

***RESISTANCE
OF
HIDDEN VOICES***

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

**GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ARTS
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO**

APRIL 2015

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Abstract

An Eastern mind living in a Western society¹ in which freedom of speech and equality among members of society are achieved goals benefits from an advantageous perspective from which to express its thoughts. Women play important roles in the creation of any society. It is just the matter of knowing that women, as active members of that society, can be productive. However, in my home country, Iran, most women, mainly from lower and middle classes, do not have the same opportunities as women here in Canada. They are struggling even in their daily lives. Women's issues gain much attention in various parts of the world including Canada, however, in Iran this is not the case. One of the main reasons for this resides in the deep-rooted beliefs and general understanding of the society about women's being. These general conceptions or master narratives can shape, influence or change the lives of women. However, in modern times with the growth of education, knowledge, communication with other parts of the world, and increase in women's awareness, new narratives and concepts are beginning to emerge in Iranian society. These counter narratives can reshape ones which damage the identity and being of women.

These master narratives have a stronghold on people's minds and souls such that overcoming them is not a matter of months. The stronghold is such that even in my own mind, as someone who has been living outside Iran for eight years, its presence is still felt. Living in Canada gave me the opportunity to examine women's resistance in Iran

¹ By Eastern minds I mainly mean myself and my Iranian community who are living outside Iran, mainly in Canada.

from a different angle, both as an outsider and insider. As I gain a deeper understanding from this new point of view, another issue has become apparent, namely the Western master narrative about Iranian women. From personal experience in these eight years the majority of Westerners I confronted see Iranian women as passive and subordinated members of society. They see Iranian women as victims. However, Iranian women are not victims. They are under various oppressions but they are not passive. They have showed active resistance towards the oppressions and they are still doing so. My role as an active Iranian-Canadian female performance artist is to resist master narratives of Iranian women both from Iran and the West. My performance about Iranian women's resistance culture is a resistant action. On the one hand I am a voice for women in my country, and on the other hand I am showing the resistant nature of Iranian women to my Western audience. This new concept of resistant nature may change my Western audience's understanding of Iranian women.

Dedication

To My Parents, Aziz and Giti, for their Love and Support

To My Love, Mehdi, for his Love and Courage

And To My Grandmother, for all the Unspoken Moments...

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Introduction

Sitting under my cozy blanket, looking out of the window, watching the snow blow reminds me of my Granny's house where as a child back home in Iran I used to sit under a big, thick blanket on cold snowy days and listen to stories about her childhood and dreams. She married my Granddad at the age of nine and delivered my oldest uncle when she was just thirteen. I remember listening to these stories at ten years old and I always thought, "How is it possible for me now to have a husband?" I would ask myself what does it mean even to have a "husband"? And yet my Granny talked about it in a very accepting way. There was no other option at that time for girls. She did not even know that she was to be married to her cousin. She told us that as she was playing in the mud her aunt suddenly arrived and took her to take a bath and change her clothes. Then she sat on a chair for hours with a very colourful heavy scarf on her head before she eventually fell asleep. That's all she remembers from her wedding day.

Now when I think about all those 'stories' I get afraid. I think about all those lives that have been changed by others. My Granny is a very intelligent and wise woman. She has been leading various help groups for youth, single mothers, and poor in her little city, Miyaneh northwest of Iran. I always regret that she could not pursue her education. Had she been able to, she would have expanded her activities to a larger scale and organize bigger, more effective institutes and organizations.

Now as a graduate student at one of the First World's universities, I ask myself: why? Why should women in my country and other neighbouring countries in my region be barred from their rights and opportunities? I look back and realize that my

grandmother, my mother, and I have similar problems. The problems may have changed in their forms but they are the same at the core. For instance, I see that we all struggled with having no choice in our society. Many times I have asked myself what are the reasons behind this issue. Why is this an epidemic problem? Does it have anything to do with the oil business? Does it have any relation to any other country? Is this due to the cultural issues of the region? Or is this the consequence of the epidemic ignorance of both people and governments? These are some of the questions I always asked myself through my life. Now seventeen years later, I am ready to explore these questions. I feel the need deep in me to find my position as an Iranian-Canadian performance artist woman in this complicated world. This paper is a beginning.

One of the most important elements that needs to be considered here is what is really going on in Iran which can be at significant odds with what the Western media reports. In Western eyes there is always a shadow of misunderstanding about Iran, which frequently comes from what the media presents. “Not Without My Daughter” is a film from 1991, directed by Brian Gilbert, in which a Western woman is depicted as violently abused by her Middle Eastern husband. The whole story is about her effort to run away and rescue herself and her little daughter from this horrible situation. This is a very minor example of the effect of media on Westerners. Now 24 years after the film’s release, I still get questions asking if Iranian women are victims as the film shows. People ask me whether we wear Borgha in Iran, if women are allowed to drive, if women can dress in colours. I do not blame my Western friends. These questions and remarks all come from the only source they have at hand, the media. However, in recent years with the growth of social media such as Facebook and Twitter this dominant

misunderstanding of Iran began to change. People in Iran, mainly youth in bigger cities such as Tehran, showed resistance to this prevailing misunderstanding of Iranians. One good example is the Facebook page called “The Rich Kids of Tehran”. On this page, upper class young people post images from their daily life. Obviously these are not images of the general society, but it does show another perspective from Iran that is current and different.

This resistance against the Western world’s misunderstanding regarding Iran is not limited to the daily life of people. Since 2005, information received through the news media only dealt with Iran’s nuclear program and President Ahmadinejad and his hardline conservative statements and speeches. However, after the 2009 presidential election and the emergence of the Green Movement, the world gained a very different perspective on Iranian people. During this political movement people demonstrated against a fraudulent presidential election and demanded Ahmadinejad’s removal from office (Iranian Green Movement). Non-Iranians began to understand Iranians as separate from their government.

The first step in understanding and analyzing a topic is to gain a comprehensive picture of the issue. That is my objective. This means that the researcher or the observer should analyze the topic within the nature, values, and norms of that topic’s own context. For example if we analyze an Eastern issue with Western norms and values, we cannot reach an accurate conclusion. The first step to reach such a position in a study is to accept, consider and become familiar with differences. Each case study has its own requirements, only applicable to that particular context. What is acceptable in Eastern culture and considered as a value may not even be an option in the West. However, this

does not mean a study should hide under the veil of cultural relativity. Rather it should attempt to understand the nature and the context of the subject matter (Taylor et al. 7; sec.10).

The misrepresentation of the East by the West becomes a mode of justification for Western governments' actions. For instance we can refer to Laura Bush's speech on *Radio Address* from November 17, 2001:

“Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”

This speech and approach is very sensitive. However, a closer observation of Afghan culture reveals that much of what the West sees as oppression is part of the culture. For example, the veil (*Borgha*) that women wear is still prevalent in most regions of Afghanistan.

It is clear that we should study any subject matter in its own context with its own norms and values. This aspect is highlighted significantly in socio-cultural issues.

As an Iranian woman, I admit that there are many different problems facing women culturally, socially, and politically. These limitations and restrictions affect women's lives in very widespread dimensions ranging from everyday life at home to social life in public. Various reasons play a part in the existence of these restrictions such as the Islamization of the country after the 1979 Revolution, cultural background, economic issues, and political relations to name a few.

As previously noted, many diverse elements can play roles within a single issue. However, the boundaries that divide people in a society are not fixed; they can change or

reverse themselves over time. Different groups in a society gain and lose control over their members. Women are no exception to this rule. The location and definition of their activities, even norms and values about their behavior shift and change as the boundaries in the society move and change. A good example of this change in the society can be seen in Iran before and after the Revolution. This will be examined in more detail in the next section, *A Look into the Past: Early Resistant Actions*.

The quantity of restrictions that characterize an Iranian woman's life can be overwhelming and extremely challenging to deal with as a whole. They constitute obstacles she must overcome. These restrictions vary from simple everyday elements dealing with clothing to more important ones such as education, career, and relationships with other men. These limitations are so deeply rooted in the society that they can seem to be a part of the culture. Yet they are not just an element of Iranian culture. Many women have accepted these restrictions as facts and realities of their lives. Unfortunately, over a long period of time, they gradually became facts and valued components of a woman's being.

Narrative Analysis: Master Narrative vs. Counter Narrative

For a better understanding it is necessary to look at the issue from a different point of view. All the restrictions woven into Iranian society and culture have a very strong and powerful root in peoples' minds and beliefs. These facts, discussed above, have become master narratives in Iranian society and culture. As Michelle N.Lafrance and Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr argue everything that happens in life can be told in a form

of a narrative or story. These narratives are not a creation of a single mind; they are social creations. We are born into a culture with already well-developed narratives. As members of this culture, individuals attempt to appropriate this stock of narratives and apply them in everyday social and private life. These preexisting narratives can shape an individual's life narrative. The conflict intensifies when someone's narrative diverges from the master narratives in that society. Women who experience oppression must eventually face a common struggle to find meaning against dominant understandings (McKenzie-Mohr, Lafrance 1-15).

Master Narrative

Master narratives are usually hard to recognize. They require very close observation and analysis. One must look under heavy layers to catch them. The main obstacle in catching and seeing master narratives is that they get accepted as common sense. Therefore they become invisible in everyday life and society. People see them as facts of life. Over time they become like a heavy object to move or bend; they become like walls in the face of new and fresh stories and concepts of life (McKenzie-Mohr, Lafrance 1-5). They are like barriers, which no one *dares* to break; red lines which no one imagines crossing.

As noted, master narratives have a tenacious hold in people's minds and beliefs. It is chiefly through repetitive acts within daily lives and interactions that these master narratives become internalized and are thus seen as facts.

A clear example of this repetition relates to who holds the power in a society and its families. In Iranian society and culture patriarchy is one of the most obvious forms of

power. As the Foucauldian notion of power suggests, patriarchy repeats itself through everyday life references (McKenzie-Mohr, LaFrance 5). In modern societies the notion of power is no longer distributed in a top-down fashion. Instead, it operates and nourishes itself through social interactions and master narratives. We, as a member of this complex web, manage to regulate each other and ourselves. For this purpose, we subject ourselves to a tightly managed self-surveillance. In most cases, this self-surveillance ends up becoming self-censorship.

As Massoume Price explains in her article, ‘Patriarchy and Parental Control in Iran’, the figure of the father in Iranian families historically had a special value and meaning to the rest of the family. As the head of the family he made the final decisions about almost everything. In past times, this meant that he could even wield authority over very simple tasks such as going out or even more important issues such as education and marriage. However, in modern Iranian society this pattern has shifted and changed. The father’s role is no longer as dominant. However, after closer observation one can feel that the shape of the dominance may have changed but its continuing existence cannot be denied. Definitions of “good father,” “good children,” “good wife,” or “good mother” are shadowing people’s lives significantly.

This hidden and complexly woven form of power, patriarchy, is one of the well-developed power systems in Iranian societies which has generated various master narratives over the years. For the most part it has been taken for granted by everyone. The threat of “telling the father” is a very familiar phrase for an Iranian child. I remember as a young girl always being careful about my dad’s gaze. While my mother might yell at me, my father’s gaze was the real threat. However, as time passes, and with

the modernization of society, women and even men are showing resistance to patriarchal master narratives by questioning the meaning of them, patriarchy's dominance, and also their consequences.

Master narratives are single stories of a multi-faceted phenomenon. Each societal issue can be treated in various ways. However, problems occur when we face it from a single angle, denying the potential of alternate approaches. Single stories are dangerous (Ngozi Adichie). Representing an issue in one single way turns it into a fact, something already been proven to be true. These single-sided views begin to engender stereotypes. Stereotypes emphasize single definitions of “good woman,” “proper husband,” and “proper wife.” For example, the “good mother” master narrative within Iranian culture dictates that the mother should forget all about herself and devote all of her time to her child. As a result, the woman will not have a separate, private life of her own. Her identity is defined by her child. These definitions restrict people from expressing their honest thoughts and feelings. They become limited in terms of what needs they have, what kinds of expectations they are allowed to have regarding their lives, people around them and society in general. They become like preprogrammed machines, which have no control over their choices. They are just followers.

Some of the master narratives are so deeply rooted in the culture that it seems impossible to change them. Their power grows to such an extent that the fear and hesitation in diverging from them becomes internalized. People are not conscious of that hesitation and fear. Unfortunately in countries like Iran, issues tend to rapidly become political. This feature also empowers master-narratives in a false way. In the past few months (Fall 2014) acid attacks have taken place in some Iranian cities. A number of

girls have lost their faces and/or have been injured badly. But instead of finding the people who committed these acts, the government has imprisoned the activist who protested against the issue. Even I, as an outsider to the society, as someone who lives far away, am a bit hesitant about the content of this paper and related performance. However, no change occurs without a price. This paper is an opportunity for me to resist rooted master narratives in my mind. The hardest point is to ask “what if,” and then everything has the potential to change.

Dare. The meaning and concept of ‘dare’ play an important role in the creation of counter narratives. Master narratives in Iran, like any other society, are so dominant and taken for granted that sometimes it seems impossible to change them or even diverge from them. The risk involved in daring to tell alternative stories in the first place considerably narrows their potential to come to light and have an effect. Indeed, “tellability” and “hearability” empower master narratives (McKenzie-Mohr, Lafrance 9). Our ears are familiar with master-narratives. We do not think about them, we just accept them. We do not ask questions, we do not analyze the facts. They are already proven to be true. That is the main challenge at stake with counter narratives. To dare to talk about new experiences, to ask new questions, to challenge pre-existing facts and realities of a society and culture requires a great courage and strong will.

By interacting with other societies, with increased opportunities in education, and the changing life styles of new generations, new questions take form in modern minds. People become familiar with other forms of living, especially ones that perhaps were a dream to past generations. New living conditions bring up new needs, which may be different than those suggested by master narratives. For example with more women

working fulltime outside the home, the master narrative regulating the woman's responsibility to housework has shifted. Women started to ask and demand new positions in the family. It is here that counter narratives come into play.

Counter Narrative

Counter narratives act as an individual person's voice, challenging master narratives in various ways and helping the individual to find her/his voice, agency, and lost identity in a more liberal manner. It is a mean to redefine one's harmed identity. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance identify two significant benefits and effects of counter narratives (among many others). First, a counter narrative shapes personal experiences in a manner that supports various needs and ideas. It opens up the field for the person to explore her/his identity, personality, and ideology in a more liberal sphere. Second, it has the potential to change collective understandings. Modern societies are not fixed entities, which cannot be changed. Everything is alterable, bendable, and moveable. These counter narratives may look small, weak, or very different from collective understandings. Yet every single narrative has the power to change the master narratives in a small way. Bit-by-bit counter narratives can become mainstream. These counter narratives are an obvious form of resistance in Iranian culture and society, disrupting the burden of generalized framing, single point-of-view, and social realities. These narratives pose real challenges within societies like Iran where master narratives have been taken for granted and people simply do not dare to ask questions about them in terms of the reality of their everyday life. Counter narratives constitute the first step in the resistance process. These narratives usually begin as very personal stories, typically

emerging as individual narratives specific to a certain time, location, or situation. However, on their emergence they may connect with similar narratives to which they can relate, thus becoming more general in a sense. The collective nature of these similar counter narratives works as the drive for further actions and solid steps. One good example of further actions born out of counter narratives resides in a new phenomenon in Iranian society called “white marriage” which will be examined in the *Public Awareness* section.

Teaching ourselves to be more open to more complex, nuanced stories and alternatives can play a huge role in the emergence of counter narratives. We, as members of a society, may not have the same problems as other members. Nevertheless we can be active members and open up our minds and visions and ears to new stories. We can be an active part in fostering the emergence of counter narratives, actively working to alter master-narratives. While it is true that we have been born into a culture that existed long before us, we can also make a new culture, develop new understandings, and acquire beliefs to teach future generations. Inactiveness and passivity among members of a society, in my opinion, are significant dangers for both the Iranian and Western (mainly Canadian) societies that I am examining. This does not mean we will fight or dishonor the pre-existing values of a culture. Negotiation, asking questions, and just being aware is the key to opening up minds. Negotiation seems to be a more manageable strategy in limited, restricted spaces.

For a better understanding we have to go back in time and explore a few events that have affected women’s lives in Iran.

A Look into the Past: Early Resistant Actions

One of the early records of women's political presence and activity in Iranian history dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of Iran from 1905-1907. Women played a significant role in the Revolution. They participated in demonstrations, transported guns, and spread the news. However, after the foundation of a new parliament, women's rights were denied. They did not have the right to vote or the right to education. After this disappointment, women started to form institutes, schools, and even began publishing newspapers and magazines specifically for women (Noshirvani). One of the most important institutes was the Institute of Women's Freedom, which tried to promote women's political and social participation. An interesting rule of this institute was that men could only participate in the gatherings if they were in the company of a female (Taftian). This was a very conscious resistance to the accepted master narrative in society, which required women to be accompanied by a male relative whenever in public.

The next stage in Iranian history occurred during the Pahlavi dynasty, the house that ruled Iran from 1925-1979, a period in which women's political parties and organizations were rebuilt, by women. In 1942, Badrolmoolok Bamdad established the "Institute of Iranian women" which promoted women's social and political rights. Bamdad also published a magazine called *zan e emrooz (Today's Woman)*. Safiyeh Firuz also established a women's party. One of the most glorious achievements during

Pahlavi's regime was the family protection law, which gave women more control over divorce and child custody (Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran* 17).

Women's continued participation in political activities, daily demonstrations, and debates during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was again a confirmation of their presence and voice in the society. The historical record indicates a reluctance of Iranian women to confront men. They do not attempt to change men's positions or replace them. This does not mean that they are not fighting against oppression; in fact, women have always sought to find new solutions and ways to confront oppressions. It is a very twisted way to face oppression but it seems to be the only viable method in Iran. Western feminism and its findings and achievements are valuable to Iranian women but they cannot be applied directly in Iranian society. Iranian women activists had to bend Western feminisms, reshape and appropriate them according to Iranian cultural, religious, and political needs.

The Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (WSIR) is one form of this appropriated feminism in Iranian society after the 1979 Revolution. The main mission of this group was to create an Islamic feminist agenda based on the values of Iranian culture and society with the goal of ending the oppression of women. At the head of this group were highly educated women criticizing the treatment of women within Islamic societies. One interesting position of this group concerned the issue of the hijab. Hijab refers to the practice by women of covering with a long scarf their whole body except their face, feet, and hands from the eyes of non-relatives and some male relatives. Veiling gradually became mandatory following the Revolution of 1979. Despite WSIR's approval of the hijab as appropriate clothing for women, the group was against its

mandatory use. They claimed that a dress code should address both genders, not only women. This kind of positioning put the group in opposition to hardline conservatives. As a result of this opposition, WSIR had to change its ways of resistance and adopt a subtler approach to be able to survive (Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran* 27-29).

Islamization of the country after the Revolution cost women numerous rights including the family protection law. During this time a large number of gender-discriminatory laws were passed such as temporary marriage or divorce rights only for men. In opposition to this, women activists initiated new interpretations of Islamic laws. From their perspective, what was seen as representing “authentic Islamic ways” was nothing but “patriarchy in Islamic costume” (Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran* 30).

Extreme political changes in only a few years taught women to be creative about the issues. The experience of abrogation of family law showed women that the most permanent change happens only if a change is made at the social level or at the very least very broadly through women's consciousnesses. An example of this is the “khanevadeh” (family) magazine. This magazine covered and still covers family issues in which women find themselves oppressed. The magazine never claimed to be a woman-specific magazine, so it attracted a wide range of constituencies including men, as well as traditional and more conservative members of the society.

Aspects of Resistance

Women's resistance in Iran is an ongoing matter. Today, resistance changes its shape and form according to various times and situations. These resistant counter narratives and actions can be divided into three groups. An examination of these follows.

1) Public Awareness

This form of resistance starts as a personal counter narrative, emerging on an individual level, to then spread among a group of people by word of mouth. This process is a very gradual and time-consuming type of resistance, which seems appropriate for more forbidden subjects in Iranian culture such as sex. As mentioned earlier, one new phenomenon in Iranian society is called "white marriage." White marriage is a new term in Iranian society but is not a new phenomenon in Western society. It is what is called "common law" marriage in the West. But according to sharia law, practiced in Iran, couples have to be married in order to live together. This ritual also has deep roots in Iranian culture. Even within families with little or no religious interests, legal marriage is the only way for couples to live together. The phenomenon of living together without marriage is looked upon as dishonorable especially for the girl. There are many different elements that play a role in this belief. However, sex and virginity are among the most important ones.

Premarital sex is a big taboo in Iranian culture. No one even dared to talk about it, in my experience. Though premarital sex has always been practiced in the margins, it

was forbidden in society at large. However, in recent years, primarily in big cities like Tehran, young people have been engaging more and more in premarital sex. They have started to talk about it. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact time for the birth of white marriage. However, personal recollections and information from different sources regarding individuals engaging in the phenomenon form the basis of the present argument (this information was collected during 2007, my last year living in Iran). This phenomenon not only concerns sexual issues, but also counter narratives about sex, and more open mindsets about male and female relationships that led to it.

In the past three years statistics have shown that the percentage of divorce has risen to 13.3 percent (increase of divorce rate up to 13.3%, BBC Persian). One of the main reasons for divorce in present-day Iran is related to sexual problems (78% of divorces, Tabnak News). One of the first steps to solve a problem is to acknowledge it. Unfortunately since talking about sex is highly forbidden and shameful this issue remained untouched for far too long. This taboo became such an ingrained master narrative in Iranian culture that no one dared to even question it. I remember my grandmother talking about past times when the groom and the bride could not meet each other before the wedding night. This was almost 70 years ago, relatively recently. This notion has changed gradually passing through several stages until the present. Current morals indicate that the boy and the girl can meet a few times before marriage to find out if they will get along. This is the accepted moral behavior by the general public. In larger cities such as Tehran, it is more like the West where people become friends for an extended amount of time and if they like they can get married or just break up. “White marriage” is still alive as an unspoken phenomenon in the society to the extent that in

smaller towns and cities people do not even know about its existence. On the other hand the main issue here is the gradual growth of a hidden, forbidden counter-narrative and its impacts on society. Women involved in this phenomenon are at the frontier of this battle. They are the ones who are risking their “honour” and their identity as a “good woman” in the society.

The growth of counter narratives about sex and undertaking actions about it such as “white marriage” has uncovered other sex-related issues in the society such as rape and sexual assault.

McKenzie-Mohr, associate professor in social work at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, writes of two narrative approaches regarding rape. The first one is the “Negate or Blame” master narrative that introduces rape as either “just sex” or blames the woman for its occurrence. This approach assumes that a woman has agency and power over what has happened to her, and may have even desired it. In other words the woman deserves the rape; she asked for it. The second narrative is the “Trauma of Rape,” a feminist discourse tasked with contesting the first narrative (McKenzie-Mohr, Lafrance 65).

The most dominant narrative in Iran, in my opinion, unfortunately is “Negate or Blame.” There is a common notion among people that anything harmful that happens to a woman is due to her own wrong behavior. This notion encompasses sexual assault to verbal abuse on the street, to rape and sexual harassment. Unfortunately the government’s reaction to the issue empowers the master narrative. In Iran women are responsible for their clothing, their hijab, and their behaviour on the street. In recent years a new branch of the police has surfaced, a “morality police” (loose translation).

The responsibility of the morality police is to check women's clothing in public and if they do not approve of someone's hijab they can arrest her.

Despite the deep-rooted power of the master narrative regarding rape and sexual harassment new voices have appeared in recent years. These voices encourage women to talk about their experiences at least to their family and friends. A prime example of these voices at a higher level (than just family and friends) can be found in a 2013 film entitled *Hiss Dokhtarha Faryad Nemizanand/Hush Girls Don't Scream* by a female director, Pوران Derakhshandeh. In this drama Derakhshandeh talks about child abuse and the deleterious behaviour of parents and society in facing the issue. The film had a large impact within Iranian society; it was a lead topic in the media for a while.

From a Western eye this example may seem very subtle or even unimportant. However, as an Iranian woman I can claim that it is indicative of giant steps. It was not long ago that one of my close relatives came out to me and talked about a sexual assault to her almost 20 years ago. She shared that she got the courage to talk about it to me only due to this film.

The relations within the operative system in Iran are very different than those represented to the West from Iran. Iran is a deeply layered society with a very complicated psychology. Every single step towards any sort of change requires wide preparations at different levels from personal initiative to family, schools and society at large. Here is the complexity of the situation: a counter narrative emerges from various social layers; however, it does not have enough courage or power to grow and face the master narrative. These subtle actions, such as those depicted in the film, work as

driving forces for other citizens to share similar counter narratives. In essence these actions are feeding back into the counter narrative and empowering it.

2) Legislative resistance

Some forms of counter-narratives and resistances lead to more legally fruitful actions. One example of this type of resistance happened during the Iran-Iraq war: according to sharia law, after the death of the father, custody of the children goes to the paternal grandfather or other close male relatives and not the mother. Many women who lost their husbands in the war were faced with losing their young children to male relatives due to this law. As a result they started to talk about it in public and demonstrate in front of Parliament. Activists talked about the issue in various ways, through publications and private gatherings. Due to this visible resistance by the women, Ayatollah Khomeini granted martyrs' widows custody of their children (Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran* 35).

Among other achievements of Iranian women activists in past decades, two are outstanding. One is the introduction of a new family law which gave women more freedom to insert conditions into their marriage contract. In recent years women found a creative way to bypass the divorce law. They added a condition on the marriage contract that gave them the right to be able to divorce their husbands. This is a legal process in which the man gives the right of divorce to the woman in a mandate. Another great achievement is called "Ojrat ol-mesal" (wages for housework). Presently, a man who intends to divorce his wife without proving fault on her part must first pay housework wages for the duration of the marriage. Aside from its legal benefits, it is its ideological

and symbolic value that is significant and outstanding (Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran* 35).

One of the most controversial campaigns in recent years was *One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws*. The campaign was initiated by a group of women activists in 2006 following a peaceful demonstration in Tehran. The campaign officially started its work after a seminar called *The Impact of Laws on Women's Lives* in Tehran in August 2006. The mission of this campaign was to challenge discriminatory laws in Iran. However, due to the government's resistance and attacks on the campaign it passed its two-year target to collect the signatures. Some of the leaders of the campaign have been jailed (Tahmasebi). Despite all the problems, the campaign captured international attention and received numerous prizes such as the Olof Palme Prize 2008, the Simone de Beauvoir Prize, the Global Women's Rights Award, and Reporters Without Borders/Deutsche Welle. This group did have some success in terms of passing laws in Iran. They were able to withdraw the law, which allowed men to practice polygamy (One Million Signatures). According to this polygamy law, men could marry other women without first obtaining their wife's consent.

3) Social Media Activism

With the growth of technology and the elevation of women's awareness of their condition in Iran, new ways were found to raise their voices and demand their wishes. By coming out of isolation and relating with other countries via the virtual world of the Internet new windows opened for women to communicate with each other and with the rest of the world. This virtual world of social media gives voice to people behind closed

doors. Social media works as a generator of discussions in restricted Iranian society. It gives a ground to express hidden, unspoken thoughts. It is interesting to note that in terms of social media in Iran, the government filters many sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Consequently expressing through these forms of social media is a dual resistance. One of the hottest topics in recent years in these forums centres on veiling/hijab.

There were many protests and demonstrations in the early years of the hijab law after 1979; however, with the push of hardline conservatives and religious people it finally became an official national law. Disobeying this law could cost women lashes, jail time, and in the worst case, attacks from hardline religious factions. Numerous acid splashing incidents characterized that period. As Azar Nafisi says: “the mandatory veil was an attempt to force social uniformity through an assault on individual and religious freedoms, not an act of respect for traditions and culture[...] the veil no longer represented religion but the state” (5). Veiling is a lived experience, full of various meanings, contradictions, and perceptions. Clearly it has been used as a mechanism in the service of patriarchy. It was and still is a way to control women’s presence in society (Hoodfar, “The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads” 5-18).

Through the years, women have shown resistance to the mandatory hijab in the manner in which they choose to cover themselves through the creation of new fashions and styles. A very important fact to keep in mind here is the nature of resistance against the sense of compulsive laws. In January 1936, during Reza Shah’s reign, veiling was banned by royal decree. Many women who believed in veiling resist this by staying at home or risking their safety by going out in veil. There was a chance to be beaten due to

the veil (Namakydoust, Azadeh). An interesting stage in hijab resistance occurred in May 2014, when an Iranian journalist in exile, Masih Alinejad, started a campaign in the form of a Facebook page called “My Stealthy Freedom.” In a description of the objective of the page Alinejad explains:

This page does not belong to any political group and the initiative reflects the concerns of Iranian women, who face legal and social restrictions. All the photos and captions posted have been sent by women from all over Iran and this is a site dedicated to Iranian women inside the country who want to share their “stealthy” taken photos without the veil. (Alinejad, My Stealthy Freedom)

The campaign started when Alinejad posted a photo of herself driving without a veil in Tehran on her private Facebook page and asked other women if they had such a stealthy freedom in their everyday life. Then thousands of women started to send images of themselves appearing in public without a veil. Many fascinating stories accompanied each image on the page. Even men and women who chose the hijab were posting photos in support of the campaign.

At the beginning of the campaign the Iranian government tried to ignore it. However, this did not last long. The first reaction came in Tehran, from the preacher of the Friday prayer, who proclaimed that various forms of de-veiling have penetrated to the houses and minds of women across the country through satellite feeds and the Internet (Iranian TV Channel). Later the official media of the country started to make videos about the value of the hijab and interviewed women dressed in the chador, a long black fabric which covers the entire body from head to toe, and is the proper form of hijab. Later, a very outrageous report shown on the news channel of the national television claimed that Masih Alinejad was under the influence of mind-altering drugs, had removed some of her clothes on a London street, and had been raped by three men in front of her son’s eyes (Simay Melli). This was not true. (Alinejad, “Iranian State

Television Faked My Rape). Alinejad, in response to the report, filmed a video of herself singing in a subway station in London and posted it on Facebook. We will examine this video in more depth below.

One of the main achievements of this campaign, in my opinion, is the initiation of discussion about the hijab in society. People now ask questions about this mandatory law in the country. And most importantly they dare to talk about it in public. In February 2015, on channel three of the national television there was a debate about the mandatory hijab in which a religious Mullah (Islamic leader) was challenging a veiled woman about making the hijab mandatory. He argued that this constituted an injustice to women; they have to have the choice (Persian Community Channel).

Moreover, the “My Stealthy Freedom” campaign has captured the attention of various international television stations, newspapers, and blogs. French television made a video about the campaign (Stealthy Freedom on French TV; Envoyé Spécial). Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg mentioned it as her favorite Facebook page (Bort). In addition, different reports about the page were published on various news channels and newspapers such as The Independent (Saul), BBC (Hebblethwaite ,Irani), ABC News (Kahen-Kashi), Time (Alinejad “Iranian State Television Faked My Rape”), and CTV News (Leung), emphasizing the effect of the campaign.

One of the interesting by-products of the transformation process of counter narratives into actions is the emergence of other counter narratives. In other words, a specific counter narrative can branch out and generate other counter narratives, which lead to actions in a new direction. Alinejad’s reaction such as singing in a subway station in London is a good example of these new counter narratives. This action started

a new campaign called “My Voice My Right.” Women from all over the country started filming themselves singing. Since solo singing in Iran is forbidden for women due to religious beliefs, this campaign promoted a hot discussion in the heart of the society. Even women who had no interest in singing or do not have the talent or training in singing made a short video of their singing in various locations such as the home, at work, on the street, and even in a mosque.

Political Self

As an Iranian woman, I lived with restrictions, issues, and dilemmas inside the country for nineteen years. All the different types of oppression faced by women in Iran affect a woman’s life even from childhood. There are very simple things that become a dream for a young girl, from going to a waterpark to laughing out loud in the street without the strange gazes of men and even some other women. In addition to my everyday experience over those nineteen years, I also heard many stories from close relatives to friends and strangers about what they faced in their lifetime in terms of oppression. Now as I write this, I realize that for so many years I just tried to ignore it. Ignorance comes in handy when you are hearing issues that do not make sense especially from your relatives and close friends. As a young girl I tried to create and protect my utopia. And those stories about betrayal, sexual assault, gender discrimination, and so much more did not fit into my world. Consequently, ignorance was an easy way out. Even in my high school years and one year in university, I faced various sorts of limitations and abuse but I tried to make fun of them. This was just not about me, a reaction that was some kind of defense mechanism for girls to get through

their everyday life. There is much to be upset about including different entrance requirements for women at university or verbal assaults in the streets that do not always look like relevant issues.

The experience of living outside the country for eight years finally gave me the strength and vision to truly see the issues that I faced along with other women in Iran. In these years away from Iran the heavy shadow of home has always hovered over my head. Every single new experience I have lived through in Canada somehow finds a connection to my past experiences in Iran. It is like my existence here is defined by my past existence in Iran. Then again, each time I return home for a visit I realize how much I have changed and how much home has changed. Each time it is like a battle between me, my memories, my knowledge of home, and the new, changing, and variable existence of home. This battle is very heavy and sometimes unbearable emotionally. However, it is also fruitful for my understanding of what is really going on there. Having the experience of living in that society and the experience of looking at it from the outside is a dual advantage, leading to better analysis. This new analysis makes me want to move, to do something about the situation.

As a performance artist this new vision of my home country gives me a very powerful drive to perform. All those past experiences are embedded in me in a way that makes escape from them impossible. My whole being in those nineteen years of my life now works as a lens for me to see the world around me. This does not limit me from new challenges, experiences, or knowledge. However, it gives me an eye to look at each thing from different point of view.

In my opinion, art must always say something; something that has some sort of effect in the world around and more importantly for the artist. An art piece can change so many minds and raise many questions, but most importantly it needs to move the artist from inside. A better world is impossible without first changing yourself. Now that I look at my self from eight years ago I truly realize how blind I was. So many embedded beliefs, fears, and hesitations paralyzed me from moving.

With this new understanding and vision, issues related to Iran especially pertaining to women, their resistance and challenges gain prominence in my mind. They charge me intellectually and emotionally and trigger the impulse to create. This does not mean that my whole performance life is about Iran. It is about the vision, the sense of vulnerability. Due to my dual experience of existence, back in Iran and now in Canada, I became a very sensitive person about the world around me. I now realize that every single element in a society can have effectiveness. I understand that there is much more in this world to absorb and experience and that there is no such a thing as a “fact” in most cases. My experience taught me to look at each issue from various points of view, to be able to understand that most of the time there is no right or wrong. It is all about the difference. These eight years of living outside the country have awakened my inner active, political self.

In the past few years changes in Iran have moved very quickly. Each time that I go back I catch new behaviours, thoughts, and beliefs in people that sometimes shock me. Yet the most interesting element for me was the nature of resistance and the various forms of resistance that are happening. Women in Iran chose to resist against oppressions in a very peaceful nonviolent way. They have chosen a new language, one

very different than the government's, to show their resistance. This choice is not out of compulsion. This is their choice to have a peaceful voice. The "My Stealthy Freedom" campaign is a good example of this approach. Another great example of this everyday resistance can be observed in women's reaction towards morality police in the streets. It has now been more than five years since the appearance of the morality police in the streets but nothing has changed in terms of women's clothing. They choose to wear whatever they wish, and they are pretty trendy and fashionable. This silent resistance is what draws my attention.

My idea for my final performance as an MFA student at York University emerged from this pure, silent, beautiful resistance. In my initial thoughts for the final performance, I targeted the Western audience. I wanted to show them that the perspectives they receive from media do not reflect what is really going on in Iran. Iran has a complex, layered reality; so much more is going on than what is being presented. Western people have been trapped in a single story, the discourse of Orientalism that has misled them. Resistance in Iran does not always have an angry face. Sometimes it looks very peaceful and nonviolent. Women are not victims; on the contrary they are fighting for their rights and their voices. This fight might have a different appearance than the image that dominates the Western mind. My performance, my presence, and I are a form of resistance to this dominant master-narrative held by the West. I started to work on the performance with this idea. However, as I went along with my research, study, and movement study I faced an important issue, which was all about me.

On January 22 2015 as a part of group show for MFA students, I performed a piece called *Hidden Voices*, which is a segment of my final performance. The

performance started with me sitting on rolls of toilet paper with my whole head wrapped in red yarn. On the toilet paper I wrote various words that expressed my feelings about oppression in Iran such as “dare,” “wish,” “what if,” and “love.” I started the performance by spitting out a tea light LED candle. At the back of the room I had a wooden coat hanger on which I hung a green cat suit; at the bottom of the hanger I placed a pair of high heels, a box full of small red candles, a box of long fireplace matches, and a small suitcase full of four new toilet paper rolls, one of which was inscribed with Farsi text. After spitting out the LED candle, I stood up and walked towards the back of the room and grabbed the box of candles. Then I looked for the word “dare” on the toilet paper on the floor and wherever I found one I marked it by placing a candle beside it and a bit of Play-Doh. After placing all my candles, I lit them with the matches and placed each burning match in the Play-Doh beside the candle. While doing all of this I spoke in Farsi about the issue of not understanding each other and misperception. In a very spontaneous move I lit all the remaining matches and yelled in front of the audience the word “daagh” which in Farsi means hot. After, I started to collect some pieces of the toilet paper inscribed with all the different words and distributed them among the audience. I walked to the back of the room and changed my black active wear for the green cat suit and high heels. I started unwrapping my head by saying “I am.” As a last action of the performance I opened the suitcase and grabbed the Farsi-inscribed toilet paper. I placed it on a metal stand and took it in my hand as if it was a flag of honour. I walked my way out of the space.

My experience from that performance is really helpful for understanding why I am doing this and why I am interested in the issue of resistance. During the

performance, surprisingly, I found out that I was presenting what was hidden inside me for a long time. The performance acted as a mechanism for me to understand the issue better and deeper, to reach the hidden layers of my past experiences in my soul and mind. Therefore now I am shifting a bit from my initial idea about the final performance, in which I targeted the Western audience. I will be the performer and an audience. The performance feeds back into my counter-narrative. It empowers my counter-narrative against the master-narrative of both Iran and the West.

My process of making a performance is intuitive. One of the most important features of performance in my opinion is the spontaneity and contingency of it, being open to your surroundings and letting things happen to you. In my process, some part of this contingency happens beforehand. I usually do some research or readings and thinking about the concept I am working on. In this period images always pop into my mind, not always consciously. Usually I do not have a conscious reason behind each image. But I learned over time that I have to trust those images and just go with them into the performance. The rest will happen there.

During the writing of this paper and the research about resistance various images occurred to me. These images are not in a logical sequence. They are related to the ideas and concepts in my mind. However, relationships between them may not be straightforward. There are always bends and twists along the way.

As I am thinking about the layered nature of society, the image of multiple clothing comes to my mind. For one of the costumes specifically, I feel that I need to use tile mirrors attached to my black chador. Then the chador would be the reflection of the audience present there. The mirrors of the image outline the idea of the reflection of

others on one's personality and being. This image also relates to the effect that the general public has on a single person's beliefs and rights or wrongs. This effect plays a huge role in terms of master-narratives and counter-narratives. Moreover, the chador is the appropriate clothing for women accepted by traditional minds and also the government.

As a continuation of thoughts from the group show performance, I would like to use the toilet paper in my final performance again, but in a different setting. The gallery that I have booked for my performance, the Special Projects Gallery (SPG) at York University, has a window looking out onto the hallway. I imagine myself writing in Farsi on this window. The material for my writings comes from a call I posted on Facebook for all my Iranian friends. In this call I asked women to talk in a few sentences about their stories, their dilemmas and issues that happened because of their gender. I also asked men to write in a few sentences their feelings and thoughts about gender discrimination in Iran. Also, I will include all the stories and issues that I have witnessed in my nineteen years of life in Iran, and the issues I face or hear each time I go home for a visit. The writing is more about revealing my inner thoughts and feelings. I may at some point during the performance start to write in English as well. Between the audience and I will be a wall of toilet paper. As I am writing on the window I will also sing loudly or privately. The singing part is a response to the government's ban on solo singing by women. Toilet paper is an object we use to clean ourselves. Moreover, it is a worthless object. It is something that we use and then throw out. In relation to the concepts in my mind, toilet paper represents the worthless, unreasonable, and valueless beliefs and master narratives that tell people what is right or wrong. These master

narratives might have been useful in certain times in the past, but not now and not for everyone. The main role these master-narratives play now is to build a wall around the person with an issue and trap him/her in the attendant misery. Counter narratives are the initiation of small actions that have a great potential to grow and build a better life for the person.

These two images are among other images in my mind, the strongest ones. There are many other types of movements, actions, and objects that I will use. I am not willing to talk about them at this stage, as some parts of my creative process require solitude to grow. The relation among various actions and objects may not be visible at this moment for others. However, inside me there are very strong connections, which hopefully will appear during the performance for the others as well.

Conclusion

The concept of resistance has deep roots in Iranian culture in diverse areas. My position, as an Iranian woman and performance artist towards the issue of resistance in Iranian culture is complicated. Since I am no longer living in the country, I can perceive the issues as an outsider. However, my past experience and relations with women from different generations who are still living in the country, give me insights into how to analyze and understand the situation better. Moreover, this displacement acted as a new lens for me to understand and capture the Western master narrative about Iranian women. What I have experienced here in Canada has shown me that the majority of Westerners are still under the influence of this master-narrative, which represents Iranian women as victims, passive and inactive members of the Iranian society. I, as an Iranian-

Canadian performance artists feel the obligation to promote counter narratives that express the realities experienced by Iranian women. As discussed earlier, the audiences for this final performance are both the Western audience and myself. My performance may open a new window for the Western audience to see Iranian women from different points of view, especially distinct from media representations. As we all know, the media can stereotype everything through the spread of a single story. Yet nothing in this world can be perceived as a single story.

The recognition of a master narrative coincides with the emergence of a counter narrative. These counter narratives can be either personal or general. These counter narratives work as the main drivers for generating resistant actions. However, we have to keep in mind that in a bigger scheme, counter narratives and resistant actions exist in a feedback loop with each other. Sometimes a personal story in a counter-narrative form spreads in a community among certain people. The growth of the counter narrative generates a certain resistant action. White marriage, discussed earlier, is a good example of this. Another situation occurs when a resistant action happens in the society with no direct relative counter narrative, such as the creation of the film by Pouran Derakhshandeh discussed earlier. Then the relative counter narratives emerge after the resistant action such as the coming out by my close relative about the sexual assault she had experienced years earlier. Also, counter narratives have generative power inherent in them. They can branch out and create new questions and resistant actions. A single resistant action can be carried out, empowering another counter narrative, which can lead to new resistant actions. The campaign “My Voice My Right,” has emerged out of a single resistant action of Alinejad in a London subway station.

My performance is my form of resistant action towards Western master narratives. I think of the performance as my medium to convey my thoughts and ideas to the world around me. However, the performance also works as a medium for me to understand the issue at hand better and in deeper layers. Each performance opens a window inside my mind and connects the issues that may seem irrelevant at first. It works as a catalyst.

Now as I sit in my studio and think about my performance, my past haunts me all over again. As I close my eyes, images pop into my head among which are traces of my childhood and my grandmother. I imagine what my grandmother would think about my performance. Would she recognize her trace in my life? Would she realize how much she is inherent in me? Would she feel any sort of relief? Her face comes to my mind with those small eyes. Her smell, her laughter, her silent cries, all haunt me at once and I think again about the meaning of performance. What does it mean to perform? Who is the real performer, me or my grandmother?

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Figures



Figure 1: Hidden Voices, “Beginning,” Anna Sarchami, Performance Art, 2015.



Figure 2: Hidden Voices, "Lighting the Candles," Anna Sarchami, Performance Art, 2015.



Figure 3: Hidden Voices, “Yelling Daagh,” Anna Sarchami, Performance Art, 2015.



Figure 4:Hidden Voices, “Towards the End,” Anna Sarchami, Performance Art, 2015.



Figure 5: Hidden Voices, “The End,” Anna Sarchami, Performance Art, 2015.