

DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 3 (2018)



DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies

Published under the auspices of:
The OU Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies,
the Department of International and Area Studies, and
the College of International Studies at
the University of Oklahoma

Volume 3 (2018)

Editors-in-Chief:
Corey Standley
Kayleigh Kuyon

Associate Editors:
Caleb Ball
Jesse Hare
Jessamine Nazari
Michael Pugh
Ciera Stafford
Sydney Warrington

Faculty Advisors:
Afshin Marashi
Manata Hashemi

© 2018, University of Oklahoma. *Dānesh* is a peer-reviewed undergraduate journal published annually by students at the University of Oklahoma's College of International Studies. Correspondence should be addressed to OU Iranian Studies Program, Department of International and Area Studies, 729 Elm Ave, Farzaneh Hall, Room 304, Norman, OK 73019.

Email: amarashi@ou.edu.

Weblink: <https://commons.shareok.org/handle/11244.46/57>

DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies
Volume 3 (2018)

From the Faculty Advisors	iv
From the Editors-in-Chief	v

ARTICLES

Exercising Agency: Contesting Cultural Imperialism in the Depiction of Muslim Women Julia Harth	1
Iran's Others through Cinema: Ethnicity and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Iran Jared Johnson	13
The Question of Women's Agency in Iranian Cinema Alexis Walker	25
The Value of Virtue: Depictions of Class and Morals in Iranian Cinema Aubrey Crynes	35
The Politics of Fashion in the Islamic Republic of Iran Sydney Warrington	47
The Evolution of Gender Equality in Modern Iran Lindsey Eisenmann	59
Ritual Impurity and the Decline of the Safavid Dynasty Caleb Ball	71
Ideology and Reality: Afghans in Iran Daniel McAbee	85
Zoroastrians: Becoming a Minority in Their Homeland Travis Kepler	95

From the Faculty Advisors

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History

Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

Manata Hashemi

Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

Exercising Agency: Contesting Cultural Imperialism in the Depiction of Muslim Women

Julia Harth*

© University of Oklahoma

In ancient times, the Silk Road brought foreign treasures and precious goods from a distant East to the people of Western Europe, instilling a fascination with the rich and mysterious ‘Orient.’ As colonialism heightened political and economic interaction between the two regions, their cultural exchange increased as well. Traders and travelers returned with items and stories reflecting both the wealth and dissemblance of Eastern society. The introduction of the unfamiliar culture materialized not only in the collection of physical objects, but also in intellectual stimulation with an emerging societal focus on evaluating these differing traditions and customs.¹ In their studies of the Middle East, both academics and artists attempted to capture and convey the exotic culture to Western audiences. However, the inherent power inequity implanted by colonialism sustained notions of cultural superiority in these discourses and representations.² As a facet of the imperialist portrayal of the Middle East, the conception of Muslim women’s role in society perfectly illustrates this imposition of hegemonic values. Influenced by larger attitudes of ethnocentrism, the depiction of Muslim women reflects a reduced, simplified, and exoticized interpretation of a complex and diverse reality.³ Ingrained into today’s popular visual culture, these stereotypes present a

* **Author’s Bio:** Julia Harth is majoring in Art History and minoring in Spanish. She is also pursuing an accelerated Masters and Bachelor of Arts degree in International and Area Studies. She will graduate in May of 2020.

¹ Gülru Necipoglu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches,” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 64.

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 27.

³ Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950* (London: Quartet Books, 1988), 4.

challenge to the capacity of Muslim women to assert their own authority and experience, playing into a global rhetoric of division and degradation. As such, contesting the visual representation of Muslim women as subservient objects of oppression constitutes a rejection of the imperialist narrative of cultural polarization.

In 1978, Edward Said published his highly critical analysis of the effects of colonialism on the power dynamics of global culture, titled *Orientalism*. Said explains that the structures of European governmental and economic control have resulted in a “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, [and] dehumanizing ideology” that influences contemporary societal interactions.⁴ In this sense, an ethnocentric attitude characterizes the Western conception of the Middle East, enabling an enforcement of a perceived cultural difference and superiority. The impact of Orientalist thinking extends into nearly all relations between the polarized East and West, including the discourse on the societal role of females and women’s rights. As European society restructured in reaction to industrialization and colonization, the position of women shifted concurrently, and feminist movements became intertwined in a larger narrative of modernization. In her article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?,” Lila Abu-Lughod details how the evolving rights of women in European society allowed for a “rhetoric of salvation” in relation to Muslim women.⁵ By construing females in the Middle East as oppressed and in need of liberation, the West justified colonial intervention. European missionaries traveled with the intent of educating and advancing the native populations, but simultaneously stripped them of any agency in their own social position and dismissed the local traditions and practices as inherently inferior.⁶ In this sense, the supposed emancipation constitutes a form of particularly hypocritical cultural imperialism.

Furthermore, as Leila Ahmed reveals in *Women and Gender in Islam*, the “Western legacy of andocentrism and misogyny,” although manifested in different customs, has equally problematic implications for women, and, in many ways, introducing European values reduced the status of females

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 785, <http://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf>.

⁶ Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 18-23.

in Middle Eastern society.⁷ The Qur'an states, in regard to the status of men and women, that "there is therefore no difference between them in regard to humanity, and no superiority of one over the other in works," maintaining the equality of the sexes in the eyes of God.⁸ Islam, as a religion, thus asserts the rights of women, but the imposition of Western structures and thought effectively objectified the Muslim female body, specifically in relation to the "politics of the veil."⁹ In Western society, the veil represents the oppression of Muslim women, suggesting their forced subservience and lack of independence. Ethnocentric discourse simplifies the experiences and beliefs of a diverse population, lumping them together as "women of cover," in the words of former United States President George W. Bush.¹⁰ For many women, the veil connotes a method of preserving modesty and a sign of social and religious respectability, but much of the contemporary dialogue ignores this reality and instead reinforces cultural division.¹¹ The imperialist rhetoric thus persists in the Western characterization of Muslim women, relegating them to a position of scrutiny and judgment, rather than permitting multiple perspectives. In this manner, the international representation of Muslim women continues to reflect the Orientalism delineated by Said, subjugating their identities to the expectations of Western culture.

As a manifestation of these larger societal conceptions, the depiction of Muslim women in art embodies and illustrates this ethnocentric viewpoint. The imagery associated with Muslim women, contextualized within the accepted methods of presenting Middle Eastern heritage, is clear evidence of the imperialism that has permeated visual culture. In terms of exhibition and education, museums and galleries have historically facilitated a simplification and exoticism in relation to Islamic art through their lack of chronology, clouding of regional distinctions, and removal of intended context.¹² Larger institutional structures have thus enabled the perpetuation of an artistic Orientalism by failing to accurately or completely convey the complexity and diversity of Islamic visual history. In the same way that fetishizing impacts the representation of Islamic art as a genre, it also

⁷ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 127-128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹ Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?," 785.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 783.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 785.

¹² Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 57-64.

affects the portrayal of Muslim women as a population. The fascination with and romanticization of the unfamiliar East created an exoticized stereotype of the Muslim woman. Envisioned as a land of “sexual freedom and experiment,” the Orient itself became symbolized as a seductive, mysterious female.¹³ Many Western artists, inspired by these cultural fantasies, thematically focused on the veiled woman and the harem in their works, with their depictions, in turn, influencing the societal conception of the Middle Eastern female. For example, in his 1814 oil on canvas *La Grande Odalisque* (see fig. 1), Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres addresses the subject of the female concubine, but as the disproportionately elongated body and embellished accoutrements suggest, the portrait stems more from a glamorized imagination than truthful observation. However, for Western audiences, images like the odalisque invaded the cultural consciousness, enforcing a “predetermined set of ideas and prejudices about Muslims and Islamic society.”¹⁴ Subjectification in this manner relegated Middle Eastern women to the status of an object, in terms of not only supposed regional oppression, but also global study and attention.

In *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950*, Sarah Graham-Brown elucidates how Western depictions of Muslim women have persistently played into larger notions of Eurocentrism and Orientalism, favoring a justification of biases over illustrations of reality. Even photographs, accepted as fact in their documentary nature, remain “entangled in aesthetic and ideological codes of representation.”¹⁵ As a medium, photography captures a version of truth while still reflecting the perspective and intent of the artist by presenting a particular subject, in a particular light and time, and from a particular vantage point. In today’s media, this opinionated nature of imagery evidences itself in representations of the veil. Photographs of women in various states of cover communicate messages, either implicitly or explicitly, about the status of women in Islamic society. For instance, with the photograph by Alexandra Boulat the caption reads simply: “A mother watches her children and husband bathing in the Dead Sea” (see fig. 2).¹⁶

¹³ Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 7-9.

¹⁴ Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Caroline Mangez and Alexandra Boulat, “Silhouettes: Muslim Women of the Middle East and Afghanistan,” *Aperture*, no. 185 (2006): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24473207>.

However, in the juxtaposition of the shrouded, faceless woman with the exposed, exuberant bodies of the men and youth, the image makes a tacit statement about the subjugation of Muslim women, suggesting their status as secondary members of a patriarchal society. A single photograph thus encapsulates a much greater cultural perspective.

This synecdochization characterizes representations of Muslim women throughout global media, as Igor Zabel explains in his articles in *Art Journal* that the “figure of the ‘woman in black’ functions in the West as a general sign for the Muslim world and its allegedly incomprehensible, irrational, uncertain, and threatening nature.”¹⁷ The veiled woman has transformed into the symbol of a civilizational divide, supporting and enforcing notions of the barbarity of the Middle East. In the same way that colonists used depictions of enslaved, hypersexualized women to justify their economic exploitation, contemporary political actors employ the image of the covered female body to brand military intervention as a form of social salvation. In the West, forms of veiling have developed into “visual signifiers of terrorism,” playing into the larger image-based narrative of the violence of Islam.¹⁸ By publicizing a portrayal of the Middle East as a site of atrocities relating to religious extremism, Western nations, particularly the United States, rationalize and legitimize their own violence in the region. The construction of this visual rhetoric of terrorism emerged during the late 1970s with the documentation of the Iranian Revolution and Iran hostage crisis.¹⁹ In fact, the highly dramatized Western media coverage of the developments reflected such a problematic bias that the students of Tehran University invited a delegation of United States citizens to the newly formed Islamic Republic in 1980, in the midst of Iran’s detention of fifty-two Americans inside the U.S. embassy. Photojournalist Randy Goodman traveled to Iran as part of this diplomatic mission, and in her lecture “Iran: Women Only” she explained the intent of the students to dispel the limited, prejudicial conceptions created by the West by introducing new imagery and information.²⁰ However, the strength

¹⁷ Igor Zabel, “Women in Black,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (2001): 17, doi:10.2307/778194.

¹⁸ Iftikhar Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 125-27. doi:10.1086/588469.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Randy Goodman, “Iran: Women Only,” lecture, University of Oklahoma (Norman, Oklahoma) March 27, 2017.

of American media largely overpowered this attempt, sustaining the factious rhetoric pertaining to the two states.

Unfortunately, a divisive visual narrative now envelops the entire political relationship between East and West. As Jessica Winegar explains in “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” depictions and conceptions of Muslims tie directly into the “discourse of freedom” that segregates and subjugates Islamic society.²¹ Today, the international media propagates Western values, asserting the validity of the democratic cause by connecting visual representations of the Middle East to messages of both imminent danger and promised liberation. The intimate and intricate connections established between the covered female figure and the threat of Islamic violence clearly evidence themselves in Alexandra Boulat’s photograph of the women’s police academy in Tehran, Iran (see fig. 3), where the subjects, clad in black chadors, demonstrate their active participation in the enforcement of Islamic law. By linking the veil to conceptions of violence, either directly (as in this image) or by implying oppression, the media has employed Muslim women as an illustration of the supposed brutality of Islam. In this sense, photojournalism has effectively enabled the dissemination of a single perspective as truth.

In contrast, much of the art produced by Middle Eastern women rejects this simplified, imperialist portrayal. For instance, the works of Iranian exile Shirin Neshat specifically address the subject of the Muslim female identity. Her series *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) employs self-portraiture as an allegorical representation and criticism of the politicized image of the Muslim woman.²² The photographs depict the veiled female form, accessorized with weapons and decorated with calligraphic writing (see fig. 4). The imagery invokes the association of Islam with both the subordinate, oppressed female and the violent terrorist.²³ By playing into the stereotypes so ingrained in Western culture, Neshat calls the characterizations into question. The artist has explained her intent, saying “I see my works as a visual discourse on the subjects of feminism and contemporary Islam—a

²¹ Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 656, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25488228>.

²² Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 127-128.

²³ Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 146; John B. Ravenal, “Shirin Neshat: Double Vision,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2005), 447.

discourse that puts certain myths and realities to the test, claiming that they are far more complex than most of us have imagined.... I prefer raising questions as opposed to answering them as I am totally unable to do otherwise.”²⁴ As such, her art prompts a conversation rather than offers a solution.²⁵ Neshat invites her viewer into this dialogue, even utilizing perspective and vantage point in the video projections of her other shows to encourage conscious participation.²⁶ The effect of this awareness of observation references the status of Muslim women as an “object of spectacle” in global visual culture.²⁷

In the same way that Neshat addresses the simplification of the Islamic female identity by embodying the associative clichés, she directs attention to the objectification of Muslim women by emphasizing its presence in her works. Additionally, she comments on the historical dynamics and underlying currents that have enabled these problematic conceptions, referencing Orientalist and imperialist ideologies in the inscribed calligraphy and simplified styling. By depicting an “affectless subject overlaid by a supplemental oriental design that is itself flat, ornamental, and ahistorical,” Neshat subverts a notion of exoticism and a narrative of modernization, contesting the traditionally presumed authority of the West.²⁸ In this sense, she intentionally targets her Western audience, attempting to dispute accepted prejudices and provoke a reflection on the impact of cultural injustice. Her work, characterized by themes of contrast and duality, including the use of black and white and the disparate perspectives of the projections, thus recognizes and negates societal dichotomies.²⁹ By identifying the perceived division between men and women, East and West, and religion and modernity, Neshat challenges their segregation, aspiring instead to acceptance of a greater fluidity. While recognizing and emphasizing the fictitious nature of these manufactured partitions and inflicted appropriations, the artist also demonstrates how they concretely affect identity. In assuming the stereotype herself, she represents the capacity of thought to influence and even determine reality.³⁰

²⁴ Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 447.

²⁵ Zabel, “Women in Black,” 17.

²⁶ Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 453.

²⁷ Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

²⁹ Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 454-456; Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 129; Zabel, “Women in Black,” 22.

³⁰ Zabel, “Women in Black,” 22-25.

Neshat's work therefore exposes the effects of generalization on the individual, implicating not only Western society, but each viewer in their compliance and collaboration with the larger cultural mentality. Knowingly engaging on multiple levels and with diverse audience members, Neshat allows for different perceptions and understandings of her work, illustrating the true "ambiguities" of these forced characterizations, yet additionally demonstrating the possibility of conceptual concord.³¹ Although highlighting the existence of cultural friction, in the unification of divergent and conflicting ideas in a single photograph she simultaneously exhibits the potential for a form of future reconciliation.

Global art, in terms of both creations and institutions, has the ability to encourage this necessary discourse rather than remain a reflection and foundation of a divisive narrative. Neshat demonstrates that imagery can challenge cultural fabrications, and the work produced by other women from the Middle East serve as further evidence, not only of the truth of Neshat's commentary on the complexity of their societal role, but also their own faculty to enact structural change. In *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society*, Mehri Honarbin-Holliday details the experience of young female artists, whose self-portraiture illustrates both a multifaceted identity and personal strength.³² By exhibiting creativity and independence, the women contradict their assigned role as subjectified, exoticized objects, asserting instead the diverse realities of Muslim women, including capable, independent feminists. As a religion, Islam fundamentally supports the equality of the sexes, and any divergence from this core value stems from inherited cultural practices, not scriptural instruction.³³ In terms of pure doctrine, Muslim women have rights, freedoms, and a respected social position. As theologian Fatima Etemadi explains, "if you think we're more different than you because of this piece of clothing, if you think we're more hidden, you don't know Iranian women."³⁴ Western society has enforced the idea of feminist and Islamist evolutions as discordant and contradictory. However, the two movements and schools of thought coexist and interrelate, developing together to

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 73-91.

³³ Qasim Amin, "The Liberation of Women," *Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), 37.

³⁴ Mangez, "Silhouettes," 39.

influence the role of Muslim women.³⁵ In its textual and philosophical basis, Islam permits the same complexities of female identity that exist in Western society, and visual representation of this alternative conception of the religion challenges the cultural misconceptions. While self-representation, as in the works by the Iranian artists, constitutes a direct rejection of Orientalist thinking, Western depictions of Muslim women also have the capacity to dispute historical stereotypes.³⁶ For instance, in her image of a Kuwaiti woman (see fig. 5), Boulat elevates and illuminates the subject, emblazoned with designer labels, and places her husband to the side, illustrating a sense of command and power. Her composition incorporates both a strength of femininity and an emphasis on religious Islam, permitting the reconciliation of the two aspects of identity.

In terms of visually portraying another culture, accomplishing an objective depiction as an outside observer remains difficult. However, Goodman, who returned to Iran in 2015, explains that relinquishing control and embracing adaptability during the creative process, rather than adhering to a specific agenda, allows for a more holistic and honest representation.³⁷ In her experience, this openness enables constructive and transformative work. While she admits that her own perspective remains an aspect of the photograph, by recognizing its presence and intentionally minimizing its influence, she finds a way to empower her subjects, giving them some agency in their own depiction. For instance, Goodman avoids providing labels for her images. Instead of imposing her own narrative, presenting just the image permits for multiple interpretations and a diversity of perspectives, even in relation to a single work. As a result, Goodman finds that a dialogue emerges. During her shows and exhibitions, the photographer stays in the gallery, engaging in conversation with visitors. In these interactions, she has the opportunity to not only detail and expand upon her own views, but also to learn and process the additional opinions and knowledge of her audience. In this sense, the display of imagery constitutes an educational experience for both artist and viewer.

As such, art clearly has the capacity to enact change and bridge divides, but it remains equally potent as a tool of oppression and division. To challenge and counteract the historical abuse of imagery in terms of cultural imperialism, inclusive methods of visual representation must be adopted in the larger global artistic culture. In the summer of 2016, at the

³⁵ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 221-225.

³⁶ Ravenal, "Double Vision," 447.

³⁷ Randy Goodman, in discussion with the author, April 2017.

National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World* attempted this very mission, drawing on the works of contemporary female artists from the Middle East to “provide visitors with fresh perspective and encourage thoughtful discussion about how powerfully women artists reflect our world today.”³⁸ By displaying the art generated by the women of today’s Islamic society and including the photographers’ personal commentary as part of the exhibit, the show rejected the homogenization, Orientalism, and temporal erasure typical to the Western presentation of Middle Eastern art.³⁹ Rather than the typical simplification and eradication of identity, the exhibit allowed an exploration and conversation about the societal role of Muslim women. This departure from and challenge of conventional portrayals will continue to enact positive change. If the artistic community facilitates the reversal of prejudices and the establishment of cultural respect and equality, future generations of artists, photographers, and curators can inherit and sustain a tradition of inclusion and dialogue, instead of today’s division and ignorance. As a key to communicating conceptions of identity, the thoughtful and respectful creation and dissemination of imagery proves essential on the path to achieving cultural equality and reconciliation, not only in relation to Muslim women, but also on a larger global scale.

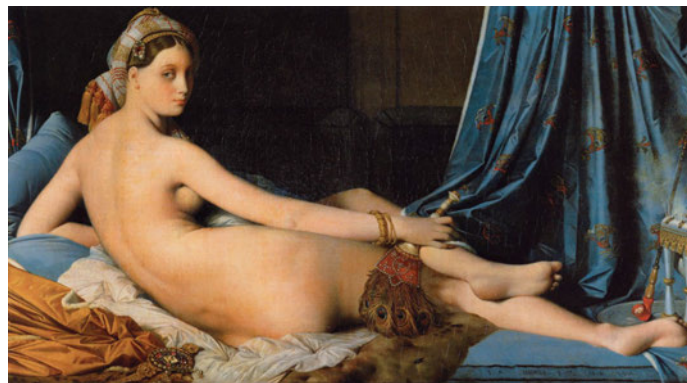


Fig. 1. *La Grande Odalisque*, an 1814 oil painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (Photo via Wikipedia).

³⁸ *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, audio guide transcripts, (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, April 8 - July 31, 2016): 2,
https://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/swtas_audioguide_transcripts.pdf

³⁹ Winegar, *The Humanity Game*, 655-674.



Fig. 2. Photograph by Alexandra Boulat, taken in Jordan, February 2006. (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 49).



Fig. 3. Photograph by Alexandra Boulat, taken in Tehran, Iran, November 2004 (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 40).



Fig. 4. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994.
(Photograph by Cynthia Preston, image from Zabel,
“Women in Black,” 21).



Fig. 5. Photograph by Caroline Boulat, taken near Damascus, Syria,
March 2006 (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 43).