

Artworks of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Female Photographers: Identification and Analysis

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The Necessity of The Research

In Iran, the social and political situation after the revolution 1979, fundamentally changed the evolution of the visual arts of this country and its natural course in terms of context. After the revolution, the university played a very important role in the formation and teaching of photography widely, and through this, artists, in addition to photography, read theoretical and historical topics related to photography, although very little. During the Revolution and the Imposed War (Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988) women also made great efforts in various political, social, literature, and artistic fields, and they had wide participation. In the post-revolutionary years, we have seen an increase in the number of women poets, writers, musicians, painters, calligraphers, as well as photographers, and this has been partly due to the growth of art schools and universities. Women artists were sensitive to issues such as revolution, freedom, the family, urbanization, and the role of women in society. In general, Iranian women in the post-revolutionary period have been on the path of growth and have had a successful entry into many social and artistic fields. Among the community of women photographers who in the post-revolutionary period, due to the existing limitations, addressed various issues from sociological, political, psychological and aesthetic perspectives, women photographers such as Shadi Ghadirian, Maryam Zandi, Rana Javadi, Azadeh Akhlaghi, and Newsha Tavakolian have had a more prominent presence in this field; In this text, the works of these photographers will be introduced and analyzed. The main purpose of this research is: Recognition of the most prominent female photographers and their artworks after the Islamic revolution of Iran.

The visual elements sit side by side like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, creating a picture. The visual elements fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces to form an image. The ordinary eye is simply interested in the straightforward relationships between these constituent elements, and they only get the explicit meanings. However, images contain more hidden meanings than what is seen. The audience's attention and intellect pass through the photographer's limited interstice, entering an ocean of connotations and signals that aid in the discovery of fascinating points regarding intricate relationships and features of people and locations (KarimMasihi 2012).

Photographers produce photographs so that they can incorporate their ideas and thoughts into it, so we need to analyze photographs to gain a better understanding of their meaning. In this hectic world of photography, women also appeared very powerful and dynamic, and although these women artists have historically played an important role in the development of Iranian society and culture, but they were not taken into account as they should be, and very little has been written about them. On the other hand, I believe introducing Iranian women photographers after the revolution in this research will help the growth of visual culture and can provide a step forward in advancing the knowledge of domestic and foreign researchers in this regard.

The questions I want to address during this research are:

- What are the characteristics of the works of post-revolutionary Iranian female photographers and what analysis can be provided on them?
- What subjects have female photographers photographed more in Iran?

The History of Photography in Iran

It is always technically necessary to look at the past and the path of Iranian photography, before starting writing about it.

Photography was also one of the "new", which arrived in Iran during the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar. In various written works, photography has been considered as one of the industries and facilities such as: telegraph, railway and gramophone and the arrival of each of them is considered as a trace of the presence of "modernity" in Iran (Hamidian 2006). In the meantime, the Qajar court is undoubtedly the most important factor in the early arrival of the phenomenon of photography in Iran (Tausk 2009). It is clear that the stream of photography in this historical period was not far from other political, social and cultural events in Iran. What has been done in many fields of photography is more the work of professional photographers than it is done by amateur or freelance photographers, and it is not necessary to consider Iranian photography as an artistic current (Hamidian 2006).

From the beginning of photography, Iran, more than most neighboring countries and even the Middle East, embraced this amazing invention of the nineteenth century. The first daguerreotype photographs were taken in the last years of the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar and in mid-December 1842 in the royal palace of Tehran, of the king and courtiers, by Nikolai Pavlov, a young Russian diplomat (Tahmasbpour 2008).

The oldest photographs of women's faces in Iran are a collection of photographs taken by Nasser al-Din Shah in his harem, often accompanied by his own annotations.

The dominance of the traditional and religious atmosphere during the Qajar period had caused women to always keep their faces hidden from non-mahram, both outside and inside. For this reason, few women

were willing to stand in front of the camera of non-mahram men of their own free will, because she was afraid that her face would be seen by a non-mahram man during or after the photo shooting and her photos spread among people. The only group of women who came easily and comfortably to be photographed were musicians, dancers, and prostitutes, who were occasionally posed in front of the camera in their normal state, sometimes in music and dance, or in western clothes, and even in men's clothes (Taei 2008).

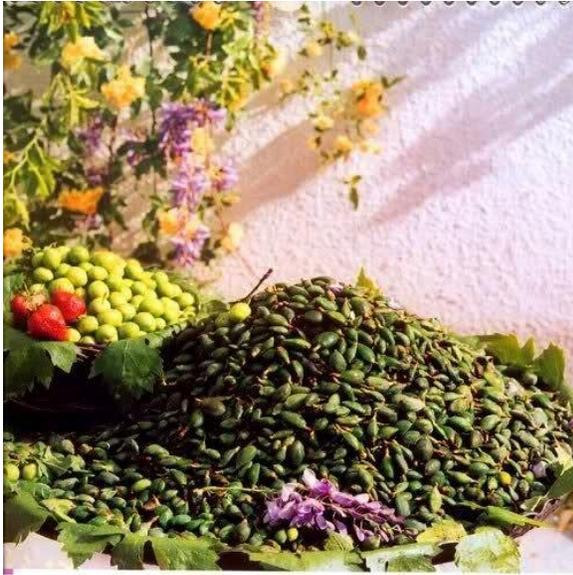
After The Islamic Revolution in 1979 a large number of people photographed the current events of the revolution and record the events. The Islamic Revolution unconsciously created different conditions for Iran photography, and documentary photography took on a special place and in the years after.

To this end, some discussion of twentieth-century nation building is necessary, for it will help clarify how the revolution, this redefinition continued, and art become one of the vehicles, both for identity's performance (by citizens) and its regulation (by the State) (Scheiwiller 2013)

Iranian Female Photographer

The masculine domination of art began to crumble with the spread of the feminine movement and the arrival of feminist ideals, and women artists were able to express their concerns and life experiences in a variety of media, regardless of the rules and definitions of masculine art. Female artists, in the meantime, have had remarkable success with the photography medium. Gradually, as more women entered universities, photography became increasingly popular among women, to the point where female photographers now account for a large portion of Iranian photography's success at home and abroad. Among the renowned Iranian photographers who have earned many achievements in the international arena are Maryam Zandi, Rana Javadi Shadi Ghadirian, Azadeh Akhlaghi, and Newsha Tavakolian.

Maryam Zandi's photography style is based on classical composition principles and obtaining the highest level of technical perfection. Her work encompasses a wide range of subjects, including nature, documentary, and portrait photography. She depicts a fascinating attraction to environment and life in her photographs by using aesthetic elements, special compositions, and strong color contrasts. Her attention to and interest in nature is evident in her photos of nature, and her photographs have a fresh and unique style.



Maryam Zandi, "Tabiat Negari" Collection

She also chooses a theme that focuses on social issues. By producing a collection of "Chehreha," (Figures), she takes another step into the documentary world. In this series, Zandi takes photographs of people who are primarily in the dark and directs the light in a way that highlights the features of their faces. In this collection, the portraits are technically dual. Some of them were photographed in natural light or in the subjects' living space, and the emphasis in these photos is on demonstrating life, and the other portraits made in the photo studio, for which she frequently employed a dark background to create a mystery atmosphere.



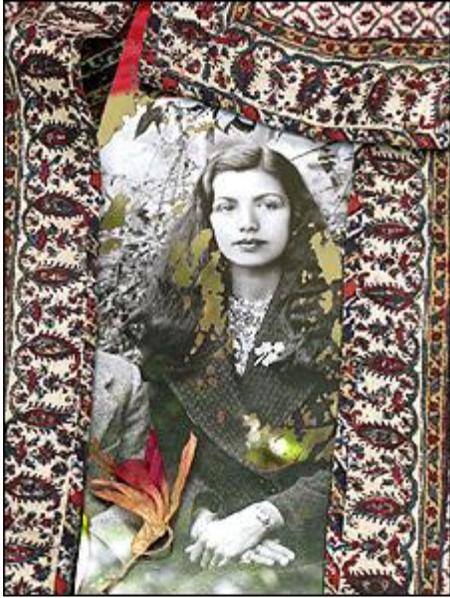
Maryam Zandi, "Chehreha " (Figures) Collection

In her photographs of the Revolution of 1979, we see a photographer who believes that the subject is important beyond ideology and political tendencies and as a result, this collection of photographs has crossed political boundaries and attitude, and recorded a flood of glorious and unrepeatable moments. Although Zandi's photos do not appear to be spectacular at first look and contain no exaggeration, everything is correct and normal, and one can clearly sense the photographs' naturalness and sincerity.



Maryam Zandi, "Enghelab 57" (Revolution 1979) Collection

The connection of femininity and nature, for example, is clearly expressed in the works of Rana Javadi. Representation based on patriarchal ideas about women manifests itself in various forms in the artworks of many Iranian women photographers, and one of the examples of this is the connection of femininity and nature.



Rana Javadi, Vaghti Mimordi(When you die) Collection

Flowers, as well as photos of women, are all suggestive of the natural femininity symbolized by patriarchal society. This link between women and nature expands the conflict between nature and culture to a conflict between women and men, effectively excluding women from the realm of culture, which is intimately linked to rationality. This link between femininity and nature establishes beauty, tenderness, and freshness as the only attractive qualities for women who desire to retain their beauty and appearance rather than reason and perform important things.

The veil, which is referred to as a form of social immunity, is one of the issues that female photographers have openly and symbolically reacted to in recent years; perhaps the most explicit reaction to this issue can be found in Ghadirian's collection "Like Every Day," in which the covering of the face and body behind colored Chadors and objects made these photographs look like photographs taken from women wearing veils during the Qajar period. Women who, without any sense of self, turned into dark masses; in other words, women who lacked any sense of female identity. Ghadirian challenges women's identity in Iranian society in this collection by reducing women's identity to a set of domestic things, leaving the audience with nothing but Chadors and objects to read.

Replacing the expected monotone of the black chador with vibrantly patterned fabrics, each portrait suggests a vivacious individuality and character, belying the limitations of stereotype. Similarly, the mundane objects, when transformed into faces, become highly poised and charismatic caricatures, embodying individual personalities (www.saatchigallery.com).



Shadi Ghadirian, "Like Every day" collection

Despite the fact that Ghadirian does not deny the identification of women in her "Miss Butterfly" collection, she accuses them of obstructing their progress.



Shadi Ghadirian, "Miss Butterfly" collection

The "Qajar" collection, which is one of the most well-known collections of Shadi Ghadirian's photographs both inside and outside the country, features photographs of women dressed in nineteenth-century Iranian clothing and modern items such as bicycles and newspapers, vacuum cleaners, guitars, and other similar items positioned in front of a painted curtain in the background, similar to those found in Qajar photography studios. This is a tradition that dates back to the early days of studio photography in the West and since then has migrated to Iran. The contradiction of modern tools and equipment in a historic environment stands out immediately in these photographs, evoking the contrast between tradition and technology as well as the coexistence of the two new and old aspects. Ghadirian depicts the conflict

between these women's confusion and uneasiness in the period to which they belong in these photographs. Women who are unable to identify which era they belong to.

Yet most of the images also have a prop or detail, like a Pepsi can, vacuum cleaner or boom box, which seems out of place in time. These details mimic the aesthetic of a banal prop that might appear in a historical studio portrait, bearing the presentation of a subtle detail, but carrying the undertone of an assertive pronouncement of difference (Heer 2012).



Shadi Ghadirian, "Qajar" collection

Azadeh Akhlaghi has not only directed but also emphasized all of the elements of the scene, from the choice of subject to the settings, model costume designs, scene objects, color, light, and texture of the image and compositions. Historical occurrences, according to Akhlaghi's collection "By an eye-witness," are used not simply to document the world of history, but also to achieve a greater conceptual goal: the nostalgic reconstruction of historical events in Iran.

The images in the series showcase the scenes of death or dying of national figures whom the artist considers major contributors to Iran's arrival at its current coordinates in space and time, and whose deaths went visually unrecorded when they occurred. The artist herself appears in every photo: having excavated official and unofficial archives and amassed firsthand witness accounts for details of the events, she poses as an eyewitness to each death from inside the frame. (Afshar 2020)



Azadeh Akhlaghi, "By an eye-witness" Collection

In " Me as Preferred by Others," the artist is utterly passive and is shown as a puppet, as if her identity is solely defined by her clothing and veil; an identity that is ambiguous between oneself and another.



Azadeh Akhlaghi, "Me as Preferred by Others" Collection

Tavakolian's photography is distinctive and daring, which sets her apart from other photographers. The phenomenon of urbanization has tremendously inspired her photos, and in the "Listen" collection, she has adopted a different perspective to the topic of women.



Newsha Tavakolian, "Listen" Collection

Static and documentary views of metropolitan landscapes and women, combined with ennui and a melancholy look at urban architecture, have produced a concrete and hard spirit in which urban human life is impossible in these photographs. There are photographs that underline the city's bleakness and monotony. There is no place for nature or man in these high-rise structures. The half-completed structures depict a primordial urban society; a wild and blank city in which women who have been victims. The place that these women are standing which is in the middle of these empty and under construction buildings could indicate a link between the establishment of a new women's identity and the modernizing process.

In the "Look" collection, for example, we see apartments in the background that resemble cells that urban residents are doomed to dwell in, as well as subjects that appear to the audience as victims of the city.

Tavakolian said about this collection: *"I wanted to bring to life the story of a nation of middle-class youths who are everyday battling with themselves, their isolated conformed society, their lack of hope for the future and each of their individual stories. Over a period of six months at 8pm I fixed my camera on a tripod in front of the window where I had watched the same view of the city for ten years."* (www.magnumphotos.com)

In fact, individuality in metropolitan life and the expansion of global communication, particularly in recent years, have created identity challenges, the most fundamental of which is a question of what is "self" in this cultural life, and thus artists like Tavakolian could not ignore this cultural cycle. It can be concluded that Tavakolian's work style is influenced by the urbanization process and identity.



Newsha Tavakolian, "Look" Collection

Despite the fact that the subjects of these artists' works span from documentary to directed photography, their concerns have been analyzed in many cases in close proximity to one another. Meanwhile, we can identify shared thematic characteristics in the works of Maryam Zandi and Rana Javadi, who have greater experience among these five artists and are part of the first generation of female photographers in Iran after the revolution. The photographs of both artists, which were taken at different points in their careers, have a conservative and figurative approach. Of course, with Zandi's photos, which have a more documentary quality, this symbolic aspect is less visible, but the conservative aspect is still present.

Due to the Cultural Revolution and ideological orientations, the "female photographer's" position was less acceptable by society in the years following the Revolution; as a result, their artworks were somewhat sensitive. Thus, Maryam Zandi's preference for documentary photography followed by portrait photography, which has a higher degree of safety than other forms of photography, might be attributed to her pragmatic viewpoint.

By bending the photographs' critical significance, the symbolic nature of Rana Javadi's photographs can also be explained. In other words, by employing aspects that are sometimes symbolic and documentary, these artists have consciously postponed the critical content of their works.

Of course, in the works of the other three photographers, such a view can be seen with less intensity. In comparison, the photos of Ghadirian, Tavakolian, and Akhlaghi can be said to have been created with more boldness and recklessness. Adopting a directed photography technique in addition to the popularity of this genre in recent years may be attributed to Ghadirians, Tavakolians, and Akhlaghi's bold and subject-oriented view. Artists that photograph in this manner are far from being conservative in their attempts to express their critical point of view in their works. Azadeh Akhlaghi's photographs, in which she has always been present in her photographs, in addition to the huge pre-production works, are the climax of such a viewpoint.

Furthermore, the primary distinction between Javadi and Zandi's works and those of others can be examined in the search for their aesthetic view of photography. The photographs of Akhlaghi, Ghadirian, and especially Tavakolian are accompanied by a conceptual view of photography, with the concept and

content of the photos sometimes taking precedence above aesthetic principles, whereas aesthetic norms are valued in the photographs of Zandi and Javadi.

Photography appears to be little more than a tool for Akhlaghi, Ghadirian, and Tavakolian to express themselves. However, technical photography has taken precedence in Javadi and Zandi's photos. When looking at the works of these artists who have dealt with the topic of women and femininity, there are indications of recurring patterns and ideas in their photographs, one of the most prominent of which is the critique of patriarchal society from the perspective of women. Meanwhile, feminist principles may be seen in the majority of these artists' works.

Azadeh Akhlaghi in "Me as Preferred by Others" collection, and Shadi Ghadirian in "Like Every Day" collection, both attack the patriarchal image of women in society, and both have feminist themes. The picture of a woman in a position only accepted by the same patriarchal society in the first collection, and the image of a woman disfigured by ordinary life in the second collection, are evidence of this claim.

In the collection "Me as Preferred by Others," Akhlaghi critiques The Other One's or society's dogmatic effect on how women are represented, and believes this style of representation to be nothing more than a mask. We also see a traditional Iranian woman in Ghadirian's "Like Every Day" collection, who has been transformed from being too much at home and doing housekeeping in the eyes of society to becoming one of the home's tools. These topics can be found in both of these artists' other collections. The feminist attitudes of these two artists are evident in Azadeh Akhlaghi's appearance in all frames of the collection "By an eye-witness" and Shadi Ghadirian's paradoxical pictures in the "Qajar" collection. In "Listen" Newsha Tavakolian takes the same feminist approach, and her collection might be seen as a protest against female stereotypes in Iranian society. Rana Javadi's photographs reflect women's problems as well as a cultural and identity perspective. Javadi combines images of women with traditional and cultural symbols in her photographs, alluding to the patriarchal culture in the same way. Maryam Zandi is the only one of these photographers that takes a documentary approach to her work. Yet, in the same documentary photographs, a feminine attitude might be noticed on occasion, particularly when the subject of the photograph is a woman.

However, women's concerns depiction by women artists has not always been synonymous with the creation of feminist works; in the absence of proper understanding, this representation can be done subconsciously based on masculine perspectives and aesthetics. In other words, the conflict between what women experience in their personal lives and what they encounter in society and the prevailing ideology can lead to political action in artist behalf, but this political stance is not always based on feminist art and is simply about women's life experiences and concerns. In fact, the artist is more concerned with the clash between women's needs and dominant ideology than with the reality that women exist as subjects.

Contemporary artists' work and progress differ substantially from those of the past. Contemporary artists no longer create works of art alone and in isolation; instead, they collaborate with their community to create artwork. It can be argued that, while the representation of women in the works of Iranian women photographers was done in response to the political situation in society, it was more a reaction to the social standing of women.

Rather than depending on feminine principles or depicting women in social situations, these works reinforce the prevailing ideology by depicting them indoors, away from any social action, and in passive states. In general, contemporary Iranian art, particularly photography, has taken on a new form, with socioeconomic changes having a significant impact on its character. Furthermore, the expansion of communication and the resulting mass interchange of knowledge has resulted in a variety of intellectual and cultural situations. As a result, an individual's and society's set of values and beliefs is continually changing, making it impossible to forecast future changes. The analyses offered in this work, however, do not contain all the photography collections on the topic of women. Many recent collections have been formed outside of these patterns, beliefs, and feminine values, instead attempting to portray an independent identity of women and show them in relation to their society; women who are no longer in physical beauty, home space, or surrounded by flowers and nature, which could be the subject of another study.

Reading the works of art by Iranian women photographers has had a great impact on my work and I could relate to their work to the great extent. My artworks, as an Iranian woman artist, are based on my personal, social, and cultural concerns about my surroundings, and they convey my sentiments and ideas about events that occur around me. What is the most essential aspect of my existence as an artist that characterizes my work? In reality, the majority of my thoughts are concerned with being a woman and her presence in the real world, while the other half is based on my visual influences and inspirations from Persian traditional and historical art and literature. I make every effort to merge Iranian traditional art with modern art using the talents I've acquired over the years and the experiences I've obtained. Every piece of artwork I make has an underlying story or message to convey, and certain elements of that tale or message may be constructed in the minds of the audience. My perspective is not solely focused on beautifying our surroundings and the environment in which we live; as a woman artist, I also feel a strong sense of duty in relation to the situations that occur today that are sometimes disregarded. I work with photography a lot, and I'm particularly interested in art photography that focuses on women's lives, social and cultural topics, and personal perspectives. Because photography's reality helps to better portray thoughts, ideas, and facts, I chose it as my main medium. By capturing various events, hopes, and moments of joy and sadness, photography can catch beautiful and impressive photographs. Seeing a photograph as a strong tool of communication, in reality, offers a portal into the physical and actual world of individuals in this globe.

My concern is for women's hair, bodies, minds and beliefs, as well as their personal and social lives. I primarily used photography in conjunction with other media such as drawing. In many circumstances, human beings experience unfavorable occurrences that occur in social currents and on a daily basis. Man cannot close his eyes and pretend that he is not aware of such events. I want to talk about the challenges that people face on a daily basis, concerns that, despite their importance in people's lives, are frequently ignored and, as a result, bring harm to people's personal lives. I enjoy dealing with neglected topics, and because I am a woman, I will concentrate on women's issues and also my personal life.

Traveling to Norway to study and live was my first experience living outside of Iran, and it was full of both good and unpleasant stories and dramas. Despite the fact that I've been here for almost a year, my artwork has been profoundly inspired by my interactions with new cultures and people. I came from a

nation where there was a lot of tension, anxiety, and oppression: when I arrived in Norway, I felt really peaceful and free, which has improved my spirit and mind. The artists' main concerns here are the ecology and global warming, and their work is extremely admirable. Although I am more concerned in raising awareness about my country's social and political challenges, being among artists in this region has also made me aware of crucial environmental issues. Despite its small size, I am convinced that this town or better to say this country has a lot to offer in terms of art and culture.

My initial idea is talk about women issues in Iran, how we experience being suppressed by what we can wear, and what we can talk about and in general our identity; Society encourages women to follow the rules and guidance that the other want chose for you, and in this culture, we are more rewarded for being obedient, as obedience is the main value of the culture and if you act like that, you are a good and decent woman. When I was in Iran, I was doing quite good at university and in my studies, I was good at being submissive that what the teachers told me. But even if I was good in doing that, I still felt my individuality was suppressed, I felt my freedom and liberty was put down, I could not express myself how I wanted to be, it was quite punished about expressing myself. So even I was adapted to the society and I was performing well, I did not feel I could be myself. Thus, when I decided to come to Norway, I wanted to go to the place where I could talk about this without being suppressed; I could speak my voice about my dislike of being oppressed and obedience which are praised in my community. But when I started a new life in Norway, and I should have enjoyed the freedom here especially in the beginning, at the same time, there are so much new things to be adapted to and being more independent. I kind of get used to just being obedient and do what other people tells and want me. My art is originally about rebellion against oppression of female self-expression, but I also think this experience of being in Norway has also been like how to learn to be more independent, because being independent can also bring a lot of responsibilities. For example, the University in Norway and Iran are so different; They want you to be on your own and this takes time to be adapted to, and I still need to become adjusted to this new culture of being independent to survive my life here. These changes and struggles in my new life have changed my art. In Iran, because of living and interacting with religious people, as well as because of the current political situation in Iran, my art and mind was more focused on religious and political issues. In Norway, although these issues are still alive in my mind, new topics such as identity and individuality, the environment, humanity, and the cultivation of the mystical and spiritual mind and spirit have occupied most of my mind.

I still think it t is very important to talk about my rebellion against being suppressed and only being loyal to my society and culture. Yet, the shock of live in uncertainty in Norway has had a great impact on my mind and heart; now I need to start thinking about myself who need to plan my own education, and my life alone; my art will be both about that; all the concerns that I have had in my home country and all the struggles that I have been experiencing in Norway. Being a suppressed obedient, and at the same time stressed about the freedom of responsibilities, can be a very interesting topic which I address in the future. Transition from culture of obedience to the situation of being more responsibilities for my own learning and my life. Initially I wanted the art to be my rebellions against female suppression, but now I have experienced something new like, humanity, racism, environment, and freedom that there is no mandatory veil to wear. But it is still a culture shock which made me to start thinking more of myself, and to see how my art has being changed when I was in Iran, that the art was a ventilator for my suppressed freedom, but here in Norway where I have my freedom left, I feel there is still need to express myself of those

compressed feelings, it is not as strong as before anymore and I feel that the direction of my art is changing gradually, as in Iran my art was a silent rebellion from oppression but here in Norway my heart is more how to find myself in a new environment, culture, people, and language. Freedom for sure is good especially when you have it since you were born. However, it could be a bit challenging when you experience freedom just when you become an adult. when people do not tell you what to do, it is nice, but there is also some stress in to it. I am an artist divided in to two cultures; I have a culture of obedience, but in Norway I need to find myself. I was like a bird that the feathers of my wings were cut so that I could not fly freely and in a way that I wished to, but in a new living environment I need to use art to grow out my feathers again, so that I could fly and break the boundaries as an independent person again.

So first my art inspired by the culture and the political situation in Iran, but art in Norway is to find my independency again; and I need to read this core of art. The purpose of art has been changed for me. So for me art can be a self-transmission action, because when I was in Iran I used art in a way to find my identity as an opposition to what I felt as an oppression of individuality, and it was more rebellion, but in Norway this form of art is not as powerful as before. Thus, the experiences that I had in Iran and all the happenings that I had been through are still very important part of me, and I still want to rebel against it, but my daily experience after traveling and living in Norway have totally changed from Iran. In Norway, I have had more independence as a woman, I am allowed to express myself freely, people are not telling me what to do all the time. Now I am trying to grow back my feathers I lost, and learn how to fly and navigate freedom, spirituality, humanity, and how to discover myself. As my wings have been cut for a long time, it will take time to grow the feathers of my wing back.

The project that I am working on now is a weaving piece with my hair into the weave which could be the initial act of rediscovering the feathers of my wings and rediscovering. My hair was something that was suppressed in my country, and now I do not want to hide my hair anymore, I want to have it free, and no one has the right to force me to cover it or not. I am going to use art as a way to heal and recover myself. Yet I need to find a new voice for my Art. I still need to think more about my art and the subjects I want to address, because I feel paralyzed by the new situations of life here in Norway. But as I said, I try to focus more on identity and individuality issues rather than just political or religious issues in the future. Although I am more interested in photography and capturing my inner and outer emotions, as well as recording human life in this inverted and crazy world, the other medium that I will use in the future is video. I believe that video has a great impact on the audience and also me, because it is combined with moving images and sounds. The world of film and video making is a huge and exceptional world that requires a lot of effort as well as a very creative mind to make an effective art piece. Although I used to weave a lot to make my artwork after coming to Norway, this is not a medium that I want to continue in the future. Despite the pleasure and energy I get from weaving, I look at it as a meditation and a sedative process, but for sure photography and video will be the main medium that I will continue to work with.

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