ESTABLISHING AN AUTHENTIC ARTISTIC IDENTITY

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Abstract: Shirin Neshat is an Iranian contemporary female artist who is in exile by choice. Born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957, the artist moved to the United States in 1974 in order to study arts. Due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, she was prevented from going back to her country. In 1990, after almost 12 years, Neshat visited Iran for the first time after the revolution, which transformed her artistic life into a productive one, full of prizes. The aim of this article is to reflect on the impact of Neshat’s homecoming experience in developing an authentic artistic identity. The emphasis of the paper will be on the artist’s first cinematic film, Turbulent (1998), which will be discussed as a manifestation of the artist’s working through the turbulent encounter with the changes in the motherland after a long separation due to the revolution.

Keywords: authentic artistic identity, exile, homecoming, maternal body, mourning, Turbulent.
Introduction

Shirin Neshat, born in 1957 in Iran, is a contemporary female artist who is in exile by choice. After finishing high school in 1974, she moved to the United States in order to study arts. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution, which resulted in the overthrowing of the monarchy and establishment of an Islamic republic, prevented her from going back to her country. After receiving her Master’s degree in Fine Arts, she moved to New York with her ex-husband in order to manage an art gallery. However, she did not produce any artwork during that period and what she did create, she reportedly destroyed. In 1990, after almost 12 years, Neshat visited Iran for the first time. Homecoming created a turning point in her artistic life. The artistic period which seemed barren up until 1990 was transformed into a productive one, full of awards. These awards include the International Golden Lion Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999; the Visual Art Award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2000, the Hiroshima Art Peace Award from the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005, the Silver Lion Prize for the best director at the Venice Mostra film festival in 2009 and the Praemium Imperiale Award by the Japan Art Association in 2017. As the cultural critic Heartney suggests, Neshat “makes art through her identities as an Iranian and as a woman, but reshapes them to speak to larger issues of freedom, individuality, societal oppression, the pain of exile, and the power of the erotic” (Heartney, 2013, p. 251). The aim of this paper is to reflect on the impact of Shirin Neshat’s homecoming experience after the revolution in developing an authentic artistic identity. The emphasis of the paper will be on Neshat’s first cinematic film, *Turbulent*, which will be discussed as a manifestation of the artist’s working through the turbulent mourning process created by the encounter with the motherland after the revolution.

**Homecoming and the establishment of an authentic artistic identity**

Homecoming, certainly a turning point in Shirin Neshat’s artistic life, seems to have facilitated the development of her identity as an authentic artist. In 1990, Neshat returns home only to find out that the strict Islamic regime
had changed the country in such a way that it became unrecognizable for her. Having lost their fundamental rights both at home and at work, women had become second-class citizens (Tenaglia, 2002). The Khoemini government, run by a group of Shiite clergymen, required strict social policies which resulted in the segregation of men and women in public places, to the extent of having no eye contact. Women were required to wear chadors – a religious outerwear covering them from head to toe – and mosque-based law enforcement officers patrolled the streets in order to enforce Islamic codes of dress and behavior and punished perceived enemies of the revolution. “That trip realigned me to Iran. It also made me want to do art, something I had stopped doing since Berkeley” Neshat had said (Tenaglia, 2002). “That trip and subsequent trips brought me an artistic focus: mainly the subject of the Islamic Revolution and of women in relation to the revolution. Finally, I had found a subject that I felt passionate about, but more importantly, making art of this nature became an excuse to reconnect myself with my long-lost culture” (Neshat, 2004). In this statement Neshat eloquently alludes to the relationship between making art and mourning the loss of a loved object, an issue which has been discussed by many authors in the psychoanalytic literature.

In his famous paper “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud, 1917, p. 243). During the process of mourning, through reality testing, one accepts that the object no longer exists and the libidinal investment in the lost object is gradually withdrawn to be projected onto new objects. In 1923, Freud goes on to say that identification with the lost object is an integral part of the mourning process and that “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and (...) it contains the history of those object-choices” (Freud, 1923, p. 29).

Klein, who describes the mourning process in terms of object relations, brings in a different perspective and elaborates on the relationship between mourning and creativity.

Klein (1940) suggests that, in the depressive position, the infant has to come to terms with the mother being a separate, whole object. That is, the infant
realizes that the good object and the bad object which he/she has destroyed in phantasy are in fact parts of the same, whole object. This recognition leads to feelings of guilt and concern for the destroyed bad object (now perceived as a part of the mother as a whole) in the infant, as well as a desire to protect and repair the good object. Klein (1940) states that the subsequent losses that one experiences in the future reactivates the early depressive anxiety, leading to a fear of loss of the good objects in the internal world and consequent feelings of persecution. While reinstating the lost object, one establishes the good object in the internal world and therefore rebuilds the internal world. According to Klein (1929, 1940, 1945) the depressive anxiety and the desire to repair the maternal body, which has been attacked and destroyed in phantasy through restorative phantasies, is at the root of artistic and creative activity. Healthy separation from the maternal body facilitates the development of symbol formation and opens the doors for creativity and productivity (Klein, 1930).

In *Homecoming*, Joannidis (2007) makes a connection between home as a metaphor and the archaic maternal body. In this context, the desire to return home is a desire to return to “a most complete experience of being understood” – “an understanding without words” (Klein, 1963, p. 301), a desire to go back to the early pleasurable and sensual relationship with the mother. Joannidis points out that various authors describe the origin of “union with the mother” state of mind either as “a defensive phantasy construction employed to counteract the anxiety/dread of separateness that exists from the very beginning” or as “a developmental point that the subject will soon be forced out of, through exigency” (Joannidis, 2007, p. 31). Regardless of its origins, this omnipotent phantasy is subsequently used to deny otherness, loss and separation, preventing the work of mourning and reparation. However, drawing from the story of Odysseus, Joannidis (2007) argues that homecoming may also have a progressive impact whereby the work of the mourning is completed, the desire to be omnipotent is renounced, and mortality and transience of one’s life is accepted. Along these lines, I suggest that homecoming had a progressive impact on Shirin Neshat’s artistic life, as she uses her art as a creative solution to go through mourning the
loss of the motherland as she once knew it. Following is a discussion of Turbulent, Neshat’s first cinematic film, as a reflection of the artist’s turbulent homecoming experience, process of mourning and identification, which leads to the flourishing of her identity as an authentic artist.

**Turbulent**

*Turbulent* (1998), Shirin Neshat’s first cinematic film produced after going back to Iran, won the first prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999. Prior to *Turbulent*, starting from 1993, she used photography and video installations reflecting “the point of view of an Iranian living abroad, looking back in time and trying to analyse and comprehend the changes that had taken place in Iran since the revolution” (Neshat, 2000). For Neshat (2000), “...it became more than art making, but a type of journey back to my native country”. She adds that “*Turbulent* was the first work that no longer had the perspective of an artist distanced from her culture; it dealt with an issue that belonged to the present and revealed a new sense of intimacy and familiarity between myself and the subject”. Yet we will trace the on-going process of mourning, elaboration, and identification reflected in this particular artwork.

In *Turbulent*, we initially encounter two different stages projected spontaneously on two walls facing each other while the spectator is situated in the middle. Perhaps this kind of installation is representative of Shirin Neshat’s position in life. The artist states that, despite the fact that she doesn’t have access to her country anymore, she feels that she is the voice of her people and that she is fighting on two different battle grounds: On the one hand, she criticizes the East and the perception the East has created of the West, and on the other hand, she criticizes the Iranian government and its regime (TEDWomen, 2010). On the screen, one of the auditoriums is filled with Iranian men in traditional white clothes, whereas the other one remains empty. In the full auditorium, a male singer who is wrapped up in white just like the male audience takes the stage and turns his back against the audience as he starts to sing a composed poem by Celaleddin Rumi. Confident in the admiration of the audience behind, this time he seems to want to seduce us,
the spectators, in a childish manner. The uniformity of the white clothes and the male singer turning his back on the audience may be considered as the male singer experiencing the audience as an extension of himself. This seems to be a reference to the grandiose, narcissistic part of the little boy and the self-objects that function to inflate his narcissism. The male singer successfully performs his song. The auditorium is brought down with applause.

On the other hand, in the dark and empty auditorium, there is a veiled figure standing in the middle of the stage. As she slowly turns, we realize that this is a female singer. In Iran, it is forbidden for women to sing in public and sustain eye contact with men. Thus, the auditorium is empty. This is the starting point of the video. Shirin Neshat (2000) states that she created Turbulent with the inspiration she drew from a blind female singer she watched on the streets of Istanbul. Both women sing their songs towards a dark emptiness...

In the audience-free auditorium, the female singer is faced with darkness, emptiness and loneliness. She is full of protest and anger in the face of the oppression established on her body and life. Can we link her ability to deal with these emotions with the feminine capacity for receptivity, containment and transformation? According to Bion (1962) in the beginning of life, the infant projects raw sense impressions and raw emotional data (beta elements) to the mother. A well-balanced mother receives these projections and transforms them in such a way that they become tolerable for the infant (alpha elements). The mother’s ability to detoxify the beta elements is based on her capacity for reverie which is a part of her alpha function. The capacity for reverie is described as the availability of the mother’s psyche to be open and receptive to anything that the infant projects (Bergstein, 2014), which leads to a feeling of containment in the infant. According to Bion (1963), the mental apparatus of the infant is developed through the container-contained relationship in which the mother-infant dyad tolerate uncertainty together until meaning is created and the infant internalizes this shared activity.

In the video, the singer uses her veiled body as if it were a musical instrument. She begins to chant a song without words. Into the empty darkness, she projects raw sensations (Bion’s beta elements) which in turn
are projected back into her. In a process of an effort to create meaning out of these raw sensations, she transmits her voice, which is an expression of her body, outside. There is no composition, but music, no words, but a song.

One may wonder about the source of the female singer’s courage to create in front of darkness and emptiness. During the part where she sings her wordless song, we, the spectators, hear voice-overs. In those moments, it feels as if the singer is not entirely alone after all. This polyphony is reminiscent of the path that the young girl has to endure as she moves from sameness to difference with respect to her mother. This “long and long-winded” (Abrevaya, 2013) path includes separation from mother as well as identification with her, the women in the family and a heritage transmitted from one generation to the next. The ability to be alone in the face of a group is possible with the internalization of a good-enough mother. Regardless of the conditions in the external reality, the internal audience (imagined public, McDougall, 1993, p. 70) of the female singer seems to give her the strength to find an authentic way to express herself.

If we go back to the male singer, he has a good command of his voice and the stage. However, in him, we do not see the same spontaneity and creativity of the female singer. Nor the same vulnerability until the female singer starts to sing her song. The veiled woman lets herself be completely naked with her capacity to be physically and emotionally receptive as well as with her creativity that transforms the darkness. And maybe this is what one wants to hide, yet at the same time admire, and is allured by in a woman’s body. And maybe this is the reason for the turbulence that transpires when the baby separates and then encounters the maternal body.

The impact of the turbulent encounter with, and separation from the maternal body

The “turbulent” feeling, which is dominant in and identical with the title of Neshat’s video installation, evokes, from the beginning, an experience of “emotional turbulence”, as Bion would describe. According to Bion (1976), an emotional turbulence is created when two personalities meet. Undoubtedly,
this statement is valid for the mother-infant dyad, which separates and rejoins many times from birth on. What triggers the turbulence is not only the mutual interaction between two different unconsciouses, but also the meeting of two bodies which play host to the drives. Freud states that “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego” (Freud, 1923, p. 26). Freud and subsequent theorists such as Klein, Winnicott, Bion, and Laplanche, illuminate the countless experiences whereby the infant encounters the maternal body and how these experiences contribute to the psychic development of the infant. According to Rousillon (2010), the sexuality of the mother, which seduces the infant to life, as well as the enigma created by the difference, lies within the sensorial sharing that the infant experiences with the mother. In my opinion, Turbulent is a work of art that has the power to express the characteristics which make the maternal body alluring and mysterious as well as dark and uncanny beyond words.

In Turbulent, the motion of the camera gives us the feeling that the female singer’s body begins to whirl. The camera seems to represent the third eye; the male singer, whom we at one-point sense to be watching or dreaming about the female singer, the male audience, or us, the spectators. In contrast to the male singer, spectators get to know the female singer from different aspects and experience her as a whole. Unlike the male singer, the female singer does not perform the composed poem by Celaleddin Rumi, in fact, she herself transforms into a whirling dervish in front of the spectators’ eyes. This transformation as signalled by the whirling motion appears to refer to the woman’s body, the maternal body as the source of creativity.

In the beginning of life, the baby needs the warmth and the smell of the maternal body and breasts filled with milk in order to survive and be freed from annihilation anxiety. According to Klein (1928), the baby phantasizes that the inside of the mother’s body is filled with riches, such as the father’s penis, potential babies and faeces. Under the sway of frustrating experiences such as weaning, which trigger envious feelings, the baby attacks the maternal body in phantasy and destroys its contents. Due to these phantasized attacks, the child fears to be punished by a retaliatory combining parental figure that
will destroy the inside of his/her body, giving way to annihilation. These archaic anxieties are also the forerunners of the castration anxiety in boys (Klein, 1945).

According to Meltzer (1988), the mother creates an intense perception of beauty in the baby with her outward beauty – her breast which sustains the baby and her eyes which draw attention to her face. However, besides her outward beauty, the mother also has a dark and mysterious internal world that the baby has a hard time comprehending. Neshat mentions the importance of the male singer to have a “compassionate but almost envious gaze” (Neshat, 2000). Doesn’t the veiled, dark body partly symbolise the inside of the mother, to which the infant tries to attribute meaning while feeling fearful, curious and envious?

The wordless song of the female singer is reminiscent of the enigmatic messages of Laplanche (1989). According to Laplanche, the enigmatic messages transmitted by the maternal body lie within the origins of the infant’s unconscious. These messages are filled with the sexuality of the adult other, which is yet an enigma for the baby. The unconscious of the baby develops as a result of the translation of such messages. And yet, the child has difficulty making sense of death as much as sexuality. When one listens to the wordless song of the woman, one may hear screams of seagulls, spring fire, and also cries of women lamenting and suffering, as well as dreadful screams of madness and death... And from time to time, a subtle lullaby heard from a distance, in order to clear the turbulence inside the female singer... The image of the archaic mother is capable of giving life as well as taking life. In the image of the woman who has her back turned there is also an aspect which reminds us of the Angel of Death. Within the darkness of the maternal body, feelings of mourning, castration, psychosis and death are also hidden.

In a recent article, Lemma suggests (2014) that the concrete changes in the analyst/mother’s body, by indicating temporality and otherness, create turbulence in the internal world of the analysand, especially when there is a need for a symbiotic transference. Drawing from the connection between the archaic maternal body and motherland, I would like to draw a parallel
between Lemma’s suggestion and Neshat’s shocking experience as she went back to Iran. Neshat states that she returned to her motherland, “inundated with a sense of nostalgia and a longing to reconnect” (Neshat, 2014), however she describes her homecoming experience as follows:

“It was probably one of the most shocking experiences that I have ever had. The difference between what I had remembered from the Iranian culture and what I was witnessing was enormous. The change was both frightening and exciting; I had never been in a country that was so ideologically based. Most noticeable, of course was the change in people’s physical appearance and public behaviour” (Neshat, 2003).

The artist talks about the changes in the appearance of her mother and sisters, who used to smoke and wear miniskirts, with astonishment, and also of the changed appearance of Iranian women in general and their militancy.

A great loss is harboured within the artist’s homecoming experience. Her motherland, which she has returned to with the desire to reconnect, has changed in such a way that she could not recognize it. Neshat approached this change and transformation as an enigma and tried to make a sense of it through her artwork. Women of Allah, her first black and white photography series, is a product of this period. In an interview, she indicates that due to the frequent visits to Iran she became more familiar with Iranian culture, which had changed, and also “had a pretty good understanding of the way in which the Iranian society functioned” (Neshat, 2000). However, during the production of Turbulent, it seems as if on some level she was still working through the turbulence that was created by the first encounter with the motherland after the long separation. The moment of encounter with the female singer is as turbulent for us, the spectators, as it is for the male singer. Neshat says that she used only black and white in the film in order to emphasize dualities such as men-women, traditional-spontaneous etc.; however, it is possible that the choice of colours is somehow related to her homecoming experience. In an interview, Neshat (2007) talks about going back to a country which has lost its colours, saying that “It was as if you lost colour and everything went to black-and-white”.

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According to Segal (1957), the root of creativity stems from a successful working through of the depressive position, followed by symbol formation without resorting to manic defences. “In this view, symbol formation is the outcome of a loss, it is a creative act involving the pain and the whole work of mourning” (Segal, 1957, p. 199). The artist shows a high sense of reality in relation to his/her internal reality as well as in relation to its material. This is due to the fact that the artist, having worked through the depressive position, has a capacity to separate internal from external as well as object from subject (Segal, 1952). The artist comes to terms with having lost the object and gives up on it, replacing it with the formation of the symbol, which is the artwork. Being able to separate external from internal and object from subject, the artwork is seen as separate and outside of the self, a creation of the self and therefore an instrument of communication that can be used freely.

Even though Shirin Neshat felt that her motherland lost its colours, at the same time she encountered a situation that had given her excitement and with which she could identify: This is the striving and creative side of the women in her country, beautifully portrayed in *Turbulent*, which emerged under oppression. Neshat states:

I then discovered why I take so much inspiration from Iranian women. That under all circumstances, they have pushed the boundary. They have confronted the authority. They have broken every rule in the smallest and the biggest way. I stand here to say that Iranian women have found a new voice, and their voice is giving me my voice (TEDWomen, 2010).

And it was only after finding her own voice that Shirin Neshat was able to create an authentic way to express herself artistically and to this day, takes on the responsibility of being the voice of her people in the outside world.

**Conclusion**

Home as a metaphor is linked with the archaic maternal body, which suggests that the desire to return home may be related to the phantasy of a union with the mother. Based on the Odysseus story, Joannidis (2007) argues that homecoming may have a progressive impact whereby the work of the
mourning is completed. For the Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat, who is in a self-imposed exile, her homecoming experience after the Islamic Revolution facilitated the establishment of her identity as an authentic artist. Neshat returned to a motherland that has changed both in appearance and ideology. The artist managed to work through her feelings of loss by trying to give a meaning to this change through her artwork. Neshat’s first cinematic film, Turbulent, is an excellent example of how the artist elaborates on her shocking encounter with the motherland after the revolution as a part of the mourning process and demonstrates her discovery of an aspect to identify with – the creative and the fierce side of the women in her country which led to the establishment of an authentic artistic identity.

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