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## The politics of clothing in the work of Shirin Aliabadi

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### **Abstract**

In the broad overlapping areas of recent scholarship deriving from, first, the field of fashion studies, and second, focusing on the politics of attire in relations between the West and the Muslim world, Shirin Aliabadi is an artist whose work has the potential to provide illuminating insights. This paper provides a general overview of her oeuvre with a focus on the way she uses fashion, clothing and associated concerns to explore the socio-political context confronting female Muslim MENA-based artists seeking to reach an international audience. The paper characterizes this context as one constituted by intersecting patriarchies: a local one that constrains artists' activity through censorship and associated laws and norms; and that of the globalist West that imposes a discursive framework via which female Muslim MENA-based artists' works are stereotyped to fit certain orientalist assumptions. Like a few prominent female Muslim MENA-based artists, Aliabadi's work is characterized by a sophisticated deconstructive approach that can be seen to contest both of these constraining frameworks in the effort to clear a discursive space. Adorno's and Rancière's ideas regarding the relation of the aesthetic to the political are drawn on to account for the forms this contestation takes.

### **Keywords:**

The politics of clothing, Shirin Aliabadi, design.

### **Introduction:**

The fraught discourse surrounding the role and place of the veil in encounters between the Western and Islamicate worlds in recent times has helped draw scholars' and artists' attention to the significances of this and other items of attire. As a result, much work has been produced exploring the meaning attributed to the veil by a range of actors and interrogating the values and assumptions underpinning these meanings. This consideration of the function of attire in such ideological frameworks has been paralleled by the emergence of the field of fashion studies, which considers attire as a cultural system imbricated with ideology and politics just as much as more established objects of enquiry of this kind, such as literature or the visual arts. Such developments underscore the semiotic potency and volatility of attire and its representation in cultural encounters, and emphasize the potential value of the phenomenon as a means of understanding them. In combination, these and related developments have led to a surge in interest in the political, socio-cultural, aesthetic and other significances of clothing, and in those artists who explore these.

In the context of the converging preoccupations of these discourses, one artist who has not received the scrutiny her work merits is Shirin Aliabadi. An Iranian who

lived and studied in France, Aliabadi produced a body of works characterized by a ludic collapsing of boundaries to highlight socio-cultural codes functioning in forms of fashion and the discourses surrounding them to shape female subjectivity in a range of regimes. Through the juxtaposition of codes of attire from different socio-cultural configurations, or the superimposition of one on another, Aliabadi's works consistently evoke a comic incongruity that makes visible ideological structures in norms of attire that are usually occluded. In this way, her work represents a critical interrogation of semiotic systems that inscribe relations of power and control on bodies. These are almost always female bodies, and forms of traditionally female attire, which emphasizes the ways the female body is shaped and coded by these schemes. In addition, the conflation of contrasting socio-cultural norms of clothing illuminates the semiotic codes functioning at this level to illustrate the frameworks shaping specific cultures' shaping and positioning of the body in public space via clothing. For example, many of Aliabadi's images critique the employment of a jargon of empowerment and self-esteem as a means of constraining subjects' horizons, which she frequently makes visible by situating such jargon in an unfamiliar context that throws its

obfuscations and pretensions into sharp relief.

Shirin Aliabadi (Tehran, 1973–2018) studied art and archaeology in Paris, subsequently splitting her time between France and Iran. The effects of such a trans-national and trans-cultural experience can be discerned in the dislocation of socio-cultural frameworks effected in her works. A way in which such inter-national and inter-cultural positioning is frequently theorized is via Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the 'third space', an interstitial excess from which it is possible to subvert rigid binaries and thus set in motion dialectical subversions of established discursive constructions. This idea has been applied to the work of many contemporary and near-contemporary female visual artists from the MENA region, including Lalla Essaydi, Shirin Neshat, Zineb Sedira, Mona Hatoum, and others, and helps to account, to a large extent, for the frequently subversively comic element to such work. A factor all these artists have in common in the need to negotiate what I understand as two sets of intersecting patriarchies. As female nationals of Muslim countries, they face constraints on what they are allowed to depict and exhibit in their home countries and cultures, while also encountering a relatively rigid set of discursive constructions when seeking to

engage in the Western-based international art market. That is, their home nations' laws constrain and situate them in specific ways, but so do the orientalisng assumptions and images that shape the reception of female Muslim artists in the international art market. Accordingly, structurally analogous responses can be discerned in the responses of all these artists to this situation, as a means of finding an interstitial positioning from which the Scylla and Charybdis of these two frameworks can be navigated.

Among the most salient of these responses is the adoption of an ironic, satirical and humorous self-positioning, which enables the work to carry out an imminent dialectical critique of its targets without, through this, being constrained to the pre-established terms of the debate. Such ironic techniques create an instability that establishes an interstitial space within the overdetermined field encompassed by these intersecting patriarchal discourses. Aliabadi's work represents an especially good example of such an ironic, humorous approach, and demonstrates the socio-political implications of its employment. This paper seeks to provide an overview of Aliabadi's use of such forms of irony for the sake of imminent critique, with a focus on her use of the trope of the veil in her work. Consideration of

works from throughout her career clarifies how consistent such an approach was in her method and helps substantiate the broader reading of such approaches functioning as an integral component of her aesthetic response to the context she was responding to. The analysis of the works themselves makes possible an elaboration of a theory of the aesthetic method, which is developed at the end of the paper with reference to Adorno's and Rancière's ideas regarding the relations between the aesthetic and socio-political.

In collaborations with her husband Farhad Moshiri such as *Battlegrounds of the Cultural Invasion/Freedom is Boring Censorship is Fun* (2003 onwards), Aliabadi used material taken from books and magazines together with their own artwork to comment, in an often wryly humorous manner, on the attitude of the Iranian authorities to censoring images from the West, particularly representations of the female form. Counterposing this, however, they also shared a common interest in exploring, in an ironic, kitschy fashion, the influence of modern consumerism and globalised popular culture on Iranian youth. In other collaborative work, such as *Operation Supermarket* (2006), Aliabadi and Moshiri acknowledged both the appeal of the Western world and also its downside in helping to create an increasingly

homogenised consumerist culture. In this sense, their work represents a searching critique, from the outside, of a given Western ideology of 'fashion', one closely linked to capitalism's promises.



Figure 1: Shirin Aliabadi and Farhad Moshiri, *We Are All Americans*, from *Operation Supermarket* series, 2006. Lambda print, diasec, mntd, 73.8 x 98.5 cm., private collection.

Such an awareness of the shortcomings of both sides of the binary West / Other is important to a full appreciation of Aliabadi's understanding of the role of attire in socio-cultural regimes. Well aware of the stereotyped Western view of women in traditional Muslim countries as cowed and subservient, Aliabadi's images consistently demonstrate Iranian women's capacities for subversion of and rebellion against constraints imposed on them – sartorial and otherwise. This preoccupation was apparent from one of her earliest series, *Girls in Cars* (2005).

Girls in Cars was produced when Aliabadi returned to Iran from studying in France, and encountered a society that had been significantly transformed by the Islamic revolution. For example, dress codes were enforced, public morality was policed, and proscriptions were imposed against public interactions between men and women. In response, the youth of Tehran developed a night-time youth culture of cruising the streets in cars as a means of socializing, flirting, and facilitating interactions between the genders. Aliabadi took to photographing the female participants in this scene. The images show young Iranian women in cars, attired and made-up in ways that contravene public decency laws. For example, in almost every individual pictured, the veil is pushed far back on the head, exposing the hair, necks are visible, and sunglasses are worn (Figure 2). Bright colours are also worn, along with lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara. The self-presentation of the individuals makes clear their ostentatious intentions.

Girls in Cars 4, depicted in Figure 2, demonstrates the significance of the approach and the subject matter clearly. The image centres on the figure sitting on the left in the back seat of the car. Her red headdress is striking, and is mirrored by the colour of the lipstick she has applied. She gazes directly at

the camera, half a smile on her face, inviting the gaze and asserting her individuality. The figure to her right in turn looks at her, watching the way she returns the gaze in this forthright manner. The expression on the face of the figure seated in the middle of the back seat indicates elated excitement at the interaction she is witnessing, and vicarious joy at thus witnessing her friend's self-assertion. The figure seated on the right of the back seat, like the figure on the left, watches the camera with an expression that mirrors that of the focal figure, her expression indicating interest and openness to the novelty of the situation of watching, and inviting such interactions of the gaze. The tone of the image is one of excitement and discovery.

The images have been read as emphasizing the constraints faced by Iranian women. Sara Mameni, for example, understands the series to be underscoring the incorporation of the gaze of the Iranian state disciplinary apparatus (the 'morality police') within the subjectivities of the individuals pictured, and therefore to be testifying to a situation of profound restriction in which 'the point of view [of Tehran's morality police] is neurotically present within the structure of each image'. Two factors would appear to argue against such a reading. The first is the

tone of the images themselves, as discussed above. The second is Aliabadi's own account of the creation of the series. She describes the observation that led to the images as follows: I was stuck in traffic one weekend in a pretty posh part of Teheran. We were surrounded by beautiful girls made up to go to a party or just cruising in their cars and I thought then that this image of women chained by tradition and the hijab is not even close to reality here. They all had music on and were chatting to each other between the cars and making eyes and conversation with boys in other vehicles. Although respectful of the laws, they were having fun.

Aliabadi's references here to an implicitly Western perspective ('this image of women chained by tradition and the hijab') suggests her own interstitial positioning with respect to the Iranian culture to which she returned after studying abroad. The verb 'chained' heavily underscores a specific construction of the Muslim women as dominated and constrained, and invokes a discourse that situates this idea near the centre of a series of justifications for the moral superiority of Western culture, hinging on notions of 'freedom' as a fundamental human good (which in turn underscore specific material forms of domination, such as military and economic). Aliabadi sidesteps the dichotomy

so often implied by this framework by not denying the presence of constraint ('respectful of the laws'), but simultaneously identifying a site of subjective agency that escapes the total control of them. In response to the implied choice between two paternalisms, Aliabadi's description of what intrigued her about the scene depicted in *Girls in Cars* indicates that she was interested in some third space that escapes both.

This exploration of an interstitial position is continued in the work for which Aliabadi is probably best known, her series of photographs entitled *Miss Hybrid* (2008), which explored how young Iranian women refused to be confined by the dress codes imposed by the authorities, instead adapting them to reflect their own personal identity. Commenting on her own work, Aliabadi explained how symbols of Western culture, and fashion accessories in particular, were used by Iranian youth as a form of contestation and assertion of individuality:

Banal as the symbols of consumer society may seem: Starbucks, bags by Goyard, or iPods, in Iran they become a subliminal instrument of the so-called cultural invasion from the West, which the Iranian authorities equate with the 'great Satan'. For the young generation, in particular for the women, such fashion accessories become – in a beguiling

manner – a kind of passive rebellion. This is the moment when fashion is not only fashion – in this context the message is not superficial. I don't believe that you automatically become a rebel with a Hermès scarf around your neck, but in the context of the society in which we grew up, within an educational system that has different values to those in the West, the phenomenon of fashion turns into an interesting paradox. But ultimately, these young women's concern is not to overthrow the government but to have fun.



Figure 2: Shirin Aliabadi, Miss Hybrid III, 2007.

Inkjet print, 89 x 70 cm., private collection.

This final sentence – ‘these young women’s concern is not to overthrow the government but to have fun’ – in fact unlocks a dimension

of Aliabadi’s own work very effectively. One would have to scour her work very thoroughly to find instances of explicit political earnestness. The prevailing tone of the work is ironic: one could call it satirical, if one were sufficiently confident that one could identify the target of the satire, but on the whole I am not confident that I can. As mentioned above, her work enlists and evokes particular discourses and jargons, and situates them in incongruous contexts that defamiliarize them and render them ironic. As subsequent discussion of specific works will show, this irony tends to be multivalent, radiating in numerous directions at once, and therefore resisting reduction to a clearly definable political position. The works are thus fundamentally playful – ‘fun’ – rather than demonstrably committed to some political agenda. As Adorno and Rancière show, however, the absence of unambiguous commitment is not to be confused with apoliticism. I shall spell out this reading toward the end of the essay, elaborating it from the analyses of specific images presented.

The first of these is a little-known work from the couple’s collaborative series *Battlegrounds of the Cultural Invasion/Freedom Is Boring Censorship Is Fun* (2003 onwards) (Figure 3). Taken at face

value, the second part of the title of this work, 'Freedom Is Boring Censorship Is Fun', could well raise concerns regarding a stance close to political nihilism. Closer appraisal of the works in question, however, and consideration of the games they play with a variety of discourses of fashion, demonstrates that the works are in fact carrying out a sophisticated critique of a constellation of interconnected tropes pertaining to the inscription of the female body by codes of fashion, with its attendant ideas of appropriateness, desirability, agreeableness, and other gendered qualities.



Figure 3: Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi, My Black Dress, 2008. Magazine print, size unknown, private collection.

In order to better understand this work, it is necessary to begin by situating it within the broader cultural context of Iran. The Iranian authorities routinely apply censorship to all forms of media to ensure that they follow the guidelines relating to acceptability established by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Women's magazines are

also subject to this process, meaning that any images deemed to be unacceptable can be altered by government appointed censors. Often this censorship is crudely done by simply blacking out any material which is judged to be offensive, such as women's bare arms, knees and cleavage with a thick marker pen. Alternatively, tape strips or paper stickers can be strategically placed over the relevant areas. Digital technology now means that pixilation or complete removal of some images can be carried out with the help of Photoshop.

It was against this background that Moshiri and Aliabadi produced the image entitled My Black Dress, for which they digitised an actual two-page fashion spread entitled 'Why I Love My Little Black Dress' from the women's monthly magazine Marie Claire and then Photoshopped the image to produce their own 'chadorified' revision of the original. Another Iranian artist, Shahram Entekhabi, has also produced a work entitled Islamic Vogue (2005) in which, using black Magic Marker, he drew a niqab and abaya on all the models featured in a two-page fashion spread, clearly a reference also to censorship practices in his country of origin. British photographer Phillip Toledano engaged with a similar theme but took photographs of the packaging of real items from Iran that had



been censored for his series *The Absent Portrait* (2013). In the artist's statement which accompanied the exhibition of this work, he made a telling comment: 'the censor, whose job it is to erase, becomes the person who makes us look' and this idea is also applicable to *My Black Dress*.



Figure 4: Photo of exhibition of Philip Toledano's *Absent Portrait* series, Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne, 9 October–2 November 2013.

The title of Mosihiri and Aliabadi's work, '*My Black Dress*', which clearly differs from the visible headline '*Why I Love My Little Black Dress*', alerts the viewer to the need to think about what has been erased and why, both in the title and in the act of censorship. Here the black dresses on show are certainly not 'little' and possibly not loved. However, since there is no untouched original against which to compare the 'censored' version, this piece also relies on the viewer's understanding of the original purpose of this image and the fashion system to which it relates. As a women's magazine, *Marie*

*Claire* forms part of the media apparatus that fashion requires for 'spreading news about innovations' and its discourse needs to be understood within the conventions which operate within this cultural arena.

For those who follow Western fashion the phrase 'little black dress' is immediately recognisable as a reference to an idea which is normally attributed to French fashion designer Coco Chanel. In 1926, Chanel promoted the inclusion of this garment as 'the must-have in the fashionable woman's wardrobe'. It was at this stage, too, that within the European fashion system black became a fashion constant 'when women started to identify it as chic, glamorous and stylish'. It is important to understand that rather than a reference to a specific style of dress, however, the little black dress 'is infinitely variable in type and individualised in many ways, for example, by the choice of accessories'. In the original image, then, while all of the women featured would have been wearing a black dress, each of these garments would presumably have differed in terms of style, cut, length and materials used. This is also hinted at by the fact that Mosihiri and Aliabadi have left certain accessories visible in their version, such as belts and footwear, and these items are all the more striking when contrasted with the otherwise

identical matte black expanse of the Photoshopped garments imposed on the women.

Intriguingly, this imposition of a garment which evokes a particular discourse not only of femininity but of orientalist representational conventions associated with this, such as submissive gestures and averted gaze, also serves the purpose of drawing attention to the women's poses. In this context, far from appearing appropriate or 'natural', the stances, gestures and facial expressions of the women are seen to be 'techniques of the body' which suggest their performance of a gendered identity that is also culturally specific.

While the initial 'chadorification' of the image provides an immediate visual impact, a further interesting aspect of the work lies in the play between the text of the original fashion spread and the images of the chador-clad women, since this also raises a number of issues about Western views of Islam, discourses of femininity, and the representation of women. The sub-heading of the magazine fashion spread states 'Every woman has one, that perfect goes-with-everything number that turns out to be the ultimate weapon in her fashion arsenal. Seven stylish women reveal why you can't be without one' (emphases added). In the

context of dress codes for women in Iran, it would be true to say that there have certainly been times when every woman was expected to have a black chador and would face consequences for being seen without one in the public sphere. However, as Aliabadi's later work showed, younger Iranian women in particular find various ways of rebelling against officially imposed conformity, and this mix of styles later displayed in her Miss Hybridity series seems to be suggested at by the glimpse of blonde hair and the eye-catching gold belt seen on two of women.

The magazine's description of a little black dress as 'the ultimate weapon in [a woman's] fashion arsenal' may seem somewhat strange but it is frequently used in the discourse of Western fashion. As Steel notes in her book-length study of this item of apparel, the black dress is often referred to as 'both chic and armour'. However, when this reference to 'weapon' and 'arsenal' is juxtaposed with the framing by Western media of women in traditional Islamic dress as alien, threatening figures, it takes on a much more ironic meaning in the context of the so-called 'war on terror'.

For those aware of the restrictions imposed on females in Iran, irony can also be read into elements of the quotes attributed to the women in the piece. The references to a

‘rock-and-roll dress’ and the comment that ‘It releases my inner diva’ are rendered deeply ironic in a context where public performance of music by women is prohibited. However, other quotes are truly thought-provoking in the context of contemporary debates about Islamic discourse concerning the covering of the female body and the emergence of modest fashion as a growing trend for both styling bodies and mediating faith. In the original context of Western fashion discourse, the statement ‘It makes my figure the main attraction’ can be understood as an assertion of a confident sexuality in a fashion system in which a tight-fitting garment is used to accentuate a woman’s physical attributes, and in which black is thought to be ‘a uniquely powerful, mysterious and seductive colour’. However, when this statement is juxtaposed with a chador-clad female, there is an immediate dissonance. Many Muslim women choose loose-fitting garments precisely in order not to draw attention to their physical form for reasons of modesty. Some also choose to wear black for a similar reason, on the basis that within their culture or specific Islamic practice this colour carries connotations of modesty and pious self-restraint. It may also be worn because they wish to mark their acceptance of social norms or show respect for traditions.

Interestingly, the comments attributed to two of the other women in the fashion spread, namely, ‘this safety outfit works for every occasion’ and ‘it’s an heirloom’, show that there can be overlap in reasons why women in very different cultures might choose to wear the same colour. However, the fact that the colour black carries multiple connotations within the European fashion context due to a range of historical and cultural factors can mean that this choice of colour in self-presentation may be read in many different ways by Westerners, some of which would, in fact, ensure that the wearer herself became ‘the main attraction’.

Craik argues that Hollander’s history of the colour black in European clothing illustrates that the wearing of this colour has been motivated by ‘ambiguous and contradictory impulses’ which help to explain the continuing existence of its ‘ambivalent connotations’ and ‘highly charged meanings’. This also illustrates more generally that the meanings of colour within fashion systems are both context specific and variable. Black was originally adopted by ascetic monks and other devout Christians as ‘a symbol of pious self-restraint’ and it was also related to death and mourning ‘but nothing else’. By the fourteenth century, however, its use had spread to courtiers as a

means of distinguishing themselves from their more colourful counterparts and was then adopted by the upper bourgeoisie as a symbol of modesty and sobriety. Over time it became specifically associated with the Spanish court (in part, at least, because it served as the perfect contrast for elaborate gold trappings), and then passed onto the French, Dutch and English courts. Eventually, it filtered all the way down the ranks to bourgeois merchants, artisans, and even farmers and fishermen, who wore it to imitate the sophistication of their social betters.

Even this brief historical overview shows how ‘colour can be annexed to social, cultural and political agendas’. It can serve as a visible marker of distinction and difference, innovation and change, and the wearer’s actual or desired place within a social hierarchy. It can be used to express emotional states such as sorrow and sympathy, as well as religious affiliation. In some contexts it can be intentionally selected by individuals to project a strong sense of identity, while in others it may be deliberately chosen as a colour that allows them to be absorbed into the collective and provides reassurance that they do not look different. It can be about ‘blending in or standing out’.

In her examination of the links between fashion, Islam and politics, Emma Tarlo discusses the emergence of what she refers to as ‘Islamic fashion’ in the British context. She analyses a number of specific fashion brands as case studies in order to explore the various ways in which they choose to interpret ‘Islamic’ in terms of appearance and design. Interestingly, all of the young British Muslim fashion entrepreneurs she interviewed framed the colour black in negative terms (all emphases in quotes below added):

When I went to the local Islamic shop, it just really scared me. The clothes were all black and made from this awful frumpy material. [...] Let’s face it, we do judge a book by its cover and I can see why black can be intimidating and off-putting.

I was loving Islam and I wanted to cover. But there wasn’t anything out there except the black Saudi jilbab. I was young and image was a massive issue for me. I wanted to be more Islamic but covering was the biggest put off.

More conservative customers in East London [...] often favour a more austere interpretation of Islamic dress and sometimes request simpler styles in black.

Tarlo further notes that Kara ‘is keen to bring a sense of fun into Islamic dress and to

combat the austerity and negative connotations of head to toe black outfits' (emphasis added).

Elsewhere in her discussion it becomes clear that as soon as black is framed by the discourse of fashion even within an Islamic context, its meaning becomes multiple and shifting. On her ArabianNites website, the entrepreneur Yasmin reframed her negative categorisation of black clothes as conservative/austere by using the more fashion friendly label of 'timeless black', while Tarlo herself describes the same colour as being both 'muted [and] modesty-associated' and 'evok[ing] ideas of the mystery and exoticism of the East'.

By framing discourse about Islamic dress conventions within the secular and mundane discourse of the Western fashion system, Aliabadi's work invites the viewer to look again at the multiple meanings that representation of the clothed body may have in the contemporary context. They encourage the viewer to reflect on debates about female (in)visibility within society, about acts of resistance and statements of identity. In short, *My Black Dress* is intended to remind the viewer that, as Aliabadi herself put it: 'fashion is not only fashion'.

This statement serves well to clarify and illuminate a great deal of Aliabadi's approach

to fashion in her art. As this discussion has demonstrated, her work consistently demonstrates a ludic, deconstructive energy, whereby discourses of fashion are folded back on themselves in ironic ways to highlight how they serve to construct specific sensibilities – even regimes of the sensible, in Rancière's idea (as discussed below). I believe this approach can be understood with reference to the specific situation in which female artists from Islamicate countries find themselves, that of contending with two discrete but interpenetrating patriarchal constructions. Much is made of the patriarchal nature of Islamicate society, with Western representations of this aspect emphasizing its transgressions of models of human rights. A corollary of this is the expectation that women from Islamicate countries should lend their support to such a human rights-based model of opposition to patriarchal norms and oppression, and failures on their part to do so are often met with frustration. Underpinning this relation, however, is the long history of colonialist and imperialist attitudes that have structured Western attitudes to the Islamicate world, and the specifically gendered nature of this construction. For example, historians of art and visual culture have produced extensive documentation of the sexualized exoticism of

Islamicate women in Western art, from figures such as Ingres and Delacroix onward. Tropes from such modes of representation are discernible in a wide range of contemporary Western attitudes to Islamicate women. The framework of the Western discourse advocating an overturning of patriarchy is itself therefore profoundly patriarchal and paternalistic, recapitulating a long history of exoticizing orientations toward the Islamicate world generally, and Islamic women in particular.

Aliabadi's art can be understood as a response to this situation. This is most apparent in her use of tropes and devices from the discourse of Western fashion in the context of Islamicate society and conventions. In works such as *My Black Dress* and *Miss Hybrid*, Aliabadi situates the material and discourse of Western fashion in an Islamicate context that defamiliarizes it, rendering visible a set of assumptions that underpin it, and indicating how this set of assumptions informs the discourse of Western fashion itself. This is a deconstructive approach insofar as it demonstrates certain contradictions of the target discourse through immanent critique that takes the discourse on its own terms, and doing so demonstrates the gap between what it believes itself to be doing and what such

immanent critique demonstrates it actually to be doing. Like deconstruction, Aliabadi's approach is fundamentally ludic: it is made possible by a deferral of commitment to some specific position, in favour of a playful putting in motion of interrelated constellations of ideas and images to explore the logic of their demarcation, and ultimately to destabilize these through a demonstration of their volatility. Aliabadi's depictions of the socio-political functions of the discourse of fashion show the deep and continuing dependence of the Western self on the oriental other in its self-constitution, centuries after Delacroix et al. with their savage Arab tribesmen and docile female inhabitants of harems.

The ironic approach adopted in this project is crucial to such a deconstructive, immanent critique, as can be clarified through consideration of Adorno's and Rancière's respective discussions of the paradox of political commitment in art. In his essay 'Commitment', Adorno discusses the question of the political commitment or autonomy of works of art: whether works of art should have, or should be interpreted with reference to, a clear socio-political program or agenda. His argument is ultimately that framing the possibilities as these two options is already to have subsumed art to socio-

political programs, and in doing so to have surrendered to a form of inherently destructive instrumental rationality. This view derives from his understanding of the way works of art 'point to ... the creation of a just life'. In turn, his view of how one would go about creating a just life hinges on his reception of the Hegelian dialectic of intersubjective relations, whereby he views a just form of subjectivity as one that involves a responsiveness to 'the particular other for which the subject must first divest itself to become a subject'. In Adorno's understanding of the Hegelian schematic of intersubjectivity, there are three possibilities: refusal of the claim of the other on the self, which results in the form of domination described in the master-slave dialectic; refusal of one's own claim on the other, which results in reification; or an acknowledgement of the open-ended task of justice presented by the intersubjective encounter, which results in an engagement in the ongoing dialectical process of divestment of subjectivity for the sake of just intersubjectivity. Analogously, the divestment of spontaneous immediacy in the encounter with otherness is enacted in the work of art through the dialectic occasioned by the resistance between form and content that is constitutive of it, and the absence of

such resistance results in a form of reification. Therefore, both commitment and autonomy represent a failure to understand the unique nature of the work of art, commitment subsuming form entirely to content, autonomy content to form. The approach Adorno calls for is one that, like a just form of subjectivity that eschews both the domination of form by content and the relinquishing of content to the demands of form, sees the dialectic between these two as a super-subjective process that places specific demands on the subject.

The concept of divestment as used here is an intriguing one for the purposes of this paper. Aliabadi is frequently interested in vestments, and the forms of self-presentation they make possible: the girls in cars wearing makeup, bright garments, contravening conservative dress codes; the codes of fashion explored in *My Black Dress*, and the way these are inscribed on the bodies of the female subjects to situate them; the figures from *Miss Hybrid* with their bleached hair, artfully arranged clothing, carefully fashioned visual identities. But the historical and social contexts of these depictions mean that these vestments are also specific and directed divestments, involving a refusal of codes and conventions governing the attire permitted the represented subjects in the

space and time of representation. As argued above, however, this subjective stance does not solidify into a position of defiance for defiance's sake, whereby the works would be representing the taking up and consolidation of some specific socio-political stance. Aliabadi's focus consistently remains on the open-ended state of the negotiation of pre-existing norms by subjects exploring forms of agency available to them. In this sense, the works refuse the constraints imposed from within their own national and cultural location, in depicting this contestation. But they also contest a Western discourse that demands a specific form of socio-political commitment on the part of such depictions, in the works' discursive framing and their implied attitudes to their subjects' self-positioning. By doing so, they demonstrate the kind of interstitial positioning that Adorno identifies as the only ethical possibility open to works of art in situations of domination. The very title of *Miss Hybrid* indicates the extent to which something of this sort is an intentional positioning of these works, as is their willingness to dwell on pleasure ('fun') as a source of subjective and intersubjective significance – the pleasure in the work and of the work representing a temporary abeyance of the constraints imposed both from within and without.

Jacques Rancière's understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political arranges itself along similar contours, and is also of great relevance to an understanding of Aliabadi's work in the terms in which it is approached above. Rancière understands the political to be an inescapably contentious realm, politics itself being in his conception the process of demanding rights and authority hitherto denied. He is therefore especially interested in situations of domination and proscription, in which groups of individuals are excluded from the public realm – in which specific categories, perspectives, points of view are systematically silenced and marginalized. The process whereby such occluded categories find expression for themselves in the public realm is termed 'dissensus', which involves contestation over 'the distribution of the sensible': the discursive and material regimes that govern what views and claims can be expressed, and by whom, and therefore what forms of political expression are possible. 'This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible'. It is in the invocation of the idea of the distribution of



the sensible that Rancière's political thought introduces the relevance of aesthetic categories, insofar as this is where contestation over the distribution of the sensible occurs. It is through art that new modes of representation arise, and thereby the capacity to pronounce hitherto unthinkable ideas.

The situation of women in Iran that Aliabadi addresses is a relatively clear instance of a situation such as this, in which the possibilities of expression and action available to women are constrained by a range of rigid circumscriptions, the social proscriptions on various forms of dress functioning to this end in an especially visible way. But importantly, as Aliabadi's works suggest, the Western-based international art market itself similarly implies a certain distribution of the sensible when it comes to Muslim women, deeply inscribed with a series of stereotyped ideas regarding their agency and personhood, their relations to the law. Aliabadi's works consistently focus on the contestation of this, depicting ways in which women in this context find means of adopting positions officially closed to them and, in doing so, creating social spaces whereby these can be challenged. In this sense, she can be seen to be interested, at the thematic level, in the use of various modes of

attire and accoutrement as a means of contesting inflexible regimes of visibility and expression. In their discursive framing and formal presentation, however, they can be seen to contest a different set of impositions. In this sense, one can discern a dissensual relation to an entirely different distribution of the sensible, that whereby the relation of the West to the Oriental other is framed, and specifically focusing on the place of Muslim women in this framing. Aliabadi's works thus demonstrate a sophisticated response to a situation of intersecting regimes of visibility and expression which female Muslim artists confront in the international art market.

Aliabadi's works therefore represent a sophisticated engagement with a specific discursive situation female Muslim artists encounter. They are constrained by two intersecting patriarchies: that of their home culture, as well as that of the globalist West that characterizes the international art market. Like many other female artists from the region, Aliabadi employs ironic strategies to dissent from the terms these schemes impose, and the options to which they implicitly limit the artist. In this sense, the figures she characteristically depicts, with their joyful transgressions of the limits imposed on them, may stand as surrogates for the role of the artist herself, similarly

contravening pre-established categories and challenging the orthodox distribution of the sensible to open up novel possibilities of representation and personhood. Laughing playfully in the face of the 'life and death struggle' of the Hegelian master–slave dialectic, these works elegantly sidestep the dichotomy it offers of defiance or acquiescence, demonstrating the way in which a third space can be opened from which these very terms themselves can be challenged.

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