

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Wandering Isle

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN ART

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 2014

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the motivations and inspirations that contextualize my artistic practice during the course of my 2-year MFA degree, including my thesis exhibition, *Wandering Isle*. Within this paper I investigate the notion of multiple identities as it applies to Iranian women in relation to different contexts such as history, place, politics and religion. Considering myself a storyteller, my research is based on lived experience and personal observations. I deconstruct visual elements such as Islamic patterns, Farsi texts and self-portraits in the context of culture and history in order to develop my own vocabulary which captures and encodes my states of being and becoming. Focusing on *hijab* as one of the most powerful forces that shapes women's identities in Iran, I make visible new identities, which develop in response to the concept of veiling and through acts of protest.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my appreciation to all those who provided me the possibility to complete my program. First and foremost I wish to thank the members of my supervisory committee for their insight and counsel through my two years of artistic and critical development. I would like to thank my Supervisor, Professor Paul Woodrow for his excellent guidance and continuous support. I would like to extend my special gratitude to Associate Professor Linda Carreiro for being an inspirational mentor and a great support at moments of despair. I would also like to thank Associate Professor Christine Sowiak and Dr. Jean-René Leblanc for their encouraging feedback and insightful remarks throughout the course of my program. Finally, a special gratitude I give to my family for their continuous support and for always being there for me.

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Introduction

Wandering Isle is the translation of an Iranian story written by a contemporary female writer, Simin Daneshvar. The story is about a young woman-artist during the 1979 revolution in Iran, trying to figure out which side she belongs to. The story has an allegorical structure: the woman is in love with two men, a communist artist and an Islamist intellectual (Communism and Islamism were two major oppositions during the revolution). She is confused between these two choices since she is aware whoever she picks, consequently will bring a whole system of unwanted ideology into her life. As an independent modern woman and artist, she has established her own system of thinking, without obeying any preconceived form of ideology (religion or communism). She constantly goes from one guy to another, like a floating island, trying to make this challenging decision without giving away her freedom.

Using the name of this novel is appropriate, due to the condition of Iranian women in the world today. They are in a similarity of this paradoxical situation to the situation of the heroine in this story. Making painful decisions while trying to remain independent, is central to my practice.

This paper is not about the theory of identity. It is actually comprised of a few personal stories in order to illuminate my art practice and thesis: a discussion of the many different identities that comprise Iranian women living in the world at present. Narrating my own life stories — what might be a personal story in fact — involves larger social considerations. Therefore my story is no longer just about me as an isolated individual but is applicable to a larger group of women with similar experiences. Where I come from the concept of identity is significantly important for the Fundamentalist¹ regime and people. Identity matters for the Fundamentalists in an ideological and religious context while at the same time Iranians have a very strong sense of national identity. Also

understanding the notion of self/other — in terms of recognizing *us* as whoever shares our beliefs, and *others* meaning whoever doesn't share them with us — is crucial in order to survive. The concept of 'Islamic Identity' is distributed everywhere through the media, the educational system (starting from a very young age) and of course through wall paintings, all over the city. Every child growing up in post-revolutionary Iran has a very deep understanding of the oppositional concepts of self/other. We start developing social identities from a very young age from the first moments that we have to attend social communities like pre-school, or parties at our parents' office. Children learn to digest how their family is different from what it is expected to be by the constitutional law. We all learned to hide our personal lives because certain behaviors might be considered as a crime, for example drinking alcoholic beverages or attending mixed gender parties. Therefore we learn we aren't one of "them". The first fact we discover about our social identity is that "I am the other". The next lesson to learn is regarding the complexity of identity due to many different and contradictory social masks that every Iranian wears in order to pass the thresholds of everyday life.

"Identity" is a very common subject matter for Iranian contemporary artists, those living inside or outside of the country. There are many different questions to be posed regarding Iranian identity. On the one side we question the schizophrenic way of living everyday life in Iran, violations of women rights and human rights, a formal dress code, our uncertainty towards the official religion, pride of Iran's history and culture, the gap between tradition and contemporary life. On the other side, those who leave the country experience oppression in a different way: being reduced to Western stereotypes of "Iranians" and discovering ourselves as an exotic object of the Western imagination, in the best case scenario. Outside of our homeland we are always considered as "foreigner"; or as Middle Eastern being considered Arab or Muslim (though many of us are not). Therefore, either inside of Iran or outside, I am considered as the "other".

My special bond with Iranian arts, poetry and literature (ancient and modern) has always influenced me as an individual, from everyday life to the process of making art. In a close relation to poetry and literature I developed some sort of sensibility to experience the world at a different level. Under such influence my work always displays a narrative characteristic. After coming to Canada, I kept thinking and working on the concept of social and cultural identity of an individual — an Iranian woman named *Setareh Minoofar* — more consciously and seriously. After a few months here, I figured out my life has developed many new different layers. I started to feel as a different person, but at the same time I was searching for the old me; the one who was hidden under the new layers of me. I sought to figure out what changed inside me in response to the external changes. Trying to find myself and redefine myself in relation to old and new contexts, I came to the conclusion that there is no solid “self”, rather many different selves, all living together under my name, moving constantly from one state of being to another.

This paper is the supporting document for my thesis exhibition at the Nickle Gallery, *Wandering Isle*. Throughout the paper, I try to clarify the relationship between my work and my constructed identities. None of the pieces is supposed to give a full vision of me to the viewer; they all have a vague quality as the consequence of the ambiguity of our state of being and also the vague nature of art. To me, art is all about fragments, or overlapping layers of being, narrating different interpretations of memories, feelings and our experience of every day. In my art I reject being direct and transparent; I save the right for myself to be opaque. Although I believe thinking about art and participating in the process of meaning-making is a way of recreating art, each time it is refabricated in a new way. The way I explain my work is only one way of talking or thinking about it; it is not the only way.

The first chapter is titled *Texture of Identity*. Texture is defined as the physical composition of something, also as the distinctive character or quality of something. Text and pattern in my work are cultural components that are used frequently to fill the surface, implying religious and cultural references, as well as traditional and political connotations that function at different levels. In this chapter I address two elements that have existed in my art: text and pattern. In the first section, *Unreadable Text*, the role of text in the context of Iranian culture and also the history of arts and literature will be discussed in order to explain my cultural and personal ties to Farsi (in oral and written forms), which is the language of the country. I stress that these texts are not meant to be read, discussing my reasons for stripping them of meaning in the context of Iranian contemporary society.

The second section is on *Pattern*. After expressing my attachment to patterns as a part of art history and Iranian culture, I will go back to the history of Islamic patterns and briefly point out their symbolic function and association with the Islamic ideology and subsequently how these are included in my own work.

Chapter Two is on *Territorial Identity*. In this chapter I begin with brief definitions about territorial identity, sense of belonging and distinction which causes feelings of “being the other”. By referring to different projects, I intend to display the procedure of altering my identity in relation to different places. I start with *Geography of Identity* in order to discuss notions of territoriality in relation to the homeland: Iran. The next section is on my performance piece entitled *The meSSagE*, when I acknowledged my deterritorialization and alienation as a result of moving to a new country and feeling as the other as a result of being in the context of a new but unfamiliar culture.

The last section of this chapter discusses my piece, *Lichen*. To interpret this installation I focus on the concept of reterritorialization and the challenging process of defining a new territorial identity including of old and new cultural elements in order to develop a sense of belonging in the new place.

Chapter Three, entitled *Framed Identity*, focuses on my thesis exhibition at the Nickle Gallery. The first section, *Framing my Face*, describes the significant role of self-portraiture in my work as the means of storytelling. I also try to acknowledge that through framing my face as an Iranian woman, in relation to different contexts, I intend to make visible the identities of majority of Iranian women, especially in relation to the mandatory *hijab* and its various effects on our lives. *Hijab*, or veiling, has different aspects, including an imposed dress code, depriving women from their right over their body and behavior, as well as banishing them from singing or dancing and suppressing their voices. *Wandering Isle* is a combinatorial series through which I aim to address different representations of veiling. In order to clarify how a history of suppression, under the name of *hijab*, affected the identity of Iranian women through centuries, I present brief histories of veil, dance and singing in Iran. Stories of the past (or history) inspire my art considerably, therefore I include these short histories of prohibitions imposed on bodies and lives of women. The long history of living behind the curtain causes great frustration which has grown silently and passively for centuries. In *Wandering Isle*, I narrate stories about manifestation of this passive frustration through simple acts of everyday life such as brushing one's hair or singing.

Over the last two years I navigated across different territories of my being. Through this journey I discovered how deeply I am affected by the stories of the others, from the heart of history to the skin of present. I collected these stories and interweaved them to mine in order to fabricate a new narrative which represents a new level of being. *Wandering Isle* reflects my identity as a wonderer

and a storyteller, all the way from Iran to Canada. I consider this exhibition as my body in which fragments of past and present, East and West, art and everyday life live together. I believe art, and only art, can be such a crossroad where the extremes meet and merge in order to create a new vision. I intended to employ this exclusivity to unveil certain aspects of hidden identities of Iranian women in the context of the contemporary world.

1. Textures of Identity

Unreadable Text

Using text in my work goes back to when I was an undergraduate student and has always played an important role in my work. Text as the written form of language has a very substantial role in development of a nation's identity. It relates individuals to history, culture and collective memory. By sharing a language, individuals connect and form a union; they become a nation. Farsi, the Persian language, plays a pivotal role within the discourse of Iranian cultural heritage. Many of Iran's cultural historians and literary critics start with the premise that the Iranian nation is defined primarily by Farsi, as a reservoir of Iranian thought, sentiments, values, and a repository of its literary arts. It has been by loving, learning, teaching and above all enriching this language that the Iranian identity survived the numerous invasions of Romans, Arabs, Turks, Mongols and all other intruders and their long-term dominations through the history.²

The textual component in my work is not for reading. I use Farsi text as a written form of my language (and I stress on calling Farsi "my language" because it gives me a sense of cultural and national belonging). I use Farsi to refer to my national identity, to reference certain aspects of Iranian culture which reside in language, such as literature and poetry. My art is nourished by literature and poetry. Therefore I employ text as a visual signifier in order to point out this strong connection. The significant role of Farsi in the process of defining my identity as an individual and also my artistic identity, no matter what is the content of the texts, is fundamental.

As long as I was living in Iran nobody cared about the content and meaning of the text I used. Using reversed or altered text, I purposely made it unreadable. But after coming to Canada I encountered this question over and over again: What do the texts mean? In my works the texts are

written in an unreadable and undecipherable way. It looks like written text, but it doesn't communicate as text. Someone once told me that text, in my paintings, works metaphorically as the stream of thoughts, like a flow of unrelated words that comes to mind without any specific meaning. More importantly the juxtaposition of text and image has a long history in Iranian art. I consciously use the same strategy but with a major difference. Through the history of Persian manuscripts, the text and image were connected in an obvious and clear way; they conveyed the same content as much as possible. I challenge this direct relationship and use the text in order to interrupt the image. So instead of completing the meaning of each other, text and image overlap and intersect in a confusing and challenging way. Consequently, not only is text meaningless but it also hides the image partially and in this way the text works as a veil which prevents us from having access to the image. There is no message in the text anymore; the message is concealed in the relationship between the text and image. In this instance, I have used text as a communicative medium which fails to communicate, negating its purpose.

Growing up in post-revolutionary Tehran, I spent the first 8 years of my childhood with war. The emerging Fundamentalist regime felt the necessity of educating people and re-familiarizing them with forgotten Islamic values. Gaining the support of people, as much as possible, was the most important goal of the young regime. One of the most common methods of educating people was writing slogans and quotations on the walls. These writings encouraged people to join forces, donate food and money, invited them to say prayers, guard their *hijab*, warn them about the hereafter punishment of the infidel. This menacing and prejudiced text was drawing a line between good people and bad people, women and men, Muslim and non-Muslim, us and the other. In this politicized Islam there was no place for interpretation; no freedom of thought, every word was an order: an authoritative statement. The text was everywhere before people's eyes functioning both

coercively and oppressively. The text became a new burden. The dictatorship of text dominated my life for more than two decades. In my early twenties, I connected deeply with literature and poetry. I learned about the redeeming power of metaphors and allegories, also about deviant use of text. As an artist I became a rebel, stood up against dictatorship of the text and took its power away: “the meaning”. What remained was the visual form, which I have always admired, and the notion of “using the text” with its national and intellectual connotations, as I described before.

Different fonts of Farsi that I use in my work have different emotional connotations because of their divergent characteristics and usage. I usually employ two fonts: *Naskh* and *Nastaliq*. *Naskh* is used in publishing industry, especially newspapers. *Nastaliq* is the modernized and computerized version of an Iranian calligraphic technique. Aesthetically very beautiful, it is composed of many curves (unlike *Naskh* which has fewer curves and is more angular) and therefore it has a dynamic and vigorous quality. Handwritten *Nastaliq*, as a traditional form of calligraphy, is considered as art and has been used to write poetry, due to its inherent beauty, for centuries. To me, as a serious reader of poetry, this font possesses a poetic quality. Even as computerized font it has artistic qualities so I find it more personal and pleasant. As a result of frequent use in governmental newspapers, *Naskh* acquired a political-ideological connotation, while *Nastaliq* owns cultural and artistic inference.

Later on, adjacent to the use of *Naskh* and *Nastaliq*, I began to handwrite the texts. Until then I always executed the texts through silkscreen techniques. After a while, I felt the urge to create a more emotional and expressive way of writing. To write my texts, I used a subversion of old *Nastaliq* which is technically very similar to drawing. In addition to its visual allure it was intuitive, meditative and individualistic. I employed the handwritten text for writing about my daily life and also my own poems and stories. I developed three forms of texts with different metaphorical

text). In *Geography of Identity* my texts are written in different ways, using varying fonts and techniques. The choices are based on emotional motivations and are related to some personal memories and experiences. The act of writing (or removing the paint) happened very quickly, it was very intuitive and expressive. I like to read this act as a metaphor: the poured paint hides the painting beneath like a veil, but the text unveils this hidden layer and releases its lure from the burden of veil. [Fig 2] In *Geography of Identity*, the dynamic relationship between text, pattern and self-portraiture is significant for the process of meaning making. This piece forms a significant turning point in my creative work, with each panel addressing underlying themes of territory, veiling, and the complexity of one's multiple identities. These issues became the basis of my thesis exhibition.

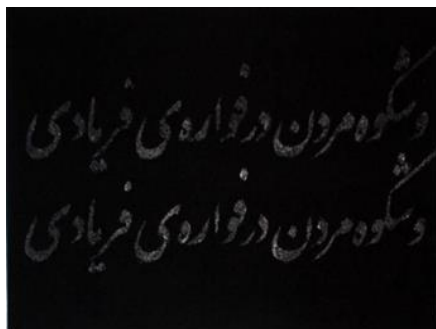


Fig. 2. Details of *Geography of Identity*

Patterns

Two years ago, I found myself in the West, in a location where I felt culturally displaced and disoriented. My culture gave me sense of belonging and dignity. It kept me connected to my roots. I used motifs found on Islamic tiles, fabrics and rugs to exhibit traces of my cultural identity, as an Iranian who came from an ancient civilization with thousands of years of history in arts, science and philosophy. So while I was criticizing the oppressive policy and pointing out the violation of women's rights in some pieces, at the same time I wanted to exhibit the beauty of Iranian art culture which made me feel proud of being Iranian. I wanted to remind everybody, including myself, that it wasn't all ugliness and repression.

On the other hand patterns and decoration formed an enriched symbolic and spiritual vocabulary in Iran after the invasion of Muslim Arabs in the seventh century.³ The figurative artistic traditions were profoundly influenced by the Islamic ideology. The Islamic resistance to the representation of living creatures ultimately is the result of a belief that asserts the creation of living forms as unique to God. It is for this reason that the role of images and image-makers has been controversial. The strongest statements on the subject of figural depiction are made in the *Hadith* (Traditions of the Prophet), where painters are challenged to "breathe life" into their creations and threatened with punishment on the Day of Judgment. The Qur'an is less specific but condemns idolatry and uses the Arabic term *musawwir* ("maker of forms," or artist) as a nickname for God. Consequently the figures in Persian paintings were often stylized and, in early Islamic era, the destruction of figurative artworks occurred. As ornament, however, figures were largely devoid of any larger significance and perhaps therefore were less challenging. Instead, vegetal and geometrical patterns employed alone or in combination with the other major types of ornament—calligraphy, geometric pattern, and figural representation—adorn a vast number of buildings, manuscripts, objects, and

textiles, produced throughout the Islamic world. The vegetal and geometric patterns of Islamic art are often said to reflect the Islamic view of the world. To Muslims, these forms, taken together, constitute an infinite pattern that extends beyond the visible material world. They symbolize the infinite, and therefore centralized nature of the creation of the one God (Allah) and convey a spirituality without the figurative iconography. To the adherents of Islam, the continuous patterns are symbolic of their united faith and the way in which traditional Islamic cultures view the world. There are two modes to Islamic decoration. The first recalls the principles that govern the order of the world. These principles include the essence of what makes objects structurally beautiful. Therefore each repeating geometric form has a built-in symbolism attributed to it. For example, the square, with its four equilateral sides, is symbolic of the equally important elements of nature: earth, air, fire and water. Without any one of the four, the physical world, represented by a circle that inscribes the square, would collapse upon itself and cease to exist. The second mode is based upon the curving nature of plant forms. Traditionally this mode recalls the feminine nature of life giving.⁴

As an Iranian, I read the subtext of these patterns in association with culture, history, tradition and religion. In addition to symbolic implications in the context of Islamic beliefs, these patterns are international signs that refer to specific geopolitical areas of the world. They represent Islamic architecture, especially mosques, in which they have been used as ornaments. In this way they can be associated with religious overpowering. [Fig 2]

In *Wandering Isle*, my thesis exhibition, exhibited at the Nickle Galleries in September 2014, the pattern and text are used together to suggest two different connotations: firstly, they express a cultural reference used to convey identity; and secondly, they are employed as a metaphorical representation of the Islamic repressions and the religious creed enforcing the veil on women. Each

piece represents a different state of being or various states of being, and based on the context text and pattern play different roles. In relation to place and geography, and in the context of history, they become cultural elements which refer to stories of the past and their impact on contemporary life. In contrast, within the context of religion and politics of an ideological society, text and pattern metamorphose into the arm of suppression and transform into a virtual veil which covers lives of people and shuts their voice. In the following chapters, the different connotations of text and pattern will be discussed further in relation to territory and politics of *hijab* in Islamic Iran.

2. Territorial Identity⁵

Mapped Identity: Geography of Identity

A few months after leaving Iran, I exhibited an installation entitled *Geography of Identity* in 621 Gallery at the art department. [Fig 1] Since coming to Canada, as a result of finding myself different than others, the question of identity occupied my mind. Trying to figure out what makes me different, I concentrated on the geographical factor which seemed to be the most obvious and reasonable response. Through working on *Geography of Identity* I tried to redefine my identity, as an Iranian woman-artist, in relation to social, cultural and political contexts of my country. In general *Geography of Identity* was an attempt to answer that burning question, “who am I?”: a question impossible to answer. There is no such thing as a single identity; we have multiple identities each constructed by different social roles.⁶ The multi-panel structure of *Geography of Identity* addresses the notion of multiplicity.

Geography of Identity possesses the structure of a puzzle, functioning as a metaphor for the enigmatic nature of one’s identity. The multiple panels of various sizes are put together to form the approximate shape of map of Iran, including a linear drawing of the border. Each piece could be read independently and also all the sections combine to form one coherent piece. It was like a country having different provinces with different characteristics; each territory has its own independency but at the same time, these independent provinces are united as a whole country. In the same way, an individual has different identities always changing, yet all these different identities fuse together under one name which distinguishes that specific individual from others.

After the show was over and I took *Geography of Identity* down, I rearranged the pieces and hung them on the wall of my studio. Every once in a while I changed the arrangement. The piece would

create a new dialogue every time. I came to this conclusion: since the components are not attached, the overall shape of the work is flexible. Due to this flexibility the work functions like an organically living creature. This quality adds a new layer of meaning to the work in terms of multiplicity of identities. It might be best to put it this way: identity is always developing, always altering and metamorphosing in relation to various internal and external factors, just as *Geography of Identity*. Each component is influenced by what is adjacent to it.

Geography of Identity was the beginning of a serious period of research and a continuous process of analyzing the idea of identity and how it's affected and shaped in relation to a place: the social, political, cultural and historical territory called Iran. *Geography of Identity* was in fact an introduction to all the works that I produced during my master's program. The same themes were separated, developed and transformed into fresh ideas for each new installation.

Since *Geography of Identity* was about the relationship between my personal identity and my national identity, I chose the map of Iran as the overall shape of my work. No doubt that there is an intimate and unique link between individual and place. Place intervenes in the production and reproduction of personal and social identities. More generally, place and identity are mutually constituted. Place is one of the most important elements affecting the process of developing national identity. To define national identity people try to analyze their relationship to their country (a politically and socially structured place). National identity gives us a sense of belonging to a place. After leaving Iran, being distanced opened my eyes to new facts regarding my position in Iranian society. I started to interpret my place in that society. I began to examine my "Iranianness" as a female artist.

I Am The Other: “The mESSAgE”

In the summer of 2013, I did a performance in downtown Calgary that explored the idea of my relocation from Iran. Clad in a homemade dress with printed text and patterns, I walked along Stephen Avenue and offered small handmade packages (placed on a tray) to pedestrians. [Fig 3] I



Fig.3. The meSSAgE, Performance on Stephen Avenue, 2013- Photo credit: Isabel Porto

wore a patchwork dress made of pieces of canvas (the material used for painting) which were ornamented with Iranian cultural elements: Farsi text and Islamic patterns. [Fig 4] The text was partially handwritten and the rest of it was screen printed, using black ink. In making this dress I didn't use traditional techniques of sewing, instead gluing pieces of canvas together and binding the seams with a stapler. The reason that I avoided using regular sewing techniques was that this dress wasn't an actual dress; it was a metaphor for my cultural identity. Patches of the dress represented little cultural bits that built the whole entity of my cultural identity. I put the pieces together and constructed my cultural identity as a dress. I even covered my shoes with this fabric.



Fig. 4. *My skin*, printed canvas, 1.5 x 3 m. 2013

I made 90 packages to give away. Each package was constructed of a piece of brown paper, crumpled and wrapped in the same printed fabric that I used to make the dress, forming a little pouch. The paper had text on both sides. On one side the word “message” was printed (by an inkjet printer) employing various fonts and sizes. On the other side I wrote (by hand): “The message is here”. I put the pouches on a tray which was covered in the same fabric and offered the tray to the strangers in the street.

The ideal location for this performance was a public place, not an art gallery. In an art gallery I am defined and recognized as “the artist” and this part of my identity stands stronger than my “otherness”. For this performance, I needed to be anonymous, and introduce myself to strangers by exposing my cultural difference. This is why I made a dress out of unreadable text and exotic patterns and also gave a piece of the same fabric to the pedestrians as a souvenir. This was my symbolic way of cultural exchange. For a year I observed and absorbed Calgary; now I was giving

back a piece of my cultural skin, in exchange. In the beginning of the performance, I arrived at the location wearing regular clothes. There was no difference between me and anyone else; I was culturally invisible (as a part of Iranian culture). I put on the dress and exposed my cultural identity in a society which had nothing in common with Iranian culture. As a result of this act I metamorphosed into the “other”. At the end of the performance I hid the overt Iranian symbols and motifs, (by changing into my everyday cloths) retransforming myself into the “culturally invisible” again.

I chose performance as my medium because of its interactive characteristic since this piece was about social interaction with the cultural “other”. Despite what might come to mind, the message was not concealed in the packages. The package was a part of the message and also an excuse to interact with strangers and observe their reaction. The message was me, veiled in a text that nobody could read and the packages were an extension of me. I wanted to stress my otherness and see how people responded to it. On the other hand I wanted to be active, not passive, so I prepared the pouches to make the connection more emotional and to prolong the memory of the experience.

The act of “offering” is an ancient form of ritual in Iran. People offer candy, pastry or halva (fudge) to the strangers in the streets. It happens in different occasions, from public events like national celebrations, to personal events like the death of a close relative. All religious reasons aside, this is a way of social connection in the times of extreme sadness or happiness, a way to relate to the society, and consequently survive loneliness or sadness. Offering can be perceived as a form of emotional exchange. The distributor gives out food (a form of caring for the others) to receive sympathy, blessing, or support (another form of caring); it is an emotional transaction. Through this act, strangers temporarily connect and feel closer to each other. I borrowed this structure and reconstructed it in my performance for different reasons. First of all, using an ancient and

traditional act added a cultural layer to my performance, another fragment of my cultural identity. Secondly, I found the strategy of “offering” as a very successful tactic to entice people and arouse their curiosity. Most importantly, the structure of transaction functioned for my purpose perfectly. I distributed cultural packages between people. These distributed messages were made of the same cultural fabric that I was wearing to demonstrate my difference.

The mESSagE took place one year after I moved to Canada. Until then all of the art work I produced in Canada was about my identity in relation to Iran. After a while I started analyzing my situation in the context of the new environment. I realized being a foreigner in Canada added another layer to my identities. I classified this new characteristic as another level of “being the other”. I was culturally dislocated in an environment that I didn’t belong to. I found out under the new circumstances that I was culturally invisible so I tried to become visible. I realized a natural need to expose the hidden layer of my cultural identity. But although I was being observed, at the same time I was the observer, therefore there was a sense of equality: nobody was in control, nobody was objectified, neither the artist nor the participants. In this performance even the people who didn’t participate became a part of it, just through the act of witnessing. And any form of reaction, comment, question or rejection was accepted as a part of this performance.

Reterritorialized Identity: Lichen

One year after completing *Geography of Identity* I exhibited a new installation entitled *Lichen*. If *Geography of Identity* was a piece about my identity when I was living in Iran, *Lichen* was about my newly developed identity in Calgary. This project explored the idea of identity in relation to place and how a foreigner develops strategies to define a safety zone — a personal territory in which the personal and external zones intersect and live together. This piece is a study of my

relationship to the city in which I had lived for 19 months and how it is constantly influences my self-recognition of my “self”. The process of working on this project began after my performance *The mESSagE*. As a result of re-examining my situation in Calgary, I contemplated the idea of exposing my identity and discovered a new strategy: applying my identity to my surroundings by leaving a personal and unique trace or signature.

When referring to culture, sociologists use the term deterritorialized to refer to weakening of ties between culture and place. This means the removal of cultural subjects and objects from a certain location in space and time. It implies that certain cultural aspects tend to question specific territorial boundaries in a world that consists of things fundamentally in motion.⁷ After moving to Canada I faced the absence of Iranian culture in the environment around me. Therefore I felt lost and disoriented. As a solution, I reterritorialized myself in this new location. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization are seamlessly conjoined; when deterritorialization happens, reterritorialization occurs immediately; there is no pause. When some layers of my identity started to change, the replacement process was in progress. Cultural elements that I employed in my work for years, in the new environment didn't seem to be the same or function in the same way. As I was changing, my cultural identity was changing with me, attempting to adjust itself with a new culture.

The new work was comprised of everyday life objects and video. [Fig 5] The objects were wrapped in canvas. The canvas is covered with personal and cultural elements such as Middle Eastern motifs, texts in Farsi (hand written and screen printed) and self-portraits (veiled and unveiled) which represent my identity as an Iranian woman. I wrapped over 150 pieces of my belongings in this fabric, from clothing and accessories to domestic objects, such as shoes, sunglasses, chair, tables, silverware, cups, bottles, cans, paint brushes, a palette, clock, paint and glue containers (used for the same project). [Fig 6]



Fig. 5. *Lichen*, Objects, Printed canvas, Glue, Video, 2013



Fig. 6. *Lichen*, Objects in the studio, 2013

I named this installation *Lichen*. *Lichen* is a composite organism consisting of two living organisms growing together in a symbiotic relationship. This idea of symbiotic relationship is very significant. My newly developed identity in Calgary is like lichen, since it is the result of two coexisting elements: the old *me*, a foreigner who arrived in this city carrying a cultural suitcase, and this city. The new *me* is a territory in which Iran and Calgary coexist.

The patchwork fabric that I used for making the dress for *The mESSagE* was an efficient form to encode my multi-layered identity. I added a new component to the cultural elements: my self-portrait. The self-portraits represented me veiled and unveiled, the old and new me. This new element in addition to the old elements shifted the significance of the fabric from cultural connotation to a personal narrative, focusing on the subject of the portraits. I realized that the cultural elements (Farsi text and patterns) in Canada gave me a sense of personal identity instead of national or collective identity. Before coming to Canada my Iranian-cultural identity was embodied within me but I was unaware of its significance. This changed when I came to Canada. What I had in common with 70 million Iranians turned into something private and personal in a new territory. I realized my Iranianess as a very personal characteristic and a very essential part of my identity in Canada, since it was the most significant factor that distinguished me from the others here.

I selected newspaper and *nastaliq* font for texts which were quoted from a writer or poet, and interspersed these with handwritten description when making personal references. I started writing my diary, poems and short stories on the objects, then shred the fabric to make it impossible to follow the story, in case somebody was able to read Farsi. Metaphorically the fabric became a well in which I whispered my secrets. After preparing big sheets of printed or handwritten fabrics, I cut them into small pieces and glued to the surface of the objects, usually upside down.

Wrapping the objects was a daily process for about 5 months, from August to December 2013. It was a ritual. Every day, I covered a few objects in the fabric. Through this act I personalized them and converted them from banal objects into something unique. Not only did I register my identity through the objects but also time, memory and my own DNA. My identity gave those objects a distinctive identity. With wrapping each object I acknowledged and re-enforced my identity over and over again through repetition.

I call this fabric “my skin”. [Fig 4] Skin is the exterior layer of our body. It is like a container. Besides covering our whole body, the skin contains information regarding our DNA, gender, race, age and lifestyle, therefore skin is a part of our identity. Skin is affected by environmental factors and duration so it records traces of time, place and memory. The fabric become the skin of my identity, encompassing the history of my past and the story of my everyday life for more than five months, marked and scared by painful displacement. By wrapping my belongings in the fabric I extended the territory of my body and created my own little island. For the installation in 621 Gallery, the objects were placed on the floor close together, in the middle of the dark space, like an island in the middle of nowhere. I use the term nowhere to refer to an unknown territory from a foreigner’s perspective. In this unknown place I felt displaced and alienated. In reaction to this alienation I tried to build my personal space and develop a sense of belonging.

Throughout the exhibition, a video was projected on the objects and the wall behind, with the structure of a 4x5 grid, comprised of 20 video segments. I chose video as one of the most convenient media for storytelling and to reflect the time-based quality of surveying a territory. The structure of the grid provided the potential of framing different parallel moments of my everyday life to implying its complexity. Videos used in the installation were recorded over 8 months in Calgary. My daily paths — the path from my apartment to the grocery store, to my studio, walking

around the campus or wandering around downtown in different seasons and different times of day — all were documented in the videos. I used my cell phone's camera to record the images. The cell phone as an everyday personal object was a very convenient way to record casual images. The videos were not cut or edited. My movements and hand tremors are registered in them without being censored. The video infers the relationship between my body and my surroundings and my natural reflections. Since the camera was my eye, I hold it at my eye level during the recording. The video was my way of framing the city's landscape and my personal involvement at certain places. I saw myself as a wanderer, an explorer, and the video became a subjective narrative of my everyday journeys around this city.

The projection of the video on the objects added another layer to the surface of objects; they seem to merge like the video and objects merge and alter each other's identity. The scenery of Calgary was combined with the patterns, texts and my portraits; the images of the city are shaped by the forms of the objects.

When I made the video instead of a simple neutral background, I employed an image of the printed fabric as the backdrop. Every time one of the video segments ended, for a short period of time the fabric was revealed adjacent to other videos displaying the city. At the end of the video (the duration was 20 minutes) when all the images of the city ended one after another, the fabric took their place and appeared in its entirety, projecting on the wall and objects. The video was constructed as a loop, therefore the image of the fabric was both seen at the beginning and at the end. [Fig 7]



Fig. 7. *Lichen*

3. Framed Identity

Framing my face

Framing my face refers to the act of placing my self-portrait in different contexts in order to investigate and discover my different identities. Focusing on my self-portrait defines a border around my face which demands attention and creates endless potentials for narrating stories based on the newly unveiled aspects of my identities.

Art historian Shearer West describes portraits as “aesthetic objects,” with “pragmatic and symbolic function.” West also explains that: “self-portraiture by its very nature engages in some way with artistic identity, but how that identity is represented and perceived is heavily influenced by the status and gender of the artist at different periods in history.”⁸ In general, portraits act as signifiers and they can carry cultural and social codes which represent politics of race, gender, class and therefore power. One of the most important elements of traditional portraiture is the depiction of the facial features, which can provide visual clues for decoding ones identity or can act as internal or external narratives. I have always used my own portrait in my art. It seems reasonable to say since I focus on my identity, I will use my own portrait. And by portrait I don’t mean just focusing on the face or torso, but on parts of the body or certain objects and belongings associated with the body. In *Geography of Identity* most of the portrait panels (except for two) depict my face. [Fig 1], [Fig 2] I believe the face is the first level of one’s identification and maybe this is why there is a photo on every identification document that we possess. Although the face is just a small part of our body, it has an important impact on how others define and recognize us. The face is the main means through which we communicate socially with others. Information is transmitted to others by means of facial expression. For Iranian women, while most of the body should be veiled,

the face and hands are allowed to be unveiled. Thus in Iran, a woman's face plays a very significant role in her social interactions. The way a woman wears make up or wears her veil is very informative in terms of social projections, for example, if she is a modern woman (educated and independent), a traditional religious, a religious Fundamentalist, a religious modernist or any variation of prescribed social groups. In *Wandering Isle*, my thesis exhibition, I employ the self-portrait as a frame in order to narrate stories about how identities of Iranian women are being affected by the imposed *hijab*. [Fig 8]



Fig. 8. *Wandering Isle*, Multimedia, Nickle Galleries, 2014

To Be or Not To Be Veiled: *Wandering Isle*

The title of my thesis exhibition, *Wandering Isle*, is inspired by an Iranian novel. As mentioned in the introduction, the story is about a young woman trying to define her own independent identity

in relation to two men who represent two opposite sides of the intellectual tendencies which were very popular in Iranian middle class during 1979 revolution. Metaphorically, this novel narrates the story of Iranian women's identity in relation to the revolution and its consequential social changes. One of the most challenging concerns of Iranian women in Islamic Iran have been *hijab* and its different interpretations in different levels of Iranian women's social and personal life. In an attempt to create their identities, Iranian women wander constantly in between refusing or accepting *hijab*.

Brief History of *Hijab* in Iran

Veil or *hijab*⁹—covering a woman's body in public and in the presence of unrelated men—is the most noticeable Islamic obligation. For Islamist Fundamentalists, *hijab* represents their individual identity and their statement to religious authenticity: it's a divine mandate that protects women and defines their place in society. The majority of Iranian people are Muslims or supposed to be Muslims. However, the significance of the veil had not been imposed throughout history in Iran by the clerical class before the 1979 revolution. In the early sixteenth century, dominant interpretations of the Qur'an did not legislate veiling, which was practiced mostly only by the "wealthy" in Iran. However, it is in the late seventeenth century that there was a change in "the form of Islam embraced by the dominant classes change"¹⁰ and correspondingly the veiling of women became prevalent. As Mino Moallem, Iranian sociologist, asserts, "during the second decade and a half of the twentieth century, called the post-constitutional period the modernizing and westernizing nation-state was established by Reza Shah Pahlavi, replacing the Qajar dynasty. In 1925, Reza Shah became Shah, ruling until 1941, when his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, replaced him"¹¹. It is in the early twentieth century that Reza Shah initiated his modernizing reforms. Reza Shah imposed European dress on the population, opened the schools to women and

permitted them to enter the work places. In 1936, Reza Shah abolished the wearing of the veil.¹² A large group of women chose to stay at home rather than confront police, who pulled the veils from their heads. Eventually, the leaders of the religious right insisted on a more patriarchal repressive version of Islamic law, and after the 1979 revolution, whatever its initial progressive ideals, the combination of the dominance of such patriarchal versions of Islam with strong anti-Western sentiment meant that veiling became once again mandatory.¹³ Indeed, the meaning and significance of the veil have been interpreted according to the social and political conditions in Iran across its history by the ruling systems in Iran.

Veiling and unveiling have been used instrumentally by the governing elite to consolidate the foundations of its power. In the Pahlavi era, political and cultural tendencies to the West can be seen, which led to unveiling. After the 1979 revolution, on the contrary, the Islamic government's political and cultural tendencies were against the West, particularly the U.S., and veiling became compulsory. Between 1979 and 1980, some women's spontaneous demonstrations against the mandatory veil occurred. Unfortunately, the non-Islamist and leftist organizations agreed with the Islamic State's policies regarding the veil, and they argued that focusing on women's rights was individualistic and bourgeois, and played into the Islamists' hands. Therefore, women were left alone in their battles against women's rights' violation, and veiling became mandatory in the Islamic state. In post-revolutionary Iran, there was no choice for women regarding the veil. The significance of the veil is manipulated, turned into a means of power for the Islamic State to show its victory, and a sign of subordination for Iranian women. Iranian writer, Azar Nafisi puts it as the 'politics of the veil', referring to the women who wear it as 'political signs and symbols'. She argues further "in many important ways the veil had gained a symbolic significance for the regime."¹⁴ The veil, in Iran, is an instrument to show that the government has gained power to

impose its own dream on women. Since there remains no choice for women in such a political context, the veiling limits their freedom of choice and affects their identity.

Wandering Isle

Wandering Isle is my thesis exhibition, a series of works in response to my relocation to Canada from Iran and the resulting shifting identities. It also poses questions surrounding the veil in contemporary society, both metaphorical and literal. *Wandering Isle* is a combinatorial piece consisting of: *Geography of Identity*, *Shahzad*, *The Big Black Bird*, *The Forbidden Song*, and an installation titled *Behind the Curtain*. Also included are a series of prints, which includes *Framed Dancer*, *Good/Evil*, *Shamseh In Progress*, *Full Shamseh*, *Niqab* and *I Am Here!* This exhibition focuses on the issue of the mandatory *hijab* in Iran applied on different aspects of women's life and identity. The imposed *hijab* not only covers women's body but also controls their behavior and social roles, for example it bans them from singing and dancing. The source of inspiration for this thesis exhibition comes from when I was in London where I saw many veiled women. It was the first time after leaving Iran that I saw so many veiled women but the difference was that in the UK there is no regimented "dress code" to deprive people from their right to think and decide about their own appearance. I felt, for the very first time in my life, that some women may actually enjoy wearing their *hijab*.

I was born four months before the Islamic revolution, so I always had to obey the dress code. Being forced to put on a mandatory *hijab* I, as many Iranian women, hated it. I started wearing *hijab* when I was six years old, attending first grade. My *hijab* was a black tight veil which covered my hair, neck, shoulders and chest. I had to wear the black scarf even in extreme heat of the summer, when it was 40 degrees. My hair never danced with the wind, never shined on a sunny day, never

soaked in the rain. I was born in a society in which not only women but even plastic mannequins in the shops' windows had to wear a scarf. My mother's generation questioned *hijab* from the beginning. They have always regretted the overthrow of Shah¹⁵ and blaming the revolutionaries who fought against Shah for this "catastrophe". For me, as a child, it was a different story: I couldn't wait to grow up and wear the veil since it seemed like a sign of adulthood. What made my mother's generation angry was that they were born and raised in a modern society which promised them freedom of dress and all of a sudden they were deprived of this right, without being asked for their opinion. They always compared their post revolutionary's situation to the pre-revolutionary, because they experienced another way of living. On the other hand my generation, born and raised after the revolution, had no criteria for such comparison. In my twenties, after traveling to other countries with no dress code, I began to realize the difference between having the freedom of choice and being deprived of it. Working on questions around the *hijab* started since I came to Canada, experiencing the freedom of choice (in terms of choosing my clothing) and freedom of speech (in terms of questioning the dress code out loud).

Shahrzad, the first piece encountered at the Nickle Galleries upon entering my thesis exhibition, is a hanging, talking dress and stresses my role as the story-teller. [Fig 9] The dress is made through the same method as previous works, screen-printing Farsi typography and inscriptions along with self-portraits. But in comparison the images of veiled and unveiled self-portrait are added to address the issue of *hijab*. The dress is embroidered with colorful threads. The embroidered lines are inspired by the transit lines on the public transportation maps, referring to relation between identity and place, and the significance of transition for me in the process of developing new identities. I also imply that as the roads connect the places together, my different states of being are related and connected too. Through this dress I intend to address the connections between

different states of being which construct me as an integrated one. The soundtrack is a part of *A Thousand and One Nights*, specifically where *Shahrazad*, is described as the story-teller, and an exceptionally educated woman who saves lives of hundreds of women just by telling stories. This dress is the connecting bridge between former projects regarding territorial identity and the new one focusing on the veil.



Fig. 9. *Shahrazad*. Printed Fabric, Thread, Glue, Staples, Scarves, Sound. 2014

Wandering Isle started with a series of prints which were a continuation of some of the ideas that I still had in mind from a previous project: *Geography of Identity*. After a year, the dynamic process of exploring different aspects of identity brought me back to previous ideas regarding my territorial identities: framing the notion of veiling. In the new works the same familiar elements still play a significant role: the unreadable text, the self-portrait and patterns. The juxtaposition of these elements in the series of prints was a rather conscious process compared to the *Geography of*

Identity because now the theme was defined. If *Geography of Identity* was a general inquiry about my identity as an Iranian woman, then in *Wandering Isle* I focused on certain aspects of my identity which were shaped and defined in relation to and in reaction to the code of enforced “hijab”.

Framed Dancer is a photo etching which portrays a defaced veiled woman. [Fig. 10] Within the void space of the face, an image of a Qajar dancer is repeated and fills the frame of the veil.



Fig. 10. *Framed Dancer*, Photo Etching, 2014

Defacing is a visual strategy of image-making that I implemented in most of the prints and it is achieved by replacing the face with another image which has a metaphorical function for example the Qajar dancer, Islamic motif or multiple eyes. The act of defacing is not only inspired by but also a reaction to the Iranian government’s advertisements. [Fig. 11] Growing up in post-revolutionary Iran I saw many advertisements for *hijab* all around me, in magazines and newspapers, on TV, on the buses, on the school’s walls and everywhere in the city. The image

which was used frequently was a faceless female figure wearing a *chador* (long black veil). This way of erasing the face of women is the best strategy to express the negation of individuality and the rights of an individual (freedom of choice in this case) within an Islamic regime. And here the paradox manifests itself: *hijab* is supposed to cover women and at the same time identify them, the code which commands covering and hiding is supposed to display and define women. So the dress code or *hijab* represents women by covering their body.



Fig. 11. *Hijab in Advertisements* (<http://zanannews.ir/content/652>, 5/7/2014)

Framed Dancer is composed of the veil and a 200 years-old image of a dancer. This juxtaposition refers to the ban of dance in Iran post-revolution. The 200 years-old image has historical and traditional connotations, denoting the roots of hatred against dance and dancers. Dancing was a highly respected form of performance and religious ritual in Iran until the invasion of Arab Muslims 1400 years ago. The Islam prohibited dancing, and this practically implied the extinction of the antique Persian dance traditions. Ever since dance turned into entertainment and the status of the dancer descended to the concubine, a slave whose job was to please the master. Although there is one exception which is Sama' or Sufi dance, which was a spiritual ritual. Sufism

recommends dancing as a spiritual instrument to “become one with God”. In 20th century with the beginning of the modernization of Iran, the notion of dance as a form of art was introduced again. But the 1979 revolution implied the end of a successful era for dancing. According to the principles of “cultural revolution” dancing was considered to be perverse, a great sin, immoral and corrupting. Consequently, the last signs of dancing disappeared.¹⁶ I named this image framed dancer as I believe, dance has been found guilty by Islamic Fundamentalists and is condemned to be veiled.



Fig. 12. *Good/Evil*, Silkscreen, 2014

Good/Evil is a silkscreen constructed of two halves: the upper half is an Iranian-Islamic pattern called *Shamseh* on a green background. [Fig. 12] The lower half is a self-portrait on red background. *Shamseh* is an Arabic word for sunburst. The sun is an essential concept in Iranian-Islamic mysticism. It symbolizes Prophet Mohammed who, based on a Hadith, called himself the sun: “I am the sun and those who shun me are like bats”. It has been mentioned in Qur’an that God

is light, Sura al-Nur (Ayah 24): “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth, and the sun” and of course, is part of this light mysticism or this admiration for light.

In addition to symbolic function of *Shamseh*, this motif has been used as a common pattern to decorate mosques. The specific *Shamseh* that I used in two of my prints is located in an ancient, picturesque and famous mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Because of its unique beauty, images of this mosque are used increasingly to invite people to pray in mosques and to empower Islamic tendencies in people. As a result of the propaganda, in my mind, this motif become associated with its religious context. The background is green. The green that I applied is a special color which is famous as Mohammed’s green, said to be his favorite color that he encouraged his followers to wear. Therefore both the motif and the color on the upper half have religious connotations. I juxtaposed the religious half with earthy elements to create a contradictory compound. My unveiled self-portrait is red. Red in Islam, similarly in Christianity and Judaism, signifies sin and evil. In Iran post-revolution and war time in the 80’s red gained another significance in relation to martyrdom and the blood of martyr. The portrait, therefore, functions as a twofold expression: on one hand it is picturing an unveiled woman, a picture supposed to be seductive and immoral; on the other hand the image has a reflective quality which cannot be considered as a sexualized being. In the beginning I wanted to create a critique of the Fundamentalists’ belief about women. Radical Muslims portray women as the source of sexual attraction and this is the only part of woman’s existence which is considered very active and destructively powerful. The extremists banish women to the land of sin or alternatively be covered from head to toe. To them woman is a temptation which should be restrained, and veiling is a solution for this problem. However, after the print was done I discovered a form of balance in the image. The colors are complementary, the portrait has a meditative quality and the *Shamseh* turned into a mandala. The contradictory parts

communicated and constructed a new whole, like the yin and yang, intertwined. The juxtaposition of the portrait's meditative physicality and motif's spirituality create a new harmony. The image denies being about the confrontation of evil and good, becoming instead about humane aspects of spirituality.

Shamseh, in progress is another print created by the juxtaposition of four self-portraits placed on the background of an unreadable text. [Fig. 13] I used my unveiled face in opposition to the faceless images employed by Islamic Fundamentalists and to stress my individuality consciously. The unreadable text denotes the irrational texts and mottos which command how people live their lives. This visual association is a protesting tactic which criticizes the commanding texts. The four portraits positioned on four sides of the frame imply overcoming and conquering the text. The wide open eyes suggest awareness and cognizance of a certain situation. *Full Shamseh* follows a similar narrative. [Fig. 14] The piece is comprised of over fifty self-portraits, put together in shape of an expanding *shamseh* which seems like it is escaping the border of the paper. But there is an actual image of a *shamseh* in the heart of the multiple portraits. Using the self-portrait is to signify the individuality and the *shamseh* encodes religion and its historical and traditional implications. I intended to picture the idea of overcoming the traditional and religious exigencies of *hijab* through a process of thinking and evaluation. The repetitive faces and the asymmetrical and unbalanced composition of the image insists on personalization of the space around the *shamseh* (religious sign). My hair in this image covers my forehead and neck in a way that resembles a veil itself. The paradoxical idea of hair-veil was an inspiring idea that I used in another thesis piece: *Behind the Curtain*.



Fig 13. *Shamseh in Progress*, Silkscreen, 2014



Fig 14. *Full Shamseh*, Silkscreen, 2014

Niqab is a photo etching composed of a self-portrait in the background blocked by the repetitive images of a *niqab*-wearing woman in the foreground. Therefore the *niqab*-wearing women functions as a *niqab*, covering most of my face with only my eyes visible. [Fig. 15] A related work, *I Am Here!* shows a defaced veil, filled with eyes. The background of the image is covered with Islamic patterns. The multiplicity of eyes signifies awareness. In this image I looked at *hijab* from a different point of view. I am aware that there are women who pick up *hijab* deliberately. They feel safe and secure, sometimes feel more beautiful and special. I respect their choice, understanding that *hijab* is a complex subject. I am not against *hijab*. What I am opposing is the mandatory *hijab* or the dress code. I believe whenever people are deprived of freedom of choice, violation of human rights happens. Forcing women to wear the *hijab* or obliging them to drop it, both should be considered as invasion of privacy. As a result of 9/11, Islamophobia increased in Western societies, and a wave of hatred against Muslims was raised. Consequently veiled Muslim women are being judged and demonized. In some countries veiled women are not allowed to go to school or go to certain stores. Sometimes they experience difficulties finding a job. Women even have been arrested and fined for wearing a veil which covers the face.¹⁷ In this print I insist

that every woman should be the owner of her body, and should be able to choose what to wear without being deprived of any of her rights, without being judged or humiliated. [Fig. 16]



Fig. 15. *Niqab*, Photo Etching, 2014



Fig. 16. *I Am Here!* Photo Etching, 2014

Wandering Isle also consists of a video piece entitled *The Big Black Bird*. The work addresses the role of Iranian women through the history of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling. [Fig. 17] The video uses stop-motion animation and is comprised of 400 self-portraits with a black scarf. The scarf flies above and around my head and sometimes sits on my head, like a black bird. The scarf takes on different shapes and sizes and in the end falls down on my head and covers my face completely. I wanted to create a living and active character with this piece of fabric while I was sitting passively, barely moving or reacting. The scarf is exactly what I used to wear back home to cover my hair and was with me when I left the country. The video was edited in a way to show how gradually the scarf comes into the frame, in the beginning it appears as a small black ball, then moves around playfully, touching my face and hair, then sitting on me. It opens slowly and

agonizingly, becomes menacing, eventually occupying most of the frame, while invading my personal space.



Fig. 17 .*The Big Black Bird*, Video, 2014, Photo credit: Jean-René Leblanc

The title of the video is inspired by a traditional form of scarf called *Kalaghi* which has been used as *hijab* in some parts of Iran for centuries. *Kalagh* in Farsi means crow: the big black bird. By naming this video *The Big Black Bird* I evoke the ancient traditional of veiling in Iran and its problematic relationship with women.

In another work, entitled *The Forbidden Song*, my image is projected on a wall covered with black lace. [Fig. 18] This video references another aspect of *hijab*: the ban on women vocalists in Iran which I call veiling the singing of women. In 2000, Touka Maleki, a historian and researcher, published a book called “Women of Iranian vocal: From myth to today” the first and only book about women musicians of Iran including vocalists. This book was collected from the stores and libraries and destroyed by the government within a few days after its release. Maleki insists that

Islam has no restrictions applied to the female voice, introducing Prophet Mohammed and his family as supporters of music. This was perceived as a critique of the will of the religious leaders who were using Islamic commands to prevent women from singing.

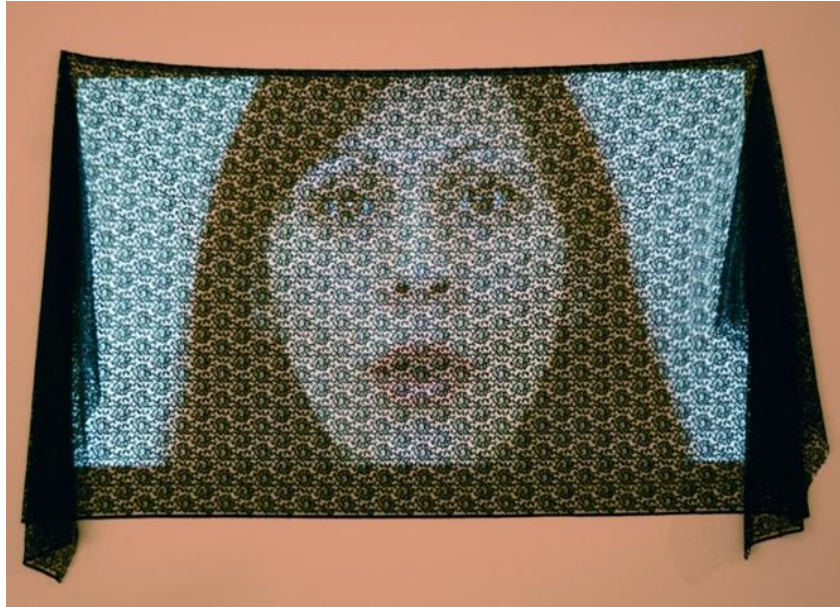


Fig. 18. *The Forbidden Song*, Black Lace, Video, 2014

Maleki notes that there is no mention or naming of female vocalists in Iran until the beginning of the 20th century. Based on Chardin's¹⁸ journal of travel to Persia, in 1700's there is evidence of women trained to perform in the Safavid¹⁹ court, and other researches notes their presence since the Qajar²⁰ period. Since then, the number of trained women singers grew progressively. After empowering Pahlavi dynasty with the new wave of modernization in Iran, women received legal permission to perform publicly, and their stage was no longer limited to the court or houses of the nobles. After the 1979 revolution, however, new restrictions were applied to certain performing arts such as dance and music. Many women who were active in such fields, mostly pop stars, left the country. But the most significant Iranian women singers who were trained by great masters stayed in the country, accepting the fact that they would be deprived of singing in public. Two

decades later these singers received permission to hold concerts for female audiences. Many young women after revolution studied music at the universities and were allowed to perform in choirs, although solo singing was forbidden.²¹ In 2014, the current president of Iran, Dr. Hassan Rohani announced that solo singing for women is legal.²²

Shirin Neshat, an Iranian artist, also addressed the subject of women singing in her 1998 video, *Turbulent*²³. The work is constructed as two separate images projected onto facing walls within a confined installation space. The first portion features a male performer singing a passionate love song written by Rumi²⁴. His back is turned from an audience of male spectators seated in an auditorium; both singer and “audience” face the viewer. As the song ends, the singer remains onstage as the second projection depicting a female singer begins. Unlike the previous segment, the woman sings to an empty auditorium. She shifts from a melodic tone into a range of throaty sounds. In this video she bears the viewer witness to what she frames as the traditionally oppressed female voice in Islamic culture. Neshat’s concept is centered on gender in relation to music and addresses women’s absence from the experience of performing music in Iran.

My own video, *The Forbidden Song* functions as a visual metaphor. The video pictures an unveiled woman singing but the audio is mute. The lace, which acts as a veil, and muteness address censorship applied to women’s vocalization. I want to convey that although women vocalists are banned from singing in public they still do it; despite all the oppositions, women keep singing even if there is nobody to listen. By dedicating the whole frame to the woman’s face I direct the viewer’s attention towards a woman who is singing but the absence of sound implies the censorship. During this 10 minute video I propose to visualize the fear and anxiety that every woman experiences while they are misbehaving. To represent this sensation I cease singing every once in a while and then continue singing again. In the beginning my lips move confidently. Near the end of the video,

I wipe off my lipstick with the back of my hand in a sudden movement and there from my lips move imperceptibly, as if I understand that I'm under surveillance. Covering the face with black lace is a common mourning tradition in funerals, as in many places in the world. I used the black lace to express my regret for the absence of voice. The voice exists but it is veiled: it is censored. I want to demonstrate the game of hide and seek that Iranians play with the government in order to gain the freedom they are deprived of: the rule of the game is staying silent in the times of danger but when it is safe sing as loud as desired.

The video is based on a lived experience. I loved to sing as a teenager, same as many other students. However, singing at school was a prohibited act and the guilty would receive severe punishment, from signing a written declaration to suspension or even dismissal (depending to the song and the number of audience). But we had a secret singing club which was a risky daring game for us. Obviously we were very proud of breaking the school's law. Whatever our real motivation was, this pastime wasn't just about singing; it was a practice of rebellion and uprising against power, an essential ability for Iranian women to become visible in a restrictive society. Singing was a talent. Singing meant disobeying the law which was a threatening activity, therefore singing was a 'counter-revolutionary' political act. We all learned from very young age that there are certain innocent pleasures of life which are forbidden. And we also learned how to play hide and seek in order to avoid trouble. Although hiding was not always the best solution, it seemed like a convenient strategy to experience freedom even in the shadow of silence. Because of all these restrictions applied to singing (and dance), in my mind singing is associated with idea of freedom, the freedom of unveiling myself in order to become visible.

Neshat's video inspires me deeply. To me, it is a breathtaking and aesthetically flawless work of art. But it's like Hollywood's cinema, far from everyday life. It is too beautiful to be my story.

Maybe because Neshat's never experienced life in post revolution Iran, *Turbulent* is not her story either. Although I admire her work I felt the urge to tell my own story. *The Forbidden Song* is my little short story in the memory of the days of hide and seek, when humming a song, through all the fear and silence, could shake the foundation of authority.

Behind the Curtain, the final piece in my thesis exhibition is an installation comprised of a woven curtain and a video projected on a wall behind the curtain. [Fig. 19] The curtain is made of the familiar material that I used in previous work: the screen-printed canvas. The printed motifs again include text, Islamic patterns and images of defaced veils.

The text is comprised of two repetitive phrases, written with different fonts in various sizes. These slogans have been used frequently for 35 years to mandate women to guard their veil: "Hijab is woman's ornament" and "Bad hijab [is] the bride of Satan". It means *hijab* is the only ornament that women should wear in public. If they chose otherwise they are "the bride of Satan". I chose these particular slogans because of their impact on me as a child. These slogans were written on the wall of my elementary school. As a newly literate I was so eager to read whatever was written on the walls of city, and the walls of post-revolutionary war time Tehran were covered with slogans from Fundamentalists' point of view to the protests of the oppositions. The walls were broadcasting the news of the verbal war between the two factions.

For me reading the walls was like reading an endless newspaper which was written by grownups (most of the times) and for them. This newspaper was intriguing and complicated, introducing me to the power of words. The image of the elementary school's long brick walls is engraved in my per week of mandatory religious training (these number of hours increased in high school) and the teachers were usually young charismatic women, who controlled our thoughts and even used

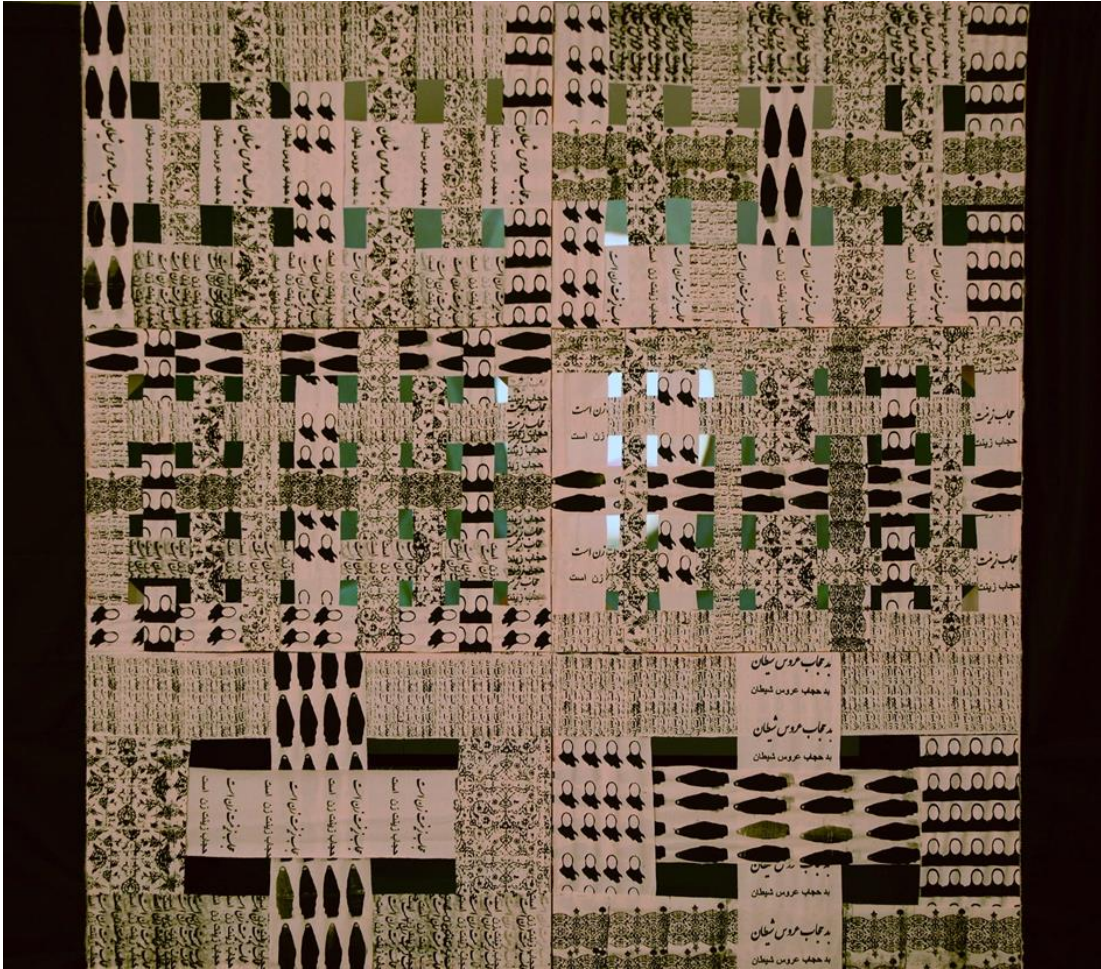


Fig. 19. *Behind the Curtain*, Screen-printed Canvas, Video, 2014

us as spies on our own families. When students turned 9 years old (the age of maturity for Muslim girls) the serious mission of these women was to inform children about good and bad, and to horrify our young minds by the image of hell and seduce us with the unimaginable beauty of heaven. And us, these young potential members of hell went to school every day and our doom was right in front of us, on the wall: “Bad hijab [is] Satan’s bride”. It is through horrible stories of tearing apart and burning bodies that the young girls learn about their own body, learn to be ashamed of it and accept the fact that their body deserves torture and punishment.

Behind the Curtain is made of strips of screen printed fabric. The strips are woven in a way so there are holes in the texture of the curtain. Through these holes, the viewer has access to the video.

[Fig. 20] The structure of the curtain is inspired by the Islamic windows which were very common till 100 years ago. [Fig. 21]



Fig. 20. *Behind the Curtain*, Detail, Photo Credit: Dave Brown

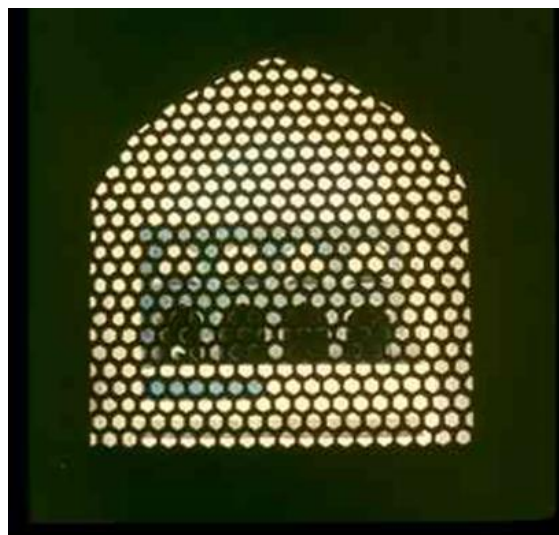


Fig. 21. Window at *Imam Mosque*, Isfahan, Iran, 2009

On the video is an image of me, combing my hair. [Fig. 22] In the beginning of the video I'm veiled, my head is down and there is no eye contact. This is an idealistic image of an obedient woman: modest and passive. After a few minutes I raise my head, acknowledge myself and remove my veil. Now I am combing my hair while looking at the viewer all the time. My intention is to portray the subjective act of combing, not an objectified image of a woman combing her hair. In the history of art picturing a woman combing her hair was a common subject matter for male artists, notably Degas, Renoir, Rossetti, and Picasso. In all of their works, the woman seems to be unaware of being watched, either pictured from their back or with their eyes looking the other way. [Fig. 23] There was a beauty in catching a woman in a private moment, a beauty which could feed the male gaze. The beautiful women became the object of this gaze thousands of times through the history of art. In 1975, performance artist Marina Abramović did a performance called *Art Must Be Beautiful*. She combed her hair in front of the audience, addressing the viewers directly. The artist combed her hair forcefully, without a pause, for more than 50 minutes. During this time, she repeats the sentence "art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful" like a mantra. By this performance she aimed to criticize this common expectation of art to be beautiful and also the role of women as objects of beauty in art. Both Abramović and I use the act of brushing our hair as an act of protest.

Addressing the viewer directly through eye contact is a provocative act in many traditional cultures. In Iranian culture one of the expressions for a modest woman is one whose head is down and avoids another's eye. Making eye contact with men is considered as a seductive act. Also

because of the hierarchical system, making eye contact with authority equals rudeness and recklessness which deserves punishment.



Fig. 22. Combing my Hair, Snapshot of the video, 2014



Fig. 23. Edgar Degas, *La Toilette* (Woman Combing Her Hair)

http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html/En/04/b2003/hm4_1_005_1.html

ideological Iran there is no individual will, especially if that individual is a woman. Although in real Iran, which is the Iran that belongs to Iranians and not to the Fundamentalists, life is different.

The real lives of Iranians are happening in private, veiled behind the walls of their houses within a territory called “underground. “Behind the curtain” is the territory where people take control over their lives, break the preconceived frames and reterritorialize their identities. In this territory people do not obey, they shift the culture slowly, in the dark. We constantly metamorphose from a piece of the faceless mass to independent individuals with various characteristics. This metamorphosis is not even an intellectualized or conscious act. I believe it happens instinctively and intuitively. Iranians are used to seeing two sides of every phenomenon, starting from themselves.

Due to the repressive system I am dealing with, in my thesis, I had to think of a metaphorical language in order to express myself. The metaphorical language works as a veil itself, a veil which is transparent. This metaphorical language is enriched by signs and symbols able to communicate through contextual interpretation. The juxtaposition of a few pictorial elements and how the viewer reads them in combination is essential for this process of meaning-making from both sides of the equation: the artist and the viewer.

Thus in my work the veil functions as a metaphor. A veil is a barrier; it is whatever stands between the viewer and the concept or the image. When patterns or text covers my portrait, it is as if I am veiled, my identity hidden. A piece of lace or a printed curtain is also a veil. On the other hand the whole life of an Iranian woman is hidden behind an ethical-religious curtain. Islamic Fundamentalists characterize woman as a passive creature except for sexuality. To them the female body is a powerful source of sexual appeal, a sexual energy that should be controlled and targeted towards reproduction. All Iranian TV programs, from entertainment to religious programs, are considered educational, in a sense that they should give people examples for the ideal appearance and behavior. I have learned that watching Iranian movies is very curious for foreigners because

they see women actors wearing their *hijab* all the time, inside the house and even in sleep. Brushing the hair is not something that should be seen in any Iranian movie since the revolution. In *Behind the Curtain*, I chose to portray this act because it signifies a very simple part of everyday life, for men and women, which is considered problematic and sinful from a Fundamentalist perspective in school. I remember when I was in high school, it was forbidden for us to have a comb or pocket mirror on our person. If the authorities found either item, they would have been confiscated. Brushing the hair in my work is an act of defiance, yet is an everyday act for most of the people all around the world. Yet is not an anti-religious act either. I would like to call it — with a hint of humor — brushing my hair as a political action, an act to break from the framed image of the decent woman (according to Islamic Fundamentalism). As a woman artist coming from a society which veils an individual's identity, where women are defined as faceless creatures hidden behind a curtain, this video is my attempt to escape facelessness. Throughout the exhibition, I chose to portray as many faces as I could, in order to set myself free of all the definitions, all the rules that try to limit me and frame me within preconceived molds.

I believe veil, as a concept, has played a significant role in Iran since the 1979 revolution. It has had a dual paradoxical function. In Iran there is a real veil between people and the Fundamentalists. The actual veil or the dress code is a tool for Fundamentalists to take control over people and suppress their individuality. But there is a virtual veil as well. People benefit from hiding behind the virtual veil to live a normal life, to live life as they wish. The concept of *hijab*, which is designed to suppress, is also functioning as a shield and therefore its controlling power is nullified. Behind this veil, Iranians have a very different life, they have a very different face. Behind the curtain there is a territory which is located within borders of Iran but it is released from any control and from any limitation, like the little island I created for myself in *Lichen*. Behind the virtual veil

there is a whole other country, in which people go to underground bars, night clubs and casinos. Behind the curtain no woman goes to heaven; instead they comb their hair, dance and sing. While the Fundamentalists try to define woman as the mother or mother to be, behind the curtain women are playing many different roles. What happens behind the curtain, good or bad, is a way to protest, a way to rebel against the rules which deprive us of our basic rights.

Conclusion

This paper began with a confined research on identity theory, but after I focused on writing about my work, many directions opened up to my mind and my soul searching journey started. I discovered how I am attached to the world and its ancient stories and how my art is influenced by almost everything I know, consciously or unconsciously. I learned that my art is a story of residing in the center of an existence where my story is linked to the others'. And consequently I acknowledged my role as a wandering storyteller. Through these stories I address the complexity of my multiple identities in relation to countless, influential elements. Regardless of geographical borders, where I was born and where I am living, I remain a wandering isle: independent and floating in the existence, constantly moving in time and in between places. Similar to the character of the novel, *Wandering Isle*, I try to avoid the ideologies which frame my identities.

I believe an artist should be the eye of the world, the witness and the observer. An artist is a storyteller, but not necessarily a problem-solver. The artist is the one who should be adventurous enough to deliberately voyage into the depth of life and face the pain, the deep pure pain of knowing, the one who survives the pain and comes back to share her/his story with the others. To me, making art is a way to ask questions, to observe and analyze the information that I absorb from my surroundings, without trying to find an answer or to suggest a solution. I believe that the question of one's identity is impossible to formulate due to the constant transformation of identity in reaction to the ever changing conditions of existence. Especially in the age of globalization and mass communication, the process of developing multiple identities seems to be accelerated more than ever. In my opinion we are metamorphosing all the time. To some extent that there is no permanent morph, the only noticeable elements are change and difference. By leaving my country I challenged my knowledge of myself and the world, I became vulnerable and exposed to pain and

the fear of the unknown. In search for knowledge, the fruit of the forbidden tree, I left my paradise of comfort and preconceptions and my journey started. The past weighed heavily on my shoulders and the horizon of the future was dissolved in suspension. On the other hand, in the new land I had no past and no future, I was lost, drowning in fear. I stabilized myself on the ground of the unknown and tried to redefine my connections to the world, in order to redefine my place in relation to my past and present. In the light of the new awareness and new experiences I tried to study myself deeply and intently. Through this soul searching journey I learned my story is related to billions of stories of other people, and also to the stories of the past (aka, history), to politics and religion. For the same reason, whenever I intended to explain my motivations and inspirations for each artwork, I could not separate myself, and therefore my art, from the rest of the world, regardless of time and geography. It seems my life story is a thread which is a part of an enormous web that has no beginning and no ending. I determined that our life story doesn't start on our birth date; we are a part of the web of life, connected to many other stories from the very beginning. Despite our contemporaneity we are still affected by the past (history and tradition) as well as by the incidents happening all around the globe. Now that we cannot live a day without mass media and due to the transitioning information, human beings are more connected and attached than ever. It is impossible to stay isolated and ignore the stories of the others.

I worked to express myself through this life changing journey that started two years ago, and the process of art-making influenced my journey and the way it was altering me. In the end, while writing about my work, I learned about many untold secrets which remained invisible located between the lines. Learning about my secrets affected my gaze which consequently changed my perspective over my subject matter: *me*.

In the end I should mention that my work is not an attempt to picture my identity or multiple identities literally. My work is the result of endless inquiries about my different identities, and a nomadic journey from one state of being to another. My job as an artist is to invite the viewer to ask questions — questions needless (and/or impossible) to be responded. I invite the viewer to experience the suspension of beliefs and doubtfulness and to experience a different way of looking at the phenomena that they face every day: the situation of human beings in the contemporary world.

- ¹ Fundamentalism is a form of a religion, especially Islam or Protestant Christianity that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture. Islamic Fundamentalists reject any worldly inclinations and insist that Muslims must obey Islamic codes. These are called Fundamentalists because they desire to build the fundamental pillars of Islamic ideology in a modern world. They accept the ‘fundamentalism’ denomination and believe that a Muslim fundamentalist is an irreconcilable Muslim. By such assertion they reject the blending of other opinions and commentaries within the orthodox tenets of the religion and consider the Quran, the Prophet’s commandments and Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudences) their legal institution (Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, *Fundamentalism and Modernism in the Contemporary Iranian Islam*, <http://nawaat.org>)
- ² Shahrokh Meskoub. *Iranian Identity and Farsi language* (Tehran: Nashr va Pajouhesh-e Forouzan rouz, 1996), 4-5. [مسکوب، شاهرخ. هویت ایرانی و زبان فارسی. نشر و پژوهش فروزان روز، ۱۳۷۳]
- ³ Abdolhossein Zarinkoub, *History of Iran after Islam* (Tehran: Amirkabir Ed. 2001), 384. [زرین کوب، عبدالحسین. تاریخ ایران بعد از اسلام. انتشارات امیرکبیر، ۱۳۸۰]
- ⁴ Rouii Pakbaz, *History of Iranian Painting* (Tehran: Zarin va Simin, 1999.), 7-11. [نقاشی ایران از دیرباز تا امروز، رویین پاکباز، انتشارات زرین و سیمین، ۱۳۷۹]
- ⁵ Peter Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 130.
- ⁶ Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell, *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014) Kindle Locations 6628-6639.
- ⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 303.
- ⁸ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 37.
- ⁹ *Hijab* is an Arabic word which means curtain
- ¹⁰ Simon Hay, “*Why Read Reading Lolita? Teaching Critical Thinking in a Culture of Choice*”, *Pedagogy* 8.1, University of California, California, 5-24, 2007.
- ¹¹ Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Cultural Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. (Ewing: University of California, 2005), 66-67
- ¹² Hey, 2007.
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir* (London: Tauris, 2003), 153-154
- ¹⁵ *Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi* (1919 –1980) was the ruler of Iran (Shah of Iran) from 16 September 1941 until his overthrow by the Iranian Revolution on 11 February 1979.
- ¹⁶ Nima Kiaan, *Persian Dance and it's Forgotten History*, <http://www.artira.com/nimakiann/history/history.htm>, 14-7, 2014
- ¹⁷ Henry Samuel, *Burka ban: French women fined for wearing full-face veil*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8781241/Burka-ban-French-women-fined-for-wearing-full-face-veil.html>
- ¹⁸ Jean Chardin, (1643, Paris, France—died 1713, London, England), French traveler to the Middle East and India.
- ¹⁹ Safavid dynasty, (1502–1736), Iranian dynasty (Encyclopedia Britannica)
- ²⁰ Qājār Dynasty, the ruling dynasty of Iran from 1794 to 1925. (Encyclopedia Britannica)
- ²¹ Touka Maleki, *Women of Iranian music* (Tehran: Ketab-e-Khorshid, 2000), 275-334. [زنان موسیقی ایران از اسطوره تا امروز، توکا ملکی، انتشارات کتاب خورشید، ۱۳۸۰]
- ²² Firouzeh Ramezanzadeh, *permission for women singers*, <http://www.radiozameh.com/105230>
- ²³ To watch the video go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2DNMG2s_O0
- ²⁴ Rumi or Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi was a 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic.

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