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Contemporary Iranian Women Artists

A Practice Based Analysis of Identity

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Abstract:

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Contemporary Iranian Women Artists: A Practice Based Analysis of Identity

This research has been concerned with the overall notion of the crisis of identity in Iran. More specifically, this research involved 20 contemporary Iranian women artists; 10 living in Iran and 10 living in exile and examines the position of women and the ways the notion of identity is reflected in their artworks, and viewpoints. The researcher's position as a contemporary Iranian woman artist living and working in the UK has been integral to the enquiry. As a member of the group being explored this position has allowed personal experience to be used in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues involved. Due to the lack of material on issues relating to the subject, the researcher made numerous visits to Iran in order to interview the artists and collect relevant data. This allowed the research to be conducted from the two viewpoints of the "East" and the "West".

Due to the central role of the researcher in this practice-based study, a process of reflection in the spirit of the reflective practitioner was adopted as part of the overall methodology. Through a multimethod approach this investigation has used various forms of enquiry in order to integrate different elements in the research, such as the analysis of documentary sources and visual interpretation of artefacts. This has provided the research with a wide range of material that has enhanced the study's aims and outcomes.

This investigation has also explored the historical changes that have affected Iranians, in particular the artists and the researcher. The prominent recent changes have been identified as the Islamic Revolution (1979), the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and Western influences. These changes amongst others have been analysed from the perspective of literary and cultural theory. Theories of identity were studied and examined in relation to the artists in order to clarify their particular positions. This research has identified the complexities of the issues surrounding Iranian women's identities. The two groups of artists have shown similarities and differences due to similar underlying issues of being Iranian women and differences due to their audiences and positioning inside and outside Iran. Both groups have shown concerns with the notion of displacement expressed in interviews and illustrated in their artefacts.

This research is a timely exploration of Iranian women's identities; a group of women that are still under-examined. With the current climate of political suspicion between Muslim countries such as Iran and the West, in particular the USA, this research is a valuable insight into understanding Iranian women's issues, and more generally Iranian identity.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This chapter begins by briefly introducing the context of this research and outlining the aims of the research and the structure of this thesis. This chapter contextualises the thesis through an introduction to the background to Iranian culture and identity.

Iran is a complex nation, often misrepresented in the Western media, which tends to homogenise the Middle East and in particular Islamic nations. Iranian women are frequently associated with an obsessive emphasis on the veil, as if veiling conveyed their essence. For some Iranian women, these stereotyped roles are limiting and, ultimately, part of what they are seeking to undermine. This research stems from a rejection of these misconceptions and aims to clarify some of the complexities of Iranian women's identities.

Iran is a nation torn between three interrelated cultural systems: the ancient Persian system; Islam; and Western influences. Throughout Iranian history there have been contradictory events such as the veiling and unveiling of women, which have created distinct relationships between binary oppositions. Oppositions such as Islam and Western ideology are central to understanding Iran as a nation. This research exemplifies many of these contradictions through a focus on these opposing elements: veiling and unveiling, national identity and personal identity, home and displacement. My own personal experience as an Iranian woman artist living in the United Kingdom has allowed for an exploration of Iranian identity from the two viewpoints of the East and the West. In conjunction with these two viewpoints, this research has been conducted through two distinct theoretical and practical approaches: in the form of studio-based work producing artefacts; and a written thesis informed by relevant theoretical work.

Taking creativity to be a social practice, art can be an indicator of particular aspects of both the producer's identity and the location that they either inhabit or from which they are displaced. The artists and artworks featured in this research are in dialogue with the 'home' and 'host' societies; they are also in dialogue with audiences. The analysis of visual artworks offers yet another angle from which to observe Iranian women's identity, which oral or written material alone does not offer in the same way. Therefore, the combination of theoretical understanding of the notion of identity (from an Eastern and Western point of view), the events that have affected Iranian identity, together with an analysis of the artworks of Iranian women artists, produces a multi-layered analysis. These artists provide valuable insights into how Iranian women's identities may be functioning at present, both in Iran and abroad. Today, many Iranian artists are faced with a dilemma, a concern about what is and can be considered as Iranian art; a visible residue of Western understandings of post-modern and contemporary art confuses this matter. Those working outside Iran are concerned with reaching a compromise between being 'Iranian' artists and commenting on a place in which they no longer reside. The artists featured in this research have been chosen specifically for the different positions that they take, whether in Iran or abroad. Their different positions challenge homogeneous perceptions of Iranian identities.

This investigation reviews and assesses some of the causes and effects of cultural displacement in the context of contemporary Iranian women artists. More specifically, this research investigates and surveys two seemingly different groups of Iranian women artists: artists in Iran; and artists in exile or abroad, working under different political and social circumstances. It also examines common cultural and political influences in an analysis of their creative practice. The analysis of the artworks, and the various positions of the two distinct groups of contemporary Iranian women artists, has enabled a more accurate definition of their identities. In relation to this, I have questioned my own

cultural position in the context of Iranian women artists and Iranian women as a whole, through theory and practice.[1]

The theoretical aspect of the research consists of a literature review (of English and Farsi sources) in order to examine the relevant historical, theoretical and political events, which have significantly affected Iranian identity.[2] In addition to this, an extensive exploration of concepts of identity, multiculturalism and nationalism was conducted in order to explore Iranian women's identities and their particular positionalities.[3] Due to the relative lack of published material on Iranian women artists, various visits have been made to Iran and other locations in the UK to collect first-hand data and interview the selected artists. Collection of visual data such as exhibition catalogues, photography and other sources has been undertaken and served as a source for analysis within the research.[4]

The researcher's position as an Iranian woman artist living and working in the UK has been valuable in understanding the context and research issues both from a subjective and objective perspective. The researcher takes the position of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1995) to develop the context for comparison with other Iranian woman practitioners. Personal experiences of displacement are used as first-hand source of *knowledge* of the subject.[5] Familiarity with both Western and Iranian modes of perception gives the researcher a double stance from which the relationship between identity and art practice is reflected upon and analysed.

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[1] It is important to note that the use of the first-person ('I') pronoun throughout this thesis is a deliberate method of including my voice and my position as a contemporary Iranian woman artist within the research. For a discussion of the methodological implications of my position, see Chapter 2 (section 2.2.1)

[2] For the methodological approach to documentary sources, see Chapter 2 (section 2.3.1).

[3] For an exploration of the ways in which artist's identities are determined by their particular cultural positioning, see Chapter 4 (section 4.4.2) Positioning and Validation.

[4] For the approach to visual analysis, see Chapter 2 (section 2.3.4).

[5] For a full discussion of the notion of reflective practitioner, see Chapter 2 (section 2.2).

This research is a unique and timely contribution to the field of knowledge about Iran, Iranian identity, Iranian women's identities and in particular contemporary Iranian women artists and the notion of national identity.

1.1.1 Aims and objectives

This research has the following main aims and objectives:

1) To identify and investigate practising Iranian women artists working in Iran and in exile, and to explore the relationship between their practice and their personal, social and international location.

2) To establish research methods to examine the role of the reflective practitioner in the context of studio-based creative activities and its theoretical association.[6]

3) To review and analyse relevant literature in the fields of cultural studies, in order to further the current understanding of Iranian women's identities, and provide the basis for the analysis of the artists' works in chapters 5 and 6.

4) To outline and define the relevant cultural and political influences that shape that practice, particularly in the context of fine art and its relation to the representation of Iranian identities.

5) To demonstrate how these distinctive identities are exemplified in the researcher's own evolving art practice, by producing fine art objects. To critically evaluate the researcher's work against other Iranian woman practitioners, working in similar contexts and settings.

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[6] The process undertaken to ensure the aims and objective are carried out effectively is discussed in Chapter 2: Research Methodologies.

1.1.2 Structure of Study

The overall structure of this Study takes the classic form of firstly presenting the background to the research, followed by a discussion of the methodological approaches taken to conduct this research. This is followed by a literature review and discussion, which is then further explored in relation to the data collected on the featured artists. Finally my own studio practice is presented and analysed and concluded in chapter 6, which outlines and presents the thesis conclusions and contributions.

Chapter 1 introduces the background to Iranian culture and identity through an historic analysis of the social and political changes that have occurred in Iran and distinguishes the position of Iranian women as different to that of other Islamic countries.

Chapter 2 discusses methodology and its suitability for this research. In order to achieve the aims and objectives of this research, to formulate a hypothesis, and reach viable conclusions the methodology chapter outlines and explains the multimethod approach taken.

Chapter 3 expands on the issues raised in Chapter 1 through a review of literature on key subjects such as identity, citizenship, race, borders and displacement, by key writers such as Said (1985), Moghadam (1995), Hall (1997), Naficy (1999) and Rogoff.[7] These analyses expand on the current understanding of Iranian identity, question the nature and position of Iranian women, and prepare the background for the analysis of the artists' works in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 explores the creative practice of the featured contemporary Iranian women artists using data from first-hand interviews and secondary sources. The artists' works are discussed in relation to themes derived from the previous chapters in order to further

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[7] The artists' data (interview material and artworks) has also played a crucial role in the areas explored in this chapter.

examine the effects of placement and national identity on art production and, more specifically, contemporary Iranian women artists' identities.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the researcher's own art practice. This chapter includes a selection of relevant artworks made previously to the research and the body of artworks made during the course of this research. This aspect of the research has been a central tool for enquiry and exploration of ideas derived from the research throughout. The artworks made also contribute to the research question and form a major part of this contribution to knowledge of the subject of women's art practice.

Chapter 6 concludes this study through further analysis of the findings, and draws together conclusions in order to contribute to the present knowledge and assumptions about the positions of contemporary Iranian women artists. More general conclusions about Iranian women's identities and contemporary Iranian identity are also expressed. This chapter concludes by outlining further areas of possible research in this subject, and the implications of this research.

1.2 Introduction and Background to Iranian Culture and Identity

The remainder of this chapter explores the complexity of Iranian culture and identity by briefly presenting an overview of Iran's geographical and historical background. This section outlines the influences that have shaped contemporary Iranian identity and presents a point of reference to the discussions in the forthcoming chapters.

The inclusion of Iran's extensive history is beyond the scope of this particular research, however, it is necessary to divulge the importance of Iran's ancient history in the context of Iranian identity. The Persian Empire saw Iran through 1,100 years of almost continuous prosperity and still provides Iranians with a sense of solidarity. Ancient Persia is fronted by the remains of Persepolis, the ancient ceremonial capital of the Persian

Empire whose carvings feature in many different guises in contemporary Iranian arts and crafts. In March 2006 record numbers of 3 Million Iranians visited Persepolis, which is an important indicator of the connection of history to Iranian identity.[8] These issues are further developed in chapter 3 and later in the works of the featured artists. The next section provides a background to more recent changes in Iran in order to build a contemporary context for the analysis of identity throughout this research.[9]

Iranian culture and identity are a conflicting mixture of the old and the new, which are visible in the works of some of the featured artists in this research. This mixture stems from ancient Persia, the Islamic period, and Western influence through modernism and indirect colonialism which has been a result of years of interaction with the West.[10] More recent developments of the last 30 years in Iran are identified here as the Islamic revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the ever-prevalent Western influences, and Iranian feminist movements. As this research is concerned with women artists, the study of the development of feminism in Iran is necessary to the understanding of the particular position of Iranian women within the wider context of other Islamic nations.

1.2.1 Iran and Periods of Change

Iran's current situation is a result of conflict and interaction between religion, cultural background and state power, culture and foreign influences which have resulted in constant adaptations to cultural and political upheavals. Katuzian (1981), who has analysed this turning wheel during the past 10-15 years, states:

> In short, government has been separated from the community in the traditional Iranian society and has been not just at the head rather high above the community. Consequently in the final analysis, the government has never had a solid, continuous base and a point of reliance within the

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[8] Statistic reference from the central ticket office at Persepolis March 2006.

[9] See Wiesehofer, Josef, 2001, *Ancient Persia*, and Godard, Andre, 1965, *The Art of Iran*.

[10] Iran has not been directly colonised and there is little literature on this subject, but the effects of the colonial era are clearly visible and this method of analysis is necessary for furthering the understanding of Iran's current position. See next section for a deeper exploration of Shallow colonialism.

community and for this reason it has never enjoyed political validity among the people and has not lawfully represented them. (Katuzian 1981:18) [11]

Periods of change and contradiction caused by ancient upheavals in Iranian history have significantly influenced today's attitudes. A more recent example is the way that the society's attitudes towards Islam have been changing throughout history.[12] As already stated, another major influence on Iranian attitudes towards identity and progress has been the prevalence of the West in Iranian industry and culture.

Cultural links between Iran and the West can be traced to ancient times.[13] In the more recent diplomatic and political sense, relationships started seriously in the Safavid era
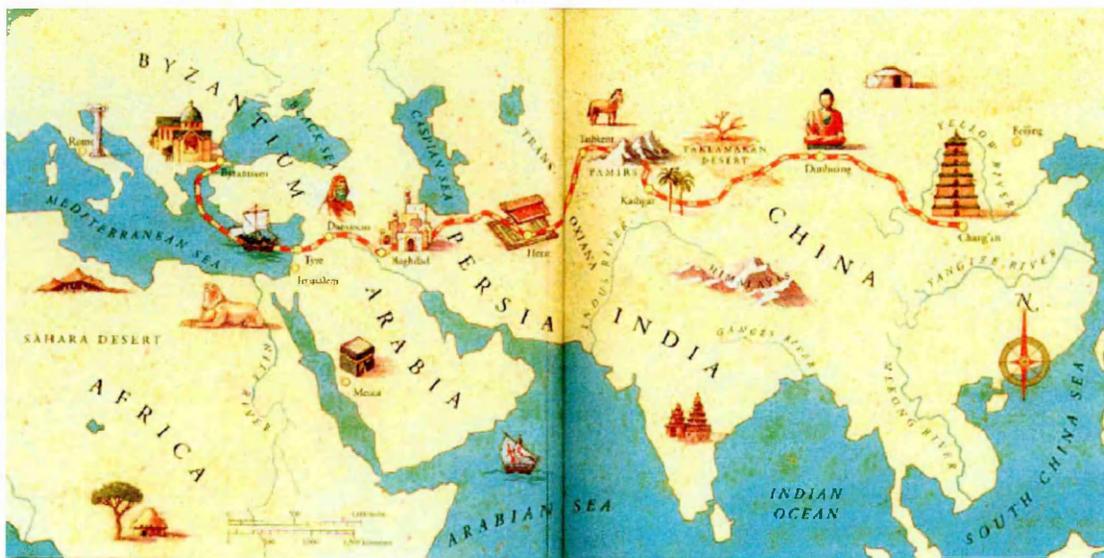
Fig **1-1**: The silk road (Source: www.burlington.mec.edu 29/05/01)

(1501-1736). In this period, Iran was the link between the East and the West. For

[11] Katouzian Cited in Memarzia, Kazem 1995, Ph.D. thesis *Productivity and the Iranian Building Industry*, University of York, UK.
[12] For a deeper analysis of the changing attitudes towards Islam, see Zanganeh 1994, *Islam, Iran & World Sensibility*. For an analysis of the ways Iranian women relate to Islam, see the section 'Women and Islam'.
[13] For a full discussion of Iran's link with the West, see Turner 1941:665-733.

centuries, the 'silk road'[14] was the major connection between East and West, connecting China to Europe over two continents (figure 1.4).

Western influences in Iranian affairs started in the Qajar period (14th century) and continued to the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), in which Iran's socio-cultural and economical link to the Western world became a major factor in Iranian life. The geographic location and resources of Iran make it a geo-politically important country. During the 19th century, industrial development in the West continued to act as a catalyst towards furthering the relationship between Iran and the West. Tom Kemp (1983) views the Industrial Revolution in Iran as unique at that time. He states: "What seems clear is that it [industrial revolution] was the leading edge of a change of European dimensions and that nothing else like it was taking place at that time anywhere else in the world" (Kemp, 1983:1). The changes in Europe attracted all nations of the world and started a new era, gradually transforming agricultural civilisations into industrial civilisations. This constituted a global Western influence. Kemp describes industrialisation as a Western import, he argues: "Whatever brought about Industrialisation in its original home, it can be said that other countries received it, along with much else of European origin, as an import" (Kemp, 1983:1).

1.2.2 Modern Iran and Shallow Colonialism

In contrast to Egypt, Turkey and India, the Iranian case does not feature prominently in post-colonial literature because it is commonly viewed that Iran was never directly and fully colonised. The early 19th century saw in Iran a series of military defeats. Iran was in need of new influences and ideas to restore and improve the nation's economy and social morale. At this time, 90 percent of the Iranian population lived in tents around the country and the tribes were controlled by wealthy tribesmen and landowners, who

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[14] The Silk Road was a 7,000-mile route that spanned China, Central Asia, Northern India, and the Parthian and Roman Empires. It connected the Yellow River Valley to the Mediterranean Sea and passed through places such as Chinese cities Kansu and Sin Kiang and present-day countries Iran, Iraq and Syria.

implemented their own laws. The country was in disarray and Nasser ed-Din Shah (the king at that time) decided that Iran could only be saved through modernisation. He took a number of trips to Europe and: "The more he saw, the more Nasser ed-din Shah became convinced that to be strong, Iran must adopt the things of the west. Thus, Iran tentatively engaged with Europe" (Mackey, 1998:137).

Nasser ed-Din Shah rebuilt Tehran as the capital of Iran. He built roads, buildings and factories. He was admired for his vision and charisma by the elite beneficiaries that surrounded him. However, by the general public, he began to be loathed and criticised for selling Iran to foreign influences. As there were no other political institutions that could take this matter on, the clergy stepped in. It seemed that religion was the only way to stop Iran's rapid fall into the hands of foreign power. Mackey states that: "...the gulf between the monarchy and the clergy which had begun earlier in the century widened in an atmosphere of growing absolutism" (Mackey 1998:139). Direct benefactors of modernisation, such as merchants and bazaaris (who benefited from roads and transport facilities) needed to convince the rest of the population to also support the Shah. The only way to do this was to involve the clerics. Thus, from two perspectives, both the clerics and the bazaaris found a solution in Islam.[15]. The influence of Islam was seen as a positive movement by many Iranians at that time; it seemed that the religious figures were listening to the nation's outcries against colonialism. [16] This revolt gave the clerics a revolutionary power to realise and implement their own ideologies of an Islamic Iran against the Shah, and the process of colonisation.

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[15] The clerics were split into two distinct groups: those who shared a vision of science and intellect alongside faith in order to improve the country; and those who believed it was necessary to implement Islamic Sharia laws in order to save Iran from foreign influence.

[16] Sheikh Shirazi the chief *Mujahid* (someone who is active and fights for Islam; a Muslim fighter) of the day called a *fatwa* (religious ruling) against the tobacco concession at that time. On January 26, 1892, the fatwa was lifted. For more detailed analysis of the tobacco concession, see Dabashi, 2000:8, *The End of Islamic Ideology* at www.socres.org/vol67/dabnotes.pdf .

Some religious groups believed that there was a way of separating modernisation from the core of the state; this would be to implement Western science[17] alongside an Islamic state.[18] Although other groups such as modernist intellectuals tried to have an influence, it was eventually the clergy who mobilised the masses towards justice and the promise of the end to absolute Qajar rule.[19]

As the people, with the leadership of the clerics, demanded change, the Shah retaliated with Russian trained soldiers. A full blown civil war was at hand. The British and Russian embassies in Iran offered safe refuge to Iranians in order to safeguard their location inside Iran. The Iranian central government was weakened and lost its autocratic control over the nation and, incidentally, the nation took the opportunity to demand and secure a constitutional system of government. It could be argued that it was because of the rivalry between Britain and Russia that Iran was not fully colonised; Iran was caught at the centre of a tug-of-war between the two states and their interests.

Finally a constitution was agreed upon whereby Muzaffar al-Din Shah allowed a national assembly to share in his powers and for the equality of all before a European model of national law.[20] Modernisation for Iran came at a cost. The introduction of an alien culture at a time of turmoil not only disrupted and threatened Iran's economy, but it also split the nation into those in favour of modernisation and those against it. Iran was now operating

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[17] Some groups believed that science was free from ideology and culture; it was safe and pure and, therefore, could be implemented alongside an Islamic state. For further analysis of the relationship between religion and science, see Mazyar Lotfalian, *Knowledge Systems and Islamic Discourses*, 2001:235.

[18] This desire for Western technology without its ideologies and culture is of course an impossible notion, which with time became more apparent, as noted in the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1968) and Shaygan (1979).

[19] The main appointed figures of the cleric movement were: Muhammad Tabatabai; Abdollah Behbahani; and Fazollah Nuri. Seventy three years later, Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, came to power with many of the same views in 1979.

[20] Incidentally, this constitution was a direct copy of the Belgian constitution of 1831; civil law system influenced by English constitutional theory; judicial review of legislative acts; acceptance compulsory ICJ (International Court of Justice) jurisdiction, with reservations. For more information on the Belgian constitution and British influences, see Edwige Lefebvre (1997), *The Belgian constitution of 1831* and www.zerp.uni-bremen.de/english/pdf/DP4_1997.pdf.

under two opposing systems: the followers of tradition and Islam; and the followers of modernity. Mackey states:

> Thus through the combination of the Iranians' two cultural traditions, the constitution which began as a Western-inspired idea found a cultural home among the Iranians, who carried it through the dynasty of the Pahlavis and into the Islamic Republic (Mackey, 1998:156).

The *Majlis*[21] continued to demand freedom from foreign influence and, although they did not allow women to vote, they used veiled women in order to carry messages and arms between their groups. After the establishment of the constitution, many women became active in feminist movements.[22] According to Massoume Price it was not just modernisation that was taking place; it was also a cultural revision:

> ...women became involved in both boycotting the import of foreign goods and raising funds for the establishment of the first National Bank. Native fabrics were worn and women sold their jewellery and dowries to finance the bank. The members of the Secret Union of women published pamphlets and articles demanding men should give up their seats in Majlis and let women run the country (Price, 2000)

With the country in disarray, controlled only in Tehran, contradictory ideologies ruled. In 1921 as a military officer by the name of Reza Khan [23] had become the Shah of Iran and began the short lived Pahlavi Dynasty. His vision was to continue to modernise Iran.[24] Reza Shah's radical modernisation plan took effect practically overnight, sacrificing anything that stood in his path including traditional values and culture.

> At his best and his worst, Reza Shah relentlessly pursued his supreme goal- a modern, powerful Iran grounded in secular society fashioned on

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[21] *Majlis* translates as parliament.

[22] For further examination of feminist movements in Iran, see the section 1.4 on 'Contemporary Iranian women and feminism'.

[23] Reza Khan's efforts to restore order to the country included using the foreign forces that were already there in leading 3000 Cossacks into Tehran in order to demand for changes in the cabinet. He then built his army of Iranians who would fight for the freedom of their country. One by one, he re-conquered the tribes and areas that were run by rebellious leaders. By 1921, the Russians were overexerted and retreated, giving the British a chance to reassert their position in Iran. For more in-depth discussion of the rise and fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty, see Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: from Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power*, 1998.

[24] Reza Shah began to rebuild Iran using the ideas taught to him by his Western-educated advisors. In 1927, Reza Shah opened the first train station in Tehran.

Western models. Holding Islam responsible for the major failings of society, which he saw as the lack of a modern educational system, an outmoded legal system, the seclusion of women, and the passive acceptance of fate (Mackey, 1998:176).

It became starkly evident to him that women needed to be unveiled. Iranian women were criticised as veiled, repressed and uneducated by Western standards. This was a source of embarrassment for the Shah and gave the wrong impression of Iran to the modernised nations; he ordered women to be unveiled in 1936. Shahrzad Mojab (1998) states that:

Contrary to widespread claims, the majority of women were not wearing the veil when the government launched the unveiling campaign. Confidential documents of the Pahlavi state, recently published by the Islamic government, reveal that women in rural and tribal areas, forming about eighty percent of the population, did not need to be unveiled because they never used the cover in the first place (Mojab, 1998: Webpage).[25]

Reza Shah hoped to launch Iran into modernity while still keeping Iran's history. [26] He did not want to include Islam and tried to avoid involvement with Britain and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Reza Shah's successor, Mohammad Reza Shah started a new era of intensive ties with the West. He visited the United States, met with US officials and addressed the United Nations. The British continued to control most of Iran's oil revenue through the British-Persian Oil Company (BP).[27] In 1951, Prime Minister Dr. Mossadeq, with the help of anti-colonialist politicians and the full support of many Iranians, nationalised the oil industry, forming the National Iranian Oil Company. This was seen as a threat to Western

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[25] For the women who chose to obey Islam and cover themselves, this act was nothing less than shameful. Instead of being so-called emancipated, they felt imprisoned by the unveiling law. Many of these women opted to stay at home.

[26] Reza Shah had carried on in the footsteps of the Qajar Dynasty in the path of 'self-imposed' colonisation of Iran; whereby Western ideologies were implemented by the nation onto itself. Another of Reza Shah's visions of restoring Iran's identity was to change the official international name of the country from Persia to the original Iran in 1935. The Iranian name for Persia was Iran and Persia was a Greek name taken from Pars meaning Parsian or Farsi. Iran comes from the word Arians the land of Arians.

[27] From British-Persian oil, BP later became British Petroleum in 1954. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/the_company_file/149259.stm for more detailed history of BP.

influence over Iran and, once again, foreign forces intervened in the politics of Iran. Mossadeq, who was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1952, was overthrown by the British MI-6, and the CIA undertook Operation Ajax.[28]

Dramatic increase in oil revenues in the 1970s and good relations with the West meant dramatic changes on the face of the society. Discotheques and bars, mini skirts and Western ideologies became part of Iranian culture. The vision of modernisation that the Shah had imported into Iran was also inspiring intellectuals; once again, opposing parties began to reshape and reform. The system set up by the Pahlavi government may have been modern but was considered unjust to the people, who felt that they did not have enough say in the country's politics. Before long, the 1979 Revolution took place and the clergy finally got to take centre stage with the leadership of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the face of the Islamic republic of Iran. The next section briefly explores the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war.

1.3 The Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War

This section takes a closer look at the more recent events which have influenced contemporary Iranian identity in the last decades of the 20th century leading to the 21st century. The Pahlavi era is characterised by the process of modernism, or "pseudo modernism" (Katuzian, 1981:285). The culmination of people's dissatisfaction and distrust of the Shah's regime set the stage for a

Fig. **1-2:** The Islamic Revolution of 1979, protestors burning the US flag (Source: www.news.bbc.co.uk 28/03/04)

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[28] For further analysis of the role of Mossadeq see Shiva Balaghi, 'Colonialism and Constitutionalism: Iran at the Turn of the Century', 1995.

significant change in 1979, the peoples' uprising, and the leadership of Ayatollah Rouhullah Khomeini led to the Islamic revolution.[29]

A detailed historical account of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 is beyond the scope of this research. However, it should be mentioned that Iranians revolted against the Shah's oppressive regime and, in a bloody revolution, overthrew the dictatorship and demanded a major change of government system from a monarchy to a republic. Other major demands were independence from Western imperialism, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, as well as social justice. The definition and the regulations of the Islamic state occurred gradually over the years following the revolution. Major ideologies prescribed by Islam were adapted by the new Islamic Republic; including laws derived from the *Sharia*[30], which were systematically adopted and enforced. These Islamic policies or the process of Islamization, as well as the government's self-definition, were symbolised by mandatory observation of the Islamic code of dress for women (*Hijab*[31]), which announced to the world that Iran was changing.[32]

Not long after the Islamic revolution, the changing face of Iran was again interrupted by the Iran-Iraq war. The eight-year war with Iraq (22 September 1980 to 20 August 1988) was another major event that shook Iran. A year after the revolution, whilst Iran was going through political and cultural upheavals, the war intensified.[33]

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[29] Figure 1.6 shows a picture taken at the anti-colonial protests, which took place during the Revolution in which the American flag was burnt. For a detailed chronology of the Revolution, see <u>A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution</u> by Nicholas M. Nikazemerad, (1980: 327–68).

[30] Sharia refers to Islamic law, derived from the Quran. It covers not only religious rituals and the administration of Islam, but every aspect of day-to-day life. This was a return to the values that the clerics had tried to implement in the Qajar period.

[31] The *Hijab* in Arabic means coverage and was traditionally provided by the chador, a long veil-like cloth covering the body from head to toe.

[32] See section 3.4 for a discussion on how the Islamic Revolution affected and changed Iranian women.

[33] The war was disastrous for the people of the two countries, stalling economic development, disrupting oil exports and costing an estimated million lives. Iraq was left with serious debts to its former Arab backers, including $14 billion loaned by Kuwait, a debt which contributed to Hussein's 1990 decision to invade Kuwait. The end of the war left the borders unchanged. Two years later, as war with the western powers loomed, Hussein recognised Iranian rights over the eastern half of the Shatt al-Arab, a reversion to the status quo which he had repudiated a decade earlier. The war would be extremely costly, one of the deadliest wars since the Second World War in terms of casualties. It is surpassed only by conflicts such as

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The reasons for this lengthy war, like many others, were various, including religious schisms, border disputes, political differences, as well as other countries' intentions for control of the nation's oil.[34] After a lengthy eight-year war, Iran regained the land that Iraq had taken and the war finally ended.[35]

Currently, Iran's international position is unstable. The President of the USA, George W. Bush has named Iran as one of the countries under the shadow of 'axis of evil'.[36] Iran's identity is once again questioned, by the rest of the world as well as by Iranians, especially the youth. More recent developments since Ahmadinejad's presidency and his views of international politics and Iran's nuclear disputes have made the situation even more complex.

The next section discusses the ways in which specific changes have affected Iranian national identity, which is further developed in chapter 4 in relation to the theoretical literature on identity.

1.3.1 Political and Social Change, and Cultural Identity

As a result of political events and consequent changes, there have been distinct cultural effects on the attitudes of Iranians and their identity. With the instability of the current situation, young Iranians feel threatened and confused about their own identity. Since the summer of 2002, many television programmes were made, and articles and books began

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the Vietnam War, Korean War and the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. While figures vary wildly, roughly a million people are estimated to have died.

[34] For Iran, the war resulted in low social morale, a baby boom in the 1980s, and a current population of 70% under the age of 30, making for a very young population indeed.

[35] Since the war, many streets were renamed with the names of the martyrs of the war, reminding Iranians daily of the pain and loss of war.

[36] For further discussion of Bush's speech, see www.uwm.edu/Dept/CIE/IWA/ModelUNDocs/I3.doc 28/08/2003.

to appear about Iranian identity, which questioned and debated different conceptions of what it means to be Iranian. Previously, the issue of identity was not directly discussed. It would seem that Iran has been going through a cultural transformation causing a crisis of identity for some time. With recent political upheavals, the issue of identity has become more prominent in the media and in literature.[37]

The question of Iranian identity is complex; today Iran is at a crossroads between the past and the present. As discussed earlier, the Persian Empire has evolved to what we know as Iran today, and today's Iran has added to this long evolving nation of change.[38] The position of contemporary Iran is uncertain yet hopeful. When president Khatami was elected in May 1997[39], a clear atmosphere of hope was created. He became known for the phrase "Dialogue among Civilizations", and tried to integrate Iran with the rest of the world, the West in particular. Unlike the previous regimes, he urges Iranians not to copy the West, but rather create a dialogue with the West. In his address at the United Nations in 2001, Khatami expressed the need for this dialogue:

> The question is how the United Nations may undertake the necessary measures to respond to this evolving global climate, and what impact it will have on the changing course of the life of mankind longing for salvation. I would like to propose, in the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that the United Nations, as a first step, designate the year 2001 as the 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations' (Khatami, 2001).[40]

At a conference in New Delhi on 12 July 2003, the Canadian Senator La Pierre commended Khatami's "Dialogue among Civilizations", adding that: "Dialogue is more effective than bombs" while calling dialogue the "antidote to terrorism". He added that

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[37] Not only are issues of Iranian identity explored through factual works, but artists, writers and filmmakers are also exploring this subject. Alongside this, the influence of Islam on Iranian culture continues to be explored by creative individuals.

[38] Iran's government is making continuous efforts to establish a national identity both within Iran, which is complicated by the young population's lack of experience, and globally in terms of how Iran is represented outside Iran.

[39] As he maintained a degree of popularity, he was re-elected in 2001.

[40] For a full transcript of Khatami's speech, see www.president.ir. To view the proposal, visit: www.dialoguecentre.org.

he believed "terrorism will grow and spread where there are no talks" (La Pierre, 2001).[41] The dialogue among civilizations proposes an understanding of one another's civilization and identity.[42] Towards the end of his second term, Khatami's popularity and the optimistic atmosphere was at its lowest level. Ahmadinejad won the people's vote in August 2005 with his promise of managing poverty in rural areas. His humble background meant that the rural people of Iran felt an affinity towards him and this gave him the majority of votes. Contrary to Khatami's reformist attitude, Ahmadinejad has since made major changes towards Islamic fundamentalism.

Ahmadinejad's fundamentalist view of Islam, his strong affiliation with Khamenei and his hardliner cabinet has started stance has started an era of reversing the reformist views of Khatami. Due to the shift of government policies and actions the identity crisis amongst Iranians has become ubiquitous. This was evident in a recent visit in March 2006 during the celebration of Iranian New Year (a 2,400 year old tradition). Iranians celebrated with more gusto than ever witnessed since the Islamic Revolution even though the celebrations coincided with a time of religious mourning. This united public gesture is a poignant political and cultural dialogue with a government losing popular support.

So far, this section has outlined Iran's history of conflicting and dramatic change in order to formulate a context in which the current position of Iranian women can be discussed. The next section addresses the current position of women in Iran with an emphasis on the ways in which Western feminism and the Islamic Revolution has shaped current feminist movements and, consequently, contemporary Iranian women's identities.

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[41] Following Iran's initiative on Dialogue among Civilizations at the 53rd session of the UN General Assembly in September 1998, and the proclamation of 2001 as 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations', UNESCO was asked to plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programmes to promote the concept of dialogue in other countries.
[42] This dialogue need not only manifest itself through politics, but also through other dialogues such as art. Art can reach those whom politics do not. This research is therefore concerned with highlighting and even erasing some of the misconceptions of the West toward Iran and vice versa. An example of how art can play a role in both testing reactions to Iran and making such dialogues possible, I decided to merge research and practice into one in my exhibition entitled 'Other Sides' in Iran. For a discussion of the relationship between research and practice, see Chapter 2 (section 2.2.2I).

1.4 Contemporary Iranian Women

So far, the discussion has concentrated on outlining the common factors that have affected Iranian people. This section focuses on the position of women in order to build a framework for the forthcoming discussions of contemporary Iranian women artists. This section briefly references the events discussed so far in the context of Iranian women's identity, their image and cultural positioning. Moving on from colonialism and modernisation, a central element that came out of this process was major changes in the position of women.[43] According to Robert Young, the invention of the issue of 'women' is a necessary result of modernity. Young states: "Modernity is defined by both its technology and its political concepts of equality and democracy, which necessarily involve the end of patriarchy and the institution of equal rights for women" (Young, 2003:96).[44] In order to distinguish the unique position of Iranian feminism, this section will explore the history of feminism in Iran in comparison to other Islamic countries such as Egypt and Turkey and will also define Iranian feminism in contrast to Western feminism.[45] This section also outlines the various types of Iranian feminisms and examines the ways in which feminism has evolved in Iran.

There is often a misconception that feminism in the Middle East has been inspired by and is a result of 'Western' feminism; that Eastern feminism and especially feminism in Muslim countries is an imitation of Western feminist theories. Mohanty (2003) points out that 'Western feminism' should not be thought of as a monolithic discourse above 'other' feminist writings. She draws attention to the fact that the 'Other' is often interpreted through hierarchical analyses. The relationship with non-Western subjects from a

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[43] Feminism in Iran has a long history with modernisation and colonialism, because Western influence also came in the shape of literature such as philosophy and feminist theory. Iranians continue to juxtapose Western ideas with Iranian ideas to this day. Bookshops in Iran contain large volumes of translated Western literature, which continues to grow year by year.

[44] For Iran, the 19th century was the beginning of modernisation, which came at a cost by suddenly displacing traditional beliefs already rooted in Iranian culture. For further analysis of the cultural shifts that took effect through modernisation, see Dabashi, 2001:215.

[45] Egypt and Turkey are closer to the Iranian situation than Saudi Arabia due to the latter's more intense version of Islam. This is mainly because they are the custodians of Mecca: the focus of the faith of Islam.

Western point-of-view is often a practise of coding, which is inherent in Western feminism rather than 'third world feminism'. This is a limiting strategy for the examination of other feminisms.

Closer examination and comparison of different approaches to feminism in countries such as Iran, Egypt and Turkey reveals that feminist thinking in the Middle East has evolved in a different social and political situation and differs significantly to that of the Western world. Feminism continues to develop with the particular situations and needs of individuals, groups, and nations. For example, although the history of feminism in Iran can be compared to that of Egypt and Turkey as one that has Islam at its centre; there are also distinct differences in feminist thinking in each nation. These differences are partly due to the different interpretations of Islam through Shiite or Sunni Islam, and a result of different political structures. Therefore, feminism in the Middle East, and indeed anywhere, can be conceived on both local and global levels. Globalisation plays a significant role in contemporary feminist movements. The global movements of feminism are not a homogeneous movement, and have very different beginnings for each nation, be it Western or Eastern.[46]

It seems unclear exactly where and when feminist thinking began in the Middle East. For Iranian women, it has been suggested that early feminist thinking can be traced back to poetry (Dabashi 2001). In 1848, one of Nasser al-Din Shah's wives Tahereh Qorrat al-Ayn (1814-1852), unveiled herself publicly and demanded the emancipation of women. Dabashi describes Tahereh as "deeply cultivated, and a poet of an exceptional versatility" (Dabashi, 2001:216). Many more female figures in feminism in Iran, such as Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi and Taj al-Sataneh (members of the Qajar aristocratic families 1840's), who gallantly wrote on behalf of women's rights, were later followed by prominent poets such as Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967), who was and still remains one

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[46] The notion of definition has also been targeted as a problematic area in the context of post-colonial feminist theory by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) in Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. Mohanty analyses the production of the 'third world woman' in some recent (Western) feminist texts as a singular monolithic subject. (see Lewis and Mills, 2003:49)

of the most influential Iranian feminist poets. [47] Her lifelong contribution to feminist thinking not only influenced Iranian women and prompted them to fight for their rights, but translations of her work continue to inspire other women in similar situations and settings. Iranian feminism originated in the privacy of the Shah's harems during the Qajar period, at a time when the threat of colonialism was at its peak.

Colonialism was also prevalent in Egypt and affected their feminism too. Egypt is often considered to be the birthplace of Islamic feminism. A prominent figure in the Egyptian feminist movement is, ironically, the Egyptian male lawyer, Qasim Amin (1865-1908), who wrote *The Liberation of Women* (1899). He argued that women's liberation was a patriotic duty that would not only serve women but all Egypt. *"The evidence of history,"* he wrote, "confirms and demonstrates that the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation" (Amin cited in Lee, 2004, Webpage). [48] Hoda Shaarawi further developed the efforts of Amin when, in 1923, following a trip to Rome during which she attended a prestigious women's conference, she took off her veil at a train station in Cairo, and prompted others to join with this powerful gesture. News of this soon spread to other neighbouring nations and a surge of intellectual feminist thinking began. Unlike Amin and Shaarawi, Tahira[49] was not influenced by Western feminist theory; her act was solely the result of her own experiences as a woman living in Iran at that time. Therefore, it seems that, in this context, Iranian feminism had a different origin to that of Egypt.

Besides Egypt, Turkey has also been progressing in feminism. In a paper entitled 'Turkish Feminist Movements and the European Union' (2003), Gül Aldýkaçtý Marshall draws upon the history of the Turkish feminist movement's relationship with Europe and the USA. In the same way as Egypt, the Turkish upper-class and educated women, most

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[47] For further analysis of Forough Farrokhzad's life and poetry, see www.farhangsara.com/farrokhzad.htm. The selection is from *Veils and Words* Milani, Farzaneh (2004).

[48] In 1901, he published another feminist book entitled *The New Woman*. In this book, Amin radically draws upon Western social theory. He writes that men treat women as though they are "not capable of moral or intellectual development" (Amin cited in Lee Smith, 2004, Webpage)

[49] However, it is not mentioned in Egyptian feminist history that, 75 years earlier, Tahereh Qorrat al-Ayn had unveiled herself publicly.

of whom Marshall identifies as close relatives of prominent civil servants, began to try to improve Turkish women's lives under the Ottoman Empire(Marshall, 2003:17).

In comparison, Iranian women were active and had established 9 women's societies and 63 girls' schools in Tehran with close to 2500 students by 1913. Marshall states that: "The presence of a feminist movement in line with women's movements of Europe and the United States played a very important role in organizing women, bringing women's issues to the public, and advocating gender equality in social, cultural, political and economic arenas" (Marshall, 2003:17). She points out that the primary force behind recent feminist changes in Turkey are due to the European Union, and that due to the plans of becoming a member of the EU the Turkish government has already made major changes in the Constitution, Civil Code and Criminal Code.[50] However, some of these changes could be viewed as discriminatory towards those women who choose to wear the Hijab.

Here, Kandiyoti is referring to an issue which affects many other Islamic nations such as Egypt, where the government is taking the lead in making the changes. For Iranian women, however, the return of Islam after the Islamic Revolution reinforced Islamic law and veiling in order to emancipate women. Presently, Iran does not have the same strategic political views as Turkey or Egypt. Although the essence of the concerns of all three nations stems from Islam as point of departure, their destinations vary dramatically due to their historical relationship with Islam and their relationship to Western culture and colonialism.

With modernisation also came influential feminist strategies, some of which were a result of foreign powers' uneasiness with Eastern women's veiled appearances.[51] Similarly to Iran, Turkey was also not directly colonised; it did, however, partake in what can be

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[50] For more detailed analysis of Turkish women's movements, see 'Women, Islam and the State' in Kandiyoti, 1991:22-47.

[51] Frantz Fanon states that the veiled woman: "who sees without being seen frustrates the coloniser" (Fanon, cited in Young, 2003:86).

defined as self-imposed colonialism. But for Turkey the adaptation of Western industry and philosophy has continued to this day. Iran, on the other hand, has been through an Islamic revolution, which has changed the course of the feminist movements. Egypt was colonised by Britain from 1882 to 1922; therefore there is a long history of Western trade. Interestingly, Egyptian women are amongst the most modest of Islamic nations; it is rare to see Egyptian women in the streets uncovered. Therefore, feminism in Egypt has taken a different route in comparison to Turkey and Iran, and indeed all forms of feminism could be said to differ from one another in some ways. Iranian feminism is contradictory in accommodating both anti-Islamic feminism and Islamic feminism.[52] The next section explores the different feminisms in Iran today in more detail.

1.4.1 Contemporary Iranian Feminism

In contrast to the way that the Western media portrays Moslem women, many activists of the Islamic feminist movements[53] argue that the Koran is fair to women and protects their rights. Rokhsana Bahramitush (1995) states her concern about the ways in which women in Muslim countries are portrayed:

> In Muslim countries today, the oppressive aspects of certain laws enforced in some countries, including Iran, are used to depict Muslims in general as backward and, therefore, badly in need of being taught civilized practices by the West (Bahramitash, 1995).[54]

Therefore, the analyses of different feminisms in Muslim countries, and their contrast to Western feminism, are central to the study of women in Muslim countries. After 12 years of absence from Iran, Khalili observes:

> You also learn that an Islamic version of feminism thrives in Iran, that a group of ferocious and learned women are using the Holy Qor'an and the

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[52] Anti-Islamic feminism views the laws of the Sharia as discriminatory to women's rights and dismisses Islamic feminism as one that is accommodating these laws.

[53] There is a recent trend among scholars of Middle Eastern and women's studies, in what has been termed as the new phenomenon of 'Islamic feminism' or 'Muslim feminists'.

[54] For further discussions, see Bahramitash, Rokhsana 1995, *Faces of Iranian Feminism* and www.genderwatchers.org/Legend/Iranian.htm (21/02/03).

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Hadith - the Prophet's sayings - to battle a patriarchal system reinforced by the laws of the land. These women have been candidates and members of the Majles written for women's magazines, spoken out from the theatre and television screens, and fought their silent and nearly-invisible war with a grace and courage you find admirable and infuriating at once (Khalili, 1997).

Interestingly, Khalili is pointing out here that, although Islamic feminism can be admirable, it can also be infuriating; that although the movement has its merits, it can subsequently reinforce certain laws by which non-Islamic Iranian women find it hard to live, such as the mandatory hijab. Because of these conflicting views of feminism, there are also conflicting feminist movements.[55] Individual activists in Iran and other Islamic countries have tried to define these terms and delineate its parameters. Haleh Afshar (1999) is one of the few writers who has addressed the various forms of Islamic feminism in Iran. She states that:

> The idea of Islamist feminists is anchored in their interpretations of the sources of Islamic Law. They have embarked on the process of reconstruction of precepts formulated some 14 centuries ago, to benefit women in their daily lives and transactions at the end of the 20th century (Afshar 1999:18).

She goes on to say that the process of 'change and interpretation' has been at the centre of Islam for centuries. Islam has been reinterpreted many times but, to the disadvantage of women, as the interpreters have generally been men (Afshar, 1999:19). Systematically, women have been excluded from the laws that originally were intended to protect them. This new Islamist feminism is concerned with re-viewing the Koran, and using it to emancipate women. Of course, this process is extremely complex when we consider the time span over which Islam has been mainly tailored for men by men.[56]

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[55] These conflicting feminist movements can fall into two groups: some favour traditional Islamic roles of women as guardians of Islamic culture; while others prefer Western ideals of women as equal to men in the job market.

[56] In Islamic law, polygamy is allowed for men. Although this was originally to ensure that women, in traditional Islamic society, were economically supported (men could support more than one wife), this law is no longer acceptable to modern Iranian women. After divorce, men have the first position in the right to the custody of their children. Today, these laws are seen by many to undermine women's security within society, and are being challenged by individual women and groups within Iran.

The social placement of men and women in Iran however, contrasts to other Islamic nations such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia; even after the Islamic Revolution, Iran can be described as having one of the more liberal regimes in terms of gender equality. Yet a closer investigation into the social position of women in Iran after the Islamic Revolution still suggests that, while there have been many improvements, there are still laws which need to be changed and Iran is still a male-centered nation. Khorasani (2001) argues that many of the problems women face in Iran today are due to the male-dominated society which they inhabit (Khorasani, 2001: 111)

Throughout Iranian history, governments have been male-orientated and male-dominated. Patriarchy is deeply-rooted and is part of the Iranian cultural system, which starts in the home.[57] In Iran, women are expected to be at the centre of family life; one could say that the home is the base for identities, which is traditionally encouraged to be the women's domain. However, an Iranian woman's identity could be viewed as composed of two parts: one being domestic and the other social; women live in two different worlds and struggle to achieve a balance between private and public life.[58] Ironically, since the Islamic revolution, great progress has been made by women in Iran in many public sectors.[59] Women's rights movements in Iran can be viewed to have been very influential in changing politics, economy and culture, and also in creating much of the contradictions in modern Iranian identity. These views, propagated by individuals such as Shirin Ebady,[60] have had a tremendous effect on the perception of Iranian women, both nationally and internationally.[61] However, Homa Hoodfar (1999) believes that, since the

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[57] For a discussion of patriarchy in Iran, see Khorasani, 2001 Chapter 3).

[58] In my own experience, the private and public appearance and behaviour of women in Iran differs significantly to those of Western women. This dual existence seems to be transmitted to children, where they have to keep home life and public life secret. Satellite television is illegal and children are asked by their parents to keep it a secret. These attitudes are creating an unsure youth.

[59] There are now women in the *Majlis*, they have prominent roles in the civil sector, and there are more women than men in universities. See Karr, 2000:231.

[60] Shirin Ebady is a leading women's rights activist in Iran, and was the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts in the protection of human rights.

[61] Among famous socially or politically active women, from different social strata and backgrounds, who have raised their voice for women's rights are: Jamileh Kadivar and Gowharulsharia Dastghaib (candidates

establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, images of Iranian women have come to epitomize the worst kind of retrogressive oppression:

> Symbolized by compulsory veiling, polygamy, and the exclusion of women from public life. Rendering the situation especially alarming is that these measures are supposedly prescribed by God and "Islam", and are thus not negotiable . . . However, developments in Iran have been far more complex than the frequently simple, often Orientalist analyses suggest (Hoodafar, 1999).[62]

She argues that, against all odds and despite all legal setbacks for women, empirical evidence belies much of the grim picture painted by the Western media. She points out that although women are barely present at the upper management level in Iran, issues concerning women (and the family) have been one of the most politicised topics since the revolution. While praising Iranian women's continuous efforts, she states:

> Thanks to the relentless work of both secularist and Islamist women activists, and the continuous participation of thousands of women in street and parliamentary politics, politicians –Never in Iran's patriarchal history have male politicians been so watchful of or attentive to women's political behaviour and views, which currently appear to threaten the historical, patriarchal Iranian world view (Hoodafar, 1999).

This new wave of women's political behaviour adds a new dimension to the study of Iranian women's identity, providing a complex arena which is constantly changing. Therefore, to write about Iranian women's identity or even attempt to fully understand their complicated world is not an easy task. Defining identities are complex and, in order to establish an overview of a nation's identity, several factors have to be taken into consideration (for example, politics, culture, economy). In the case of Iranian women, their identity is further complicated by their lack of, or at times exclusion from having an input in representations of their identity. Their image is often portrayed for them, by the Iranian government and by the Western media. Texts written by Iranian women, their

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for the Seventh Parliament in the February 2004 elections); Fatimah Rakeie (member of the Sixth Parliament and firm supporter of 'reformists'); and other women activists including Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji.

[62] Hoodafar is Professor of Anthropology at Concordia University and a founding member of Women Living Under Muslim Law, an international organization that campaigns for Muslim women's rights.

beliefs, concerns and aspirations in a non-fiction format has been scarce. In recent years, many women writers are publishing fictional novels that deal with certain feminist issues. However, the Internet allows Iranian women to voice their opinions and concerns without being censored. Nevertheless, their 'true' image is rarely seen publicly in Iran and seldom in the West.[63]

The Western media often over-dramatises Muslim women. Sociologist Gema Martín-Muñoz (2002) argues that many of the misconceptions of Muslim women are related to the Western media. She argues that: "Women are often called upon to illustrate a preconceived cultural landscape that endorses the 'agreed paradigm of Islam in the West': distant, passive, exotic, victim, veiled, reacting to events instead of actively participating in them" (Martín-Muñoz, 2002). Her analysis of American newspapers shows "that Western media interest in women in Islamic countries tends to be restricted to the Muslim dimension" (Martín-Muñoz, 2002). She concludes by stressing that, although inequalities between the sexes are not exclusive to Islamic cultures, the emphasis based on Islamic women in Western media rarely occurs elsewhere. Women are said to be in a better social position after the Islamic revolution. In a recent report made by William Beeman (2001), author of <u>Language, Status and Power in Iran</u> (1986), states that:

> ...contrary to American belief, women in the Islamic Republic are better
> off today than they were under the Pahlavi regime. The Islamic Republic
> has made a special point of emphasizing women's equality in education,
> employment, and politics as a matter of national pride (Beeman, 2001).

The adaptability and endurance of Iranian women can be said to be a result of the historical evolution of 'change';[64] symbolised by being forcibly unveiled in the 1930s, and again veiled in 1979. The traces left by previous governments and cultural ideologies still play a role in the construction of contemporary Iranian women's identity and their

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[63] In my experience throughout the 15 years of living in the UK, reactions to Iran and Iranian women have generally concerned the black 'chador', worn by an individual who spends most of her time quietly and at home.

[64] The notion of change is further discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to Iranian women artists and their identity. The notions of change and contradiction are central themes in this study.

position within the social structures of Iran. Consequently, the national identity of present-day Iran is connected to women's central role.[65] There are many female-led organisations which work toward integrating women more and more into employment opportunities, thus into Iranian culture.

While there are improvements, Farhi (1999), social thinker, political scientist and writer from Tehran, views the current position of Iranian women as unstable and confusing. Farhi suggests that, since the Islamic revolution, the state has:

> ...maintained a Janus-faced relationship with women; on the one hand, seeking to mobilise and keep their faces, and bodies (if not their issues) at the centre of the Revolution and, on the other hand, forcefully attempting to be the articulator of what deems to be the 'proper' Muslim woman (Farhi, 1999).

Farhi also acknowledges that this central position has been utilised in effective ways by women, in that they have been able to voice (to some extent) their concerns within this centre stage of the 'revolutionary drama'. Most visibly, since the Revolution, the number of women at universities around Iran has already surpassed that of men. This, among other reasons, may be due to strict Muslim families' acceptance of the new regime and the creation of a safer environment for their daughters to attend universities. Farhi notes that:

> In such a field of conflicting forces, Iranian women have been both cautious and opportunistic, staying aloof whenever necessary and seizing every possible opportunity whenever a space for manoeuvre is smelled (Farhi, 1999).

Despite their social gains after the Islamic Revolution, women rarely serve as judges and seldom as religious leaders. Adultery is still punishable by stoning to death. Boys are tried for crimes at the age of fifteen, while a girl can be tried at the age of 10, when she is also allowed by law to marry.[66] Inheritance is half that of a man. Men can divorce their

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[65] In the available Iranian literature, there is a lack of discussion of Iranian men's identities. One of the reasons for this may be that women have always been at the centre of Iranian national identity, and occupy a more complex arena in Iranian society.

[66] Young marriages are now culturally discouraged.

wives at will, but women need to prove an unstable relationship through a court trial. A woman needs her husband's permission to travel abroad, start a business, and sometimes even to get a job.[67]

As established in this section, it would be naive to generalise about women of Islamic countries such as Iran. The Western image of Iranian women portrayed through the media is slowly changing. More articles are beginning to appear which begin to explore differences between Islamic nations' attitudes to women in more detail. For example, the Afghani women's position and relationship to Islam is different to Iranian women's, because they are influenced by different histories, cultures and political systems. However, Muslim women are united under the image of the hijab or veil which is the most visual aspect of their collective identity, setting them apart from women of other nations or religions. The next section briefly explores the veil and the different ways it affects the identity of Islamic women and contemporary Iranian women in particular.

1.4.2 The Significance of the Veil and Iranian Women's Identity

The veil is often seen as having a singular function and meaning to all Islamic nations and Muslims around the world. A homogenous approach to this deeply rooted symbol is precisely what causes misrepresentations and interpretations. Throughout the Middle East, the history of the veil shows that each nation had its own particular relationship with it, both enforcing and resisting it at different times and under different rulers.

The complex history of the veil, or what constitutes modest Islamic attire (*Hijab*), requires careful observation; the veil has many different appearances and just as many

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[67] Aside from these laws, since the revolution, literacy among women has improved with organisations such as the LMO (Literacy Movement Organisation) in Tehran which started the initiative and is active nationally. Mehdizadeh, Director of Educational Affairs, states that the literacy rate in rural areas has improved from 55.8 per cent in 1979 to 80.4 per cent in 2000, and for women it improved from 47 per cent to 76.3 per cent. For further discussion on the rights of Iranian women, see Sciolino, 2001. The official website for the LMO can be found at www.unescobkk.org/education/appeal/clc/p_iran.htm.

connotations. Therefore, the wearing of the veil or hijab can have different meanings and associations for an Iranian woman as for an, Afghani Turkish or Egyptian woman.[68] More specifically, each nation has countless contradictory attitudes towards the wearing of the veil. For example, the current mandatory law of wearing the veil in Iran, in an attempt to render the nation 'Islamic', has created many modifications of the veil by women who either oppose or condone it.[69] These attitudes are also the result of each nation's specific historic attitudes towards veiling, which have to be taken into consideration.

Historically, the veil has been conceived from the 'outside' as either tantalisingly mystical and 'full of Eastern promise' or oppressive and backward. From the early days of travel to Islamic countries such as Egypt, Turkey and Iran, the veil has been both a object of desire and interrogation. Travel writers would often fantasise about what the veil did not allow them to see. Reina Lewis (2003) discusses the travel writings of British feminist Grace Ellison who, in 1915, visited Turkey. In her work, Lewis points out that Ellison was in love with the veil and, whilst she was all for fighting for women's rights, she found the veil to be an irresistibly beautiful garment. In her essay entitled: 'On veiling, vision and voyage: cross cultural dressing and narratives of identity', Lewis examines a dialogue which took the form of letters between Grace Ellison and her Muslim friend Zeyneb Hanum. She poses the question: "...whether recent critical work on the pleasures and politics of cross-cultural dressing can be applied equally to Europeans wearing the veil as to Turkish women wearing French Fashions" (Lewis, 2003:521).

In the context of this research, Lewis's example here poses similar questions that can be asked of the Iranian women's relationship to the veil and Western clothing. Lewis also

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[68] Currently, Iranian women are required by law to observe the hijab, whereas in Egypt the current regime is struggling to convince religious women to discard the veil in public spaces, as is the law in Turkey. Both approaches are problematic in that neither takes into consideration the various degrees to which the women themselves either want to conform to or go against the hijab.

[69] The hijab in Iran is interpreted in a variety of ways from the Chador, to trousers and overcoat (which has recently (2005) become much shorter, tighter and more brightly coloured.)

questions Ellison's delights in the Harem, her being too close to her subjects as a woman, her being amongst the Turkish elite and experiencing the rare benefits of the rich, and using the veil in order to experience the thrill of momentarily being the 'Other' (Lewis, 2003:524). Lewis also points out that the relationship between 'new disciplines and new technologies' became coterminous and, by late 19th century, photography was considered an important part of researching cultures (Lewis, 2003:256). Photography has remained one of the main, if not the most, accessible and prompt forms of picturing the 'Other' in the world-wide media.[70] Today's relationship with veiled women continues to be explored through photography.

Fig. **1-3:** Muslim women from different Muslim countries

Visually, all of the women in figure 1.3 look different because of the ways they interpret the veil and Islamic attire. They represent various Islamic attitudes through clothing. The contradiction lies in the different views of Islam, and the different ways they deal with Islamic laws daily. Another attitude towards the veil today is the common Western (unveiled) nations' perception of this clothing as a tool of repression, which is both desired for its exotic qualities, and desired to be removed in order to 'emancipate' the

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[70] Rarely do the 'Western' or 'Eastern' audiences come face to face with the multifaceted images of one another, images that convey more than one view point; images that are speaking of the many faces of the veil for instance.

women. Young (2003) states that the Western response to the veil is often first and foremost to remove it, which he believes has a direct link to a colonial attitude:

> More often, reading the veil amounts to how the veil looks out of its own social context, to what the exterior viewer puts into his or her interpretation, and has very little to do with what the veil actually means for the woman who is wearing it (Young, 2003:86).

Therefore, the veil has to be viewed in context. For Iranian women, there are many contexts and, therefore, the concept of veiling is mutable. Evidently, the veil is not just about covering the hair; it is also about the separation of the space between men and women.[71] Starting from the concept of the veil as a way of dividing the sexes and limiting their access to one another, the Iranian government, as well as other Islamic states, has often tried to implement other ways of separating men and women. For example, in 1993, the Deputy Minister of Health, Larijani, believed that there should be minimum contact between the sexes in medical centres. He proposed to create all-women hospitals; a somewhat severe concept that would be impossible to implement effectively (Iran Bulletin, no.3, second series, July-September 1993). The concept of special separation is complex and has been subject to much debate as noted by Haleh Afshar:

> The obsession with the separation of men and women has resulted in restrictive as well as ludicrous situations and has on the whole been breached out of sheer impracticality (Afshar, 1998:212).

Spatial segregation, therefore, is not just a physical separation; it is also a separation of gender specific beliefs and ideologies. Sarah Graham-Brown (2003) explains that:

> Segregation of space and control over the visibility of women were forms of patriarchal control which emphasized the need to channel and contain women's sexual power (Graham-Brown, 2003: 502).

She goes on to note that Muslim women's sexual power has been argued to be different to that of European women. The ways that Muslim women or women living in Islamic nations engage with 'sexual power' is often covert rather than the European or Western

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[71] In Islam, women are believed to be protected by the veil from the *na-mahram-* men who are not their family or husband.

engagement with sexuality, which is generally overt. This difference in the practise of sexual power is evident in the ways in which women use their bodies in order to gain access to patriarchal spaces. For example, since the Islamic revolution, Iranian women have demanded access to the political arena by using their *covered* bodies as a way of demonstrating that, by Islamic law, they cannot be discriminated against as women; they are no longer sexually arousing to men since they are covered.

However, being covered does not mean that women are no longer attractive to men. There are often contradictions at play as noted by Nawal Saadawi (2004). Saadawi, one of Egypt's leading feminists, points out a concern with what she terms as 'false awareness' by women who are either for or against veiling. In an interview with Ahmed Nassef of Internet-based 'Women's e-News', she states that:

> These days, there is also a phenomenon I call "false awareness". Many women who call themselves feminists today wear makeup, high heels, tight jeans and they still wear the hijab. It is very contradictory. They are victims of both religious fundamentalism and American consumerism. They have no political awareness. They are unaware of the connection between the liberation of women on the one hand and of the economy and country on the other. Many consider only patriarchy as their enemy and ignore corporate capitalism (El Saadawi, cited in Nassef, 2004: Webpage)

Therefore, it is what the veil signifies and is associated with that gives prominence to often contradictory meanings and various degrees of power, conformity, and resistance. Afshar explains that, for Iranians:

> The veil has become one of the negotiable elements governing women's lives. All too often the government asserts its effectiveness by tightening the dress codes and issuing new orders on stricter rules of the veil. Similarly many women assert their opposition by periodic outbursts of what the moralists choose to call 'nakedness' that is discarding the head scarf (Afshar, 1998:197).

Afshar also points out that, although these acts can be seen as symbolic gestures, public de-veiling is punishable by law. [72] The Iranian government regards the veil as central to the correct moral behaviour of the nation, which positions women at the very centre of the nation itself. It is indisputable that the veil encapsulates a variety of contradicting ideologies and concepts both for the wearer and for the non-wearer. What is important is who is wearing the veil and in what context. The fact that the veil itself has been subject to much debate both from inside and outside, often with contradicting concepts, reveals its changeable and malleable nature. For Iranian women, the veil can be a symbol of womanhood, protection, and even emancipation; it can also be the symbol of repression, patriarchy and internment.

Globally, new situations brought about by governments or external pressures impact on the veil; whether it is the banning of the veil in schools in France[73] or frequent reinforcements of the veil in Iran, intervention of this kind prompts women to modify their views and approaches towards veiling and the hijab. It seems that the veil's relationship with government cannot be separated. Those who choose not to veil, or are not required to wear it, also need to be open to the ways in which this powerful and malleable cloth shifts and changes. The veil is indefinable, it is shapeless until it is worn; it is then that it gains both its various physical shapes and meanings. The veil continues to be at the centre of the relationship and debates between Islamic nations and non-Islamic nations (mainly the West), which includes both those that condemn it and those that promote it. Iranian women have a pivotal role, through the flexuous veil, as symbols of the changeable nature of Iranian identity.

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[72] In accordance to Article 139 of the Islamic Criminal Code, the sentence for being unveiled in public could be anything from 10 days to two months imprisonment (Afshar, 1998:197).

[73] France's ban on religious symbols and apparel in public schools took effect on 2 September 2004. The ban includes all overtly religious dress and signs (including Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses). However, the furore over the ban has focused mainly on the banning of Muslim headscarves or hijab.

1.5 Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the many forces of change which have shaped, or maintained, Iranian identity. The history of Iran reveals a rich environment in which cultures merged and developed resulting from Iran's geographic position as a gateway between the East and the West. Although Iran was never formally colonised, its modern history is shaped by European Imperialist projects. Iran has gone through the experience of a quasi-colony as well as a neo-colony. As demonstrated in this chapter, a particular type of colonisation took place in Iran, and continues to do so today. What began as a quest for modernisation, which indeed directly benefited Iran, convulsed the country into sudden changes, some of which the nation was not ready for. For Iranians today, this history of economic and cultural colonisation[74] is as much part of its current position as it was then.[75]

Both the Iranian government and the Iranian people have had a contradictory relationship with modernisation and, currently, globalisation. What looms over Iran now is the consequences of the constant flow of Western ideologies without the means to practice some of them. Although one can hear the latest Madonna songs in taxicabs, buy the latest perfume from Chanel, or discuss the latest Western views on globalisation on the Internet, as before, Iran is still tied to its traditional history and culture of Islam. The celebration of New Year still takes place; Muslim women still take pride in their chadors whilst other Iranian women have plastic surgery and dye their hair blonde so that they can appear more European. The current state of Iran's national identity has been termed as 'Tamed schizophrenia' by Daryush Shaygan (2004). Shaygan refers to Iran as both a mediator and a median: a schizophrenic society that is in constant flux, where both

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[74] 'Cultural colonisation' is a term used by some critics of neo-colonialism. For further reading, see Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 1940, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, cited in During 1999:31.

[75] Peter Lentini (2001) points out that, during the late Shah's reign, American influence over Iranian culture was encouraged, and he supported the media in showing Western ideologies through movies and advertisement of Western ideals of consumption and capitalism. Lentini (2001)

history and present day coincide, and sometimes collide with one another, to make way for new perspectives of selfhood and nation.

Iran is still being affected by its quasi-colonised history, and by the current Americanisation of the global world. Although McDonald's has no branches in Iran, there are countless imitations of it in every major city. Fuelled by American movies, most young Iranians dream of moving to America. They have grown up with the vision of the 'American dream', offered firstly to their parents by the Shah and later available to them through the satellite dishes that the government tried to ban.[76] Therefore, it seems that Iran's relationship with its colonisers is not one-sided; in many cases, notably Nasser ed-Din Shah, Iran's invited the colonisers to improve it. Today, Iran is once again threatened by foreign influences. Following the example of the American and British attack on Iraq, Iran is next in the firing line for reform. What differs this time for Iranians is their experience of neo-colonisation, whether this has any place in the hearts of a discontent young nation or not is debatable.

Iranians' perception of the West has changed significantly since the Industrial Revolution. In more recent history, Western ideologies have added a significant layer of influence which now resonates throughout Iranian culture. These ideologies are, at points, in stark contrast to the Islamic ideology of society and culture. Of course, the relationship between the East and West is undergoing constant change and continues to be mutual in order to further developments in world economy, and globalisation is inevitable. Aside from political relationships,[77] countries need each other's resources and technologies, as well as philosophy, science and other cultural exports. Today, Iran plays

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[76] Although the Islamic government tried to defuse Western influence through banning satellite dishes, many Iranian households possess one.
[77] Iran fulfilled an important role towards the end of World War Two by acting as a neutral ally, which meant that although it did not send soldiers to the front, it contributed by letting the Allies use oil and other resources as well as its roads, bridges and other infrastructure. This contribution was so important that Iran was named by Winston Churchill as the "Bridge of Victory", for playing a logistic role in the victory. See www.answers.com/topic/participants-in-world-war-ii for an in depth discussion of the participants in world war II.

a key role in the politics of the Middle East; this has a significant role in the creation and maintenance of Iranian identity both within Iran and outside it.

The various definitions of the current situation in Iran as discussed in this chapter suggest that appropriation of Iran's heritage lies deep within contemporary Iranian identity. The focus of this research, on the parameters of change, contradiction, constantly shifting identities and the consequent positions assumed or maintained by Iranian women artists, is explored further in the following chapters. The next chapter will explore influential factors in the formation of identities and how the changes discussed affect Iranian identity.

Having explored and examined the particular historic context in which Iranian national identities are formed, the next chapter outlines the particular methodological approaches taken in order to understand and discuss the various positions of contemporary Iranian artists and their identities.

Chapter 2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This research examines the works and viewpoints of Iranian women artists from two distinct groups: those living and working in Iran; and those displaced from Iran. The use of these two distinct groups gives the research a more "secure platform" (David Sweet 1995). This platform enables the analysis of Iranian women's identities from two different perspectives and approaches to fine art practice; it also facilitates a unique method of exploring Iranian women's identities. Because of my position as a contemporary Iranian woman artist, the analysis of personal experience and knowledge, together with other contemporary Iranian woman artists, has facilitated a more in-depth understanding of the notion of national identity and the possible effects on works of art.

My shared experience with the artists is further analysed through reflection, as discussed in this chapter. In this research, both theory and practice are closely-related and are integrated through the use of a suitable methodology that acknowledges their relationship. Through a multimethod approach, this enquiry is informed by a variety of sources, which include my own art practice (figure 2.1), the artists' works and comments and a broad range of Iranian and English literature (including a constant review of recent material from the Internet).

This chapter outlines the methods implemented in this investigation. It discusses methodological approaches to this type of enquiry, to demonstrate the position of this research within the discipline. This chapter commences with a discussion of the overall methodology, and demonstrates the rationale for using the 'reflective practitioner' approach (Schön, 1995). Section 2.2.1 discusses my role in this research as a central element of the enquiry in contributing to the data as a contemporary Iranian woman artist

living and working in the UK. The production of artefacts and their relationship with the research is explored in section 2.2.2. Although the core methodology can be categorised as that of a reflective practitioner, other methods have also been used to aid the research and analysis of the data. The next sections discuss in more detail the various methods used to aid this research, such as the use of documentary sources (relevant literature, exhibition catalogues and magazines), interviews with artists and visual analysis of artworks.

2.2 Research Methodology

Because of the lack of material on contemporary Iranian women artists, the first task of the research was to establish various methods of data collection to enable the research to commence. As well as researching and analysing the particular political and cultural context of this research which has formed part of the previous chapter, my position an Iranian woman artist also provided an insight into the initial areas that needed to be explored. Because of my position as both researcher and a practitioner, the methodology needed to address and clarify my position in the research. It also became evident that a method of effective evaluation needed to be used in order to maintain an objective view of the research arguments.

Through speaking with other fellow artists it became apparent that artists rarely question their methodologies. When artists were questioned about their methodology, most artists did not seem to be directly aware of the methodology they employ when engaged in an activity. However, within each activity, there are methods employed and an overall methodology is established, even if the person in the activity is not aware of this. Evidently, there are distinct differences between the methods of fine art production as practice only, and fine art production as a method of research and enquiry. It could be said that, in this research, most of the artists are engaged in fine art production as mainly 'practice'. This practice may be part of their artistic enquiries but it is not identified as a

methodology. On the other hand I have *knowingly* used various methods of art production; art as a research tool (furthering theories of identity through art practice), art as data (further analysed through engagement with theory) and art production as a way of engaging with various audiences (analysed through evaluating responses).

One difficulty a researcher in the field of fine art may face is the approach to knowledge derived from fine art practice and its proficiency in engaging with research arguments; or rather, how the researcher's artefacts can be used effectively as data. David Sweet points out in a paper entitled 'The Reflective Practitioner in Context' that:

> The device of the reflective practitioner...as I understand it, when applied to the artist... requires that the individual operates on two levels. The first is the customary one of familiar studio routines. The other takes place, on an unfamiliar platform, built to secure a position from where these routines may be examined (Sweet, 1995:3).

He goes on to say that this method can present difficulties in that the artist may only generate personal knowledge, which is ineffective on a general-use level, and is not an accountable form of research.

In order to avoid generating personal knowledge in research such as this (where the researcher's experience and practice are part of the research enquiry), the issue of accountability was identified as an integral aspect for evaluation through implementing suitable methodology. Schön points out that the issue of accountability and the analysis of data derived from experience (or tacit knowledge) can be solved through *reflective* conversations with the various research situations. He states:

> In a practitioner's reflective conversation with a situation that he treats as unique and uncertain, he functions as an agent/ experient. Through his transaction with the situation, he shapes it and makes himself part of it. Hence, the sense he makes of the situation, having a life of its own distinct from his own intentions, may foil his projects and reveal new meanings (Schön, 1995:163).

In this research, the act of reflection has been crucial in the evaluation and analysis of both data and personal knowledge. Schön argues that there are two types of reflection:

reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. The first term refers to reflection after an activity has been carried out[1], and the second describes reflection during an activity, which directly affects the outcome.[2] Reflection enables the practitioner to develop a more conscious view of his or her actions, i.e. to re-view situations and problems and confidently choose methods which solve that problem. Once reflection has taken place, it then becomes experience, which with time often becomes tacit knowledge and can be efficiently 'recalled' where appropriate. Maranhao (1995), explains that:

> The relationship between reflection, dialogue and the subject can be represented in an unproblematic manner as one of smooth complementarity. Reflection is a property of the subject associated with his faculty of thinking. More specifically, reflection is a particular operation of thought by means of which the process of thinking folds upon itself, creating a two-tier effect in which one thinks about thinking... (Maranhao cited in Steier, 1995:236).

Furthermore, the act of thinking about thinking leads to a process of introspection; of turning inwards to the 'self'. In order to understand my role in this aspect of the research, it was useful to refer to myself as a participant observer and field researcher. Babbie (2004) defines the role of the field researcher as one that does not always participate, and at times observes (Babbie, 2004:285). Personal experiences relating to the research were noted and analysed using critical theories of identity. At times even solid perceptions of my own identity were revised and reshaped as a result of being part of the research and having engaged in reflective conversations between 'self' and 'theory'. The next section is a more detailed exploration of the role of the researcher as a central component in the methodology of the reflective practitioner in this research.

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[1] For example, the public response to the OtherSide exhibition (Zinat-ol Molk Gallery, Shiraz, 2001) prompted a discussion forum, which presented further paths of enquiry into the way Iranians view Western opinions about them.

[2] For example, the outcome of the discussion forum prompted further enquiry and determined new artworks. For examples of exhibition responses and artworks, see Chapter 5.

2.2.1 Role of the Researcher

The practice-based element of this research in the field of Fine Art PhD is a relevantly recent phenomenon and is relatively new to the Humanities. A Practice-based or Practice-led PhD is notably different to the more traditional art theory or art history PhD's.[3] Prof Carole Gray of the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen has presented several papers on the notion of practice in research in Art and design in recent years. She views practice in research as an important evolution in art research and describes this as 'a different way of knowing':

> Creative practice is a legitimate form of research, leading to different ways of knowing from the dominant academic kind characterised by reason and logic, that champions theory as the primary means of generating new knowledge. (Gray 2006, web page)

As creative practice offers a different kind of knowledge, it is therefore important to bring a level of accountability and understanding to this knowledge. In practice-based research such as this, there needed to be a degree of detachment from the artworks in the evaluation process. A series of questions had to be addressed: how do the artworks produced relate to the research; how can emotions put forward in artworks which can often be subjective inform the research question; how can direct involvement of the researcher be evaluated? In order to address these issues, it required a multimethod approach.[4]

This multimethod approach facilitated the utilisation my own role in the research effectively and objectively. In this research, 'personal' experience and knowledge has been drawn upon as a starting point for reflection on the theoretical analysis of Iranian women's identity and art. The numerous visits to Iran, involvement in interviews,

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[3] However, the role of practice in research is not uncommon, and has been used in fields such as science, where experiments form a major part of the research.

[4] The multimethod approach can be used in an investigation of a research question using a variety of research methods, each of which may contain inherent limitations, with the expectation that combining multiple methods may produce convergent evidence. For further discussions on the multimethod approach, see Brewer and Hunter 1989, Multimethod Research, A Synthesis of Styles.

seminars, exhibitions, and the experience of travelling between Iran and the UK has given direct and first hand insight into the subject. This direct involvement in the research has required a critical and objective analysis, through adapting methodologies in the spirit of the reflective practitioner. Subjective experiences have been analysed through objective analysis of issues by referring to relevant theories in the literature on identity. My empathy, which could be described as methodological empathy or as noted earlier as that of a participant observer or a field researcher, with the subject allowed rapport to be achieved with the informants, in this case Iranian women artists, allowing a direct approach to the subject, and a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

Another method of enquiry was established due to the fact that this research has been conducted in both the UK and Iran. Evidently, this thesis has been written in English and used English cultural theory with its significant history of key words such as 'hybridity'.[5] However, the use of Farsi in the interviews with artists and Farsi cultural theory and research has also been part of the research, which according to Stephanie Pourcel (2002) is a valid methodology. In a working paper entitled 'Investigating Linguistic Relativity: A Research Methodology' (2002), Pourcel discusses the relationship between language and thinking, and analyses how language can change the ways we perceive situations and ourselves. Pourcel's approach suggests that using two or more sets of languages to explore ideas bears a closer relationship to the object of enquiry. Pourcel explores English and French through comparative linguistics. This research is in the spirit of Pourcel's approach of using two languages. The two languages posed two distinct roles, which became of notable importance throughout the research.

During the course of this research it became evident that the act of role-play is an integral part in the realisation of the methodological devices employed. The term 'role-play' here means that the researcher adopts different roles (as a result of reflection-on-action), in order to achieve the best results from a situation. Different roles were taken up during

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[5] For further analysis of the methodological effects of writing about Iranian identity using the English language, see Chapter 3 (section 3.3.2) Language and Identity.

various interviews (as a result of reflection-on action), i.e. in certain cases, the artist being interviewed felt more at ease if approached from the position of the academic and less of the artist; thus not in competition with the artist. In some other cases, the artists felt more at ease when I was more inclined towards being an artist, thus establishing a common ground between artist and interviewer/artist. During the visits to Iran, I became aware of the shifts which occurred in my role as an Iranian woman and in other instances the Westernised Other. The awareness of these distinct roles has been central to understanding notions of national identity and the crisis of identity faced by some Iranians. This unique position enabled me to adapt to changing circumstances within Iranian society and more specifically to my own positioning.

Peter Landy (1993) describes the self as: "a central intelligence that frames the personality" (Landy, 1993:30). By intelligence, Landy refers to the awareness of the frameworks under which we create our various personalities, similar to the examples above. He goes on to say: "If at the core of the human personality is not a thin, a godlike self, perhaps we can conceptualise a dramatic process - that of impersonation, the ability of the developing person to fashion a personality" (Landy, 1993:30). Therefore, the personalities fashioned for each unique situation that this research presented are in themselves valuable methods. This method of role-play is also central to contemporary Iranian identity due to the notable dual lives that Iranian women lead. Landy concludes by stating that: "...the concept of role implies not only that the world is a stage and the people are players, but that the space between reality and imagination is the source of creative energy" (Landy, 1993:30). In this case, the research arena has become the stage on which different roles were played; as the researcher, and the researched. The exploration of the self through distinguishing different aspects that effectively aid the research has been used as a method to understand some of the theoretical ideas within the research, through reflective conversations with the situation and myself. The act of role-play has been used both in social situations and in the artworks in order to build upon and enhance the research.

The other visible distinction has been the roles of the practitioner (artist, studio based, creator of artefacts), and the researcher (the reader, interviewer, and writer), and the critic (ensures that both research and practice comply with the aims). Earl Babbie points out that, within social research, the researcher has to adopt certain roles in order to conduct the research effectively. He states: "Different situations ultimately require different roles for the researcher" (Babbie, 2004:286). These distinctive roles have been central to the methodology of this research.

The changing of roles also became an important action in the development of both theory within the thesis and more visibly in my practice as exemplified in *Improbable Dialogues* (2001). The digital image in figure 2.2 re-presents two fictionalised aspects of my identity as the traditional 'exotic' Persian woman and the Iranian 'terrorist' in dialogue with one another.[6]

In this research, there are three distinct roles. Each role has been identified to have certain characteristics. This methodology has been informed by both my art practice, in which I have explored identity through

Fig. **2-1**: *Improbable Dialogues*, Mitra Memarzia (2001) Digital print 150 x 200cm

role-play, and an awareness of methodological approaches to research as a whole. The three main 'research roles' are identified in figure 2.2.

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[6] I am interested in the space between these roles and the meanings which are born out of that dialogue rather than what the individual roles stand for. The notion of role-play is also represented in the diagram in figure 2.3 in relation to the research methodology.

The Artist   The Critic   The Researcher

Maker   Identifies data   Manager of data

Technician   Reviewing / Analysing   Formulates lines of enquiry

Instigator   Ensures rigour   Formal/objective link

Explores ideas/theories   Reader   Engages with ideas/theories

Exhibitions   Analyses theory & practice   Written thesis
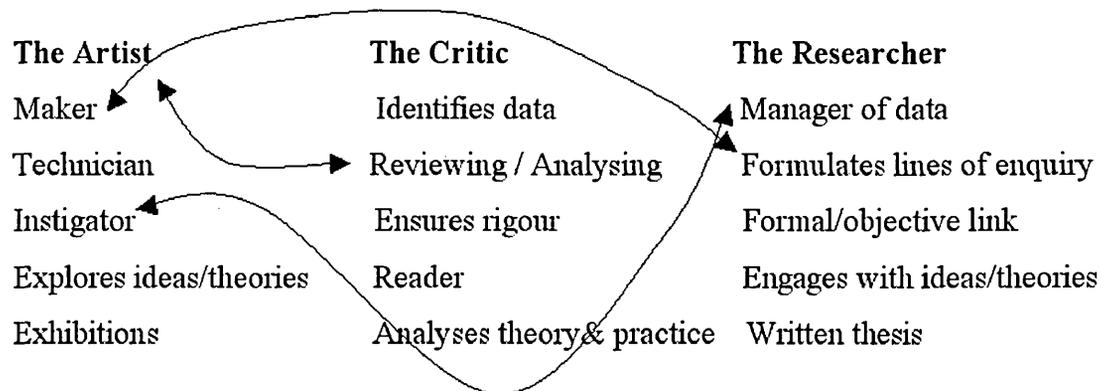
Fig. 2-2: Research Roles- activity of making artworks

In a new research 'situation', these roles work as a unit, in that they interact with one another; different aspects of each role reveal different ways of working effectively. The arrows above have been drawn as examples of the following. In the process of producing an artwork (illustrated above), the researcher is the 'artist' at the outset, but the researcher is also taking notes on or even informing the initial idea for the piece of work, and the critic may be analysing the work for its theoretical content and implications for the research. The arrows have a dual direction because there is a dialogue being undertaken. There are countless possible interactions between the roles, and between theory and practice. It is also notable that one cannot draw a distinct line between the roles cited above; characteristics of each role are not exclusive to that role. Not only do the roles interact with one another but at times they also share characteristics in a given situation. For example, the artist criticising and engaging with ideas and theories in the same way as the researcher would.

Theory and practice are interconnected in this research. For example, the concept of 'displacement' is identified as a topic for research, and with the theoretical knowledge achieved, these concepts are then explored through the process of art making. This process may be repeated over and over, until a suitable solution is reached and the work is realised to its full potential. The same can be applied to the thesis; a circular path of enquiry is undertaken to reach the desired goal. Thus, within this research, there have

been different modes of knowledge achieved through the use of theory, practice and experience.

Honey & Mumford: Typology of Learners

- Concrete Experience
- Reflective Observation
- Abstract Conceptualisation
- Active Experimentation

Activist prefers doing and experiencing

Reflector: observes and reflects

Theorist: wants to understand underlying reasons, concepts, relationships

Pragmatist: likes to "have a go" try things to see if they work
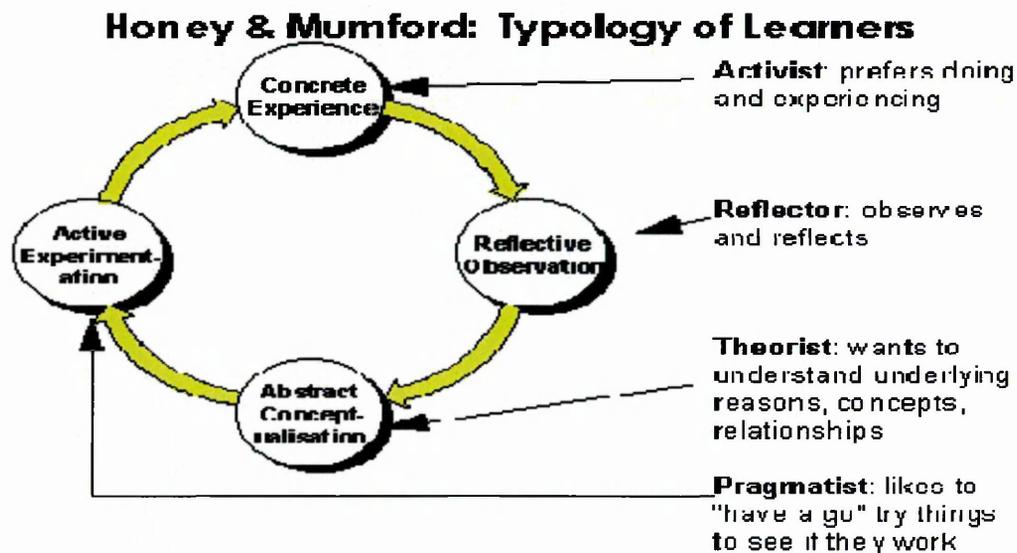
Fig. **2-3**: Honey and Mumford elaborate on Kolb's (1984) Learning cycle diagram (Source: Atherton 2002)

The diagram in figure 2.3 is an example used by Atherton (2002) in which he uses the learning cycle introduced by David Kolb (1982) expanded upon by Honey and Mumford (1982) who also reflect upon the different roles required for enquiry and learning. In connection to the diagram Atherton emphasizes that there are four stages which follow from each other: <u>Concrete Experience</u> is followed by <u>Reflection</u> on that experience on a personal basis. This may then be followed by the derivation of general rules describing the experience, or the application of known theories to it (<u>Abstract Conceptualisation</u>), and hence to the construction of ways of modifying the next occurrence of the experience (<u>Active Experimentation</u>), leading in turn to the next <u>Concrete Experience</u> (Atherton, 2002). He goes on to say that, depending on the topic, using this model can either occur in a flash or over days, weeks, months, and that there may be "wheels within wheels of process at the same time" (Atherton, 2002).

Although the act of research at times seems to have a life of its own, especially in the early stages, new possibilities can arise and open unique outcomes. Therefore, the methodology used here can be described as opportunistic, with a structured yet fluid perspective throughout. Outcomes are not predetermined but can be anticipated by using intuition in order to search in the correct context. For instance, the belief that fundamental issues related to Iranian women lay in their representation through Islam; began a path of enquiry. Paths of enquiry can be selected in accordance to possible outcomes; however, it was vital that my role remained transparent until later stages of the research where I could objectively begin to define and solidify the research both in terms of content and structure. Therefore, role playing has aided the research both methodologically and theoretically. The next section explores further the practice element of this research and its relationship to the process of enquiry.

2.2.2 Practice and Research

An integral part of the research has been my own studio work, which has been constantly reviewed in order to establish links between other Iranian woman artists, the related theories of identity and my own identity. As noted earlier in this study, theory and practice are interconnected; the 'artist role' is informed by issues raised in the research and vice versa. Personal reflection on studio-based work has been used to both enhance the quality of the artworks and to aid the analysis of them.[7]

The process of reflection has been practised through writing and making visual artworks. It was at this stage that the reflexive introspection was realised and evolved within the research. The process of reflection and vocalisation/representation/textualisation has had an enhancing effect both on my practice and the way I view my identity. It is through

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[7] In order to analyse studio-based activities, a series of exhibitions have taken place internationally in cities such as Sheffield, Berlin, Shiraz, New York, and Bishkek. These exhibitions have been reviewed and assessed by my peers, the supervisory team, and myself. In order to evaluate my progress I noted comments in several sketchbooks as a point of reference. See Chapter 6 for examples of artworks and discussions.

understanding the causes of these changes, consciously making decisions, taking actions and evaluating the outcome, that an objective analysis is achieved. It is rather like having a bird's-eye perspective on the entire research and including myself in that picture. The next sections discuss the various methods used to aid this process.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Documentary Sources

As noted earlier, there is a lack of publication of contemporary social issues about Iran and especially contemporary Iranian women artists. This research has involved an exploration of theoretical literature dealing with the notion of identity and displacement, through multidisciplinary approaches in the fields of cultural studies. Theoretical literature on identity and displacement has created the framework for the analysis of the artists' positions, their artworks, and their distinct identities.

A wide range of sources, such as periodicals, newspapers, and websites, in English and Farsi, have been used. The merging of Western and Eastern theory has enabled a more extensive analysis of contemporary Iranian women artists and their art practice. Special attention has been paid to how different elements in the research relate to one another, such as how the political events in Iran influence the work of both groups of artists.

The use of 'theoretical sampling' as noted by Alan Bryman (2001), where he suggests sampling relevant literature, in this case in the field of cultural studies, provided a method of coding areas for research (Bryman, 2001:391). He states that this is then followed by a "constant comparison" between data and conceptualisation, enabling categories to be made and hypotheses which allow for initial "hunches and relationships between concepts" (Bryman 2001:391-392). These comparisons provide direction towards viable conclusions. For example, through examination of the data on the artists in relation to the

theoretical literature on identity (chapter 3), it was viable to analyse relationships between events such as the Islamic Revolution on the featured artists' identities and artworks. Key areas within cultural studies such as feminist theory and post-colonial theory (chapter 1) were also explored in relation to Iran, and Iranian women in particular. Within these areas, relevant issues in relation to the theoretical framework of the research and its central theme of identity, art, and displacement were examined. New findings led to further and more specific sampling. As the research became more advanced in content, the enquiry arguments and practice were also defined and integrated. Theory and practice were both interlinked and strengthened the enquiry.

2.3.2 The Use of the Internet

Since the Islamic revolution censorship of all communication media has intensified in accordance with Islamic beliefs, ideas and institutions. The Internet is the Iranian peoples' platform for less controlled communications. Despite the use of all available means of screening and censorships implemented in Iranian telecommunications and Internet facilities the young population of Iran perceive it as the gateway to the rest of the world and eagerly make use of it. In the context of this research, the internet has proved to be a vital link to the variability of the Iranian psyche. Due to the freedom of speech on the internet, sites relating to Iranian identity across a wide range of backgrounds and within various fields, including Fine Art, are available; these were previously unavailable. Systematic use of the internet, and sites related to Iranians and Iran, as well as a range of creative and critical material related to contemporary Iranian identity and displacement, provided data for analysis. Sites such as *The Iranian* gave access to up-to-date information about Iran and Iranians abroad.[8]

Although the Internet provided a valuable insight into issues on Iran, this information was at times highly biased; therefore, the validity of this information became of concern. In

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[8] *The Iranian* website address is www.theiranian.com.

order to rectify this problem, the findings were approached cautiously and were validated in comparison to other international and academic sources such as published books and articles.

2.3.3 Interviews

Because of the relative lack of coverage of the current works of Iranian women artists, the main source of data for this study has been first-hand interviews with selected artists. A questionnaire was constructed, informed by the documentary sources and theoretical knowledge of the subject. As a result of the particular political and social conduct in Iran, and a concern with the privacy of the individual artists and their reservations to provide personal feelings on politically sensitive subjects, several factors had to be considered when designing the questionnaire. The questions acted as a starting point for conversations; I was interested in the ways the conversations evolved and how the artists communicated their identities.[9]

A total of 20 artists are examined in this study, with 10 living and working it Iran and 10 outside Iran. The selected artists satisfied five criteria. They were all female, they had produced and exhibited a substantial amount of work, their work had been publicly shown, their work was varied in content in comparison to the other chosen artists, and they had to be willing to participate in this research. The artists were located through different means such as contacting the Iranian Museum of Contemporary Arts in Tehran, who helped in locating some of the artists in Iran. Many other artists were contacted through magazines, which had interviewed them. In Iran, a total of ten artists were selected out of twenty initial telephone interviews. All interviews were recorded and translated into English.

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[9] Conversations rather than a strict question-and-answer session allowed the artists to express their ideas more naturally in a discussion.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, whilst the questions remained constant for all of the interviews to ensure consistency. Jack Douglas (1985) points out that:

> Human life is always necessarily partially unpredictable and, therefore, effective decisions and actions must always take into consideration the concrete situation that emerges at a given time (Douglas, 1985:17).

The semi-structured approach also involved an understanding of the emotional setting of the situation and the particular artist being interviewed. Douglas also expresses the importance of emotional settings, by introducing key questions such as "from what age did you start to become interested in Art?" which encourages the subjects into a personal level without intruding on their privacy. These types of question can help to establish a sense of trust between the interviewer and the interviewed.[10]

The same interviews were undertaken with Iranian woman artists working and living in the UK[11] to establish a comparative relationship to those working and living in Iran. Building a network with Iranian artists in the UK has proved to be a much more difficult task than in Iran. Although it would seem that Iranians are freer outside Iran, there seems to be a level of distrust that Iranians may have toward each other when they are residing outside Iran.[12] The use of data derived from interviews in this research has depended largely upon the depth of the information obtained from the artists. Some artists were more interested in the research and more open about their views, or there was more secondary data such as interview transcripts and reviews. Therefore, they feature more prominently in the analysis.

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[10] See Appendix B for an example of the questionnaire.

[11] Artists residing in the USA and in Europe were researched mostly through secondary data, due constraints of costs and time.

[12] This is particularly so in the case of those who either travel back or have links to Iran. They are cautious with who they choose to have relations and censor themselves even more than those in Iran. The artists' network inside Iran is much bigger, and more established; therefore, artists inside Iran were much more willing to be interviewed than those outside.

2.3.3.1 Interview Analysis

The collected interview materials took the form of recorded tapes, written questionnaire responses and notes, which were all translated from Farsi to English and transcribed. The initial questionnaire provided the main structure for categorising the data. However, as the approach to the interviews was semi-structured, there were extra topics discussed during some of the interviews which provided further insights and in some cases follow up interviews, emails and phone conversations, which were all recorded and transcribed. Therefore, a second process of categorisation and coding process was developed to establish further themes within the data through reoccurring themes and concerns evident in the interview transcriptions. The final data structure, together with the theoretical structure, provided a framework for the artists' data discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.3.4 Analysis of the visual data

Because this research explores contemporary Iranian women artists and their art practice, the analysis of the visual data is an integral part. A visual database was constructed containing catalogues of exhibitions, photos of artists' works, and visual data from magazines, books, videos made by the artists of their exhibitions and visual material from the internet.[13] The visual data or artworks have been an integral component of this research in evaluating contemporary Iranian women's art and identities.

The visual data has been examined in the context of the study through three main *sites*, as Gillian Rose (2001) expresses:

> Interpretations of visual images broadly concur that there are three **sites** at which the meaning of an image are made: the site(s) of the **production** of an image, the site of the **image** itself, and the site(s) where it is being seen by various **audiences** (Rose, 2001:16).

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[13] There have also been gallery visits and observational photography. This information has been edited accordingly and incorporated into the thesis through systematic interpretation of visual images.

In this study, the three sites put forward by Rose have been useful in analysing the artworks of the featured artists. The site of production has been identified as either inside Iran or outside Iran, which has had significant effect on the artworks due to restrictions and censoring in Iran and other cultural and political influences. The site of the image itself has been analysed with attention to the particular elements in individual artworks. The site of the audiences has also been acknowledged where artists have been expected to fit into certain public expectations. The consideration of all three aspects enables a more in depth understanding of the two groups of contemporary Iranian women artists' concerns and identities. Mirzoeff (1999) points out that visual culture is often not so much about medium, but rather the relationship between viewers and viewed, which he terms as a visual event (Mirzoeff, 1999:13). The prominent visual event between the stereotyped images of Iranian women both in Iran and the West, together with my role as the viewer and the viewed, has enabled a variety of different perspectives and analysis of the visual data.[14]

There are four main points of view which have been considered in the analyses of the artworks in this research with appointed methods to collect and analyse this information: 1: The thoughts and the intentions of the <u>artists</u> themselves have been considered and included through the interview process, this also included my own analyses of my practice. 2: <u>Art critics and reviewers</u> point of view have, where appropriate, been incorporated through reviews and publications on particular artists. 3: <u>Audiences</u> views and perceptions have been integrated where appropriate in the form of feedback on my own exhibitions. 4. Perception and critique of the <u>researcher</u>; in other words my understanding as the researcher has been informed by the various points of view and data collected to reach viable conclusions and analysis of the artworks. These various points of view allow for a more in depth and objective analysis of the visual data to take place. Throughout this thesis, certain artworks are featured more prominently and analysed in more detail due to their stronger engagement with the concerns of this research.

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[14] For examples of the artworks featured in this study, refer to Chapter 5 on Contemporary Iranian Women's Practice, and Chapter 6 on My Work.

2.4 Conclusions

To conclude, it is important to note that a major part of the research has been an investigation into the concept and application of approaches exemplified in this chapter. Research and practice are closely related and according to Donald Schön; "...Research functions not as a distraction from practice but as a development of it" (Schön, 1995: ix). The relationships between theory and practice are central to this research because of my presence as a subject amongst other featured artists. The acts of role-play, both in a methodological and artistic sense, are outlined as tools for effective enquiry.

Through using multidisciplinary sources of information, this research has utilised primary and secondary data, together with personal experience, enabling a multiple perspective on the issues involved. The methodology for this research has been shaped to aid the enquiry in an organic manner; relevant methods have been used in accordance to each new situation to enable an objective and informed study of contemporary Iranian women artists and in relation to the issue of identity.

The various methods outlined in section 2.3 have aided the research, with particular findings and implications. The use of documentary sources, interviews, and analysis of verbal and visual material, together with my role in this research, has created a more in-depth analysis of contemporary Iranian women artists and their art practice. To conclude, the diagram in figure 2.5 briefly demonstrates the distinct structure of this research in relation to the parties involved.

The three primary colours represent the three dominant groups of data in this research: the larger red circle represents my position in the research; the yellow circle represents women artists living and working in Iran; and the blue circle represents women artists living and working outside Iran. The overlapping of the circles represents the particular findings within the research, and the relationships between the areas. We all share identity transformation in the central white section. The green part is shared by the two

groups of artists as respondents to research criteria. Each section is informed by different data, theory and analysis, through the methods discussed in this chapter. The following chapter explores the notion of identity through theoretical literature and informs the analysis of Iranian identity and contemporary Iranian women artists.
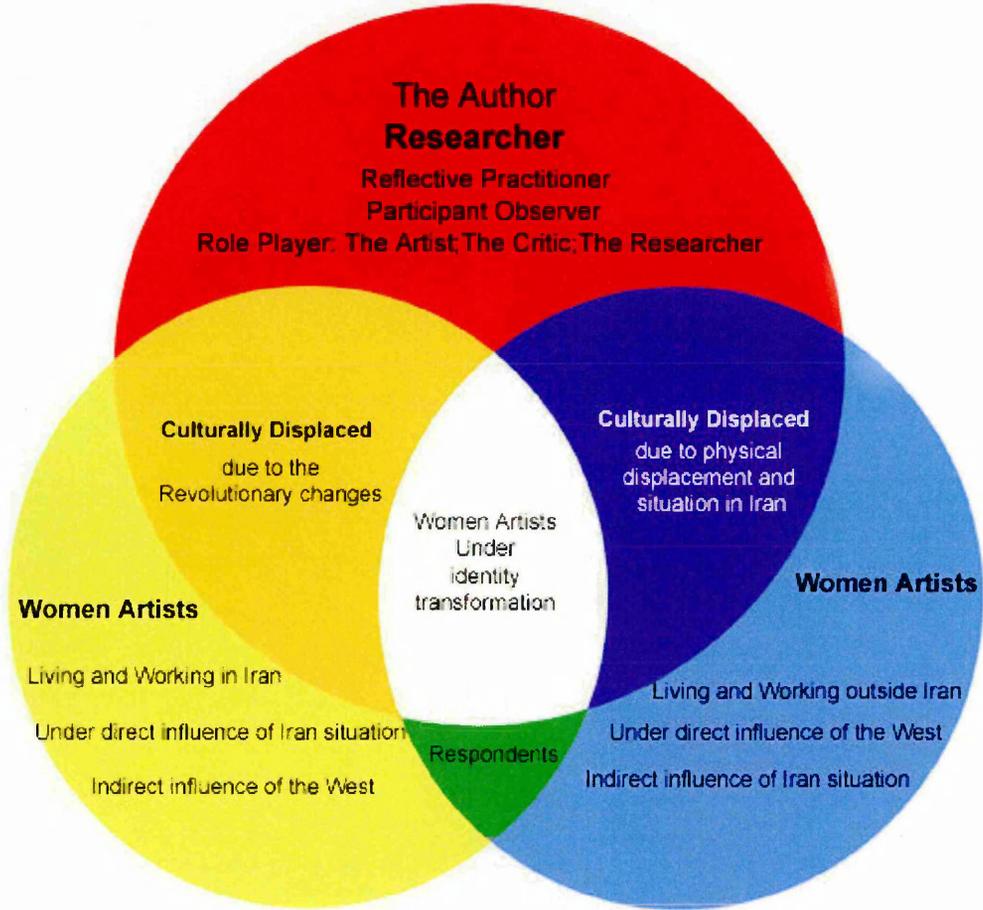
Fig. **2-4**: Methodology relationships

Chapter 3 Theoretical Analysis of Iranian Identity

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is an exploration of the relevant literature on the notion of identity, to inform the analysis of contemporary Iranian women's identities and their art practice in Chapters 5 and 6.[1] This chapter draws on theories from key writers within the various fields of cultural studies, sociology, psychology, gender studies and post-colonial theory such as Hall (1997), Said (1981;1994) and Lewis (1996). Other key theorists already mentioned in Chapter 1 include those who have specifically commented on Iranian identity such as Moghadam (1994) and Khorasani (2001). Concepts of identity are explored in relation to concepts of displacement, otherness and representation.

Section 3.2 analyses the implications of the key historical events which have affected Iranian identity, and the ways in which we narrate and represent a sense of self through national and personal history. In section 3.3, theories of identity in relation to the notion of 'self' and 'other are explored. Section 3.3.1 examines the physical body as representative of home and belonging. Furthermore, section 3.3.2 explores the importance of language in the maintenance and translation of identities from one culture to another.[2] This section also explores the notion of borders and the effect of geographic placement and displacement on identities. Section 3.4 explores the notion of national and cultural identity, through an analysis of negotiations of Iranian culture in Iranian people's

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[1] Throughout this chapter, some of the works of the artists interviewed are discussed in order to further evaluate and demonstrate how these events have affected their identities, and to determine some of the areas relating to the artists' works, discussed later in Chapters 4 and 5.

[2] As we are dealing with two groups of artists who are of Iranian origin, language is an important factor. Therefore, the relationship between language and identity is explored with a view to the meanings of English and Persian words, which describe identities such as 'hybrid', both linguistically and conceptually.

personal and shared identities. This chapter concludes by exploring issues representation, which is further developed in Chapter 4.

3.2 The Effect of History on Identity

In this section, the effect of history on identity and the role of narration in representing the self are discussed within a theoretical context. The notion of shared identity is also explored as a concept which relies on history.

National and personal history can be problematic when representing identities. Identities and histories are unstable. In relation to this, Sandhal (2002) describes the historical contextualisation of identity through traditional museums and 'traditional psychological theory' as a flawed method (Sandhal, 2002: 104).[3] She challenges this method and points out that: "During the last few centuries, the prevalent theories of identity formation have mirrored a specific political and social situation or reality" (Sandhal, 2002:106). History, therefore, is mediated and controlled, and identities are understood and preserved through objects and theories which best fit into these constructed realities. She goes on to say that theories of identity formation are increasingly beginning to change as we become exposed either personally or through the media to cultural exchanges. Our negotiations and narrations of these identities constantly change and, in turn, reconstruct our sense of self.

History, in this context, becomes an arena in which the individual and the collective tell their stories. The validation, or authentication, of identities and their personal narratives are often subjective, creating uncertain and changeable biographies. Nevertheless, history is used by all of us to validate our sense of self. We have a history: therefore, it seems we possess a past, a present, and a future. Sandhal refers to the impossible nature of the ownership of identity: "Identity is often referred to as something one owns or has, as if

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[3] By 'traditional museums', Sandhal is referring to museums that show artefacts and objects as signifiers of the cultures that produced them.

one had a specific identity once and for all. As if identity is a constant and static entity, as if identity is the sum of memories, as if identity is made up of the past" (Sandhal, 2002:105). Clearly, Sandhal is referring to the problematic nature of identity as something which is in a constant state of flux. However, most of us desire to have a clear sense of our own and others' identities. Our sense of self and identity is something which most of us believe to be our own. We often refer to our own personal history as a starting point for explaining who we are; we recollect our sense of self through events, and experiences that have had an effect on us, but these reference points are subject to revision and change.

Historical explanation is usually concerned with factual data recollection, which points to the notion of bringing the past to the present; an act of remembering. According to Bullock and Trombley (2000), history depends upon interpretation, which can be problematic, as historians deploy different methods of interpretation such as empathetically driven explanations or purely logical analysis of data. They also ask the question as to whether it is possible to scientifically explain social history (Bullock and Trombley, 2000: 396-397), which points to the notion that social history relies on socially informed individuals to analyse or narrate it.[4]

In relation to Iranian women's identity through history, Mehrabady (2000) has collected more than fifty texts written by travellers to Iran from the Safavid Era[5] to the early Pahlavi Era[6]. Her book *Iranian Woman: in the Words of Western Travel Writers* is a

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[4] The application of literary criticism techniques to history writing has become known as the post-modernist approach, a technique often associated with Michael Foucault's works, in particular The Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972, Tavistock Publications, London. Foucault overturns commonly held preconceptions about history and locates man as a function rather than the originator of history. He describes the discursive relations of a given historical era by examining what is said as a discontinuous view of history. Rather than depicting history as a progressive trajectory from one discursive system to another, Foucault creates an understanding of history that tends to isolate different discursive formations from each other.

[5] The Safavid Era (1499-1736) established Shiite Islam in Iran as an official state religion.

[6] The Pahlavi Era (1925-1978) was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

valuable collection of the few texts written about Iranian women of that era.[7] Mehrabady believes that the lack of observational material written by Iranians at that time is due to the constant social and political changes taking place, leaving the public unaware of the details that foreign travel writers noticed and wrote about (Mehrabady, 2000:23).

There are extreme elements of subjectivity in a piece relating to the passing of Nasser Al Din Shah's wives in carriages through public streets. Sorna (2000) observes:

> There is so much security around looking at the king's women, it seems totally illogical! Because, even if anyone glanced over at them, they would see nothing but a few parcels wrapped in blue chador with white face cloths. The only part of their body which can be recognised is their hands, which are covered by silk gloves in red, blue, orange and yellow, and it is only from this that other men can guess that these blue parcels must be women! (Sorna, cited in Mehrabady, 2000:388).

Although no information is given about Sorna, her comment makes it starkly evident that she writes from a Western perspective, with little understanding of the social and political context to which these so called 'blue parcels' belong. Mehrabady's work lacks analytical analysis of the texts, and there is a gap in knowledge about Iranians at that time which she aims to address by collecting these texts. Lewis, however, explores the orientalised gaze most notably in her book entitled *Gendering Orientalism* (1996), where she questions the relationship of the West with the East, and contextualises the Orientalist gaze. Lewis analyses the works of women Orientalist painters and their involvement in the production and reception of the ideas explored in their work. She particularly concentrates on the paintings of Henriette Browne and George Eliot's novels, where Eastern women in harems were represented. In pursuing her enquiry about gendering Orientalism, she proposes to "challenge the historically inscribed inequalities of patterns of discrimination that are today organised around the categories of gender, race and authenticity" (Lewis, 1996:1). Lewis proposes that, when reviewing and analysing historical material, it is necessary to assimilate current views of 'race, gender, and

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[7] The book is a collection of visualisations of Iranian women; mostly observed by men, although there are some texts written by women.

authenticity', and that inequality is historically inscribed. She talks of women writers and painters placed within female surroundings such as harems in the East, and the fact that their gendered responses were thought to be true, and states that: "their gaze in the harem is registered both as female, since their gender gains them entry, and as Western, since their presence is represented as spectator and rarely participant" (Lewis, 1996:146).

The Western gaze upon the East is deeply rooted in history and, in the case of Iran, as stated in Chapter 1, it is a reciprocated gaze. These analyses from the outside world have affected Iranians in many different ways. As noted, in the nineteenth century, women were unveiled in order to visually signify to the West that Iran was being modernised. A few decades later, women were veiled once again as a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. What is important here is that definitions and interpretations of the same events have shifted, as have identities.[8] Social history is, therefore concerned, with contextualisation and revision of data. Mills (1959) views identity as a notion deeply connected to history.[9] He believes that it is through "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959:12) that we can understand biographies and their relationship to history. Thus, historical narration requires a degree of imagination. When we narrate history, we imagine ourselves in that particular time in order to make sense of our biography. In connection to this notion of history and biography, Soja (1993) comments that:

> ...historical imagination has been particularly central to critical social theory, to the search for practical understanding of the world as means of emancipation versus maintenance of the status quo (Soja, 1993, cited in During 1999:117).

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[8] As exemplified in Chapter 1, the notion of veiling has come to signify different meanings in the light of other events which have occurred since.

[9] Mills states that: "...an individual can gauge his own faith only by locating himself within his period that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence" (Mills, 1959:12).

Active participation and re-imaging of history can be useful tools in re-visioning and reviewing the present.[10] It is through understanding the mutability of history that one can analyse the changeable nature of identity itself. The definition of identity that results from this memory construction is, therefore, deeply imaginary. In the context of this research, the re-imaging of Iran's history through featured artworks represents a way of imaging the 'self'. Examples of this can be viewed in the works of Sinai, who takes her inspiration from ancient Persia and constructs an imagined past in the present.[11]

History can possess powerful signifiers which manifest themselves in cultural objects such as historical sites, artefacts in museums and architecture. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, ancient sites in Iran have a powerful influence on the Iranian nation.[12] History is narrated through socially constructed outlets such as politics and the mass media, of which some are 'controlled' by the state; governing individuals and groups such as political parties and politicians. Much of Iranian history has been reviewed since the Islamic Revolution to suit the new government's particular ideologies.[13] Thus, the Islamic Revolution has affected Iranians differently depending on the generation they belong to.[14] Different narrations of the same event contribute to the contradictory nature of a singular contemporary Iranian identity. The narration of these events through different individuals is an integral part of Iranian identity. The next section explores the notion of history and narration in more detail.

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[10] Soja also points out that social theories that only aim to rationalise existing conditions promote repetitive behaviour, and continuously reproduce already established social practices. Social theory without historical referencing through imagination and revision, and the active role of the individual on changing grounded history, cannot be critical (Soja, 1993, cited in During 1999:117).

[11] See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of Sinai's artworks.

[12] In March 1999, I attended the first New Year conference and celebrations held at Persepolis since the Islamic Republic was formed. Various historical and cultural scholars, including poets and celebrated writers, discussed the tradition of celebrating the New Year and its significant symbols. Emphasis was placed on the qualities which Iranian history, and in particular the ancient city of Persepolis, brings to Iranian identity today. The aim of the conference was precisely to bring the people together and to give them a sense of 'shared identity'. See section 4.4.1 for fuller discussion of the notion of shared identity

[13] Through the education system, Iranian history has been re-narrated. Politicians such as Mossadeq, who nationalised Iranian oil and were national heroes, are now viewed negatively.

[14] Those born after the Revolution - known as 'the children of the revolution' - have experienced the aftermath, whereas the older generation has been part of that change.

3.2.1 History and Narration of Identities

We narrate our identities through both personal and shared historical key events. National identity is narrated verbally, textually and visually. White (1987) states that there are many different forms of historical narration and, because narration appears as natural as language itself, it can be misleading when it is used in history writing (White, 1987:38). Personal history relates directly to this issue, childhood memories are an integral part of an individual's sense of self, which is in constant revaluation and reconstruction through narration. A nation's history is re-narrated and remembered in much the same way as personal history; memories are aroused and affected by the events and times at which they are re-visited. In relation to childhood memories, Freud (1899) states that: "Our childhood memories show our earliest years not as they were, but as they appeared at the later periods, when the memories were aroused" (Freud, 1899:322). Thus the re-visiting of history becomes an amalgamation of impressions, which is affected by the present. Our memory depends upon the ability to remember, to reassemble the past. This can be susceptible to fantasy, as the past becomes a distant land. Michielsens (2000) discusses the act of remembering and argues that, in the narration of our histories, "…it becomes difficult to tell when the frame of reference in which experiences were originally placed had evaporated" (Michielsens, cited in Cosslett, 2000:183).

Michielsens researched the life stories of three women from Bulgaria and found that their recollections became more tenuous as the context in which their emotions were based withered away and became distant (Michielsens, cited in Cosslett, 2000:184). Thus, she suggests that our emotions have a direct link with the ways in which we remember and reconstruct our histories. Where we have been, what we have done and when, are all part of our legitimisation, and our sense of belonging. Belonging to a seemingly authentic history which is threatened by political, economical, and cultural changes causes a rupture in the ideological flow of history. In the case of Iran, there is a gap between the old Persia and current Iran. Thus, self-doubt and identity crisis can occur both on a personal and national level. It is within these gaps that re-visioning, reviewing and

revising history becomes significant.[15] Eric Kluitenberg states in <u>The Politics of Cultural Memory</u> (1999), that:

> Identity is belonging, and a basic sense of belonging to me seems indispensable for any kind of social structure to be able to function, for any kind of social cohesion to emerge" (Kluitenberg, 1999).

Social cohesion is something for which society strives, but with the emergence of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran and Iraq war, gaps were widened in the continuity of a solid national identity. Many Iranians migrated and the experience of migration intensifies memory, a place that encapsulates the ideological self. Said (2000) points out that: "The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (Said, 2000:173). In a sense, it could be said that we all leave our past behind, but for those in exile, such as some of the featured artists in this research, geographic dislocation, together with being in a new land, intensifies the need to hold onto the past. This 'past' belongs to a different landscape, a different geography, with which the exiled can identify and 'feel at home'. The space between these two positions becomes more than mere distance, it becomes a metaphor for 'identification'. The current unstable situation in Iran prompts some individuals to revisit history in order to recreate a solid identity. Creative individuals, such as artists, who reach this conclusion within their practice, use their Iranian history in a variety of ways to construct and deconstruct identities, either dismissing ideologies or stereotypes of Iranian identity, or reaffirming them.

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[15] Farah Ossouli returned to the techniques and narratives of the Quajar Era deployed within miniature painting as a way of remembering the self, and contextualising the present. For more examples of Ossouli's works, see Chapter 4.

Artist Ghadirian explores this notion through the juxtaposition of Iran's history with current issues that women face in Iran today. In the same manner that Neshat uses images of politically charged veiled women, Ghadirian uses the charged space between the past and the present. In a wider sense, she constructs identities which question the effect of the West on the East. More specifically, she explores the challenges that Iranian women face today. In figure 3.1, an Iranian woman, dressed in the style of the Quajar period (nineteenth century), is set against an obvious studio backdrop typical of that period. She holds a can of Pepsi (American motif) in her hand in modern Iran. The Quajar period was also
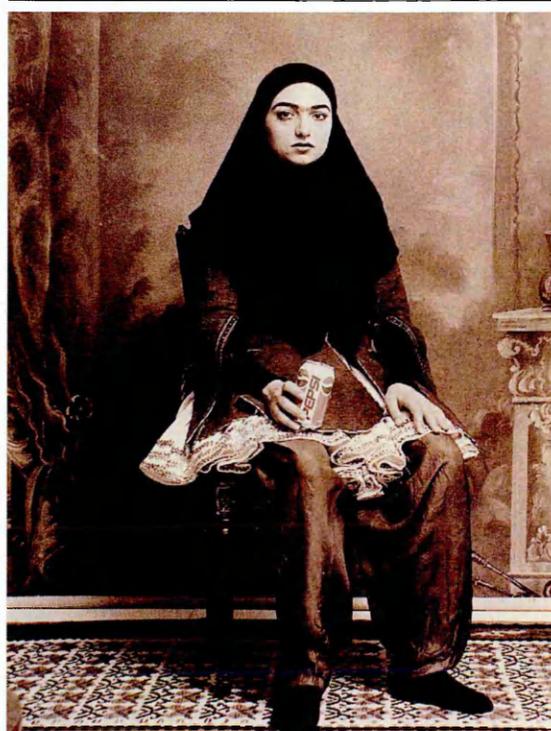
Fig. **3-1**: Quajar Series, Shadi Ghadirian (1998), photographs, 16x24cm (Source: courtesy of artist)

a time when Western influences were creeping into Iran and the Iranian psyche. The images that Ghadirian constructs are revisions of historical ideologies of Iranian women and, in a wider sense, the Western gaze upon Eastern women, with reference to the Orientalist vision. Ghadirian makes the viewer aware of the constructed nature of the image through the obvious use of props and backdrops, which directly relate to the notion of constructed identities.

Said (1990) explains that our sense of displacement from the past is in constant recovery; a belief that the past will secure us a place in eternity, as the past is already in place; history is written (Said, cited in Rutherford, 1990:225). He goes on to say that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and we position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Said, cited in Rutherford, 1990:225).

Personal and national historical narratives determine and position identities. In the next section, the notion of identities is explored in relation to selves and others, and how we mediate between the two.

3.3 Selves and Others

This section addresses the notion of identity in its form most relevant to this study. Three main areas of self and other, self and language, and displacement and hybridity, form the rest of this section in order to further examine the elements which challenge or reaffirm Iranian identity.

One of Freud's early theories describes identity as something which is always in process and governed by our Id, Ego, and Superego.[16] In subsequent years, sociology and psychology theorists have broadened identity studies to more specific categories such as gender identity, ethnic identity, class identity corporate identity and so forth. In the case of Iran, access to these arenas of thought has produced discourses on feminism and Islam, and current Islamic feminist movements in Iran as discussed earlier. The theoretical analysis of identities, and understanding the influential factors that shape them, is crucial to formulating ideas about how societies interact, evolve and maintain certain aspects of their identity. The fluidity of identity as something that is in constant flux and contradiction has become one of the main aspects of this research.[17]

The two identity-related discourses most relevant to this study are postcolonial studies[18] and cultural studies. Complex interplays between individuals, societies and cultures, and

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[16] Cited in, The Ego and The Id by Freud, 1949:19. For Lacan, see The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1977:17.

[17] The notions of change and identity are explored in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3) and in the analysis of the artists in Chapter 4 (section 4.4). They are explored through the ways that the artists have adapted to changes, such as the Islamic Revolution and how it has manifested itself in the artists' work.

[18] Although Iran was not colonised, it was however affected by the industrialisation period, after the discovery of oil in the early 1900s, when the UK, USA and Russia began their rivalry for power over the nation.

the many groups and subgroups which operate within them, shape individual and national identities. According to Hegel (1807), the concept of self and other is a reflection on the 'master' and 'slave' theory, where there is always a dominant party. According to Hegel in *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), the master is a consciousness that defines itself only in mutual relation to the slave (Hegel, 1807, reprint 1967:61).[19] Both master and slave recognize their own existence only in relation to the other. Among the many implications of the master-slave dialectic is the idea of there being a mutual dependence between master and slave, rather than an absolute opposition of dominance to subordination. The slave ironically shares in the master's power because the master defines himself only in opposition to the slave; the master needs the slave in order to legitimate his comparative privilege. Further to the post-colonial discussions earlier, Iran's relationship with the West within the master-slave theory is complex; there has not been a single dominant master.[20] However, on a general note, presently the West can be seen as dominant over the East.

In reference to the domination of the West over the East, Said (1985) points out that, for Westerners, the 'Orient' evokes some of the most ancient civilisations, along with customs, colours, philosophies, sounds, tastes and even smells, and at the same time it is one of the strongest sources of the 'other' from the Western point-of-view. Therefore, it could be said that West and the East need each other in order to define themselves.[21] Said states that: "The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilisation and culture" (Said, 1985:44). In Said's view, the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' are a cultural, not a physical, phenomenon; they are not determined by geography. This divide is not imaginary, but very 'real'. Common cultural beliefs are often confused with reality; they are representations filtered through cultural codes, such as language, ideas,

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[19] "Thus he is not certain of existence-for-self as the truth; rather, his truth is the inessential consciousness and the inessential action of the latter [the slave]" (Hegel, 1807 reprint 1967:61).

[20] For further analysis of geography, location and identity, see chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

[21] For example, in many discussions with Iranians in Iran, they would often comment: "Unlike westerners, we are more modest in our daily appearance".

politics, and other social constructions. When a 'Westerner' writes a text about the Orient, he/she relies more on Western ideology than on the Orient itself. As noted earlier, we make meaning through comparison. For one to make a distinction between the self and the other, the self becomes the larger part of the analysis.[22] Therefore, the ways in which Western or non Islamic others see Iranian women, and how they represent them, becomes part of their own projected identities.

Others may analyse our identity through our physical and racial appearance, which can be misleading in today's multicultural societies where race and colour no longer represent fixed identities.[23] As identities become more complex, our viewpoints also need to consider these complexities in order to both understand the 'other' and 'ourselves'. 'Difference' forms part of our social structure; the importance lies in the meaning we bring to differences. Hall (1998) suggests that "race is a floating signifier", and that the concept of race is obscured because of its dependence on visual analysis (Hall, 1998 lecture). In the past, anthropology used race in order to organise difference; that hair, skin, and bones could be categorised into groups which are easily locatable. Science has objectified difference by using logic and 'scientific reasoning', often manifested and projected through racism. Hall describes the concept of race as similar to the concept of language; it is in constant flux. Race as a signifier is rarely fixed and is constantly redefined, re-signified to have different meanings at different times. However, physical appearance and racial background govern over many of today's social exchanges between selves and others.

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[22] Said analysed the Orient through his own identity; as a child, he grew up in Palestine and Egypt (British Colonies), and was educated in the 'Western' way. It is important to note that the Iranian artists who live abroad are influenced by their Western placement, and are able to relate to their homeland with "more than one set of eyes" (Said, 1993:9).

[23] Mass world travel and migration have enabled people to mix and become dislodged from their original locations. For example, in Britain approximately one in every eighteen people identified themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority group in the 1991 Census; but, by 2000, the figure was estimated to have increased to one in every fourteen. See www.irr.org.uk/statistics/population.html 18/10/2003.

In order to establish a framework for the analysis of how location and dislocation affect contemporary Iranian women artists and their artworks, the next section explores the connection between the representation of the body and the notion of home.

3.3.1 Representations of the Body as Home

The various ways in which the body is covered by clothing offer public representations of status, religion, culture and so forth. In some instances the particular covering of the body is connected to the notion of home. In Iran, women's 'covered' bodies are an integral part of their projected identity, due to the connotations of the hijab as discussed in Chapter 1. The different representations of Islamic women's covered bodies often provoke politically sensitive issues. Therefore, the body in this sense is a powerful signifier. Sobchack (1999) asks: "Who of us is 'at home' in our bodies?" (Sobchack, cited in Naficy, 1999:45). She comments: "Our bodies, in so far as we endure them, seem an objective and exteriorised physical limit holding us captive from doing the things we want to do, and being all that we think we can be" (Sobchack, 1999:46). For Sobchack, our bodies represent contradictions of home and prison simultaneously. The notion of home is a central issue in the works of many of the artists in this research. In Figure 3.2, Chalack explores the notion of the body as landscape.[24]

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[24] For further analysis of the notions of home and representation, see Chapter 4, section 4.3.

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In Chalack's work, the body signifies homeland. If one takes the view that our bodies represent a sense of place, or lack of it, the body becomes a metaphor for the representations of the self. When it comes to representation of Islamic women's identities, the covered body is used to denote certain narratives.[25] For artists, bodies can be connected to many issues of personal and national identity.[26] Bodies are positioned and belong to particular places, whether physical or metaphorical.

Fig. **3-2**: *Hope*, Ladan Chalack (1999), Acrylic on canvas (Source: courtesy of artist)

Morse (1999) explores the notion of home as an 'unreal' place, and links 'feeling at home' with the imaginary. "Feelings and memories linked to home are highly charged, if not with meaning, then with sense memories that began in childhood before the mastery of language" (Morse, cited in Naficy, 1999:62). 'The home is where the heart is', but 'where *is* home' and 'where do you come from?' According to Morse, homes are stories of origin, and the sense that we make of our own embodied homes plays a crucial role in the construction and representation of selves (Morse, 1999:68). The political and cultural changes discussed earlier have reshaped and relocated Iranian identities, both physically and conceptually. When a subject is removed from his or her known surroundings and placed into unknown territory, the subject can inevitably become aware

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[25] For example, British newspapers used many images of Burka-wearing women during the American and British attacks on the Afghanistani regime in 2001.

[26] See chapters 5 and 6 for examples of representation of bodies in artist's works.

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of his or her subconscious 'otherness', accentuated by being viewed as a minority.[27] The Iranian identity crisis (felt by part of the society) is a result of being displaced culturally, whilst still in familiar surroundings (homeland).[28]

A case in point is the introduction of Islam to Iranian culture in the year 637. Although Islam has been a part of Iranian culture for hundreds of years, it is important to note that, for centuries, it had not been used to dictate a whole social structure with its own set of rules, symbols and signifiers. A similar situation occurred when many Iranians left Iran during the Islamic Revolution (1978 and thereafter) for various reasons in search of another home.[29] Many of the Iranian expatriates, and the new Iranian generation who have never been to Iran, view their 'Iranian-ness' through a narrative created by their elders.[30] Raza (2002) states: "...my recollections on the Iranian Revolution, and more widely Iranian history, have also been formulated on the basis of tales, which I have acquired through family members, friends, historians, academics and newspapers" (Raza, 2002:1).[31] From Raza's comment, it is evident that one does not have to be positioned physically in Iran in order to feel Iranian.

Veiled or unveiled, Iranian women are constantly associated with veiling and Islam. Their visually marked veiling creates a difference both with men and with other unveiled women. Whether in or outside Iran, Iranian women assume the position of the 'other', interpreted through many stereotyping discourses: Western, political, cultural, and so on. In the context of this study, Iranian artists occupy an often-misconceived arena. As West

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[27] I moved to the UK at the age of nine and, when I went to school, I soon became aware of the ways I was being perceived as different. This led me to become aware of my 'otherness', which is explored through my art practice. See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion.

[28] For a discussion of Iranian identity crisis, see Chapter 3, section 3.3.

[29] There are unofficial figures of up to five million Iranians now living abroad, of which American-Iranian and Canadian-Iranian are the most prominent.

[30] See History and Narration, Chapter 3, section 3.2.1

[31] Raza was born of Iranian parents and has never been to Iran, yet she is active in promoting Iranian culture and art. In an essay entitled 22 Years of Exile, written in a diary format Raza analyses her own identity. Raza, Sara, 2002, 22 Years of Exile, MA project Art History 20th Century, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

(1999) points out, artists and writers of colour are required to prove their self-worth and gain acceptance by "white formative gazes", an issue which is deeply rooted in the Iranian psyche, where foreignness is often synonymous with quality (West, 1999: 265). Assadi (2002), refers to Iranians as being deeply affected by the approval of the West and by Western influences on Art in Iran and she comments: "If foreign curators take the works of certain artists abroad and show them, then suddenly these artists are also favoured and supported by the Museums" (Assadi, Interview, 2002). Thus, in this instance, it is possible to conceptualise a situation of building a home from external influences, i.e. to validate bodies/ identities as public buildings rather than personal homes.[32]

The outsiders' validation of the public body as home, and as a case in point the Western media's constant validation of Iranian women as 'covered' identities, mostly wearing the chador, and therefore hiding something can be viewed as a mode of controlling the public gaze. This together with Assadi's concern that as Iranians we are happy to be presented by outsiders creates a complex relationship with securing the self through external and seemingly strong influential others. The West, in this instance promotes the modern and the advanced and consequently, its approval instantly validates. But this still leaves us with the issue of the extent to which these representations actually reveal a truthful image of the Iranian woman's body. The next section explores the ways in which language also validates identities and creates differences.

3.3.2 Language and Identity

This section is concerned with the contextualisation of the self through language. This research was conducted in two languages, Farsi and English. It is not merely the

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[32] Khorasani (2000) also comments on external validation of the self: "Our society views its cultural productions from 'outside'. The government also takes part in this visualisation which is either validated or revoked, through the outsider's model" (Khorasani, 2000:99).

difference in the two languages which is crucial to this study, but also the ideas defined through languages.[33] These differences in languages reflect differences in ideas of gender and the self. The question raised here is 'how can one understand Iranian identity and write the thesis in English?' The artists chosen for these study all speak Farsi, and subsequently many of the interviews have been conducted in Farsi. Further to the notion of narration and history (discussed earlier), this section explores the implications of language in narrating the self.

Not speaking one's mother tongue can be analysed as adapting to a new instrument. Concepts of reality can become obscured in narrating the self through two or more languages. Rice et al (1996) state: "Language...is not a mere tool devised for the re-presentation of a pre-existent reality. It is rather, a constitutive part of reality" (Rice et al, 1996:3). A new language could be described as a scar which heals after a while into a passable imitation of what went before. Speaking languages other than one's mother tongue is, in a sense, the adoption of a new mother; a new mother-land that offers a new tool for expression of the self. The mother land and mother tongue draw a direct link to a localised identity, a prominent symbol of identity. Accents are vocal expressions that authenticate our geographic origin.[34] Hybrid identities may or may not have accents but, with time, accents can diminish and it becomes impossible for others to place identities through accents. In this instance, not having an accent can be described as a way of securing one's self in a stable sense of an identity. As an Iranian woman, my identity is obscured by my English accent, not my Iranian accent. The response to my being Iranian is generally, 'but you speak such good English!' a statement with which many foreigners who have no residue of their mother tongue when speaking a new language are familiar.[35]

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[33] For example, in Farsi there is no 'he' or 'she'; we use 'ou' to refer to both sexes, which is contrary to most Islamic nations.

[34] In some cases, this may be experienced as a negative issue; that somehow the individual is refused entry into the new language and culture. My experience differs; having lived in the UK since the age of nine, I have no particular accent. This may have been a result of an unconscious effort to be un-locatable, a hybrid.

[35] Two Iranian woman directors, Taghizadeh and Safinia, who live and work in the UK, used this statement as the title for a documentary-style film. They interviewed Iranian-British men and women about the questions and comments of their white British friends. This work commented on the ways that accents can

In an article entitled 'Women, War, and Conflict', Ghorashi (1997) explores the experiences of exiled Iranian women in the Netherlands. During her research, Ghorashi notes that, when the women narrated their past, they used the vocabulary of that time, i.e. when they discussed the Revolution, they used "...revolutionary words of the past, a vocabulary that for all of us belongs to the past" (Ghorashi, 1997, in Cosslett, 2000:287). Ghorashi refers to language as a vehicle which encapsulates history and identity; vocabulary which becomes engraved in events. We use particular words to resurrect our past. For example, the vocabulary used during Iran's war with Iraq will remain charged with the feelings of that time. Therefore, language is a slippery tool; like identity, words are not static - they change as society changes. The differences we bring to words exemplify particular values and beliefs.

Hall (1977) suggests that, for de Saussure, (1966) "...difference matters because it is essential to meaning; without it meaning could not exist. Meaning depends on the difference between opposites" (Hall, 1977:234). Derrida (2001) used deconstruction of the word difference itself and re-wrote the word using the letter 'a' in place of the letter 'e'; *Differ'a'nce*, meaning to *differ* and also *defer* (Derrida, 2001:248). Thus, Derrida interrupts the immediate and comfortable relationship with the word by displacing the signifier. This method of deconstruction expands upon the qualities and power of the word 'difference', and questions its 'real' meaning. These differences in translation can further complicate the process of relocation for the displaced or exiled. It can then be assumed that belonging is largely dependent on the process of translation, both for the newcomer and for the inhabitant of the new place. In the media, this is a process which Barthes calls 'relay', in which the text (verbal or written) gives connotations to the image and ideologies created by the mass media (Barthes cited in Storey 1993:89). Language and its codes represent ideologies through institutions, such as the media, by establishing,

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be misleading and obscured, but nevertheless form a substantial part of our projected self. For further review of the work of Parisa Taghizadeh, see Chapter 4.

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promoting or demoting common beliefs. Therefore, language is a powerful tool in defining beliefs and creating identities.

It is not only spoken language, but also written text and spelling of words, which give them a social context. Cultural texts (verbal and written), therefore, define and are defined by society. Cultural texts play an important part in the construction of what may be considered as the authentic society from which the newcomer is excluded.[36] Semiology, the term conceived by de Saussure to describe the study of signs within society, gives permanence to the notion of language as a system of signs that express ideas. He used the word to describe a new science which he saw as "a science which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life" (de Saussure, 1966:33).

When a Westerner writes a text about the East, there is more dependence on Western ideas than those of the East, due to his/her social positioning and the language that they use.[37] Miller (1991) argues that "Since meaning is often defined through oppositions, dominant groups may often be found not only to construct material representations of their own interests, but also to project models of those which they define themselves in opposition to." (Miller, cited in Hiller, 1991:58). [38] For example, in the case of Iran, the images of the veiled woman are more dominant than images of Iranian men.

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[36] For me, as a displaced individual learning English, it was not only a new language, but also a new set of ideas and cultural codes in which language operates. For a fuller discussion of representations, see Chapter 3, section 3.5.

[37] This dialogue depends on the ways in which the culture that they are writing about has been presented to them in their culture, and can be described as a process of writing through ideologies.

[38] According to basic Marxist theory, throughout history, the dominant positions of power, such as governmental power, not only determine politics and laws, but also play a crucial role in the construction of the social ideologies. For further examination of the notion of power and social ideology, see, Hiller, Susan, 1992:58.

It is notable that most of the images of the East shown in the West are 'translated' images and impressions. Thus, the difference created through the dialogue between the imagined boundaries of the East and West creates visions of the other side, of the other language.

Many hybrid artists have frequently used foreign languages, both spoken and written, for viewers who would not understand the languages. Neshat uses Farsi text in her images entitled 'Women of Allah' (1993-97).[39]

It is evident that language plays a pivotal role in the interaction between the 'personal self' and the 'public self'. Language plays a dual role in both affecting and being affected by society. In the case of Iranians, those living outside Iran adopt new mother tongues and it could even be argued that those living in Iran have and continue to experience the same phenomenon. During the Pahlavi era (1920's) there was a governmental effort to eradicate Arabic words, whereas after the Islamic revolution reinstated Arabic words

Fig. 3-3: from the series *Women of Allah*, Shirin Neshat (1993-97) Black and White RC print and ink 121.8 x 85.7cm (Source: Issa et al, 2001:116)

because of the connection to the Koran. The Islamic government has been steadily eradicating many foreign words, especially those from the West, as part of their efforts to

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[39]The texts are fragments of poetry about the experiences of Iranian women, or are of a religious nature. The Farsi text resembles tattooing of the skin, changing the skin's identity. The Farsi text on the skin is foreign to the Western audience and heightens a sense of difference in the viewer. Here, Neshat's work is an example of how language can be used to exemplify cultural difference.

reinstate the influence of Islam. Here, language is viewed as something which can be purified and kept authentic, or used as a tool to control or even shape culture. The eradication of Western words is also in line with the systematic governmental policy of defence against what they term as 'Western Cultural Assault'.

Language exemplifies shifts in belief systems, or a shift in the hierarchical system of beliefs. Young (1995) explains that, in the eighteenth century, many anthropologists were isolated in their theories around the classification of man, and that scientific discussion around the subject always had its own hidden ideological agenda (Young, 1995:7). Many of the debates at that time became preoccupied with the origins of the human race.[40] One could argue that perceptions have merely shifted in language, and that these underlying beliefs can still be observed in today's society, manifested in racism and stereotyping. The usage of words such as hybrid, and its development during colonial years, gives direct evidence of cultural ideologies and perceptions toward identity and race.[41]

In this research, the observation of Iranian identities is made through the English language and its affected terminologies which describe displaced identities. The two distinct groups of Iranian woman artists are both affected by the languages they inhabit. Language is, therefore, directly linked to geography and placement. In the next section, the notion of geography and identity is discussed with a view to the problematic nature of determining identities, Iranian identity in particular.

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[40] From the 1850s, the question of species and of hybridity became prime subjects of discussion. Thus, the offspring of humans from different races were seen as different species. It is difficult to assume that, today, this perception has vanished. Terms such as 'Half-caste' are not commonly used today. 'Dual heritage' or 'mixed heritage' are the current politically correct terms.

[41] Today's terminologies can have a controlling effect on individuals. Government institutions such as the Home Office in the UK use the word 'alien' to describe those who are not native to the country; 'registered alien' refers to an outsider who is recorded and traceable. Before 1 January 1949, an alien was simply a person who was not a British subject. Section 32(1) of the British Nationality Act 1948 extended this definition to include a person who was neither a British subject, nor a citizen of the Republic of Ireland. Section 50(1) of the British Nationality Act 1981 now defines an alien as a person who is neither a Commonwealth citizen, nor a BPP (British Protected Person), nor a citizen of the Republic of Ireland.

3.3.3 Identity Borders

The location of the self in relation to identity is an issue which is central to the analysis of the cultural positioning of the two groups of contemporary Iranian woman artists. In this section, the notion of geographical positioning is analysed and challenged as a notion which is ambiguous. How we are here, and how here is in us, is an issue with which social theorists, such as Iranian writer Naficy (1999), are concerned. In his book, *Home, Exile, Homeland*, Naficy refers to exilic cinema as a discourse which explores the notion of place and geography removed from its original location as an "accented style" (Naficy, 1999:125). David Morley argues that geographic borders are a means of separating the outside world (threatening others) and the inside world (safe selves). Boundaries come to represent the difference between the familiar and the unfamiliar. He goes on to note that boundaries become part of society's way of inclusion and exclusion which is amplified through nation and state (Morley cited in Naficy, 1999:161). Therefore, borders not only physically separate countries; they also separate peoples and cultures.

Geographical location is also a fluid signifier of the private and public self which is open to interpretation and manipulation. Rogoff (1993) explores the shifting of 'locality' and 'belonging' as a form of crisis; a crisis which she regards as one of nationalism and racism, fuelled by the anxiety of Western supremacy and the desire to maintain Western ideologies of production, consumerism and the so-called democratic society (Rogoff, 1993:70). Rogoff is concerned with how the West sees itself as morally justified and tries to change the East through representation. Indeed in the case of Iran, following the events of September 11th, one year later, a reconstruction of the Iran hostage crisis referring to events following the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by Iranian students on Nov. 4th, 1979, was shown on ITV in Britain.[42] It is through representation that we begin

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[42] This could be seen as an example of Western political manipulation through the media to try to shape the British public's perceptions of Iran and Iranians as a terrorist nation and worthy of Bush's title as the 'axis of evil'. Although of course relationship between the media and the government are not always clear, there are often conflicts between the two, in this instance I would simply like to draw attention to the multiple

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to understand one another; the problem arises when representation is manipulated. Certain locations (such the Middle East or the West) can often become a centre stage for misrepresentations through various ideologies and politics, each different nation posing the possibility of ownership of particular representations, and in some ways ownership of other nations' projected national identity.[43]

The instability of today's world is synonymous with globalisation or, in a sense, with the diminishing of borders; a phenomenon blurred with contradiction and multifaceted in its foundation and its goals. As globalisation tries to unify, it also tries to mould cultures with ideologies of the Western world. Rogoff believes that, without a dramatic shift in the signifiers that surround us in society, there will always be problems with the idea of globalisation (Rogoff, 1993:70). Shohat (1999) analyses the new age of globalisation and the euphoric Western belief that enhanced communications of cybertechnologies has made us more universal, more able to travel without being tied to one place. She states: "In the context of strict immigration laws and abusive detention centres ...the cyberspace 'travelling' of information is clearly used against the travelling bodies of refugees, immigrants and border crossers" (Shohat cited in Naficy, 1999:220). She also notes that globalisation, in the context of mass communication, has created "imaginary homelands", where minority groups can create forums for voicing and discussing their opinions (Shohat cited in Naficy, 1999:223). The Internet has enabled Iranians to narrate their identities in ways that were previously not possible. However, people still create borders through groups and clubs on the Internet. Therefore, in this context, the notion of globalisation becomes flawed in that we are always trying to locate ourselves within groups. Locality suggests the notion of active participation within a particular social construct; alternatively, globalisation tries to disregard this notion in order to establish an identity that belongs to nowhere.

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representations of other nations through the media and the ways in which these representations can manipulate our perceptions.

[43] Indeed, many wars and political upheavals are to do with land ownership in some way or another, whether it is the land itself, in the case of Israel, or the resources of that land such as crude oil in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan. See Chapter 6 final project Hidden Half for an interactive piece dealing with land ownership and oil.

However, specific location is vital to a stable identity and Rogoff explains this specific geography as "imagistic signification of geographies and their link to the representation of contemporary identities" (Rogoff, 1993:70). Thus, geography becomes an imagined landscape, a construction and a formula with which we can identify and to which we can belong. Iranian women artists interviewed for this study were asked if they had lived outside Iran and/or in Iran, how they envisaged differences in both their identities, and consequently how they envisaged their art practice. Zahra Entezari, who lives in Iran said:

> I don't think I would be working any differently to how I do now. My subject matter would be different because my environment would be different, but other than that I think my response to my environment comes from my deep feelings, my deep Self which remains the same (Entezari, Interview, 1999).

Entezari's attitude to location comes across in her comment here as one which does not affect her inner self. Yet in her artworks, she mainly depicts constrained human figures. Her statues often depict a sense of entrapment which seems to mirror the constraints which surround her environment.[44] On the same issue, Parisa Taghizadeh who lives and works in the UK responded:

> Yes, of course I think if I was in Iran I would be affected by other social issues which I would use in my artworks, although as it stands I work within many different fields. However, my connection to Iran always leads me to do work about it (Taghizadeh, Interview, 2000).

Taghizadeh's attitude towards the possibility of working in Iran is informed by her experience in the UK which allows her to have more choice in the topics she chooses to explore in her work. In recent years, there has been a distinct focus on Diaspora, Exile and Displacement within scholarly and theoretical fields, visual arts, music culture and the media across the globe. Minorities are determined to have their say; cultural displacement is almost becoming a household term. Williams (2000) explores the notion

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[44] Entezari works in a basement at her parents' home where she also lives. In her comments she described her space as 'cramped and noisy'.

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of border-crossing in relation to identity in an essay entitled 'I going away, I going home, Mixed-Race, Movement and Identity'. She narrates her own identity: "My usurping of this idea of moving away and moving back as a continual process of border crossing allows for a recognition of multiple points of identification" (Williams, cited in Pearce, 2000:180). It is through the negotiation of constant "mixing of heritage and tradition and a constant movement toward their identification and reformation" that multiple selves can claim a sense of location within new surroundings (Williams, cited in Pearce, 2000:180).

For Iranian women living outside Iran, public and private life, veiling and unveiling suggests that the negotiation and crossing of borders is a possible place to claim as their identity. This new place can be termed as 'the third place'. It is a new location which is not physically stable, it is not made of soil; it is a conceptual place which encapsulates the motherland theoretically and spiritually. As Rogoff puts it: "...geography is never a place and is always an ordering principle and a theory of cognition [It signifies] identities in dispute and in formation; the migrant and the exiled, the Diasporas and the exiled" (Rogoff, 1993:71). Although geographical location does play a significant role in the construction of identities, it is evident that we cannot determine identities by locations alone. For Iranians and Iranian women in particular, it seems that location represents not only physical space, but also a deeper sense of self; a spiritual self, which is in constant flux. For artists such as Houshiary who live and work in the UK, the spiritual sense of self, located in Sufism, creates the location for her identity and her artworks.[45]

Claiming a location, whether it is in the past or the present, is something in which Iranian women artists both in Iran and outside Iran are involved. It can be deduced that the qualities of change and constant contradiction create the landscape to which Iranian women belong; a position which is also dependent upon the cultures that surround them. Cultural positioning is central to understanding changes and their effect. In the next section, the notion of culture and its relationship to Iranian identity is further analysed.

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[45] For further analysis of Shirazeh Houshiary's artworks, refer to Chapter 5.

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3.4 National and Cultural Identity

So far, the issues of history, language and location have been discussed. I will now discuss the notion of national and cultural identity. As with the term 'history' (discussed in section 4.2), the term 'culture' has been analysed by many different theorists and can, therefore, be elusive. In this study, the term culture is used to convey the notion of socially constructed discourses, which in turn construct society and the nation itself.[46] In this section, the social and cultural self stands for identity's external role, rather than inner personal roles; society and culture are here defined as made up of many individuals, who are both affected by or affect the construction of cultural and national identity.

Culture is made up of various themes, symbols, concepts, ideals, styles and sentiments. Barbara Abou-El-Haj (1991) discusses the issue of culture as a phenomenon which is directed from the core and thus creating peripheries and boundaries of "...core-periphery, western, non-western, developed and developing, etc" (Abou-El-Haj, cited in King, 1991:142). Iran is not only 'non-western', it is also regarded as a 'developing' country. This language demonstrates what Abou-El-Haj describes as: "...our failure to generate a comparative language beyond the set of tidy binaries which produce the global regime" (Abou-El-Haj, cited in King, 1991:142). The global binaries created through Western cultures to describe the East is also reciprocated by Iran and other Eastern countries about the West, where the terminologies to describe the West are non-Islamic, colonising and modern. Culture and society define binaries and make distinctions through actions and language about other cultures; the border created between personal and public life for Iranian women in Iran echoes global difference in a local setting. Iranian women's positions are visually and culturally very different to those of non-Islamic societies. Islamic laws in Iran are interpreted by the government and enforced both by appointed Islamic police and the Islamic culture. Representation of cultural differences

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[46] For an in-depth exploration of discourse, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1972.

can often be misleading and dependent upon individual interpretation and, therefore, open to manipulation.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Iranian culture has been a thoroughfare of different cultures through travel and invasion. Subsequently, these have influenced Iran culturally and politically. In this instance, the question remains as to what is current contemporary Iranian culture? The only conclusion possible is that it is a culture of many contradictions, and this manifests itself in the ways in which Iranian individuals affirm and communicate their sense of self, both on a personal and shared level. We can build a clearer picture of the shapes that these identities are taking, and envisage what possibly lies ahead for Iranian national identity through the changes that have taken place. In the next section, the notion of shared identity and national heritage is discussed in relation to the preservation and maintenance of culture and, subsequently, identity.

3.4.1 Shared Identity

Although we are strangers to one another, we imagine that we belong to a shared national identity and, according to Hall, "We share an idea of the Nation and what it stands for" (Hall, 1999-2000:4). National heritage both as an organisation (i.e. The national heritage of England; the National Trust) and as a concept is a powerful and influential provider of shared national identity. Supported by each nation's governments, national heritage is promoted to give a sense of unity to the state and nation. The cultural meanings inherent in this heritage bind individuals to a larger national identity, which, it could be argued, may be a barrier against the 'new-comer' or the exiled. As Sandhal puts it, museums in a European context have "had a fairly distinct function of exploring, defining and disseminating the value systems of European supremacy" (Sandhal, in NIFCA, 2002:102). She argues that, previously, museums were 'preoccupied' with defining European identity and history as different to the cultures of people outside Europe, and that these people were defined through a homogenising process. She explains that, more

recently, "Museums have had to re-examine their role and responsibilities [due to the changes in the field of identity and representation]. They have also had to start 'renegotiating histories', reflecting a shift away from the nation state and homogeneous cultures that they were initially formed to support" (Sandhal, in NIFCA, 2002:102). Cultural heritage is thus deeply rooted in nationhood, mediated through national symbols, belonging to collective memories.

For Iran, national heritage is disjointed. This is mainly a result of the ways in which the Islamic Republic of Iran views that nationalism is against Islam. That Iranians should view themselves firstly as Muslims. Amongst Iranians there is a divide between those who believe in 'Iranian-ness' and those who believe in 'Islamic-ness' which creates a chasm between a united sense of national identity and a personal sense of identity. Ayani, an Iranian architecture student, explores the notion of Iranian identity. He controversially states that it is difficult for the young generation of Iran to speak of national identity, when they exist in a state of 'non-identity'. He states: "So you ask me what Iranian identity is? My explanation lies in power, the power which created identity, the same power that can make, as well as change, identities. It is power that decides. My identity is 2500 years old, or it is 1400 years old. Yes, just as easily 1600 years of my identity has been taken from me" (Ayani, 2002:1). Ayani refers to the ways in which the current government of Iran has been constructing his heritage for him. He is part of the young Iranian generation which, as noted, is a significantly large proportion of Iran's population, who are obsessed with what has been lost.[47]

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[47] On various trips to Iran, I have often heard young people speak of living through times of turmoil and confusion. However, we could argue this to be part of Iranian identity throughout Iran's history. Attempts have been made by various groups to erase Iran's heritage. In 330 BC, Alexander the Great ordered the destruction of Persepolis and so forth. During these times, many attempts were made to deface and vandalise various heritage sites and artefacts, in order to somehow erase the past. The traces of these attempts can be seen at various historical sites around Iran.

Currently the heritage of Iran still survives in artefacts; but, ironically, much of this heritage is stored outside Iran.[48] In recent years, the Iranian Cultural Heritage Foundation,[49] Museum of Contemporary Arts, and other such institutional foundations, have been making significant efforts towards creating a sense of national identity through the exhibition of artworks by artists such as Ghadirian and Sinai, who comment upon Iranian heritage.[50] It may be assumed that, in Iran, heritage had been swept aside because of capitalist imperatives, which the previous government made central to the development of Iran and its people. The modernisation process created many positive outcomes, mostly in industry; but, according to Moghadam (1994), it also had some unforeseen effects on the structure of Iranian culture and identity:

> ...the capitalist development and industrialisation in Iran underwent an 'abnormal' dwarf-like formation, creating an uneven economy and what Cardoso and Faletto called 'Structural Dualism (Moghadam, 1994:114).

Today, this 'structural dualism' seems to have translated into factors affecting Iranian culture. In Iran, one is often confronted with contradictory attitudes. For example, on the one hand, all that is Western is good and, on the other hand, the West stands for colonialism and power which is a negative position. In pre-revolutionary Iran, the process of 'modernisation' became an imitation of the Western cultural structure, especially in consumption patterns. Bill and Leidon (1984) describe the Iranian scene during the modernisation era as follows: "Discotheques and mosques, modern luxury hotels and squalid mud huts, nuclear energy programmes and the fuel of animal droppings, F16s and old rifles and daggers, palaces and tents, computerised libraries and omnipresent illiteracy" (Bill and Leidon, 1984: 2-3). It is important to remember, here, that Iranian women went from the miniskirts of the 1970s to the chador; both symbols of

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[48] On a visit to Iran in 2002, I went to Tehran as a tourist and, disappointingly found the museums to be quite empty. I discussed my concerns with a gallery worker who stated that much of our Iranian heritage has been taken abroad, and that it is only in recent years that museums in Iran have been given any attention. He reasoned that, because of the war and low national morale, history heritage, and contemporary art (as mentioned in the previous chapter section 3.5.1), had been neglected. Many priceless items and some of the best-preserved items from Iran are kept in the Louvre (Paris) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London).

[49] For more information about this foundation, visit www.chf-iran.com.

[50] For examples of Sinai and Ossouli's work, see Chapter 5.

incompatible belief systems, which exemplify the duality and inconsistency in Iranian culture, particularly in the lives of women. The 'beechador'[51] woman became subject to interrogation and the 'westoxicated'[52] woman posed a threat to social and cultural structure; she had no sense of identity. Ahmed (2000) states that, Westernisation would not create an authentic Iranian identity and that modernisation, "through Islamic culture, is necessary if Iran is to avoid the homogenising and alienating forces of the socio-technological modernisation" (Ahmed and Shari'ati, in Mirsepassi, 2000: 96). An often-negative term, 'Gharbzadeh' ('struck by the West') individuals often stand for all that is Western; a moral disease and a risk to society.

The political and economic influences of the West have also changed the structural development of Iranian culture and, in turn, Iran's position globally. Moghadam(1994) points out that the process of change in Iranian culture has been a "synthesis not just a simple imposition" (Moghadam, 1994: 112). Thus, Iranian culture has a shared relationship with Westernism, Islamism and Nationalism, each with distinct changes and consequent discourses.

It could be assumed that society responds to change by either opposing it or adapting to it. The veiling of women in Iran, for instance, is a change to which women had to adapt. The West, as well as many individuals in Islamic countries, often view traditional Muslim women as being old-fashioned and ignorant of integration and modernisation, because of their marked visual difference. The Islamic government has also used the opposing imageries and ideologies of the veiled and the unveiled as a crucial foundation for implementing Islamic laws concerning women in Iran. It was precisely this

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[51] Beechador means unveiled, without religion.

[52] Westoxicated and weststruckness are direct translations of the Farsi word Gharbzadegi (West-affected; like a virus). It is unclear where the term Westoxicated originated, but it was in use during the modernisation era of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Jalal el-Ahmadi (2000) wrote his book entitled *Gharbzadegi (Westoxication)* in 1962, when Westernisation was at its peak, and he analysed the effects of the modernisation process on Iranian identity. His comments on Iranian identity still form an integral part of contemporary discussions on Iranian identity.

'difference' which acted as a launch-pad for Iran's position with the West; Iran was not going to become Westernised, Iran's veiled image communicated this difference.

The Italian Marxist, Gramsci, used the term 'hegemony' to refer to the way in which dominant groups in society, through a process of "intellectual and moral leadership", win the consent of the subordinate groups in society (Gramsci cited in Storey, 1993:12). Taking Gramsci's approach and referring it to Iran's situation of women, it seems evident that the male-centred leadership takes the dominant role. The importance, as Gramsci has pointed out, is that it is an 'intellectual and moral leadership'; meaning that it is not a mere domination (Gramsci in Storey, 1993:12).[53] It uses cultural codes with which society, and in the context of this study, Iranian women in particular, feels connected with, in this case the already-established rules within Islam.

By appointing women who conform to social Islamic social rules to high positions in the government such as Zahra Rahnavard,[54] other Iranian women feel that they can share with the dominant powers. To what extent appointed female figures are able to change laws is a complicated issue, and one which is currently being debated in Iran. Both Khorasani (2001: 22) and Moghadam (1994:120) have pointed out that, in Islamic societies, women are considered as the guardians of culture; they are the bearers of children and responsible for the family unit as part of the larger culture. Within a predominantly male-orientated society, women's roles are measured by their ability to restore and maintain cultural values and possess 'authentic' identities. The various religious leaders mainly communicate these values.[55] Former President Khatami actively promoted the role of women in the Islamic republic, appointing a woman as one of his three vice presidents. The contemporary Iranian woman is integrated into society; she is

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[53] For further analysis of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, see Joseph Femia, 1981, Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process, Clarendon press, Oxford.
[54] Rahnavard is a feminist and an appointed speaker for other women in parliament
[55] In a recent talk given by president Khatami, he stated that: "Women play a fundamental role in society, she is the pivot of the family. But that doesn't mean that she has to work exclusively at home or that she is limited to guaranteeing the comfort of men" (Khatami, 2001).

not merely a provider of children; she has aspirations and she is interestingly aware of her identity. However, the many groups founded throughout the years to make changes in Islamic laws are extremely male-orientated. Iranian women are still dealing with the remnants of the past, and searching for the right identity.[56]

Subsequently, Iranian women occupy identities which are in constant flux, as are the cultural and political changes around them. It seems that their shared identities operate within many different localities, and yet there seems to be one connecting factor: relocation. In relation to contemporary Iranian woman artists, they all share in a form of 'collective representation' as termed by Faist (2000): "The most important form of solidarity is 'collective representations'. These are shared ideas, beliefs, evaluations and symbols" (Faist, 2000: 120). In the arenas of shared identities, terms used to describe women's issues are often subjective and only valid in the context of the particular situation. For example, the wearing of the Islamic hijab for some women is part of what their religion, and for others, a law which they have to abide by. In this sense, the ideologies of citizenship as a shared ownership of values often reject those who do not 'fit in' to certain value systems and ideologies. Therefore, those who are in a position of statelessness find it hard to fit into new social structures, whether they are displaced through religion, politics, culture, or displaced geographically. As an example in point, Ossouli [57] refers to the notion of 'shared symbols' in her work: "I have my history, my religion, my customs, my poetry, and my femininity, all these come with their own symbols, and I use these in my work; they are the components of my identity" (Ossouli, Interview, 2000).

Whether or not the notion of a shared identity is ideological and unattainable, it seems that for Iranians (whether in Iran or outside it), it is a place to anchor one's self. Dualism

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[56]Moghadam argues that: "The very politicisation of women and their continuous exposure to ideological and political challenges of the opposition forces, particularly the growing secular feminism among Iranian women, has made it increasingly difficult for the Islamic state to re-domesticate and politicise them" (Moghadam, 1994:139).

[57] For examples of Ossouli's work, see Chapter 4.

has become part of Iranian culture, echoed by the dual lives that Iranians lead both inside and outside of Iran. The opposing lives inside and outside of homes in Iran are also mirrored in the lives of those living outside Iran, where they narrate their sense of self through opposing Iranian and Western cultures. These uncertainties bring us to the concern with authentic identities; with solid perceptions of what it means to be Iranian. The next section briefly contextualises the discussion so far and explores the notion of representation and belonging in order to further analyse the position of contemporary Iranian women artists as presenters of Iranian identity.

3.5 Representation and Belonging: Artists as cultural agents

Misconception is the tyrant to 'true' representation and authenticity, and comes with a lack of knowledge about others. In Iran's case, most Iranians would agree that they feel unfairly represented outside Iran. Central to any national identity is the wish to be 'properly' represented, both within the country and by other countries. Art can play a major role in this, due to its relationship with the public sphere. Art can operate on the outskirts of political and economical arenas. In this section, the notion of representation as a form of belonging is explored.

Said believes that discourse and exchange within any culture is not necessarily the 'truth', but rather it is a 'representation' (Said, 1985:50). Representation, in its many forms, is vital to the integration and establishment of old and new concepts within any culture, and can be both negative and positive. A problematic form of representation is 'stereotyping'. Stereotyping is a tool used within all cultures, which results from an attempt to define cultures and people, which is often based on simplistic and sometimes false ideas. Hall (1997) states:

> The important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is being perceived as 'real'. And what is visually produced, by the practices of representation is only half the story. The other half - the deeper meaning - lies in what is not being said, but is being fantasised, what is being implied but can not be shown (Hall, 1997: 263).

Practices of representation influence the positions from which we speak. Hall explains, "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', positioned, I was born into and spent my childhood and adolescence in a lower –middle class family in Jamaica. I have lived all my adult life in England, the shadow of the black Diaspora -'in the belly of the beast". He goes on to say, "I write against the background of a lifetime's work in cultural studies. If the paper seems preoccupied with the Diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement it is worth remembering that all discourse is placed, and the heart has its reasons" (Hall, 1997:225).

Like Hall, Neshat's background is one of displacement from home, and her fascination with Iran came from a return trip after the Revolution in 1990. With an art education in the U.S, she began to explore her homeland, which was a significant personal journey. Consequently it affected her art practice, both in style and content. Iran had changed dramatically since the last time she was there. The veil was the most prominent change that she noticed, and with it a set of ideologies that she had never experienced before. She recalls the experience as

Fig. **3-4**: *Rapture* (1999), Shirin Neshat, Production stills (Source: Vogue Hommes International, Fall/Winter 2003-04)

"Exhilarating - because I had never seen a society in which everyone functioned under a

common ideology, and frightening - because it was nothing like I had remembered"
(Neshat, 2000:150).[58] Neshat's main interest is Iran and her outsider perspective gives her
work a fresh insight.

Therefore, the discourse of identity is synonymous with location and preoccupied with a
sense of belonging. In today's society, where boundaries are supposedly fading, so-called
'Black art' or 'Asian Art' has become a method of defining artists, their belonging,
locality, and marked difference.[59] Art is used to represent identities. Representation is a
key factor both for communicating a sense of belonging and not belonging. It is also the
foundation of a given identity and how it is represented from the outside. Art can be a
way of communicating locality and exile, creating a bridge between selves and others.
Within the ideologies of Iranian women's central position in the national identity of Iran,
there are many representations and stereotypes. This puts enormous pressure on Iranian
women, especially women who are active in representing Iranian identity namely through
the arts. Some Iranian women artists are faced with a dilemma, a concern, or a sense of
duty to their viewers (whether in Iran or not) in representing a truthful images of their
gendered, politicised and stereotyped selves. The notion of 'true' representation is
something with which many of the artists, including myself, have struggled, due to the
issues posed by both our personal and national identities.

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[58] Through media-based works of film and photography, mainly black-and-white, she explores the
relationship between men and women in Iran. Some of her works could be about any Islamic nation. Her
choice of material exemplifies a search for the truth. Although her work is often poetic, it displays a
documentary quality because of the predetermined power which we mainly associate with this type of
imagery. The use of black-and-white photography, which is often associated with newspaper images and
film, gives her work at once a powerful authority and also accentuates the duality of positioning that men
and women assume in Muslim societies, which could be said to be more visually apparent than in other
countries.
[59] Black art and Asian art are terms often used by contemporary art critics in the West to describe artworks
made by artists originating from these countries. While at the same time these definitions help to define
groups of artists that may have been previously underrepresented, it also creates boundaries. Often these
artworks are primarily judged by their maker's orientation.

Contemporary Iranian women artists working in close relation to the subject of Iran and Iranian identity belong to the same group, whether living in Iran or abroad. This is apparent in the subject matter of some of the artists featured in this research, such as Neshat and Ghadirian. The two artists are working under different circumstances (Neshat in New York, Ghadirian in Tehran), yet they explore similar themes of women's identity in their work. Shirin is well-known as an Iranian woman artist living and working in the U.S. Shadi has become well-known in Iran and to a wide audience across Europe. Publicity enables artists to become aware of one another, and general themes begin to take shape. Galleries and curators also have a part in publicising or reinforcing certain kinds of representations. In the last 10 years, Iranian cinema brought Iranian art into the public arena and this made Iranian art, especially art produced by Iranian women, very fashionable.

In a recent exhibition in London entitled *Good Sayings* by Shahbazi (2001), we see another example of an attempt to depict a true image of Iran.[60] Shahbazi's exhibition is a combination of documentary style images with an artistic angle achieved through both subject matter and framing. The images are mostly of mundane scenarios. In figure 3.5, an Iranian woman is doing up her son's shoelaces. The boy stands as his mother crouches down to tie his laces. The situation is ordinary, but what gives this image power is the fact that it is set in Iran. "She strips the imagery of the Orientalist imaginary - the desert, the odalisque, the veiled woman - down to its bare reality" (Shahbazi, web link, 2001).

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[60] Good Sayings derives from the Zoroastrian faith of good thoughts, good words, good deeds and refers back to an optimistic religious morality. Shahbazi sees this as fundamental to the spiritual traditions of her country.

The image conveys many levels of meaning, one of which comments on the subject of a male-dominated society. As Khorasani notes, they are the mothers who affirm the ideology of the male hierarchy in their sons' childhood (Khorasani, 2001:111).[61] Although this may not be an intended message in Shahbazi's photograph, the exhibition of such works outside Iran creates new contexts and in some ways changes the work. Shahbazi is clearly aware of this in an interview with Michele Robecchi of Flash Art she states:

Fig. **3-5**: Good Sayings Shirana Shahbazi (Source: www.guardian.co.uk)

> It was interesting to compare how it was received in Europe and in Iran. I was thinking of the most simple situation I could take a picture of, but the knowledge that something is made in Iran seems to be enough in many European circumstances to make it very special! (Shahbazi, Robecchi interview, 2003)

Other artists such as Tabrizian and Neshat have explored issues around female identity, marked by their displacement from homeland. Indeed the desire to explore and communicate the complex issues surrounding their identities, relating to history, religion, displacement, culture and the gendered relationships is present in the works of many of the featured artists. The culture of representation afforded to artists through various exhibitions and their deliberate choice to make specific works on issues of identity places

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[61] Although one might say that all mothers fasten children's shoe laces, in the case of Shahbazi's work, and in the context of her other images, this image takes on other levels of meaning in subtle ways and can be interpreted (in the context of her interests and other works) as a maternal contribution to patriarchy.

them within a specific context of Iran, a context which offers a public outlet and a place of dialogue; it also offers a place to belong to.

As Iran is a nation often misrepresented, there is a great need for multiple viewpoints and multiple representations. The analysis of the works of Iranian women artists and their various representations of identity, aims to both question and at times erase previous misconceptions. Contemporary Iranian women artists are important cultural presenters, precisely because they offer insights into the complex psychology surrounding the representations of Iranian identity.

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter has examined theories of identity from the perspective of cultural theory in relation to Iran and in particular Iranian women. It has specifically focused on the ways in which Iranian women deal with their different and conflicting political, gendered and religious identities. The role of personal and national histories, the narration and the changeable effects of events, such as the Islamic Revolution, mirror the dichotomies present in Iranian identities. It has also been established that history can be problematic; it is in a constant state of flux and, therefore, needs to be seen as malleable depending on the different contexts. Although history has been rewritten after the Islamic Revolution, and different narrations are often in conflict with one another, for Iranians, history remains an important reference point in the narration of their personal and national identities. Iranian identity is a mixture of the old and the new, where modernisation and tradition work both against, and in tandem with, one another. These various levels of interaction that are central to understanding the Iranian situation today. Therefore, in order to understand the many sides of contemporary Iranian women's identities, it is fundamental to consider multiple narrations and representations.

An approach which homogenises Iranian identity is flawed, due to the many contradictions discussed so far. However, all Iranians could be said to share a sense of 'Iranianness', whether it is through re-narrated history, as in the case of Raza[62] and her inherited Iranian identity, or through actual shared experiences such as the experience of war. However, Iranian identity is one of contradiction. There are distinct divides between Iranians, both inside and outside Iran. These divides can be observed in the ways in which individuals observe Islamic laws and practice elements of Iranian culture. As discussed in section 3.3, the mixture of Western, Islamic and Iranian ideologies create different projections of Iranianness or rather, attitudes towards being Iranian. These distinctions are practised in the divide between 'us' and 'them', and can also be observed globally in geographic divides between nations. The location of Iranian culture and the contradictory elements that form it are constantly translated and represented to form what may be loosely termed 'contemporary Iranian identity'.

This chapter has established the complexity of the notion of identity, both in theory and in the current identities of contemporary Iranian women. It is also evident from this chapter that the role of creativity in both formulating and representing identities is very important; creative outputs come from, and are part of, the cultures that make them. Therefore, the art produced by contemporary Iranian women is an indicator of social and cultural ideologies and the structures of complex identities.

In the next chapter, an integrated analysis of the Iranian woman artists is undertaken, to further evaluate their placed or displaced identities in relation to cultural and political influences and the theories already discussed.

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[62] For Raza's experience of constructing her identity through other peoples experience and historical narrations, refer back to section 4.3.

Chapter 4 Critical Analysis of Contemporary Iranian Women Artists and Art Practice

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the one-to-one interviews conducted with the artists in relation to the discussions put forward in previous chapters. The issues raised in the interviews further informed the structure for the analysis of the artworks as discussed in chapter 2 section 2.3.4. This chapter analyses the specific thematic elements raised so far in the works of the contemporary Iranian women artists in relation to their identities. In a broader sense, this chapter establishes the relationships between the artists' specific positionalities and their consequent identities through both interview data and their artworks, and indicates specific concerns of Iranian women today. As established in Chapter 3, identities are extremely complex; therefore, this research does not propose to make generalisations about Iranian women's identities. Rather, it attempts to understand these specific identities in relation to the effects of the *changes* discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.[1]

This chapter acknowledges the factors that have affected the artists whom I discuss on a personal, national, and international level, through a thematic analysis. The artists and their artworks can be viewed as social commentaries on the effects of the changes, such as those brought about by the Islamic Revolution. As stated, the chosen artists in this study belong to two distinct groups: those living and working in Iran; and those living and working outside Iran. By exploring these two groups, Iranian identity can be viewed from two seemingly different viewpoints, enabling a wider examination of the various circumstances that affect their identities and production of art.

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[1] See Chapter 4 section 4.4 for an analysis of the *Forces of change* and the effect on the featured artists and their art production.

As established in the previous chapter, there are many elements that contribute to change and transformation in identities. The construction of identities, and in particular Iranian women's identities, is affected by their gendered, cultural and political positioning both publicly and personally.

In recent years, in particular since September 11th 2001, and the consequent Western war with all that is Islamic, Iranian cinema and art has become fashionable.[2] When this research started in 1999, there were few well-known Iranian artists in the West, particularly in the USA and the UK, where the majority of the researched artists residing outside Iran live.[3] It is also important to evaluate this renewed interest in context. Gordon Hon (2004) describes the current fashionable interest in the East (2004:4) as a homogeneous vagueness, which is "a political tool and is often used by the West in connection to that vague region, the near or middle East" (Hon, 2004:4). Hon describes the effects of September 11th as creating a dilemma when it comes to describing Eastern art created in the West by artists residing outside their home countries; it is described as arts located in-between – that is to say, these types of art are neither here nor there, neither one thing or the other. Indeed, this vagueness is exactly what this research, and in particular this chapter, seeks to dispel in search of new, more accurate definitions.

The next section outlines the artists chosen for this research. Section 4.2, the notion of authenticity and Iranian women artists is explored in order to examine ways in which contemporary Iranian women's art can be defined. This is followed by an exploration of the role of history in the artists' works and identities. Section 4.3 explores the notion of home and representation, which is further evaluated in a section entitled Cultural Constrictions, in which the reflection of predetermined moulds or ideologies in Iranian

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[2] As demonstrated in the fall/winter 2003-04 issue of *Hommes International Vogue* magazine, it is evident that Iranian art is fashionable; the issue is devoted to the Middle East, especially Iran.
[3] Previously, artists such as Ghadirian and Ghazel were unknown. In recent years, these same artists' works have been featured in countless touring exhibitions such as *Veil* in 2002, which has been touring the UK and Europe.

culture in the artworks are examined alongside the ideologies promoted by the West, as well as how these two different cultures affect the artists and the production of artworks. Section 4.4 is an analysis of the forces of change, and it explores the ways in which various artists have engaged with, and reacted to, the major changes brought about by the Islamic Revolution, the war with Iraq and the omnipresent influence of the West. The current political representation of Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, is explored in section 4.4.2, entitled the Eastern Gaze. Section 4.5 explores the various positions that these artists take, both in their work and their identities. Similarities and differences present in the works of the artists are further analysed and discussed in relation to the theories already explored in previous chapters. To conclude, this chapter refers to the role of feminism in Iran as discussed earlier (Chapter 1) and its relationship with contemporary Iranian women artists.

4.1.1 Choice of Artists

This study considers a total of twenty artists. Most of the artists who live and work in Iran have been interviewed directly, while the artists who live abroad have been mainly explored through secondary sources.[4] The following pages outline the 20 artists chosen for this research in two distinct groups of those living and working in Iran and those living and working outside Iran.

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[4] For a visual list of the artists please see pages 122-23. For biographies of the artists, see Appendix A.

Artists living and working in Iran

Minoo Assadi

Ladan Chalack

Shahrzad Elmi

Bitta Feyyazi
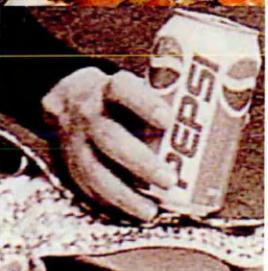
Shadi Ghadirian

Farah Ossouli
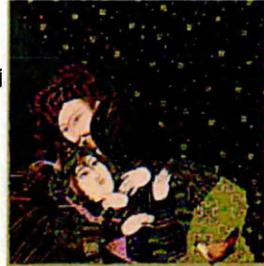
Zahra Rasoolzadeh

Leila Sadatfar

Gizella Sinai

Hamila Vakili

Artists living and working outside Iran

Katy Kianush

Mitra Memarzia

Shirin Neshat

Mitra Tabrizian

Parisa Taghizadeh

Farah Bajull

Nooshin Farhid

Shirana Shahbazi

Ghazel

Shirazeh Houshiari
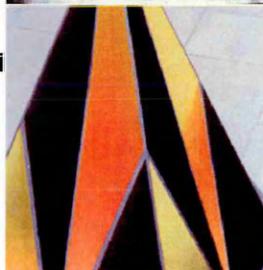
The criteria for the selection of artists were: the artists had to be well established, i.e. they needed to have exhibited publicly on a regular basis; the artists had to be from different age groups and backgrounds (in order to provide a spectrum of experiences and viewpoints on political and cultural issues); and the artists had to have used different media, styles and subject matter. The overall aim was to explore a diverse range of contemporary Iranian women artists. The next section commences with an exploration of the reflection of history, as discussed in the previous chapter, in relation to the artists and their artworks.

4.2 Reflection of History in Iranian Women Artists' works

History as a signifier of the authentic is reflected in the works of the artists discussed in this section. Today, popular art in Iran often refers to symbolic imagery of the past as transhistorical. For example, artists frequently depict the authentic walls of Persepolis using modern methods of representation.[5] As a nation experiences an identity crisis, it becomes preoccupied with the 'authentic'; a return to what is believed to be unchanged and, therefore tries to create a concrete sense of self and national solidarity through revisiting the past.

It was important to locate the artists who, in their own unique way, explored a sense of 'truth', a sense of 'true Iranianness'; those who were, in some way, searching for the authentic, whatever that might be.[6] This was, of course, problematic as identity is in constant flux and there are no clear-cut guidelines or categories into which their identities

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[5] The walls of many official buildings, such as banks, are decorated with images of Persepolis and, on arrival at Shiraz Airport, one is greeted by images derived from the stone carvings of ancient sites, appropriating Iran's ancient walls, constructing them in modern materials, setting them in a modern building.

[6] It is important to acknowledge here that the notion of true Iranianness is something that cannot be exactly defined For further reading on the notion of true identity, see 'Truth Matters: Normativity in Thought and Knowledge', Pinedo 2004, section V. Here, Pinedo discusses the importance of truth as value and the notion of 'truth makers'.

and authenticity can neatly fit; and the notion of authenticity itself is deeply problematic. The main concern here has been with what the search for authenticity reveals. Could it be that the course to authenticity offers a safe refuge in times of change?

As mentioned earlier, satellite communications including the World Wide Web in Iran has expanded and developed extensively in the last fifteen years.[7] As a result, the young generation of Iran is exposed more than ever to other ideologies, chiefly Western ones; this creates even more confusion as to what qualities an authentic Iranian woman should have. So it comes as no surprise that there are extreme examples of 'Iranian women': veiled from head to toe or clad in the latest Western fashion. Sean Sayers (1999) states:

> The concept of authenticity, the idea of `being oneself' or `being true to oneself' is widespread and familiar. It is one of the central notions of modern moral thought. Yet it is a puzzling and paradoxical notion. Surely I am always myself and necessarily so? How can it be otherwise? `I am I' is a trivial and logically necessary truth. How can I possibly not be myself? In what sense is it possible not to be true to oneself? How are authenticity and in-authenticity possible? (Sayers, 1999).

Indeed, authenticity can be described as part of the legitimisation of the self. Authenticity promises a sense of truth and, when discussing identities, the notion of truth is central. Hassan Naraghi (2002) describes the intricacies of Iranian identity in *Our Own Sociology* (2002). Naraghi believes that, "In general, we Iranians have very little interest in coming face-to-face with truth that is in some way not in keeping with our beliefs and expectations" (Naraghi, 2002:39). He goes on to say that contemporary Iranian culture has become obsessed with pretence and covering up the truth, because of the pressures of the current political climate (Naraghi, 2002:39). During the interviews that I conducted, it was at times evident that the artists were not entirely honest in their replies to politically-sensitive questions. Although it is not ethical to reveal the artist's identity, it can be revealed that certain artists maintained that events such as the Islamic Revolution had had

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[7] For further examination of Iranians and the Internet, see *Imagined Cyber Communities: Iranians and the Internet* by Haleh Nazeri, 1996, in which she states the importance of the Internet in keeping Iranians in touch with one another globally and allowing them to express taboo subjects with one another. Also see Alfred Hermida, 2002, *Web Gives Voice to Iranian Women*.

no effect on their identity or their work. Sayers comments on the fact that consistent history is central to the notion of the authentic self:

> To have an identity, the self must have some unity over time. At the minimum, this must involve some settled commitment to a specific pattern of activity or way of life; and being true to oneself is a matter of maintaining such a commitment in the face of contrary pressures (Sayers, 1999).

The commitment Sayers points out here is something with which many displaced artists including myself deal with from time to time. Collectively, the artists featured in this study cannot be categorised as having a consistent view of history or Iranian identity, because of their different experiences of events and the ways that they choose to describe them. There are also outsider influences and particular objects and beliefs that are connected to the Middle East, such as the inclusion of Persian rugs, patterns, motifs, clothing and historical structures.

The notion that something is mimicked in such a way, that it promotes certain values and ideologies in its new surroundings, is something that is also present in identities where one mimics in order to fit in, and mimics what is accepted in a particular context, society, culture and so on. It is therefore possible to mimic authenticity.[8] In relation to the notion of mimicry, Homi Bhabha states: "In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy" (Bhabha, 2000:90). Therefore, through substituting one thing for another, mimicking identities can be described as a way of authentication, or rejection of the authentic, depending on the way it is represented. Artists may choose to use the notion of the authentic as a point of reference, or a place to take refuge during times of uncertainty and turmoil. It could be assumed that distant history becomes an arena in which artists can narrate a sense of the authentic self.

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8 Bhabha explores the notion of mimicry extensively in 'Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse'. He states: "I want to turn to this process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates; the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence" (Bhabha, 1994:87).

As discussed in Chapter 3, Iranians strongly associate themselves with the time of the great Persian Empire. The stone-carved figures of ancient Persians have stood to attention throughout history, as shown in figure 4.1. Artists such as Sinai draw direct inspiration from these ancient sites.
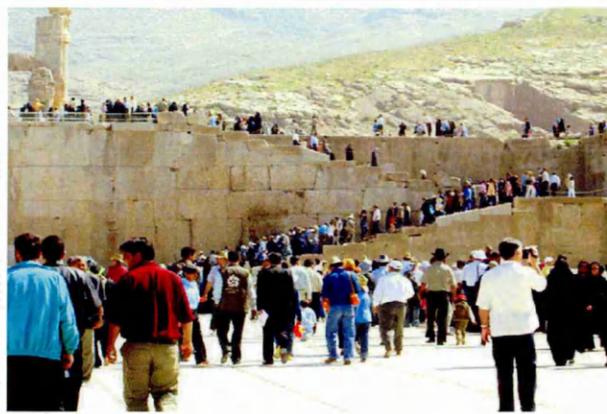
Fig. **4-1**: Visitors flood to Persepolis in record numbers (Source: Mitra Memarzia 2006)

Figure 4.2 shows a painting by Gizella Varga Sinai. She is an Iranian with Hungarian origin and sees herself as a hybrid Iranian. The old and the new make for an exciting creative platform for Sinai and it is obvious that she associates strongly with Persepolis.[9] In this painting she uses a combination of recognisable stone carvings from Persepolis. Sinai tells me that the eggs are a metaphor for the notion of history giving birth to the present. Interestingly Sinai denies this renewal by presenting us with a skeleton of the bird, which cannot provide warmth to the eggs in order for them to hatch. Sinai, is therefore concerned here with the
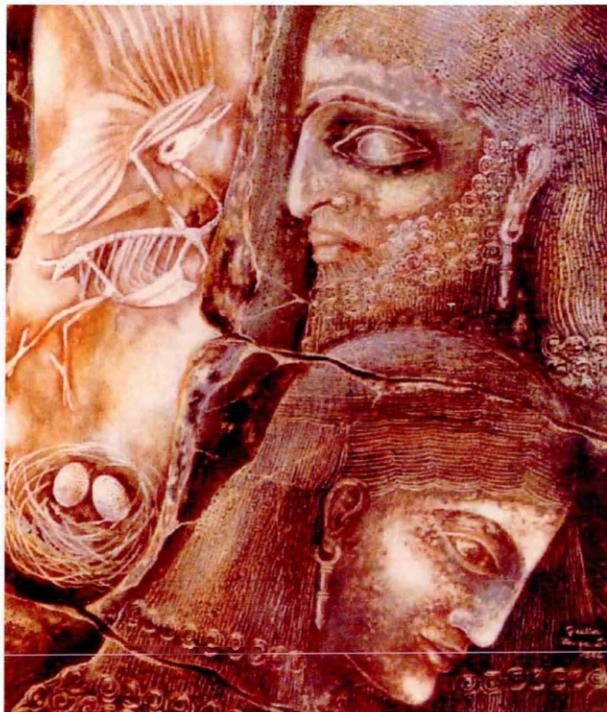
Fig. **4-2**: *Untitled* Gizella Varga Sinai (date unknown), oil on canvas (Source: courtesy of artist)

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[9] As discussed in Chapter 3, (section 3.2.1) a sense of what has been before confirms a sense of place, belonging.

notion that Iranian history is somehow unattainable. Her fascination with male and female figures in her paintings also presents us with the notion that there are always opposites at play when trying to describe a notion of Iranianness.

Fig. **4-3**: *Lovers* Gizella Varga Sinai (1996), oil on canvas (Source: courtesy of artist)

Sinai's works often have an element of sentimentality and a hope that the past will be rejuvenated. In the "fresco" painting (figure 4.3) of two lovers embracing as a lone bird

sits on the wall, Sinai presents a metaphor for life, freedom, and hope. The bird sits in the hope that its companion will someday join it.

In another of Sinai's large fresco paintings (figure 4.4), the theme of the bird is once again explored. Here, the nest at the bottom of the painting represents life and hope derived from the past, from history, and again clearly points to the notion that the past and the present are disjointed. Somehow, the future longs for the past to come alive and nurture the present (represented by the two birds). There is also an aesthetic beauty, which Sinai

Fig. **4-4**: *Nest*, Gizella Varga Sinai (1989), Oil on canvas, 100x70 cm (source: courtesy of artist)

manages to create from her fascination with the passing of time and decay through her meticulous attention to detail and colour. The large scale of these works also presents the viewer with something monumental; a visitor commented: "Her paintings make me think I am actually there, I find myself lost in that time." (Haydeh Frahmand, exhibition visitor 2001)

History is also reflected through various elements in the works of other artists in this research such as Ghadirian, who dresses her subjects in clothing from the Qajar period (figure 4.7). Also, Tabrizian makes direct links to political events in Iran's history in her films and Ossouli and Sadatfar who use traditional methods and motifs in their miniature paintings. Evidently, the pressures created by the notion of authenticity in Iranian culture and history have a firm root as something that has remained unchanged. This may be the reason why some Iranian women artists continue to search in Iranian history for a sense of a solid identity. Another issue at play here is the lack of Iranian women's art history. There are few women artists recorded in Iranian art history, which further complicates the

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production of art that does not reference history for some artists. In relation to this Sadatfar comments: "The only real art to me is traditional miniature painting...women have not had and still do not have a status in this arena, I would like to be seen as one of the leading women miniaturists in Iran and that is why I obsessively try to perfect my traditional style." (Sadatrar, Interview 1999) Here Sadatfar directly points to the lack of Iranian women's presence in Iranian art history an issue which is currently being improved upon due to feminist movements taking place inside Iran and other forms of research taking place.

In the next section, the notions of home, representation, and the ways displacement from home affects the artists in this study, are explored.

4.3 Home and Representation

As discussed in the previous chapter (section 3.3.3), the notion of 'home' has many roles in the construction and maintenance of identities. Home and nation are often associated with one another. For those living away from their homeland, the memory of home often becomes obscured, dependent upon the ability to remember and the temptation to fantasise. Home is also associated with the domestic and the female; therefore, terms such as 'motherland' and 'mother tongue' are gendered. Islamic women have often been associated with the home, and historically with secluded spaces such as harems. For Iranian women living in Iran, the home can mean both freedom and confinement.[10] The duality presented by the public and private, veiled and unveiled, also presents multiple projections of the self.

Hamila Vakili, a young photographer who works in Tehran, uses both the home environment and the public environment as a way of exploring the contradictions in her own identity, and she uses a broken mirror to include herself in the pictures (figures 4.5

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[10] See Chapter 3 (section 3.3.1) for Sobchack's view on the notion of home and the body.

and 4.6). The image of a veiled woman is shown on a television in the background, a Persian rug lies on the floor[11], whilst Vakili and her friend Nooshin wear westernised clothes: jeans; T-shirt; combat trousers; denim shirt. One becomes aware that there is a third person taking the photograph. Consequently, Vakili deconstructs the stereotypical image of young Iranian women by inviting the viewer into her home through this intimate imagery.

Fig. **4-5**: *Untitled*, Hamila Vakili (2003), Photograph (Source: Home Vogue International Winter Fall 2003/04:158)

In another series of photographs Vakili uses a mirror to project disjointed parts of herself onto a brick wall, which looks as though it would fall apart at any moment. The word Iran is spray painted onto the brick wall that is revealed in one image and covered by part

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[11] Here the Persian rug is again a symbol of Persian identity as in the works of Sinai.

of her body in another. These snippets of self-portraiture have a close relationship to the notion of the covered Iranian female body as representative of homeland and self identity. Vakili's works mainly concentrate on the representation of her own identity which she views as something which is highly disjointed and in a state of flux. "I am interested in dismantling my identity to see what is pure about it, to see what is left, maybe this way I can get closer to who I really am." (Vakili, 2003)
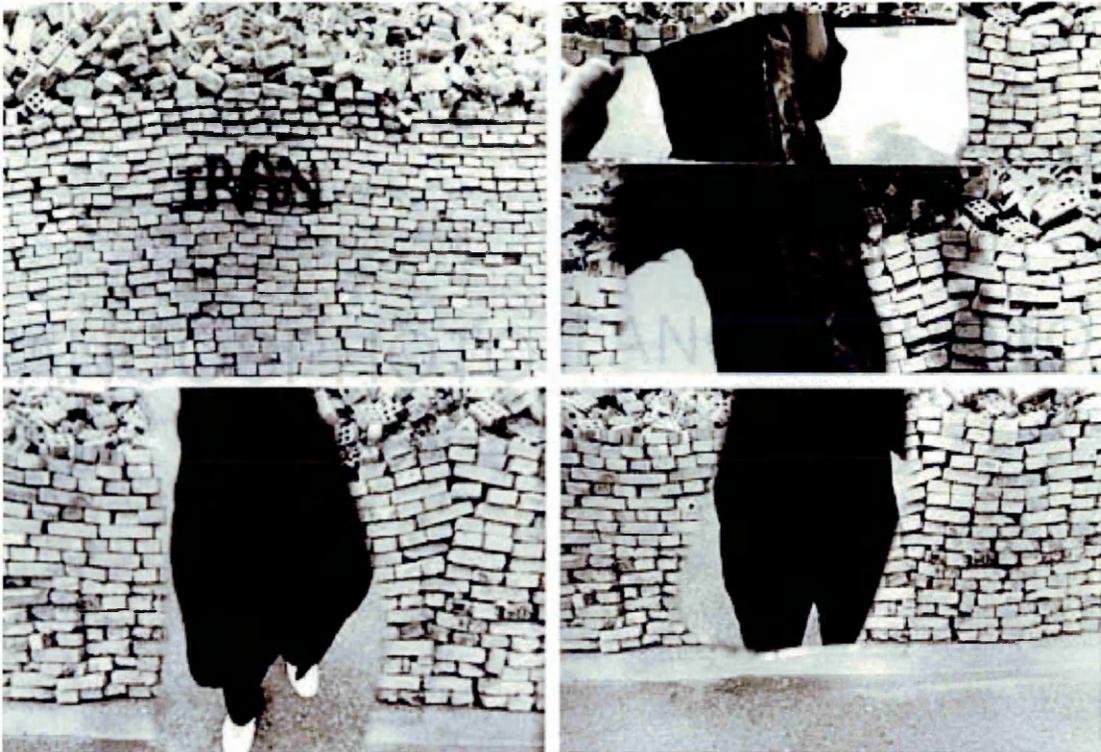
Fig. **4-6**: *Untitled*, Hamila Vakili (2003), Photograph (Source: www.fanoosphoto.com)

Vakili's use of black and white photography with a documentary style also references the imagery in the media. However, in a more recent exhibition (May 2006 in Boston USA) Vakili's work has moved into colour photographs of Barbie dolls covered in cling-film which she has slowly burnt in a succession of photographs. This new direction of work can be seen as a response to her new audience outside Iran. A way of exploring what she believes Western audiences to associate with the ideological female representation. Her

deliberate use of the symbolic Barbie is made interesting because of her own identity as an Iranian woman.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Ghadirian has also made the constructed nature of her work explicit, demonstrated in figure 4.7; an artist is painting the backdrop to the photograph as the picture is being taken. She uses the court photographs of the Quajar dynasty as inspiration for her work and, therefore, her images have similar qualities to that of Orientalist images. Artist and writer Janan Al Ani comments on Ghadirian's work and compares it to the Orientalist[12] image in figure 4.8:

Fig. **4-7**: *Quajar Series*, Shadi Ghadirian (1998), photographs 16x24cm (Source: Bailey and Twadras, 2003:98)

For an Iranian audience, the contemporary props are seen as ordinary objects in an extraordinary costume drama, whereas for a Western audience with no knowledge of the history of Iranian dress the contemporary props disrupt what appears to be a timeless ethnographic portrait of another culture (Al-Ani, cited in Bailey & Tawadras, 2003:97).

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[12] By employing the term Orientalist, I am referring to the collection of photographs, paintings and text about the Orient that relied heavily on Westerners' perception of the Orient. For post-colonial analysis of such works, see Lewis 1996 *Gendering Orientalism* and Kabbani (1994) *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of the Orient.*

As Al-Ani suggests, this 'acting out' is something that many artists employ in their work (Al-Ani, cited in Bailey & Tawadras, 2003:97). Ghadirian is directly using the Orientalist gaze and reflecting it back at the viewer. Here, Ghadirian's work raises the issue of the Orientalist gaze upon Eastern women by firstly using an authentic Eastern look and juxtaposing that with elements from the Western world such as a Pepsi can or a ghetto blaster. Her approach is to entice the viewer into an image they are used to seeing and to reveal the mark that Westernisation or modernisation has made on Iranian identity.[13] These images are also testimony to the Iranian relationship with colonialism. Ghadirian's work, therefore, mediates between two distinct histories and sensibilities of the Orient and the Occident, the past and the present.

Fig. **4-8**: *Interieur Mauresque- La Danse* (Moorish Interior- The Dance) (Source: Bailey and Twadras, 2003:97)

Similarly, Farah Ossouli (figure 4.9) produces works that deal with contemporary Iranian identity using historic referencing of traditional Iranian miniature painting in a modern style. After training as a graphic designer at university, she decided to research traditional miniature paintings, in order to establish a sense of identity from which she could begin to represent a contemporary identity. In the interview she expressed that she felt a sense of loss, a gap in her identity and the distance between herself and the regime, which was shaping after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

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[13] For a more in-depth analysis of the role of the *West* on the featured artists, see Section 4.4.2.
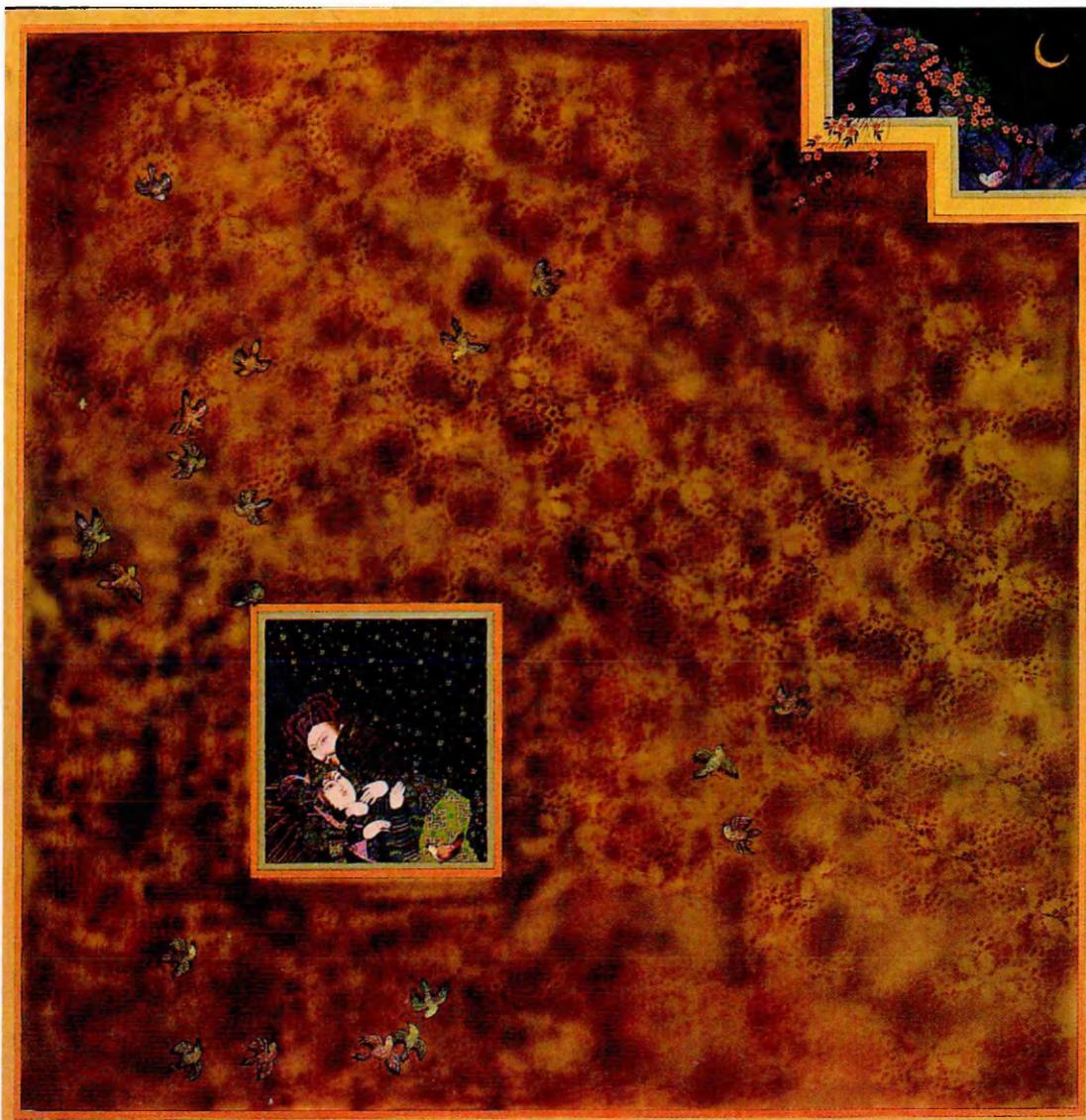
Fig. **4-9**: *Untitled*, Farah Ossouli (1997), Gouache 37 x 37, (Source: Courtesy of artist)

Ossouli's position, as one of the two wives of Khosro Sinai, places her well within the realms of an outmoded traditional view of women in Iran today.[14] This complicates her identity both within the confines of the home and within Iranian society, even though polygamy is still legal in Iran but not common. It is not surprising, therefore, that her

[14] Film-maker Khosro Sinai is married to both Gizzela Varga Sinai and Farah Ossouli, In Islam, men are allowed to have up to four wives. This is a tradition rarely practised in modern Iran, and it makes this relationship rather unique.

subject matter often explores male-female relations. Ossouli's art is a representation of traditional Persian miniatures, mostly from the Safavid period,[15] but she visually explores ways of expression through a traditional art form in a contemporary style. Her paintings are less busy when compared to traditional miniatures which are often overflowing with people, objects, and designs. Here, the notions of home and belonging are evident in Ossouli's use of the confined spaces in which she places her characters.

As shown in figure 4.9 Ossouli invites the viewer into a private moment between a pair of lovers through a window. She isolates her subjects with sensitivity, denies them access to objects and creates abstract intimate spaces. Her characters become victims of confinement where their emotions are expressed. Often the characters are men and women placed in a barren landscape of colour, where all outside influences have been removed. Her paintings communicate with great power and a strong sense of dignity, and her use of colour and space creates an imaginary landscape for the viewer. As she mentioned in the interview, Ossouli wants us to place her work, firstly, within the authentic framework of the traditional Iranian miniature (this could be described as an attempt at authenticating her work) and, secondly, within the contemporary art world through her distinctly modern painting methods and compositions.[16] In the interview (1999), she stated that, when she was a child, she would make people out of card and create houses for them to live in, and she sees this as the root of her current inspiration. Thus the notions of home and private spaces are a recurring theme in her paintings. Figure 4.10 shows the same group of women in two opposing situations, on the right a baby is present with great joy, on the left the baby is absent or lost, showing great

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[15] Early Safavid women were distinctive from women in other Islamic societies because much power and respect was given to the pious and celibate unmarried sister or daughter of ruling men. Consequently, these women were active patrons of art, architecture, and religious institutions. Ossouli may have chosen this era as a marker of a golden age, where Iranian women had a positive and central role. The shahnameh (the world's longest poetic literature, which was lavishly illustrated using Persian miniatures) was also conceived at this time. This could be another factor in Ossouli's search for the ultimate form of art and representation of Iranian women. For more detailed analysis of the Safavid Era, see Reid, 2000.
[16] Ossouli uses airbrushing techniques and spraying through lace in order to achieve some of her patterns, which are different to traditional miniatures in which each pattern is painstakingly drawn. This gives Ossouli's miniatures a modern sense of movement and immediacy.

sadness. Sinai has a direct relationship with the notion of home, and motherland and on representing 'true' Iranian identity, Ossouli comments:

> I have a problem with people who live here and are totally Iranian, and they produce work that is totally outside their culture, a different space, totally unrelated, I ask, how can this be being true to one's self? I represent issues that I feel are deep from my Iranian culture. (Ossouli, interview, 1999).[17]
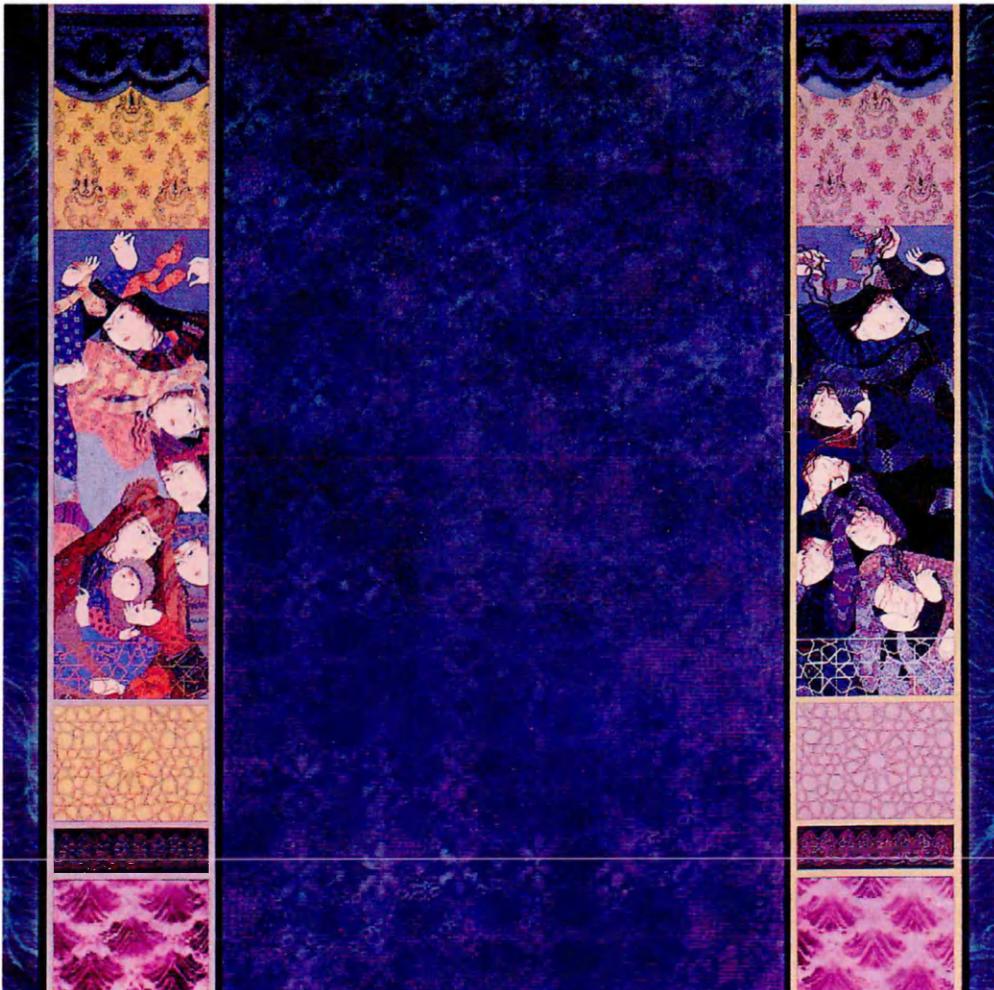
Fig. **4-10**: *Untitled*, Farah Ossouli (1997), Gouache 37 x 37, (Source: Courtesy of artist)

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[17] In figure 4.11 Ossouli explores issues of maternity. The section on the right shows happy women with a baby, and the section on the right shows them mourning with the loss of the baby.

In contrast to Ossouli, Zahra Rasoolzadeh was inspired by reaching out from her 'home', by placing an advertisement in the Visual Arts Magazine (1999) expressing her wish: "...to exchange ideas with other artists from different backgrounds, to discuss ideas and possible future collaborations" (Rasoolzadeh,1999).

Rasoolzadeh is not a well-known artist; nevertheless, her productive art activities in the basement of her home were inspirational. Her sense of isolation from the art world, from other people, was visible in many of her sculptures, most noticeably in a series of sculptures, such as figure 4.11, in which a central figure is tangled in a web. In some of these sculptures, the figure becomes almost the web itself, reflecting Rasoolzadeh's feeling of suffocation or being held back by her current surroundings.

Fig. **4-11**: Zahra Rasoolzadeh, Untitled (1998) Plaster and thread (Source: Curtsey of artist)

In figures 4.12 and 4.13 the body gestures are simplified, yet they speak with great volume. The size of the pieces varies from very small to a maximum of 60cm high, which she informed me was due to the lack of space and resources. Her sculptures seem to live within themselves and occupy a somewhat reclusive space. Often starting from a general idea, she allows the forms to almost create themselves, in relation to this she stated: "I think that art can only be alive when it is uncertain at times, otherwise it becomes dead and uninteresting to me" (Rasoolzadeh, interview, 1999).

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Fig. **4-12**: Fig. **4-13**: from series *Untitled* Zahra Rasoolzadeh (1999), mixed media approx 73cm high (Source: Mitra Memarzia)

In figure 4.13, the figure is split in two, depicting a visual representation of her split sense of identity as an artist displaced at home. The element of veiling or draping could also be seen as signalling the restrictions of her current position.

In the same way, Minoo Assadi, an artist much older than Rasoolzadeh, told me that she operates outside the "fashionable art scene". Assadi is not interested in joining new art movements, nor does she want to stay within the older, more traditional ones; this is expressed in her works in two distinct ways.
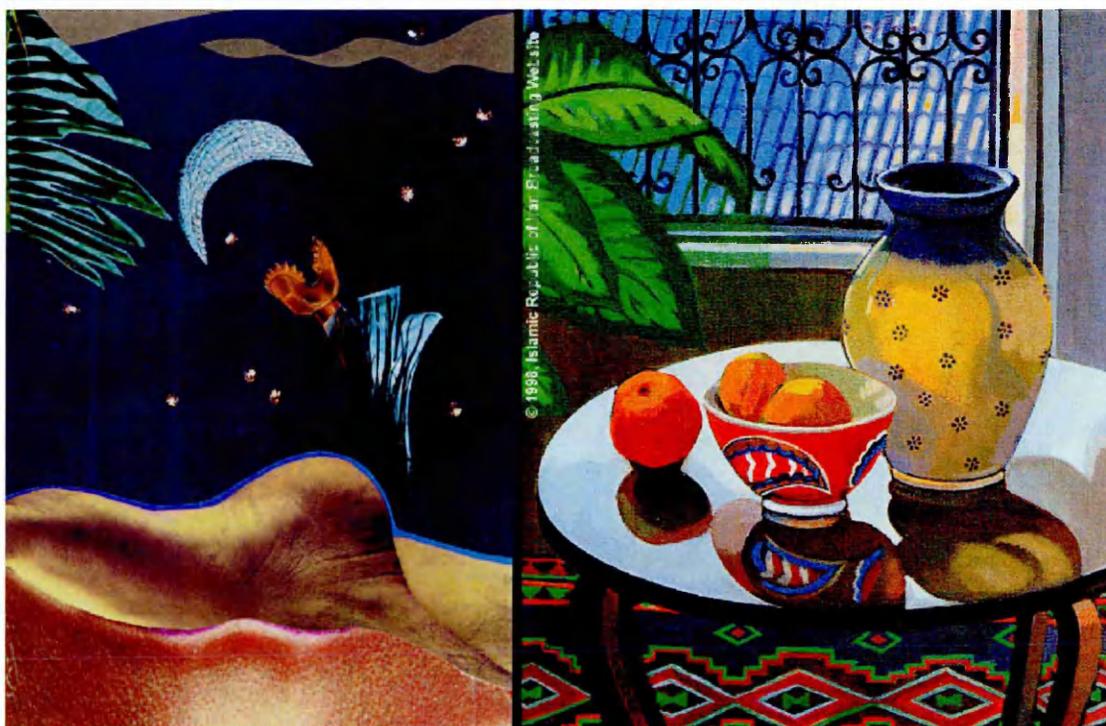
Fig. **4-14**: On the left: *The year 2000,* Minoo Assadi (2000), collage. On the right: *Still life* 1998 (Source: Courtesy of artist)

The image on the right (figure 4.14) is a painting of objects in Assadi's home; the collage on the left is abstract in both content and style. Her collage images portray a sense of desire for another land, another space, whereas her paintings are testimony to her private self. I asked her whether her approaches were signifiers of how she felt. She replied:

> Yes! I think to a point. I have worked cut off from the art landscape as it were, my space is my home, here, I love my home, I have everything how I like it. I live alone, everything is my way, I surround myself within my belongings. I am very attracted to these objects I have around my house (Assadi, Interview, 2001).

Assadi draws inspiration from her home and paints personal objects to somehow preserve a sense of identity. During our conversation about living in Iran, and how the Revolution and the current climate affected her, she told me that:

> After the Revolution I lost my family. My husband (Pakistani with a British passport) left during this time and joined his family in Pakistan, my son and daughter eventually followed suit. I experienced a deep sense of

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loneliness. So the friendly atmosphere of my home is my sanctuary (Assadi, Interview, 2001).

Fig. **4-15**: *Voyeuristic Series*, Parisa Taghizadeh (1998), Photographs (Source: courtesy of artist)

Therefore, although Assadi lives and works in Iran, the Revolution left her feeling displaced and lonely. In order to retain a sense of identity, she created a safe environment within her own home. Parisa Taghizadeh took the exact opposite approach by taking photographs of other people's homes to create her 'voyeuristic' image series (figure 4.15). She told me that:

Other peoples' homes always look so cosy and inviting, especially in wintertime when the lights are on. I was interested in capturing the idea of being outside these homes (Taghizadeh, Interview, 2001).

In a similar way to Taghizadeh, Nooshin Farhid turns the viewers into voyeurs using her parents as representatives of her displaced identity. In a series of video installations, Farhid filmed her parents in various scenarios that echo a sense of displacement, which is exemplified in a video entitled *The Pigeon* (2001) shown here in figure 4.17. Farhid provided me with the following written statement about this particular piece:

Fig. **4-16**: The Pigeon, Nooshin Farhid (2001), Video still, Single screen video 5.30 mins (Source: Courtesy of artist)

> An elderly couple are seen seated in an empty train. There is the story of a pigeon in this video that becomes significant. The pigeon flies high and goes very far, always going back to its original location. There is an immediate connection between the elderly couple and the pigeon. They are in a fast train to somewhere seemingly unknown to them; in a place that is very far from their original location (Iran and Britain); The anxiety on their faces suggests to us that they can never go back, there is a sense of waiting, and that something unexpected might happen. The uncertainty of what might be at the end of the tunnel is very evident in the piece followed by a sense of relief as they emerge at the other end. The video evokes a mixture of fear, danger, excitement and anticipation (Farhid, 2001).

The train is a representation of movement, of constantly changing landscapes and locations. Farhid's parents are in a state of flux. As viewers, we do not know if they are leaving or returning. I asked Farhid whether she saw a link between her particular identity and this piece of work. She stated:

> Central to my work is communication particularly in relation to its breakdown; and both the possibility and the impossibility of communication. These ideas reflect my own experience of moving from one culture to another, leaping from one language system to another. This dislocation gives rise to both discomfort and fascination and the realisation of otherness (Farhid, Interview, 2004).

Home is a central issue both to those artists working in Iran and those working abroad. The notion of home also requires an engagement with cultural and national identity. Evidently, the 'Home' and its various geographic and psychological connotations feature strongly in the complex ways that artists from both groups choose to respond to it. In the next section, entitled Cultural Constrictions, the issue of culture and its restricting or enabling possibilities for representation are explored.

4.3.1 Cultural Constrictions

Within all cultures, there are many moulds that one can adapt to, aspire to, or resist. In Iran, there have been many upheavals and changes, but some cultural expectations still remain that are enforced or expected by the older generation. For example, in the art arena in Iran it is still perceived by many that art should include something that is handmade.[18]

Fig. **4-17** *Untitled*, Leila Sadatfar (1999) Gouache on card, approx 15 x 30 cm (Source: Mitra Memarzia)

Leila Sadatfar (figure 4.17), who resides in Shiraz, Iran, adapts the style of the miniature in its entirety, working with the materials and subject matter drawn almost entirely from

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[18] For example, modern art ('Honarhaye nou', as discussed in Chapter 3), conceptual works and installation art are still a fairly recent phenomena in Iranian art history. Due to the disjunctions in the development of art in Iran, the notion of modern art is still in debate and is mostly pursued by the younger art generation.

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the Safavid period, when the miniature was at its most celebrated.[19] To Sadatfar, this period was the only one in which "real Miniature painting" was practised, and she believes it is the only true form of art to have ever been created in Iran. She has been faithfully practising for ten years the art of the miniature and Tazheeb, which is a form of intricate decoration used to decorate text. She refuses to adapt to a new style of the miniature. Sadatfar describes her fascination with the art of the miniature as follows:

> There may just be a very small face in a Miniature, but it has been painted with such love and concentration, that one cannot help but be captivated by it. The other thing that makes them so enticing is the paint they used; all the paints were taken from nature to represent nature, and that is magical (Sadatfar, Interview 1999).

She believes that 'miniature' is a word that should only be used to describe works that comply with the rules established by the painters of the miniatures painters in the Safavid period. The new style of miniature painting is called "Iranian Painting". In Sadatfar's opinion, "The Safavid period was the peak for Miniature in Iran, religion entered the arena and sculptural art was forbidden/ not appreciated, Miniature represented nature, and in turn life, this made it very popular at that time" (Sadatfar, Interview 1999).

On the face of it, Sadatfar appears not to address the issues of contemporary Iranian women's identity in her work. On closer examination and through talking with her it became evident that her devotion to miniature paintings as something that is particular to Iran, and her position in a traditional Shirazi family refers to a concern with keeping traditions.[20]

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[19] The Safavid period: 1502-1736, during which Farsi was established as the Persian language. See www.iranchamber.com for in-depth discussion of the Safavid Period.

[20] Sadatfar's affinity to tradition was echoed in her immensely traditional mannerisms and hospitality when we met to discuss her work

Similarly to Sadatfar, Kianush who lives and works in the UK uses similar methods of miniature painting in some of her works. Although she is not as strict in using the same techniques, colours, and methods of a particular era of Iranian miniature painting, her meticulous attention to detail certainly places her in the same arena. Displaced from her homeland, Kianush explores ancestral art, but she also explores other styles of painting (see figure 4.19). In Figure 4.18, she has adapted the miniature approach in depicting an iconic Iranian woman of the Safavid period. She states that:

When Iranians are looking at my work they generally ask me why I don't just paint traditional Iranian miniatures; I tell them that I do, but that is just part of me, I like to have many styles and subjects in my work. I am judged through my art and my nationality, but they only see one part of me, that is to be expected, they can only comment on what they can see. But I think that to produce art; at all times, an artist must be true to themselves (Kianush, Interview, 1999).

Fig. **4-18**: *Persia*, Katy Kianush (2003) acrylics and pen and ink, 80 x 51 cm (Source: Katy Kianush's Web Site www.art-arena.com 15/08/01)

This notion of being true to one's self, as Kianush puts it, touches closely on the issue of cultural constrictions; Kianush wishes to create work that does not conform to any predetermined expectations that others may have of her identity as an Iranian woman artist. Kianush works in a fairly traditional manner but is also depicting people from around the world, not just Iran (figure 4.19). At the age of eleven, she moved from Iran to

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the UK with her family and has been living here ever since.[21] Her early displacement from home has enabled her to feel at home anywhere in the world, and yet she sees herself as an Iranian woman artist. Kianush states:

> The world has become so small, especially with the Internet, it is not just about Iran, Europe or Africa, it is about the whole world. Personal culture is important. But empathy to other cultures is also very important, and that is what brings people together. As an Iranian woman artist painting a Native American; I also keep my own identity, but this makes me closer to the rest of the world. I travel to a lot of countries and soak in a lot of other cultures, I take photos and sketch, when I return I incorporate then into a vision or an idea that I might have about what I want the final image to look like (Kianush, Interview, 1999).

Here, Kianush refers to keeping her 'own identity'; but, in contrast to the other artists such as Sadatfar, Kianush makes a conscious effort to explore cultures other than her own with the same amount of interest and enthusiasm. The drawing in figure 4.19 is a visual homage to black rights, towards which she felt strongly affiliated. An interest in another culture is also a way of becoming more international, making her art more accessible both to the British audience and worldwide.[22]
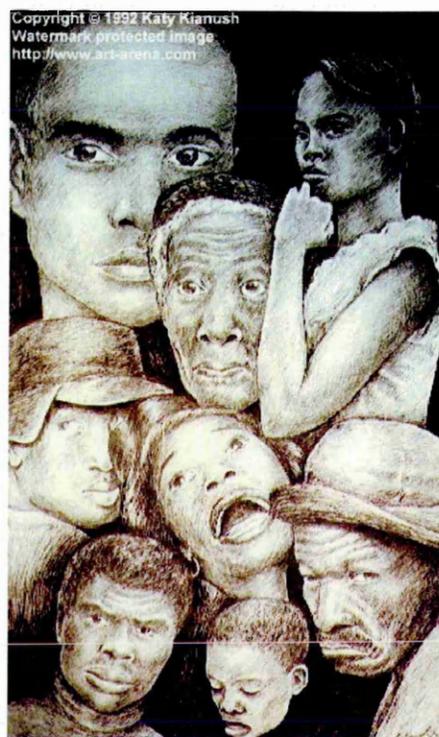
In contrast to Kianush's move away from her own culture, artists living

Fig. **4-19**: *My Song*, Katy Kianush (1992) ink and pencil, 20.5 x 14cm (Source: www.art-arena.com)

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[21] Similar to Kianush, I moved to the UK at the same age. Kianush and I share a similar connection with art as a way of exploring our personal and national identities. We discussed at length the ways in which art offers an outlet for exploring displacement.

[22] Kianush sells much of her works on the Internet (www.art-arena.com).

inside Iran such as Ossouli demonstrate that it is precisely the culture which surrounds them which feeds their artistic passion. It could be argued that in some ways the production of works which reiterate certain values, such as the obsession with completeness of self with a male partner. In these images Ossouli may further validate constricting relationships such as the patriarchal male gaze. Interestingly, Khorasani explains the role of marriage in the life of Iranian women:

> The particular gaze that the Iranian man has on Iranian women has been a result of years of cultivation, from generation to generation, and even more so by mothers; the women themselves (Khorasani, 2002:112).

Khorasani is interested, here, in the ways in which Iranian women themselves are responsible for the ways in which they are perceived. In relation to this, Ossouli describes her relationship with art as that of falling in love with a handsome man. Her view of making work that embodies love is:

> In my work, I don't want to show war and violence, I want to show love. Because I think the world is already full of violence. I don't want to push the romantic notion that everyone loves each other in the world. No, But I say, I know there is violence, but there is also love. I want my work to please people. Instead of valium, I read Molavi [Ancient Persian Poet] - I want my work to heal. When I lose myself in poetry I am torn away from this life, I realise that the things I was worried about were so small (Ossouli, Interview, 1999).

Ossouli is evidently aware of the idealist images that she constructs: perfect spaces with perfect scenarios (as in figure 4.20) that contradict her real surroundings. This pattern of contradiction is prevalent in the lives of all Iranian women; the private and the public, reality and fantasy, covered and uncovered. Contradiction is a reference made in many of the artists works including Ghadirian, Ghazel, Tabrizian and myself.

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Evidently it is not just Iranian women in Iran who are affected; those who live outside Iran also have to live with contradictions. The stereotyped views of Iranian women in the form of the representations of ideological Muslim women are constantly revived through the media. There are, however, creative individuals, such as Parisa Taghizadeh, who strive to break these constrictions. Taghizadeh lives and works in the UK and returns to Iran frequently. She made a video about Iranians
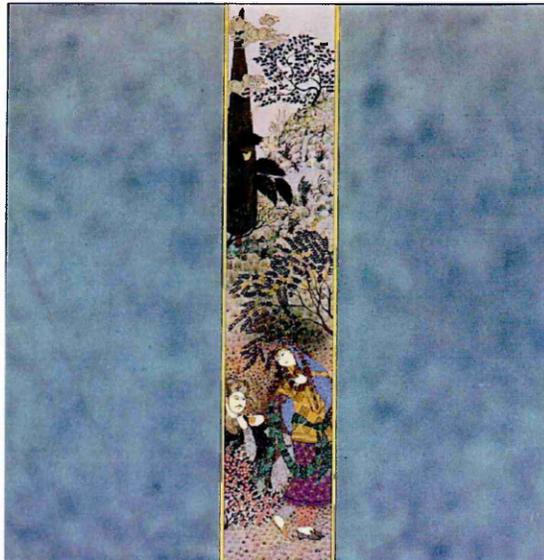
Fig. **4-20**: *Untitled*, Farah Ossouli (1998) Gouache 50 x 50 cm (Source: Courtesy of artist)

living in London, in an attempt to question Western and Iranian perceptions of Iranians. She stresses the importance of raising awareness by focusing on real people's lives. Her film was a documentary on well-known Iranians, such as the comedian Omid Djalili, and other Iranians living in London. In the documentary, the characters speak of the many stereotypes that they have to face daily. In my interview with her, she told me that her identity was often associated with the notion of authenticity; true Iranianness. But when it came to being judged as an artist in Iran, she explained:

> I am totally cut off from contemporary art in Iran, I think that my work would be misunderstood there. I think that they would doubt my authenticity as an artist. They would see me as someone more influenced by Western culture. I would disagree with that because that influence of Western culture is myself, just as much as they're influenced by Iranian culture. I don't think they don't take my work seriously, but that they would judge my work without reference to its context (Taghizadeh, Interview, 2001).

Iranian artists such as Taghizadeh are producing works that document reality, in contrast to Sadatfar and artists such as Sinai and Ossouli who are concentrating on moving away from the every-day. The artists' approaches may seem different, but what they have in common is the continuing search to find ways of expressing the self through others.

Iranian women artists are expected to produce works that deal with certain issues both inside and outside Iran.[23] This issue is demonstrated in the work of Farah Bajull (figure 4.21) who lives and works in the UK. As part of the 'Veils' exhibition (Walsall 2003), her installation comprised a 30-metre long string of wooden prayer beads tightly wound into a ball (figure 4.22) and an image of a woman bound up by them hung on the wall behind. David Bailey says of her work:

The intricate knot seems to symbolise the intractability of the problem of bridging cultural and religious differences against the current of the continuous stream of media images that caricature and steadily reinforce the unbridgeable, irreconcilable, difference between the Western and Islamic societies (Bailey, 2003:27).
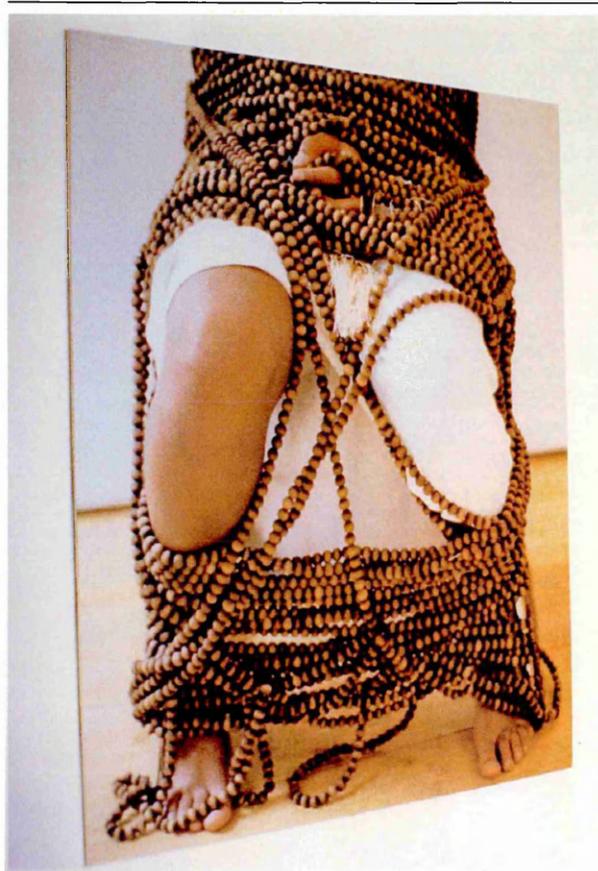
Fig. **4-21**: *Notime*, Farah Bajull (2001) Digital Print 76 x 61 cm (Source: Bailey and Twadras 2003:28-29)

[23] Both inside and outside Iran, contemporary Iranian women artists are faced with the demands of different audiences and establishments; i.e. an Iranian woman artist in the West is expected by galleries and collectors to produce work that deals with her identity, that way they can fulfil the criteria provided to them by the government such as the 'equal opportunities' initiative. Feminist movements, both inside and outside Iran, also have a large influence on the ways that Iranian women artists may be expected or prompted to deal with certain issues of womanhood.

Bajul's work exemplifies the attempt to break cultural constrictions, by using the Eastern element of the worry-bead in a Western setting for a Western audience. The representation of cultures removed from their usual setting can often be problematic, as the viewer's 'outsider' opinion is often fuelled by stereotypes and misconceptions about the artists and their work. The artist Zahra Rasoolzadeh, has also faced these sorts of pressures: "People tell me that I would sell more pieces if I stuck to more traditional forms of sculpture" (Rasoolzadeh, Interview, 1999). Her comment exemplifies the extent to which the public, and the ideologies inherent in the notion of authenticity, influence the kinds of artworks that are successful and, ultimately, sell. Therefore it seems that, if artists want to sell their work, they should explore the traditional media, subjects and forms, as they are what people want to have in their houses.[24]

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[24] One could argue that the same could be said worldwide to some extent, but possibly not in such an extreme way. Most highly 'modern' works are bought by collectors and galleries in the West, whereas in Iran there are still other issues to which the government is giving more attention and resources, such as the rising issue of unemployment in young people after leaving university due to the mass of young people in Iran after the Iran-Iraq war. Therefore, there is lack of funding in the arts, although all artists interviewed in Iran agreed that there has been much improvement in the last two years following the election of President Khatami, as noted in Chapter 2.

Fig. **4-22**: *Notime*, Farah Bajull (2001) worry beads and string (Source: Bailey and Twadras 2003:28-29)

What has gone before creates cultural moulds, which present a safe refuge for artists who are somehow displaced, whether inside or outside Iran. History for Ossouli and Sinai is almost like memories; of a self in history, a self that has remained unchanged, a clearly-defined self. Fran Lloyd views memory and the use of memory in artworks, as central to the construction of identities, particularly identities that are under question:

> ...memory as personal and cultural history, memory of objects and memory as part of a process of making and meaning in the work. Perhaps it is not surprising given that it is through memory that we locate ourselves, through our histories and experiences at both a personal and collective level (Lloyd, 1996:139).

As Lloyd points out, our memories operate on a personal and collective level. To this end, the artworks return to the place from which they first came; memories that are the

foundation of national identities consequently become cultural moulds. For both groups of artists, cultural constrictions play a pivotal role in their choice to either make or break these social, cultural or personal boundaries. It, therefore, seems valid to explore outside influences that contradict these constrictions in the next section, entitled Forces of Change and Artists.

4.4 Forces of Change, Positioning and Censorship

In this section, the forces of change that have been discussed throughout this thesis are further analysed in relation to the works of relevant artists. The Islamic Revolution, the influences of the West and particularly the position of the artists inside and outside Iran have been identified as key areas for further discussion in this section. The first section explores the direct relationship of the some of the artists with the Islamic Revolution and subsequent changes that occurred for both groups of artists. In section 4.4.1, reflections of change and contradiction are identified and analysed in the context of the artists' comments and artworks. In conclusion to both these areas, section 4.4.2 discusses the notion of geographic positioning in relation to the West and its validation through the Western art world.

The Islamic Revolution meant drastic change in all aspects of Iranian life in Iran. Evidently, there are more visible divides between men and women; many public spaces, such as buses, swimming pools and, in some cases, the sea, have been divided for male and female.[25]

The difference between the private and the public has become wider through two distinct forms of censorship which are state censorship and personal censorship. Not only do men and women have to behave in particular ways in public (inside Iran), but also in what

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[25] Some of the beaches in Iran have separated areas for women to bathe at.

people say and do in their homes.[26] Censorship for Iranians does not only operate inside Iran, it is also an issue with which many Iranians, especially those in the public eye such as artists have to deal with. This type of behaviour lends itself to widening the gap between personal and public identity. The expectations of the Islamic government are, at times, at odds with Iranian society at large, which is evident in the public's dismay and unease with censorship and certain strict rules of conduct. The issue of censorship is something with which Iranian artists have to deal. Since the Islamic revolution, exhibitions have to be reviewed by representatives of the Ministry of Culture. For example, they cannot show scenes of an explicit nature such as nudity, and they cannot discuss sensitive political issues or make comments against the Islamic regime.[27] The artists I interviewed mostly said that these restrictions had somehow made them more creative, although due to the sensitivity of this subject it was difficult for artists to be entirely honest about issues concerning censorship. On the issue of censorship, Ossouli points out:

> I believe that unless there is some crisis, some change in your life, you don't question things, and you go on doing the same work. Crisis forces one to change. My work changed as a result of the Revolution (Ossouli, Interview 1999).

From ongoing engagement with artists in Iran during the course of this research, it is evident that while artists find ways to deal with censorship in creative ways, it is not always viewed as a positive force of change. Further to our discussion, I asked Ossouli to describe her feelings during the revolution and subsequent changes:

> Suddenly I was thrown into another country, it was as though I never grew up here. At the beginning of the revolution, I saw a friend from uni in the street and she said 'do you think that life was a dream or this one?' I was

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[26] Of course, this was not the first time Islam has been introduced into Iran; there is a long history of Islam in Iran since its emergence into Persia during 1500. Many of the Islamic teachings have now become part of Iranian culture and are practised by non-Muslims as well. For further reading on the history of Islam and Iran, see Sandra Mackey, (1998:40). For further analysis on gender issues in Iran, see *Gender Relations in Persia and the Islamic Republic*, Milani, www.iranica.com.

[27] Before my exhibition of Other Sides in Iran (see chapter 5), I met with a representative from the Ministry of Culture, who certified the show as fit for public viewing. He was fine about the fact that I represented women without the hijab in my photographs because they were not Muslim.

25 at the time and now 20 years of Islam (half my life) I still don't know the answer (Ossouli, Interview 1999).

Ossouli felt displaced at home while Sadatfar, who does not remember the Revolution in the same way due to being quite young at the time, responded:

> Every society has its own restrictions, it is not only the political system that may disregard certain art forms and subjects, cultural beliefs may not accept certain arts; the people themselves. There are always restrictions (Sadatfar, Interview 1999).

Chalack had mixed views about the Revolution and the war:

> Our Revolution belonged to our people, as a woman artist who does not have a traditional or religious interest, I had a belief in our system, in our Revolution. The Revolution did bother me in many ways, it changed me. The war was horrendous, we were totally trampled on. There are lots of pressures, and some can only see that. But I myself believe in it, I was there when it happened and even today I feel that it belongs to me, it damaged me, but I would do it all over again if I had to (Chalack, Interview 1999).

For Chalack, the damaging effects of the Revolution were a necessary part of her life as a creative individual. She went on to say that the censorship laws of the Islamic government have gradually made artists work harder and, therefore, more creative. As a teacher of art, she pointed out that her students use their Eastern sensibilities and mix them with Western modes of art making, which makes their work unique. Chalack also points out that:

> Women have a much bigger sense of responsibility in most, but not all cases, starting from early childhood, Iranian girls have certain restrictions, boys are allowed to run wild and experiment (Chalack, Interview 1999).

Furthermore, Iranian women's cultural upbringing is more restrictive and, as noted in Chapter 1 women's roles are pivotal in the Islamic Republic; their represented image, projected to the rest of the world, also takes centre stage. Chalack views women's situation in Iran positively as she states:

> I don't see any reason why we should have the presumption that women are discriminated against, or women have not succeeded like men, no...in

my view women have different powers and abilities to men. We may choose not to be active in certain areas. Any open minded person can see this (Chalack, Interview, 1999).

The opposing changes in the laws concerning women can either confirm a new position or displace Iranian women; thus causing their identities and artworks alike to shift and change.[28] Artists who live outside Iran, such as Neshat, have used their outsider perspective to explore in their artworks the changes that have occurred in Iran. This can be seen in the way Neshat repeatedly examines the divide created by Islam between men and women. In contradiction to Chalack, Neshat sees these differences more prominently, demonstrated in her stark black and white gender-oriented works.
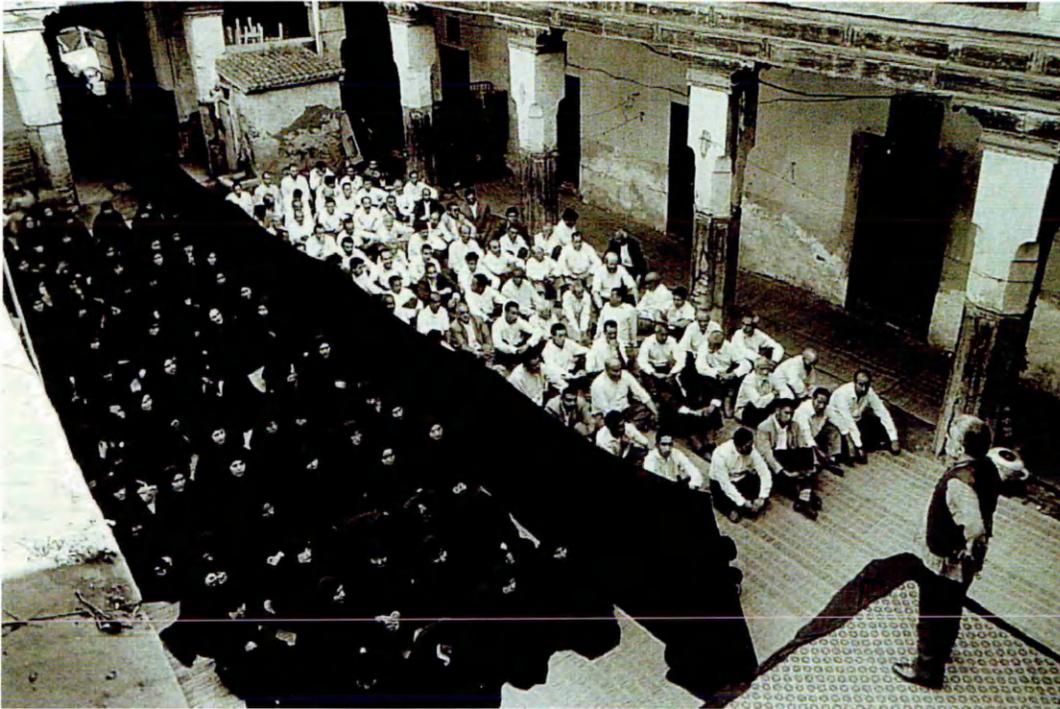
Fig. **4-23**: *Fervour*, Shirin Neshat (2000) production still photo, (Source: Larry Barnes Serpentine gallery catalogue 2000:2)

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[28] For example, my experience of displacement from Iran at an early age places me in an arena where I am able to take on the identity of the visitor in my home country, as well as being able to blend in.

At the centre of 'Fervour' (Figure 4.23) is a scene where men and women gather in a meeting place (or mosque) but sit in different halves of the hall, separated from each other's view by a central black curtain. The same speaker from his podium harangues them all, and his message is the suppression of desire. A couple leave the meeting house and are united at a crossroads, where they take separate paths. Neshat uses this narrative to tell the story of Islam, tradition and forbidden desire. However, Neshat points out that her Iranian audience often misunderstands her work. She explains:

> My work runs into a lot of problems with Iranians. I think that very often, since the subject is Islamic and very much deals with contemporary society and lots of people are not very happy with the current regime or the Islamic Revolution altogether. Or in fact, if they are living abroad, they haven't even returned since then. The fact that I have chosen that subject, even that itself is a sin as far as they are concerned. So they are not even interested in a dialogue (Neshat, cited in Desai, 2003).

From Neshat's comment, it seems that the viewer's understanding of works made by artists residing outside Iran is also affected by the changes that have occurred in Iran, causing contradicting translations of the same pieces of work. Whereas those living in Iran, such as Sadatfar, Chalack and Ossouli, experience social, cultural and political changes first hand, artists residing outside Iran are able to explore these issues in their work with fewer restrictions. Kianush explains her attitude to these changes as follows:

> Your psyche is the product of your experiences; the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war would have affected me much more and would have come across in my work if I still lived there. After a few years you begin to fantasize about Iran, although I have heard that Iran in culturally blooming and I can see that even in the new year cards that relatives send me from Iran, there are such beautiful paintings, on the other hand I get the news here about this and that and I think…that one is true (Kianush, Interview, 1999).

For artists like Kianush, who do not frequently travel to Iran, their view of their homeland depends upon other representations. She fantasizes about Iran in her traditional miniature art, which is a way of preserving a sense of 'Iranianness'. Kianush points out that:

Yes there is art there that reflects our society, but there is art here that is trying to take us back to our roots, they both have roles and this is the role that I take as an Iranian artist living outside Iran (Kianush, Interview, 1999).

While Kianush uses both her Western and Eastern perspectives to produce art, some artists in Iran also do this through the use of Eastern and Western modes of art making, as well as the long-standing relationship between Eastern and the Western ideologies. This complex relationship with Western ideologies, personal beliefs and various censorships creates a force that has shaped and continues to change Iranian identity and art, which is discussed further in the next section.

4.4.1 Reflections of Change and Contradiction

Throughout this research, the notion of contradiction has become a prevalent theme in Iranian identity. The contradictions brought about by the various cultural and political changes have also had an effect on Iranian art. For example, during the 'Westernisation/ modernisation' years (post-1925), artists were encouraged to take on modern styles, media and subjects within their art. Much of what one could call 'traditional art' was practised by a few artists and was
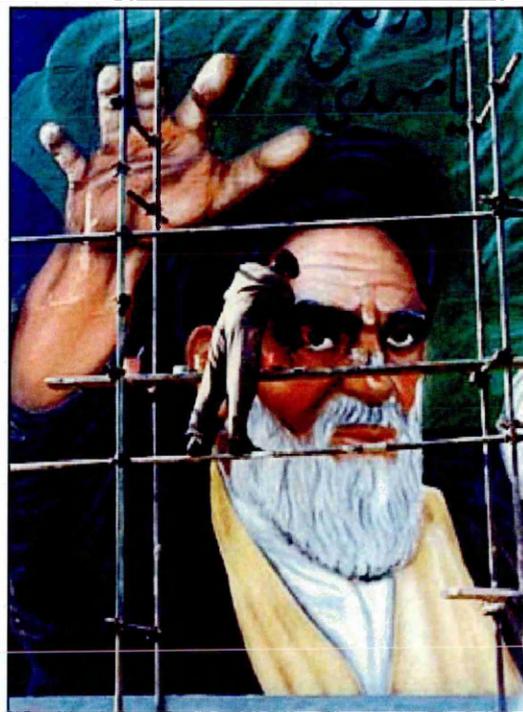
Fig **4-24**: to mark the 20th anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution, a painter in Tehran works on a mural of Ayatollah Khomeini.(Source:www.search.csmonitor.com 5/02/99)

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viewed as backward.[29] Thus, artists experienced a few years of embracing the new and ignoring the old, until the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

After the Revolution, the new Islamic government, Khomeini closed all museums, galleries, and universities for two years. These were amongst many other changes that caused stress and upheaval to the nation, and also to creative individuals who were suddenly faced with questions of personal and national identity. During this time, artists did not stop working; there were private exhibitions and gatherings debating their immediate situation and the future. The Islamic Revolution brought about a change in the attitudes of many artists in Iran which contradicted what had gone before. Ossouli comments:

> We had private shows and artists groups, but the most dominant feeling was one of loss, of confusion and a severe bout of anxiety. Where were we going with it all, who were we and being as this was the people's revolution, because we were so fed up with the Shah, what did we actually want? Did we even really know that before we started the revolution? We wanted change and we got it! What were we going to do with it? (Ossouli, Interview, 1999).[30]

Ossouli compares the effect of the 1979 Revolution to suddenly being displaced, in the sense that she was still in Iran but her whole cultural system was being reshaped in accordance with a politicised Islamic structure. She told me that she looked back on 'those days' without regret, and she believes that Iran needed to go through this change, as the previous government was no longer working for the people (Ossouli, Interview 1999). Ossouli points out that the Islamic Revolution forced her to question her identity in a positive way:

> Because of the Revolution, a feeling of loss- a 'question of who am I' was born in me. Why are things the way they are? I began to read a lot of Iranian history, I read about Islam, and how was it that suddenly we were being told that things had to be like this. I began to question who/ what we

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[29] For a discussion of the Modernisation Era in Iran see *The Iranians* by Mackey 1998:130-210.
[30] During this time, Islamic art began to take centre stage. As museums were closed, Islamic art took root from the ideologies of the government itself and consequently took the form of banners and wall paintings. This type of art went hand-in-hand with slogans and used highly symbolic imagery and colours.

are. Why are our Miniature paintings so small? Why is the Seh-Tar[31] so small? Why is our post-Islamic architecture so detailed, so delicate, and small spaces led from one door to another? Then I thought how did we make these things Iranian, and what is Iranian anyway? (Ossouli, Interview, 1999).

For Ossouli, this profound experience changed the way she works today. At the time of the Revolution, she was a graphic designer, but that soon changed after the Revolution as it caused her to rethink her role as an Iranian woman artist. For artists living outside Iran at that time, such as Shirin Neshat, the experience of the Islamic Revolution came years later. Neshat returned to Iran in 1990. She describes the experience:

...I went back and I really felt like I stood out like a stick in the mud. And I felt almost really embarrassed by who I was in relation to all these people. I was like this pretentious all-American-type of woman who had been away for a long time, you know lying on the beach getting sun-tanned, whilst the country was going downhill (Neshat, in Alhadef, 2003:132).

Fig. **4-25**: *Offered Eyes*, Shirin Neshat (1993) Photograph and ink (Source: The Guardian 22/07/2000:21)

This experience led Neshat to produce her first artwork, which deals with the subject of Iranian women in a series entitled *Women of Allah* (1993-97) (Figures 4.25-26). In these works, Neshat has used her stereotyped female body wearing the Islamic

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[31] The Si-Tar is a traditional Iranian instrument comprised of 3 (seh) strings (tar).

chador as a canvas for her poems and texts. [32] She points to the notion that, within her work, she is also taking on the role of women who sacrifice their freedom in the name of Islam, a far greater goal than mere personal goals.

Having lived in the West and experienced individuality, as promoted by most Western societies, the contradicting notions of an Islamic woman and her own displaced identity gave way to a field of fascinating possibilities that Camhi (2001) describes the work of Neshat:

I was immediately struck by the work's graphical power and its potential for a two-sided reading. Did it represent an armed opposition to fundamentalism or a kind of fundamentalist chic? Was it religious or complicit with the conservative religious conventions? That ambiguity is where I continue to locate the power of Neshat's work. She is able to find potential for power and poetry in Islam as well as in resistance to traditional roles and fundamentalist restrictions (Camhi, 2000:150).

Neshat is concerned with the notion of communicating on an international level. She affirms her belief in the importance of Iranian culture explored artistically, but does not want to be considered as an ethnographic artist. Neshat's work could be said to be made for Western audiences. This means she speaks
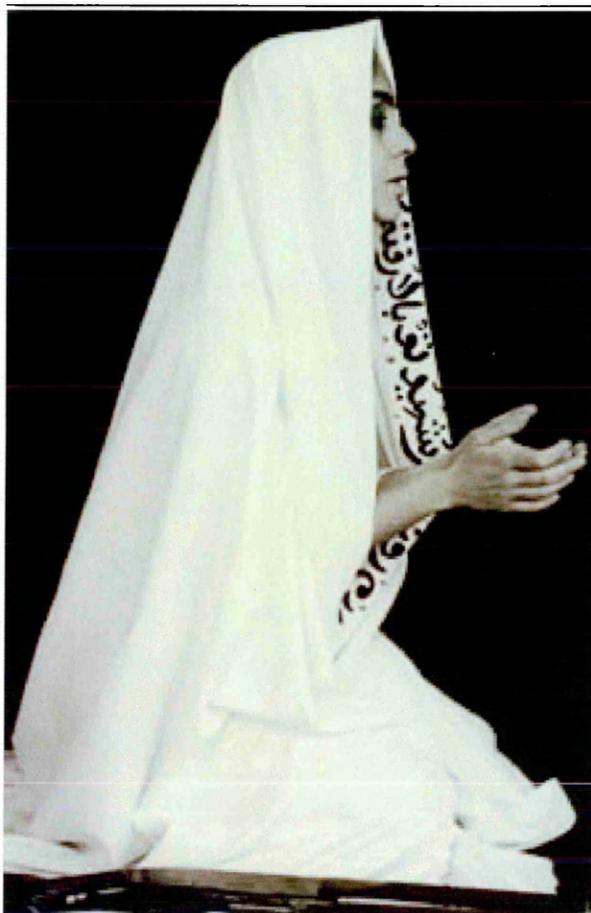
Fig. **4-26**: *untitled*, Shirin Neshat (1994) Photograph and ink (Source: http://www.konsten.net 12/01/2004

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[32] Neshat writes directly onto her images because of the complications that writing on the skin would cause in the final text to be represented backwards.

mainly to an audience detached from her culture, an issue with which many artists working outside Iran have to deal at some point in their career. Ghazel positions herself in between the borders of the East and West, and states:

> My work talks about the outsider I am in the West and the outsider I am in Iran" - and she continues: "My films are like home movies; like 'moving snap-shots' documenting my life, my mind, my observations, my ideas, my thoughts, my trophies, my fears, my desires, my souvenirs, my wishes, my experiences, my present, my past, my future, my emotions, my hopes, my passions, my energy, my feelings, my obsessions, my complexes, my paradoxes, my identities, my dreams, my memories…They are my parallel life (Ghazel cited in Torre, 2001).

While Ghazel's unique outsider position offers many diverse ways of creating artworks and exploring her multiple identities, it can also cause limitations. The UK-based artist Taghizadeh explained that she feels the limitations of her position as an Iranian woman working outside Iran:

> Yes there are certain restrictions, even though I live here in the UK. But still I try to get my point across somehow, without spelling it out. You have to work harder, more challenging. That process of finding a language to get the point across in a different way for me is interesting. Iranian cinema has done this. As an Iranian all the political reasons matter, but most non-Iranians probably bored of these films (Taghizadeh, Interview 2001).

Taghizadeh made a distinction between art made for Iranian audiences and art made for Western audiences:

> I thought of making a film about Googoosh (Iranian singer) but I think to myself how can I make an honest film about her when I have to censor it so much.[33] She will have to sit there in a headscarf and make no references to where she comes from. The audience here won't understand that. I have to think of ways of getting around that, I decided to make it about the memory of her. As an icon, what she represented and what she was (Taghizadeh, Interview 2001).

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[33] Googoosh is a much-celebrated pop star of the pre-Revolution years; she left Iran due to the new government laws against female singers. Today, she remains one of the icons of Iranian pop music and continues to sing in the USA.

Due to her position, Taghizadeh has made a conscious decision to change her approach to the documentary and use people's memories of the Iranian woman singer Googoosh. These limitations are set by the artist herself; she is, in a sense, censoring her own work. She comments:

I think that having spent part of my life in Iran I am fortunate in that I feel a strong connection with my identity and I am deeply rooted. I believe that art must speak for the time that it belongs to. Artists in Iran speak of a different art and different concepts to artists from here for instance. Locality of the artist has great influence over the art that they produce. Every artist soaks up their environment, which goes towards what they express" (Ghadirian, Interview 2001).

Taghizadeh feels that her position outside Iran is more artistically privileged:

I think we are in a luckier situation being here because we have the option, I think it can make things confusing but we have a lot more opportunities, it's a privileged exile. I hear Iranians say, we were somebody we had a country. As though somehow what is happening at present is not included. It's a huge change of identity for them to have to go through. For us here, it's a case of looking into our culture not looking out from it. The image of Iran here seems to always be a matter of Islam, a matter of extremes; I am interested in the little things (Taghizadeh, Interview, 2001).

Fig. **4-27**: Fig. **4-28**: Fig. **4-29**: *Make-up-Iran 2001*, Parisa Taghizadeh (2001) photographs (Source: Courtesy of artist)

In this series of images (Figures 4.27-29), which Taghizadeh later created, she represented Iranian women in a new way; instead of concentrating on their differences,

she presents them in a more universal setting. These women apply their make-up as women of any country might, but what gives these images a new perspective is that they are Iranian women.[34] The fact that this work cannot be exhibited in Iran also brings an extra meaning to her narrative. Therefore, it seems that, for those living outside Iran, there are ways of circumventing limitations.

Shirana Shahbazi's images of Iran are decidedly different to most of the stereotypical images a Western audience may be used to seeing.[35] At the Photographers Gallery in London (2001),
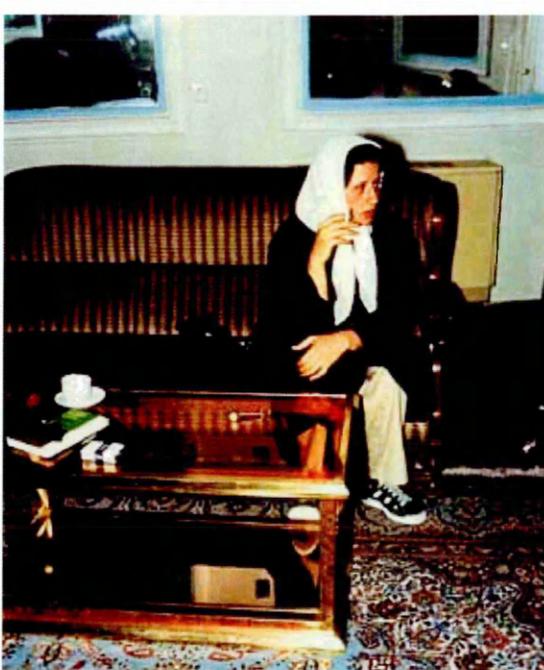
Fig. **4-30**: *Good Sayings*, Shirana Shahbazi (2001) colour photographs (Source: Guardian unlimited, www.guardian.co.uk 17/02/03)

not long after the September 11th attacks on America, Shahbazi showed images of the everyday mundane Iran. The image here (Figure 4.30) depicts an Iranian woman smoking a cigarette and watching television, a rare representation of Iranian women. She comments:

> Being from Iran has its advantages; an exotic bonus, that is better than none at all. You would think it would open grounds for new ways of discussing where you are from, instead of always going back to 'us' and 'them', For countries as globalised as the Western European, It's time people started getting used to more open ways of thinking about these things; that they started getting used to feeling a little more uncomfortable

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[34] Make-up is considered as bad hijaab (the Islamic woman should be pure and simple as god intended) in Iran and indeed for many years after the Revolution the wearing of make-up was punishable by law. However, women persevered and today the cosmetics and plastic surgery industry in Iran is booming. "There are no official statistics exist, but a leading surgeon says the 100 or so nose specialists in Iran perform 35,000 procedures per year" (Peterson, Web Link, 2000).

[35] Shahbazi resides in Zurich and explores the every-day situations in Iran when she visits; she is determined not to use stereotyped imagery.

(Shahbazi 2001, in conversation with Zolghadr at Photographers Gallery-London, 2001).

In contrast to Shahbazi's subtle imagery of Iran, eleven years earlier, photographer Mitra Tabrizian used her position outside Iran to communicate direct and highly political messages through her work entitled 'Surveillance' (1990) (figure 4.31). Here, she explores Iranian politics and the influence of the West.[36]

Fig. **4-31**: *Surveillance*, Mitra Tabrizian (1990), photograph 300 x 120cm (Source: Mitra Memarzia)

In this image, we see a panoramic vision in which actors take on political and culturally significant characters such as the veiled woman, the mullah and Western clients.[37] Tabrizian draws directly from the 1979 Islamic Revolution in a disjointed manner, as Prantner (1994) describes:

> ...panoramic, yet discontinuous, a broken view of history; a history without cause and effect. Three fragments of Iranian history are constructed, to establish not a causal connection between them, but precisely the opposite; to indicate their historical discontinuity (Pratner, 1994:24).

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[36] Tabrizian's most recent work deals with Western ideologies and the relationship between individuals and charged spaces; for a review of this work, see www.iniva.org/archive/person/509 12/10/03.

[37] The panoramic camera was originally used by police to survey, turning through 360 degrees to capture all the surrounding landscape. Here, its use is also a metaphor for capturing the panorama of a nation's history.

The title "Surveillance" is a metaphor for both technological control over politics and the media and the relationship between subjects and God. "Surveillance" can be looked upon as a visualisation of the forces of change. The placement of the various characters, and their relationship with one another, creates multiple readings of this image. The notion of Islam as the ruling figure in Iran is demonstrated in the female figure at the centre of the image. In her more recent works ('Beyond the Limits' 2000) Tabrizian is taking a more global perspective of identity and through a series of highly staged photographs presents a series of playful filmic scenarios of human coexistence and the contradictions between fact and fiction.

Contradiction and duality is central to this study and, indeed, artists such as Tabrizian have used juxtaposed ideals to depict these views. Many of Tabrizian's works demonstrate notions of duality, which is a large part of Iranian women's lives. Ghadirian opts for a traditional method to illustrate these contradictions and her concerns about the relationship between historical representations of Iranian women and the present day in staged images (Figure 4.32). By contrast, Houshiary, who also lives and works in the UK, uses Islam as her source of inspiration. Using the geometric patterns of Islamic architecture and Sufi[38] teachings, Houshiary makes sculptural poetry.
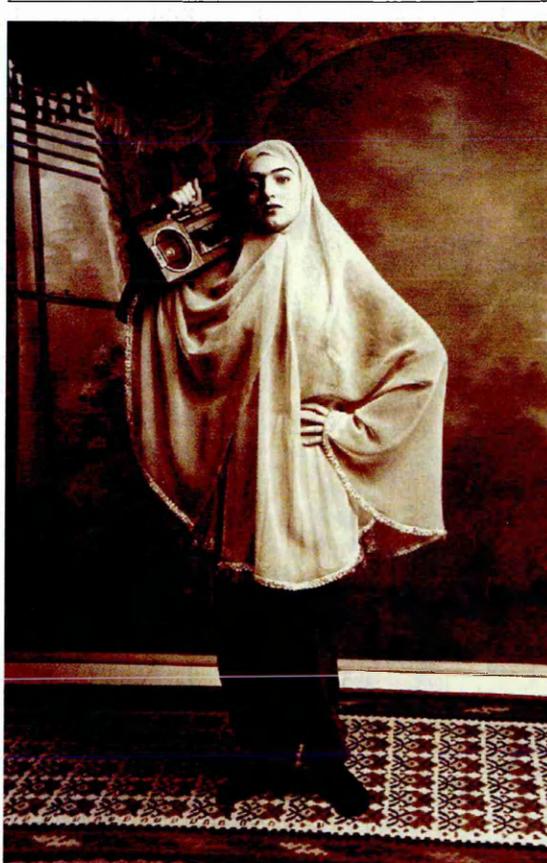
Fig. **4-32**: Quajar series, Shadi Ghadirian (1998), photographs 16x24cm (Source: courtesy of artist)

[38] Sufism is a mystic religion believed to have started in the 8th Century and considered to be a branch of Islam.

As Santacatterina (1994) states:

All Houshiary's work has to do with an idea of art as the space of opposites reconciled: the reality of symbolic consciousness is suspended between presence and absence, between seeing and not seeing; light obscured: a transit towards space-time (Santacatterina, 1994:77).

Oppositional elements form the basis for most of Houshiary's sculptures, where contrasting materials colours and forms are combined in harmonious ways. In the sculpture here (Figures 4.33-34), Houshiary's reflection of duality is visible; the scientific and spiritual. She uses form and light as the source of the divine and the metal boxes act as a structure, or mould that can be translated as momentary states of change. In contrast, Sadatfar, who works directly with traditional miniature painting, explains:

I think that identity cannot be separated from the artist's work; I cannot say that I consciously decide to put my identity in a painting. I believe that each image I paint is a piece of my identity laid before the viewers' eyes to discover, if they choose to (Sadatfar, Interview 1999).

Fig. **4-33**: *The enclosure of sanctity*, Shirazeh Houshiary (1994) (Source: www.sculpture.org.uk 5/03/2004)
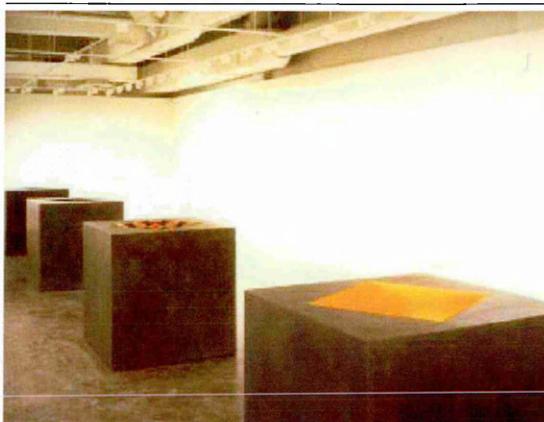
Fig. **4-34**: *The enclosure of sanctity*, Shirazeh Houshiary (1994) (Source: www.sculpture.org.uk 5/03/2004)

Sadatfar is aware that, having lived in Shiraz all her life, she may appear slightly restricted; she has complete faith in the importance of not being culturally displaced or challenged. On the other hand, Elmi expressed that she felt no limitation living and

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working in Iran. At the time of the interview, she lived in a small flat in Tehran and she worked from the corner of her living room. She described her identity through the analogy of her home:

> The space that I work in may be small, but within this small space I feel a vast sense of freedom, and so I feel no limitations. The work that I do is really what I want to do; it does not matter to me what anyone thinks, in the sense that I will carry on doing what I feel is right. I value opinions with great respect but I take what I want and then carry on (Elmi, Interview, 1999).

Elmi was very aware of the limitations other artists face, due to the nature of their work, and recalls an artist who was questioned for five hours by government censoring officers, prior to the opening of her show. She described how all public shows are monitored; which on the outset may limit artists who work within political frames. Elmi states that there are certain limitations, such as not being able to paint a nude woman; but as her work does not concern itself with unacceptable issues or subjects, she feels no limitations:

> I have no relationship with the words: limitation, politics or social ideology... Art cannot be controlled by any politics or Monarchy. Art should be allowed to be what it wants, artists should be as free, and the world will carry on just the same (Elmi, Interview, 1999).[39]

Since the interviews Elmi moved back to Canada and is now living and working there. Through talking with her peers, it is believed that her move was due to censorship of freedoms of expression. In the light of this, her statement here was expressing an imagined sense of freedom in Iran which was evidently not the case and ultimately limited her artistic practice. In the case of this research it has become evident that both groups of artists face limitations in certain aspects of their work regardless of their geographic position. In the same way, both groups experience limitations and benefits of their particular positions. The next section is an exploration of the ways in which these

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[39] Since the interviews, Elmi is believed to have moved back to Canada and is living and working there. This could be an indication that she really did feel limited in Iran and eventually decided that moving abroad would give her more freedom in her work.

two seemingly different positions of inside Iran and outside Iran are reflected in the works and identities of the artists in this research.

4.4.2 Positioning and Validation

There is a notable dilemma present in the current validation of Iranian women artists' works. The geographic positioning of artists living inside Iran (the East) and those living outside Iran (in the West) presents the issue of why certain artists such as Ghadirian and Shahbazi may be valued more because they have exhibited to a Western audience. In relation to this outsider validation Shahbazi comments that: "I was showing my work to a gallerist in Iran, and she liked it, but she said she couldn't show it because it was of no commercial interest. But then having received the Citibank Prize and being part of the Biennale and things, there were reasons to have a show in Iran. The more attention I get, the more people think there must be something important about the work!" (Shahbazi, Robecchi interview, 2003)   In the same way, Artists such as Neshat have a more prominent and celebrated status because they live and work in the West. This validation from outside which was discussed earlier in chapter 3, (section 3.3.1) can be analysed through "Western Gaze"; a frequently used term in post-colonial discourse (Fanon 1989; Bhabha 1994; Said 1985). It refers to the Orientalist gaze on the East. Today, this gaze continues in tourism as Mackie (2000) points out in an essay entitled 'The Metropolitan Gaze: Travellers, Bodies and Spaces', where she draws a direct link between the Orientalist approach and the ways that the East is advertised for tourists. She notes: "The colonial gaze shares many features with the tourist gaze. Spatial displacement from the metropolitan centre is an important feature of the production of colonial desire" (Mackie, 2000).[40]

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[40]The Industrial Revolution played a major role in colonialism. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Shah of Iran took pride in being forward-thinking and developing a modern country and much of what was considered Western was welcomed by the government as 'progressive'; and with progress came power. Thus, through a glimpse at the surface image of Iranians during the Pahlavi Shah's Dynasty, one can see the influence of the West in industry, clothes, music, philosophy and other ideologies of self-image. The residue of this is still visible and is reinforced by the ever-growing age of global communication. Although

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Therefore the West has played a crucial part in both the preservation and the formation of attitudes towards Eastern culture. In the context of this research the current Western art worlds' fascination with Middle Eastern artists especially women takes its roots from what Mackie has described as the 'colonial gaze'. This gaze, together with the more advanced structure of Western art history, gives validation to work which is exhibited and critiqued in the West. The Western art world's validation system has a direct influence on the ways in which contemporary Iranian women artists are seen both inside and outside Iran.

This relationship with validation through Western art modes naturally started at the same time as the colonisation era and travels between East and the West.[41] Thereafter, the Museum of Contemporary Art was built and funded by Farah Pahlavi, the Shah's wife in 1976. With it came exhibitions featuring works from Europe and America. Artists in Iran were excited by all the new art; many travelled to Western galleries. The majority of artists regarded traditional art as backward and stale, and Chalack saw the influx of new art forms as a force rather than a movement. She felt unsure about studying art: "I was unsure about going to university to study art in Tehran; I was worried that they would try to change my style of work" (Chalack, Interview, 1996). Other artists, such as Ossouli, welcomed these movements at the time, but later contemplated the effects of Western modes of creativity and thinking that had no roots in Iran:

> We were introduced to Western art history and learned all about the different movements, such as cubism, expressionism, and abstraction etc, and became familiar with a rich array of artists ranging from Van Gough to Dali. It was an exciting time of change and renewal. Now I realise that we never did any Iranian art history, it was not considered important to know our own traditional art, I see this as an important and still current issue in contemporary Iranian art today (Ossouli, Interview, 1999).

Iranians have always held on to many traditional values throughout the changes, the West seems to have left a lasting impression, and the Iranian gaze upon the West continues to this day.

[41] Godarzy, Morteza, 2002:3

When I asked Rasoolzadeh about her views of Western Art, she answered: "When I look at art made in other countries I can see that my work is different, culturally different and I like this very much!" (Rasoolzadeh, Interview, 2001). Shahrzad Elmi agrees with Rasoolzadeh's views that the art world is one large world; she studied art in Turkey, Quebec, and later Canada. She sees Western and Eastern art as the same, in that neither is better than the other. She comments:

All this talk about, 'we did this before them etc...' is irrelevant. Both the Eastern world and the Western world have gone through many processes and changes at different times to get to be where they are now. There is a lot of debate on this subject and my view is that, one can not say that is better, their directions are different, because they are different, geographically and culturally, that inevitably affects art, and art will always follow a natural evolutionary process as do humans (Elmi, Interview 1999).

Clearly, Elmi is aware of the differences between the two worlds of art in the East and West, and we can see through her work that both have clearly influenced her. Her work has abstract qualities that she acquired during her studies abroad. She also admitted that she is fascinated by patterns and colour. Her paintings (Figures 4.35-36) have a striking relationship with Persian 'Gabbeh', a form of abstract rug design made in Iran by nomadic

Fig. **4-35**: Fig. **4-36**: *Untitled* series, Elmi (1996-99) Acrylic on canvas, various sizes (Source: courtesy of artist)

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tribes (Figure 4.37). Elmi states: "I was outside Iran for 12 years and I have a lot of work that is still there, I am sure that my work would be different if I had stayed in Iran, I probably would have never chosen the path of painting" (Elmi, Interview, 1999).

Living outside Iran for twelve years has heavily influenced Elmi, which is visible

Fig. **4-37**: Traditional Persian Rug named Gabbeh (Source: Mitra Memarzia)

in her adaptation of both qualities of Persian pattern and colour and Western abstraction in her work. She sees the works as part of a larger painting and has produced hundreds of paintings that fit together like a jigsaw, rather like small patterns forming a larger overall pattern, as with rugs and much of Iranian and Eastern Islamic architecture. Clearly, Elmi's work cannot be categorised as being completely Iranian in conception because of her distinct use of Western abstraction, which she studied in Canada. However, it is evident that she takes inspiration from Iranian patterns and colours. Elmi firmly believes that her individual character is projected in the works, though she also asserts that her paintings have no particular subject matter, describing them as:

> I like to call my works my writings; that is how my work speaks, the subject is I guess my own life, myself (Elmi, Interview 1999).

Elmi describes her paintings as segments of one large painting; "Like the cells in our bodies" (Elmi, Interview, 1999). Her fragmented use of the canvas could be described as embodying a fragmented sense of the self, which she describes as being amplified by the fact that many parts of her paintings are still in storage in Canada. She told me that her paintings existed both in the East and the West. In the interview, she claimed that in her mind there were no major differences between the West and the East; but we can assume there must be differences because, since the interviews, Elmi has moved back to Canada. In contrast, Sadatfar has lived in Shiraz all her life and has attended a number of contemporary and traditional art galleries that inspired her and, as she put it, "opened up

my eyes". She says that, if the opportunity arose, she would have no hesitation in travelling to other countries, not just the West, but Third world countries too:

> Seeing the way diverse countries and cultures produce art would make me more open to new work, but right now, I am in Shiraz and I am immersed in the tradition, and that is the way that I work; my family has a long history here. I would love to compare my work to the work produced in the West. Comparison is a vital thing for any artist (Sadatfar, Interview 1999).

In contrast to Elmi, Ghadirian feels secure in her Iranian identity. She has lived in Iran all her life and does not want to be anywhere else in the world, although she values showing her work outside Iran:

> I think that having lived in Iran all my life I am fortunate in that I feel a strong connection with my identity and I am deeply rooted. I believe that art must speak for the time to that to which it belongs. Artists in Iran speak of a different art and they have different conceptions of art to artists in the UK for instance. Every artist soaks up their environment, which goes towards what they express (Ghadirian, Interview, 2000).

In a later meeting with Ghadirian in July 2002, I asked her what she thought about her various visits abroad to show her work, and how that had changed her attitude to Iranian art. She replied: "Some of the art was just too confusing; I felt that I couldn't relate to it, but there were some that I felt inspired by" (Ghadirian, Interview, 2002).

Ghadirian's most recent works explore the notion of the veil and women's domesticity (Figures 4.38-39). As we drank tea and looked at her work in a hotel in Tehran, Ghadirian talked about the hidden qualities of the type of chador worn at home:

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Fig. **4-38**: a series *As Every Day,* Shadi Ghadirian (2002) Colour Photographs (Source: Courtesy of artist)

> They are often flowery and patterned, they are so much less overwhelming than the more recognisable image of the Black Chador, I liked the femininity that these chadors offered…the contrast of the chadors and the household objects fascinates me, we see no faces, yet we know the figure underneath is female (Ghadirian, Interview, 2002).

There is a sinister side that one feels when faced with these images, as we are led to believe that these women's identities are represented by domestication, and that is a problematic message to portray in an exhibition touring Western countries. This work demonstrates the pressure of responsibility that artists such as Ghadirian may need to address.[42] . When I commented on this, Ghadirian explains that the veil has so many faces and this work shows one aspect of it, she did not seem concerned that this work may in some ways be validating stereotypes of Muslim women which already exist in the West (Ghadirian, Interview, 2002).

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[42] Ghadirian wears modern Islamic attire that consists of trousers, a knee-length overcoat, and a scarf tied loosely showing a small amount of hair. This is common and more conservative than other versions of this attire worn by women who oppose the current regime's dress codes

Fig. **4-39**: *As Every Day,* Shadi Ghadirian (2002) Colour Photograph (Source: www.universes-in-universe.de 3/10/2003)

Indeed, the contrasting ways in which the veil has been utilised in works of art by women is an indicator of the many faces of the veil. This fascination with the veil has also been central in the work of Orientalist artists and writers, and analysed in post-colonial theory by Reina Lewis (1996) and Frantz Fanon (1989).

The West is fascinated by this type of imagery, as can be seen in the advert for a Chanel handbag (Figure 4.40). This advert focuses on the exoticism attached to the veil, and what makes the advert even more compelling with regard to the notion of the exotic veil is that it is in *Vogue* magazine.[43] On the reverse page of this advert is Vogue's 'In-Vogue' guide (Figure 4.41), where Neshat's work is featured to advertise a 'must-have' photography book. The question remains as to the appeal of the veil. The long relationship between the East and the West reinforces the power and mysticism of the veil to this day because it is the single most powerful visual difference between them. The veil represents the hidden, an alluring sense which the Western viewer finds fascinating and intriguing because it is different. This could be why so many Middle Eastern artists are making work about the Veil; that somehow they are encouraged to make these works in order to be validated.
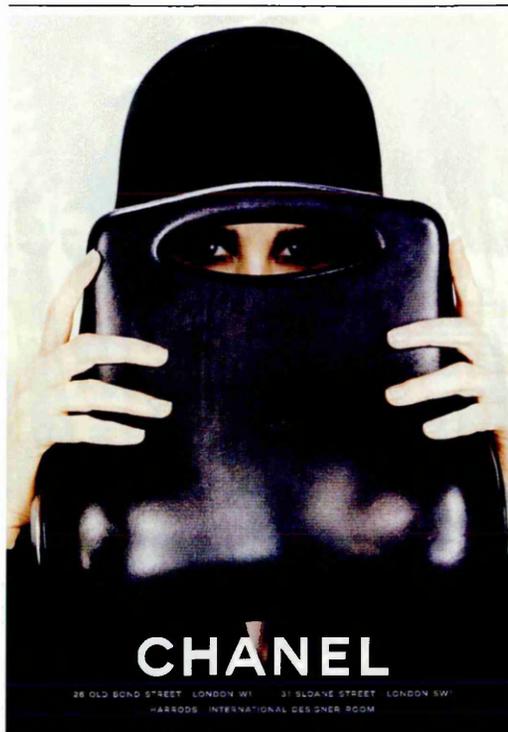
Fig **4-40**: Chanel Advert (Source: Vogue Sept 1999:39)
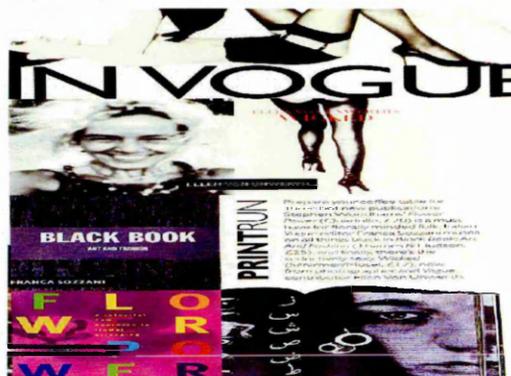
Fig. **4-41**: Vogue advert featuring Shirin Neshat's work (Source: Vogue Sept 1999:40)

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[43] Vogue magazine is associated with Western high-fashion and the production of 'exotic' Eastern imagery, in order to promote French fashion, is somewhat of a contradiction to the ways in which this type of imagery is used in Western media. In Western media, the image of the veiled woman often signifies oppression and Islamic fundamentalism.

Artists such as Neshat are returning to the East, and viewing their homeland with Western eyes. The result is work that comments on the current Iranian issues for a mainly Western audience through Eastern sensibilities and narratives. Her most recent installation/theatrical work entitled "Logic of the Birds" (2001), which I attended in London, was collaboration with the writer and filmmaker Shoja Azari, and the performer and vocalist Sussan Deyhim.[44]
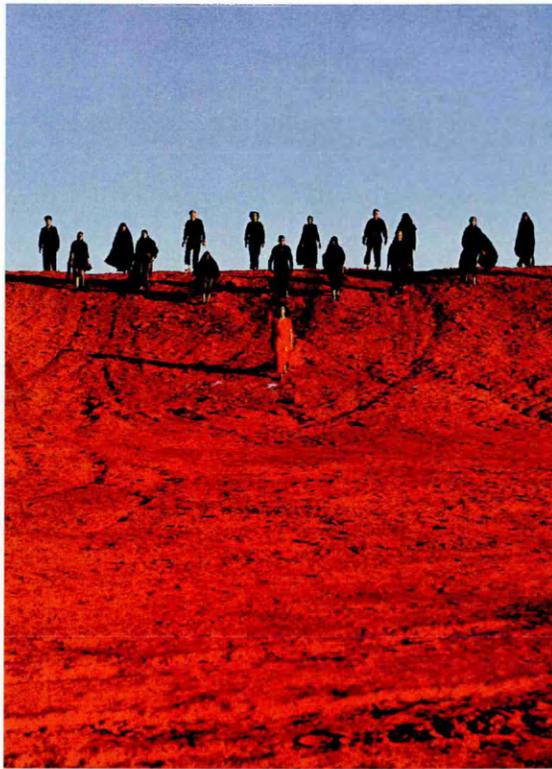
Fig. **4-42**: *Logic of the Birds*, Shirin Neshat 2001, film projection and performance (Source: Event leaflet 2001)

Logic of the Birds (Figure 4.42) explores migration and, by projecting their own identities, it is as if the artists' intentions are to explore the notion of Iranian identity as a migrant identity. Neshat comments:

> One of the themes that infuses our work is the perception of Iran's cultural shift from a Persian identity to an Islamic one (Neshat, 2001).

Neshat's partner Azari states:

> Persian culture is 5,000 years old, and the Islamic invasion only happened 1,500 years ago. The history of Iran is resistance to domination through a mystical approach to Islam. Basically what we are trying to do is to make

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[44] Neshat has collaborated with singer Sussan Deyhim in other works such as *Turbulent* (1998), along with film-maker and cinematographer Ghasem Ebrahimi. It was particularly poignant that four (New York-based) Iranian artists were showing this work, which was partly-funded by the American government during Bush's "Axis of Evil" campaign. The work was a combination of music, film and performance; a non-literal re-adaptation of the mystical text by the Persian poet and philosopher Attar.

sense of this confused identity, to go back to our roots and translate them into a universal language (Azari, 2001).[45]

The universal language, as Azari puts it, comes through in a highly technological performance using ancient Persian mysticism alongside contemporary Muslim symbolism, and more universal themes of migration. The performance could be viewed as a metaphor for Iran: the use of technology derived from the West, the ever-present history and, of course, today's Iran at once in harmony and in contradiction.

The Iranian-born artist Ghazel, who travels between Iran, France and the USA, also explores the contradictions of Iranian identity. In a series of videos entitled *Me*, she explores the notion of Hijaab with a sense of humour that is at times dark and at other times highly amusing. 'Me' was shown on three television monitors at the preview of

I try being a feminist

being 'cool' was showing-off with your two-wheels when we were teenagers

My friends and I tried to lose weight over a weekend once
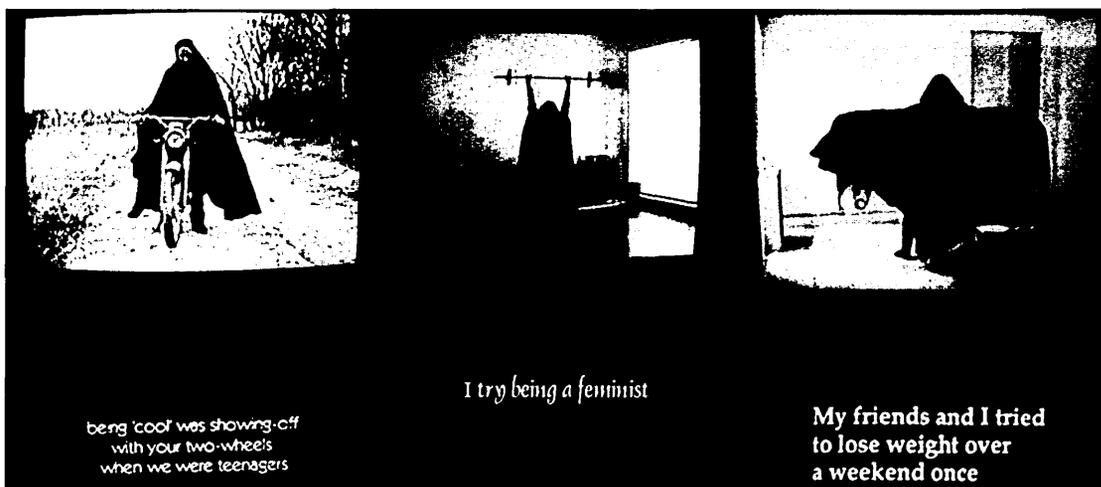
Fig. **4-43**: Fig. **4-44** Fig. **4-45** *Me series*, Ghazel (2002) 3 x T.V monitors installation (Source: www.miroslav-kraljevic.hr 12/02/04)

[45] Azari addresses the implications and importance of producing a performance so close to the horrific September 11th attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, where he resides with his partner Shirin Neshat. As eyewitnesses to the event, both Neshat and Azari felt that: "Now we have a feeling of terror here, that there will be killing and beating. We came up with the determination that it is even more important than before to represent the beauty of a culture. Evil doesn't know sides. Creativity and terror, construction and deconstruction, this is the condition of human nature, so let's create" (Azari, 2001).

'Veil' exhibition, [46] in which Ghazel filmed herself while wearing the chador and acting out different tasks, some mundane, some adventurous and some poignant (Figures 4.43-45).

In one scene, the caption reads 'People Had to Find Amazing Ways to Sneak Out (Of Our Country)', and in it she rolls herself up in a Persian carpet and then rolls off screen. These scenes have a close relationship with reality, but her intensely Iranian sense of humour delivers these messages to her Western audience in a way that differs from more critical representations made by artists such as Tabrizian and Neshat.

In an exhibition at the Barbican in June 2001, Bitta Feyyazi used the same kind of dark humour as Ghazel in her ceramic cockroaches (1998). Feyyazi made in excess of 2,000 cockroaches, which are three times the size of a normal cockroach (Figures 4.46-48).

Fig. **4-46**: Bitta Feyyazi in her studio (2003), (Source: Home Vogue International Winter Fall 2003/04:158)

Feyyazi sees cockroaches as a metaphor for her identity:

> they still come...they are breeding. The roaches are changing because I am changing," she says. "They started out like caricatures but now they are becoming more real." And when she is confronted with a real cockroach she does not kill it. "You know what's happened in our house? I don't see many roaches any more. Maybe they just became considerate towards us, like we are towards them. That's what I like to think" (Feyyazi, in Ellis, 2001).

[46] Veil exhibition was previewed at The New Art Gallery Walsall, UK, 14 February-27 April 2003, curated by Janan-Al-Ani.

Feyyazi produces multitudes of the same psychologically-charged forms, such as dead dogs, crows and babies. Both the approaches of Feyyazi and Ghazel reject exotic or romantic representations of the East and Iran. Feyyazi maintains that her work is not in any way political. In my view, her work refers to the acceptance of the social and political situation that she is in and, for her, fondness of cockroaches can be assumed to denote a fondness of the situation she is in, evident in her comment about how they do
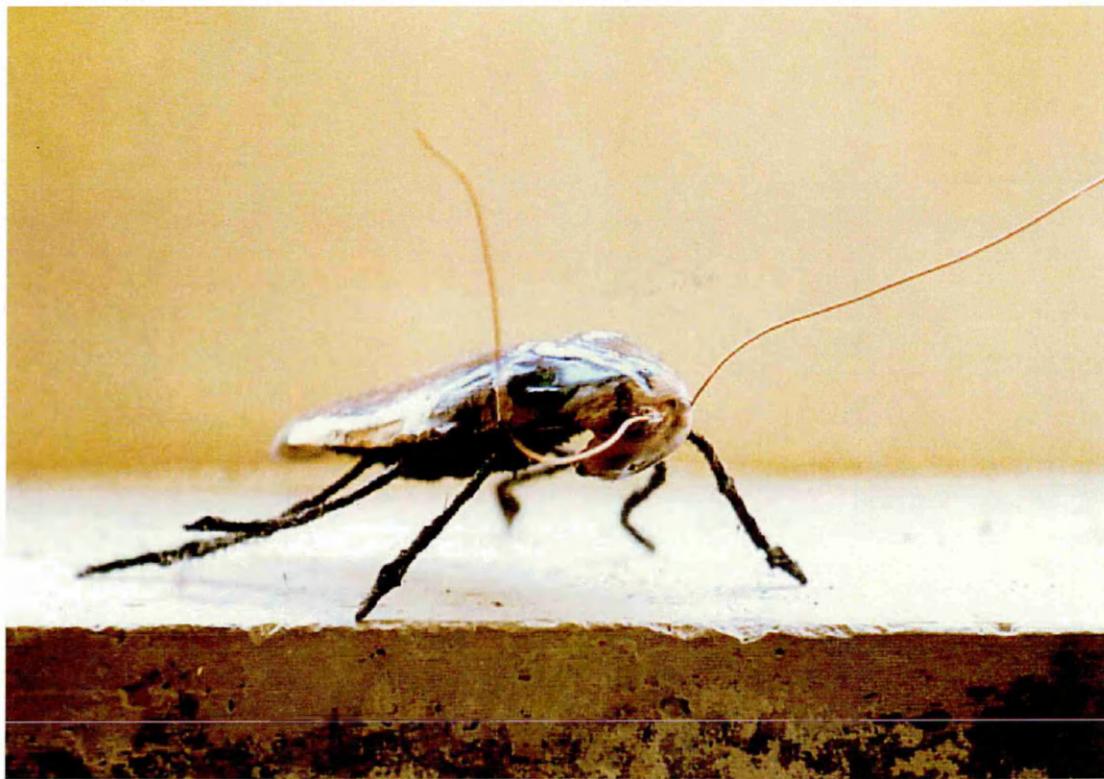
Fig. 4-47: *Cockroaches*, Bitta Feyyazi (1998) Ceramic, length 15cm Installation of 1,000 ceramic roaches (Source: Issa et al, 2001: 98-99)

not kill cockroaches in their house and in return the cockroaches become their friends. Feyyazi does not exoticise Iran; she expresses a view of Iran through real objects which resonate with a dark sense of humour.

Taghizadeh also uses a sense of humour in her work, often with political undertones. This has, at times, caused her to question showing her work outside Iran. She says that showing work outside Iran can be problematic and, inside Iran, the audience's perception is also problematic and is something she is still debating:

There is definitely a difference in how my work is seen because I am Iranian. I think that the definitions are in language and the ideas those languages pose. I am seen as a foreigner in Iran. If I show an image of women covered in Iran it is going to mean something completely different to it being shown here. I have thought about showing work in Iran, I feel as though I would be copping out, over there I am big fish in a small pond, here I am a small fish. I choose a more difficult situation, I live here I choose to show my work here. I think I would be seen as better than I am. Because 'khareji' is considered highly (Taghizadeh, Interview, 2001). [47]

Fig. **4-48**: *Cockroaches*, Bitta Feyyazi (1998) Ceramic, length 15cm Installation of 1,000 ceramic roaches (Source: Issa et al, 2001: 98-99)

Artists such as Taghizadeh face the critical scrutiny of both their homeland and the country in which they reside; their stereotyped image travels with them. Chalack is very much aware of stereotyped Western images of Iran and women in Muslim countries, and expresses her views on the subject strongly:

One thing that I have a firm belief in as a response to the view that 'the west' has on us, is that how they see me as an Iranian woman and the reality of who I really am are worlds apart. I am a woman who is in

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[47] Translation of the Farsi word, 'Kharej' is foreign lands, and 'khareji' means coming from foreign lands.

constant conflict with the society here; I come home at night totally worn out from this! But I have never seen a woman, who has great abilities and cannot use them and hold herself high, a talented woman (in any field) is recognised, respected, credited by the society and successful. Cultures are merging and people are changing. Twenty years ago I may have been closer to the Western ideas of who I am, but now I see changes (Chalack, Interview 2, 2001).

This section has established that Iranian women artists gaze back and forth toward the East and the West. For artists in Iran, their gaze toward the West may be mostly an interest in modes of art such as Chalack, and in some instanced the validation of the Western art world. For those working outside Iran, their gaze towards the East and in particular Iran, can be a source of identification with a lost sense of self, such as Neshat. The geographic position of artists and their international success both inside and outside Iran has a direct bearing on their success in the Western art world. This Western validation is due to that fact that within Iran, there is still a lack of insider validation, which is due to the lack of art criticism, and women's art history. The Western art world is connected to the global structure of collection, categorisation and validation of art and therefore artists such as Neshat, whose works are shown internationally, are prominent. For example in a recent publication of Women Artists[48], the only Iranian artist featured is Neshat, precisely because of her global status. Artists who have a status within Iran such as Ossouli and Sinai but do not have a global status are not known and therefore not featured.

The issue of positionality, whether in Iran or in the West, is an issue for both groups of artists. The experiences of the drastic and continuous changes that have occurred in Iran, since the Revolution, have affected these artists in different ways, and continue to be a source of both inspiration and frustration. Being an Iranian woman artist in Iran presents the issue of how to be successful inside a country with very little feminine art history. And for women working outside Iran, the issue of being categorised and expected to

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[48] See Grosenick, Uta, 2001, *Women Artists*. 2001: 378-383.

produce specific works can either place them high on the art scale, or hinder their freedom to explore issues other than being Middle Eastern women.

As already discussed feminism in Iran bears a direct relationship to Iranian women's artistic practice and ultimately their personal, national and international identities. To conclude this chapter, the next section is an analysis of the ways in which feminist criticism can be applied to these artists, and how their work is a contribution to the ongoing feminist movements both inside and outside Iran.

4.5 Feminist Criticism and Contemporary Iranian Women Artists

Previous sections thematically explored and analysed the ways in which the artists in this research conduct their practice and how various influences are reflected in their works and identities. Feminist movements can have a direct bearing on the ways in which these women adapt to change, or create changes, through their artistic practice. This section acknowledges the relationship between feminism and contemporary Iranian women artists and explores this further through their practice.[49]

As noted by Katy Deepwell (1995), what distinguishes a critic, a writer or an artist as feminist is that they may place women at the centre of their activities, inform/educate or enlighten audiences about women's concerns and works, and also generate interest about groups or individual women. Conley (2000) points out that female creative thinkers, writers and makers are often universally categorised as 'female'; the consequence of this is that particularities of the individual can be overlooked and, therefore, misunderstood. The artists featured in this research are firstly viewed as individuals; their feminism has to be viewed in context. The attempt here is not to render them homogeneously as 'women'; it is rather to examine their particular concerns and strategies as women. In

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[49] Although I do not see myself as a feminist artist or critic, on closer examination of my activities both as an artist and as researcher, it is clear that there are notable contributions that this research and practice makes to the field of feminism, which is further outlined in this section and in chapter 5.

relation to this, Conley states: "For women artists, painters, filmmakers, in the present era of standardisation and slogans, at stake is always a resingularising, or particularising to the point of universalising, of, once again, becoming minoritarian, of embracing aesthetics and ethics rather than a militant reductionism" (Conley, 2000:29). Feminist criticism, therefore, becomes an area within feminist debates and practices which can empower the broader feminist coalition. As Deepwell states, feminist art criticism is: "...an opportunity to consider the implications of women's work and a means of spreading the word about women's contribution and feminist issues to new audiences" (Deepwell, 1995:10).

Grizelda Pollock and Rosika Parker (1986) have described the period of 1970 to 1985 as a marker for a notable shift in the practices of women artists in the Western art world (Parker and Pollock, 1987:3). They describe the shift as going from 'practical strategies to strategic practices'; an observation which can also be applied to the present Iranian art world, and to the social practices of Iranian women artists. Artists such as Shadi Ghadirian and Shirin Neshat can be viewed as advocates of feminist strategies through their artworks; both seeking to redefine misconceptions of Iranian women and more broadly the positions of women in Islam.

Fig. **4-49**: Turbulent, Shirin Neshat (1998) Installation projections (Source: www.kultura-extra.de)

Figure 4.49 shows stills taken from Neshat's 'Turbulent', in which she projects on two opposing walls two projections running simultaneously. On one wall, a man in a simple white shirt sings thirteenth-century Persian poetry with his back to a male audience as he finishes, and the audience applauding the projection on the opposing wall begins to come to life. On the opposite wall, a single veiled female waits in a darkened room and begins to sing without words as though each sound were coming from her deepest thoughts, desires, fears and hopes. The viewers are centralised between two opposing ideas: the dominant male, who has his supporters; and the lone female in the dark. Here, Neshat's work links directly to feminist concerns that are prevalent not just in Iran but worldwide. Barlow views this particular work as follows: "Neshat explores tensions between the individual and the masses; male and female; east and west; received histories and the evolving world" (Barlow 2004:1). Feminist themes are strongly reflected in the works of 15 of the 20 artists featured in this research. From this standpoint, artists such as Neshat and Ghadirian and Ghazal, who are showing their work internationally, are central to feminist movements and spreading powerful and important messages through a medium that can reach different audiences.

The artists enter the feminist dialogue from different standpoints but their unifying effort is to highlight Iranian women's presence in the feminist dialogue. For example, Neshat, in comparison to Ghadirian, has a more general and westernised view of Iranian women, having lived outside Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Neshat often re-visions women of Islamic nations in groups. In her work 'Rapture' (1999), where a group of chadored women walk to the sea to climb on board a small boat, she is directly referring to feminist freedom and the uncertainties that lay ahead, represented by the sea. The boat is also far too small to carry them all, another possible reference to the idea that this freedom does not include all women. These different theoretical and aesthetic attitudes are significant examples of the strategies that these women choose, in order to represent both themselves and their nation. Therefore, a notion of a singular feminist strategy that influences Iranian women or women in the Middle East is simplistic.

Pollock points out an important aspect of women's studies: "Women's studies are not just about women – but about the social systems and ideological schemata which sustain the domination of men over women within the other mutually inflecting regimes of power in the world, namely those of class and those of race" (Pollock, 1988:1). Pollock further examines the ways in which women have been denied access to art history. Linda Nochlin (1971) warned that the redefinition of art history through the inclusion of female masters was a 'no win' situation, and that: "The criteria of greatness was already male defined" (Pollock, 1988:1). [50] The lack of women in art history is due to social, cultural and political influences which, over the years, have controlled the access of women to such fields as the Arts, both in Western and Eastern cultures. Deborah Cherry analyses women painters in *Painting Women; Victorian women artists* (1993). In this book, Cherry exemplifies the various ways in which Victorian women were denied access to the art world at the time, and the strategies they employed in order to gain their place in the arts through using feminine subject matter.[51] Whitney Chadwick (1990) also refers to a period in Western art history where: "women were isolated from the theoretical and intellectual debates that dominated the arts because in most cases they were barred from membership of the academies in Rome and Paris, the major centres of art education during the eighteenth century" (Chadwick, 1990:33). In the same way, Iranian art history does not include great female artists, and has mainly favoured men. It was men who travelled to study art abroad, and men who pioneered art movements until shifts began in women's movements. Women artists have been integrated into the Iranian art world synchronously with the use of feminism in Iran. As feminist groups formed, women artists began to form groups, strengthening their position and voices.[52] Their integration has also been affected by social segregation of men and women implemented by the Islamic regime, making it easier for groups of the same sex to meet. This way, there are no prohibitions and the groups can conduct their meetings without fear of prosecution on the grounds of

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[50] See Nochlin, Linda (1973), 1971 article 'Why have there been no great woman artists?'

[51] Cherry 1993:201 *Body maps*, discusses the adaptation of the female nude by women artists in history that were seen as obscene by their peers, the public and the state.

[52] There are groups such as *Dena,* the Iranian women painters' group that includes Sinai and Ossouli. Also, there are yearly exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, for example 'Manifestation of feelings' was an exclusively female painters' exhibition.

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social misconduct.[53] The social and cultural differences in the practice of feminism in Iran are central to the difference between Iranian women's art and women of other Islamic nations.

As discussed earlier, feminism in Iran differs from that of other Islamic nations. Nevertheless, in the little literature and cataloguing that is available on women artists, especially women of Islamic nations, Iranian women are often regarded as 'Arab'. Neshat is featured in both 'Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World' (Nashashibi, 1994), and 'Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present' (Lloyd, 1999) with no regard for the particular history to which she belongs. While these books are rare, and indeed constitute important contributions to feminist studies and women's art studies, their homogenising approach indicates a need for more particular attention to the artists' unique positions, which Sherwell acknowledges in her essay 'Bodies in Representation: Contemporary Arab Women Artists' (Sherwell in Lloyd 1999). Sherwell uses the term 'Arab women artists', but she also questions the term as follows:

> Up until now I have been using the term Arab woman with frequency without raising the question or defining of what one means by Arab woman? As soon as we begin to deconstruct this label we fall into problems. What comes to our immediate attention is that the term provides an umbrella for a wide variety of experiences. Neither what it means to be an Arab, nor what it means to be a woman are fixed categories (Sherwell in Lloyd 1999:59).

To conclude, 'contemporary Iranian women artists' is, therefore, a reference point, where varieties of difference co-habit, contradict, inspire and even devalue one another to divulge different aspects of being an Iranian woman artist. The correlation that feminist criticism brings to these practices further examines these crucial differences, as Deepwell points out:

> Feminist Art criticism remains criticism with a cause. It is committed to challenging the representation of women's work in a culture which

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[53] Islamic laws in Iran require that unrelated men and women do not mix unless it is in a public setting. Of course, this law is repeatedly broken, the consequences of which, if found by the state police or *paasdaar*; Islamic military police, can vary from warnings to imprisonment and even torture.

continues to devalue, degenerate and ignore it. Feminism is still the tool through which women empower a self-reflexive, developing, open-ended set of debates about what it means to be women (plural) in a patriarchal culture (Deepwell, 1995:5).

It is interesting that Deepwell, here, is referring to Western culture, and yet her analysis can also be applied to Iranian women's situation. In recent years, especially after the election of former President Khatami (also previous Minister of Culture), women have become much more active in the art world; but there are still underlying issues that need to be addressed. There is a lack of art criticism and a lack of feminist criticism of art. This type of criticism does exist in the works of women artists, but it has not been contextualised in Iranian culture in the same way that it has in Western culture.

4.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, the works of contemporary Iranian women artists have been explored through a thematic approach. The concern for different elements of cultural, political or personal attitudes has been central to this chapter.

As identified in chapter 3, history has a strong root in Iranian identity which is also reflected in the works of the artists presented in this study. More specifically it seems that artists living and working in Iran are more affiliated to using historic references to Persepolis and traditional miniature painting in their work such as Sinai and Ossouli. Artists living outside Iran such as Tabrizian or Neshat, use more cultural or political references from history. This could be due to the fact that the current unstable crisis of identity inside Iran presents these artists with the premise of history as an unchangeable and deeply rooted subject matter for the representation of a stable sense of Iranian identity in their work. On the other hand artists living outside Iran can more readily make use of strongly political sources in their work due to more freedoms of expression outside Iran. However, it is evident that artists from both groups are inspired by the complexities offered through an engagement with Iranian history.

The other issue raised from this research is the notion of the 'Home'; something that many of the artists are engaging with in their work. Artists such as Assadi have a very direct relationship with the sanctuary of the private home in painting their personal items around from their home. While in contrast, Taghizadeh chooses a voyeuristic approach in photographing through windows of houses in the UK, and marking her feelings of being an outsider. From a more theoretical perspective, Ghadirian's work on the Qajar women juxtaposes two viewpoints of the 'East' and the 'West', the 'Insider' and the 'Outsider', and represents a strikingly true, but conflicting picture of contemporary Iranian women.

Cultural moulds and expectations of the artists has also been a point of discussion in this chapter. Artists living inside Iran such as Sadatfar are affiliated to using traditional methods and subject matters of the Persian miniature in an attempt to bring women into the forefront of what may be termed as 'Iranian art'; historically dominated by Iranian men. Artists outside Iran such as Rassolzadeh feel the pressure from their peers and viewers to produce more 'traditional' works, yet she continues to make non-traditional sculptures. Outside Iran, Kianush makes works which are not connected to her Iranian cultural heritage and chooses to diversify her practice despite expectations that she should make work which is relevant to her background. For artists such as Ghazel and Tabrizian, it is the blurring of cultural constrictions that gives resonance to their work. Cultural constrictions exist for artists of both groups as they try to locate a position within the cultures and art worlds they inhabit.

The forces of change as discussed throughout this thesis clearly play an important role in the ways the artists choose to represent Iranian identity. Both groups have been affected by the culture of constant change that has become so central to the understanding of Iranian identity. The political, cultural and geographic changes that have occurred in the lives of these artists are represented in a variety of ways depending on the degree to which the artists have been involved in the changes. Kinaush states that had she lived in Iran, her response to the changes that have occurred might have featured prominently in her work, whereas Chalak views these changes as central to her Iranian psyche and something which has made her more creative throughout the years.

The subsequent and prevalent changes due to political upheavals of the last 30 years are reflected in contradicting ways in the works of both groups of artists as explored in section 4.4.1. Neshat hailed as somewhat of a cultural ambassador for Iran by the western art world, directs her artistic practice towards creating work which is geared towards a western audience. Likewise Ghazel also makes work which is directed towards a western audience. Shahbazi's work on the other hand shows the mundane and the everyday Iran and it is her western audience that brings new meanings to the work. Together, artists outside Iran clearly represent contradicting viewpoints of the same pivotal changes, through their specific positioning. While Iranian women in Iran seem to take a less involved approach to the affects of changes that have occurred, this could be said to be due to their closeness to the issues.

The particular positioning of artists inside and outside Iran brings us to the issue of validation as discussed in this chapter. Artists are validated for a variety of reasons, this study has revealed that outsider validation had a central role inside Iran. With artists such as Ghadirian, having shown outside Iran makes them much more celebrated inside Iran. Artists such as Neshat are prominent due to their position in the Western art world. This presents an important issue in how the works of these artists is viewed and subsequently validated. A major issue is that there needs to be more critiquing of works inside Iran and more Iranian women need to reach wider audiences. This issue is something which artists such as Shahbazi are engaged with and are trying to explore in their work. In terms of artists inside Iran, Assadi being a good example, there are some issues surrounding male domination and male validation which she was keen to address in her interview. However, what is central to both groups is that their marked Iranian identity and being associated with a host of ideologies and preconceptions offers them a complex set of signifiers to engage with on a daily basis and explore in their work. These arenas make Iranian women artists' works amongst the most truthful representations of Iranian women's identity. This work also offers an insight into feminist movements and

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contributes to Islamic feminist theory which has been discussed earlier and briefly explored at the end of this chapter.

The analysis of the two groups of women both inside and outside Iran has aided a more in-depth analysis to of Iranian identity. Due to the artists' various geographic positioning - living and working in Iran, or displaced from their homeland - it could be assumed that they would have very different concerns and approaches toward their identity, both personally and artistically. However, it is evident in this study that the concerns of both groups of artists are often very similar to one another. Due to the changes that have occurred in Iran, both groups of artists have a concern with their identity which also echo's the Iranian 'identity crisis' and is therefore a national concern for Iranians globally. As an example, similarities can be drawn between artists such as Neshat and Ossouli, both born in Iran (Neshat now living in New York), who explore notions of displacement. Both artists deal with the notion of a lost identity; but, whereas Ossouli uses fantasy and reverts to traditions of Iranian miniature painting to search for a lost or authentic identity, Neshat comments directly on the situation in Iran today. Essentially, there are similarities in the ways the two groups of artists experience and represent their identities in their work.

The twenty artists featured have all been affected in some way by displacement, whether geographically, culturally, politically, or personally. What remains central to this research are the ways in which these individuals narrate an often underrepresented and misunderstood identity and continue to expand upon the growing knowledge about Iran both to Iranians and non-Iranians. The next chapter presents and explores my own evolving art practice and where appropriate draws links with the artists discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 5 Presentation and Analysis of My Practice

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on and explores a selected body of artworks made during this study. The body of works presented here form a major part of the submission of this research. Therefore, it is important here to note that an integral development of the ideas discussed in this research has been the public exhibition of these works. The exhibitions examined here are acknowledged as important outcomes of the research made throughout the study. As an artist-researcher I have been able to make use of the issues raised throughout this study and reflect upon them through the production and exhibition of artworks both nationally and internationally. My professional development as an artist has been a focal point and aided the assimilation of some of the central issues surrounding Iranian identity. As well as drawing on my practice as an integral part of this research, a comparative analysis with the works of the artists discussed is also undertaken when appropriate. This chapter explores the development of my practice through a self reflective analysis of the practice through experiments, and exhibited works. As this research has involved the implementation of a reflective methodology, it is important to include personal experiences derived from diaries and sketchbooks, which are analysed objectively in relation to some of the theories discussed earlier. The written style of this chapter is purposefully reflective of a personal account demonstrated through a more prominent use of the first-person. This self critical approach is reflected in the descriptions and explorations of the intentions of the artworks from a personal viewpoint and do not necessarily present a finite analysis of the works. This chapter intends to describe and discuss the artworks within the frameworks offered through this research and where appropriate critical analysis from writers such as Sara Raza have been included.

The discussions in earlier chapters, specifically Chapter 3, inform and are informed by my own practice. Where appropriate, cross-references are made in relation to some of the theories that have contributed to the creation of specific artworks. Further attention is given to my identity and placement, both in relation to the artworks and in the context of contemporary Iranian women artists.

The next section examines the basis for my interest in examining the notion of identity through a brief autobiography and introduction to selected key artworks that inspired this enquiry. The next four sections thematically analyse the practice element of this research, through four distinct themes. These themes are derived from the issues raised, and important factors affecting identity, art practice, and Iranian women artists in the context of my practice, entitled: Forces of Change, Representing the Veil, Multiple Selves, Positioning and Viewpoints. The relationship between theory and practice in this research is made more visible in this chapter. Much of my thinking and inspiration for making particular works has come from the three distinct sources of personal experience, engagement with relevant theories, and interaction with other artists in similar circumstances. This chapter concludes by presenting and discussing the compilation of artworks chosen for the final submission entitled: 'Far Nearer'.

5.2 Artist Biography and Statement

I was born in Iran and moved to the UK at the age of 10. This early displacement from homeland disrupted the natural process of the construction of my personal identity. I had always been aware of my Iranian roots and made efforts to acknowledge and understand Iran. The notion of identity has played a major role in my life, and I often tried to fix this identity to a history, a time and a place. In recent years, and as a result of this research it became evident that my position is not fixed, it is neither here nor there, and belongs to a 'third place'. My position in this research has been one of fluidity; moving from British culture into Iranian and from Iranian culture into British, and using both sets of

languages, ideologies and aesthetics in the artworks. My position could be described as one which fluctuates between 'Iranian-ness' and 'British-ness'.

As an Iranian artist educated in the UK and with the opportunity to exhibit outside Iran, I inhabit a position that enables me to produce works that I would not if positioned in Iran. I use media-related tools such as photography and film; the use of this sort of material is reflective of the global media which shapes, distorts and validates Iranian identity. The power of manipulation is evident in most of my works, such as 'Exodus', which relates to control of the media, and 'Improbable Dialogues', in which juxtaposing images of the self represents the complexities of the construction of identity and its maintenance within society and culture. The following two pieces of work have been selected for their pivotal role in inspiring my more recent work throughout this research. They reference the background to much of the themes and concerns which have been further developed

As discussed earlier, Iranian identity has been dependent upon forces of change. These were present in the early stages of my practice, where I felt prompted to explore the notion of the self and identity in response to the forces affecting me. A prominent personal change for me was my parents leaving the UK and returning to Iran when I was eighteen. Shortly after, I received a letter from the Immigration Department asking me to leave within twenty-eight days. The following work (Figure 5.1) is video piece in response to this change, which was shown as part of a film reel.
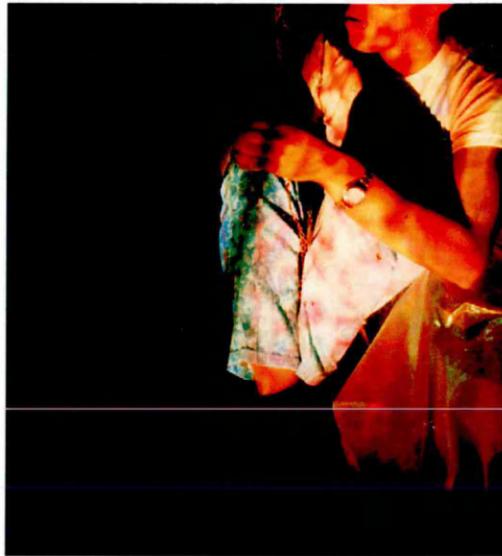
Fig. **5-1**: *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* Mitra Memarzia 1998.

Are you sitting comfortably?

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Video piece shown at Psalter Lane, Sheffield Hallam University, Feb, 1998

Figure 5.1 shows a still from the three-minute video. This work marked the beginning of a new interest in exploring the self through artworks. [1] My immigration status had changed due to my parents leaving the country and British Immigration and Nationality Department required me to leave the country. This work was a direct response to receiving a letter, as well as the practicalities of appealing against an unreasonable request, as by this point I was enrolled on the BA Fine Art course at Sheffield Hallam University.

As the title suggests, the viewer anticipates the possibility of bad news; 'are you sitting comfortably?' or the beginning to a children's story 'are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin'. The video was shot in my bedroom, lit with candles, and the soundtrack was taken from a soothing and melodic relaxation tape. Fragments of the letter from the immigration office, of old photographs, and my passport were overlaid. I wanted to create a sense of 'calm before the storm'. The ambiguous film ends with the words, 'leave the UK within 28 days'.

This short film marked the start of exploring notions of identity, displacement, change, and control, which later became the overarching themes explored in my practice. The next significant work explored the issue of self identity in the context of displacement from homeland.

I continued to use my displaced physical self as a reference point. The motif of the displaced mermaid began to take shape which later resulted in larger and on-going projects. I became interested in the predicament of the mermaid in tales such as the 'Little

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[1] Previous works dealt with notions of private and public spaces in which objects, such as cupboards and handbags, were physically turned inside out and the outside became the inside. The viewer would often have to look through a spyglass to see the inside the objects.

Mermaid'.[2] The fairy tale nature of this work was intentional and typical of most of my early work, but the fairy tales were never perfect. The constructive element of making the work also became symbolic of the constructive nature of identity, which was developed further in consequent works. The following work is an example of the 'Mermaid' series. In this piece, the water also symbolised dislocation, since one is unable to breathe and function under water; this was a metaphor for struggle against the forces of change, both for myself and Iranian women in a more general sense.

Breathing Still, Hanley City Centre, World AIDS Day Carnival, Stoke on Trent, Dec, 1999

Fig. **5-2**: Fig. **5-3**: Fig. **5-4**: *Breathing Still*, Mitra Memarzia 1998 Series of Twelve Slides projected on 9ft by 9ft screen 7ft high.

The costume was based on the nomadic costumes worn by my ancestors, as shown in Figure 5.5. I was particularly interested in the connection between the nomadic and the

[2] The little mermaid is not happy in the sea, as she falls in love with a land man; but, if she is to become a land walker, each step she takes will feel as though she is walking on broken glass.

mermaid, and fusing the two together. [3] The nomads have a similar position to the mermaid, in that both are in a state of constant flux, occupying a multitude of spaces.

In a similar way to Ossouli, this work is an exploration of personal history in order to encapsulate an essence of 'Iranian-ness'. My mermaid-self is a representation of contemporary Iranian women; enticing, and full of contradictions. This work was the inspiration to further explorations of self identity through the adaptation of multiple characters in future works.

Fig. **5-5**: The Nomadic Costume (Source: Mitra Memarzia)

I feel fortunate to have experienced dislocation, and to be able to draw on my personal experiences as a source of inspiration. This unique position has enabled me to question and seek a better understanding of the complexities of Iranian identity through theory and production and exhibition of artworks to various audiences. In a broader sense, the complexities of new borderless identities, of migrant selves, and contradicting

Fig. **5-6**: *Breathing Still*, Mitra Memarzia 1998,

forces of change are recurring themes in my work. Through this, Western audiences may

[3]The experience of making the work was also significant. My struggle in the water mirrored the struggle of Iranian women. On entering the pool whilst wearing the restricting mermaid costume I realised that I could not stay afloat, and the difficult task of holding only a small amount of air in my lungs in order to sink and pose for the pictures was painful.

begin to have a better understanding of Iran and the East, and begin to question their own perceptions. I aim to encourage the viewers to develop new ways of looking at Iran and perhaps to challenge the monolithic and homogenous notion of the 'other'.

Throughout this research, I have endeavoured to question and challenge perceptions of Islam, Iran and especially Iranian women. My studio work and methodology reflects a multilateral analysis of these issues; often there are dichotomous relationships between concepts of identity, religion, culture and authenticity.[4] As already discussed, Iranian women's identities are further complicated by political and propagandist influence; thus, they are under an immense strain to establish a place to belong to in the global art world. An over arching aim in my work, is to dismantle some of the fixed perceptions offered by the media through juxtaposing imagery and signifiers with which the Western audience is familiar, which draws them into more serious and often unexpected contradictions. My aim is not definition in a finite sense; it is rather a kaleidoscopic view where ideologies of Islam, exoticism, politics and the notion of representation contradict one another to form an inclusive multilateral view.

5.3 Forces of Change

This section briefly presents some of works produced in response to the notion of 'change'. The forces of change as outlined in this research play a major role in the construction of Iranian identity. The constant changes at force both inside Iran and in the representations of Iran create a prominent sense of multiplicity, adaptation to change. "Dear Axis of Evil" is a direct response to the notion of the forces of change, the power of labelling and representation.

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[4] During the early part of this research, all research students were asked to give a presentation in a series of seminars. Focussing on representation and identity, I dressed within the regulations of the Islamic Republic of Iran; the chador. Underneath it I wore the more liberal Islamic dressing adapted by most Iranian women; this constitutes a headscarf, a long loose coat, underneath this garment I wore my usual clothes. I walked into the room and waited my turn to present my research and, through my presentation, I removed my Islamic garments until I was wearing my Western jeans and T-Shirt; visually demonstrating the importance of understanding the unfixed nature of Iranian women's identity.

Dear Axis of Evil Simunye Gallery, Sheffield, *Axis*, *Repetitions*, Chameleon Gallery Walsall, March 2006

'Dear Axis of Evil' is a series of digital images comprised of patterns. Robert Clark of the *Guardian* guide described the works as: "…topical and politically loaded digital images are arranged to ironically mimic the hypnotic symmetries of traditional Islamic mosaics and Persian Rugs" (Clark, 2004:37).
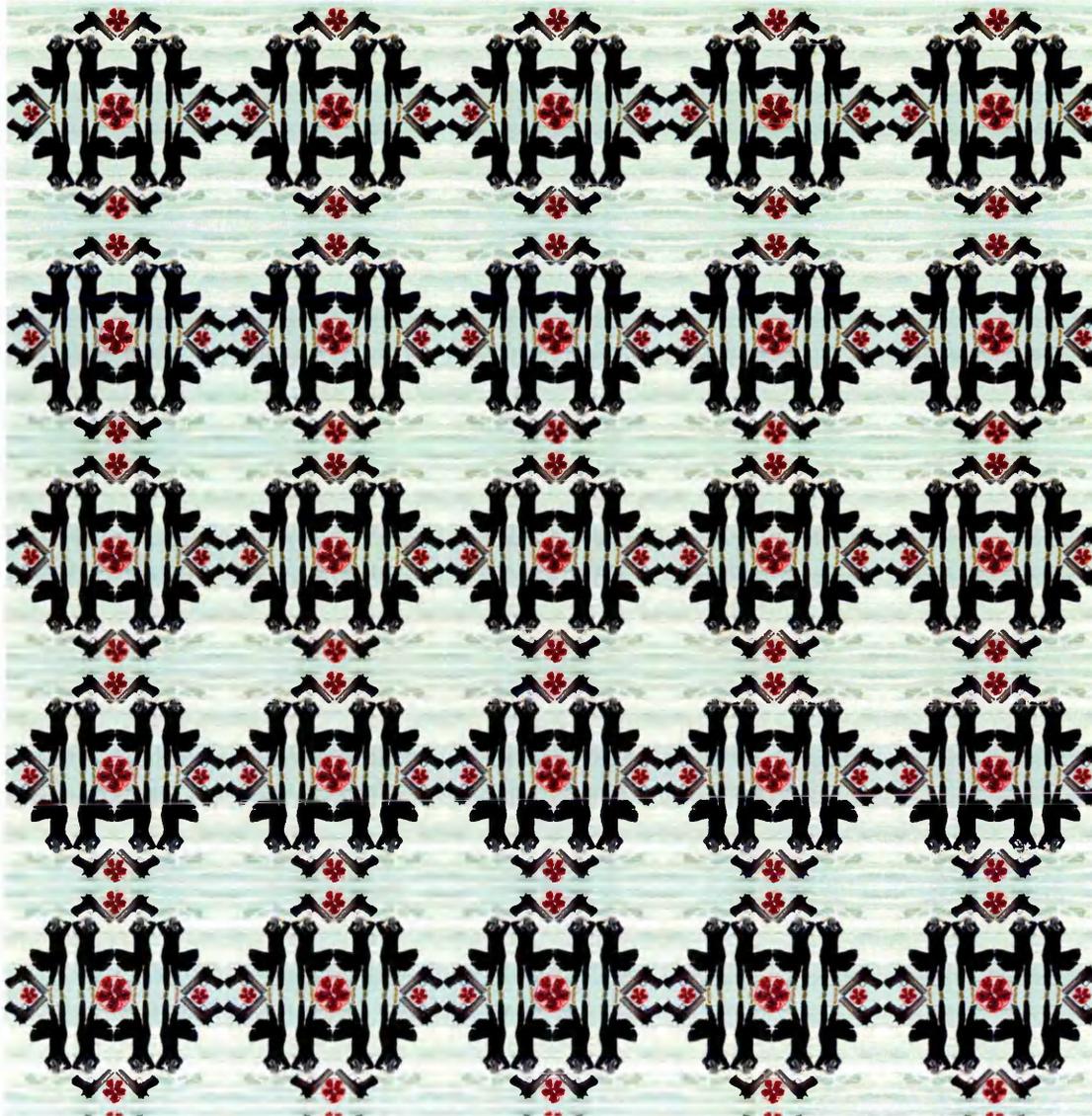
Fig. **5-7**: *'Dear Axis of Evil'*, Mitra Memarzia 2005, digital print 100x100 cm, 1/5.

The title is a playful evocation of the ways in which labelling can be misleading, and how images can be constructed from an outsider's point-of-view. These patterns are a collection of visual correspondence between Iran and the West. The images have been mostly taken in Iran and the work has been constructed in England; the combination of this approach has enabled images that have a dual stance on the current climate between the Middle East and the West. The deliberate choice was to show these works in Simunye, a gallery and coffee shop, to reflect the Iranian tradition of coffee shop paintings, and to explore the ways in which alternative gallery spaces offer access to a wider audience in a more relaxed and approachable setting. Sara Raza (2005) states that simunye is:
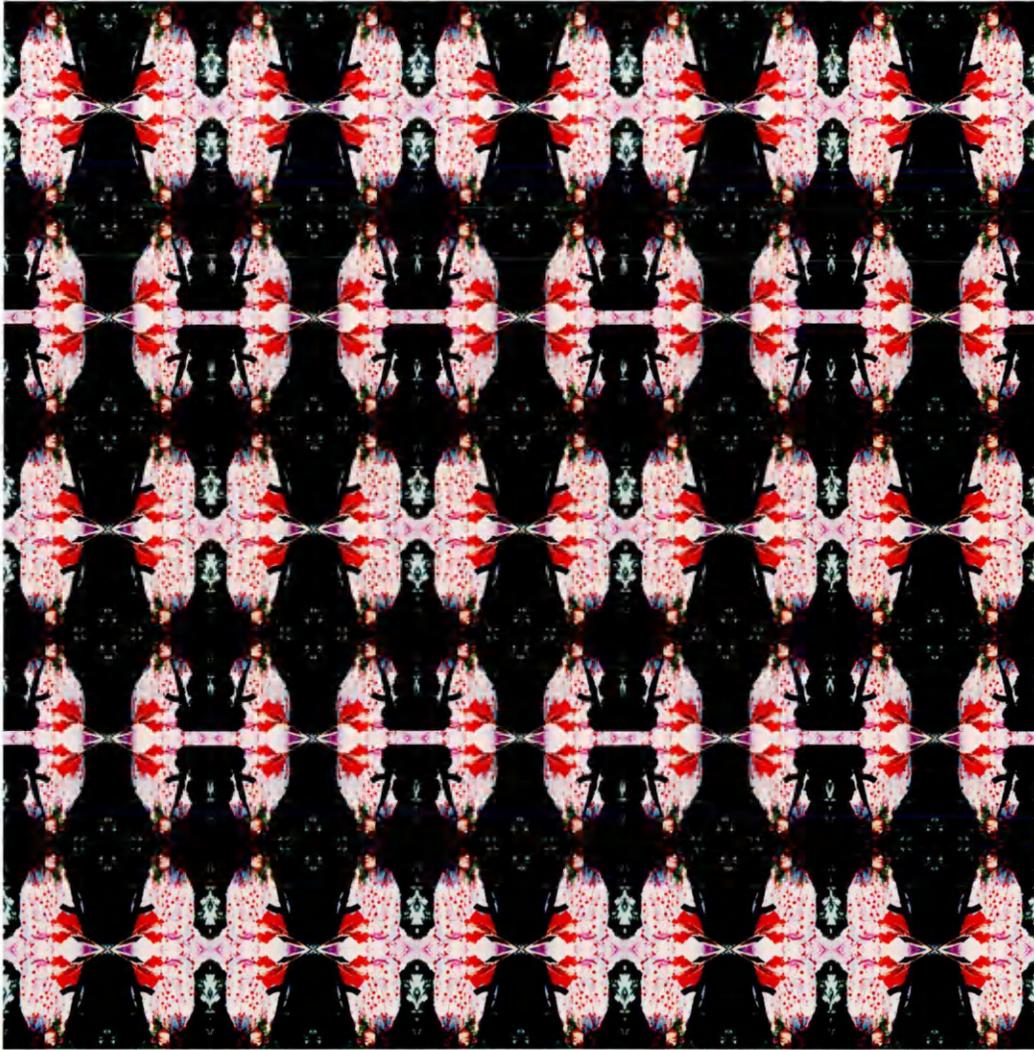
Fig. **5-8**: *'Dear Axis of Evil'*, Mitra Memarzia, 2005, digital print 100x100 cm, 1/5.

...a space that can be compared to old Persian coffeehouse art salons, which emerged in Iran in the 16th and 17th centuries during the Safavid era and were dotted across the major cities...Within these coffeehouses scenes of epic and mythological tales were depicted on the walls and stories and political banters were exchanged amongst the artists and intellectuals. Fast forwarding to the current century and another continent later one bears witness to the formation of a new set of powerfully epic "tales," portraying guns, pomegranates and veiled women against the backdrop of the Caspian Sea [see figure 5.46] – and of course igniting a brand new exchange in dialogue amongst the new wave generation of artists and intellectuals (Raza, 2005)

Another element of the work is the way in which, from a distance, the patterns look just like any other pattern, and it is only through going close up to the images that the viewers

see the elements that make up the patterns. This intentional use of scale in the work is intended to reflect the way that, often, as outsiders to other cultures, we do not see the intricacies involved or experience a necessarily true picture. The viewers were encouraged to re-consider their first impressions by moving closer to the work and engaging more intimately with the issues presented to them. [5]

> Ultimately, Memarzia's works concern themselves with the notion of familiar signs and symbols of Persian or Iranianness as imagined through the eyes of a curious outsider. For instance, the image of the veiled woman signifies one of the universally recognised actions of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, that ordered that all women be veiled in accordance with the Qu'ranic principles of Islam and refers to Iran's historic relationship with the veil and women as central to each government's criteria. Moreover, the explicit use of weaponry can be read as an overt reference to Iran's "supposed" terrorist tendencies, which have branded it as one third of the infamous "axis of evil (Raza, 2005).

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[5] One visitor to the exhibition remarked to me that she had not realised that there were pictures within the patterns until it was pointed out to her to get closer to the pictures, and this made her think about the works' intentions in a totally different way.

Fig. **5-9**: *'Dear Axis of Evil'*, Mitra Memarzia, 2005, digital print 100x100 cm, 1/5.

This work playfully hints at the serious issue of misinterpretation of other cultures through the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy, the visible and the hidden. The divisions created between what is seen and unseen has taken a central role in this research.

Consequins September 2000

The title of this piece is a play on the words 'sequin' and 'consequence'. Two seemingly different words merged in order to create a new language to reflect the ways that the media may decorate the truth (symbolised by the sequins), and the consequences of fragmented information.

The constructive element in the work of Ghadirian, as discussed in Chapter 4, is also a central element to this piece. The hand-made quality of the sequins reflects the nomadic women's costumes, which are always meticulously hand-made. The dyed and cut newspapers became items of decoration. Decorating the truth, in the same way that information is translated from culture to culture
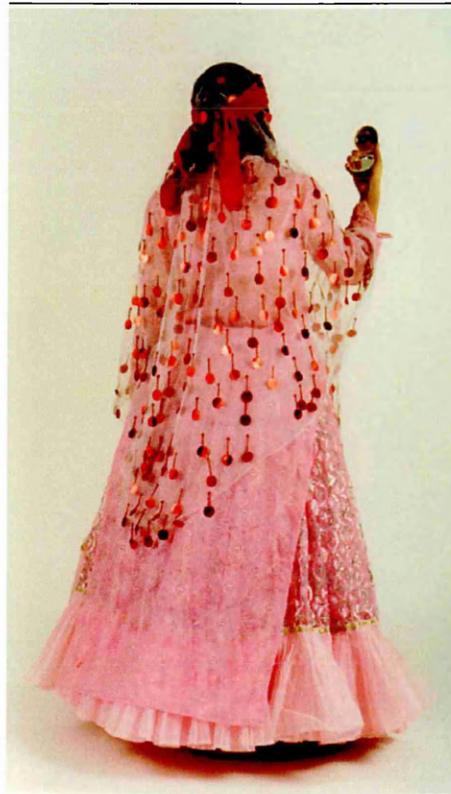
Fig. **5-10**: *Untitled*, Mitra Memarzia 2000, Photograph.
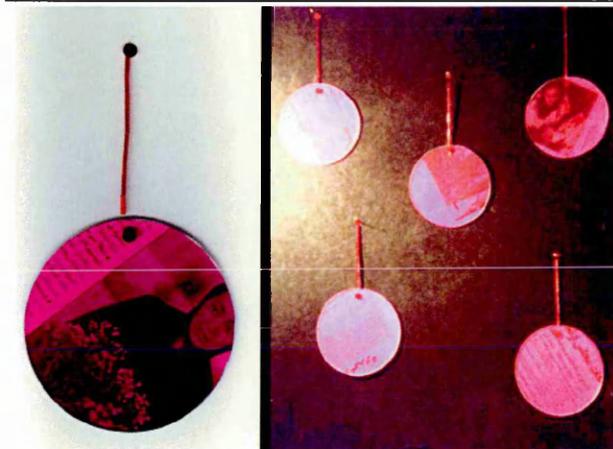
Fig. **5-11**: Fig. **5-12**: *Consequins*, Mitra Memarzia 2000, 200 hand-made sequins from dyed Iranian newspapers, Perspex and beads (9cm diameter).

to communicate what is desired, whether good or bad. A further exploration of the role of the media as mediator between cultures and the 'others' identity, the following work 'Exodus' was made one year later.

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Exodus May 2003

(Exhibited as part of *Hidden Half June 2004*)

In contemporary Iran, newspapers are highly symbolic of change. During the turbulent times of the Revolution and the war, and the consequent changes which took place, newspapers were prime instruments in both shaping and reinforcing ideologies, and also in changing and shattering them.[6] Every week in Iran, newspapers that do not conform to the rules of the government are shut down, and every week new newspaper firms are established. This is much like the life of the butterfly, so brief yet purposeful.

Fig. **5-13**: Exodus, Mitra Memarzia 2003, 400 handmade butterflies from hand-dyed Iranian Newspapers.

The individual butterflies are made from Iranian newspapers; fragments of news, advertisements, and the random cutting of the butterflies render the newspapers' content useless. The information in the newspapers has been fabricated into something else, in the same manner that information is manipulated according to a government's requirements. The butterflies are messengers that are also fragmented and constructed; they are mere imitations of real butterflies, and the dress pins which hold them onto the wall of the gallery restrict any notion of exodus taking place. The title also mirrors the 'Exodus' of Iranians out of Iran after the Islamic revolution.

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[6] Writers in Iran have been active in all arenas of thought, and the newspaper gives them wider coverage than books. Over 2,326 licences for publishing new publications were issued until October 2003 of which 1,300 have already been published and the rest are in preliminary stages. See Aqli 2004 for a detailed report on the growth of newspapers in contemporary Iran.

5.4 Positioning and Multiple Viewpoints

Throughout my practice, a conscious post-colonial approach has been adapted in many of the works. As with artists such as Ghadirian, I have used a post-colonial approach as a point of reference in order to draw the viewer in and question their previous perceptions of the exoticised Eastern woman.[7]

As the title of the painting – *An Oriental Beauty* (Figure 5.14) suggests, these types of imagery often depict women as exotic subjects to be looked at. This is encouraged by their often-diverted gaze (looking away from the viewer and allowing them to look without being confronted). The notion of looking at oneself through Western eyes (as discussed in Chapter 3) has been an

Fig. **5-14**: *An Oriental Beauty*, Henriette Browne 1861, Oil on canvas, 57.99 x 45.00 inches / 147.3 x 114.3 cm (Source: http://www.artrenewal.org)

element that I have explored in many of my artworks.[8] To an extent, I have been an Orientalist at times; looking at Iran through Western eyes, except my observations lie in a different place – a place of multiple views and of contradiction. In re-visualising some of the stereotyped images of an Eastern or Muslim woman, and juxtaposing this with contradicting imagery or ideas, I aim to create alternative perceptions. In the following

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[7] As discussed in Chapter 3, theorists such as Lewis have contextualised this in researching artworks made by woman Orientalists and writers (Lewis, 1996), illustrated in Figure 5.14.

[8] For an analysis of the notion of the 'Western seal of approval', refer to Minoo Assadi. In Chapter 4 section 4.3, she argues that Iranians often evaluate themselves through Western values.

exhibition, this was achieved through placing contrasting photographs alongside one another.

Eastern Promises 2 Sheffield Hallam University, June, 1999

In this work, the viewer is presented with a stylised Eastern doorway, much like the doorways we see in Disney cartoons. The dark exterior suggests a sense of mystery and wonder. The symmetry used in constructing the space echoed Eastern, and especially Islamic, architecture. On either side of the door, there are two rosewater holders. Upon entering the space, a strong scent of rosewater overpowers the viewer and the warmth of the sandy coloured interior is inviting. On the ceiling there is a dome shape that is reminiscent of Islamic architecture and mosque domes. Central to the space is a

Fig. **5-15**: Eastern Promises 2, Mitra Memarzia 1999, Video Installation (installation facade), Book, and Fans.

large book with blank pages placed upon a Koran stand. A video projection fills the pages of the book. The narrative of the film is fluid in that the various characters (all played by myself) are in dialogue with one another. Sometimes the dialogue is successful, and other times not. In one scene, the mermaid hands over a black chador that she has been struggling to free herself from under water. The cloth moves around her like an oil slick in the sea, but she finally manages to free herself and sends the veil to the surface of the water. The surface is a river and the Islamic woman picks up the veil and examines it. There is no ending to the saga and the video loops back to the beginning.

Meanwhile, the pages of the book are continuously turned over by the wind generated from two fans inserted into the walls of the installation space. The notion of the wind is there to represent the fragility of time itself; they are the winds of 'change' that force the narrative of identity to take different routes.
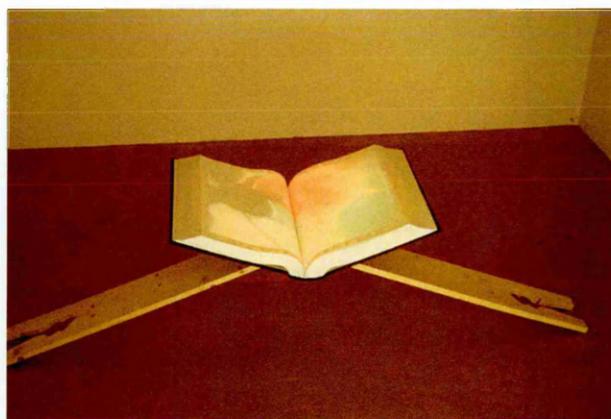
Fig. **5-16**: *Eastern Promises 2*, Book on stand (interior).

Fig. **5-17**: *Eastern Promises 2*, Video still (interior)

Ironically 'Eastern Promises 2' makes no promises and gives no conclusion to the story, which loops in circles in a perpetual state of change. The imagery draws the viewers into

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an exotic dream that has no beginning or end. In the next piece, I decided to use the pomegranate fruit as a point of reference to explore the exotic.

Anaar April 2002

The pomegranate is a highly exotic fruit and in Iranian culture it represents the world, with the seeds representing people, and the sweet pips inside compared to jewels in many Iranian poems. In replacing the seeds with crude oil, I wanted to comment on the ways in which oil overshadows the truth, the hidden beauty of something: in this case, Iran. The pomegranates are lit in such a way so that the shadows create a perfect pomegranate, representing the fickle irony inherent in power struggles, where the oil corrodes the centre of the pomegranate, yet the glistening oil seems to bring a new kind of beauty to the fruit.

Fig. **5-18**: *Anar*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, 100 pomegranate halves filled with crude oil.

The black substance in the pomegranate also represents the veil and the act of covering up. It gives the pomegranate a similar mystery that the veil gives an Eastern or Muslim woman. The title of the piece is the word for pomegranate in Farsi, which gives another dimension to the work as most viewers are unaware of what the word means, leaving a

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feeling of the unknown. The pomegranates start to decay over time, spilling the crude oil onto the surfaces around, until the initial pristine order of the installation deteriorates into chaos and disarray, which is also a comment on the deterioration of Iranian culture, caused by this powerful and enchanting substance.

AlterNation AtreEast gallery, New York, May 2004 as part of an exhibition entitled 'Near'. Also shown at the 2nd Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art
In the Shadow of Heroes October 7-17, 2005.

This work is a five-minute video-loop (figure 5.19) performance in which a female removes layers of clothing. The title of the piece echoes the intentions of altering meaning to change, to adjust, modify, revise, rework, correct, and maintain, and the nation is reflected in the video's subject of alternation meaning, rotation, regular change, replacement. All these are reflective of a nation's identity, in this instance, Iranian identity. The female in the video has been "decapitated" through framing, denying the viewer her identity. The flashing strobe light is used to hide and reveal her and is reminiscent of old 8mm films. The repetitive illumination of the screen creates a sense of nervousness in the viewer, this effect also creates a mesmerising yet unsettling feeling as the viewers are lit and then left in darkness, reflecting the way information is filtered and interrupted by the media. A dark shadow, representative of crude oil, appears at the bottom of the screen and, slowly, we see a shape forming to resemble a 'Chadored' woman filmed against a stark white background. She rotates slowly, as if on a display turntable and takes off the chador to reveal a pink nomadic costume underneath. Bit by bit, pieces of the outfit are removed through the flashing light and the image gradually becomes more blurred, until eventually all layers are removed and the final image is out of focus.

The viewer is denied access to the 'Eastern promise', unlike much of the Orientalist paintings of the sixteenth century and perceptions of the Eastern woman, either as an

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object of sexual desire or as a veiled passive subject. The mysticism of the piece reflects that which shrouds Muslim women both visually and conceptually.[9]

The video then repeats itself backwards and loops timelessly, amplifying the very nature of taking off and putting on a sense of self. The format of the striptease has been made mechanical in the movements of the figure turning slowly on an axis. There is no sensuality in the act, yet there are references to the exoticised Islamic woman. Rogers (2004) reviews this work in the Near exhibition publication and states:

Fig. **5-19**: AlterNation, Mitra Memarzia 2003, Video-still

> The visualization of process through video allows Memarzia to play with the concept of identity in her work in Near, AlterNations. In this video loop, a female figure dressed in elaborate garb, slowly removes the various layers of costumes. By decapitating the figure's head through framing, the artist denies the viewer access to the woman's face, one sign of identity. Simultaneously, the figure remains in a constant state of altering her dress, yet another sign of identity. Memarzia thus challenges the privilege of visuality and identification in Western culture ('to see is to believe') and uproots the location of meaning from the sign of the visual (Rogers, 2004).

The uprooting of location is something which has been a central theme running though much of my work. Indeed as discussed in chapter 3 (section 3.3.1) where Sobchack (1999) asks the question of whether we feel at home in one's bodies, this work further expands the notion of the body as an ever-changing home. A home in a state of constant flux; where positioning becomes more to do with a multiple place which is closer to a definition of me as an Iranian woman; altering myself and altering my nation

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[9] As discussed earlier, the Iranian woman occupies a central position in the identity of Iran and she is at the forefront of the visual message which Iran presents to the rest of the world. She represents the motherland and mother tongue, yet she is full of contradiction, and she has many faces, concerns, and roles.

(AlterNation). This notion of multiplicity has been further explored in a series of works in the next section 'Multiple Selves'.

5.5 Multiple Selves

The reoccurring theme of multiple identities is central to the understanding of contemporary Iranian identity.[10] The contradictory elements of Iranian identity, past and present, East and West, and many other more personal contradictions inhabiting the same self, make for much debate and artistic exploration.

Because Iranian women's reflections of the self are in a constant state of flux, the gaps are created between the Islamic nation and Iranian culture, between private and public life create the concept of multiple selves. This issue has been central to both my research and my own experiences as an Iranian woman artist living and working outside Iran. As a result of studying other Iranian women artist it has become apparent that we share a similar state of flux. Between here and there, inside and outside, private and public are issues that Taghizadeh, Assadi, Vakili are also dealing with. The notion of identity as a multifaceted and changeable concept has become central to much of my art practice, and is exemplified in the following artworks.

Flesh and Bones Oct 2000

In an earlier piece entitled 'Flesh and Bones' (figure 5.20), I constructed a visual image resembling images found in medical books inspired by reading the work of Stuart Hall (1997). In conjunction with experimenting with self-portraiture as a way of exploring both my own identity and that of Iranian women, I was directly influenced by the theories put forward by Hall. He argues that race is composed of skin, hair, and bones, and that

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[10]Arguably, multifaceted identity is a phenomenon that could describe the twenty-first century's mass-communication and mass-migration.

we all judge one another firstly by appearances. Although the idea is commonsense, it manifested itself in a self-portrait, in which I revealed everything by showing my flesh and bones, which were digitally put into place. The title of the image is also important as it makes references to the ways in which we talk about those that belong with us: our family and our children, with whom we identify as having the same flesh and bones.[11]

I was also interested in the fact that this work would be unsuitable, or forbidden by the present Islamic government in Iran. The fact that I could use my own naked body in a piece of artwork both interested and concerned me. Another aspect to this piece was the directness of my gaze and the pose I chose to take. I wanted to confront the viewers by gazing straight at them while showing my internal organs as though I were a medical subject.

From this piece, I began to explore the many other selves that I inhabited, or was believed by others to inhabit. In a series entitled 'Multiple Selves', I enacted different characters using costumes and props in a photographic studio. Against a white background, I photographed factual

Fig. **5-20**: *Flesh and Bones*, Mitra Memarzia 2000, large scale digital prints.

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[11] In Corps Étranger (1994), Hatoum used endoscopy with the assistance of a physician to generate images of her body, inside and out. The camera travelled into Hatoum's body through her varied orifices. The ultimate self-portrait, one that renders us as the same race; we all look the same from the inside, our visual outer body is merely a protective layer.

and stereotyped characters, such as the 'terrorist' and the 'Islamic woman'. These characters were conceived not only to represent my own identity, but also to represent Iranian women's various positions. This was a process of starting from the self and writing oneself out.

Fig. **5-21**: *Placed*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, Large digital prints.

After photographing each character, I began to reconstruct spaces in which the various characters engaged with one another. The spaces created became narratives of factual and fictional portraits of the self, which were exhibited later entitled 'Improbable Dialogues'.

Improbable Dialogues

Occasional Gallery, Psalter Lane Campus, Sheffield Hallam University, April, 2000

In a series of digitally-manipulated images, several characters are played out: the traditional Iranian girl (in a nomadic costume); the stereotyped terrorist (holding a gun); the artist as the analyst or the observer; and the Islamic Iranian woman in a chador. All are symbols of the multifaceted Iranian woman's identity.[12] In Figure 5.21, the characters are involved in various dialogues. The artist in the middle observes the nomad tying to make contact with the Islamic woman, who has her eyes firmly shut and is in her own

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[12]This series was amongst the first pieces to be made since my research started. At that time, the research project involved theorising identity and displacement alongside adapting suitable methodology for the research. This work also references the role-play elements of being a researcher. For a discussion of role-play in the research methodology, refer to Chapter 3.

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world; this demonstrates the friction that is created when trying to mix different elements of Iranian identity together. The terrorist character is set to destroy the physical racial self, who is helplessly on show. This also crudely demonstrates the stark violent nature of terrorism and how it has become sensationalised through the media and the film industry.

Another element in this work is the relationship between the visible and the hidden where the naked body is at the polar opposite to the covered (chadored) body. The charged spaces between the various characters produce a 'third' space, in which other selves appear and disappear. Shot against a white background, the solitary selves are manipulated digitally to interact, and the title 'Improbable Dialogues' (figure 5.22) suggests a fatalistic view that these dialogues do not occur in this way. The viewer is prompted to imagine the situations as real, although they are impossible situations.

Fig. **5-22**: *Improbable Dialogues,* Mitra Memarzia 1999-2000

Fig. **5-23**: *Improbable Dialogues*, Mitra Memarzia 1999-2000.

Fig. **5-24** Fig. **5-25**: *Improbable Dialogues,* Mitra Memarzia 1999-2000, Series of digital prints.

I am particularly interested in the performative and staged element in these works, which demonstrate the constructive nature of identity (Figure 5.24) in a constant process of hiding and revealing. Figure 5.25 explores the qualities of the notion of symmetry, and mirror images inspired by Islamic architecture and mosaic works.[13] In this particular piece the mirror image has a hidden element, which is the terrorist appearing through the

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[13] Symmetry is an intrinsic part of Islamic architecture and Persian carpets. As there is nothing considered more perfect than God in Islam, all man-made creations include a purposeful imperfection. Many artisans display this in their mosaic works.

exotic nomad. All of these images have one element in common, that of de/re-construction, which is the position of contemporary Iranian identity today. This issue is explored further in the following exhibition (Figure 5.26-31), which is a commentary on outsiders' perceptions of Iranians.

Other Sides Zinat ol Molk Gallery, Iran- Shiraz, April-May, 2001

Fig. **5-26**: *100 Faces*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, 100 photographs and text.

June 2000 to May 2001 was officially designated the "Year of the Artist",[14] which allocated grants to artists working in all art disciplines. I was awarded funding through the 'Research and Development' allocation and proposed to create an exhibition in my hometown, Shiraz. I decided to collaborate in order to create an exhibition that explored the notions of travel, home, and being translated from one culture into another (as discussed in Chapter 3). With these suggestions I asked Bashir Makhoul, a Palestinian artist who deals with similar issues to myself, to collaborate on two pieces of work with me, along with my own works.

[14] Year of the Artist (or YOTA) was funded by the Arts Council of England (ACE).

The exhibition was held in an old seventeenth-century house in Shiraz called *Zinat-ol-molk*[15] House, which had been part of the *andarooni*[16], which had been converted into a gallery. I anticipated an interesting relationship between traditional Iranian architecture and contemporary art constructed outside Iran. The major piece in the exhibition was '100 Faces' (Figures 5.26 & 5.27). I photographed 100 random people in Sheffield (my home at that time) and asked each person to tell me the first word that came into their head when I said the word 'Iran'. The most prominent words were 'war' and 'Islam'. When I photographed participants, I encouraged them to gaze straight into the camera and directly confront the Iranian viewers head on. Their responses were displayed underneath each image around the gallery with Persian translations in small print.[17]

isolation

Fig. **5-27**: *100 Faces*, Mitra Memarzia 2001

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[15] *Zinat-ol-molk* is the name of the female owner of the house.

[16] Andarooni is the name given to the part of the house which was, at that time, the women's quarters. This was an architectural norm for many of the houses of that period; Islam was widely practised and part of Iranian culture. The structure of the space was very 'Iranian', with its winding corridors and arched walkways, and this made the gallery space unique and appealing to me.

[17] The viewers engaged with the image before the text, as the words were in English and the translations were in small letters; and, although most Iranian viewers can read English, they engaged with the images before engaging in the text and its relationship to the subject.

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The other pieces in the show followed the theme of the title of the exhibition 'Other-Side', through exploring other viewpoints and otherness. At the bottom of the gallery walkways were two speakers emanating sounds recorded from the streets of Sheffield where many of the images of the '100 Faces' were taken. On entering the gallery, the viewer would hear the sound of people talking but could not see where they were coming from, signifying that what one hears is not necessarily the truth. At the end of the gallery tour the viewer faced two walls covered with images of closed doors, signifying possible doorways to the other side. I was interested in arousing a sense of curiosity and wonder in the visitors to the exhibition from the first moment they walked into the gallery.

Fig. **5-28**: *Doors*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, photographs and sound
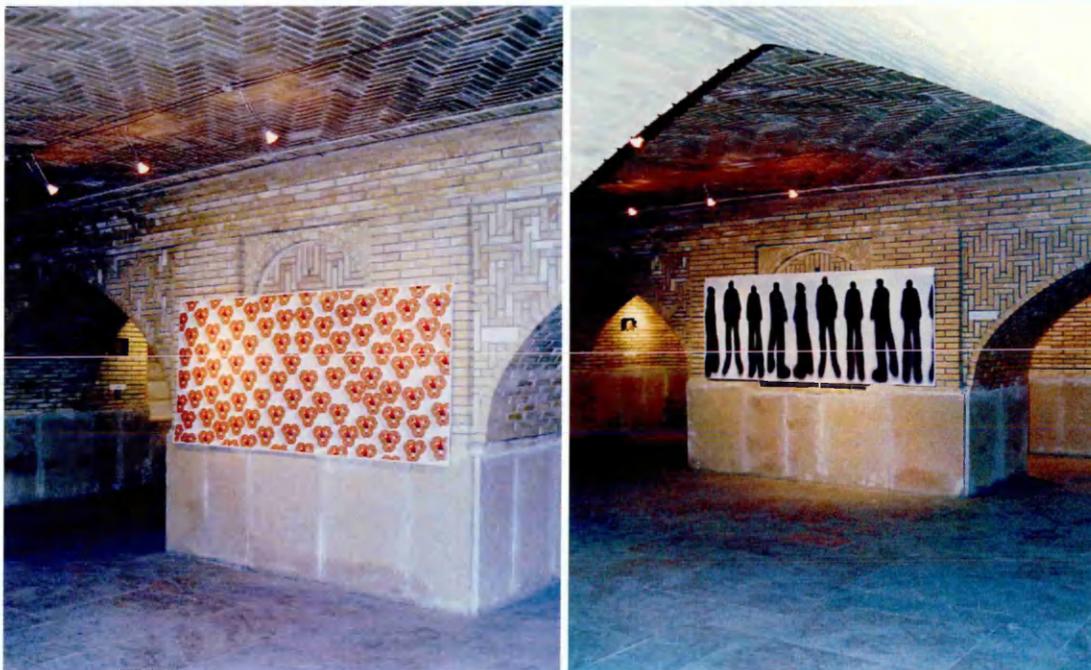
Fig. **5-29**: Fig. **5-30**: *Untitled*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, Digital print.

There were two other pieces in the exhibition made in collaboration with Bashir Makhoul (Figures 5.29-31), which included two digitally composed prints and a video piece. On opposing walls, a composite of our two metaphorically opposed organs - the heart and the brain - and shadows of our figures played off against one another. The notions of travel and translation of the physical body and the emotional body are aesthetically and metaphorically explored in this work.

Placed in the middle of the two images was a looped video monitor showing 'surveillance'. We filmed our eyes moving left to right as if reading English text, as opposed to Persian, which is read from right to left. The eyes moved from male to female, posing the idea of reading across genders and cultures. The multi-layered meanings inherent in these three pieces suggest many different interpretations and most viewers were very interested in the piece because of its overtly abstract nature, and also because installation and video art is still in its infancy in the Iran, with the exception of Tehran.

The exhibition's main aim was to pose questions about self and other, and encourage the viewers to analyse their own identities in relation to the other side, the other viewpoint. In a discussion panel organised by the Photographers' convention in Shiraz, in which I gave a presentation of the exhibition, we discussed the value of art that transcends borders. The mainly young audience (twenty to thirty year olds) seemed to be

Fig. **5-31**: *SurVeillance*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, video loop.

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primarily drawn to the '100 Faces'. Many wondered why there was a predominantly negative view of Iran in the work yet, when I asked them to engage with the same exercise of responding in one word to their view of Britain, the words were highly political, such as 'imperialism' and 'colonialism', remnants of the near colonisation of Iran by the British (dating back to the 1930s, as discussed in Chapter 1). The fact that they had just seen the exhibition hindered a spontaneous response; nevertheless, it became apparent that neither side (Iranian or British) knows enough about the current contemporary position of one another. This lack of knowledge was precisely what this exhibition aimed to address.

Reactions to the exhibition were mostly positive, as the comments from the visitors and the visitor's book revealed:

> This exhibition opened my eyes to the fact that our country is so misrepresented in the West, I hope that works like these prompt us to try and change these perceptions (Falahy, 2001).

> I thank you for the steps you have taken to bring another nations views of our country and our identity to our attention (Anonymous, 2001).

> It is so important to know how others see us, my question is how do I deal with what I have learned in this exhibition? How can we change the ways we think of other nations? It makes me think of the parable that: 'If you want to know what sort of person you are, look at the ways others describe you, and what they say behind your back.' On the other hand, I think we have to try and show ourselves in a more positive way to the world, and to me that is for the Iranian nation as a pinnacle of a successful Muslim nation (Habouvandi, 2001).

From the comments, it is evident that the issue of Iranian national identity is in a state of confusion, and needs much improvement. There were also comments from British visitors to the exhibition:

> A fascinating insight into the unfortunate ignorance of British people about Iran which, of course, is fuelled by the Western media's narrow understanding of a primarily beautiful, friendly and lovable country and people. An ignorance which I shared for many years before making the effort to look outside the 'headline' news clips fed sparingly to the public at large. Of course Iran has problems and issued to address, but I have

been overwhelmed the country's beauty and generosity since arriving two weeks ago. I think my one word would be 'beautiful' (Corbish, England 2001).

There were two television interviews on the exhibition which were shown a number of times on local and national television in Iran. It seems apparent that, in the age of new media and mass communication, we really are no further advanced in addressing our similarities and differences; and we are no closer to having a deeper understanding of one another. Later, I was asked to present my view of September the 11th events with one single image: the next piece was made in response to this request.

Soghout The Shock of September 11[th,] by Lettre international, in the house at the Luetzowplatz in Berlin, 10th June to 21st July 2002 (organised by German artist, Rebecca Horn).

Fig. **5-32**: *Soghout*, Mitra Memarzia 2001, Photograph.

In this exhibition, the responses of thirty international artists to September 11th through a single image were shown.

> Today, expressing one's opinion is as important as ever and with this exhibition we are doing precisely this. Thirty internationally committed artists many authors have vividly addressed the events of September the 11th, and despite the events' incomprehensibility, thematised them (Haus am Lutzowplatz, 2002:8).

The prominent issue for me was death; the death of people, the death of faith, and the death of communication and understanding. Therefore, I decided to pursue the project from that point-of-view. This image is entitled 'Soghout', which is a Persian word to describe rapid descent, often used to describe planes falling to the ground, or the fall of a government or empire. The image of the dead bird was taken during a visit to Iran and is part of an ongoing series of dead animals left to rot. The dead bird here symbolises both lost freedom and death. The title is in Farsi, to signify our inability to fully understand these situations or each other's points-of-view. The bird here embodies the notion of the self, not in its usual physicality but in a metaphoric sense; representing my personal ideologies and beliefs amongst 30 other artists about the same subject.

Since September 11th and prominent changes in political relationships, which included the American and British war on Iraq (2003), and the proactive responses such as anti-war marches; there have been multiple representations of Western and Islamic nations in the media, building a multiple image of other identities. The artworks presented in this section are a direct dialogue and response to issues of multiplicity and the representation of the fluctuating self, which is central to the understanding of nations such as Iran. From this juncture, the next section explores the study of different aspects of hiding and revealing and the Islamic veil.

5.6 Hiding and Revealing

When discussing Islamic countries such as Iran from the 'outside', there seems to be an emphasis on what is hidden and what is revealed which is also echoed in the connotations of the veil. As discussed in Chapter 1, to people outside the culture of the veil, it is the most visual aspect of Islamic nations. This section presents the work I have produced with these issues in mind. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, veiling is not only a personal religious decision; it is also a powerful tool. Veiling and unveiling has taken place in Iran's history, each time with a purpose. As noted by Ahmed (1992): "As an item

of clothing, however, the veil itself and whether it is worn are about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescriptive of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles over substantive issues" (Ahmed 1992, cited in Bailey 2003:54). Ahmed goes on to say that, in the case of Western feminism, items of clothing such as bras were identified by the media frenzy to be at the centre of their struggles; and that, in the case of the veil and Islamic women, it was colonial and

patriarchal men, like Cromer and Amin, that declared the veil at the centre of feminist struggle (Ahmed 1992, cited in Bailey 2003:54). Thus, the veil's significance is under question. It is not the veil itself that suppresses women, but it remains the single most prevalent image of Islamic nations. The next piece of work is among the first pieces in which I try to expand perceptions of the veil.
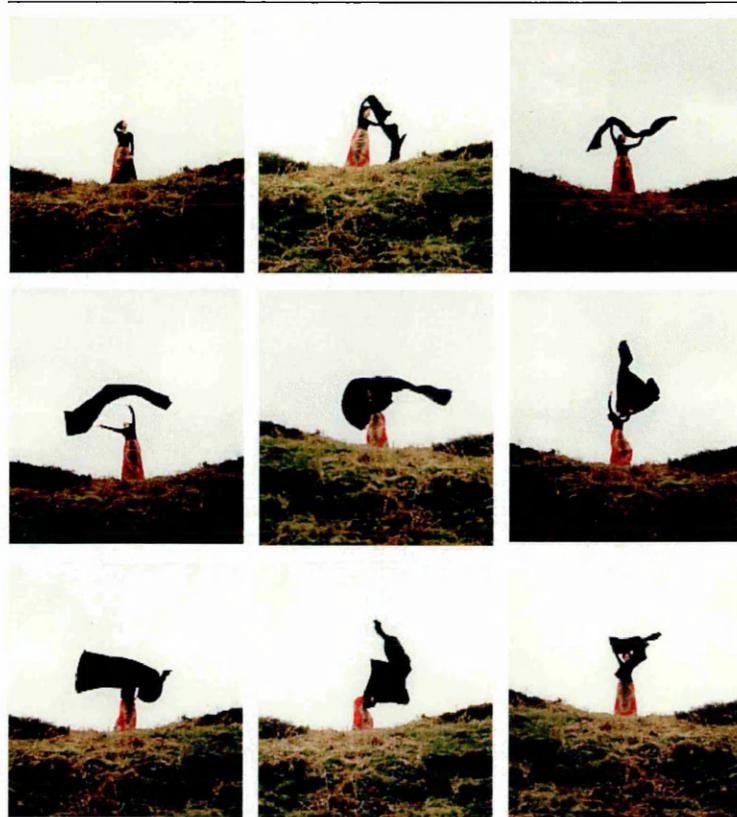
Fig. **5-33**: Play 2001, Mitra Memarzia 2001, photographs.

Play 2001

Throughout my art practice, the ever-changing nature of the veil has influenced my identity and my work. In *'Play'* (Figure 5.33), the chador is literally an object of play. Displaced in the countryside, the female figure explores the qualities of the chador through throwing it in the air and catching it. The shapes become obscure, and the

malleable qualities of the material become evident visually. I was particularly interested in the dynamic quality of the chador as a medium, to create alternative representations of the chador.

This work suggests a new representation of the veil, and veiling particularly, to non-Islamic audiences; thus, the images reflect a notion of exploration and creativity with the chador as a medium. My role as an artist and subject is also present, as I 'play' with the chador. The works that followed reflect a similar mood to the 'Mermaid' series, in which the chador/veil takes on new qualities and resembles oil under water.

Mermum March 2002

Mermum (figure 5.34) was part of a group exhibition entitled 'Warped' at Psalter Lane Main Gallery, Sheffield. The exhibition dealt with the theme of cloth, memory and embodiment. For this work, I asked my mother to dress in the Islamic chador and to pose in a swimming pool surrounded by flowers. I also wanted to make references to Western artistic iconography in "Ophelia" by Sir John Everett Millais (1852), and to juxtapose it with the Islamic veiled mother. As she struggled to keep afloat, the chador restricted her movements and resembled crude oil. This resemblance between the black chador and oil is a direct visual sign to the notion of power and control. As in previous works I wanted to explore the relationship between Islam and tradition through the use of symmetry. In duplicating the image, I wanted to create a 'third space' prompting the viewer to take a second look, to speculate other viewpoints and to question the authenticity of the work; which one is the real image and which one is fake?

Fig. **5-34**: *Mermum*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, Digital Print 85 x 210 cm.

The shape created by the two images is reminiscent of the womb or the reproductive carpel on flowers. The very notion of having a chadored woman in the water contradicts the way in which these women are usually perceived, thus making this image simultaneously provocative and unsettling. From this work, I began to explore mirroring pictures I had taken in Iran in order to explore the notion of hiding and revealing other sides to the narrative of Iranian identities. In the next series of works, I explored these issues further.

OtherSides 2 'Near', AtreEast gallery in New York, May 2004 as part of an exhibition entitled,Oct 2003

In 'Other Sides' the notion of hiding and revealing is dealt with through the intentional use of symmetry and cropping of the images at specific points, which both hide and reveal possible narratives. All the images were taken in Iran in April 2002 in various locations, as part of an ongoing series of observational works.

Fig. **5-35**: *OtherSides2*, Mitra Memarzia 2003, Series of 5 Digital Prints 200x75 cm.

The four images presented here are primarily concerned with the notions of identity, duality and contradiction. The characters in the images are a mixture of strangers and family, but all the images are spontaneous and un-staged, although much attention has been paid to capturing moments that have a sense of profound stillness; scenes in which the inhabitants are in dialogue with themselves or with one another. The mirroring also refers to looking at one's self in a mirror: what we perceive is a reversed image, not a true picture, reflecting the way we perceive one another socially and globally. Sarah Rogers (2004) reviews this work for the *Near* exhibition and states:

> "By doubling the images, Memarzia draws attention to the formal patterns of the carpet, the sand and the ocean so that the figures themselves become elements of a patterned landscape. The metaphor between the content of the work and its formal strategies weaves itself through both Memarzia's video and photography works. Yet when one considers the artist's identity as an Iranian woman, living and working in exile, the political context begins to inform the works' formal content" (Rogers, 2004).

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Fig. **5-36**: *OtherSides2*, Mitra Memarzia 2003, 200x75 cm.

In the Bazaar image (Figure 5.36), a carpet is being purchased and many interactions are at play. Most of the obvious dialogue is between the merchant and the buyer, yet the doubling of the image accentuates the narratives of the more passive-looking woman, and the man waiting to tie-up the rug. Both seem to be in their own worlds whilst listening to the carpet merchant's sales talk.

Fig. **5-37**: *OtherSides2*, Mitra Memarzia 2003, 200x75 cm.

In Figure 5.37, the couple are the central focus, although they are confined to the rules of conduct between unmarried couples; they keep their distance but are in conversation. The figure in the foreground is observing this dialogue and, on the far side of the room, a woman is observing a painting on the wall, both mirroring our position as viewers.

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Fig. **5-38**: *OtherSides2*, Mitra Memarzia 2003, 200x75 cm.

The wedding dress shop image (Figure 5.38) demonstrates the contradictions present in Iranian women's lives and identities. The young chadored bride-to-be glances tentatively towards me as I take her photo from outside the shop. There is a moment of dialogue, frozen and unspoken in time; a dialogue of uncertainty. The starkness of the contradicting Western style wedding dresses that are now the norm and 'a must' in Iran are in stark contrast to the chador, and it questions the Western viewers' approach to the veil through the contrast between the chadored women in a Western-style wedding dress shop. We also see the two extremes of veiling at play between the white netting of the wedding veil and the black chadors.

The lengthened images also reflect the cinemascope scale of the movies, a scale with which we associate stories. In this piece, our vision is expanded and we can scan from one end of the image to the other, yet we are not given any extra clues, except that we do not know which side is the real image and which is not. The notion of 'truth' remains central to these pieces; it is also central to the understanding and re-presentation of other identities. These seemingly simple situations, captured as fleeting moments, gain extra time and power through their being mirrored; they speak of the constraints and contradictions within Iranian culture. The image of people next to the Iranian northern sea in the next piece of work is a prime example of this contradictory position, where the roles of men and women have been reversed.

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Fig. **5-39**: *SheSideHeSide*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, 63x48 cm.

For some time, I had wanted to photograph women in Iran at the seaside and in the sea. In Iran, it is mandatory for women to cover up in the sea and I was interested in the ways that the Islamic attire and the veil changed and became sexualised through becoming wet (Figure 5.39).

Fig. **5-40**: *SheSideHeSide*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, 63x48 cm.

I wanted to photograph strangers, and it was my intention to capture natural images rather than the often staged and constructed images to which I was accustomed. My position as a voyeur, much in the same way as the works of Taghizadeh, which I discussed in the previous chapter, reflects the ways in which displaced individuals often become outsiders to their surroundings. My displaced position had allowed for different observations of my Iranian culture.

Fig. **5-41**: Fig. **5-42**: *SheSideHeSide*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, 63x48 cm.

Fig. **5-43**: *SheSideHeSide*, Mitra Memarzia 2002, Digital print, 200x175 cm.

It was a warm but windy day and the overcast sky added an element of drama, which was further amplified by the rough sea. As the women entered and left the water, a transformation took place through their clothes becoming wet, which also affected the interactions between the men and the women. My preconceptions in finding fragility and vulnerability in the women in the sea, and a dominant male role, faded as I found the exact opposite took place. The women played in the sea in their Islamic attire, and the sea responded by clinging to their bodies and displaying their feminine curves. It seemed that the women felt fewer inhibitions than the men; their clothed bodies had dominance over the men's uncovered bodies. The role reversal of the men and women, where the men seemed more vulnerable than the women was an interesting and natural outcome, which is highly visible in Figure 5.43.

The tension in the sea mirrored a tension between the figures engulfed in it. At times, the waves dictated their movements, forcing them closer to, or further away from, one another, which for me echoed the 'forces of change' as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. The various representations of the veil, which both myself and other women artists have undertaken, are testimonies to the changeable nature of the veil and our often-misrepresented identities. The next piece of work entitled "Dear Axis of Evil" is an exploration of misrepresentations and contradictions present in Iranian identity and a reflection of the wider concept of observing the 'other'. The next pivotal exhibition takes on board these divisions in order to question perceptions of the 'hidden halves'.

The Hidden Half Installation at Main Gallery, Psalter Lane Campus, Sheffield Hallam University June 2004. [18]

The central element in this exhibition was a division wall (2.5 metres high), which split the gallery space into two parts, separating men and women from two entrance points marked with the signs 'Women Only' and 'Men Only'. The laws that split the spaces into male and female were purposefully left blurred in order to test the participants in their

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[18] Please refer to the CD enclosed for video footage of the *Hidden Half* 'happening'.

willingness to follow orders. The two signs 'men only' and 'women only' were just signs, but they held immense power over the visitors until one individual decided to question them.
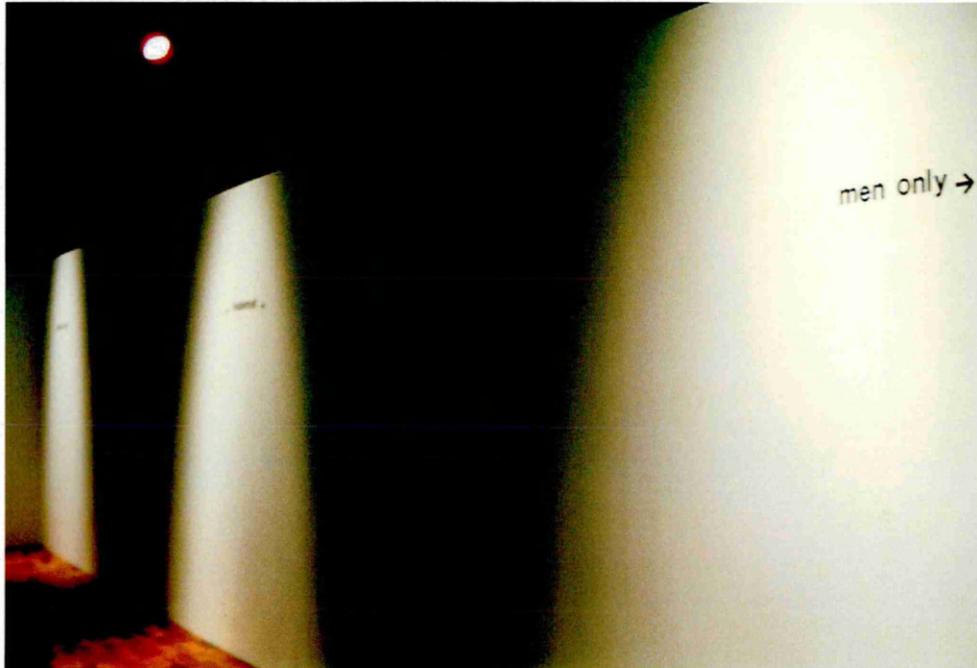
Fig. **5-44**: *Hidden Half*, Mitra Memarzia, 2004, Front wall of the Installation.

As the artist, I enforce this rule, directing men to one side and women to the other. Neither gender can enter the other hidden half. Only through discussing their own experiences with the opposite sex can they build an understanding of the exhibition as a whole. Viewers relayed their knowledge, data and understanding at their own discretion, i.e. the data relies on the interpretation and narration of the viewers to one another.

Fig. **5-45**: *Hidden Half*, Mitra Memarzia 2005, Men's side, Newspaper butterflies, pins, crude oil.

The wall has many metaphorical meanings. The male side of the wall was covered in crude oil and the female side of the wall was covered in honey, differing visually and physically. The wall is a singular object yet has two sides; the oil represents power, and the honey represents life. For Iranians the rich source of oil has been as much of a curse as a blessing. Pinned upon the wall of oil were 1,000 butterflies, made from dyed Iranian newspapers, covered in oil.

Fig. **5-46**: *Hidden Half*, Mitra Memarzia, 2005, Women's side, petrol nozzles and wall of honey.

On the women's side, the wall of honey was lined with 10 petrol nozzles cast out of black rubber pointing into the wall, reminiscent of guns pointing into the unknown other side; hostilities towards other nations without full knowledge of that nation, of what lies behind the borders and walls. Both sides of the wall included elements that were connected to one another in the same way that the relationship between the East and West is interconnected; it questions notions of power, mediation and narration.

The central issue here was how we interpret and imagine boundaries. The viewers became the bridge between the two spaces; divided through gender, the participants experience half the exhibition and relayed on one another to narrate the hidden half.

During the exhibition opening night, which can be termed as a 'happening', many interesting interactions between the participants took place. The evening ended in a mini revolution in which one woman decided that she would enter the male space before the female space. She proceeded to argue with the bouncer and, as I approached her with the question as to why she wanted to do this, she replied that this was how wars happened and that she would not be told what to do. From this, I allowed her to enter the male space which felt controversial to some of the visitors, and caused others to do the same. Some, however, maintained that they would rather not see the hidden half and preferred to imagine it.

Fig. **5-47**: *Hidden Half*, Mitra Memarzia, 2005, Detail.

Fig. **5-48**: *Hidden Half*, Mitra Memarzia, 2005, Detail.

This installation was an exploration of the ways in which individuals and groups operate and react to the notion of borders and control. Their reactions bear a direct relationship to the ways in which societies deal with gender separation, power relations, and information. This exhibition was an important outcome of this research at that time.

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My creative practice is now taking on a broader perspective and responsibility in exploring issues that are currently of global interest, such as mass communication, gender specific issues and the notion of identity in the age of globalisation. Although, issues concerning Iranian identity still remain to be inspirational and my frequent visits to Iran present me with yet more questions that remain to be explored.

5.7 Final Exhibition- *Far Nearer*

The final exhibition for this PhD submission is a compilation of works which have been made in relation to the central issues in this study and have a fundamental presence in my artistic practice. The prevalent theme of power, media, representation and state systems are especially prominent in this exhibition. Moreover, these works have been tested in the public realm through exhibitions during 2005 and 2006. The curation of these works for this particular exhibition under the title of 'Far Nearer' brings together a series of works which deal directly with some of the key issues discussed in this thesis. The title relates to bringing the Far East Near and the notion of a far nearer representation of Iranian identity. These diverse works offer multiple viewpoints of Iranian identity and Iranian women. They also relate directly to my own personal identity as a contemporary Iranian woman living and working outside Iran. My position as both and insider and an outsider is evidenced in the ways in which the various works juxtapose the notion of the private with the public. The central installation piece in this exhibition is Chad'ore, which links the works together in a physical and psychological way. The various elements in this exhibition present a visual conclusion to this research and further expand upon the central issues of Iranian identity and representation.
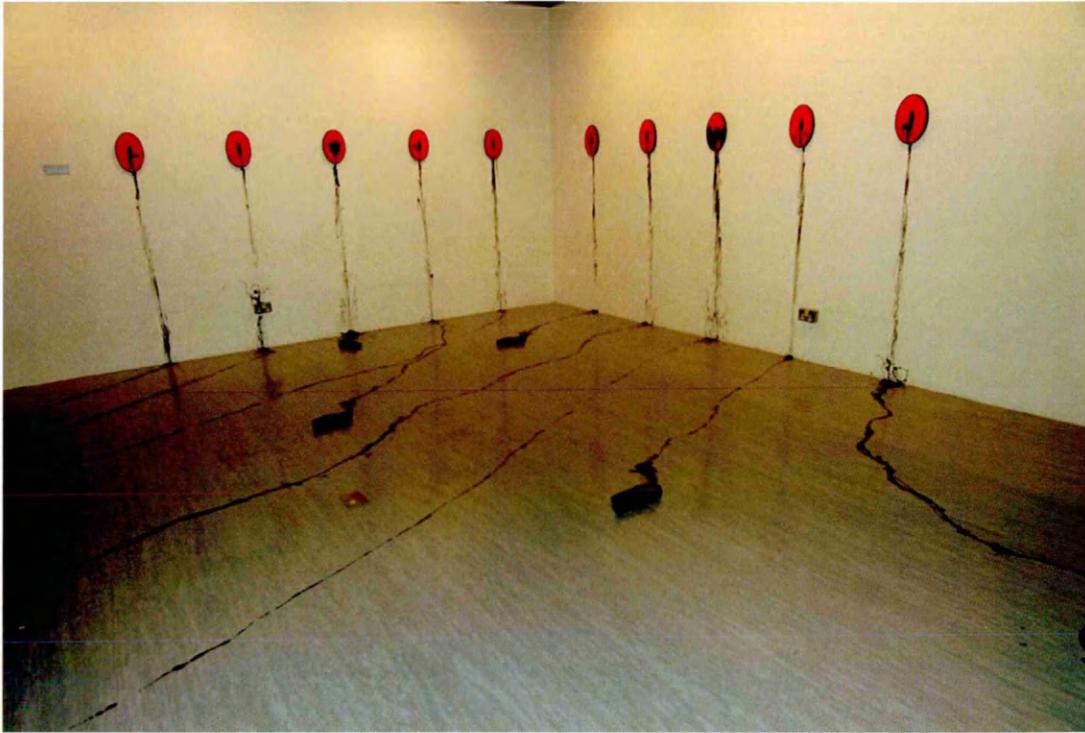
Fig. **5-49**:*Chad'ore*, Mitra Memarzia 2006, Illustration and Black latex installation.

Chad'ore Rough Diamonds Group show at the Mailbox (level 5) Birmingham Nov, 2005.

As highlighted in this research (chapters 1 and 4) the veil is often seen as having a singular function and meaning to all Islamic nations and Muslims around the world. A homogenous approach to this deeply rooted symbol is precisely what causes misrepresentations and false interpretations. The current unstable climate between the Middle East and the West has highlighted the veil/chador as a symbol for both emancipation and repression.

'Chadore' is a play on the word chador and to adore or the French J'adore (to love). The love/hate relationship with the chador places it in the crossfire between opposing viewpoints; the East and West; men and women; veiled and unveiled; Muslim and non-Muslim. In this series of works the concept of the chador, what it does and does not

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represent; how it is viewed and not viewed and the multiple ways in which the chador is both loved and loathed are explored.
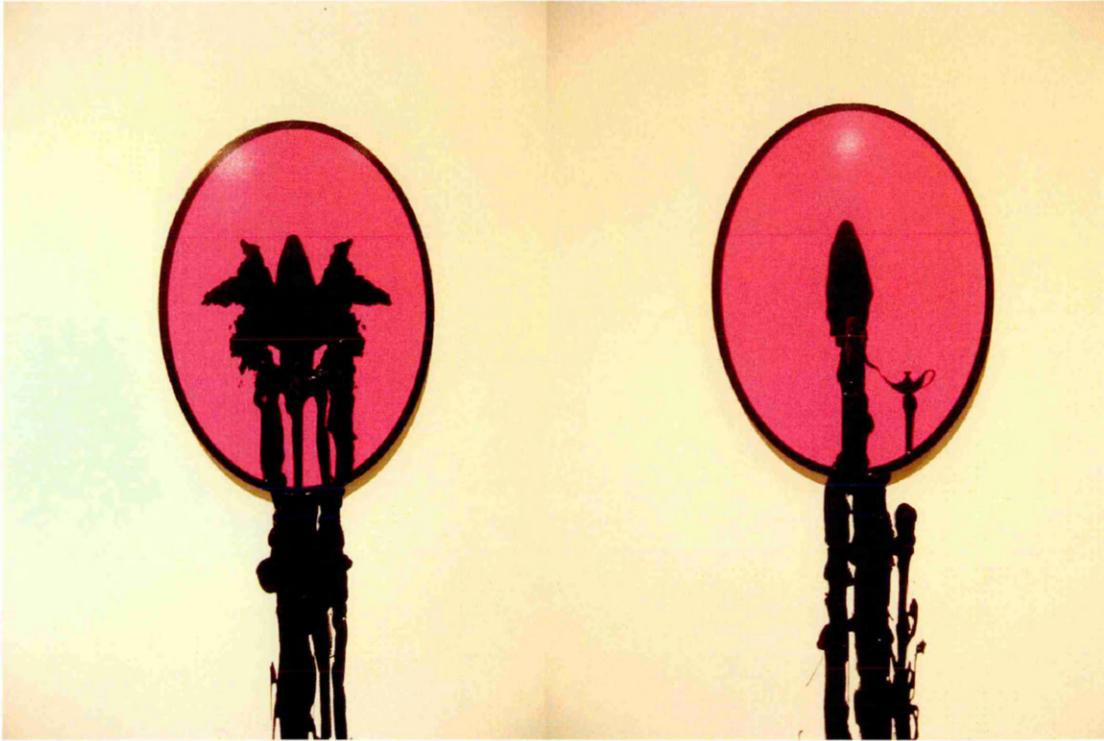
Fig. **5-50**: *Chad'ore*, Mitra Memarzia 2006, Illustration and Black latex installation.

This work comprises of a series of 10 shiny black PVC graphic silhouettes on a pink background. The central figure which is repeated over and over is of a chadored figure. In each image a number of objects and symbols are introduced which form a narrative both within each individual peace and between the works as a whole. Another important component of the works is the black substance (silicon), which seeps from the central image out into the exhibition space, and connect to shiny black petrol nozzles on the floor. Like oil spills the images spew outwards creating a psychological dimension as well as a tactile physical presence which the visitors can touch and feel and manoeuvre around.

Fig. **5-51**: *Chad'ore*, Mitra Memarzia 2006, Petrol nozzle and latex detail.

The stylistic approach in these works reference both 18th century miniature silhouettes and contemporary pop-art, contextualising the notion of veiling and its exotic connotations within today's modes of visualisation and representation. The use of PVC fetishises the obsessive gaze and is a product of oil which is also significant to the Middle East. The viewers are enticed towards the work firstly by the bold designs and stark contrast between the black and pink. Their negotiation towards the piece both theoretically and physically tip toeing around the silicon also adds to the experience of tip toeing around the sensitive issues surrounding the Middle East; oil and religion. The multiple representations and the relationships between each piece encourages the viewers to question their own views on the relationships between politics, religion and representation.

Prey Hunted (Ignite) group exhibition, in association with Rhubarb Rhubarb international photofair. St Paul's Gallery, Birmingham 26-31July 2006.

Prey, is a compilation of 12 photographs form a collection of images taken during a recent visit to Iran in March 2006. This work intends to question and diversify perceptions of Iran by subverting the often-limiting viewpoints of the world media and offering alternative imagery. The focal point in this work is images of Iranians filming and taking photographs in a variety of settings; recording both public and intimate moments.

Fig. **5-52**: *Prey*, Mitra Memarzia 2006, 12 Lambda Prints on Perspex

Fig. **5-53**: *Prey*, Mitra Memarzia 2006, 12 Lambda Prints on Perspex.

Prey raises the sensitive issue of representation and the act of recording itself in a setting where the camera is a powerful hunter and the subject is often the prey.

It Goes Temporary Cities- International ArtExpo Collection, Klaipeda, Lithuania, 20-22 September, 2006.

'It Goes' can be loosely described as a moving photograph, an hour of recorded traffic at the Shiraz gates peacock roundabout in Iran in March 2005. This recording captures the chaos and order of interaction between people and traffic on the 13th day of Iranian New Year celebrations, which is traditionally ended with leaving the house and picnicking outdoors.
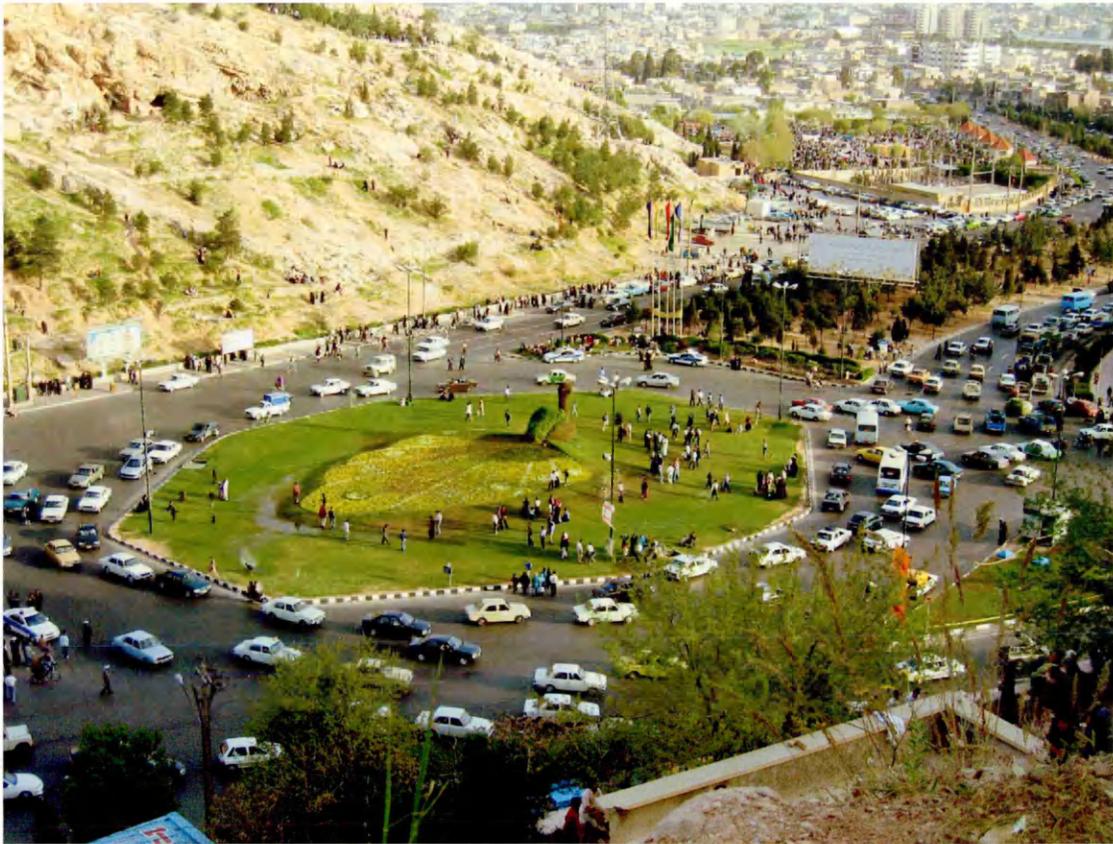
Fig: **5-54**: *It Goes*, Mitra Memarzia 2005, Looped video.

At a time when countries such as Iran are subject to much criticism and mass media coverage 'It Goes' is a direct dialogue with the notion of surveillance. Mitra's intentional framing and single view from above mimics that of C.C.T.V's and the Big Brother syndrome and comments upon the current and often obsessive gaze towards the Middle East.

The film has no particular narrative although once the viewer engages with the work they notice distinct and subtle interactions taking place. The traffic at times seems to lack control, the roundabout system is in opposition to most traffic rules as the right of way is with the motorists joining the roundabout not with those already on the roundabout. At times the traffic becomes congested and seems chaotic only to detangle and 'go on' like

slowly unravelling a knotted piece of rope. The gardener watering the grass in the centre of the roundabout constantly tries to move people 'off the grass' with little effect.

At first glance 'It Goes' appears to capture the mundane which often consists of those things that can be explained away without a second thought, they go unmarked and unnoticed because they do not challenge our preconceptions. However in this instance the mundane challenges our ideas of the everyday and the unusual, and we begin to question the realities of Iran against the preconceptions we may have accumulated through the media. The viewers will experience a series of emotions throughout the long 15 minutes, fluctuating between intrigue to boredom. This film will challenge their patience and provoke them to revaluate how they perceive information in the current instantaneous mass media age.

The mundane details in 'It Goes' can be viewed as narratives to the enormous personal conflicts of life in a country battered by decades of violence and religious warfare. Despite all this, as the title of this piece suggests 'It Goes', life really does just go on in Iran despite the veneer of chaos, which often filters the Western Media. After 15 minutes of intently watching the video piece the viewer is left to decipher what lies beyond the roundabout, where the people go and what they will do. 'It Goes' illustrates the complexities and uncertainties of modern day Iran reflected through the architecture of the roundabout as a central system versus the people.

'Far Nearer' brings together the central issues of this research through pivotal artworks. 'Axis2' which is another series of pattern works inspired by 'Dear Axis of Evil' series will also be shown as part of this compilation along with video footage of the 'Hidden Half', both considered to be poignant in both representing and questioning the complexities of Iranian identity.[19]

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[19] It is important to note here that the works selected will be installed after the submission of this thesis and therefore, some of the work will be presented differently in accordance to the gallery space, and in relation to the unique narrative created by curating these works together.

5.8 Conclusions

During the course of this research, a journey of self-discovery has taken place. The literature review undertaken throughout this research has been vital in understanding issues of my own identity, other Iranian women featured in this study, and in a broader sense Iranian identity. My studio-based practice has improved and progressed and taken inspiration from the theoretical investigations. Some of the artworks communicate particular aspects of the theories discussed in this thesis, such as the works drawing on Stuart Hall's work. However, they are not merely representative of the theories in the thesis and are equally valid outcomes of this research. The analysis of my art practice revealed that, while there are parallels between the artworks and the written thesis both in methodology and in theory, there are distinct areas that are independent of one another. Enquiry through visual practice enables multiple observations and narratives within the same work, whereas the written thesis takes a more structured path, both serving to strengthen one another and the research as a whole.

This research has changed the way I think and work in many ways. Through comparing earlier works which examined displacement and identity, I feel that my work has become much more direct, whilst keeping some of the mysticism used in earlier works, such as the 'Mermaid' series. As an artist, I have always researched other sources to inform and enrich my work. This study has enabled me to become more aware of the scope of a practice-based research in art. The featured artworks analysed in this chapter exemplify an intense relationship between myself (my personal experiences), the theories and discoveries made through research, and the works made in response to the various experiences. Through the reflective conversation, which is significantly evident in this chapter, I became aware of the multifaceted nature of conducting research which focuses on oneself.

My art practice has been primarily exploring the various perceptions of identity and displacement in the context of Iran. During the course of this research my practice has

had a reciprocal relationship to the discussed theories which has created pivotal shifts in the creation of artworks. As an example, the works made previous to this study had a more personal perspective, often using my personal identity as the central subject, which has now shifted to broader observations and representations of Iranian identity. These important developments can be observed in exhibitions such as *Other Side* (Iran 2001) where the viewpoints of 100 British people about Iran were presented to an Iranian audience.

The works exemplified in this chapter are part of an ongoing project that will continue to evolve and change. Forthcoming exhibitions include: *Man Made*, which is a collaboration with Farhad Ahranian. During a visit in March 2006 we collected a series of images and videos taken from Iranian men working in various settings such as confectioneries, florists etc. This work marks a new series of works that attempt to diversify the limited perceptions of Iranian men. Figure 5.54 shows fashion designer, Mohammad Sokhanvari in his home wearing one of the suits he has designed and made himself.

Fig. **5-55**: *All That Jazz,* Man Made, Mitra Memarzia and Farhad Ahrarnia, 2005- work-in-progress.

In addition to this work I am also in the process of an

exchange programme between Shiraz-based artists with Birmingham-based artists entitled *2Sides*. 2Sides aims to create international dialogue through creative practice, where the artist will engage in making work about one another through a 10-day exchange. Through this and other works I aim to direct my professional creative practices towards inspirational dialogue and exchange.

In comparison to the artists featured in this study, I felt I could not describe myself within the fixed boundaries of those living and working in Iran or those living and working outside Iran. This research has enabled me to transgress the fictitious boundaries of the East and West. I have used both aspects of my dual nationality and my bilingual identity in creating artworks that I hope can communicate to various audiences globally. Both the artists I have discussed and myself are involved in issues that affect us all; our worldwide representations follow us wherever we choose to reside. The stereotypical vision of the East - positive or negative - resonates through much of my work, as well as that of many of the featured artists. I feel fortunate that I have been able to use my particular position creatively, expanding on and challenging perceptions of Iran and Iranian women, and building on a growing community of Contemporary Iranian Women Artists.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary and Conclusions

Political upheavals and conflicts of interests amongst nations and the current war on terrorism affect our lives in various degrees, the closer to the centre of crisis the more dramatic the effects. The long term effects of these changes does not seem to be a prime concern within governmental and global strategies, which deal with issues on a more immediate basis. The often-dramatised reportage transmitted worldwide can reinforce a hostile feeling toward the other. Islam is often portrayed as being synonymous with terrorism and, from the other perspective; the West is associated with colonialism.[1] The relationship between the West and Middle Eastern countries, Iran in particular, continues to be somewhat uncertain, and at times dramatised in the media.[2] The Internet, satellite television broadcasts and globalisation are cultures and ideas developing at a rapid pace. As the face of the world is changing; attitudes towards the self and the other also need to be reviewed. Homogeneous conceptions of identity seem no longer valid. It is no longer possible to locate an identity by history or geographical location alone. While history and location are important factors in the creation and maintenance of identities, relying solely on this type of data can be limiting or, at times, misleading. Global movement is creating more complex identities. With complexity comes confusion, which leads to stereotyping and generalisations. Artists who are caught in these dilemmas are in a situation where their position and work becomes of national and international importance, due to the fact that they respond to their surroundings through the international language of art.

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[1] In my exhibition of 100 faces, in which 100 people in the UK offered their response to the word Iran with the first word that entered their mind, many of the words were Islam, war, veil and oil. In conversation with the Iranian viewers of the exhibition their response to hearing UK was mostly colonialism, imperialism, wealth and technology.

[2] Iran's relationship with the West is significantly different to that of Afghanistan or Iraq. Historically Iran has not been colonised and with the recent invasions of both Afghanistan and more recently Iraq, Iran's position has become of central importance in the Middle East.

Rapid changes in rules and regulations due to the Islamic Revolution along with Iran's current ambiguous global position have resulted in a crisis of identity on both a personal and international level. This research was inspired by the abundance of misconceptions I witnessed in the UK about the Middle East, Islamic nations and in particular Iranian women. The very young population of Iran also enhances this situation with 70% under the age of 30 with reservations about the current regime, aware of Western ideologies, and in need of some form of change. As discussed in this thesis, Iranian women are at the forefront of the Islamic government and the Western media as representatives of Iranian identity. Iranian women's current position within feminist theory, especially in the field of art, is underdeveloped. Whilst acknowledging the current lack of feminist criticism in Iran, this thesis also provides a background to Iranian feminism and examines its effect on the identity and representations of Iranian women.

The position of women in Islamic nations varies in accordance with a nation's particular relationship to Islam and its distinct history and cultural ideology. As discussed in Chapter 1, Iranian women's relationship with feminism is notably different to that of Turkey; while Turkey prohibits the wearing of the hijab in certain public places such as schools and official government buildings. The mandatory hijab has encouraged many Iranian women to use it to their advantage and gain more influence through it as exemplified in this study. Therefore, this research has revealed that as well as notable differences, there are also similarities between Islamic countries' approaches to feminism. Their similarities are conveyed in the struggle to secure a position from which women can voice their concerns and opinions, particularly in uncertain times. The increase in media coverage of the Middle East, together with the growth of Islamic feminism, has prompted intellectuals around the globe to become more engaged in defining the distinct positions of women within Islamic theocratic states and societies.

The aim of this research has been to look beyond limiting perceptions and to define new ways of looking at Iranian identity, a country often misunderstood and misrepresented,

through the analysis of the cultural output of art. For this study, twenty artists from inside and outside Iran were selected and their artworks were analysed within a theoretical framework. Their distinct positions provided the research with different perspectives on Iranian national identity. The study of the featured artists, in the light of theoretical studies and my direct involvement and experience with the issue of identity has enabled me to develop my art practice and analyse it in more depth. The relationship between theory and practice has been central to the structure of this research.[3] This methodology involved a variety of data collection and analysis, and included an extensive literature review covering a wide range of related subject matters. My position as a contemporary Iranian woman artist and a participant observer of other artists in this study has enabled a deeper analysis of Iranian women's identities in a unique way. My involvement in the process of making art and exhibiting has aided the assimilation of Iranian identity and the conceptualisation of some of the theoretical discussions in this study. The current study of Iranian culture and identity is prominently based on social and anthropological studies with small amounts of research on Iranian artists, which does not cover groups of contemporary Iranian women artists living both inside and outside Iran.[4] These unique positions and viewpoints make the contributions of this research crucial and timely.

In order to understand the current issues surrounding Iran and being Iranian, it was important to re-assess the central events that have shaped contemporary Iranian history, particularly in relation to Iranian women. Chapter 3 revealed that the Islamic Revolution (1979), the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the influences of the West have had major effects on the Iranian people's sense of national identity. However, other historical events and eras – such as the Persian Empire as a source of national pride, the influx of Islam, and the many successions of dynasties and governmental rulers – still form the foundations of contemporary Iranian identity as exemplified in the artists comments and

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[3] The overall methodological approach to this study has been aided by some of the suggested methods of the 'reflective practitioner', through implementation of reflective conversations with research scenarios (Schön 1995). For a full discussion of methodological approaches, see Chapter 2.

[4] An extensive review of current research on Iranian identity and art in August 2006 revealed that while there is increasing research in this field, this research occupies a unique position both due to my position as an artist within the research and the groups of women analysed.

works. This research has established that history forms a large part of the way Iranians, and in particular some of the artists in this research narrate their identities, which is evident in the works of artists such as Sinai and Ghadirian.

As demonstrated in this thesis, particularly in Chapters 1 and 3, Iran has a complex history of change; its geographic location as the gateway between the East and the West has ensured a constant chain of cultural influences, which were at times forced upon it and at other times welcomed. Therefore, it is possible to refer to Iranian national identities as a mixture of contradictory elements that reflect a 'culture of change'. This culture of change is also facilitating a situation where the number of women studying at universities is 60% in proportion to men, which is a dramatic increase to pre revolutionary Iran. Due to these changes, Iranian women have gained a central position both in the Islamic Republic of Iran's legislations and their concerns have become of international importance.[5] Women are voicing their opinions in a variety of ways, as demonstrated in this research. Iranian women artists are amongst the most prominent representatives and engage in the debates of identity and the position of Iranian women through art making in national and International arenas. These cultural outlets are significant contributions to the current perceptions of Iranian women both inside and outside Iran, which this study contributes towards. This study has revealed that Iranian women artists are able to voice their opinions in less restrictive ways using subtle yet powerful strategies of expression. For example artist Ghazel questions the role of the chador or the hijab in her work with a sense of humour, yet her work is highly critical of the current position of Iranian women. This type of commentary is something which women would find almost impossible through other means. Therefore, the artistic practices of Iranian women are vital social outputs, and have provided this research with a unique perspective.

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[5] Shirin Ebadi's nobel peace prize in 2003 is a significant achievement and an indicator of the Iranian women's determination to be heard internationally.

The exploration of contemporary Iranian women artists and their creative representations of Iranian identity have provided insight into the ways in which Iranian women engage with their various personal, cultural, geographic and political positioning. Throughout Iranian history, women have been veiled and unveiled in accordance to the particular requirements of the government. The symbolic power of the veil defines women's identities in a variety of ways, both inside and outside Iran. The veil can be both seen as a tool for emancipation and from another perspective as a repression tool. However, what is certain is Iranian women's perception of identity, as well as how they are perceived by others, has shifted dramatically throughout history, particularly in post-revolutionary Iran and the subsequent rise of women's rights movements. On numerous visits to Iran and interaction with Iranian women outside Iran, it became evident that Iranian women have not homogeneously accepted these changes.[6] Their various views of issues such as veiling indicate contradictory attitudes and beliefs. Their veiling and unveiling have prompted mixed messages and double standards, which have led to the belief in one ideal while being forced to act another way. In Ghazel's video works this issue is humorously expressed in her wearing of the chador while attempting different tasks such as skiing, ballet and other activities which are not usually associated with the chadored woman. Similarly in my work entitled Chadore, I aim to diversify the functionality of this monolithic symbol through repetitive renditions of the chador in correlation with various objects. These critical observations have been further evidenced in the works of artists such as Ghazal, Neshat, Ghadirian, Taghizadeh and myself who have made works in response to the ways in which Iranian women are perceived from various viewpoints. This study also contributes to a more varied and multi-layered approach to the current perception of Iranian women. The position of artists, as discussed in chapter 4, bears a direct relationship to the ways they have been inspired to produce works that either represent or comment upon Iranian women's complex identities.

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[6] For artist Ossouli, the veil was something which freed her from the confines of fashion and the male gaze. For Neshat who had been living outside Iran during the revolution, the veil became of prime interest in much of her recent works.

Due to the cultural and political influences discussed in this thesis, Iranian women have undergone many contradictory changes and been subject to misrepresentation, both in Iran and in the West. It can be observed that these contradictory cultural changes make their identities difficult to define. In relation to theories of identity as discussed in chapter 3, several key areas were identified and later discussed in relation to the artists' works. These included the notion of physical and psychological displacement from homeland, the connection of mother tongue with motherland as in the work of Neshat (women of Allah). Through the use of relevant theories of identity, this study also contributes to an in depth analysis of the ways in which these women reflect and represent key issues of self and nation.

Today, Iranians may be described as experiencing an identity crisis; a confusion which has continued for centuries. What can Iranians call Iranian? The answer could lie in looking at Iranian identity as a multicultural nation. An idea which to an outsider may seem inaccurate as Iran does not boast the sort of multicultural society which the UK does for instance. For Iranians multiculturalism lies deep within their psyche. A country made up of a varied mix of cultures hidden to the outside world; a mixture of Turks, Baluchies, Persians and so forth, something that the western media often homogenises. In addition to this, as already discussed in this thesis, throughout history Iranians have had a reciprocal relationship with foreign cultures, philosophies, religions, arts and languages which has resulted in a culture of easy adaptation to change. Today, Iranians are increasingly linked to the Western world through the Internet, satellite television and travel. With an insatiable appetite for new technologies, modern fashion, music and philosophy, the ability to adapt to displacement and change has become a trademark of Iranians around the globe. Ghadirian's work is a prime example of how the old and the new and seemingly disparate cultures can live in an almost enchanting harmony, evident in her image of the Qajar women holding a can of Pepsi or a Ghetto blaster.

While artists such as Ghadirian celebrate this unlikely harmony, for some artists, history represents an authentic identity, unchanged by turmoil or war, which they prefer to hang

onto and keep, separated from the present.[7] Artists such as Sinai and Sadatfar gain a sense of stability through returning to the past, whether it is the ancient city of Persepolis or traditional Persian miniature paintings. This retrospect enables them to confirm and rebuild their dislodged identities, which were unsettled by factors such as the Islamic Revolution and the changes it imposed upon women culturally, politically and socially. Iranian women artists are working in an environment with high expectations by their own peers, the art world, the public, and at times the Iranian government. Initially, I speculated that artists living and working in Iran would have a more stable attitude to their identities. As the research progressed, it became arguably apparent that the question of a stable identity cannot be applied to Iranian women today either residing in Iran or in exile. Artists from both groups are in some ways dealing with the same issues of representation and definition of their identities.

The artworks of women such as Neshat resonate with a search for definitions, not in a finite sense but in an attempt to bring Iran and Iranian women into light. Neshat claims that the Islamic Revolution affected her, even though she was not physically in Iran at the time.[8] Artists such as Houshiary are producing more subtle works, which reflect an essence of their identity from a more spiritual perspective, through the use of Sufism in her practice. Others like Ossouli are engaged in exploring traditional subjects and creating a distinct contemporary style from traditional old miniature paintings. In some ways, the artists in this research all represent a sense of migration, whether it is from Iran to another country or from one position to another. Due to the forces of change, their identities are under constant transformation. The featured artists have exemplified the ability to both adapt to and challenge new situations and positions. This collection and analysis of contemporary Iranian women's artworks also demonstrates their determination to narrate their complex identities under often difficult conditions. Their

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[7] For Iranians, the age-old conflict between Western and Eastern ideologies, and the relationship of a perceived notion of previous events with the present Islamic government, plays a significant role. Throughout Iranian history, from the days of Persian Empire to today's Iran, contradictory forces have determined Iranian people's identities both for Iranians themselves and to the rest of the world.

[8] See Home and Representation, Chapter 4 Section 4.3, for Neshat's comments on being affected by changes in Iran.

contradictory attitudes towards Iranian identity are exemplified in the works of artists such as Ghadirian, who has used history and Orientalist paintings as a reference point for exploring the identity of contemporary Iranian woman. In contrast, Neshat deals directly with the gender divisions proposed by Islamic beliefs.

This research has established that both groups of artists have in some way been affected by the same events and consequent changes, whether inside or outside Iran. They have both knowingly or subconsciously experienced or explored displacement and the crises of identity that has occurred through cultural and political upheavals. The concern with the notion of self and national identity has been expressed in their art practice in different ways. For example, Ghadirian's new series of works can be seen as visual contributions to Iranian feminist theory. The analysis of her work in this context offers contradictory elements present in Iranian women's projected identities. For Farhid, being Iranian is explored through her parents in her short film *Pigeon*. Other artists such as Neshat are involved in a more direct approach to the ways in which Islam shapes Iranian women's identities. These distinct approaches to the exploration and representation of Iranian identity form an integral arena in the contemporary history of Iranian women.

The topics and the strategies of expression chosen by all the artists in this research reveal that, for Iranians, being placed within one's country of birth does not necessarily constitute a stable sense of national or personal identity. Having analysed the works of two seemingly different groups of Iranian women in the context of Iranian politics, culture and history informed by theories of identity, again it is evident that location does not constitute to fixed identities. The 'forces of change' in Iran have affected most of the artists discussed in this study, whether inside or outside Iran. The current Iranian identity crisis offers both groups of women either inspiration or agitation. Artists such as Ghadirian Feyyazi and Vakili aim to dislodge fixed perceptions of Iranian women; they question Iranian identity and search for new definitions within Iran. Outside Iran, Taghizadeh represents displaced identities in the form of her short documentary *But you speak such good English!* which questions the identity of Iranians living in London. The

expressions of artists like Taghizadeh mark the various ways in which national and personal identity interact, sometimes in harmony other times in contradiction.

The analysis of Iranian women's identities and my position within this research is manifested through shared experiences with the featured artists. This affiliation with the research subject has enhanced the assimilation of both the theoretical and practical aspects of this enquiry into Iranian identity from the point-of-view of contemporary Iranian woman artists. As exemplified in Chapter 5, the artworks produced throughout this study show similarities with artists both in Iran and abroad. The artworks I have produced throughout this research have aimed to further discuss the issues raised and contribute to Iranian art as a whole. The exhibitions of *OtherSides* (Shiraz, 2001), *Soughout* (Berlin, 2001), *Near* (New York, 2004), *Dear Axis of Evil* (Sheffield, 2004), *In the shadow of fallen Heroes*, (Bishkeck, 2005) and more recently, *Hunted, Prey* (Birmingham 2006) have reached a global audience whose responses to the exhibitions have been valuable to this research. The critical responses to the exhibitions have led to a more in-depth understanding of the issues raised in this research. The *Hidden Half*, 2005, exhibition which was shown at Sheffield Hallam University, was set to test audience responses to issues raised in this study.

Hidden Half explored the contradictory nature of identity and representation. The central wall was a metaphor for the borders we create between the East and the West, men and women, and them and us. The separate experience of men and women in this exhibition questioned the ways we choose to represent the truth about the *Hidden Half*. The participants, who took part in what may be termed as a 'happening', were encouraged to explore the ways in which individuals (themselves) and groups (others) operate and react to the notion of perception and control of information. Their reactions bear a direct relationship to the ways in which societies deal with gender separation, power relations, and information.[9]

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[9] Refer to the video excerpt of the *Hidden Half* 'happening' on the accompanying CD for examples of the responses to the exhibition.

The final compilation of artworks exhibited as part of this PhD submission entitled *Far Nearer* is an integral contribution to the research concerns in dealing with some of the main issues raised in this study. Far Nearer plays directly with the notion of bringing to the forefront the various contradicting perceptions of Iran and Iranian identity by bringing the Far East nearer. Nearer through a diverse range of works that playfully represent various aspects of the complexities of being Iranian, being female and being part of a larger national and global structure. Most of the works included have been part of recent national and international exhibitions such as 'It Goes' (Lithuania 2006) and 'Chadore' (Birmingham 2006). These works have been in direct dialogue with various audiences and therefore contributed to the findings of this research. However, the specific compilation of these works in the university gallery offers a new narrative both through the relationship of the work with the space, with the other works and with the new audience. As well as being a visual feast, Far Nearer entices the viewers into a contradicting and surprising installation which hopes to diversify and question singular perceptions of a complex nation under immense global scrutiny. Through this exhibition and the accompanying thesis, I have revealed some hidden aspects of Iran and, more broadly, questioned the ways in which individuals' perceptions and narrations of identities affect one another.

6.2 Implications and Further Research

This thesis and the accompanying body of artworks contribute to the field of contemporary Iranian art and the study of Iranian women's identity. [10] Although in recent years, Iranian art, especially Iranian women's art, has become prominent and of international interest, the level of exposure of such works is still relatively low. It is

[10] Although Iranian cinema has flourished and become an internationally-known art form, Iranian art is still struggling for a secure place within the global art world. In recent years, artists such as Neshat, Shahbazi and Ghadirian have elevated Iranian women artists into the global art world, but their positions remain to be one which is always determined by their being Iranian women. Therefore, there is still a considerable way to go until and Iranian woman artist is seen on a par with 'Western' artists.

hoped that this body of works will draw attention to Iranian women's art and their current concerns, beliefs and aspirations. This particular approach to the exploration and analysis of Iranian identity has illuminated other areas for research which are outlined in this section.

It is intended to publish the outcome of this thesis both in English and Farsi. There are currently two possible publications; one which would outline the visual practices of the artists in relation to their current national and international positions and the other with more emphasis on theoretical implications. This research explores some of the socio-cultural changes that have occurred in Iran by analysing the featured artworks, all of which provide a unique contribution to the current debate on Iranian identity. Further research and more in-depth analysis of socio-cultural changes in Iran, and its effect on perceptions of personal and national identity in Iranian art history, would aid a more informed approach to the analysis of Iranian art. This would also contribute to Iranian art history and, more broadly, to the current debates of Islamic feminist art theory.

With a renewed interest in Iranian national identity, new art movements known as *Honarhaye nou* (new art), seem to mark a national review of what may be termed contemporary Iranian art,[11] which has been progressing somewhat slowly due to the major upheavals that have taken place. However, during the course of this research, it has been observed that the Iranian art scene is changing and becoming more diverse. More galleries are opening and Iranian artists (both inside and outside Iran) are reassessing their perception towards Iran and Iranian-ness. The need to reassess the terminology used to describe art in Iran and to facilitate a position in the global art world were two of the issues that become evident during this research. Through more critical reviews and organised lectures discussing the uses and implications of Western art theory and art

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[11] This type of enquiry could also be applied to other creative individuals such as filmmakers, poets, writers, fashion designers and architects. Therefore, an exploration of how Iranian architects of the twenty-first century represent Iranian identity, and the implications these buildings have on Iranian history and Iran's national identity, allows for further understanding of Iran. These individuals may act as the key contributors to the development of Iranian culture and identity.

terminology, Iranian artists would be in a position to build a more distinct platform from which to express themselves.

Another area for further investigation is the variety of feminist movements inside Iran and many Iranian women's organisations that are operating outside Iran. In turn, Iranian women's art practice can contribute to the development of Iranian feminist movements. It is anticipated that these movements have a direct effect on contemporary Iranian women artists. Feminist movements influence the ways artists narrate their own identities, and how they are perceived both inside and outside Iran. Whilst this area has been explored in this research, more in-depth analysis would contribute to a better understanding of women's issues in Iran, and would contribute to the wider understanding of women's positions within Islamic countries.

Through analysing the similarities and differences between both Iranian male and female artists residing both in Iran and outside Iran, it would be possible to examine the ways in which gendered identities deal with cultural displacement, narrate their identities and challenge stereotypes. In order to further this research, an analysis of contemporary Iranian male artists would enable a deeper comparison of the relationship between gender and identity within an Islamic state. As with Eastern women, Eastern men have often been depicted as terrorists and religious hardliners in the Western media. Within Iran, men are often associated with patriarchy, as Khorasani (2001) has noted. It seems that Iranian men are often viewed with a homogeneous emphasis on the notion of power, both within the home and the state. Iranian men's art might reveal further insights into the ways in which they contradict their stereotypes and challenge perceptions.

Another area for further research could be the analysis of the current influential roles of the Internet and satellite television as the facilitators of Western culture in the lives of Iranians inside Iran. This could reveal how these new forms of freedom are influencing Iranian identity. With these new freedoms in expression, Iranian people's perceptions of identity are becoming more complex, where for example Western fashion styles mix with

the hijab and produce multiple meanings and attitudes. These contradicting attitudes contribute to the current national identity crisis. An analysis of Web-log entries made by Iranians globally could illuminate issues and concerns that are not permitted in other formats, namely published material. Iran is amongst the highest ranking Weblog producers on the Internet, at a time where restrictions on access and content of web sites are enforced by the state. The issue of censorship and the ways in which it affects, and at times even improves, cultural outlets such as literature and artworks is yet another area which remains to be explored.

As discussed in this chapter, this thesis and body of artworks offer a number of insights which contribute to the study of Iran. Moreover, these insights open new scopes for further development, and offer a range of resources and references to facilitate the work of other researchers in the fields of cultural studies and the arts. I plan to continue developing this research in theory and in practice, by producing and exhibiting further artworks and projects which explore the notion of identity and question perceptions towards the other. I also plan to expand aspects of this research and contribute to journals and publications in order to widen the understanding of Iran, Iranian women, and more broadly, issues of displacement, nationhood and representation. The areas outlined for further research in this chapter are part of an ongoing study of Iran. The experiences I have gained through this research have developed my connection to Iran and broadened my perception of Iran, Iranian women, and my own identity as an Iranian-British woman artist. I aim to continue to question, and strive to understand the complexities of contemporary Iran through the various inspirational dialogues and exchange offered by creative practices.

Appendix A – Artists' Biographies:

Artists living and working inside Iran:
Minoo Assadi, born Kazvin, Iran 1943. She is a Painter (Interview at her home in Tehran 23rd April 2001) She received her university education in England 1969 from *The Royal academy of Arts*- London. Since 1979 she has been employed as a university lecturer. Currently she is a Senior lecturer at Azzahra University- Tehran, where she teaches BA and Postgraduate courses in Art. She has taken part in more than 50 individual and group exhibitions. Her most recent exhibitions include ECO International exhibition- Tehran in June 2000 where she received an award.

Ladan Chalack, born Shiraz, Iran 1964. She is a Painter (Interview at her Studio/ art school, *Negarkhaneh Naghsh*, Translated: Pattern Gallery, Shiraz, 31st March 1999.) Ladan was interested in art since childhood; she was encouraged by a friend to further her artistic career at the age of 20 by going to The Fine Art University in Tehran in 1984. Since then she has been practicing art in Shiraz and teaching at her own private art school for women.

Shahrzad Elmi, born 1965 Tehran, Iran. She is a Painter (Interview at Tehran Museum of Contemporary art, The Café, Tehran 15th April 1999.) Shahrzad's artistic activities started in 1982 in Turkey-Istanbul, and she works in ceramics. She then began to take an interest in painting on silk, and did so for about a year. She then went to Montreal-Moscow and worked in the sculpture department for a year whilst still carrying on with painting on silk, at the age of 24 she entered Quebec University, and studied Fine Art. Since then she returned to Iran and is now believed to have returned to Canada. .

Bitta Feyyazi, born Tehran, Iran 1962. Works in Sculpture and Installation. Feyyazi studied ceramics and pottery at the Iranian Handicrafts Association. She lived in the UK from 1975 for a period of 7 years and later returned to Tehran. Her first exhibition of contemporary sculpture was in 1989 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, since then she has had extensive exhibitions of her works at various galleries in Tehran. Her work was featured amongst the Contemporary Iranian Art exhibition at the Curve galley, Barbican centre in London April/June 2001.

Shadi Ghadirian, born Tehran, Iran 1974. Works in Photography (Interview at Showroom Café, Sheffield Nov 2000 and Tehran 2003.) Ghadirian studied photography at the Azad University in Tehran and graduated in 1998. She has exhibited worldwide since her success with the Quajar women series which have been included in several exhibitions including Lili Golestan Gallery in Tehran 1999, Guildhall University in London 2000, and the Veils exhibition at Walsall new Art Gallery Feb/April 2003. She is currently showing at the Culture House, Stokholm, Sweden, March 2004.

Farah Ossouli, born Zanjan, Iran 1953. Is a Contemporary miniaturist. (Interview at her studio in Tehran which she shares with Gizella, April 1999) Farah received her BA in Fine Arts at Tehran University in Graphic design in 1977, from 1972 to 77 she taught at the Design studio in Tehran and later at the Moaser studio also in Tehran. Ossouli has shown her work internationally, including in Switzerland, the USA, Turkey, France, China, Ukraine, the UAE, Lebanon, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Tunisia, the UK, Belgium, Kuwait, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Finland, and Norway. She was *"Elected Woman Painter",* in tribute of Iranian Women Artists, 2002.

Zahra Rasoolzadeh, born Tehran, Iran 1968. Works mainly in Sculpture. (Interview at her studio 14th April 1999) She started her artistic activities in 1993, since then she has studied sculpture at Tehran Fine Art University. She is at present teaching sculpture at a college in Tehran alongside working on her own sculptures at her studio situated in the basement of her mother's home.

Leila Sadatfar, was born Shiraz, Iran 1978. Traditional miniaturist painter. (Interview at her studio and private art school, *Negarkhaneh Baran*, (Rain Gallery) in Shiraz, 6th April 1999) After studying science, Leila gained a Diploma in the arts and crafts in Shiraz, she then moved onto needlecraft for two years, after which she became interested in the visual arts. She later attended private art school and was encouraged by her tutor to take up miniature painting as she had a good eye for detail due to her past interest in needlework. She has shown her works in various galleries in Shiraz her hometown where she also teaches the art of miniature privately.

Gizella Sinai, born Chakvar, Hungary 1944. Has been living in Iran since 1967. She is a painter. (Interviewed at her studio in Tehran which she shares with Farah Ossouli.) Sinai studied at Vienna's Akademie Fur Angewandte Kunst, and received her BA in Fine art there. Since she has been in Iran she has developed her career in the arts, and become one of Iran's established artists. Sinai has shown her work internationally including shows in New York (1991), Belgium (1993) more recently she has exhibited at the 6th Painting Biennial at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran Dec/Jan 2004.

Hamila Vakili, born Tehran, Iran, 1979. Is a photographer. Studied at Azad University in Tehran and gained a BA Hons in photography. Her artistic career began in the year 2000 with an exhibition at Samar Gallery in Tehran. Other exhibitions include *Assar* at Silk Road Gallery in Tehran 2001, and 2002. She has also exhibited in Paris in March 2003.

Artists living and working abroad:

Farah Bajull, born Shiraz, Iran (date unknown) Works in sculpture, performance and installation. (Brief Interview at Walsall New Art Gallery 13th Feb 2003) Bajull left Iran for the UK when she was 14 years old, and went on to study at the Royal College of Art. She studied BA (Hons) Fine Art in Sculpture at Chelsea College of Art and Design in 1996. Her exhibitions have included *Four Degrees in the Open* (part of Whitechapel Open), Stand Point Gallery, London, 1996, *If not, then...*, Moravian Burial Ground, London, 1995, *22 Thresholds*, Fridge Gallery, London, 1995. More recently her work featured in the touring exhibition of Veil, which started at the Walsall New Art Galley Feb/April 2003.

Nooshin Farhid, born Tehran, Iran (date not given). Works in a wide range of media including Sculpture and motorised objects, animation, photography, computer-generated images and video. Farhid Studied at South Bank University for a BSc in Computer Science 1993, and in 1999 graduated from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design where she received a BA in Fine Art. Her work has been featured at the Geneva Video Festival and at the 13th Rencontres Video Art Plastique in Normandy-France. In 2003 she showed *Reduced*, at Century Gallery, London and Candid Film and Video Night, Candid Art Trust, London. She is currently teaching art at Central Saint Martin's college of Art and Design.

Ghazel, born Tehran, Iran 1966. Works mainly in Video. (Short interviews both in Iran-Tehran April 2001 and Walsall New Art Gallery 13th Feb 2003) Ghazel lives between the two capital cities, Paris and Tehran. She studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Nimes and graduated in 1992 and went on to study Film at the Universite Paul Valery, Montpellier 1994. She has shown her *Me* series worldwide.

Shirazeh Houshiary, born Shiraz, Iran 1955. Works in painting and mainly sculpture. Houshiary moved to the UK in 1974, She studied at Chelsea School of Art, London (1976-79) and then was Junior Fellow at Cardiff College of Art for 1 year. She was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 1994, and has shown her work extensively through the years. Her work was recently exhibited at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery in London under the title of *Breath*, Oct/Dec 2003.

Katy Kianush, born, Tehran, Iran. 1964. She is a Painter. (Interview at Westminster Gallery Hall, August 1999) Katy is a *self-taught* artist as she puts it, at the age of eighteen she was offered a place on the fine art course at St Martins College of Art, or a Literature degree, but then the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran and she did not qualify for student fees at that time. Katy worked at a bank for nine years and became the manager's assistant. She carried on painting and over the past 10 years Kianush has had more than 50 solo and joint shows. She is the director of NAPA (National Acrylic Painters

Association) and co-ordinated their first exhibition in London at the Westminster Gallery Hall in August 1999.

Mitra Memarzia, born Shiraz, Iran 1977. Works in a variety of mediums including sculpture, photography, installation and video. She moved to the UK with her family 1988. She studied fine art at Sheffield Hallam University, and completed her BA in Fine art in 1998. Memarzia began her research into contemporary Iranian women's art as part of a PhD course at Sheffield Hallam which she completed in summer 2004. Memarzia has exhibited in Shiraz-Iran Zinat-ol Molk Gallery (2001), Berlin-Germany *Shock of Sept 11th* at Haus am Lutzoplatz gallery with 29 other international artists responding to the Sept 11th 2001 attacks. Her most recent exhibition is at the Arts International gallery, New York-USA May 2004.

Shirin Neshat, born Qazvin-Iran 1957. Works mainly with film and photography. Neshat moved to the USA in 1974 and studied art and became a gallery owner, her own practice was not as prevalent until she returned to Iran in 1990 and was deeply affected by the effects of the Islamic revolution and the war. Since then Neshat's work has become widely exhibited and appreciated both by Iranian and Western audiences. Her most recent work is the touring theatre piece; *The Logic of the Birds* was performed at the Union Chapel, London 6th-12th Nov 2002. Currently Neshat can be described as the most internationally acclaimed contemporary Iranian woman artist.

Shirana Shahbazi, born Tehran, Iran 1974. Works in Photography. Shahbazi moved to Germany 1985 and later, studied photography in Dortmund before moving to Zurich where she attended the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst. After producing two successful series, *Goftare Nik/Good Sayings* (1998-2003) and *The Garden* (2002) her career took off in 2002 when she was short-listed for the London Citibank Prize along with safer bets Thomas Ruff and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Shahbazi won the prize, which exposed her work to major press coverage, and led to her participation in the last Venice Biennale 2003.

Mitra Tabrizian, born Iran (Date unknown). Works with film and photography. She studied photography at the University of Westminster in London. Tabrizian has published and exhibited widely in Europe, America, Canada and Japan and is currently teaching at the department of Design, Digital Media and Photography at the University of Westminster. Her most recent exhibitions are Bilbao-Spain *Lumo 04 trienial of Contemporary Photography,* Jyvaskyla Art Museum-Finland 2003, and Solo Show at Museum Folkwang and Veil at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. 2002.

Parisa Taghizadeh, born Tehran, Iran 1970. Works mainly with photography and film. (Interviewed in London April 2000) She came to London-England in 1980 when she was 10 years of age. Taghizadeh studied Fine Art Painting at Bath Spa University and completed her BA Hons degree in 1995. Taghizadeh works as a freelance photographer along with her own practice. Between 1995-2000 Taghizadeh has worked as a Production coordinator for independent film and TV production companies including Pirate

Productions, Century Films and 3BM and Wall to Wall. Her work was featured in solo show entitled In Side Out 1999 at Space gallery-London. Make-Up Iran 2001 was featured in Tank magazine. Her video entitled "But you speak such good English" (2001) has been shown extensively.

Appendix B - Questionnaires to Contemporary Iranian Women artists:

Iranian Woman Artists practicing outside Iran

Name:

Contact details:

Could you tell me in brief a little about your life and with particular attention to your artistic activities?

From what age did you feel that you were interested in art?

What or whom was your main driving point?

Which artists have been your main sources of inspiration?

Which artists and works inspire you?

What role does art play in your life and how much importance do you place upon it?

If you were to describe yourself in three words what would those words be?

g) Where did you study, and do you feel that education is important in the creative field?

About the artworks:

Tell me about your themes, subjects, and methods in which you work?

Do you feel a sense of displacement living here?

How does your Identity come across in your work? How important is it for you to maintain an Iranian identity in your work?

Do you think that if you lived in Iran, your work and attitude would be different?

Do you feel that you have a responsibility to get a certain message across to people?

7) How much are you aware of the contemporary art scene in Iran today?

8) To what extent do you identify with the contemporary woman Fine Artists of Iran?

9) Do you feel that you have total freedom in your work here?

10) Do people judge your work with view to your identity or purely what they see?

11) To what extent is the understanding of the public near to what you have intended within your work?

12) Do you believe in art for arts sake or do you feel that an artist has a responsibility to the public to get a message across?

13) Do you feel a sense of privileged exile; that you are in a good position to see things through two pairs of eyes, Iranian and British, and in return be able to make work about it?

14) To what extent does the government support you, financially or intellectually (media and critiques?

15) Please give details of any competitions and or shows in which you have taken part?

Iranian Woman Artists practicing in Iran

Translated Questionnaire

Name:

Contact details:

1) Could you tell me in brief a little about your life and with particular attention to your artistic activities?

a) From what age did you feel that you were interested in art?

b) What or whom was your main driving point?

c) Which artists have been your main sources of inspiration?

d) Which artists and works inspire you?

e) What role does art play in your life and how much importance do you place upon it?

f) If you were to describe yourself in three words what would those words be?

g) Where did you study, and do you feel that education is important in the creative field?

About the artworks:

2) Tell me about your themes, subjects, and methods in which you work?

3) Do you see/feel any limitations created in choosing a subject or a medium to explore your artistic career because of living and working in Iran?

4) How does your Identity come across in your work? How important is it for you to maintain an Iranian identity in your work?

5) Do you think that if you lived abroad, your work and attitude would be different?

6) Do you feel that you have a responsibility to get a certain message across to people?

What do you think about western or non-Iranian art?

8) To what extent do you identify with the contemporary woman Fine Artists of Iran?

9) Do you feel that you have total freedom in your work here? Do you always show the work that you want to show to the public in galleries, or do you choose them with attention to the taste of the public and what is acceptable by the government?

10) Do people judge your work with view to your identity or purely what they see?

11) To what extent is the understanding of the public near to what you have intended within your work?

12) Do you believe in art for arts sake or do you feel that an artist has a responsibility to the public to get a message across?

13) Do you think that if you lived abroad, your work and attitude would be different?

14) To what extent does the government support you, financially or intellectually (media and critiques?

15) Please give details of any competitions and or shows in which you have taken part?

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