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The Artwork of Mona Shomali

After searching for artwork that represented the suppression of women in Iran, I found an artist named Mona Shomali. She grew up in San Francisco and her series of paintings reflect her experience growing up in America as an Iranian woman. Shomali aims to expose the private lives of these Iranian women who are not allowed to express themselves in Iran. The main subjects in her artwork include modern Iranian women in traditional settings. It is important to understand the history of women in Iran when analyzing Shomali's artwork. Therefore, I will start off by discussing Iran's political history followed by her artwork. The paper is divided into four categories: women in Iran, the artist, the artwork (subcategories: nudity and eastern/western cultures) and the analysis of Naked Folklore. The last category aims to explain her paintings. I will do this by including her views and her ideas, as well as focus on my analytic interpretations of the artwork.

Women in Iran

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran turned into a country in which no citizen would have thought it would ever become. After the citizens overthrew the Shah, the Islamic republic took over under Khomeini, who was the leader of the revolution. In 1979, Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of the country. Little had the citizens known that this revolution would lead to the darkest of ages in the history of Iran. Never had a country changed so drastically over such a short period of time. Human right violations skyrocketed and even more specifically, the treatment and socialization of women turned upside down. Women went from wearing dresses and skirts to "chadors," which are black gowns covering everything save the face. Never again could women feel the breeze flowing through their hair, for it was considered a sin to reveal hair or skin.

It was during this time when the Family Protection Act was repealed and held stricter rulings. The new version reinforced patriarchal norms, making the man the head of the family and labeling the woman as the "second sex." Polygamy was allowed only for the man and women lost the right to divorce or to have child custody. Within months of this law, female government workers were forced to dress a certain way and segregated from men during sports and local beaches. These laws are still active today, and if females are caught violating them, they can be sentenced to fines, and beatings. If they are engaged in pre-marital sex, they are often sentenced to death!

Iran is known to be a country of contradictions. For example, even though the legal system is repressive towards women, there have been 42 female candidates registered to run for president. Unlike the United States, Iran has had a female vice president. The first female vice president of Iran was Masoumeh Ebtekar. It is interesting to note that a gender repressive country has had a female vice

president while a more progressive country such as the United States has never had a female vice president. Another surprising fact is that Tehran, which is Iran's capital, has the highest rates of plastic surgery procedures in the world. It is known as the "nose job" capital. It's ironic that such a conservative country such as Iran would be the number one city in the world for rhinoplasties.

No other Islamic country is as progressive in women's rights than Iran. For example, in 2006, there was a women's rights rally with goals to obtain one million signatures. These women are educated and determined to get back those rights they once had before the revolution. What I find most inspiring is that these women can easily leave Iran and move to a more progressive area, but they choose not to. They are strong and ready to move the country in a new direction and will do whatever it takes to get there. We saw this with the famous "green movement" in 2009 after the fixed election. Millions of Iranians protested in the streets after their candidate, whom the majority of Iranians voted for, was defeated. The majority of these protesters were women. They were not afraid to go out into those streets to protest against their corrupt government. To this day, they continue to excel in all aspects; there are more females than males attending universities and more importantly, they continue to struggle to stand up for their rights.

Several artists have undertaken the issue of women's rights and many of these artists continue to express their artwork to reflect their own experiences. Through paintings and sculptures, artists have addressed the issues women face around the world and spread awareness about human rights issues. Through these visual articulations, the artists are able to express themselves and at the same time use their visual artwork to communicate it to us. One artist took her own experience as an Iranian woman living in the United States and communicates these experiences through her artwork. This artist is Mona Shomali. I will be discussing her newest collection of paintings entitled "Naked Folklore," which she describes as the narrative of an Iranian-American woman.

The Artist

Mona Shomali was born in 1979, the same year as the Iranian Revolution. Her mother had fled Iran with her husband while she was pregnant with Mona. Mona Shomali was born in Los Angeles and was raised in the San Francisco Bay area. When she was 14 years old, her high school art teacher introduced her to the live nude drawing group, which was a weekly collective sponsored by the Berkeley Artists Guild. This encouraged her to start experimenting with different types of art tools to create human bodies. She learned how to sketch and paint the human body with charcoal, watercolor, and oil. She later graduated with a degree in Environmental Studies with an emphasis on International Relations while continuing to pursue art. Her artwork is most influenced by Iranian-American artwork and the California bay area figurative movement that took place from 1950 to 1965. The figurative artist movement included Nathan Oliveira, Elmer Bischoff, David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Joan Brown, and Manuel Neri, who all inspired her. European artists such as Matisse and Gauguin also inspired her along with Kahlo and Riviera who were famous Latino artists.[1]

Her Artwork

Her artwork depicts Iranian-Americans, such as herself. There is an important distinction between Iranian contemporary artwork, and Iranian-American artwork. Mona Shomali emphasizes these differences and why it's important. She explains that Iranian art draws from its own histories and expresses personal narratives from events such as the Islamic revolution of 1979 to other politically charged artwork. Student riots, protests, beatings from Islamic government police, and imprisonment are all examples of what many Iranian artworks portray. However, Mona's artwork is different in that it addresses the dichotomy of Iranian women living in an American world.[2]

When Mona was 19 years old, she started the Naked Folklore series depicting American-Iranian women. Her political activeness is clearly expressed through her artwork and she continues to influence audiences with them. Born and raised in the United States, she wanted to challenge the image of Iranian Women in the American media. In an interview I had with Mona, she brought up the fact that Iranian and American women face similar issues but in different circumstances. The way I understood this was that women in Iran deal with suppressing their sexuality whereas in a government such as the United States, which allows more sexual freedom, women deal with issues such as rape. The way women approach their rights also differs between the United States and Iran. In the U.S., women express their rights through social movements of independency and autonomy. In Iran, the women's movement is based on quoting the Quran about women's rights in order to prove their equality. Both are movements striving for equality, but the approach differs for each government.

No matter what country you live in, as a woman, you are faced with daily struggles that you have otherwise not faced if you were a man. Women are faced with many contradictions, and after looking at Shomali's artwork, I had identified many of them. These contradictions include the following themes: 1. To always be sexy and look good, but if you look too good and show too much, it's your fault if a man takes action. 2. We are strong enough to bring another life into this world but we are seen as the "weaker sex" 3. The freedom of choice, religion, and expression versus political mandates and 4. Public lives versus the private lives of Iranian women.

Nudity

In her Naked Folklore series, the women are nude. These nude females are Iranian women who question the traditional ways of living. "These women are surreal and provocative as they experience their own self-defined identities- regardless of what is possible." [3] In the American media, we see Iranian women as sexless, shapeless, and formless with their black "chadors," which is the outfit they are required to wear to cover themselves. Shomali challenges these images we see in the American media by using nudity in her art when depicting Iranian women. The typical images we see of Iranian woman are shapeless as they are stripped away of their femininity and sexiness and are portrayed as lacking sexual desire. With these images, Shomali plans to expose the truth about Iranian woman. The typical Iranian woman we see in the media is not how Iranian women look at themselves. What we see in the photos of the women is how they see themselves, and not how others see them.

I noticed in several photos, the woman has her arm up. After asking about why she drew the woman this way, she explained that this was her way of portraying full exposure and vulnerability. She gave a perfect example involving cats: when they roll on their backs they trust you to rub their belly; they are vulnerable and want attention and affection. By fully exposing themselves, you know that they are comfortable. This implies that the woman in these photos are comfortable with themselves, and to me, this sends a message that it is not Iranian woman who are uncomfortable, but rather, it is the government who feels threatened and “uncomfortable.” She creatively shows that these women are expressing themselves how they’d like rather than how others want them to express themselves.

These women essentially question the taboos and assumptions made by both Iranian and American women. Mona wanted to explore the “sensuality, volition and complex desires of the authentic woman who was underneath the [chador].”[4] To Mona Shomali, Nudity is sheer vulnerability and liberation. She paints nude women who are doing ordinary activities, and paints them in a way to where they seem oblivious to the fact that they are naked, almost as if nudity is something they don’t notice.[5] Through nudity she can express the contradictions that are defined in each of her artworks. Unlike many artworks done by artists who use nudity as a form of love and pride, Mona Shomali uses the nudity to symbolize modernity and liberation. Her use of female nudity is political. This is in contrast to the typical use of female nudity in American popular culture, which is often designed to appeal to male sexual fantasy. She uses this type of nudity to contrast the “modernity” and “liberation” with the “traditional” and “classical” ways of living.

Various cultures have expressed their artworks through nudity. Areas of Europe and Africa have had their art movements featuring exposed individuals. However, in Iran, under the governmental Islamic rule, nudity in art is strictly prohibited and seen as shameful. Therefore, Iran has never actually had artwork depicting nudity. Shomali recognizes the fact that her artwork would be taboo and that these scenes she creates would not be permissible in Iran. She would not be able to publicly exhibit this work in Iran and therefore she understands that it is a privilege for her to express herself here in America.

Eastern vs. Western culture

Her series of artwork is designed to illustrate what it is to be an Iranian-American woman with Iranian traditional backgrounds living in an individualistic American society. As an Iranian-American woman herself, Mona is able to draw on her experience to express her own struggles and contradictions she faced growing up. Because she was the first generation Iranian-American in her family, she dealt with many social contradictions and had to find herself somewhere in the middle where she belonged. For the first time at age 11, she associated being Iranian as a bad thing due to what she had sensed from her social surroundings. She went as far as to ask her mother not to speak to her in Farsi in public because of the embarrassment and fear it would cause in front of her classmates. The negative images of Iranians in the media resulted in Mona’s internal battle of her own identity. She has previously stated that in her early teens, she remembers feeling defensive when asked questions about being Iranian. She felt as though she was always trying to compensate and trying to show alternative and positive perspectives of Iranian culture. She states, “Personally, I found it very difficult to operate and behave within two

opposing cultural standards. I felt most comfortable somewhere in between rebellion and renaissance.” [6]

Mona explains that she had to discover a balance between the modern western society and traditional eastern society and what that meant as a woman. In her paintings, she combines the eastern and western culture into one woman to embrace the complexities of Iranian women. The women are making choices they would normally do in an Iranian society to express themselves. However, it is important to note that many of these expressions are fictional and symbolic. They are challenging their own image in the eyes of the society they live in and defining it for themselves. They are proving who Iranian woman really are instead of living and acting under the stereotype they have been given by others from western societies.

These images and definitions of her artwork are all evident in these next paintings of hers that I will be discussing. In each painting, there are contrasts and contradictions of what it means to be an Eastern and Western woman and I will be discussing what each of those contradictions are within each artwork.

The Analysis of Naked Folklore

In the first painting, titled “Waiting for Pomegranates to Ripen,” I noticed traditional Iranian cypress trees outside of the window. Inside of her home, there are pomegranates sitting inside of a bowl, which also brings out the “Iranian-ness” in the photo. The pomegranates (which are traditionally found in Iranian homes) and the Iranian cypress tree outside sends a message to the observer that this is an Iranian woman. To my observation, this woman seems tired and restless. As she holds both her hands above her head, she seems exhausted but yet vulnerable at the same time because of her nakedness.

It is interesting to me that she is naked and at the same time has jewelry and lipstick on as if she is going to go out. Her matching earrings and bracelets along with her naked figure exaggerate her femininity. So what does this all mean? Why does she look exhausted but at the same time has make up and jewelry as if she is ready to go out? To me, it symbolizes the burden of being a woman. Even if you are restless and vulnerable, you are told to be dolled up and look decent enough to look at. She is expected to look beautiful, no matter what her condition might be. Her dissatisfaction with her treatment in the house is hidden under the make-up and jewelry so that she can appear happy and ignore the reality of her dilemmas, which she has no control over.

When Mona Shomali constructed this painting, she drew in the pomegranates to symbolize the womb of the woman. She states, “As well as being beautiful fruits, I feel that they bear resemblance to the womb of the woman. The title suggests the woman is waiting for the fertile pomegranate fruits to ripen and burst open, or perhaps she is waiting for her own fertile body to ripen so that she can come into her own as a grown mature Iranian woman.” [7] After reading about her symbolic comparison of the pomegranates to the womb, the painting could also be seen differently in regards to why she is standing there waiting with make-up on. Her eyes are closed as if she is wishing for something greater: to become a grown mature Iranian woman. By wearing the jewelry and make up, she can stand in hopes that one day she too will be “ripe” and ready like these pomegranates, to burst open and ready for a new world in which she could be looked at as a grown woman instead of being treated like a child.

In the painting to the left, titled, "Outside of Our Bedroom," there are two scenes illustrated. The scene on the left is a bedroom, while the scene on the right depicts nightlife. After analyzing the scene on the left, I noticed a dress on the bed and a self-portrait above the bed. It is evident that this room belongs to a single woman. The painting she has hung in her room with the road and trees is the same picture on the right side of the artwork where the two women are standing. This is a place where she dreams to be. This is her ideal free world: exposed, with a care-free night life where no one could tell her how to dress or how to act. In Iran, the bedroom is the only place where a woman could feel vulnerable, sexy, or nude. Mona Shomali challenges the traditional ideas of public versus private lives of Iranian women. This is one type of contradiction Mona is illustrating of the Iranian-American woman: the contradiction of the public and private life of an Iranian woman.

By illustrating these two women dancing on the street, it exposes the inner desires of Iranian women: wishing they could dance and have a good time by bringing their sexiness out in the public rather than keeping it in the bedroom. When asked about this artwork, Mona exclaimed, "This painting for me is an exploration of women who feel so drunk on life, so that they abandon the bedroom nude and run out into the street to celebrate." [8] I find this artwork to be very eye opening for people who live in the western world because it raises awareness of the suppression of female sexuality in Iran. It is important for people in the western society to realize that women in Iran are sexual beings, just like any other woman. They want to express themselves, but are restricted to do so because of governmental laws forced upon them. They could only dream of having the type of freedom women in the western world possess. The next painting that I will be discussing also challenges the idea of suppressing female sexuality.

The painting titled, "The Strength of a Vulnerable Man" is the only artwork in the "Naked Folklore" series by Mona Shomali that illustrates a male presence. It portrays a man offering an apple to a woman, who is lying down on her stomach. She seems happy but uninterested in the apple being offered by the gentleman. I feel that the idea behind this was to challenge the idea that women are the temptress. The idea of woman "tempting" men has been a trend throughout history.

For example, Mona points out that in the story of Adam and Eve, it is Eve who tempts Adam towards sin, and in Samson and Delilah it is the woman who tempts the man towards the betrayal of God. Bible stories are not the only proof of this, in the Koran 24:1, it states, "Tell the faithful women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts and not display their beauty except what is apparent of it." [9] After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, this quote was taken literally and it became mandatory for women to wear "chadors," which covers the head and body so that women do not tempt men who are not their husbands. Women are covered head to toe in order to prevent a man from sinning. Again, this is reinforcing the idea that it is the woman's fault if the man "sins." The problem with this is that it automatically assumes that men cannot control their sexual desire. If a woman is wearing revealing clothing, her rape gets justified because she "provoked" the sexual acts done to her. I feel that the chador does not fulfill its role in creating more value or respect for a woman, but rather sends a message to men that they are not able to control themselves, which is ironically a degrading and

humiliating message to men. Mona acknowledges that women possess sexual power, but she also acknowledges the restraint that the modern man is capable of. This respectful restraint is overlooked and underestimated in many societies, specifically, the Iranian government.

Mona addresses gender norms in this photo by illustrating the opposite of the classic image of Adam and Eve. Because of all the contradictions of gender strength and what it means to be a “strong man” or “strong woman,” Mona decided to reverse these roles in the picture. The questions she wants to leave her audience with is, what if it was Adam that was really tempting Eve by offering her the forbidden fruit? Would the ideas of ‘strength’ and ‘temptation’ change? Who would be vulnerable, and who would have to resist whom?” [10]

I find this painting to be extremely creative because it makes you think about how the story would change if the roles were switched. To me, it seems that she is not giving into the temptation. Her back is towards him, and her arms are crossed, to herself. She also looks like she is smirking at him, almost as if she knows what he is trying to do, but she is resisting the temptation.

This next painting, “Persecution and Prayer” is very personal for me. The necklace she is wearing around her is the first thing I noticed when looking at this artwork. This necklace is known as the “ringstone symbol” most commonly found on rings and necklaces worn by Baha’is. It consists of two stars mixed with the word “Bahá.” The lower line represents the world of humanity and the upper line is the world of God. The middle line represents the station of the Manifestations of God, which refers to all the prophets of the past. The line, which goes through the middle, is symbolic to how we can connect to God through all the Manifestations of the past, such as Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, and Bahauallah. This necklace identifies her as a Bahá’í, but her nakedness is not a typical “religious” depiction, therefore, I became curious to know what the message of this picture could be.

Like this woman in the photo, I myself am also a Bahá’í. Bahá’ís are the largest minority group and are hated by the Islamic government in Iran. So, my first thought was what if this picture gets in the wrong hands, or anyone who represents the Islamic government in Iran? They could use this picture against the Bahá’ís as proof of what their religion must represent. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the government had a systematic plan on exterminating the Bahá’ís, much like what Hitler planned to do with the Jews. This painting is very specific to the Bahá’í Faith. As noted earlier, Mona’s parents had to escape Iran during the revolution. This is because they too were Bahá’ís. Like Mona’s parents, my mother and her family had to escape the country as well. These persecutions continue today and are hidden from the international community. I could only imagine what other accusations (along with many false accusations against the Bahá’ís the government could give if they saw this photo!)

When I asked her about this painting and how it could be misinterpreted, she replied, “I don’t feel responsible for other people’s interpretation of my artwork. I do not attempt to control ideas based on my images. For me, it is a visual expression. For others, they can relate to it however they like.”[11] It is clear that Mona uses her artwork to express herself and leaves her artwork free for interpretation.

When I interpret this painting, I see the woman praying, as she holds her hands, eyes closed, and asking God for assistance. There are many contradictions in this artwork. The biggest contradiction is that she is

wearing a veil to cover her beauty and be “modest,” but yet, she is nude. Another ambiguity about this photo is whether she is dead or alive. Mona describes her as already dead because she is lying in a casket like shape with flowers inside. She describes that the veil covering her lips as the wind blows is symbolic to how the Iranian government silences the Bahá’í’s and the lack of freedom they receive simply because of their religion. I think she is still alive in this scene, and is at the midst of preparing for her persecution. Her nakedness symbolizes her new freedom she will soon be experiencing after her murder. Even though her freedom of religion is being taken away from her, she understands that this lack of freedom is temporary and that very shortly she is going to be free from all the pain and suffering she had endured in the past.

“Freedom of Choice” is another artwork that relates to the contradiction of freedom and choice. The painting depicts a woman who is making a decision between two pears. These pears are symbolic to different/larger choices women are given. On the left of the drawing, it reads, “Freedom is not freedom if only those that agree with those in power are free,” quoted by an unnamed Iranian reformist. In other words, it is not true freedom when you are obliged to agree with the government. You don’t have a choice of whether you agree or not, you are forced to obey. Women lack freedom in Iran: freedom to say what they want, dress how they want, and express what they want. Even though the woman is given the opportunity to make a decision, this freedom is not true freedom because she is still under control with what she decides. Because the pears she is choosing from are identical, it is evident that it makes no difference what she chooses. She sits there contemplating, wondering if this free decision is actually freedom at all. No matter what her decision will be, or what she chooses, in the end it will not matter because it is already decided for her. It appears to be freedom, but in actuality, it is predestined. She might feel that she is receiving freedom but in reality she is only given one choice. This choice has already been decided but is disguised as two separate “choices.”

This next painting is comprised of two distinct pictures. Shomali had painted both photos separately before she put it together into one painting. By making the gap off centered, she aimed to make it visually more jarring to the eye.[12] After looking at this photo several times and taking the title of the picture into consideration, I came to the conclusion that the message she was sending to her audience was that women are the source of creation. However, I could not depict what the woman in the photo was doing, or the message behind the two scenes in the photo. Therefore, during my interview with her, I addressed this photo and asked her about the subliminal message behind this painting. She pointed out a few significant points about the photo. One important point she made was how the woman is inside of the house, which, in patriarchal societies, is common. Women are kept indoors however the irony of this is that they are the source of life. So the question that Mona wants to leave her audience with is, if women are the source of life, why are they separated from the core?[13] Why should they be kept away indoors and unexposed to other natural creations when they are the nurturers? It’s clear that the bond between woman and nature is a natural existence that should be recognized. I found the flowing waters in the art to symbolize life and the tree as growth. These are both important characterizes of Mother Nature that these women are being stripped away from in their suppressive environments.

After analyzing Mona Shomali's artworks, it has become clear to me that her paintings capture audiences who can relate to the American/Iranian culture, such as myself. Like Mona, I too have never been to Iran and have lived in the United States my whole life. However, when I see Iranian women in the media, I notice that they are not portrayed the same way that American women are. American women are represented in the media as sexy, beautiful, and appealing to men, which is quite the contrary of Iranian women in the media. With these set of paintings I feel that we see the traditional Iranian women in a different light, a more accurate one. In each of these artworks discussed, we saw how Mona exposed their private thoughts through her paintings. By doing so, she exposed the forbidden expressions of Iranian women and how their true identity differs from what we see in the media. Because of governmental control, there is a huge contrast of public and private lives of Iranian women. At the end of the day, it does not matter whether you are an Iranian or American women; if you are a women, you are a sexual being with sexual desires. This is an important message the artist is sending to her audience and I feel she delivers this creatively and thoughtfully.

[1] Shomali, Mona. "Look Mona: about the artist," n.d.,

http://www.lookmona.com/TheCollections_abouttheartist.html

[2] Saremi, Sepideh. "Pars Arts," 22 Jan 2010., <http://www.parsarts.com/2010/01/22/the-art-of-mona-shomali.html/>

[3] Saremi, Sepideh.

[4] Saremi, Sepideh.

[5] Shomali, Mona. "Outside The Tent" 26 March 2003.

<http://www.iranian.com/Arts/2003/March/Shomali/1.html>

[6] Saremi, Sepideh.

[7] Shomali, Mona "Outside the Tent" <http://www.iranian.com/Arts/2003/March/Shomali/1.html>

[8] <http://www.iranian.com/Arts/2003/March/Shomali/1.html>

[9] Saremi, Sepideh.

[10] Saremi, Sepideh.

[11] Mona Shomali, Interview, 25 May 2010.

[12] Mona Shomali, Interview, 25 May 2010.

[13] Mona Shomali, Interview, 25 May 2010.