

THE DIALOGUE OF AN OPPRESSED SILENCE

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Abstract

"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" Cesar Cruz¹

Resistance struggles to seek a powerful and loud voice. It refers to political, economic, social, or other concerning circumstances of any society. Resistance aims at raising awareness about an issue and calls for justice. The paper intends to discuss two such works of Shirin Neshat and sketches based on the book 'Evidence Jeongeori Prison' based on descriptions given by former inmate Kim Kwang-il. These relate to punishment and violence against people in custody and raise many questions regarding their human rights. The art works of Neshat attend to the social, political and psychological dimensions of women's experience in contemporary Islamic societies. Although Neshat actively resists stereotypical representations of Islam, her artistic objectives are not explicitly polemical. Her work recognizes the complex intellectual and religious forces shaping the identity of Muslim women throughout the world. Using Persian poetry and calligraphy she examined concepts such as martyrdom, the space of exile, the issues of identity and femininity. Her film 'Women Without Men' is also a remarkable expression. This film won her the 'Silver Lion' for being the best film at Venice Film Festival.

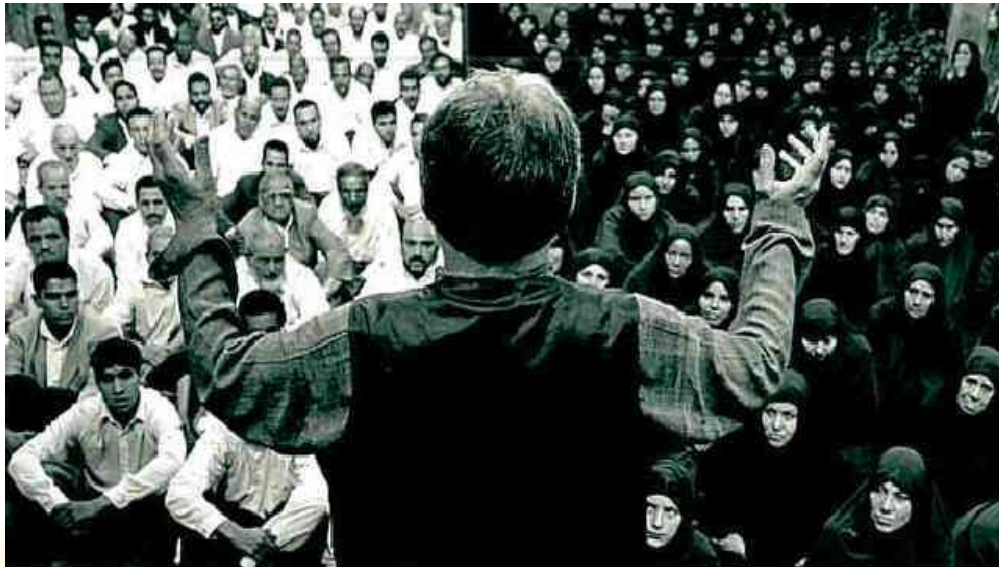
"Art is not what you see but what you make other see"-Degas²

Key Words:- Social, political resistance, human rights, feminism

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“**T**he Islamic revolution in Iran has been one of those remarkable occasions in history when the power of words and images has successfully challenged the military might of an established state.”³(Nafisi). In Shirin Neshat’s works the female body is highlighted which symbolizes the will to violence, the calligraphy indicates an intellectual and emotional engagement that women were not permitted to express. The pictorial effect of the written word, deepens the meaning in the mind. This beautiful calligraphy in Islam is called as the “music for the eyes”⁴ (Plate) The rationale behind using the female body and calligraphy Neshat states, ‘ ...they are reflections on the military participation of women in the revolution: Islam trained women to fight in the Iran- Iraq war, the one area in which they could be equal to men. And it is the paradox of their enforced submissiveness and their strength. It is why I decided that women had to be the focus of my work because they embody, in a way men do not, the value systems of that society.’⁵ (Suzie) After returning to Iran after almost 15 years what Neshat’s eyes saw was only black and white. When she left the country it was Iranians- Persians, but after return it was only Muslims and hence she says, “Virtually everything was black and white, and women had to be in dark clothes.”⁶ (Ravenal) Her use of Black and white is thus organic and impressive. There is yet another analogy that goes with these colours, of being pure and chaste for white and dark and mournful for black which echoes similar feelings in the onlooker’s mind. The contrast is very sharp and attracts the attention to the water tight compartments of black and white, men and women, where there is no room for the ‘gray matters.’ In art, and in life there cannot be such a sharp demarcating line between sexes, their roles or any two sects for that matter.



Neshat uses the *hijab* very often, which means ‘curtain’, this was initially worn by educated women as a sign of revolution, she expresses why she chose Hijab to express the inexpressible, “The concept of hijab or veiling philosophically operates in many ways in Islam; it is not only a piece of fabric over a woman’s head.... In Islam, hijab dictates a need to establish boundaries, curtains, or borders to separate the inside/ outside, private/public, sacred/profane, but most of all to protect belongings from foreigners.”⁷ (Neshat) through this she has re-emphasied the complexities of gender politics, power games between genders and spaces of women, their encroachment into the territory which is called as only ‘Men’ in the post revolutionary country. The femaleness is also fore-grounded through these pictures.

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Neshat's work helps us to understand the religio-political significance of post 9/11 world. As it voices the relationship between terrorism and gendered body, which is yet another revolution in itself and foregrounds the threat of terrorism. In the Khomeini's regime Iran allowed women to vote but it restricted them by the sharia law to be actively engaged in political arena. This made many women ask questions and argue although in a very limited manner, about women's rights in Islam. The Islamic revolution had visual imagery playing a vital part, when the power of words and images has successfully challenged the military might of an established state. It is her work which plays a catalyst to speak to a range of personal and social issues and to express her point of view from the intersection of overlapping identities.



The another incident which this paper aims to study is sketches form a book, **“Eyewitness: A Litany of North Korean Crimes Against Humanity, Prima-facie Evidence, Jeongeori Prison”, volume 1, published by the North Korea Human Rights The Third Way.** This book contains horrifying sketches and information which raises many questions regarding human rights in prison. Kim kwang-il, who was one of the in mates, disclosed this information. The inhuman treatment to the prisoners is most loudly expressed by sketches.

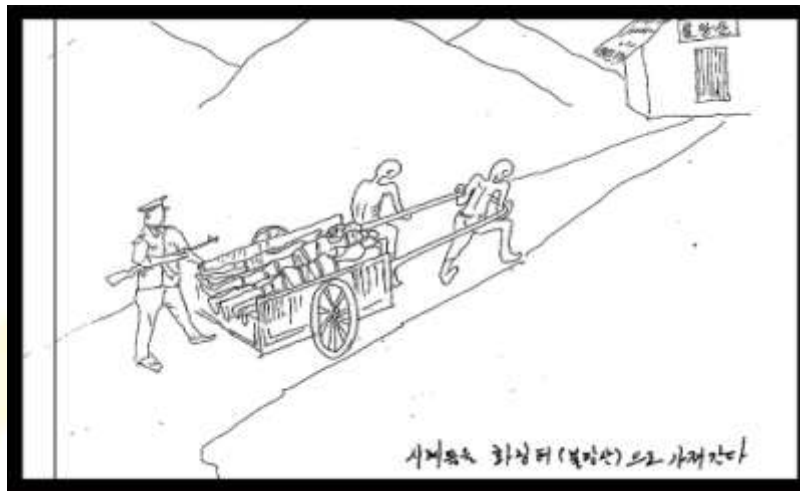


Kim kwang il has been in the above said prison for 2 years and 5 months, and he has narrated the horrifying and inhuman experiences of the time. While recounting one such incident he says, *“How do you eat a snake in the street? but for us the first one to eat, we would find snakes in the street. I know this sounds terrible to you. Everybody raced to catch those snakes and that’s because we were so starved.”* ⁸ (North Korea report: drawings reveal horrific scenes witnessed by former inmate as he tells of life in prison)

This inhuman treatment calls for ears to listen and sympathize towards the ill conduct. These bizarre tales registers more tellingly on the viewer due to the pictures. The sketches show us the grim and dark realities of prisoner’s life. How ruthless the life would have been there and how suffocating for the prisoners. This kind of atmosphere is enough for one to lose his mental equilibrium and go insane. For instance he says once, *“...to put it literally, we lived in a hole of human defecation.”* ⁹

(Kwang-il)

Art in any of these forms instructs and is didactic. Shirin Neshat's work appeals to the head whereas the sketch the heart and sensitivities.



United Nation's panel has accused North Korea of crimes against humanity, including systematic extermination, torture and starvation, etc. As per the report persons who were found to have engaged in major political crimes are 'disappeared', without trial or judicial order, to political prison camps. Besides, "people are denied right to have access to information from independent sources: state controlled media are the only permitted source of information in the Democratic people's Republic of Korea (DPRK)" ¹⁰ (www.bbc.co.uk)

These sketches arouse the desired emotions and feelings in the onlooker's minds and fulfill the purpose. As the Chienese proverb, 'A picture stands for a thousand words.' And sometimes it adds volumes to the information that needs to be provided. It is a visual effect

which has colours, textures, dimensions, emotions, and multipronged approach. Pictorial art adds effects, genders, cultures, edifices, emotions in the eyes, suggested paradoxes, contrasts with the use of background and light and shadow, etc. In both the examples confrontation has loudly been registered. Thus art has many tools to imply to design, 'what you make others see.'

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