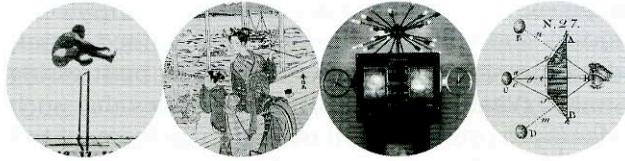


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Veiled Subjects: Shirin Neshat and Non-liberatory Agency

Adair Rounthwaite

Abstract

The controversy over Shirin Neshat's representations of Muslim women has been dominated by interpretations that use an unexamined liberatory model of agency to understand the artist and her subjects. Consequently, criticism of Neshat has become polarized by readings of Islam and women's agency as fundamentally incompatible, and the possibility of female subjects whose agency is grounded in and who aspire to Islamic values has been ignored. Using Saba Mahmood's theory of non-liberatory agency as a way to approach women's embodiment in Islamic culture, this article provides re-readings of the films *Turbulent*, *Rapture* and *Fervor* that suggest how Neshat's art can be read as depicting pious Islamic modes of embodiment.

Keywords

embodiment • Islam • Muslim women • non-liberatory agency • Saba Mahmood • Shirin Neshat

Gaining urgency post-September 11, a wave of media has sought to introduce Western audiences to a more user-friendly Islam as represented by Muslim women 'in their own terms'. For example, in *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* (2005), editor Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur states that her intention 'is to humanize American Muslim women to our fellow citizens of the world' (p. 6). In the visual arts, female artists of Islamic background such as Shirin Neshat, Zineb Sedira, Janane Al-Ani and Shirana Shahbazi are among a group of artists commended for 'seeking out the borders they first crossed, which are now emblematic sites of diasporic experience' (Elwes, 2005: 175).¹ Though this cultural tendency is much needed in many respects, failing to examine how the normative subject of these accounts is constructed in the discourse and dissemination that make them available to the public results in complicity with the reproduction of colonial power dynamics.

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The way that Shirin Neshat's art has been disseminated and marketed to bolster conservative agendas is discussed by Valentina Vitali, who demonstrates how Neshat rose to prominence during a period of increasingly close ties between exhibition spaces and corporate power in the United States, amid criticism that shut down possibilities of cultural hybridity by stressing her role as a Native Informant (Vitali, 2004: 3–10). Vitali argues that such criticism seeks to reduce identity to oversimplified traits such as 'woman' and 'Iranian', and that '[once] the boundaries are erected, the artist's work can be judged on the basis of whether it can "transgress", that is, whether it can operate "outside" "European preconceived ideas"' (p. 10).

One of the features that sets Neshat apart from many other artists dealing with contemporary cultural identity, whose work is easier for critics to ethically endorse, is that in both her art and public persona, Neshat fails to put her meditations on cultural origin and religious identification between scare quotes. As opposed to presenting us with a vision of identity that constantly qualifies its relationship to authenticity and refers to its own dispersion and citation in a globalized world in which, as Ernst van Alphen (2005) states, 'there are practically no places left . . . that are not hybrid in terms of culture' (p. 53), Neshat's work seems to say that the vision of identity it presents us with is 'really it', something that has a direct relationship with the origin. This tone has left Neshat and her art notoriously open to critiques that she creates a stable, binary image of Muslim women's identity that invites conservative appropriation and supports her own vested interests. However, it also makes her work a departure point for addressing questions of what it means to identify with a traditional culture or faith as if it were 'the real thing', as if it presented a set of norms which were not only foundational to the subject, but desirable to aspire to. Through employing anthropologist Saba Mahmood's concept of non-liberatory agency for an analysis of three of Neshat's best-known works, this article explores how Neshat's art offers a way of thinking about Islamic women's agency which is not reducible to the binary opposition of liberal freedom vs religious oppression employed overtly or covertly by the majority of her critics.

Over a hundred publications have been written about Neshat since the beginning of her career in the early 1990s. Vitali (2004) makes a distinction between those that promote the marketability of the work and those that purport to assess it critically, and shows how both amount to assessments of the work in terms of whether or not it represents a culturally authentic Other viewpoint (pp. 7–10). I too will make a provisional division in the criticism of Neshat's art between those authors such as Vitali, Alison Butler and Lindsey Moore, who discuss the ways that binaries have functioned in criticism of Neshat to market her art through exoticism, and authors such as Paul Miller, Negar Mottahedeh, Susan Horsburgh, Scott Macdonald and Ronald Jones, whose writing supports those binaries. The second group attributes agency to Neshat using models of individualized and emancipation-oriented subjectivity in a way that supports a monolithic conception of the 'third world woman' that is mapped onto constructions of the artist and her female subjects. Interestingly, Neshat's own statements about her work often fall into this category.

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The first group productively points out the problems with the second group's unquestioned use of binaries in discussing Neshat's art. However, the alternative readings they propose do not sufficiently deal with the fact that her work is specifically about Islamic culture and women. Instead, Moore, Butler and Vitali propose that the art and artist be understood in the context of a cosmopolitan world of hybrid identities and fluid exchange between cultures. For example, Vitali (2004) argues that Neshat's works provide an alternative to recent hardenings of national identities by stressing 'hybrid differentiations that soften native cultures and comparatively homogeneous forms of life in the wake of assimilation into a single material world culture' (p. 18). These readings do not fully engage with the fact that reactions to Neshat have been so strong specifically because most viewers see her work as being about Islam, and not about the elimination of borders between cultures. Though a construction of Neshat as authentically Islamic would be just another attempt to view her as a Native Informant, her practice clearly signifies Islam in mainstream art discourse, and I want to discuss it as such.

Among writers who deal with the question of how Western institutionalized feminist discourse should view Islamic women's agency, an important division lies between two groups. The first are liberal critics who to some degree uphold 'universal' liberal norms and rights regardless of cultural context, such as Seyla Benhabib (2002) and Karen Vintges (2004). The second group includes writers Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2002) who work with Butler- and Foucault-based models of subjectivization, and who question whether an individualizing, emancipatory model is one with which we should view the subjectivities of Muslim women. Mohanty and Mahmood specifically position themselves in opposition to liberal feminist approaches of the type practised by Benhabib and Vintges. As Mohanty (2002) writes, these approaches

discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular 'third world women' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (p. 53)

Mahmood briefly lays out her theory of agency in the article 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' (2001) and develops it further in her book *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005). In examining the ambivalent nature of women's agency within the Egyptian women's mosque movement, a context which *could* be read as a case of women's self-empowerment from a feminist viewpoint because their participation in public life is increased and they are brought into conflict with various levels of hierarchical authority (Mahmood, 2005: 2-3), Mahmood attempts to highlight the elisions that attend a focus on liberatory agency. She argues that:

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the ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression. This acknowledgement notwithstanding, it is critical to examine the assumptions and elisions that attend this focus on agency, especially the ways in which these assumptions constitute a barrier to the exploration of movements such as the one I am dealing with here. (p. 7)

Mahmood discusses Judith Butler's theory that social norms are the ground through which the subject is realized and comes to enact her agency. Mahmood states that her own theory of agency differs from Butler's in that the latter focuses on resistance in the possibility that iterations may be resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of the norm (p. 19). Instead, Mahmood wants to consider how norms can be inhabited or aspired to, and to re-explore the relationship between the imminent form a normative act takes, the model of subjectivity it presupposes, and the kinds of authority on which the act relies (p. 23).

Mahmood makes a connection between Foucault's emphasis on the importance of the embodied form for understanding modes of being, and the large emphasis placed in the mosque movement on outward markers of religiosity and socially authorized forms of performance. These outward markers and performances are seen as the ground through which the pious self is realized (pp. 27-31). In light of this, Mahmood states that the activities of the mosque participants are not a product of their independent wills, but of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceed the consciousness of the subjects they enable (p. 32). She writes:

Among mosque participants, individual efforts toward self-realization are aimed not so much at discovering one's 'true' desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self. The women I worked with did not regard trying to emulate authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained individual freedom. Rather, they treated socially authorized forms of performance as the potentialities – the ground if you will – through which the self is realized. As a result, one of the questions this book raises is: How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? (p. 31)

Key to Mahmood's text is her questioning of what sort of subject is assumed to be normative within a particular political imaginary. She argues that we must recognize that political formations presuppose not only distinct modes

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of reasoning, but also depend upon embodied modes of assessment (which of course includes Western assessment of the mosque participants). She clarifies that she is not saying that agency never manifests itself as resistance, but that to read the mosque movement only in terms of resistance ignores a whole dimension of politics that remains under-theorized (p. 35).

Far from arguing that we read the subjectivities of the women in Neshat's films precisely along the lines of Mahmood's accounts of the mosque participants, I want to use this theory to reveal the often invisible assumptions about agency and selfhood present in other authors' texts. The point is not to find a new model of subjectivity that shows how Muslim women 'really are', but to show precisely how loaded most readings of Neshat's art are with unexamined evaluations of Islam and the various ways of living in accordance with it. The kind of discursive colonization of Muslim women's lives that Mohanty critiques occurs in relation to Neshat's art through criticism which produces the Muslim woman as a symbol of what Islam oppresses, by envisioning the flourishing of women's lives within Islam as fundamentally unthinkable. In what follows, I attempt to undermine this equation of agency with a very specific type of resistance to domination (Mahmood, 2001: 203) by focusing on the notion that the subject's agency and desire are enabled by the culture of which she is a part. What type of art criticism might be produced if the possibilities of women who live, love and think within the context of Islamic belief were not figures whom our texts feared to address?

Of all Neshat's films, most criticism has centred on *Turbulent* (1998) *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000), a quasi-trilogy of black-and-white two-screen works. I viewed all three films at the Gladstone Gallery in New York in January 2006, and *Turbulent* and *Rapture* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in March 2006, and they are the focus of my analysis here.

In *Turbulent* (1998), a man and a woman both give vocal performances in the same auditorium space. The man is dressed in a white dress shirt and sings a love poem by Rumi to a smallish group of similarly dressed men who occupy the front section of the auditorium, while the woman wears a black chador and gown and sings abstract vocal music in an empty theatre. Throughout the piece, the male performer faces away from the audience toward the camera, except when he turns to bow and they applaud demurely at the end of his song. The camera films him in a static, frontal, single-channel shot. He performs first, and during that time the woman's back faces the camera in a similarly static shot. When he is finished, she begins to sing and the camera filming her starts to move, circling around her in a way that echoes her increasingly dynamic body movements (Figure 1). It is clear that both performers are lip-synching, the man to the voice of the famous Iranian singer Shahram Nazeri (MacDonald, 2004: 632), and the woman, Sussan Deyhim, to a digitally enhanced version of her own voice that echoes, soars and splits in noticeably artificial ways that are not always matched to the movements of her mouth.

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Figure 1 Shirin Neshat, *Turbulent* (1998), production still. © Copyright Shirin Neshat. Photo: Larry Barns. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Like *Turbulent*, *Rapture* (1999) shows two screens which appear initially divided between a group of men, dressed in modern Western-style white shirts and black trousers, and a group of chador-clad women. The men carry out various actions in a heavy, stone-walled fort or castle, and the women move in a 'natural' landscape of desert, beach and ocean. It is difficult to discern the goal of the men's activities, which include marching, sitting in a circle, pushing each other, and placing ladders against the stone walls, actions which are often accompanied by drums reminiscent of a military setting. By contrast, the women's actions are more recognizably directed, such as kneeling in prayer and walking towards the ocean to launch a boat (Figure 2). The two groups often appear to watch each other across spaces that are physically separated, only reconciled by the presence of the viewer's gaze that joins them both. Although, in the first part of the film, the women approach the camera and stand still facing it as a group, seeming to watch the men's turbulent and confusing activities, the work is dominated by the women moving and acting as a group as the men look towards the camera, and apparently towards them. This is emphasized at the end of the video, where a small group of women depart in the boat while the rest stand motionless on the beach facing away from the viewer, and the men stand waving their arms on the ramparts of the castle.

Fervor (2000) has two screens that are roughly occupied by a man on the left and a woman on the right but, unlike the other two videos, they sometimes cross over into each other's sides, and the filmed spaces overlap and diverge at points that constantly shift. The work begins with the man and woman

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Figure 2 Shirin Neshat, *Untitled (Rapture series – Women Pushing Boat, 1999)*, gelatin silver print, 44 x 68¹/₄ in. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

passing each other at a crossroads shown simultaneously on both screens. Again, the woman is veiled in black with her face exposed, whereas the man wears a Western-style suit, and she looks back and smiles as they pass. The two see or sense each other again in a space in which men and women are divided by a black curtain, and all listen to an authoritative man deliver a speech (Figure 3) that Neshat states is about the sin of being tempted by the opposite sex (MacDonald, 2004: 638). The man and woman seem to sense each other's presence though they sit on opposite sides of the curtain. Various subtle effects make it seem as if the video projects the woman's subjectivity, such as more close-ups on her face than on the man's, and the fact that at one point we see her clearly whereas the view of him is obscured by a black veil, as if we are seeing him from her point of view, behind the partition that divides the assembly space. The audio component escalates as both groups join the speaker in yelling 'Curse upon the Satan!' and thrusting their arms as if to expel the devil from the space – activities in which the man and woman do not participate either verbally or physically. The culmination of this is the woman running from the hall, after which she and the man cross paths once more in a street but do not acknowledge each other.

Alison Butler (2002) makes a move in the direction I take in this article in that she contextualizes the performance of the singer in *Turbulent* within Islamic culture, and writes that the performance could not 'exist without [that culture's] symbolic laws'. However, the exploration of what Neshat's art means in relation to Islamic values is sidelined by a focus on how the diasporic conditions of the art's reception distort the meanings that it had in the Iranian expatriate context of its production. Butler writes:

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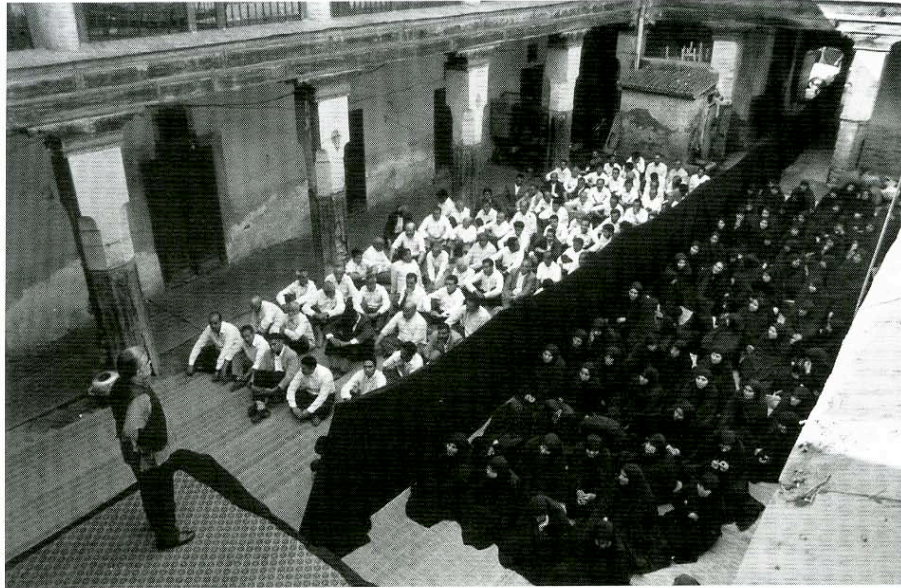


Figure 3 Shirin Neshat, *Fervor* (2000), production still. © Copyright Shirin Neshat. Photo: Larry Barns. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Neshat's films and installations articulate a politics of dislocation, of deterritorialisation and loss, through starkly dichotomized forms. However, there is a danger that beyond the exilic community from which they emerge and which they address in the first instance, their binary patterning will invite readings in terms of exoticism or demonisation of the Other. (p. 118)

Though I disagree that articulating a politics of deterritorialization is the main function of the works or that they primarily address an Iranian diasporic community, it is definitely true that, even in attempting to be culturally sensitive, many critics frame Neshat's work in relation to a series of binaries. The most insidious of these is not that of male/female, but the freedom/oppression binary that Mahmood (2001, 2005) contests. In the following paragraphs, I outline the arguments made about *Turbulent* by Paul D. Miller (1998), Negar Mottahedeh (2003) and Neshat herself, about *Rapture* by Ronald Jones (1999) and Scott MacDonald (2004), and about *Fervor* by Lindsey Moore (2002) and Susan Horsburgh (2000), and discuss how their interpretations perpetrate this binary opposition. Following each summary of these authors' approaches to a specific work, I offer my own reading of that piece based on Mahmood's theory.

In all of these arguments, the unquestioned use of agency 'as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination' (Mahmood, 2001: 203) prevents the authors from seeing possibilities for Islamic women's agency within their culture instead of outside, underneath, or against it. This operates largely through the implicit association of freedom with various iconographic

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elements in the two works – with the voice in *Turbulent*, with the natural landscape in *Rapture*, and with sexual desire in *Fervor*. Key to my method of reading here is Mahmood's (2005) argument that forms of embodiment are central to understanding modes of ethical subjectivization, and are not 'superficial particularities through which more profound cultural meanings find expression' (p. 119). Instead of assuming that we understand the subjectivities of the women in Neshat's films from the outset, and then mapping their actions into those preconceived notions, if we examine their actions and then 'elaborate the architecture of the self through the immanent form bodily practices take' (p. 121), different readings can emerge about what universals those actions might embody.

The freedom/oppression opposition is particularly evident in the ways that writers discuss the role of the veil in Neshat's work, such as in Miller's analysis of *Turbulent*. Miller's (1998) article explicitly frames Neshat's art as 'a powerful critique, not only of Iranian culture and the changing role of its women, but of the gaze of a world culture where the role of women must be questioned' (p. 156). Failing to specify which women he is referring to, and implicitly suggesting that the process of examining their roles is in itself the problem, Miller goes on to state that in *Turbulent*, the 'formal placement of Neshat's observations of Iranian women in a world of culturally inscribed limitations and their subsequent transcendence from their milieu become the foundation of an aesthetic based on a negotiation between the different screens' (p. 158). The man and the woman are 'two symbolic vectors', who operate 'in a realm where the devices of theater and intrigue, action and its electronic representations, have displaced the "real"' (p. 158). After she performs her song, 'the woman who appears to us stands affirmed in her culture, having transcended the silence and invisibility of the veil' (p. 164). In Miller's reading, the figures in the film become symbols that both replace and represent the reality that is Iran, whose contemporary historical situation is the actual subject matter of the film. This is a reality primarily based on a binary gender divide reflected in the formal structure of the work, a divide that is so unilaterally oppressive to the 'third world woman' that she can only become empowered by transcending the forms of embodiment forced on her by 'a history of prohibition' (p. 159).

Negar Mottahedeh and Neshat herself also make comments that depict Islamic women as having agency only insofar as they can operate outside cultural norms. Like Miller, Mottahedeh (2003) interprets *Turbulent* as a direct metaphor for contemporary Iran, stating that the work is a literal reflection of 'the law that forbids women to perform solo under the rule of the Islamic Republic' (p. 3). Additionally, for Mottahedeh, the man, whose 'music, considered acceptable by the current regime, maintains the status quo' (p. 3), directly represents cultural norms, whereas the woman, who 'in singing breaks every rule' (p. 3), becomes the symbol of freedom and resistance. Though Neshat herself does not precisely discuss the woman as a direct embodiment of freedom, she makes it clear that she sees the female singer's song as representing a necessary exit from culture, a sort of bid to attain an equal but different spiritual sphere:

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Through her own invented music, and breaking all the rules of traditional music, [the female singer in *Turbulent*] found her own way of escape, her own way of reaching that level of mysticism, or that which the men had achieved through their traditional music. She ultimately began a rebellion, and ended up freeing herself in her own improvised way. (Neshat, quoted in Ebrahimian and Neshat, 2002: 3)

Construing the woman's song in *Turbulent* as simply rebellious and free in comparison to the man's traditional song ignores the fact that her performance is virtuosic, the result of mastery of a tradition in which she was trained to acquire the ability to sing as she does. In order to explain her theory that there can be agency in the docile body, Mahmood (2001) offers the example of a concert pianist. She writes that:

we might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability – the requisite agency – to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated on her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as docility. (p. 210)

Not only does the performance of the woman in *Turbulent* trump the man's because she displays more virtuosic ability, but she commits herself physically to making her body the vehicle for rendering tangible a greater power. As stated earlier, it is clear that she is lip-synching, but lip-synching with a vengeance: her movements emphatically perform the intensity expressed in her voice, her body appearing almost as a vector through which energy moves to express itself as sound.

Understanding her song as a virtuosic one, a trained and masterful performance as opposed to a 'bizarre series of primal vocalizations' (Mottahedeh, 2003: 3), encourages us to consider the agency expressed in her song as one exercised through the enactment of Islamic cultural norms, and not as only being able to find form outside of them. While the man performs his song well but with a seemingly stiff disengagement, the woman throws her formidable virtuosity into a performance that comes much closer to communicating to the viewer something which could be understood as spiritual commitment and belief. In this reading, it is possible to consider her veil not as necessarily opposed to her agency, as Miller does, but as a form of embodiment she intentionally deploys, just as she intentionally uses her voice. Just as the song creates the woman's agency in that it renders it concrete, the veil can be considered as a means of attaining a certain type of selfhood. In her account of the mosque participants' veiling practices, Mahmood (2001) argues that they veil 'not to express an identity but as a necessary, if insufficient, condition for attaining the goal internal to that practice . . . The veil in this sense is the means both of *being* and *becoming* a certain kind of person . . . [not] an expression of a performed self' (p. 210).

The view that Neshat's work should be judged according to how closely it approximates the historical reality of contemporary Iran is found in the work of many other authors, including Ronald Jones. Jones begins his (1999) article for *Artforum* with a discussion of student protests at Tehran University, and then states that earlier readings of Neshat's work 'were never nimble enough to account for the evolving political and social policies of rectification, including the broad-based gains of Khatami's reform government' (pp. 111–12). In his discussion of the end of *Rapture*, Jones writes that 'if what we've seen is an act of suicide, it does not matter. . . If it is the sacrifice of the many for the few, there may be hope for salvation; if it is the sacrifice of the few for the many, it is martyrdom' (p. 113). The necessary opposition of cultural tradition to women's agency leads here to a reading that the women's action must represent either naïve hopefulness or self-sacrifice, shutting down any option for an Islamic female subjectivity that does not fall within that opposition. It also implies that, consequently, whether or not real Muslim women live or die does not matter because their actions will ultimately be judged according to an idealistic Western trope of freedom.

Rapture is also discussed by Scott MacDonald (2004) in his interview with Neshat, in which he begins by equating Neshat's own agency with the dichotomy between freedom of expression and religious tradition supposedly expressed in her art. He then goes on to conduct highly problematic analyses of her art in dialogue with the artist herself in a way that uses her participation as an authenticating signature that works to circumscribe other interpretations. MacDonald writes that Neshat's works

reflect the repressed status of women in Iran *and* their power, as women and as Muslims. They depict Neshat herself as a woman caught between the freedom of expression evident in the photographs and the complex demands of her Islamic heritage, in which Iranian women are expected to support and sustain a revolution that frees them from Western decadence and represses dimensions of their individuality and creativity. (pp. 621–2)

Though this quotation does contain the idea that being repressed and having power cannot be so easily demarcated, it still reduces Neshat's art to an expression of freedom that responds to an unproblematized historical reality of Iran. Equating Neshat as an individual with the women in her videos creates a number of problems, including the fact that it allows her to be viewed as the archetypal Muslim woman whose act of resistance is her art. That act of resistance is one that occurs primarily in a Western cultural context, outside the Islamic culture it supposedly critiques. Accordingly, though MacDonald attempts to conceptualize the agency of the women in *Rapture*, his inability to think about it as being enabled, not crushed, by Islamic cultural norms leads to a formulation in which it appears as a reenactment of *colonial* agency. He writes that at the end of the film 'the men are waving to the women, who seem to have given up and are rowing out to sea in search of new territory' (p. 636).

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Assuming as Jones and MacDonald do that the work must be a direct metaphor for contemporary Iran because it is made by an Iranian artist and employs Islamic imagery sidesteps the question of how religious symbolism functions in current historical and social situations, reducing the work to being read along the already power-loaded lines on which the West views Middle Eastern politics and culture. Far from guaranteeing progressive politically engaged scholarship which escapes from Western scholarly bias (Mahmood, 2005: 38), as these authors seem to think it does, drawing an unexamined parallel between Neshat's art and contemporary Iran can cause the art to simply be read as a 'placard of Islam's abuses' within a political climate where 'all forms of Islamism (from its more militant to its more quiescent) are seen as the products of a roving irrationality' (p. 199).

Reading the women's departure in the boat at the end of *Rapture* as either martyrdom, suicide, or conquest rests on a representation of the sea and ocean landscape as the unknown, that which is exterior to language and culture, and which presents either a threat to individual existence or an opportunity for that mode of existence to propagate itself through colonial expansion. Noticeably missing from this reading is the concept that destiny is controlled by the will of God, an organizing principle that is greater than individual thought or action. Mahmood (2005) clarifies that this conception of fate does not eliminate individual choice, but rather 'while God determines one's fate (for example, whether someone is poor or wealthy), human beings still choose how to deal with their situations (for example, one can either steal or use lawful means to ameliorate one's situation of poverty)' (p. 173). If *Rapture's* iconography of the natural landscape was instead equated with the omnipotence of God the creator, the women's departure in the boat would appear as the manifestation of a desire to entrust themselves to that divine will, to find a faith which is noticeably missing in institutionalized forms of religion.

In contrast to Jones (1999), who writes that the men in *Rapture* 'must represent the status quo of fundamentalist Islam in Iran' (p. 113), I suggest that their clearly non-Islamic clothing, reminiscent of Western administrative contexts, and their generalized military setting prevent them from being read as the signifier for a specific social agent. Instead, it encourages the viewer to read them as representing various different levels of authority to which Muslim women can be subject, which include domestic, foreign, religious and militaristic. At the end of the film, whether the men are waving to attract attention or to say goodbye, their gestures signal a distance from the important event that is taking place, whereas the women's departure is a way of realizing the event of faith in physical action.

The idea that individual Muslims must work to put into practice ideals which have become abstracted to systems of belief divorced from action is one of the major points on which Mahmood (2005) states that female mosque leaders and participants are critical of contemporary Egyptian society (p. 44). Mahmood writes that one of the mosque movement's main goals is assisting participants 'to render *all* aspects of their lives . . . into a means of realizing

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God's will' (p. 46) in ways which are sometimes in line with the various institutionalized forms Islam takes in Egypt, and sometimes are not. Considered in relation to *Rapture*, this goal offers a reading in which the women's departure represents an action that seeks to create an embodiment of faith different from the one present in institutionalized religion, but that simultaneously seeks submission to God in a way that is not antithetical to that advocated by mainstream Islam. Mahmood argues that, although the mosque movement has proved unsettling to state-oriented Islam – particularly because of the different connections it draws between the body, the nation and spirituality – to read the movement primarily in terms of how it challenges state and institutional authority 'ignores an entire dimension of politics that remains poorly understood and undertheorized within the literature on politics and agency' (p. 35).

Perhaps the most disturbingly problematic text I examined in my research was Susan Horsburgh's (2000) article on Neshat for *Time*, which opens with the following statement:

Fervor is pure erotica, though perhaps not the conventional kind. The female lead wears a formless black chador, with only her face exposed. She does not even meet the man's gaze. And for most of the 10-minute video the two are separated by a thick black screen. The sexual charge is tempered by an unsettling sense of sadness and yearning, of repression and isolation. In *Fervor* Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat offers a disturbing glimpse of Muslim society – one that can be seen at London's Serpentine Gallery until Sept. 3, then at Hamburger Kunsthalle in January. (p. 44)

In this quotation, the most clichéd stereotypes about how men and women behave are presented even before the author indicates that *Fervor* is a work of art. Not only is thwarted sexual tension designated as *the* content of the work from the outset, but it is implied that such repressed desire characterizes a monolithic 'Muslim society', itself a totality that viewers can experience and understand if they simply direct themselves to the Serpentine Gallery or the Hamburger Kunsthalle. Horsburgh uses Neshat's work both to present a titillating Orientalized view of Islam, and to depict Islamic cultural codes as the repressive agents that reign in an implied natural desire. She writes that when the man and woman 'next see each other on a deserted street, the physical barrier may be removed but they still pass by without a second look, their cultural taboos so deeply internalized' (p. 45).

Though she is critical of not-so-subtly Orientalizing accounts such as Horsburgh's, Lindsey Moore (2002) still propagates an opposition between sexual desire and Islamic cultural norms. Referring to Neshat's work as 'both productively troubling and somewhat disturbing' (p. 1), Moore argues that *Fervor* 'presents [a] frustrated attempt at individual assertion' (p. 10). In her analysis of Neshat's work, she writes: 'Disillusionment with cultural Islam is most pointed in *Fervor*. The female protagonist's departure from the mosque/theatre signals a refusal to corroborate the speaker's denunciation

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of female desire' (p. 11). In this account, 'female desire' is understood as necessarily sexual, and is attributed a natural potency which breaks through the Islamic cultural norms to which it is necessarily opposed, as when Moore argues that the work 'encourages a questioning of the effectiveness of policing the sexual gaze' (p. 14).

In criticism of *Fervor*, the equation of sexual desire with freedom and freedom with agency leads to readings that a sexual relationship is what the woman in the film necessarily wants. This forecloses other readings such as the possibility that she might veil by choice, attend the religious lecture because she really subscribes to its teachings, or purposefully cultivate shyness as a virtue, as do the women in the Egyptian piety movement whom Mahmood interviewed (Mahmood, 2001: 212–17). When the woman rushes from the assembly place while the crowd shouts and waves to expel Satan, she becomes identified with the figure of the devil in a way that seems to be the culmination of the tension that has developed between the flirtation and the religious setting. However, as I mentioned earlier, various formal choices in the film point to the fact that it is focalized from the woman's perspective, and consequently we might also see the identification of her with Satan and the sexual tension with sin not as how institutional Islam sees her, but how she sees herself. Accordingly, we could interpret her action not as fleeing from that institution, but as extracting herself from a situation in which she feels her piety is being compromised.

Mahmood states that for the mosque participants, faith is sedimented through performative action in which 'each performance builds on prior ones, and a carefully calibrated system exists by which differences between reiterations are judged in terms of how successfully (or not) the performance has taken root in the body and mind' (p. 216). We must be open to seeing a subject's potential judgement of her own actions as sinful, not as just 'the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized' (p. 16), but as a legitimate choice, and consider the possibility that the woman's decision not to look back at the end of the film is not just submission, but an act of agency because it is how she decides to enact her own faith. *Fervor* only presents a 'frustrated attempt[] at individual assertion' (Moore, 2002: 10) if we are unable to understand a woman's agency as being unable to be directed at anything apart from having a sexual relationship. Further, both Horsburgh and Moore ignore the culturally contextual nature of the desire, viewing the woman and man's attraction to each other as some sort of biological heterosexual magnetism, as opposed to examining the specific desiring gaze that is produced in cultural contexts that emphasize physical gender segregation and bodily concealment.

As I have attempted to show in this article, the necessity of using a non-liberatory model of agency to read Neshat's art is particularly pressing because of the large amount of scholarship which occludes her work's ability to address theoretically progressive debates about Islamic women's agency. Through the unquestioned application of the binary of freedom/non-freedom in reading Neshat's pieces, many critics polarize understandings of

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the works around axes of political usefulness, co-opting them for political agendas of varying degrees of conservatism by framing them as providing answers to a monolithic question of women in Islam. In such readings, the extent to which the subject's agency is enabled by and formed in her culture becomes lost. This makes it seem like Islamic women are incapable of taking agentival action within and in dialogue with traditional culture, and also makes us forget how dependent on cultural context are our conceptions of Islamic women in traditional cultures and our readings of Neshat's art. The readings presented here have shown the extent to which analyses that maintain the opposition between freedom and traditional culture not only work with unexamined understandings of explicitly Islamic signifiers in the videos, such as the veil in *Turbulent*, but are also founded on readings of other elements which are implicitly colonial, such as MacDonald's (2004) discussion of the boat and ocean in *Rapture*.

How this blindness is linked to critiques of Neshat herself as profiting immorally from misrepresenting Islamic women, which frequently depend on a host of unquestioned assumptions about the role that minority artists play in art-world politics, raises major methodological questions about how critics can ethically depict the agency of minority artists (as distinct from the agency of their works), which are beyond the scope of this article. Though I do not by any means see Neshat's works as politically or ethically unproblematic, I think that before condemning them as dangerously Orientalizing or commending them as advocating the liberation of Islamic women, we must first interrogate the models of agency on which those readings are based. Hopefully, in doing so, we can move away from reading the works as either representationally responsible or irresponsible, towards a consideration of how they might be seen to address a whole realm of agency and religious experience whose existence the West often seems too scared to even start to imagine.

What has been at stake here is the recasting of a particularly ferocious art critical debate from the past decade in a way that brings together contemporary theory about Islamic women's agency and mainstream international art that deals with Islamic forms of embodiment. Much of this debate and the indignation against Neshat it has involved would most likely have played out differently if an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective had been employed from the beginning to question what type of agency the art might be showing. Because many critics depart from stable liberatory assumptions about the subject present in Neshat's practice and those of other Muslim women artists, the non-cosmopolitan subject, who either does not want to or feels unable to belong to a world of cultural hybridity or Western-style empowerment, becomes largely neglected in their interpretations. Instead, we need to take up the challenge offered by some of these practices, and think about what those non-cosmopolitan subjectivities might mean for art criticism. In order to do so, it is essential to work closely with the texts of theorists in other disciplines, such as Mahmood, who challenge the way we think about subjects whose forms of embodiment we may find uncomfortably traditional.

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Note

1. Elwes's discussion is limited to video art, and Neshat is the only artist from this list discussed in her book; however, her statement is typical of the terms in which the art of many female artists of Islamic background is often interpreted.

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