Shirin Neshat's Visual Narratives as Monumental Space of Truth and Memory: A Select Study

Shamla K.M.

Associate Professor

Department of English

University of Calicut

Malappuram, Kerala, India

dr.shamla.k.m@uoc.ac.in

Abstract

The Iranian visual artist, Shirin Neshat, through her visual arts of photography, video installations and movies seem to present the cultural transformation of her native land triggered by the Islamic revolution of 1979 which drastically changed the social, political and cultural realms of the land. The change became visually evident in the compulsory dress code for women who were forced to wear 'chador', a traditional Iranian loose black cloak like garment and veil in public space. The present paper is an attempt to study the three photographs included in the series, 'The Women of Allah' as revealing the monumental space within Iran that in turn exposes the ambiguous and ambivalent representations of the land and its people in the cultural context. 'Monumental space' as envisaged by Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* includes the notions of collective memory, power and permanence. This spatial concept when used to analyze the condition of post revolutionary Iran as revealed in these photographs in the series, may throw light on the selective representations and deliberate omissions leading to a tilted view of the past through history. It may help to analyze the alienation of the artist from her native land as enabling her to step back and understand the versions of truth represented by certain memories. The portraits themselves

may be revealed as the monumental space of untold saga of resistance and defiance against a set of narratives that project stereotypical images weaving their own versions of truth.

Keywords: Shirin Neshat, Visual art, Monumental Space, Truth, Memory, Narratives.

Introduction

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought drastic changes to Iran which under the Pehlavis followed a westernized culture. Under the leadership of Ayathulla Khomeni there was a rapid revival of Islam and women were forcefully made to dress according to religious laws. While a group of women supported the Islamic revolution and hijab was taken as a weapon against western culture, the forceful dressing up of women in Islamic attires like chador and hijab were not acceptable for many Iranian women like Shirin Neshat. Neshat had left Iran before the Islamic revolution to pursue her higher studies at the United States but could not return to her native land till 1990. The revolution of 1979 was soon followed by the Iraq- Iran war in 1980 that lasted for about eight years. Neshat after a long interval of fifteen years went to her native land which to her utter dismay was totally different from what she remembered it to be. The change she encountered at her native land was so drastic that she found novel ways to express the subtle thoughts the experience engendered in her with regard to the positioning of women at various junctures of history reinforced by certain incidents dictated by structures of power. The photographic series with which she came up in 1994 titled, “Women of Allah”, was the novel response she contrived to make towards the changed cultural scenario of her native land. The present study is an attempt to analyze three photographs from the series to explore how these photographs represent the monumental space that Neshat encountered in her native land especially in matters of gender role and identity.

Content

Henri Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space* explains the concept of monumental space as part of social space. “Monumental space offered each member of society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social usage. It, thus, constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one” (Lefebvre 8). Lefebvre though develops the notion of monumental space in the context of edifices that are built to preserve the past like archives and museums, W.J.T. Mitchell while explaining the notion of violence with reference to monumental space, associates not only monuments but even public art too as pertaining to the realm of monumental space. Mitchell presents three forms of violence namely the image as an art or object of violence, the image as a weapon of violence and finally image as a representation of violence which includes an imitation of the violent act or other trace of past violence. (Mitchell qtd. in Sakr 22). Neshat’s visual arts are placed in the context of violence perpetuated through the state machinery and power structures which seem to make possible to study them as presenting the monumental space within Iran of 1990s.

The series, *Women of Allah*, is the second series by Shirin Neshat; the first one being, *unveiling,* which deals with veils and is largely concerned with the pre- revolutionary period of Iran ruled by the Shah while the second series of photography, *Women of Allah,* deals with the post revolutionary Iran which she encountered in her visit to the place in 1990. The photographs that are chosen for study are *I am its Secret, Rebellious Silence* and an untitled one. All these photographs are portraits of women (Neshat herself)dressed according to Islamic tradition. These portraits hence present monumental spaces as portraiture was regarded as sacrilegious in Islamic culture. As it is mentioned in the Hadith, “Allah’s messengers (may peace be upon him) said, those who draw pictures will be punished in the day of resurrection. It would be said to thou, breathe soul into what you have created.” (qtd. in Yusuh 368). Orhan Pamuk’s novel, *My Name is Red* has the plot of painters getting

murdered in Ottoman Turkey because of deviating from the traditional artistic practice of miniature painting by adopting portraiture which was regarded as Western in origin. Thus the photographs become arte facts which violate the tradition from within the system thereby turning out to be monumental spaces.

These photographs along with other thirty-five photographs form the series, *Women of Allah*. *I am its Secret* depicts the portrait of a veiled woman in black and white covered in chador, the traditional dress, with the face which is the only visible part covered with lines from Iranian poem in Farsi script inscribed in red and black ink. The woman is seen as gazing steadily into the camera with vivid and piercing eyes. The portrait with the woman dressed in traditional ways according to Islamic rules itself presents a monumental space where the memory of Islamic practice is reinforced to attain permanence through art but the piercing glance juxtaposes the traditional positioning of gender as passive and submissive. The way female figures are depicted in miniature paintings where they are drawn to face down or sideways and never directly at the onlooker evidently show how women are positioned in the Islamic culture. Shekure, the prominent female character in Pamuk's *My Name is Red,* remarks about the female figures that she happened to see in her father's books on miniature paintings seem relevant here. "They do exist if few and far between and always look shy, embarrassed, gazing only at one another, as if apologetically. Never do they raise their heads, stand straight and face the people of the world as soldiers and sultans would." (Pamuk 42)The women in Neshat's photographs seem to interrogate this tradition while remaining within the tradition as marked by their veiled appearances.

I am its Secret is an unsettling picture by its very title as it unsettles the conventional identity of the oriental women as being passive by rendering them with agency and elevating them from being the objects of male gaze to become the subjects with individuality. The woman in the picture may be regarded as the representative of the post revolutionary women

of Iran who took part in the Islamic revolution of 1979 as supporters of Khomeini to safeguard the Islamic culture from the western culture. The title may be suggestive of the fact that the secret of the Islamic revolution is the woman who got agency as a subject while trying to safeguard a culture which denied the same. But it remains a secret as she is denied voice in the conservative society and the picture speaks for her. The secret gets revealed in the lines inscribed in red and black colours covering her face. In fact these lines form the voice of the picture as said by Neshat. "The written text is the voice of the photograph," Neshat says, "It breaks the silence of the still woman in the portrait". (Dabashi 78)

The inscribed lines are taken from the poem, "I will Greet the Sun Again" by the Iranian feminist poet Forough Farrokhzhad who lived during the Shah's regime and is known for her revolutionary stance on various issues related to women's lives like veiling, sexuality, desire , freedom and so on. The translation of the inscribed lines is not given by the artist along with the picture which makes the picture appear uncanny to the viewers who are Westerners and who do not know Farsi scripts. Here a tendency to monumentalize the Farsi script may be seen as it is a remarkable aspect of the Persian culture. The tradition of calligraphy which is yet another legacy of the Persian culture too is brought in here by the artist who without adding the translation wanted to get the attention of the viewers towards the aesthetics involved in the ornamental writing of the script which developed as an art in itself in the Arabian world at a time when drawing of human figures was regarded as sacrilegious practice. The portrait presents itself as the monument preserving the art of calligraphy at the same it becomes monumental space as the calligraphy is done on a portrait that marks the deviation from the very tradition that upholds calligraphy. Tradition is preserved at a juncture where that very tradition is violated.

A part of the poem of Farrokhzad from which the text is taken is translated as

Once more I will greet the sun,

the stream that flowed in me,
the clouds which were my long thoughts,
the painful growth of poplars in the garden
which pass through the dry seasons with me,
the flocks of crows
which brought me the smell of the night farms
as presents,
my mother who lived in the mirror
and was the image of my old age.

(Trans. *Gorgan Roodi* 1)

The text inscribed into the visible part of the picture seems to be crucial in adding symbolic meaning to the picture. "The *Women of Allah* series confronts [this] "paradoxical reality" through a haunting suite of black-and-white images. Each contains a set of four symbols that are associated with Western representations of the Muslim world: the veil, the gun, the text and the gaze. " (Young 1). The absence of the gun is compensated in the colour red by which a part of the text is inscribed. The red may symbolize the violence that the revolution and the war that followed spread into the women's identity and freedom. Though the text forms the part of a poem written by a pre revolutionary poet, Farrokhzad, the lines may well explain the predicament of women in the post revolutionary Iran. The text when translated presents the yearnings of an individual to live in the free open space of liberty which the revolution failed to provide the women who actively took part in it. Through these lines the monumental space of post revolutionary post war Iran is presented before those who can read the Farsi scripts but for the rest it remains a secret like the oriental Muslim women remain an enigma under the western gaze.

When it comes to the second photograph under study which appears in the series with the title *Rebellious Silence*, all the four symbolic elements are evident namely veil, gun, text and the gaze. The photograph presents a woman dressed in black chador holding a gun against her face in such a way that the gun stands at the middle intersecting her face. The lines from the revolutionary poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poem "*Allegiance with Wakefulness*" are inscribed into the face which is the only visible part of the portrait. In this portrait the monumental space works at different levels. First of all the gun in the hands of the woman presents the militant nature of the Islamic revolution where women too were the warriors fighting along with men for their religious rights. The portrait in this sense acts as the monument that marks the history of the revolution steeped in violence. The role of women as warriors of the revolution is problematically presented in the title as rebellion failed to articulate particular women's issue. When Neshat visited Iran after the war in 1990 she found the capital city devastated and women were not allowed outside their domestic space without covering themselves in long black traditional cloth called chador. She found the city lost its hues and luster which as an artist she presented through the black and white portraits of veiled women. **"**The public appearance of women was different from what she remembered, due to compulsory veiling. Women now wore either traditional veiling (a top to toe veil called chador) or the headscarf that covers the hair along with the manteau (an oversized shirt dress)" (Debashi 78). But the silence gets voice through the text that is inscribed on the face in black ink. The lines by the revolutionary poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh from her poem *Allegiance with Wakefulness* in Babaie's translation stand for the woman's offer to support the martyr of the revolution and to rise hand in hand beyond the earthly limitations and attain heavenly bliss.

O, you martyr,
hold my hands

With your hands

Cut from earthly means

Hold my hands,

I am your poet.

(qtd. in Zahara 58)

The piercing gaze of the woman in the portrait supports the heroic fervor of the lines thereby voicing the silence to which the women though rebellious have fallen into after the revolution.

The third photograph which is an untitled one presents a veiled woman with her hands on her parched lips and the hands inscribed with lines from the feminist pre revolutionary poet Forough Farrokhzad's poem, "I feel sorry for the Garden".

As translated by Shirin Neshat: 'No one is thinking about the flowers No one is thinking about the fish No one wants to believe that the garden is dying that the garden's heart has swollen under the sun that the garden is slowly forgetting its green moments' No one is thinking about the garden and the garden is slowly, but surely dying.

(Stefani 32)

Here Neshat seems to suggest through these lines how women are abandoned even by the movement or revolution for which they fought for. Neshat by not providing the translation of these lines leaves the viewers to ponder over the beauty of the tattooed hands and their exotic connotations associated with oriental women. The portrait is monumental for those who can understand the Farsi script and those who do not. The former may realize the cruelty and violence with which women's cause was left unaddressed in such national risings and the latter find the tradition of tattooing with henna in the oriental culture immortalized through the portrait.

Throughout the *Women of Allah* series, Shirin Neshat employs the use of direct calligraphic text on her photographs to create a pure, sensual visual presence and a material ornament that indicates meaning. Westerners who do not read Farsi may understand the calligraphy as an aesthetic signifier, a reference to the importance of text in the long history of Islamic art.

(Dabashi 78)

All the three photographs present the cultural shock that Neshat had gone through in her return to her native land after the Islamic revolution and war with Iraq. The place she remembered as her home lost its grandeur and presented the devastation of war. The loss was personal as well as social; physical like economical as well as psychological. The place that she left as a teenager vanished and presented itself as a war torn disfigured entity.

She returned to a place devastated by the eight-year war, where every corner of the capital, Tehran, told the story of an uneasy time. The city was especially bombarded during the last months of the Iran-Iraq war. Tehran was covered with murals of the eight-year war martyrs, ayatollahs, and "paradisal promises delivered in thick Arabic phrases," the city that had once been likened to Paris, was not Paris anymore.

(Nejad 231)

Conclusion

The artist found her own ways to represent the monumental space that she encountered in her native city. The dichotomy between the conventional westernized view of veiled women and the militant women she encountered in the Islamic revolution had to be represented artistically to which she found photography as most handy. "Photography is about capturing a specific moment. In that sense, a photographic work becomes monumental" (Shadi 1) says Neshat in one of her interviews. The specific moment of cultural shock when she encountered the atrocities of war and revolution done to her native city is captured through the lens of camera tilted a little to see the unseen, to mark the voiceless in spatial

inscriptions and to pierce the viewers glance with the tip of the gun poised with detached yet poignant gaze. In this venture uncanny combinations emerge where the veiled Muslim woman is found challenging the onlooker with her defiant gaze gripping a gun instead a scripture and with her face inscribed in Farsi script, lines from revolutionary feminist poets instead of Arabic scripts for prayers from Quran. With these unholy combinations Neshat seems to have brought home to the viewers of her photographs similar tumults of emotional crisis that she experienced in her return journey home after fifteen years of exile. The diaspora has indeed found the right means of expression in these novel photographs. These photographs along with other photographs in the series remain as a monument that interrogates the western stereotypes recurrent in history regarding the positioning of the oriental women in a society steeped in tradition challenging the set notions of it.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Works Cited

Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. The Holy Quran (trans). Lebanon: Dar Al Arabia, 1958**.**

Banyamerian, Zahara "Women of Allah" and "The Book of Kings:" Shirin Neshat's Narratives of Returning Home. . City University of New York (CUNY) CUNY Academic Works Dissertations and Theses City College of New York, 2021.

Dabashi, Hamid. Shirin Neshat - Women of Allah.1997.

Lefebvre, Henri. The Production of Space. Tran. Donald Nicholson South UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1991

Nejad, Manya Saadi. "Mythological Themes in Iranian Culture and Art: Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives." Iranian Studies 42(2):231-246. April 2009.

Neshat, Shirin. *Women of Allah.* New York: The Exit Art/ The First world, 1994.

Pamuk, Orhan. *My Name is Red.*Trans. Erdag Goknar. London: Faber & Faber 2001.

Roodi,Gholamreza Sami Gorgan.(Trans.) *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Series 3. no.2, 2004.

Sakr, Rita. *Monumental Space in the Post Imperial Novel: An Interdisciplinary Study.*London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

Sheybani, Shadi. "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat." Volume XXXVIII, Issue 2, Spring 1999.

Stefanaki, Cristinah."The use of neo-orientalist female representations and the decorative function of Arabic script in Shirin Neshat's "Women of Allah" Freie Universität Berlin, Art History Department, 2018.

Young, Allison. Shirin Neshat, Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah series.2015.

https://www.khanacademy.org › humanities › ap-art-history › global-contemporary-apah › neshat-rebellious