moment, *Mountain Language* exhibits a raw display of torture. One example includes a long display of a prisoner being beaten by guards while one of the guards sips from a jar of blood and then spits it back in the face of a young male inmate. Herein, torture is re-enacted not only as an assault on individuals but also as a disciplinary tool against the society. As William T. Cavanaugh, in *Torture And Eucharist, Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, argues:

> Torture does not uncover and penalize a certain type of discourse rather creates a discourse of its own and uses it to realize the states' claim to power over the bodies of its citizen. Torture plays out the dream of a certain kind of state, the production of a type of power/knowledge which I will call the *imagination* of state. To speak of imagination is not, of course, to imply that state power is "merely imaginary," a disembodied thought. The imagination of the state has a tremendous power to discipline bodies, to habituate them and script them into a drama of its own making.[27]

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Figure 3.8: *Mountain Language*, photographer unknown, Molavi Theatre, Tehran, Iran, October, 2016.

In Alizad's *Mountain Language*, the power dynamic between the torturers and the tortured is also foregrounded by the use of language/silence, audibility/inaudibility, and mobility/immobility. As Alizad argues in his interview, "Language becomes a political means for indicating the amount of power and privilege that each character is entitled to have in a society."[28] In *Mountain Language*, while those women capable of only speaking in their forbidden language are dressed in dark colors and are immobile, the young woman knowing the language of capital is attired in red and empowered to move freely across the stage. In one instance, the young woman, sensing the fear and lack of courage for action by other visitors, approaches one of the officers and introduces herself and her husband as intellectuals. The Officer, upon examining their papers, informs the sergeant:

He doesn't come from the mountain. He's in the wrong batch.

Sergeant: So is she. She looks like a fucking intellectual to me.

Officer: But you said her arse wobbled.

Sergeant: Intellectual arses wobble the best.[29]

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After this exchange, the Officer slaps the young woman which not only silences her but also limits her range of movements and mobility. As Alizad asserts, "language, in *Mountain Language*, contains everything that is regarded as taboo in the sociopolitical context of the country. In such society, any alternative language is banned, subjectivity is banned, freedom and mobility is restricted, and bodies are regulated."[30] In such an environment those incapable of adjusting themselves to the rules and regulation of the capital, would become the subject of torture and physical pain. And as William T. Cavanaugh contends, "Those in great pain are reduced to inarticulate screams and moans, or words which convey little of the actual experience of pain ("throbbing," "stabbing," burning")."[31] Either the tortured/the outcast will conform or his/her/their moans will mirror the torturer's absolute superiority. That is why in Alizad's production, those who are tortured scream silently and fall quietly. They refuse to lend their individual and collective voices to the megaphones of power structure that amplifies the pain of the tortured for disciplining the rest.

Thinking of torture as a tool capable of restructuring the identity of its victim, individual or communal, can be considered as an initiation process where the wounds, pains, and marks on the tortured bodies materialize itself in establishing a new understanding of power hierarchy and its absolute superiority over its masses.[x] Herein, the practice/existence of torture acts as a rite of passage where imaginary concepts such as State's power get transformed from "physical inevitabilities into cultural regularities."[32] With such a conceptualization, torture can be defined as part of ritual family where ritual is defined as an action, "[dramatizing] the collective ideas by which a given community imagines its communal status, because rituals give these ideas material form."[33] If torture is considered as a ritualistic act, staging violence in a formalized manner and within a specific time-space context, then displaying it on stage of a theatre can be looked upon as a revered ritual/rite of passage aiming to de-initiate spectators into conscious states of (dis)obedience characterized by not total submission and not-not total freedom. Therefore, the production of

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[x]William T. Cavanaugh theorizes torture as a kind of "perverted liturgy, a ritual act which organize bodies in the society into a collective performance, not of true community, but of an atomized aggregate of mutually suspicious individuals. Just as liturgy is not a merely "spiritual" formation which then must be applied to the physical world, torture is not a merely physical assault on bodies but a formation of a social imagination. To speak of the imagination does not imply unreal fantasy. As I use the term, the "social imagination" of a group is that vision which organizes the members into a set of coherent performances, and which is constantly reconstructed by those performances."

Mountain Language constructs a liminal space, where the spectators witness the sociopolitical dimension of practicing torture and its effects in altering their self-understanding of their individual and communal characters.[xi]

While the *Mountain Language* turns the display of ritualized torture into a reversed rite of passage for its spectators inside the country, its performativity is quite different for those who read and document the work from the outside. In one of the scenes, while a brutal torturing act is being unfolded in the background, one of the officers starts to sing *Perfect Day* by Lou Reed in the foreground:

[xi]Victor Turner in his book, *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*, defines liminal stage as a "mode of redress, which always contained at least the germ of self-reflexivity, a public way of assessing our social behavior has moved out of the domains of law and religion into those of the various arts. By means of such genres as theatre, including puppetry and shadow theatre, dance drama, and professional story-telling, performances are presented which probe a community's weakness, call its leaders to account, desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stick of its current situation in the known "world."

Figure 3.9: *Mountain Language*, photographer unknown, Molavi Theatre, Tehran, Iran, October, 2016.

Just a perfect day

Feed animals in the zoo

Then later

A movie, too, and then home

Just a perfect day

You made me forget myself

I thought I was

Someone else, someone good [34]

It is almost inevitable to be a Muslim spectator/reader, looking at this photo and listening to the song, and not to think of Abu Ghraib where torturing the Iraqi inmates turned into a racist porno-graphic photo-shoot session by a handful of American soldiers. The sexualized nature of the tortures was in fact an extra racial tool utilized by American soldiers to reiterate the stereotypes

associated with Muslims and their supposedly homophobic attitude. According to the testimonies of one of the witnesses, Specialist Matthew Wisdom, on April 9th 2004, after delivering seven hooded and handcuffed Iraqi inmates to Abu Ghraib, "saw two naked detainees, one masturbating to another kneeling with its mouth open."[35] He then continues, "I thought I should just get out of there. I didn't think it was right… I saw SSG Fredrick walking towards me and he said, "Look what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds." I heard PFC England shout out, "He's getting hard.""[36] In Abu Ghraib incident, unknown bodies of tortured Iraqis' inmates are displayed to construct the image of America as the single most powerful First World country. There is no shame in making public the private torture of Iraqis inmates. No matter how brutal and crude the images are the afterimage burnt into the individual and the collective Muslim psyches are among the desired outcomes. As Werner Binder et al. argues, "At Abu Ghraib it was not only a gesture of domination dividing torturer from victims, but also a display of power, first of all to the torturers themselves, and secondarily to a generalized audience embodied in the camera."[37]

In *Mountain Language* the procession of torture, while a delightful song such as *Perfect Day* is sung, turns into a sadistic comedy serving many goals except obtaining information necessary for maintaining the safety of the State and its citizens. As this chapter argues, it is of a paramount importance that productions such as *Mountain Language* get documented and circulated not only because of their subversive natures, within their immediate geopolitical context, but also because of their capabilities in addressing the atrocities done by First World powers under the justification of spreading freedom and democracy among the so-called less civilized nations of the Middle Eastern region. Herein, *Mountain Language*, in the hands of Alizad's, becomes an example of *strategic acts of repair* through which the long history of inferiority of Iranians citizens, within and without their country, gets bluntly exposed and challenged. In addition, the production, through its redressive modes, encourages its spectators to de-initiate themselves from the constant state of fear only to get empowered to imagine a different and maybe a brighter future for their country. However, as Alizad rightly puts it, "optimism for future should be caused by and contextualized within the consciousness from the past. Otherwise, hopelessness is better than a naïve and void

optimism."[38]

ENDNOTES

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[23] Torange Yeghiazarian, "Dramatic Defiance in Tehran," *The Drama Review* Vol. 56:1 (T213) (Spring 2012): 89, accessed October, 2014.

[24] Ibid

[25] Tobin Siebers, "The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 5 no. 1 (December 2003), P 13. `http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.1/siebers.pdf`

[26] Tasmin News.com, Interview with Alizad on November 15, 2016, posted online at 10:14 am. `https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/08/25/1231272/`

[27] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture And Eucharist, Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (UK Blackwell Publishers, 1998), P 31.

[28] Tasmin News.com, Interview with Alizad on November 15, 2016, posted online at 10:14 am. `https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/08/25/1231272/`

[29] Harold Pinter, *Mountain Language* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), P 25.

[30] Tasmin News.com, Interview with Alizad on November 15, 2016, posted online at 10:14 am. `https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/08/25/1231272/`

[31] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture And Eucharist, Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (UK Blackwell Publishers, 1998), P 34.

[32] Catherin Bell, *Ritual Perspective and Dimension* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1992), P 94.

[33]   Tobin Siebers, "The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 5 no. 1 (December 2003), P 16. `http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.1/siebers.pdf`

[34]   Lou Reed, "Perfect Day," recorded August 1972, released November 1972, track 3 on *Transformer*, London. Compact disc.

[35]   Seymour M. Hersh *Chain of Command, The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), P 24.

[36]   Ibid

[37]   Werner Binder, Tom F. Drive, and Barry Stephenson, "What's at Stake in Torture," in *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*, ed. Ronald Grimes, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), P 230.

[38]   Tasmin News.com, Interview with Alizad on November 15, 2016, posted online at 10:14 am. `https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/08/25/1231272/`

Chapter 4

"She's Red & Black, Circling Round, I Jumped So Hard, I Died, There, She Was"[i]
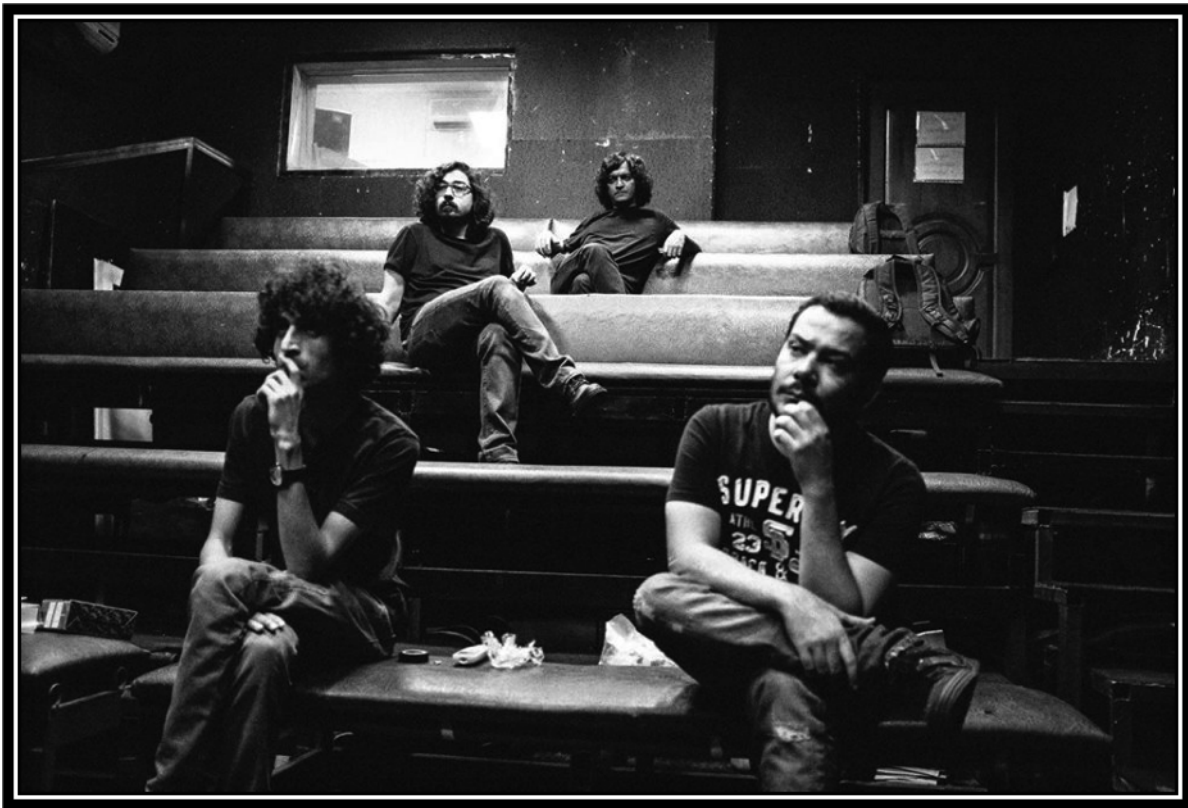
Figure 4.1: SET Experimental Art Event, Photographer Unknown, Published on Facebook on May 1, 2016.

"Media represents us [Iranian musicians] as either runaway rock stars or oppressed rap singers. There are so many things in between that we can be, so, why are we deprived of them?"[1] Asserted Siavash Amini, an electronic musician and a member/organizer of SET Experimental Art Events

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[i]This is the title of Nima Pourkarimi's track, released on October 26, 2016 on SoundCloud. For listening his track please visit `https://soundcloud.com/umchunga`

in Tehran, who through his music, has been protesting the stereotypes associated with Iranians.[ii]
Surprisingly so, Amini is not alone; an ever-growing list of musicians, chief notable among them
Nima Pourkarimi[iii] (aka Umchunga), Atta Ebtekar[iv] (aka Sote), Hesam Ohadi[v] (aka Idelfon), and
Shahin Entezami[vi] (aka Tegh), share and pursue such an objective of reconfiguring the image of
Iranian identity through sonic space too.

Considering music as a multimodal discourse for thinking about race, identity, and nationality,
within the contexts of cultural hegemony and market demands, is not a radically new idea. However, exploring dissident Iranian music as a site capable of examining Iran's critical positionality
in the nexus of West/East (or West and the rest[vii]), can lead into interesting and somewhat para-
doxical discussions. The electronic music movement in Iran has built an inclusive platform where
musicians with different backgrounds and nationalities are welcomed to experiment and contribute
to the growth and progress of the community. With doing so, this movement has turned music into
a mobile space where cultural encounter can occur; a neutral sonic space where the biased percep-
tions and assumptions towards one's cultural belonging and political history, can supposedly be
surmounted or at least not foregrounded. Such sonic space, at its core, attempts to bring together
artists from different ethnicities and nationalities only to (re)form and probe the presupposed ideas
imposed on one's cultural identity. As Josh Kun, in *Audiotopia, Music, Race, and America*, argues,
music can be considered as an audiotopia where "[it] functions like a possible utopia for the lis-
tener, that music is experienced not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our

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[ii]Based on their website, SET Experimental Art Events "is an artist run festival founded in 2015 with a specific focus on experimental music and audio-visual performances. Its main event is the yearly SetFest which incorporates lectures, workshops and performances. Additionally SET organizes smaller events throughout the year. The festival's main emphasis is on certain styles of audio visual acts which cannot be contained by the regular boundaries of mainstream music and art." For Further reading please visit `http://setfest.org/about/`

[iii]For listening to Nima Pourkarimi (aka Umchunga) music and reading about his works visit `https://www.facebook.com/Umchunga/` and `https://soundcloud.com/umchunga`

[iv]For listening to Atta Ebtekar (aka Sote) music and reading about his works visit `https://www.facebook.com/ata.sote.ebtekar/`

[v]For listening to Hesam Ohadi (aka Idelfon) music and reading about his works visit `https://soundcloud.com/idlefon`

[vi]For listening to Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh) music and reading about his works visit `https://soundcloud.com/tegh`

[vii]Bavand Behpoor, in "No Belief, No Homeland," concisely notes, "It seems as we can no longer talk of the East and the West, but the West and the rest. For further visit `http://www.behpoor.com/?p=773#more-773`.

bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from."[2]

The inclusivity of this movement is a strategic shift towards resisting an Iranian mainstream culture which according to Amini, the de facto spokesperson of the movement, "rejects whatever that challenges its norms."[3] The mainstream culture, with a strong gravitation towards pop and folklore music,[viii] excludes all other styles that stand outside its perception of desirable/marketable/permissible musical product. Such selectivity of the mainstream market pushes the alternative musicians to either assimilate into the existing system or to isolate themselves further by finding alternative/unofficial ways for producing and distributing their works. Within such a system, the institutionalized cultural strategies are applied to identify those eligible for inclusion and those condemned living at the margins. The power structure pursues this radical bifurcation as a regulatory means through which, without applying any direct excessive force, the standards of good citizenship, and by extension, the right of accessibility is implicated, practiced, and reified. Thus, by probing the dominance of music styles such as folklore and pop, distributed widely by official and domestic labels, this chapter asks how does the electronic music movement resists the assimilatory pressures only to exercise different/possible modes of expression, recognition, citizenship and senses of belonging? I argue these artists, by building a dynamic and inclusive community, turn their music into a means by which individual as well as collective identities can be imagined from different perspectives. Therefore, their music stands against the government's exclusion of different artistic expressions that represent ideas outside what's considered permissible by the Islamic Ministry of Culture. Atta Ebtekar (aka Sote), an Iranian electronic musician who recently moved back to Iran after years of living and working as a DJ in Los Angeles, believes, "the movement's resistance has been effective in relaxing government's control over the music industry."[4] The music by these electronic musicians penetrates the auditory space of the state's

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[viii]As Wendy Debano in "Singing against Silence: Celebrating Women and Music at the Fourth Jasmine Festival" contends, "After 1997, significant policy changes occurred. For instance, certain kinds of Iranian pop music were legalised and, within specific parameters of style, performance and lyrics, a number of local pop musicians (mainly men) have emerged." For further reading please refer to *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, edited by Laudan Nooshin.

approved music to reconfigure the boundaries and limitations of the official domain alongside of its cultural hegemony. As Josh Kun contends, "we should be thinking of music in terms of the differences it contains, the differences it makes audible, not the unities or harmonies it can be used to fabricate."[5]

While the nontraditional form of the electronic music movement in Iran promotes and mobilizes the emancipatory hopes for reconfiguring the cultural domain, the appeal of this movement to the Western world can become somewhat problematic. Amini, in his interview with CTM, Festival for Adventurous Music and Art, in Berlin argues,[ix] "Label situation in Iran is pretty awful... they reject us and push us towards outside sources where, due to the international sanctions, we must pay a lot of money to get those labels to record and market our works."[6] The distribution of these musicians' records by international labels within diasporic scenes, such as England, has a twofold effect; on one hand, due to the Westernized style of the works produced within the movement, the common idea of exoticizing oneself with the hope of higher sales and visibility in the global market become erroneous. The exoticizing trend started mostly with Shirin Neshat who turned cultural specific objects such as chador and Iranian calligraphy to marketable goods within Western countries. Such a trend was applied to music where Iranian artists employed traditional instrumentations as exotic point of entry into the Western sonic space. Regarding the Iranian electronic musicians, there is nothing authentically "Persian" about their works; these musicians refuse to utilize traditional Iranian instruments and do not consider the sound of these instruments a projection of themselves as (freelance) electronic musicians. On the other hand, despite their refusal to implement marketable "Persian" features as the guarantor of immediate visibility, these Iranian musicians continue to receive impressive international attention. It is difficult to believe that such an outside attention/visibility is solely associated with the technical and artistic abilities of these musicians while the tagline of their international promotion is the acknowledgment of their imposed marginalization within Iran. For instance, the digital magazine, *A Closer Listen*, in its review of Amini's latest track release, entitled *TAR*, writes

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[ix]Throughout his interview with CTM, Amini spoke in English, which is not his native language. The Iranian's native language is Farsi and English and Arabic is taught in schools as second and third language.

Are we afraid because our society is afraid? Are our fears affecting others? Is this a closed loop? Today I went to the local deli, whose television is always on, repeating the same news every 20 minutes. A motorist had just driven into a group of people. "It's a terror attack!" a customer said, *going table to table to emphasize his point*. I just wanted a tuna sandwich, but I felt compelled to say, "it just looks like a terrible accident." *"No, it's not"*, he insisted, *smiling*, before heading into the parking lot to tell others.[7]

By forcing the readers to question their source of fear, the review continues, "So here's this album *TAR*. A dark album, to be sure, but not without its points of light. Iran has had its share of upheaval in recent years. Siavash Amini has continued to make art in the midst of chaos. In a way, even his darkness seems like light, should one approach his music in this manner. From another angle, we have a choice. *I choose to hear the strings*."[8] Thus, the value of Amini's work is more contextualized within the political climate of Iran, as a country struggling with dissension and revolt, rather than the artist's technical authenticity.

The politically charged attention of the international agencies to the electronic music movement in Iran is not only endemic in reification of the stereotypes associated with fundamentality, barbarity, and militarism of Iran's clerical regime but also is an effective economical factor used by the capitalistic market eager to sell everything at the cost of complete neutralization of the product's core objectives. As John Hutnyk, in *Critique of Exotica, Music, Politics and the Culture Industry*, contends "Nowadays, culture is valorised as a site of struggle, where, in the accounting processes of the public domain, the mere fact of appearance counts as a politics."[9] He then continues,

> I want to carefully acknowledge that visibility does matter in a context where exclusion from resources and opportunities is much more than an absent-minded and myopic blindness of the dominant cultural groups, to be repaired by policy. But it is also my argument that visibility here is only part one of a struggle, as state-sponsored celebration of increased visibilities for hitherto 'marginal' groups can readily be turned to market opportunism.[10]

Thus, it is imperative to think about the causality of the Western labels' intention in investing their resources in the music produced by marginalized and unacknowledged Iranian musicians beyond the claims of hybridity, praises of beauty, and humanitarian missions. Is this attention and investment bestowed as a refurbished way of reifying the First World's supremacy within

the "less civilized" parts of the world or is it genuinely a means for providing an inclusive and visible platform for marginalized non-white artists on a global level? And how such a platform can potentially disassociate itself from the (old) Orient/Occident bifurcation where the former is constantly being (mis)used as a promotional code for the civility of the latter? As John Hutnyk puts it, "It could be argued that this is an import of an older anthropological attitude that continues to work within a paradigm that considers the rest of the world as the site of documentary difference and fantasy, and has merely replicated this in conditions of transmigration."[11] Thus, the invitation to join the "global" dialogue on the topic of electronic music can become another means to fade the Other's (colonized) experience of the past; a means to push the Other towards relinquishing its past and "[forgetting] colonial violence, white supremacy and systematic exploitation and oppression [since] hybridity saves."[12]

During their 2017 panel discussion in Berlin, Shadi Bigdeli Shamloo (a member of 9T Antiope due), Siavash Amini, and Atta Ebrekar all proposed and shared a concern of being politically hijacked by Western outlets and labels.[x] The very existence of "underground" art scene in Iran, as Amini believes, has become the most accessible means for those who seek asylum and right of citizenship in Western countries.[xi] Most notable example among musicians who left Iran within

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[x]As Explained on their Facebook page, "The 9T Antiope duo band consists of Iranian musicians Nima Aghiani and Sara Bigdeli Shamloo. The band formed in 2014 alongside the Migrain Sq. trio band, which also includes Pouya Pour-Amin and has existed since 2002. Working since 2014 with this new band, their albums include "Syzygys" (December 2015 by "Unperceived Records"), "Brobdingnagian" (July 2016 by "Flaming Pines" (UK) as part of its "Tiny Portraits" project), their single track "Venator" featured in "Absence" compilation, (February 2016 by "Flaming Pines", alongside a number of other Iranian Electronic/Experimental artists). They have a self-released Ep "Of Murk and Shallow Water" which came out on January 2017, and also their latest album "Isthmus" was released on March 2017 by "Eilean Records" (France). The main focus of the band is on experimental music, using layers of acoustic instruments, electronics and combining them with vocals and lyrics, in order to narrate tiny bits or huge landscapes of the chaotic worlds they vision, along with their inhabitants." For further reading please visit: `www.facebook.com/pg/9TAntiope/about/?ref=page_internal`

[xi]Shahram Khosravi, in *Young and Defiant in Iran*, explores the meaning and geology of the formation of underground movement in Iran. As he argues, "Zi[r] zamin means both "basement" and "underground" in Persian. The basement in Tehran is another place/space for cultural defiance. A remarkable activity in Tehran basements is rock. There are numerous rock groups that are "both metaphorically and physically underground" (Nooshin 2005: 464). There is also an online music magazine called Zirzamin (underground), which is a forum for the new wave of Iranian underground musicians. Started in early 2006, Zirzamin aims to be a connection between different bands that otherwise have no contact with each other. The editor of Zirzamin , himself a rock musician based nowadays in Sweden, believes that there are nearly a hundred active underground bands in Tehran. 7 The number includes also other illicit music styles such as Heavy Metal, Rap, Techno, Reggae, and Alter- native. By summer 2006, ten albums had been distributed through underground channels. O-Hum and Kiosk have released their albums outside Iran. Others who lack capital to give out albums inside the country or contacts in the Iranian diaspora put their music on their homepages.

the past decade is Mohsen Namjoo, a current Artist in Residence at Brown University, who took advantage of his trial in absentia back home to file his request for political asylum in the United States.[xii] Amini then continues, "Some of the musicians who make "intellectual" music which, is a mix of Persian instrumentations and poetry with Jazz and Rock move abroad and do one interview with BBC and VOA (Voice of America), then, apply for political asylum. We are absolutely against that."[13] The issue is more complicated than what Amini asserts as a critique to those who seek asylum in diaspora. In such cases, and in the context of West/East dualistic relationship, those who "produce intellectual music" and those who are like Amini, are both actually being used as a means of reification of the hegemonic power, superiority, and civility of the Western culture. Whether it is Iranian musicians in diaspora who mix Persian instrumentation with Western ones to show their assimilatory desire to the host(ile) culture, or it is artists like Amini who from inside Iran collaborate with Western poets and musicians, they all attract the same politically charged international attention. In both cases, the flirtation with the West becomes a new mode of inclusion for those who lack the feeling of rootedness in and belonging to their own original community.

The history of cultural evolution in Iran also plays a bold role in the younger generation of artists' gravitation towards the West. Before the Islamic revolution, and during the Pahlavi's dynasty, organizing glamorous pop concerts and art festivals was a key feature in the modernization of the country. These events ranged from the Pahlavi regime's extravaganza of pop concerts led by domestic singers to inviting renowned international musicians such as John Cage to the *Shiraz Art*

Music styles like Pop and ethnic are more fortunate than rock. Since the late 1990s and after a wave of liberalizations in the field of youth culture, rock musicians are still "underground." I met Kian, one of the most celebrated bassists among rock fans in Tehran, in a coffee shop in Tehran in August 2006. Rock cannot be overground because of its rebellious nature. Many rock bands do not want to be overground in order to avoid compromising their music with Ministry of Culture. Under the ground you play what your heart wants, but over the ground there are rules, basijis , and like this. They bully us not only for the music we play but for everything. Our hair, clothes or something else. It is amazing to see how so many bands worked hard "underground" to create an Iranian rock, perhaps for the first time in Iran. Kian says: We have never had rock here. What they called rock before the Revolution was a copy of bad Western music. There were one or two exceptions like Farhad and Fereydoun Foroughi. But nothing more. Now in Tehran basements you can hear a rock music which is Iranian. Its lyric, its tune, come from Tehran not from Los Angeles." Thus, underground has become a strategic means for Iranian musicians to mark their invisibility/inaudibility.

[xii]"Yarom Bia" is an example of Namjoo's work, a music video that he produced through collaborating by a well known underground rock band Kiosk. For viewing the music video please visit: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFRworsIhW4`

Festival.[xiii] By turning the country into a market for western commodities, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who reigned from 1941 to 1979, paralyzed the domestic businesses, eliminated the middle class, and divided the country into lower and upper social strata. His attempts to westernize the country was firmly supported by the then American President, Lyndon B. Johnson, who In 1964 said "What is going on in Iran, is about the best thing going on anywhere in the world,"[14] and his ambassador to Tehran chimed in "The Shah (Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi) is making Iran (a) showcase of modernization in this part of the world.""[15] Due to a such fast modernization process, the cultural and sociopolitical discourses of the country were widely divided. As a result, various oppositional groups including socialists, liberal-nationalists, students, elites, and clerical leaders started to criticize the Pahlavi's Western-biased cultural and political agendas. By referring to the West as the 'Other,' these oppositional groups believed that such a westoxicated transformation was designed to put an end to the authentic Iranian culture and its political and economic sovereignty in the Middle East. These dissident voices accentuated the authenticity of the Middle Eastern identity and "warned Asian intellectuals to safeguard their cultural identity, ethnic memories and heritage in the face of the intellectuals' assault of Western thought."[16] Though determined to bring about changes, the various oppositional movements lacked the presence of a charismatic leader, capable of uniting and coordinating an impactful movement. "Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, who had previously challenged the Shah's authority and was thus exiled to Turkey and Iraq, provided the missing link."[17] As Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, in *Iran Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, argue, "In a patrimonial political culture such as Iran's, charismatic patriarchal authorities are usually welcomed and emerge as lightning rods of socio-political mobilization."[18] By constructing a strong political culture, Khomeini united all the social classes and oppositional voices within an Islamic movement and toppled the Pahlavi regime in 1979.

After the revolution, by dismantling the populism that had aided the clerical leaders to mobilize the masses, myriad restrictions were enforced on the cultural domain of the country. These restrictions were imposed under the justification of cleansing the country from the illicit monar-

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[xiii]The Shiraz Art Festival was an annual event held in Shiraz by Pahlavi regime from 1967 to 1977 as a way of bringing East and West together.

chical and westoxicated influences. Within the span of few years, Iran's cultural scene went from hosting artists such as Cage, Robert Wilson, and Peter Brook, individuals who symbolized the highest degree of cultivation, aesthetic taste, and intellectualism for Pahlavi monarchy, to a total shut down where for instance any tapes of Western music had to be deconstructed and hidden in pairs of socks to be imported into the country by individual travelers. Such radical reconfiguration of the country's cultural space, particularly within the sonic realm, became a means by which Iranian people realized the gravity of their evolving national identity both inside and outside the country.

In the realm of music, the total monopoly over the popular and folkloric music scene, its permissibility and distribution became a means of exercising power and sovereignty by the Islamic regime. The critique of such a strong governmental grip was initially manifested in the visual art discourse and through the works of artists such as Newsha Tavakolian and Shirin Neshat. Shirin Neshat who was born in 1957 in Qazvin, left the country after the revolution and moved to the United States where she started to study fine arts. In 1990 and upon her visit to Iran, Neshat was surprised and perplexed by the radically changed and Islamicized cultural and political discourses of the country. After witnessing the brutal restrictions imposed on Iranian women in public places, Neshat created one of her best-known photo collections, *Women of Allah* (1993-97). Photographing Iranian women covered with veils and Farsi words and embellished with weapon-shaped jewelries, Neshat "Challenged the perceptions of Iran's social, cultural and religious codes by depicting militant Muslim women in whom she infuses the idea of martyrdom."[19] After *Women of Allah*, Neshat started to experiment with the medium of video installation and the issue of impermissibility of women singing in public to an audience of all genders.[xiv] The result of her critique was *Turbulent* which was a split-screen video art piece depicting male and female performers singing one of the traditional Iranian hymns on a public stage. While the male performance is witnessed and applauded by a crowded audience, the female singer performs in front of an empty house.

[xiv]Still to this date, the appearance of women on public television while playing a musical instrumental or their attendance to a public concert as a lead singer has remained a highly contested area. Judicial punishment can be pursued if a woman sings in a public setting without acquiring a necessary permission.

By limiting the female performance to kind of a private gig, Neshat capitalizes on the issues associated with dichotomies such as man/woman, permissible/ impermissibility, and public/private endemic in clerical regime ideology and manifested most obviously within the contested discourse of music.[xv]

Another artist is Newsha Tavakolian who also in her series titled "Listen" criticizes the impermissibility of displaying (female) singers.

[xv]Although Neshat's commentary on the condition of Muslim women in Middle Eastern countries is important, the appeal of her works within the Western mainstream culture is problematic and more aligned with the stereotyped perception of the Muslim identity. Incorporating marketable objects such as chador and Persian calligraphy aides Neshat to identify herself as an exotic female artist based in diaspora. Her works prove the essential outlook of the "Occident" towards the "Orient" and at its core bears the idea of backwardness, barbarism, and traditionalism of the Middle Eastern nations. Though the rhetoric of the black/white racial binary of the Occidental world in general and the United States in particular is designed towards eliminating the existence of the people of color, such depiction of the Middle Eastern culture works in favor of what Andrea Smith, in "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy," labels as the policy of "orientalism, which anchors war." The logic of orientalism functions based on the idea of the West identifying itself as the superior nation to the exotic and inferior Oriental people. Logic of this pillar, Smith believes, is the United States' desire for war with colored immigrants, most notably Iranians and Arabs, identified as strong enough nations to pose a serious threat to them. As Sherene H. Razack argues "Regarded as inherently fanatical and prone to violence, the figure of the Muslim/Arab shows that the strictly biological basis of race is accompanied by the notion that "the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics of which skin color and other physical attributes provide only the most obvious, and in some respect the lost superficial indicators." Thus, while Neshat depicts and problematizes the violence imposed on Muslim women in the Middle Eastern countries, she reifies the biased post 9/11 racial ideology of the Occidental world towards Islam. Such commentary within the field of visual art on the topic of Islamic domination over the practice of music is not new. For further reading on Andrea Smith and Razack's arguments please refer to *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Daniel Martinez Hosang.
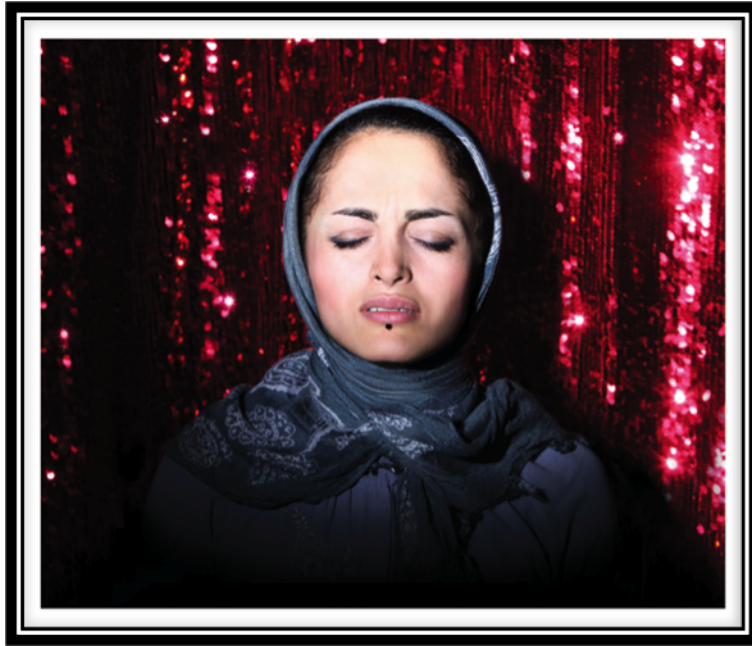
Figure 4.2: Newsha Tavakolian, *Maral Afsharian* from the series "Listen," 2010; Pigment print photograph, 23 5/8 x 31 1/2 in.; Courtesy of the artist and East Wing Contemporary Gallery, Photo downloaded from the National Muesum of Women in the Arts, "She Who Tells a Story" Exhibition.

As Tavakolian contends,

> The project 'Listen' focuses on women singers who are not allowed to perform solo or produce their own CDs due to Islamic regulations in effect since the 1979 revolution. The photos are taken of the professional women singers performing in their mind in front of a large audience, where in reality this was taking place in a small private studio in downtown Tehran. Subsequently, in my mind I made a dream CD cover for each of the women, which was my own interpretation of the society I live in and experience. However, the CD cases will for now remain empty.[20]

Jasmin, a music festival organized exclusively for female musicians and audiences, was the direct outcome of the rising domestic and international pressure on the regime's total clamped down on the country's sonic space. As Wendy S. DeBano, in "Singing against Silence: Celebrating Women and Music at the Fourth Jasmine Festival," describes

> The Jasmine Festival (Jashnvāreh-ye Gol-e Yās) is a weeklong festival of women's music that began in 1999, one of the first national festivals of women's music in Iran. The festival, which features art and folk musics, is held annually at one of Tehran's most prestigious concert halls, the Tālār-e Vahdat, and is timed to coincide with the birthday of Fatemeh, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammad and wife of the first Shi'eh Imam, Ali. Open only to female performers and audiences, this event is a

unique occasion on which women, performing for and with other women, work to negotiate complex government policies and changing social views regarding women, music and performance.[21]

While within the context of these artworks, music was depicted as a contested area with limited, and sometimes mutated, visibility for its agents, alternative rock, pop, and metal movements started to form an underground space, offering audibility at the cost of no visibility and thus reversing the resistance process. Absence from the public realm bestowed a critical performativity and political audibility to these movements necessary to challenge the regime's domination over the sonic space. The result of the subversive presence of the underground space was to issue permissibility for the pop music during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist Shia theologian who was elected in 1997 as the fifth president of Iran. As the former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Khatami was a cleric known for his tolerance, opposition to censorship, and modern outlook towards Islam. During his campaign, by prioritizing issues such as ""political development," "civil society" and "rule of law," Khatami glorified the role that students, youth, and women play in the future development of the nation."[22] Khatami aptly realized that ignoring the "third generation" and their needs would be a big mistake in reconfiguring the cultural and political discourses of the country.[xvi] Particularly with the rising rate of literacy in Iran from "49 percent in 1980 to about 70 percent in 1995,"[23] and the rising number of students to over 19 million in 1997, continuing the same old policies would become very costly for the newly elected reformist administration.[24] Khatami's moderate, optimistic, and "democratic" Islamic ideology assisted him to win the votes of a large body of young voters who were fed up with the state's restrictions.

[xvi]Shahram Khosravi, in *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, provides a genealogy of Iranian generation by contending, The First Generation made the Revolution. At the time of the Revolution they were in their twenties and older. They had spent their youth under the Shah's rule and had experience of pre-Revolutionary Iran. In the 1970s, thanks to the oil boom, they witnessed a relatively expansive economy and Westernizing urban life. They lived their youth in an Iran that was connected to the global village and aimed to be one of the most modern countries in the world. But what unites them as a generation is, perhaps, their experience of the Revolution. The Second Generation (to which I belong) was in its early teens at the time of the Revolution, born between 1965 and 1970. It has vague memories of the time prior to the Revolution. What unites them as a generation is spending their formative years during the eight-year war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. This generation makes up a large part of the expatriates who left Iran in the 1980s. The Third Generation, who have just come of age, make up more than half the present population and have no memory of the Revolution. Unlike the First and Second Generations, the Third Generation has been totally formed under the rule of the Islamic regime. In their own words: "We are the product of the Islamic Republic." For further reading please refer to his book page 5.

Capturing seventy percent of the votes, Khatami's landslide victory was a firm response to the hardliners who had dominated the country for almost a decade. Following the election, the reformist press labelled the day of Khatami's victory as the *epic of 2 Khordad* (23rd of May). Later, the 23rd of May "was chosen by coalition of Khatami's supporter as their designation."[25] However, in response to the reformists' victory, hardliners were able to hold onto enough power to stop Khatami's cabinet from re-channeling a political euphuism formed during the election towards building a more democratic society. Khatami's administration, however, was able to open up the space for cultural activity, specifically in the field of performance and sonic art. "One of the most remarkable changes"[26] Laudan Nooshin argues "was the legalisation of pop music – which had been banned in public since the 1979 Revolution – and the subsequent development of a local pop music industry."[27] She then continues,

> Not only did this legalisation allow the government to take control of the pop music market, but many Iranians welcomed what came to be known as 'pop-e jadid' ('the new pop') as an alternative to imported diaspora pop which had dominated the black market since the early 1980s and was increasingly regarded as disconnected from life in Iran.[28]

During Khatami's era, the youth culture introduced itself as one of the most prominent elements within the country's newly reconfigured socio-cultural domain. Increased access to the Internet and satellite technology in the 1990s promoted the currency of global culture and Western-based ideologies among the youth in Iran. The dial up Internet and its capability in sharing music (through piracy, mp3 files, and later USB flash drives) revolutionized the accessibility of international music inside the country. As Siavash Amini contends "With the advent of dialed-up Internet, people would go to each other's houses and trade their collection with one another. We couldn't and still can't buy anything directly, so we have to rely on free downloads, or people who travel internationally and are able to bring music back with themselves."[29] Parallel to the radical reformation of the cultural discourse, venues such as cafés and galleries became among the most pivotal spaces where the limits of the Islamic freedom/democracy were put into examination. The legalization of pop music brought with it an emancipatory hope for marginalized groups to challenge the

relationship between the center and peripheries within the contested discourse of music. However, as the alternative groups such as rock, metal, indie rock and electronic music were about gaining momentum to claim their right of visibility and inclusion, the presidency of Khatami ended with the election of the fundamentalist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, who became the sixth president of the Islamic Republic for the subsequent eight years.

Ahmadinejad's first term of presidency ended with a massive wave of criticism domestically and internationally. Despite all the criticisms, Ahmadinejad was re-elected in 2009 through a disputed election resulting in chaos and uprisings across the country. After reversing Khatami's reformative policies, Ahmadinejad aimed and masterminded eight years of strict control and censorship on sociopolitical and cultural discourses of the country. "The preceding eight years of reform had had long-term implications for music in Iran and the election was followed by a period of uncertainty among musicians."[30] Such uncertainty pushed musicians further to the margins as well as underground (zir zamin) spaces where performing music did not require permit from the Islamic Cultural Ministry.

After few years of staying underground, the electronic music movement, with the hope of attainting more publicity, organized its first round of SET Experimental Art Event, an artist run music festival in Tehran with a main focus on electronic music, in 2015, where not only musicians but visual and media artists gathered to realize a holistic audio-visual concert. The first SET Fest was organized purely on what is called "DIY" (Do It Yourself) culture, as none of the musicians including Amini, Pourkarimi, Ebtekar, Ohadi, and Entezami had any experience of transforming a venue designed for a pop concert into a heavily technological audio-visual electronic event. However, the SET Fest proved to be a success for the movement as Ebtekar contends,

> Digital media, mix media, and electronic scene are growing rapidly in Iran... we are trying to collaborate with other communities instead of competing with them; we share venues, software, experience and expertise with each other only to help each other to grow. In terms of audience, people with different musical tastes were in attendance and that is the reason why this movement is maturing organically.[31]

The second SET Fest happened in 2017 where a wider group of artists from different back-

Figure 4.3: Audiences at the last day of the SET Fest in Tehran, Iran. Photographer Unknown, published on Facebook on June 6, 2015.

grounds, ethnicities, and nationalities showcased their works. However, due to the restriction over the foreigners traveling to Iran, the SET Fest experienced a setback, one that the SET organizers hope to be resolved by the end of Trump Presidency. Amini believes, "The travel ban for us is a sign of a very bigger and scary thing."[32] He continued, "Not that it won't affect *us* as people or artists, but it puts the lives of many people from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other places in serious limbo—and, in many cases, in direct danger."[33] In terms of the Tehran experimental music scene—specifically the SET festival—the effects of the new administration had immediate consequences. A handful of international artists who had previously attended the events "seem unlikely to choose to do so as having a previous Iranian visa on your passport could lead to difficulties getting into the United States."[34] Thus, while the electronic music movement is keen to center its international appeal on its purely technical and radically new style, it is undeniable that the political climate surrounding Iran's relationship with the United States, alongside its allies in the Middle East, is the foremost factor in the acknowledgment of this movement on a global level.

Without a doubt, individuals such as Amini, Ebrekar, and Pourkarimi and events such as SET Fest have played a bold role in the re-articulation of the governmental rules and regulation over the music industry within the past few years. However, it would be to the benefit of Iranian domestic music industry if this movement starts to distance itself from the hybridity and humanitarian claims of the foreign labels and acknowledge the consequence of its international appeal in a more comprehensive and informed manner.

Core members and organizer of SET Fest: A Guide

Siavash Amini

Known As the de facto spokesperson of the Iranian electronic music movement, Amini was born in 1987 in Tehran where he spent most of his childhood listening to traditional and folk Iranian music. His interest in music intensified when he was exposed to the Western black metal, jazz, and rock, dissident and subversive sonic movements formed as a reaction to the hegemonic and highly regulated cultural events in the West. Amini, in his interview with Hearfeel website remembers, "As I became older, I got into jazz and then certain contemporary composers through a friend who had a huge collection of ECM Records which I devoured. At the same time, I was listening to black metal and other extreme metal genres."[35] He then continued "It was in my last year of high school that I got into Massive Attack and it opened up a whole new world for me; I started digging more and more into the electronic music world and the search still continues."[36]

The rise of Amini in the international scene is due to the release of albums such as *Subsiding* in 2016, and *TAR* in 2017. *TAR*, the most successful release by Amini, has been praised by numerous international critiques; for example, Hollow Ground, one of the most important virtual platforms for independent musicians,[xvii] in its review of the album asserts,

> Continuing his experiments combining elements of drone and modern classical music, Tehran based composer Siavash Amini's 4th solo LP "TAR" explores the fragile tensions between an individual and a collective subconscious. TAR is an inquiry of

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[xvii]For further information please refer to `http://hallowground.com/about`

Figure 4.4: Siavash Amini, Photographer unknown, Published on Facebook on March 13, 2017.

how fears and hopes of an individual can be related to a broader state of mind shared collectively. Making it's starting point the expression of these feelings in dreams and nightmares of each individual, and translating the images, feelings and textures into sound.[37]

Without a doubt Amini's music is subtle, immersive, and at the forefront of the movement. By synthesizing noise, drones, and ambient music with instruments such as violin and bass, and in the context of strictly regulated cultural atmosphere of Iran, Amini invites the listeners to a sort of sonic documentary presenting Iranians with an opportunity to imaging their individualities in radically new and different ways.
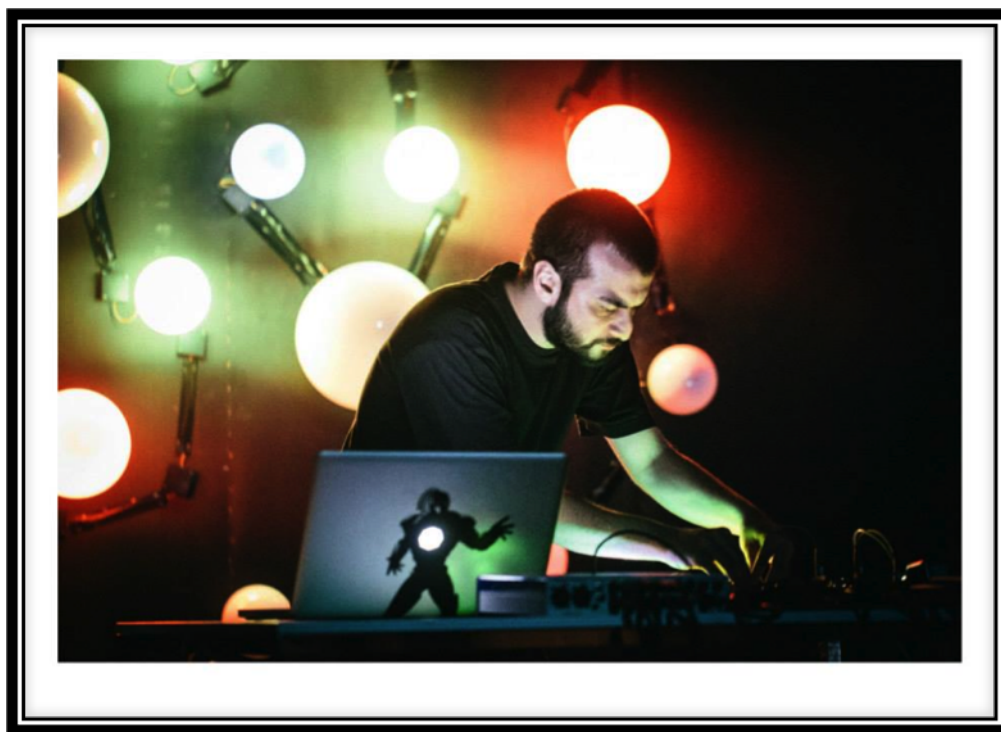
Figure 4.5: Umchunga performs with Amir B Ash in day 3 of SET Fest, Photographer Unknown, published on Facebook on June 8, 2015.

Nima Pourkarimi (aka Umchunga)

Umchunga is the pseudonym of Nima Pourkarimi, one of the founders and major voices of the electronic music movement in Tehran, Iran.[xviii] Born in 1987, Nima, through attending public music classes, received an extensive training in classical music and playing guitar. After being accepted into Tehran University of Art, Department of Music, Nima started to experiment with electronic music alongside his classmate, Siavash Amini, and friend, Hesam Ohadi. Upon dropping out of University, Nima devoted all his time to produce electronic and noise music with release of his debut album, *Should Have Been Done by Now*, in 2016 through the British label Hibernate Records.

Should Have Been Done by Now earned the praise of international music critiques such as James Catchpole, an expert in ambient and electronic music, who believed Nima's music "Perched on the tips of the trees, the vocals cry out. It is a desperate cry that contains a subtle kind of urgency,

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[xviii]Nima picked up this name from Mira Calix's track titled *Umchunga Locks*.

but this cry is also a reassurance of the music's destiny, and because of that it's oddly soothing."[38] He then continues, "It waits until the time is right, and only then do the drones strike. It all starts with a single note; a spark can cause a prairie fire."[39] In another review, Mathew Atkins compares *Should Have Been Done by Now* to *Pink Floyd* by asserting, "with a quiet drone, but after a few minutes there's an unexpected twist in intensity. Droning organ sounds and effects reminiscent of early Pink Floyd, from their most psychedelic period. But on the other side, there are also the calm guitar themes from the title track."[40] He then confessed "I don't know if it's the context and being from Tehran that gives this album an extra, and somewhat different, dimension: there's a cry of despair in almost every track, but there's also hope."[41]

Nima also frequently uploads his tracks on soundcloud.com, a platform that has provided Iranian musicians a more direct contact with their listeners. One of Nima's latest tracks is titled *She is Red & Black, Circling Round, I Jumped So Hard, I Died, There, She Was* which is going to be part of his upcoming album with no concrete release date yet. The track, which perhaps has the most resemblance to familiar local melodies for its Iranian listeners, progresses within a very narrow pitch range with lonely keynotes inviting to an immersive experience where numbness and immobility is the only outcome at the end. Most of Nima's music resembles a closed circuit where the outside turbulent and chaotic world materializes itself in an internal wound.

Conclusion

Music can be considered as a means for investigating and displaying social concerns, particularly for those marginalized groups who find no official outlets to exercise and express their collective and individual identities. The music produced by the marginalized Iranian musicians is then a way of building personal narratives about a hegemonic power that insists on excluding those standing outside its defined normalcy. The importance of the electronic music movement inside Iran is in its ability to circumvent official censorship by eliminating lyrics from their music. The music they produce is semiotically vague as it undercuts the power of language in producing robust statements. By tapping into the individual and collective experiences of its listeners, this music brings with

it a bundle of nuanced emotions impossible to be articulated within linguistic texts. As one of the organizers of the SET Fest argues "One thing I think is important to remember is that these performances were not raves at all. No part of any performance resembled a party. Everyone sat in the dark, moving discreetly with the music and most people listened quite seriously. It was kind of a brain rave."[42] It is exactly due to the positionality of this music, its counterhegemonic stance, and the anxiety surrounding its distribution that such level of performativity becomes possible. Ash Koosha, an exiled Iranian musician in London, accentuates the same issue by drawing comparison between Iran and London and concluded that,

> The main difference is that [in London], a musical event is a casual event. You listen to music, enjoy the arts and have fun. In Iran, it's not a casual event. It's well-prepared (if it's legal, and most Western music is illegal in Iran). So, there's a huge element of stress. A lot of adrenalin is involved regardless of whether you're a performer or an audience member. At any moment, you could be arrested. It's an intense state of mind; you're always on edge. You think 'what I'm doing is so big and so important. I could be arrested but I'm still here.' The idea of having fun and having a couple of beers at a gig in Dalston really isn't the case in Iran. It's quite the opposite - it's a really big deal."[43]

Thus, music needs to be fully contextualized in its sociopolitical and cultural discourse as well as its dynamic cycle of production, distribution, and reception in order to become performative. However, such attempts often have ended up in romanticizing the marginalized music as inherently subversive and authentic at global level. Domestically, the electronic music is counted as an innovative form, actively challenging the long-held shared values of an authentic Iranian musical style. While this movement interrupts the flow of mainstream folk and pop culture by interjecting noise synthesis into its rhetoric, it also challenges the underground rock movement that has heavily relied on linguistic text to get a message across.[xix] Globally, the authenticity of this music is an imposed and external value based solely upon the nationality of the musicians. This is an intersection where one should ask the tough question regarding the performativity of this movement on its

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[xix]Douglas Kahn, in *Noise, Water, Meat*, define noise as "the forest of everything. The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion; moreover, it implies a genesis of mutability itself. Noise is a world where anything can happen, including and especially itself. In a predictable world noise promises something out of the ordinary, and in a world in frantic pursuit of the extraordinary noise can promise the banal and quotidian."

global level. While such a movement "feeds on and borrows from its cultural and social milieu, taking aspects of the publicity-dominated consumerism which surrounds it and subverting them for its own dissident purposes,"[44] as Ian Biddle and Venessa Knights in *Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location*, argues, "it is perfectly possible to see the opposite process taking place, arguing that capitalism always and everywhere succeeds in taking control of social and cultural movements that emerge within it, however initially subversive their ideology, defusing them and perverting them to serve its own purposes."[45] Anywhere on this spectrum, music is capable of facilitating a platform to imagine and think through different modes of identification. As musicians of electronic movement in Iran believe, one should not be molded into the stereotypes of either oppressed rap singers or runaway rock stars. However, as this chapter demonstrates, even if these musicians see themselves somewhere in-between these stereotypes, the dimension of this in-betweenness space should be drawn in relation to each end, otherwise it becomes a vacuum entity incapable of producing a meaningful change.

ENDNOTES

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Chapter 5

Em-Bracing the Liminal rather than Nostalgia

I had the visceral experience of leaving my country, not thinking of myself as a brown person until I arrived at the Minneapolis airport security check where I was treated as a "colored" Muslim immigrant from the Middle East.[i] The next eight years was an effort to process this transformation; how through passing three borders, from Iran to Frankfurt and from Frankfurt to Minneapolis, my whole perception and personal identification was forced to change. In the United States, while I learned to see myself as an individual not white enough to escape the race-based discrimination on its grand-level, I realized I am often read as "too white" to have the privilege of being categorized as a minority on a legal level. Racial loophole such as these became the reality of my new American life where daily news, any terrorist attacks around the world, the slightest geopolitical shift in the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy would simply add another dimension to it.

Without considering the challenges of overcoming the racial hierarchy, reified and reinforced based upon legal top-down and everyday bottom-up policies, I labeled Iranian immigrants who introduce themselves as "Persians" deceivers; Iranians who desperately attempt to get the American public into believing that "Persians" are better than "Iranians," or "Persians" are a more civilized version of "Iranians." Interestingly enough, many of these "Persian" immigrants resided in Los Angeles, their paradisiacal destination, refering to it as *Tehrangeles* like the city is theirs or can be theirs exclusively. This population often appears as a delusional tribe to me; a tribe that creates its own alternative Persia in America's "melting pot."

Gradually as I witnessed Iranians being pinpointed for all the wrongdoings around the world, including the tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks, the never-ending Iraq and Afghanistan military occupa-

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[i]While living in Iran, I was never forced into seeing myself as a person of color or specific race.

tions, the formation of radical terrorist groups such as ISIS, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Yemeni catastrophe, and the Israel and Palestine's pointless ongoing "peace" conversation, I started to think perhaps misrepresenting one's identity is not the worst idea when truth is completely substituted with its simulacrum on such a national scale; a simulacrum that is promulgated and preached into the Americans' ears through mainstream cultural venues such as National TV and radio. By broadcasting the U.S.'s involvement against foreign threats, particularly those from the Middle East, people from that region are antagonized and stigmatized on a daily basis. It is through this continuous depiction of the abjection associated with brown bodies that the American identity is built "in relation to its "outside"—in terms of international power-relations—and in relation to its "inside"— the diverse and hierarchical construction of identities within the national borders."[1]

As an immigrant of color, one of the most interesting examples of being depicted as the "Other" was the case of Iran and its demotion from U.S.'s most important Middle Eastern ally to its most dangerous and hostile foe. The 1978-79 Islamic Revolution, the invasion of the American Embassy, and the hostage crisis of the 1979 became the signposts of this new Iran. On the November 4th of 1979, images of the Basij (Iran's military force) invading the American embassy in Tehran, while taking sixty-five American diplomats hostage, became the new hot breaking news on every single channel. The whole story was broadcast every night on ABC's *Nightline* program titled "America Held Hostage."[ii] The rhetoric of most of the American programs, including that of ABC's, heavily capitalized on the depiction of Iranians as the enemy of the United States and as a danger to its allies in the region. Witnessing these programs and as a reactionary and more likely a survival move, Iranians based in the U.S. started to counter such abject depictions by injecting themselves into the mainstream culture and articulating their desire of assimilation into the society. As Hamid Naficy, in *The Making of Exile Cultures, Iranian Television in Los Angeles*, argues "exile is a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete."[2]

[ii]Please refer to `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUeo36Vzkb8` for watching one of the episode of "American Held Hostage."

The most notable outcome of decades of assimilatory efforts made by Iranian émigrés based in the United States is probably The Bravo TV reality show, *Shahs of Sunset*.[iii] Following the lives of six Iranian-Americans in Beverly Hills, California, *Shahs of Sunset* depicts "Persians" as those constantly attempting to introduce themselves outside of their connections and attachments to Iran and its clerical regime. Showcasing such intent, the subtext of the *Shahs of Sunset* is thus heavily based on capitalizing and promoting the inclusive nature of (capitalistic and consumeristic) culture of the United States.

Figure 5.1: *Shahs of Sunset*, Bravo TV, program poster.

Every now and then one of the characters of the show utters a few words in Farsi with a thick American accent in order to highlight the welcoming attitude of the American cultural hegemony towards the exotic trends of a widely stigmatized group. However, for me, the simulacrum of inclusion promulgated by the *Shahs of Sunset* becomes fully exposed when it is juxtaposed against the normative ways of depicting Iranian culture within the American media. For instance, parallel to the success of *The Salesman*, an Iranian movie directed by Asghar Farhadi and the winner of the best screenplay and the best leading actor in the 2016 Cannes Film Festival and 2017 Academy

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[iii]*Shahs of Sunset* first premiered on March 11, 2012.

Award winner for the best foreign Film, *The New York Times*, on June 1st 2017, published an article about the arm tattoo of Taraneh Alidoosti, the lead female actress of *The Salesman*, as a source of great controversy in her country.
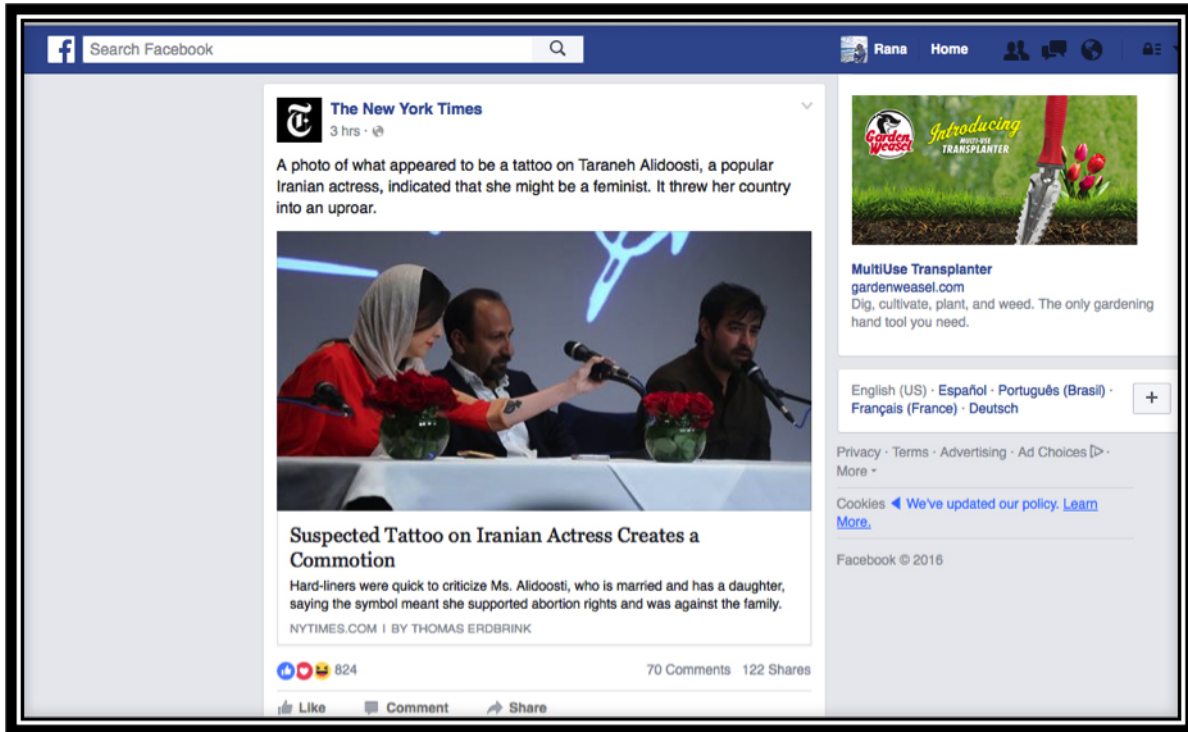

Figure 5.2: Screenshot from The New York Times article posted on Face Book on June 1st, 2016.

As another example of depicting Iranians as backward and fundamental, on May 22nd 2016, during the closing ceremony of the Cannes Film Festival honoring Farhadi's *The Salesman*, NBC's *Today* show reported that the Islamic Republic government of Iran was masterminding a plot to ban Iranian Instagram users from accessing Kim Kardashian's account due to her erotic and inappropriate content. By capitalizing on the backwardness and barbarity of the Islamic regime, the American media trivialized the success of an Iranian film whose international recognition is definitely entangled with its state approved presence in such spaces.[iv] So, while the mainstream culture in the United States bestows the stigmatized communities few opportunities to experience "the moment of hegemony," it uses the very same opportunities to reify and dictate its superiority.

[iv]The Islamic regime support for the *Salesman* was also a response to the first executive order on the travel ban signed by the newly elected Donald Trump as the president of the United States.

Following all these observations, as an Iranian scholar living in the United States, I wrote this dissertation trying to find a gap between such an essentialist and highly problematic representation of my identity. I started with Shadi Ghadirian's *Like EveryDay* photo collection where I questioned a common resentment and stereotypical depictions of the role of the hijab and chador in the Western World. By challenging western perspectives of the chador as a sign of backwardness, I directed my analysis to acknowledge it as a different form of a feminist and liberatory standpoint for Muslim women. Further, I criticized artists, most notably Shirin Neshat, who uses the chador as a marketable object for exoticizing and enhancing the visibility of their artworks in diasporic spaces. In order to provide such a two-fold argument, I have to acknowledge my positionality toward chador/hijab and the Islamic theology in general. Growing up in a household where obeying the "Islamic" dress code was never compulsory, I was exposed to and acquainted with a moderate version of Muslimhood. While I was learning how to read Quran, I was free to listen to and enjoy Western music. And while I was taught about the Islamic and Iranian moral behavioral codes, I was encouraged to develop a very active social life and to pursue my interest in art and performance. I never considered Islam as an inherently backward lifestyle and never saw myself as an oppressed Muslim woman due to my moderate religious tendencies. I was taught to think of religion as a separate entity from its different interpretations by hegemonic powers. However, upon moving to the United States, I learned that I would always be categorized as a brown, Muslim woman from the Middle East who should consider herself lucky not to be forced into an arranged marriage or to be stoned to death because of her progressive view of the Islamic theology. Shadi Ghadirian's photo analysis was a journey through this process of becoming more vocal about the problems associated with stereotyping my Iranian identity. I wanted to demonstrate that being a feminist has different forms and some of it happens to look radically different to those well-known Western versions.

Writing about *Endless Monologue* was a necessity for me, an act of survival, somewhat a duty. Working for four years with Alizad, as the photographer of his 84Theatre Company, provided me with an opportunity to know one of the performance's interviewees, Hamid, whom I defined in

the first chapter, as "a homosexual doctoral student fluent in seven foreign languages." Seeing his struggle and his suffering was not easy, however, accepting that he was used like a toy by the West for pushing its anti-Iran/Islamic agenda was even more frustrating. Witnessing his daily struggle, alongside of many others like him, being misused by domestic and foreign governmental agencies in furthering their biased political and administrative agendas, was soul wrenching. So, I responded with writing about and documenting *Endless Monologue* where I questioned not only Iran's domestic policies toward its own LGBTQ community but also the United States' biased anti-Islamic agenda.

Mountain Language directly spoke to and addressed the overwhelming feeling of living in a racial loophole and in-between identities. With *Mountain Language*, I stood in the gap, alongside of Alizad, as we both looked at the oppressed bodies falling and breaking under the state sponsored practices of torture. While I was aware of the problems associated with questioning the political violence imposed on Muslims through a work of a white playwright such as Pinter, I kept asking myself if not Pinter then who? If not Beckett, then who? And if not Crimp or Sarah Kane, then who? While their whiteness and Otherness assist(ed) Alizad in circumventing the high level of censorship imposed by the country's Cultural Ministry, turning these playwrights into critiques of the Western-based racial policy was a statement by itself. I do believe that during difficult moments such as the current time, making choices should be more about creating deliberate paradoxes rather than igniting a revolution as the former fosters performative conversation while the latter only costs lives of its advocates.

Chapter 3, "She's Red & Black, Circling Round, I Jumped So Hard, I Died, There, She Was," was in part a criticism of my generation. As a reaction to the Islamic regime, many of us became obsessed with a whitewashed Western culture where the core values of Islamic and Iranian culture would be looked at as a sign of backwardness and naivety. As an artist who collaborated with one of the musicians of this movement, Nima Pourkarimi (aka Umchunga), for staging a performance piece on the stage of Department of Theatre and Film at the Tehran University of Art, I had to distance myself from the nostalgia only to be able to sit in the gap and write about the problems of

this movement. I admire these artists for their creativity and braveness; however, I wish they could see the other side to understand their "Otherness" from the point of view of their foreign labels and producers.

While I wrote this dissertation to analyze the performativity of artworks produced mostly by artists based in Iran, I do believe it is imperative for future research to consider artists who live and work in diasporic spaces that are trying to rearticulate the American (vertical) color line of white/non-white. Questions such as, how diasporic artists are (re)defining and (re)negotiating the limits of whiteness? could lead the future research towards an intelligent reconfiguration of the positionality of brown bodies. It also would be helpful to define how much assimilation is "too much" and how much of resistance against mainstream culture is erroneous and moronic. I have encountered scholars who used to listen to *Radiohead* and organize Rave parties in Iran and upon migration to various diaspora, starting to wear turbans and to set up Quranic stations in the American and Canadian universities only to show their resistance against assimilation into Western culture as well as showing their pride in their brown(ed) identities. I do believe there is a gap in between; as a matter of fact, there are many gaps in between. This dissertation has explored one of these gaps and I believe via future research many of the other gaps will be located, analyzed, and understood. As long as there exists extreme poles in the white/non-white color line, many performative gaps can be shaped, animated, and lived within.

ENDNOTES

[1] Melani Lynn Mcalister, Diss. "Staging the American Century: Race, Gender, and Nation in United States Representations of the Middle East, 1945-1992." (Brown University, 1996), P 7.

[2] Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures, Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), P 8.

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