

The weaponization of Beauty as a means of control has long fore fronted the conversation regarding Iranian women's bodily autonomy. This is evident in the double bind of a theocratic government demanding that women observe mandatory veiling whilst a patriarchal culture demands that Beauty¹ is performed.

Iranian-born artist Ramak Bamzar speaks out against the oppressive and patriarchal Iranian regime through her art. In *Moustachioed Women and Rhinoplastic Girls*, Bamzar explores the ephemeral, performative and violent nature of Beauty as she reflects on the discipline and obedience that are demanded from Iranian women's bodies.² In particular, she focuses on cosmetic surgeries that have become common practice in contemporary Iranian society.

Through a feminist lens, Bamzar uses photography as a tool to subvert the male gaze. The women in her photos are captured in varying temporal states of Beauty. Some are enacting the contemporary performance of undergoing a rhinoplasty procedure whilst others are enacting the 19th century performance of growing facial hair to fulfil the Beauty obligations of the time. When these vastly different Beauty performances are presented side by side, common threads can be unpicked to unravel an insidious side to Beauty: its capricious, fickle nature but its perpetual power over women.

¹ Kurdish writer Ava Homa in 'Beauty is Mandatory Yet Illegal In Iran' comments that despite 65% of university graduates are women, Iranian women struggle to find jobs outside of the secretarial sector. Instead, women are expected to aspire to be 'beautiful' and marry well. She quotes a statistic from an India-based newspaper *Etemad* that every year around 200,000 Iranians undergo rhinoplasty. While adhering to Beauty standards is essential, Homa mentions that in October 2014, 25 women were victims of acid attacks for not adhering to modesty laws. Pg 31, Homa, Ava. *Beauty is Mandatory Yet Illegal in Iran*, Herizons; Winnipeg, Vol.29, Summer 2015.

² Ladan Rahbari, Chia Longman, and Gily Coene discuss the idea of the Iranian female body as the embodiment of national space; it's a body that must be controlled and kept in line with social Order. The idea that Bio-power, as conceptualised by Michel Foucault, is connected to nationalistic politics can determine which bodies are a 'threat' and to be eliminated to uphold this social Order. In this case, it is how close Iranian women abide to Morality dress code imposed by a theocratic government. pg. 1418, Rahbari, Landan; Longman, Chia; Coene, Gily; *The female body as the bearer of national identity in Iran: a critical discourse analysis of the representation of women's bodies in official online outlets*, Abingdon: Routledge 2019, Vol. 26, No. 10, 1417–1437.

Bamzar also draws out another layer of complexity to the discourse as her Moustachioed Women are evocative of Iranian photographer Antoin Sevruguin who was known for his portrait photographs of Iranian women. Sevruguin's extensive portrait portfolio lends itself to a complicated discussion on the art of photography and Orientalist traditions.³

Bamzar's utilisation of Sevruguin's work as a reference point for her own photos illustrates the role of colonialism and Orientalism in the male gaze. Sevruguin's images have historically been appropriated by Orientalists to provide an exoticised onlook on Iranian women. Similarly, it could be said that feminist and political movements led by Iranian women are often exoticised and orientalised by Western media. The topic of the Veil⁴ and bodily autonomy becomes a contentious and racialised topic that often results in decentring Iranian women in discussions about their own rights.

Photography practice has the potential to reclaim narrative and space. Bamzar reckons with both the male and Western gaze as her models wear the impact that Beauty and Western colonisation has on their bodies and on their culture. The theocratic Iranian's regime attempts to subjugate women and the ongoing infiltration of Western imperialist influence onto Iranian society are to be confronted and resisted against.

³ Antoin Sevruguin was a prominent 19th century portrait photographer who was born in Iran to immigrant parents who were ethnically Armenian and Georgian. His work stood at a rather unique crossroad: his practice included photographing people and landscapes of his home country Iran, but his work involved engaging with other European Orientalist scholars including his own father. The question of whether Sevruguin's work led to further exoticisation of Iran is highly debated though most art historians would suggest that it proposed a more interesting dilemma: At what does the Western gaze shift and can it be unlearned? Pg.125, Navab, Desiree Aphrodite, *To Be or Not to Be an Orientalist?: The Ambivalent Art of Antoin Sevruguin*, Cambridge University Press, Iranian Studies, Vol. 35, No. 1/3 (Winter - Summer, 2002), pp. 113-144.

⁴ Although the discourse on Iranian women's bodily autonomy is much more than a law that mandates the wearing of the headscarf, much of the Western media reduces this complex and nuanced issue to a single image of an oppressed Muslim women forced to Veil. Alia Al-Saji in 'The racialisation of Muslim Veils: A philosophical analysis' describes this image of the Veil as which '...that recalls orientalist and colonialist images of Muslim cultures, presenting in a homogenous way what are historically dynamic and culturally distinctive modes of feminine dress.' This colonial logic removes agency and establishes a victimhood narrative that suggests Iranian women are to be 'rescued' or 'liberated'. Pg.878, Al-Saji, Alia, *The racialisation of Muslim Veils: A philosophical analysis*, Sage, 2010, Philosophy & social criticism, 2010, Vol.36 (8), p.875-902.

Iranian women's revolution is in active defiance. Mahsa Amini⁵ was an Iranian woman who was defiant in the face of oppression. Her resistance to the male gaze sparked a nation-wide ongoing revolution that demands that the world, instead of gazing upon, listen to Iranian women. *Moustachioed Women and Rhinoplastic Girls* is a work that intends to carry and amplify Amini's voice through its confrontation with the gaze. Bamzar's images brings forth an uncomfortable but honest conversation that holds both an Iranian patriarchal society and the Western world accountable for the violence that they have inflicted on Iranian women's bodies through Beauty. This, in itself, is resistance.

⁵ Mahsa Amini was an Iranian woman who died at the hands of state violence on the 16th of September 2022 after being detained for breaking morality laws. She was not known as a political activist. She was a young University student that actively chose to resist against the State. Her unjust death inspired further and more vigorous protests.