SEPIDEH DASHTI

No-East, No-West

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Not all diasporas are the same. Not all female experiences of oppression are the same. The spaces I have inherited and now occupy have shaped my life in specific and concrete ways. As an Iranian woman who grew to adulthood in Iran and who now resides in Canada and the United States, I have experienced deep feelings of ambiguity with regards to experiencing different cultures and social expectations. These enduring feelings of ambiguity have both unsettled and politicized my daily life and helped to raise my consciousness about the oppressions I face as a woman.

The repeating pattern of hair threading on the rectilinear shapes of grid pattern fabric, called *Chafiyeh* or *Qafiyeh* features a dialogue between my body and the patriarchal power structure of Islamic Republic of Iran. *Qafiyeh* is the scarf that first donned by the Islamic revolutionaries to support Palestine and resist westernization.¹ *Qafiyeh* was then after known as symbolic, representing volunteer soldiers fighting in the Iran-Iraq war.² Thinking through layers of clothing and meaning, *Qafiyeh*'s meaning, and symbolization can be seen as confusing. The scarf is still worn by Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the Leader of the Islamic republic of Iran, and the *Basij* militia. The *Basij* militia is intensively engaged in ensuring the maintenance of assigned dress codes such as hijab and other standards for controlling women's bodies.

Hijab refers to a strict code of dress that covers both the hair and most of a woman's body in the presence of males who are not close relatives such as father, brother, and husband. As an Iranian immigrant woman, I see that the hijab in Western communities has become a choice for many Iranians and a means of expression. Conversely, for me as a woman who experiences living in the authoritarian society of Iran, the hijab is a tool of oppression that strips away my most basic human rights and the dignity to wear what I want.

"No East, No West" is a slogan, that was formulated at the beginning of the governing of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979). The slogan addresses the state's rejection of the influence of both Soviet and American Powers in Iran, and its intention to establish an independent government. The current Iranian political regime has assigned sets of rules such as compulsory hijab for women corresponding to their ideology of being powerful and independent. This leads to marginalizing and violating many women's rights in Iran.

According to Zahra Ashraf:

Head hair in its physical form is sexless, the symbolism and meaning of hair is highly gendered, and female head hair has become a symbol of sexuality. Although there is nothing inherently sexual about female hair, most societies past and present have sexualized female hair.³

In talking about hijab, I face dual exclusion from both my homeland Iran and in Western society despite my willingness to engage with both places. As an individual opposing compulsory hijab, returning to my homeland will result in imprisonment and face further punishment. As an immigrant, I encounter unsupportive attitudes in western societies over my decision to criticize compulsory hijab. I have been accused of representing hijab and veiling as a mechanism used to oppress women and Muslim women for being oppressed and in need of saving.

No East, No West is a photography piece that contains natural hair balls that I sewed on fabric that is mainly used to sew fancy *Chador*; a large scarf to cover from head to toe, in my hometown. The shirt is also made of a fabric that is used for making *Qafiyeh*. I handwrote the "No East, No West" slogan in both English and Farsi on the fabric. The piece reflects the idea of being affected by the restriction rules from Iran's regime that violated my body and rights while considering the way these restrictions have affected my identity and sexuality. This work explores my constant negotiation about my body and identity as an Iranian and immigrant woman in a global context.

No-East, No-West,
photography (hair, handwritten fabric), 2020.

Detail of the photograph (hair balls).

Details of the photograph.

Endnotes

- 1 Roxanne Varzi, "Warring souls. Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran." Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 290. In IBR Online. Berlin, Boston: K. G. Saur, 2009, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/database/IBR/entry/ibr.ID1881708815/html>.
- 2 Ibid, 187.
- 3 Ashraf Zahedi, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (2007): 76, accessed April 26, 2021, doi:10.2979/mew.2007.3.3.75.