Women in Iran: Ancient history to modern times, and back

by

Rahele Jomepour

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Program of Study Committee:
Chuck Richards, Major Professor
Barbara Walton
Robert Sunderman

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I would like to thank my committee chair, Chuck Richards, and my committee members, Barbara Walton and Robert Sunderman for their guidance and support throughout the creation of my thesis show and research. I value their experience and opinion highly and I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with them so closely.

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Finally, thanks to my husband Daniel Bell for his steadfast support and advice. His storytelling talent and problem solving skills cannot be underestimated. His determination helped me to finish well. I would not have been able to do thesis without his patience and love.
This thesis is the written component to the art exhibit “Women in Iran: Ancient History to Modern Times, and Back” which will take place in March 2015 at the Design on Main Gallery, Ames, Iowa.

This body of work explores issues of women in contemporary Iran. The topics range from personal freedom, gender equality, historical precedence, and the desire for peaceful change. The artwork uses multiple media, this including oil and acrylic on canvas, clay sculptures, digital illustration, pencil and paper, cardboard, pastel, and marker. Narrative and theatrical styles reach out to the viewer to draw their own conclusions based on the artist statement but without specific titles to color their perception.

This thesis documents the creation of the work through the intentions, experiences, and influences of the artist. The audience is encouraged to place themselves in a world most likely beyond anything they have imagined, a hypocritical dystopian dream of religious zealotry.

Included in the thesis are images of work displayed on March 13-20 at the ISU Design on Main Gallery, 203 Main St. in downtown Ames.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts in Integrated Visual Arts this writing serves to document and summarize the work I have accomplished. Within this thesis I discuss the visual and conceptual conclusions I brought with me from Iran, and have developed within my time at Iowa State University. These written thoughts complement the visual component of my thesis, which will be exhibited at the Design on Main Gallery, Ames, Iowa.

This thesis and accompanying visual works of art illustrates a general theme running through Iranian Women’s history and my own personal history – a theme of division. Iranian history is generally divided into two segments: Pre-Islam, and the Islamic era. The modern era is also divided between the time of the Pahlavi Dynasty from 1921 to 1979, and the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 revolution. People throughout most of Iranian history have been divided in familial roles, religious practice, and legal rights based on gender. My own personal history is divided between my early childhood, school-age and into adulthood, and coming to the United States in 2011. This thesis explores and uncovers the divisions within society as a whole, divisions of groups of people, families, and ultimately the schizophrenic nature of identity imposed on individuals.

The title of this thesis exhibition “Ancient History to Modern Times, and Back” refers to the cyclical journey of Iranian history through the millennia, particularly the role of women. This journey begins with some of the earliest civilizations on Earth, through the Sassanid Empire and the transition to Islam, into the Pahlavi Dynasty of the early 20th century with Western secularism, and finally to the era of post-1979 Islamic revolution.
and a return to the institutionalized subjugation of women. The title also refers to my own
cyclical journey from the “Ancient History” of childhood innocence, transitioning into
the “Modern Times” conforming to life in mainstream Iran, and “Back” to the freedom
and innocence of my youth since coming to the United States.
CHAPTER 2: ARTIST STATEMENT

Early Influences and Motivating Factors

Life in Iran as a woman is a surreal existence: a state-mandated schizophrenia in the name of piety, where the absurd is so deeply ingrained it has become the norm. While some of my work may appear funny, there is a sad irony within. This is life in Iran – a country so advanced, yet so backward.

In my work I examine issues of personal freedom and reproductive rights, censorship, the government’s interpretation of the Koran and Islamic Law (Sharia), and gender roles. I look at the tools with which the government controls society, and Iran’s long history of inequality.

Throughout recorded history dating back to the Achaemenid Empire (2000 – 550 BCE) women’s roles have for the most part been that of subservience to men. There have been periods within Iranian history where women gained a level of freedom closer to that of men, and briefly rose to rule the kingdom, however these were sporadic and generally short-lived. It would not be incorrect to consider womanhood as a form of slavery with a history spanning more than 4000 years. The 20th century era of the Pahlavi Dynasty is generally regarded as a low point in Iranian history by the current ruling class of Islamic clerics, yet could also be considered a high point in terms of women’s rights.

For me there were always questions as to why women in my country do not have the same rights as men, questions that could not easily or safely be answered. Why have women not fought for freedom? Why do they tolerate unfair laws? Are they satisfied with living as second-class citizens – or worse? I decided that the only way I would ever be able to affect any real change was first in my own transformation out of the lie that I had
been living in Iran, and then outwardly through my artwork. Many visual and performing artists are still living in Iran in fear of their lives, however the mainstream population rarely has exposure to their work. Through my freedom in the United States I am able to show the world what Iran looks like, from the outside, and then continue to inspire hope to those on the inside.
CHAPTER 3: THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN IRAN

Part 1: Pre-Islam

Iranian history is divided into two segments. The Pre-Islamic era began pre-civilization and evolved into pastoral nomadic societies on the fringe of the Sumerian civilization of Mesopotamia, with recorded history starting with the Achaemenid Empire approximately 2000 years BCE. Little is known directly of the early Achaemenid Empire due to vandalism and deterioration through time. Much of the understanding of this era comes from Greek history. What remains of this era exists in the form of art and sculpture that depict mythical creatures which also usually showed men and soldiers. The Achaemenid Empire grew to absorb the later Sumerian and Elamite people, along with numerous other tribes and city-states on the periphery. The languages, customs, and religions of these societies were incorporated into the empire, which reached from present-day Libya to India. With this growth came more accurate understanding of history, specifically regarding the status of women in society.

Women in early middle-eastern civilizations

The Sumerian culture developed in an area commonly referred to as Mesopotamia. They developed urban life and institutions, and women had important roles in this early society. As urban life expanded and the population rose, women gradually stayed home to focus on producing and raising children. Women became less involved outside of the home and with society in general. Gradually it became the norm for women in Mesopotamia to be more restricted in public affairs. A legal text from the
neighboring Assyrian culture states that women could not meet strangers (men) in a flirtatious manner, under punishment of death. Women in royal families in many contemporary cultures generally had greater freedoms, but their power to command was always second to that of men. Women in lower social strata worked outside of the house, most often as servants, shopkeepers or temple workers.

In the pastoralist societies intersecting the larger city-states women were more involved; such as caring for livestock, managing the family’s belongings, and performing other duties necessary for survival mostly equal to that of men. Eventually these rural and nomadic cultures immigrated to the cities and Sumerian culture adopted some of their customs.

The Sumerian civilization gave way to the Elamites in the third millennium BCE. Information about Elamite women comes mostly from religious sources and is limited to the women related to the royal families. Women, in comparison to other civilizations of the era, were generally more revered. One of their most important deities was a goddess named Pinkir, mother of all Elamite gods. In that time women had equal rights of inheritance with men. Some fathers preferred to transfer the responsibility of the states to their daughters rather than their sons. Elam royal women had stronger political power than royal women in Mesopotamia. The Elam culture continued to have a major influence in Iranian culture to the present, including the major Iranian city of Elam.

**Indo-European Tribes and the Advent of Zoroastrianism**

Indo-European tribes from central Asia arrived in the second millennium B.C.E to the Iranian plateau. Their cultural influences gave rise to a new religion, Zoroastrianism,
which became the foundation of moral values of the latter Achaemenid Empire. The information obtained from the Zoroastrian Gathic hymns (the earliest portions of Zoroastrian scriptures known as Avesta) indicates that men were more valued than women. Women had been included in agricultural duties such as sowing seeds, harvesting, and tending livestock but their most important role in relation to society was bearing children. Men retained positions of authority such as priests, warriors, and top positions in the new religious hierarchy of government. For women, producing young men ready for civic and military duty was a part of the moral and ethical teaching of the Avesta. Abortion was a capital crime for women. Women were deemed to be taken over by an evil spirit during their menstruation or after childbirth, and they were restricted to rooms without access to the sky, moon, water, fire and sacred objects for fear that their impurity would act as a poison from demons. This was the logic behind the reason for why women were excluded from presiding over religious rites.

**Women in the Achaemenian Empire**

The Achaemenian Empire was formed by King Cyrus after conquering the Medean civilization and allying the empire from the Nile River in present-day Egypt with the empire from the Oxus River comprising the present-day Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border. The culture of Iranian highlands under Cyrus was a combination of...
different customs of Elamite, Medean, Sumer, Babylon, and other smaller city-states. They were influenced by and adopted cultural practices such as observing the rules of seclusion of women and veiling in Babylon. Early Achaemenid women had more participation in civic affairs, but their participation in the urban life style still was surprising for many of the society members. According to the Greek accounts, women in Achaemenid Empire participated in the affairs of state in a subordinate role to men. Herodotus, after visiting the Achaemenian Empire, noted that Persian women and men participated in public ceremonies and activities together, including the duties of managing the state. Women in royal families had access to education, were trained in horse riding, and participated in official ceremonies such as the king’s birthday.

Before the rise of the Achaemenian Empire, Persian women were not required to wear a veil, which was used as a symbol of respect for women and indicator of social status. In the Assyrian period many women were kept in harems. Achaemenian kings had multiple wives; a custom adapted from the Mesopotamian traditions.

Zoroastrian teachings spread widely during the Achaemenian period and emphasized women’s roles and their position in society. By this time Persian women were strongly encouraged to have children, which eventually became their most important role. During the later Achaemenian Empire women gradually lost most of their public influence as the population rose, trades became more specialized, cities expanded, and the priesthood gained power.
Women in the Sassanian Period

Zoroastrianism spread to become the dominant religion of Iranian people, who spoke the Pahlavi language, also known as Middle Iranian, a precursor to modern Farsi. As the religion became more wide-spread, the religious class became more powerful. Royal women retained their privileges and were equal to the dynasty’s men. Two women of this era, Purandukht (630-31) and Azarmidukht (631-32), daughters of Khusra II, temporarily ascended to the throne. Their reign was short lived however, as the Zoroastrian priesthood was against it. Their rule was only accepted due to the lack of a mature male heir.

According to the religious teachings and legal writings of the late Sassanid period, women had a lower position in society. Elite women wore a veil to be protected from non-elite men. Wealthy women did not work outside of the home as their main concern was bearing children. Rural and poorer urban women had to work with the men for economic reasons. These women had a central role in trade specialization, such as making carpets and clothing, which were major commodities across the Iranian Plateau. However, in general, women were regarded as equal to children and slaves in terms of legal protection. The legal marriage age was nine years old for women and fifteen years old for men. If a woman could not produce children then the man could get a divorce. If the wife left the house without a specific reason, the punishment for her was death. An expression uncovered by historians from this period was “Women are not smart. Do not tell them your secrets”.
Purandukht is the only woman of the Sassanian dynasty to have her image struck on coins as a reigning monarch.

Part 2: The Islamic Era to the 20th Century

During the latter part of the Sassanid Empire, Muslim Arabian armies conquered or assimilated smaller tribes and city-states on their way to the Iranian plateau. Before the rise of Islam, most of the Arabian people were nomadic and women worked with men. Arabic women did not wear a veil, as it had not yet been adopted from the Babylonians. Koranic teachings affected women in every aspect of life. Women were not equal to men in most respects, but they were obligated to religious rites and duties. During the prophet’s lifetime, the growing prosperity of Mecca had strengthened patriarchal influence in the city. Nevertheless, women enjoyed greater social freedom than those in the contemporary Sassanid or Byzantine empires. But by the end of the first Islamic century women’s lives changed and they became gradually less visible. Women’s rights and freedoms did not change dramatically in the course of Islamisation. Women were still bought and sold, inherited, married at a very young age often to men much older, and generally were regarded as property.

There was an exception in this period of time from the beginning of Islam in Iran to the 20th century. In the sixteenth-century Safavid Dynasty came to power. Women in Royal families gained a foothold in state affairs. Like the Achaemenid and early Sasanid period, women again could administer their property and engage in cultural activities. These privileges lasted until the early 18th century with the rise of the Qajar Dynasty.
Part 3: The Pahlavi Dynasty

In 1921 the Qajar Dynasty was on the verge of collapse due to corruption and fighting. In 1925 Reza Khan, an officer from the Iranian Cossack Brigade instigated a military coup overthrowing Ahmad Shah Qajar, the last Shah of the Qajar Dynasty. Khan changed his name to Pahlavi in reference to ancient Iranian identity and established the Pahlavi Dynasty with the support of the Majlis – the Iranian Parliament. He created an authoritarian parliamentary government that endured until toppled in 1979 amid the Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruholla Khomenei. Reza Shah presented numerous social, financial, and political changes, eventually establishing the framework of the Iranian state which lasted until 1979. Through absolute rule, Reza Shah instituted changes that transformed the lives of Persian women fundamentally.

In 1935, Reza Shah mandated that women were no longer to wear a veil in public. He, his wife, and daughters went to the graduation functions at the Women's Teacher Training College in Tehran the following year. The women of the Pahlavi family were all uncovered, as were the rest of the women in attendance. That year, the University of Tehran admitted its first female students. Women entered areas of the economy where previously they had been formally banned, family laws were altered, and open co-instructive elementary schools were built in 1936. For many, these changes were welcomed and began a resurgence in the Women’s Suffrage Movement that had began in the 19th century. For others, a forced secularism of the government, with laws banning hijab, were seen as an affront to religious freedom. Reza Shah declared Iran officially neutral at the start of World War II, allowing German consultants to remain in the country against the protests of the British and Soviet governments. Reza Shah’s main
motivation was to prevent undue outside influence of foreign governments in Iranian
affairs. In 1941 British and Soviet forces invaded Iran and Reza Shah was forced to
abdicate to his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who then became Shah until 1979.
Mohammad Reza Shah sided with the Allies in World War II, allowing the flow of
supplies, most important of which was oil.

Throughout the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah changes in women’s rights
continued, with Queen Farrah Pahlavi at the public forefront of the women’s movement.
In 1963, Dr. Farrokroo Parsay was elected as the first female member of the Majlis.
Parsay was an outspoken proponent for women’s rights, having been brought up in a
household that stressed the importance of equality. Immediately after the 1979 revolution
Parsay, who refused to wear a veil, was executed by firing squad by the new Islamic
State. In a letter to her children she noted that, as a physician, she was not afraid of death
and would welcome it over accepting the shame of forced hijab.

Other major changes in women’s rights came in the form of reproductive rights,
with the legalization of contraception and abortion. Women were allowed to sue for
divorce, given equal access to children in the event of divorce, and eventually gained the
right to vote. With free and open access to information – newspapers, television, radio –
Iranians were increasingly aware of the interconnected world and adopted many western
fashions and customs. Segregation laws, as interpreted from the Koran, were lifted during
the Pahlavi Dynasty.

The rapid changes in Iranian lifestyle, including secularization and
westernization, inadvertently sparked resentment among religious institutions in Iran. As
a result, Mohammad Reza Shah suspended the law banning the veil, making it optional to
appease those who saw it as an affront to their religious freedoms. This was not enough however, and in 1979 Ruhollah Khomenei, who went into exile to France after 15 years of imprisonment by the Shah, led the overthrow of the Pahlavi Dynasty, putting an end to over 4000 years of monarchy in Iran. Little is actually taught about the Pahlavi Dynasty in public schools, and what is taught is heavily biased against the truth. While it is true that the Pahlavi Dynasty had their secret police, the Savak, and it is true that the Dynasty suffered corruption, and numerous other ills of what may have been considered a tyrannical monarchy, in terms of women’s rights it was 54 years of unprecedented development toward equality.
The 1979 Revolution was born out of the growing desire for religious freedom, but many felt betrayed by the institution of Sharia - Muslim Law. Women are once again treated as second-class citizens, analogous to property of men, and subject to very harsh treatment for violation of these laws including public stoning. It is important to note that not all countries dominated by a Muslim population observe such a strict interpretation of Sharia, and those that do have different interpretations. For example, in Saudi Arabia it is illegal for women to drive a car, however in Iran it is legal. The two societies comprise different sects of Islam, but both societies have similarly strict rules regarding personal appearance and division of the population according to gender. It is also important to note that many of the laws instituted in countries that observe Sharia do not come directly from the Koran (they didn’t have cars in the era of Mohammad) and interpretation of the intent of Koranic law varies not just between countries, but by populations within countries as well.

Not all members of the new regime agreed with the new supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and many of them were also executed. Khomeini instituted immediate and harsh sentences for anyone who refused the new law. Although the Savak of the Pahlavi era was disbanded, a new secret police force was formed – the Savama, or Ministry of National Intelligence. The Revolution of 1979 started in part as a response to the brutality of the Pahlavi Dynasty, but later proved even more ruthless. Many people who took part in the Revolution were imprisoned or executed soon after, as they felt betrayed by the new theocracy and voiced their dissatisfaction publicly. All persons who served in the government of the Pahlavi Dynasty were removed from office, hunted,
imprisoned, or executed. The new Islamic State government included some women, such as Zahra Rahnavard, were highly educated and took part in the overthrow of the Shah. Rahnavard, wife of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was considered a “reformer” when in 2005 Mahmoud Ahmedenijad was elected President. One of Ahmedenijad’s first moves as President was a purge of all perceived reformers, and she and her husband are serving life sentences in house arrest.

Many women, who previously held prominent positions in society during the Pahlavi Dynasty, were relegated to traditional roles keeping them much closer to home. Some were able to maintain their pre-1979 positions provided there was no conflict with the law including maintaining permission from their husbands. It has been reported that there are more educated women in Iran now than during the Pahlavi Dynasty. The Islamic State has retained the right for women to obtain an education, but under strict supervision of male family members, and all programs of study must be approved by the government.

It is a simple task to find parallels between the tactics of the Islamic Republic of Iran and those tactics used by other totalitarian regimes. The only differences are in the specific tools used. For Nazi Germany it was the scapegoat of the Jews. For present-day Iran it is their interpretation of Islam and total control by a megalomaniacal supreme leader, purported to be chosen by Allah. It is a fact well-hidden from the people of Iran that the ruling clerics – the Akhoond – are extremely wealthy, corrupt, and anything but pious when not subject to public scrutiny. Such statements as this are a death sentence in Iran.
CHAPTER 4: BACK TO THE BEGINNING: THE ART WORK

Part 1: Contemporary Women’s Issues – A return to Ancient History

In this section I will discuss my work as it relates to Women’s issues and my interpretation and discussion of contemporary topics. It is generally not my practice to title my work. My intent is for the viewer to understand the visual story and develop their own interpretation without the intrusion of my written ideas. A strong and engaging visual message should speak directly to the viewer’s preconceptions and experiences. Titling my work or placing an explanation nearby colors the viewer’s experience and may excuse them from challenging and developing their place in the narrative.

Much of my work relates to the period of Iranian history that has taken place in the last 35 years since the Revolution, which happened within weeks of my own birth. My generation is referred to as “the flower of the regime”. We were the first to be brought up under the strict new Iranian Islamic law, and never knew life under the Shah. Our parents however were forced to adapt to radical changes in society with the closure of movie theatres and bars, outlaw of alcoholic beverages, strict gender segregation during leisure activities, outlaw of extra-marital relationships, banning of female vocalists,
reduction of professional and governmental opportunities for 
women, and other major changes. Children in schools were 
coerced into spying on their parents and reporting on what 
was spoken in the household, or reporting the possession of 
contraband items such as alcohol. These “flowers of the 
regime” were the hope of the new government’s plans for a 
new Islamic society in an Iran free from western influence. 
This generation was not brought up as our parents were, in a 
society of western-style equality with a secular government. 
The idea of male dominance in all aspects of life was forced on our families, and 
cultivated in every aspect of our lives. These new laws bore a striking resemblance to 
pre-Pahlavi society and ancient history, enforced division among families, and while 
many protested (and were removed from society) most reluctantly adapted to the new 
lifestyle. Men who were unsure of their new role were guided by the new religious 
government doctrine as dictated by the new Islamic authority. Under the new law, 
women who wished to travel for any purpose now required permission from their 
husbands, or in the case of a minor, from their father. (See fig #1)

In 1980 the new Iranian government headed by Ayatollah Khomenei created the 
Basij – a public militia tasked with the enforcement with the new laws regarding personal 
behavior, with no basis in the Koran – and ushered in a new era of control and 
domination of the population.
At this time the Basij, like nearly every other official position, was entirely composed of men. In 2001, with the blessing of the new Ayatollah Khamenei, President Rafsanjani instigated a major shift in the Basij. Women were now employed by the Basij to enforce male dominance. Young women who entered the Basij were given access to more opportunities than other women, such as education and career choices.

As part of the cultural shift, men who still supported the free will of their daughters or wives were labeled as “zanzalil”, or controlled by their women, and accused of trying to betray the ideals of the State. Any woman who went out in public with less than the required garments were ticketed or arrested by the Basij. The husband, father or other dominant male family member such as an uncle or other brother were then required to post bail and pay a fine. Often these men were ostracized by society as being “zanzalil”, or “be obaru”, bringing dishonor to their family. (See fig #2)

Hijab refers to the Koranic code addressing proper attire for women. This includes the veil, manteaux (a garment intended to hide the female figure), footwear, and the amount and type of skin that is allowed to be shown in public. Essentially, only hands and face are allowed to be uncovered according to Iranian state law. Other countries who employ Sharia have different interpretations, and may allow a more relaxed attitude, or go even further and disallow any skin.
Since the defeat of the Green Revolution it has become more common to see women testing the bounds of Hijab laws by wearing colorful manteaux, not covering their hair completely, or wearing trousers that reveal their figure. The veil has turned from a tool of oppression to a tool of protest. As a response, the government has increased the size of the Basij, which now constitutes the largest female militia in the world at over a million members. While exact figures are not publicly available, it is conceivable that one in 75 citizens of Iran is a member of the Basij. It has now become more common to see Basij on street corners, with police escort and vans, rounding up young women on charges of “improper Hijab”. (See fig #3)

A woman who professes her own free will, to have a lover, drink, dance, or maintain any other aspect of lifestyle reminiscent of pre-Islamic State western-style freedom is labeled as “be haya”, or an adulteress, prostitute, or religiously dirty and without piety. These women were actively sought by the Basij. Many of them were subjected to summary judgments of harsh prison time, forced marriage, or execution. (See fig #4)

Women in the new Islamic State who were subject to an unwanted pregnancy were forced to get married, or to consider
illegal black-market abortions. Since the law is heavily biased toward males, proving that a woman was raped is very difficult. Children born to women out of wedlock were denied the same civil rights as their peers and were labeled “haram zawdeh”, or bastard children born outside of a religiously clean relationship. (See fig #5)

Many people, not just women, who were unwilling or unable to adapt or accept the new regime fled Iran in several waves, beginning just before the 1979 revolution. Since then there have been numerous other waves of emigration. One notable exodus was after Mahmoud Ahmedenijad took office in 2005, and the government cracked down on dissent. Another was after Ahmedenijad’s 2009 reelection and the crushing defeat of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution marked a turning point in Iranian society, where students, housewives, and workers from every sector took part, much as had happened during the 1979 revolution. (See fig #8) The movement was crushed by the Basij, state police, army, and members of Hezbollah hired by the Iranian government. Some of the more prominent women active in the Green Revolution were forced by the state to reverse their positions, recant their statements on national television, and apologize to the people of Iran. Those who refused disappeared. (See fig #9 & #10)
There are many techniques used by the Iranian government to control the population. Some techniques are very old, dating back to ancient priests condemning followers to damnation for their transgressions. But some techniques had to be invented commensurate with the modern era, as may be applied to computers and the internet. Censorship is not a new invention, only the techniques of its use are new. (See fig #11, 12)
For me, the concept of censorship is a surreal experience. Denying that something exists in order to protect doctrine, even when it is right in front of you or part of a natural process, is symbolic of the blindness normally associated with ignorance. The insult to an educated and worldly population such as Iran is incomprehensible. The regime has taken censorship to extremes, forcing the population to live a lie. The population is forced to live two separate lives; one in the privacy of their homes, and one in public.

**Part 2: Return to Innocence**

When I was 7 years old I did not know the meaning of ‘gender segregation’ until it happened to me the first day of school. Students ages 7 to 18 are educated separately according to gender in Iran. I was confused by this, as I watched movies and animations from other countries on national Iranian TV channels where no gender segregation occurred except for the occasional depiction of religious education. It seemed strange for me as child to study at a school segregated by sex, as preschool and kindergarten did not prepare me for segregation. I had friends of both genders, and the notion of separation or inequality did not exist in my mind. As a result, my view of segregation has never been associated with the family, but with society and the governing religious establishment; The Islamic Republic of Iran.

My first day of school was the last day for me to experience social freedom in Iran. Looking back, I felt as though I had travelled back in time. Before that day I never wore hijab, or experienced any restrictions in terms of clothing regardless of where I was. Beginning with the first day of school I had to cover my head with a black cloth, for no
apparent reason. I was commanded by the school to wear a large gray manteaux and trousers. My trousers were long and loose enough to make my sneakers barely visible. Other than my nice new leather bag with a silk screen of Disney’s Goofy, I didn’t like any of it. School was fun in the sense that I met new children and made friends to play with, but it also began a very dark period in my life. I became a subject to be controlled by the state. Every day the schoolmasters would stand at the head of the line of students, all girls, to ensure conformity of dress. Wearing white socks or jeans, having long or painted fingernails, or any colorful clothing was banned. These practices were written into law by the government at the beginning of the era of the Islamic State. Throughout my school experience students were written up, suspended, or expelled from school for lack of conformity. This became a part of their permanent record and affected their ability to continue into higher education, and restricted their career choices.

The only place I was felt safe was my home. There was a big gap between what I saw and heard from my parents and what I was taught at school. My parents’ opinion and all comments about the regime were considered a secret in our house and I was constantly warned against speaking about things I would hear at home. I knew if I spoke about something against the regime and religion my parents would be in trouble and they could be arrested by government agents. So I learned to be silent at school, as did my classmates. I developed two different characters; one was a girl full of playfulness and curiosity at home and the other was shy and silent in public. I still carry a general apprehension about speaking my mind.

As I got older, the restrictions also grew. Young women are forbidden from associating with young men without proper supervision. Parties, walks on the beach,
sitting at café’s, and any number of freedoms common to the rest of the world could result in severe punishment. This includes any form of political activism that does not conform very carefully with Iranian State doctrine. The protests of 2009 and the Green Revolution became a tipping point in my life. The haze of conformity that had slowly crept into my daily life was suddenly and violently removed during the street rallies after Ahmedenijad’s re-election. This was the first time I had witnessed the brutality of the regime first-hand. Neda Agha Soltan was shot in the chest from close range only a few meters from where I was standing. Neda was murdered by a member of Hezbollah, hired by the Iranian government to suppress the masses gathered to protest an obvious sham election. The Iranian government responded by blaming other protesters and jailing witnesses. The defeated presidential candidates, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, called for national calm and a day of remembrance. They were soon after sentenced to house arrest. I knew at that point that I had to leave Iran. My motives were much deeper than political reasons. I knew that I could no longer be a victim of state-sponsored human rights violations, and to stay in Iran would mean conforming to a system I despised. I could have chosen to stay in Iran and likely go to jail for my beliefs, or I could find a way to come to the United States to express myself freely.

After coming to the US to study art, and looking back at my experiences in Iran as a woman, I found the veil to be a tool for censorship and social control. It has had a lasting psychological affect on my character. I began to study the history of Iran from beyond the grasp of the Iranian government. I soon realized so many aspects of life I was denied in my home country; the freedom to say what I want, where I want, with
whomever I want. I began my own transformation back to the freedom I knew as a child before my first day of school.

As one of my projects I chose the story of Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll. Alice represents a journey undertaken by a young traveller, meeting new people, and the surreal experience of new and strange places and customs. (See fig #13)

I felt very much like the character of Alice in this new wonderland of Ames, Iowa. This was my first taste of freedom since I was 7 years old. In a way, I felt a part of my psyche had gone dormant on my first day of school, and had now awoken after a long terrible nightmare.

Life in Iran became the surreal experience as I settled in to my new freedoms in the US. Every day life became something to celebrate, even something as simple as the sun on my skin and letting my hair fly in the breeze.
Part 3: Processes and Symbolism

My work is a mix of three different techniques: digital illustration, traditional painting such as Acrylic paints and mini sculptures made out of clay and chipboard. These methods have developed over the last three years through the courses I have taken at Iowa State University. Experimenting in different media helped me improve my visual vocabulary in explaining my work. Through these media I developed methods to reference issues not unique to women in Iran.

I use bright colors and irony to invite the audience into my work. At first, the work looks shiny and happy but further study reveals the dark message within. My paintings are narrative and theatrical. One of my inspirations for making narrative art is related to the large-scale painting on wall or canvas as first produced in the Qajar period. The main subjects of these paintings depict religious Islamic martyrdom common in Shia tradition. These large paintings, called Parda, illustrate dramatic scenes of the ta’zia. Ta’zia is a collection of stories about holy Imams and their children in the Islamic period and illustrates their suffering from their battles. These paintings are oil on canvas, generally 3 1/2 x 2 meters, and are easily rolled up for transportation. The traditional role of the Parda-dar (storyteller) is a person who goes from one locality to another, hangs the paintings, and sings and recites the story, using a pointer to elucidate the scenes.
Later this kind of painting moved from villages to the cities and became a very common type of performance in coffeehouses in Iran and called Naqqali. Naqqali, another name for the act of storytelling, has for centuries been performed in coffeehouses. When parda painting was popular in Iran, they served as the ateliers of the painters. The parda painter was housed and fed by the owner of the inn who also supplied him with painting materials, canvases, and pocket money. The painter was commissioned either by the same hotelier or by outsiders. The name of the commissioner appears on the parda painting to immortalize his pious act. Surrounded in the coffeehouses by storytelling and religious rituals, the painters began to paint scenes from Karbala, from Koranic stories (which had entered the repertory of ta’zia drama by the first half of the nineteenth century) and from the national epic Shahnama. The genre of the painting remained the same, and so it came to be known as “coffeehouse”. The Ghahveh-khaneh or coffeehouse artists, are influenced by modern western arts such as cubism, symbolism, and surrealism. In addition to these inspirations, my paintings are also influenced by comic art from the west and Japanese art. Using the wide eyes, big heads, and cartoony characters helps me to picture the modern people who are suffering from the issues, which have roots in ancient history. My paintings include heavy dependence on line and stiff and unnatural portraits, wild juxtapositions and flattened perspective.
The colors I use in my paintings also have their influences from rich and saturated colors in Persian paintings. The reason for using sharp and bright colors refers to the violence of the work and subjects. I have used digital and florescent colors in my works to indicate that all characters are living in a modern era but struggling with very old and traditional problems. (See fig #14)

Reza Abbasi, The Wolf Hunter, Iran, 1642 AD, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C, USA
I also have done studies about women artist and their artwork, more in the field of painting. Kelsey Shwetz is one of the feminist artists from Canada who influenced me in the concepts and thematic context of my works. Her works are about the gender norms, sexuality, fertility and beauty. She said: “I’m interested in addressing how these are mediated by a social context; also how the gender we identify as, the time period we live in, and our geographical location negotiate the experience of our bodies and the bodies of others.” Her works reminded me of Frida Kahlo’s paintings and very early Renaissance murals. In the painting below by Kelsey Shwets, “The Birth of Christ”, she highlights subjects that are traditionally considered taboo. Her work takes a taboo subject and makes it normal, or even celebrated. In the same manner, I paint women in positions where they holding their genitalia in a natural fashion while hiding their identity as one would in a strict Islamic society, but the rest of their body is naked. This contrast is an expression of those women in Iran who lost their rights and freedom but have not relinquished their identities. Some of them are executed, some of them have sought asylum in other countries and some are still living in Iran and fighting for their rights while living in fear of their lives. (See fig #15 & #16)

16. Rahele Jomepour, Mixed Media
Jennifer Linton is another artist who’s work I find very interesting. Her focus is on gender related issues and showing the experience of womanhood. She is inspired by the second wave of feminism. She combines her personal experiences with popular culture and mythology. The surreal atmosphere in her painting with bold outlines helped me to develop my characters in my paintings and illustrations. Using mythology as symbolic elements lead me to expand the ideas for describing the personalities of the characters playing roles in a subject I chose for my paintings. (See fig #17)

I use animals in a symbolic form in my paintings. Animals have a central role in ancient Persian art and literature. The history of using animals in literature goes back to the time when freedom and imagination started to play a larger role in art. Animals were used in literature maintaining their form but using the human language. The movement started at the same time that fetishism and worshiping of animals became popular. Humans used their imagination to attribute to animals in different roles and qualities, for example spiders were from one point of view the symbol of a keeper of unknown secrets, a wizard or prophesier, and from another
point of view, their web, despite its geometrical order, is used as the symbol of the ephemeral world due to its unsteady nature. In my work I use the symbolism of animals to portray the irony of life. (See fig #18)

There are two main characters that I like to use representing women and men in my work; rabbits, representing female characters, and mice representing male. The reason is rooted in my childhood, from nursery songs from my family. In these songs, girls are compared to rabbits because they should be cute, docile, fertile, and subservient. While it is true that rabbits may represent some of these things, in Persian literature rabbits also represent wit and cunning. One story from the collection *Kalila wa Dimnah* depicts a rabbit thinking her way out of certain death by tricking an arrogant lion into thinking there is a stronger lion down in a pit. The lion jumps in to attack, only to find he has fallen prey to his own vanity, and cannot escape. Boys are cultivated to be brave and strong, as is the dominant lion from nursery songs, but I see through the arrogance of the Iranian patriarchy perpetuating these stereotypes. In my work I imagine the head of the lion with its mane shaven, as though stripped of its pride as happened in the story above. The shape of the head appears more like that of a mouse, and takes on characteristics opposite of the lion – weak and feeble, dominated by all around them, victims of circumstance and powerless to take command. The ruling religious class in Iran, who fashion themselves as lions, are nothing but frail old men. Without the cult of personality surrounding them, and the immense wealth they have amassed at the expense of the people, they would wither into insignificance. The ruling clerics have twisted the meaning of Islam and banned many activities that are permitted in other conservative Muslim countries, such as females singing, or dancing openly with men because it is
considered erotic. (See fig #19) However, it is widely known that many in the ruling class have homes in other countries where they can enjoy the freedoms they have taken away from those whom they supposedly serve, and do so away from the state controlled media of Iran. This logic further does disservice to the people by blaming women for the actions of men in cases of rape or other abuses perpetrated against women. By banning the freedom to sing and dance the women are “being saved” from the ravishes of men who have never learned to respect women. (See fig #20)

The family in the depiction of the courtroom is the central focus of the image, even though they are far to the lower right of center. The man, in the image of a mouse, is overwhelmed by the law in its vast power and self-evident righteousness. He wants to do what is right by his family in the name of prosperity and kindness, but he is told by society that he must dominate his wife and child, who’s sole purpose is to serve him. His wife is pre-occupied by the needs of her infant, as she is not afforded any help from her husband, and does not want to make more trouble. The solders protecting the court are caught in a similar conundrum of a corrupt system of morals at odds with an emasculated
system of ethics. They have no choice but to obey, as does the husband, for fear of others like them carrying out brutalities ordered on them by the ruling and pious elite. (See fig #21)

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The intended audiences for my work are the men from Iran. The first issue is thousands of years of Patriarchal culture which from the basis for inequality in a family, a society, and a country. The patriarchy allowed a dictatorial regime takes control of society and keep the people blind. Dictatorship in Iran has limited the political participation and social activities and prefers to limit their maternal roles as a mother through the society. There are men in Iran who are activists for equality between men and women of Iran; however, this is dangerous work. There are families who do not agree with the government and encourage women to follow roles other than just being a mother. Women’s rights are not clearly defined in Islam, which opens the way for world’s Muslim communities to use the religion as a tool to abuse women. The law will not change unless people are united. If men in Iran wear hijab just for one day to protest, I am sure it would be big shock for the government and regime. I would like to get attention from my intended audience, the men of Iran, to think about the message in my work, and question the patriarchal culture under which they grew up.

Through my work I have learned what it is to be a feminist. Previously I had been taught that feminism was pro-woman, anti-male. I now understand that this is not true, and that the true nature of feminism is equality, which includes rooting out injustices toward men. It is my life’s goal to use my art in pursuit of justice through whatever means available. My message is to the entire world, but specifically to the women of Iran. This is a message of hope, and patience. My problem is not with Islam; it’s with the people that use Islam to institute inequality. No modern government can legislate
morality and expect to survive. It may be several years, or generations, but the current
regime will be reformed by way of the very tactics it uses to maintain control. At some
point an iron fist can hold onto nothing. But I also caution those who would seek to
topple the regime by force. You cannot bomb a people into democracy or freedom, a
lesson that has unfortunately not been adequately learned by the dominant powers on
Earth. I am very pleased to know that there is change happening in Iran from within. The
population is getting younger, and the ruling classes are getting older. At some point the
old guard of the 1979 Revolution will be gone. My hope is that women and men can unite
in the cause of freedom, support each other’s rights, and recognize that an injustice to one
is an injustice to all.
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Collection One

Digital Painting

Digital Pigment on Archival Paper

2011-2012

Size vary (Between 36X60” to 40X40” )
Collection Two
Sculptures
2012-1013
Size vary
Collection Three
Coffee Cups
2013-2014
Size vary
Collection Four

Censorship

Mixed Media

2014

Size vary
Collection Five

Alice in Wonderland

Acrylic and Oil on Paper

2014

Size (21”X27”)
Collection Six

Painting

Acrylic on Canvas

2015

Size vary