Gender in Contemporary Iran in the Works of Abbas Kowsari

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Gender in Contemporary Iran in the Works of Abbas Kowsari

Senior Project Submitted to
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of Bard College

by
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I. GENDER DEPICTIONS IN QAJAR ART

The Islamic Republic of Iran represents a strong connection to Islam and Islamic culture, but nevertheless, Iran’s history dates back to the Persian Empire, which makes the modern state of Iran a successor to one of the oldest and most powerful civilizations in the history of mankind. Deep Islamic traditions have dominated the region for centuries and factors such as sexuality, sex, gender roles and customs, were deeply affected by it. However, Iran’s culture might often be misunderstood by Westerners. Very often, when “Iran” comes up in the conversation, a lot of people get uncomfortable: this word in Western media is usually mentioned in a contentious context, which makes a lot of people think of Iran as a synonym for ‘religious extremism’. Somehow, priceless cultural heritage and many centuries when Persian-Iranian people have prospered peacefully with their neighbors get forgotten and today’s extreme gender inequality and human rights violations rise up. While the Western media is very quick to judge, condemn and spread a certain fear about Muslim countries, it is highly possible that the history which led Iran to become the country that it is right now would not have been possible without western, or more precisely - European, intervention.

Nowadays the most progressive nations demonstrate an interest in making sure minorities living within their borders are heard and granted the rights to live in safety and security. Governments of countries such as United States, Brazil, France and other countries have recently legalized same sex-marriage, which not only serves as a sign that love has no gender, but further makes us question the legitimacy of the stereotypical binary gender system.
Discussions of the limits of the binary gender system are becoming more and more popular as the subject reaches us from everywhere. This might sound like a revolutionary idea, completely changing the way we are used to seeing the world. The concept of binary system of gender is a direct descendant of European culture; many researchers have found out that surprisingly, the majority of non-European cultures have had more gender identities and expressions than the “traditional” binary system does. Together with much more social gender models, different relations and very contrasting social behavior of individuals in the societies of the past, where Iranian society is included as well.

Today, the stereotypical “alpha” or “macho” type of male seems to be praised the most in Western society. Following this stereotype, they are strong, loud, aggressive, harsh and rude heterosexuals who also are supposedly gifted with a hyper-libido. If a male individual has different characteristic features, he is suddenly seen as weaker and his “manly” qualities are often questioned. Perhaps surprisingly, in pre-modern Iranian society (Early Qajar era 1789 - 1925) male sexuality was understood in a very different way than the norms of today. To begin with, Iranian beauty standards did not differ according to the gender of a person: almond-shaped eyes, dense and connected eyebrows, the “full-moon” form face were considered the standards of beauty for men as well as women. In addition, choices of wardrobe - wearing of skirts, dresses, jewelry and makeup - were not exclusively assigned to either gender. This unifying understanding of the beauty of the human body put the concept of beauty in the category of art or the divine. We can see what a beautiful human being should have looked by viewing the portraiture of Qajar dynasty, in which all the necessary and important features are exaggerated and accentuated. In fact, the idea of the same beauty standards for all genders was alive up to the late nineteenth century, until the European gender example grew to replace old Persian ideals.
Concerning standards of masculinity and male behaviors, men in this earlier period had completely different standards of behavior toward each other. Afsaneh Najmabadi in her book “Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity” introduces the reader to these different types and genders of men, such as the *amrad* - the young adolescent male, - and the *mukhanna* - a mature man, who desires to be an object of desire of other adult males. In the early Qajar period it was considered perfectly normal for older men to be attracted to *amrads* - younger males. The unified beauty standards for both sexes might also be relevant here, since the individual’s sex would not matter, as long as they were
considered beautiful, charming and attractive. There was even a distinctive feature that figured explicitly in men’s sexual preferences: the beard. Young males, for example, were considered to be objects of older men’s desire, because they did not have beards. When their facial hair began growing and destroyed “the beautiful moon,” they had the chance to transform themselves from the desired one to the one who desires. Thus, the beard became a symbol of both immunity from the attention from other men and the symbol of strength, power, desire and even aggression in some way. An individual with a beard would be seen as a hunter who looks for a younger male to share his masculine energy and passion. A painting as the one below is an example of the depiction of male body as both object of desire and the one who desires. This unique tradition of depicting male couples and the seductive male gaze is one of the most specific features of the paintings from the pre-modern Iran.¹

¹ A. Najmabadi in her article Gendered transformation: Beauty, Love, and Sexuality in Qajar Iran attributes this painting tradition to the Zand Period (1750-1794). The Qajar period is significant in the switch in the depiction of genders which left out male couples out of the sight, thus making women the only object of desire. (Iranian Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 / 4, Qajar Art on Society (2001) pp.92)
However, this transformation was not expected of every young male at the first sign of puberty. Naturally, the majority of men started growing their beards, but there was not a lot of social pressure to wear one. There existed an alternative option that was also completely up to the individual - he could have become *mukhanna*, and continue being the object of desire. The very interesting part is that a male individual would announce his choice by starting to shave the beard, which would have been seen as a declaration, and the refusal to grow it and would be understood as the attempt to maintain a youthful face and “clean full-moon” face. Nevertheless,

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this act would never be seen as aspiring to look feminine. Following social norms, mukhannas would also be expected to act more flirtatiously, to “swing their hips” and have a coquettish smile to seduce other males. This serves a great example that the concept of maleness or masculinity was much broader and more elaborate than the one that prevailed in Europe. The shift of sexual attraction was also seen as natural: as Najmabadi writes: “Instead of considering homosexual men a minority of peculiar queer disposition, men are seen to engage in same-sex practices but only for a marginal period of their life cycle”. And even though male-on-male sexual intercourse was never technically proscribed, a marriage with mukhanna was forbidden - which shows that mukhannas were seen men who were available for pleasure, but not the creation of a family.

Furthermore, these kind of relationships were not acts of pedophilia - younger partners would be old enough to fully understand and consent to the intercourse. In fact the law demanded homosexual male intercourse to be consensual, because otherwise one party would be accused and punished for rape.

The most important thing here, however, is the fact that the art with this message has been created. It clearly shows that the artist was not afraid or constrained by any external factors to create a portrayal for a royal family, without hesitating to include two men of different ages. The portrait embodies the existence of a flexible and wide approach to masculinity, believably, as it was celebrated at the time. Even if this depiction does not confirm, the fact that sexual encounters between adult men and young adolescents were equally tolerated among all the social groups in the empire, it states a few things: firstly, that those encounters had existed; secondly, 

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3 Afsaneh Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, University of California Press, 2005, p.58
4 Both male and female individuals were protected by laws against raping or sexual harassment: the most common punishment for committing a rape act would have been a cutting off the ear - whereas for performing an act of rape on a young girl, the punishment was castration.
since the picture does suggest the intimate relationships between two figures, it shows that it was not seen as shameful activity, otherwise the most powerful people in the state would not have been portrayed in this manner. Interestingly, the understanding of gender starts to change in throughout the years.

Najmabadi writes: “in the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward: hetero-normalization of eros and sex became a condition of “achieving modernity.” As Iran became more modernized and westernized, male love becomes a shameful sign of something that was now claimed as unnatural. Along with the rejection of same-sex love, beauty standards shifted profoundly, infusing the cultural heritage of the Persian empire with European role and gender models.

The nineteenth century became a time when Western culture had influenced Iran over the centuries leading an inevitable change in Iran. Starting in the Middle Ages, the history of Near East encounters with Westerners had been greatly marked with terrible wars. Western countries had more advanced military forces and technologically advanced weapons, which made them superior on the battlefield. Moreover, the enemy’s artillery on the front line formed an impression of the excellence and supremacy of their soldiers, which, following a series of military defeats, made Iranians believe that their European enemy was truly more sophisticated and worthy of imitation. Historian Guity Nashat writes: “Some Iranians, primarily the secular members of the ruling and upper middle classes, began to believe that Iran’s salvation rested in emulating the West. They advocated adoption of Western military techniques and institutions,

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5 Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, University of California Press, 2005

6 I refer to wars starting in the Safavid Dynasty (1501 - 1736) and ending in the Pahlavi Dynasty, where the main opponents were Ottoman, Russian Empires and United Kingdom.
including opening modern schools and teaching European languages⁷”. Hence, Iranians were introduced to the techniques of European military strategies just as they also gained valuable information about guns and other war machines that had not been used in Iran before.

This “new-old” relationship with Western nations was a significant incitement for Iran economically. For instance, during the Middle Ages, Iranian goods and works of art would reach European markets only through Venice⁸, but with industrial capitalism and trading with Europe on the rise, Iran had access to a much larger market, as many additional trade routes were open. Nevertheless, it served as a great way for artistic ideas and traditions to spread and be shared among Persian and European cultures. This new global stage became a foundation for the creation of Iranian modernity, which in the early Twentieth Century permanently changed the whole nation.

From the European perspective, Europe’s need of Iranian agricultural goods and handcrafts (textiles, especially) increased enormously, as many markets desired them and treated them like luxury goods. This important change resulted in new business opportunities, especially for women, because they would usually be the ones working with textiles. This social - economic development undermined the old model of men as major bread winners, when women started to receive their own salaries and became able to support their families financially. However, while Europe helped Iran improve militarily, introduced it to many new things, gave an economic lift for the whole country and increased opportunities for women, not all of these changes were beneficial, because “greater exposure to Europe and Europeans made Iranians aware of the

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⁸ During the middle ages, Venice became the most important trade center between Europe, Islamic World and Africa. (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cedr/hd_cedr.htm)
decline of their country, resulting in an uncritical admiration for European civilization and its material achievements.\(^9\).

The elite of the Iranian society in the Qajar period was largely dominated by men, which formed a large homosocial group and consolidated male superiority and power, similar to European model. However, the Qajar period is marked with a great change in how femininity and womanhood were seen in society. Mainly because of the male dominance in the social life, there are not a lot of sources that would prove the appreciation of free and versatile sexual lives for women. The fact that women became more financially independent from their husbands testifies to a great change in Iranian society. In a way, it meant the beginning of recognizing woman as a part of not only of society, but of Iran’s economy as well, which was a new, European idea. However, some certain social norms and standards consequently turned a different way.

The most important aspect of the Qajar art period is the dramatic transformation of old ideals, as the concept of beauty as such became gender specific in artistic practices. Najmabadi notes that “Beautiful faces were no longer representations of beauty incarnate, carnal or divine. In this process, beauty became not simply gender differentiated but feminized.\(^{10}\) But even this “feminization” was a phenomenon within itself: women beginning to be portrayed in art as an entertainers - as seductive sexual objects for male viewers. Moreover, European fashion and gender behavior started to appear in Iranian artworks. For example, popular new themes in art were about Iranian men falling in love with European women or allegories of Europe as a woman.

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\(^{10}\) Afsaneh Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, University of California Press, 2005, p.26
One of the most unusual details starting to appear in female figures in Qajar paintings was the representation of bared breasts. Of course, breasts had been portrayed in Iranian-Persian visual art much earlier than the nineteenth century, but now they were exaggerated. From this point on, representations emphasized décolletage, this was actually the fashion of European, not Iranian women. Moreover, bare breasts functioned not only to excite the heterosexual male viewer, but would additionally serve as proof that a performer really was a woman - a consideration made first for the enjoyment of European males. This also had a consequence of pushing the mukhanna (and amrad) out of the sight.

Thus, according to A. Najmabadi, “perhaps the most significant of nineteenth-century aesthetic shift in gender marking of beauty [in Iranian art] was the disappearance of the male

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11 Image source: http://www.arthermitage.org/Painting/Woman-Holding-a-Diadem.html
object of desire from later Qajar paintings\textsuperscript{12}, which also meant the disappearance of homoeroticism. This extreme shift of the object being portrayed in art was strongly influenced by European culture. Since the Iranian army experienced many failures to the Europeans on the battlefield, the latter were regarded as much stronger, tougher and more dangerous men. It is not surprising, then, that, the image of the image of the Iranian male started to assimilate qualities of the European model: the concept of manliness became synonym of strength and physical power, forcing men to fashion themselves as strong fighters driven by passion and sexual instincts. Now, the behavior led by those instincts was seen as the only one suitable for a modern man - a wish to be desired was to be repudiated. This new concept made a crucial difference in the way that male and female sexuality were perceived: men exclusively played the active role, as women were expected to act in a passive way.

One of the most well known facts is that women are required to veil their bodies in Iran. However, this law is not as old as one might think. Before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, veiling was not a required fashion attribute; it was left for a woman to decide on her own. Yet, after the change of power, and anti-western cultural shift strongly affected politics and diplomacy, the \textit{Chador}\textsuperscript{13} was a required piece of clothing for women that were supposed to be worn every day when leaving the house. Anne H. Betteridge writes: “[Once the revolution was accomplished] wearing Islamic forms of dress was first encouraged by social pressure and later enforced by official decree / Dress was no longer the matter of individual choice which it had been before and during the revolution”.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the \textit{chador} supposedly worked as a

\textsuperscript{12} Afsaneh Najmabadi \textit{Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards}, University of California Press, 2005, p.26
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Chador} - a full body length cloak, wore by Iranian women, which covers all of the body, except face; usually tossed over the head and hold with hands in the front.
shield or protection from infidelious actions and unfaithfulness, because woman - a mother and a wife - would be seen as a guard of her husband’s and her son’s honor.

While speaking about the Iranian Revolution, it is necessary to mention that the veil as a symbol gains a great power at this time. After the Qajar dynasty, Pahlavi (1925 - 1797) came to power, whose reign is marked with an aggressive politics promoting the westernization of Iran\textsuperscript{15}, which is also marked with such laws as the abolition of the veil in 1936\textsuperscript{16}. The ban of veils strongly affected the lives of women as well as men; the act of having their wives in public space without covering their bodies made many men feel very uncomfortable. Of course, the young generation women mostly supported the new view on clothing, yet the decision to eliminate veiling from the life of Iran appeared to be way too harsh. First, not all the women seen in public places were able to afford European style clothing, as it was more expensive. In answer to that, Shah Reza Pahlavi pushed even further, and allowed “government to implement the law by force if necessary, and women who appeared veiled on the streets had their chadors or scarves torn away by policemen”.\textsuperscript{17} Following this this treatment, many Iranians were highly dissatisfied with the violations of their rights. Anne H. Betteridge claims that wearing the chador during the Revolution “became a symbol of rejection of the regime / Even those women who /.../ would object to wearing one, donned it voluntarily to express their anti-government position and to participate in the marches”\textsuperscript{18}. It triggered Iran not only as a nation, but as well as a religious

\textsuperscript{15} The main model that Reza Shah Pahlavi had followed while modernizing the Empire State of Iran was the model of Ataturk in Turkey, but nevertheless Turkey had disestablished religion, it never produced laws banning the veil (Haleh Esfandiari \textit{Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution}, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, p.23)
\textsuperscript{16} Reza Shah Pahlavi had banned tribal and local dresses in 1928 and imposed a dress code which consisted of European - style jacket, trousers and a hat. (Haleh Esfandiari \textit{Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution}, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, p.23)
\textsuperscript{17} Haleh Esfandiari \textit{Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution}, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, p.23
society, thus it became one of the many symbols of the creation of the Islamic state which nevertheless is a great subject in the contemporary Iranian art.

Furthermore, homoerotic relationships were starting to be seen as unnatural and shameful. In the 19th century, some European travelers had documented same-sex practices and dancing of young male dancers (who were usually cross-dressed as women) with a great disgust: William Ouseley wrote: “...the performer being a ... beardless boy ... wearing the complete dress of a woman and imitating, with most disgusting effeminacy, the looks and attitudes of the dancing girls.”\(^\text{[19]}\) On the other hand, many Iranians read this kind of critique as the misunderstanding and condemnation of their culture, which resulted not only in derogation of queer individuals, but also in the heterosexualization of the concept of love\(^\text{[20]}\). However, the anxiety and shame that was being heaped upon same-sex practices seems to have been too strong to resist and homoeroticism slowly started to lose its place in modern Iran.

The modern era in Iran is associated with a Iran’s great leader Ayatollah Khomeini. As a leader of the Iranian revolution, he came to power in 1979 and became Iran’s political and religious leader until he died. During his reign he made very important changes in Iranian law that are vital today. Among them was the legalization of sex-change surgeries in the 1980’s and which have been performed in massive amounts throughout Iran ever since. It is quite hard to understand: how is it possible, that in a country where women and homosexuals are treated as inferior, sex change and transexuality are so popular? Furthermore, the huge number of surgeries performed every year is based on comparing Iran not to its neighbours Middle Eastern states, but

\(^{19}\) Afsaneh Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, University of California Press, 2005, p.35

\(^{20}\) Afsaneh Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, University of California Press, 2005, p.35
to the whole world, including very liberal first world countries. The main explanation for this circumstance can be traced to current theology, as it is said in the Qur’an: “...For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds.... And we rained down on them a shower (of brimstone).” Based on this and a few other passages, the law in the modern state of the Islamic Republic of Iran dictates that any homosexual desire or practice should be punishable by death.

In the article “Gay People Pushed to Change Their Gender” by Ali Hamedani, published on the BBC website in November, 2014, the author brings up a dilemma that gay people are facing in Iran: young people who have just discovered their sexuality are being forced to a dangerous and complex surgery that would change their live forever. And this pressure is placed upon them from every side - by their family, friends and society in general. In the article, author quotes the words of Soheil, a 21 year-old Iranian gay man, who shares his experience. The main struggle of many young gay Iranians lies in a huge misunderstanding, or rather ignorance towards the difference and realization of sexual orientation and sexual identity.

Modernity in the Islamic Republic of Iran is unique and complicated. Normally, modernization would be seen as an adaptation of Western culture and behavior, but yet in Iran’s case it has worked in an opposite way. Iran’s transformation into the Islamic Republic can be seen as a rebellion against European Ideals. Laws such as the ones that prohibited women from wearing religious clothing made people feel like their national identity was being threatened. The disrespect of the identity and “Iranianess” many felt, inspired the movement. In addition to that,

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21 Official statistics for 2007 put the number of transsexuals in Iran between 15,000 and 20,000 people, with unofficial estimates suggesting many more — up to 150,000, the Guardian reports (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/04/iran-sex-change-operation_n_1568604.html)

22 Qur'an (7:80-84)

23 “My father came to visit me in Tehran with two relatives / They'd had a meeting to decide what to do about me... They told me: ‘You need to either have your gender changed or we will kill you and will not let you live in this family.” BBC (http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29832690)
the intervention of outside powers in the politics of Iran made people even more worried and doubtful towards their leaders.24

Nevertheless, Iranian modernists, who proposed adopting Western culture, belittled and condemned Iranian - Persians traditions by treating them as second-rate. Iraj Mirza (1874 - 1926) is one of the most celebrated poets in Iran, and is exceptionally famous for his satirical works about pederasty. He writes:

\[ \text{Until our tribe is tied up in veil,} \\
\text{This very queerness is bound to prevail.} \\
\text{The draping of the girl with her throat divine} \\
\text{Will make the little boy our concubine.}^{25} \]

In this verse he not only condemns a homosexual male intercourse, but also blames the Islamic tradition of veiling women’s body for it - the message in this verse is that unveiled female bodies would awaken men’s sexual appetite and make them stop having sexual relationships with younger males. Mirza also speaks about the European model of gender relations:

\[ \text{In other parts women help the men;} \\
\text{In this unhappy place they hamper them;} \\
\text{There men and women share one profession;} \\
\text{Here, men must toil in lonely obsession.}^{26} \]

Here he also sees a heterosocialization of society as a sign of modernity - a society where men and women can have the same jobs and careers. It seems like the veil for Mirza is not only a

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24 In 1953, the overthrow of the Prime Minister of Iran Mohammad Mosaddegh was strongly influenced by United Kingdom and the United States of America. The goal of this movement also known as Iranian coup d'etat was to strengthen the position current pro-western leader Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/19/cia-admits-role-1953-iranian-coup

25 Translation by Sprachman, 1995, 85 (Women with moustaches and men without beards, p.149)

26 Translation by Sprachman 1995, 89-90 (Women with moustaches and men without beards p.149)
disadvantage towards the functioning of binary gender system, but an association with the restriction of women as well. Yet, the only solution he, and many other modern Iranian writers, proposes is the full integration of the Western tradition in Iranian life.

The compulsory westernization of Iran led to the Revolution, which turned Iran from a pro-western monarchy to the autonomous Islamic Republic. Though many historians and human rights activists might see the change in Iranian modernity as a step back, it has created the unique and distinctive Iran that exists today. The main goal of this paper is to try find the connections between pre-revolutionary Iranian art and the contemporary post-revolutionary works by Abbas Kowsari. In order to understand and familiarize with Iranian culture that I, as a Lithuanian, have no connections with, I received help from Mohammadali Ghods, an Iranian living in Berlin, whose opinion I will use as a supportive information in the following chapters. It is worth mentioning that I have faced difficulties finding sources suitable for my specific theme as I am particularly interested in the change of portrayal of masculinity and rebellious nature of Kowsari’s work as a contemporary Iranian artist, working in Tehran where government’s censorship of art is very present.

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27 “For many modernists, the veil as a sign of Iran’s temporal lad with Europe, its premodernity, was associated with the veil’s non-Iranianess; the veil was cast as a heritage of Arab conquest and Islamic hegemony” - A. Najmabadi
I. ABBAS KOWSARI ON MASCULINITY

Abbas Kowsari - (born in 1970, Tehran) is an Iranian photographer who is currently working as a senior photo editor for the newspaper *Shargh* in Tehran. Throughout his career as a photo editor and photographer, he has worked with thirteen different publishers[^28] - however, ten of them have closed as a result of the censorship of the Iranian Government. *Shargh* ("شرق" lit. "East") is considered to be the most popular reformist newspaper in Iran. Having a career history that is related to reformist publications that are openly critical of the Iranian government, Kowsari achieved an international recognition as a controversial artist whose work reflects the real world. The artist’s works have been featured in internationally known publications such as *The New York Times*, *Time magazine*, *Paris Match*, *Der Spiegel*, and the *Colors magazine of Benetton*. Kowsari has held solo exhibitions in Tehran and Paris where his series *Light* and *Shade of Water - Shade of Earth* were exhibited[^29]. His works are included in permanent collections in LACMA and The British Museum[^30] and he was nominated for Prix Pictet Award in France in 2009.

Kowsari’s work balances documentary and expressive motives which most of the time could be described using terms such as *provocative* and *surprising*. His artwork is visual documentation of today’s Iran - a country that is often portrayed in the West as something very foreign to Western ideals. However, Kowsari’s works transcend borders and provide the viewer with a different perspective. His works are striking, yet very subtle and quiet at the same time.

[^30]: https://www.unseenamsterdam.com/photographers/abbas-kowsari
By studying the environment surrounding him, he illuminates real features of Iranian society, but at the same time avoids blaming, criticizing or even showing his own opinion about it. These images thus serve as a mirror to society and to the world, and the author becomes a silent commentator who presents everyone with facts that are left for the viewer to judge.

The photo series *Masculinity A*\(^{31}\) depicts bodybuilding culture in contemporary Iran. *Masculinity A* features by the Iranian male bodybuilders backstage before and during their performance at the Elective contest for Iran’s national bodybuilding team as well as for the Mr. Olympia, which was held at Tehran/Azadi Stadium on April 22nd, 2006. In the photographs, athletes are stretching their exceptionally well developed bodies, warming up, and rehearsing the poses that they will perform for judges in the competition. Their oiled bodies shine in the light, as every muscle is exposed to the viewer - a perfection of a male body, achieved by endless sessions in the weight room and strict dieting. *Masculinity A* is a collection of twelve images and is mainly focused on the preparation before the show: bodybuilders apply artificial tanning to their bodies, warm up with weights and rehearse their poses. Throughout the twelve images, a vital, strong, youthful atmosphere is being felt clearly. Yet, these images are not only striking for their extreme masculine energy, the display of strength and power, but for their eroticism as well. Since bodybuilding is focused on not only perfecting the muscles of the body, but on exhibiting them as well, the athlete’s body automatically becomes an object of admiration. From here it is a short step to acknowledge that admiring the human body arouses sexual desires, whether they are consciously held or not.

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\(^{31}\) Series: *Masculinity A*
Abbas Kowsari
Iran, 2006
Photographs, print on metallic photography paper
27 9/16 × 39 3/8 in. (70 × 100 cm) Sheet: 29 3/4 × 43 in. (75.57 × 109.22 cm)
Kowsari begins his series with a photograph of five bodybuilders lined up and performing abdominal flexing. In this image\textsuperscript{32} most likely used a photo filter that brings out the red tonality that makes bodybuilders look more like bronze statues than human beings. With their hands held behind their heads, they are reminiscent of a Greek sculptures or a frieze - a visual representation of ancient titan Atlas, who holds the world on his back. Nevertheless, the whole background of the picture is a black wall or a giant black fabric decorated with white stars. This composition creates the illusion of perfection. To the spectator, it automatically reminds the one of Hollywood, a perfect entertainment show. Nevertheless, dark background makes bodies stand out even more.

![Image of five bodybuilders lined up and performing abdominal flexing.](http://www.abbaskowsari.com/Menu1/Description.aspx?id=65)


The lighting here is also very important; technically speaking, the organizer of the competition was trying to get the most illumination on the athletes, yet Kowsari intensifies the shadows and sharpens the contrast and color saturation in order to maximize the appearance of

\textsuperscript{32} As an examples of *Masculinity A*, I am using images from Abbas Kowsari’s website - [http://www.abbaskowsari.com/Menu1/Description.aspx?id=65](http://www.abbaskowsari.com/Menu1/Description.aspx?id=65)
muscles on the bodies. By doing so, Kowsari takes those five bodies even further away from the body images that we are surrounded every day; these figures became much more sharply geometrical. The torso and abdominal muscles seem to be made from the metal, as the photograph’s high saturation makes them appear extremely solid and heavy - it creates the illusion of unnatural strength and even bullet-proofness. In addition, Kowsari places the camera so that the men are at the very bottom of the picture, choosing not to include their legs in the picture. The rest of the photograph is left to the black background with white stars. As a result, the largest part of the picture is simply black. This decision allows Kowsari to work on two levels here; first, a decision to choose these proportions forces the viewer concentrate on the athletes and their pronounced frame. Secondly, the effects that he uses lead viewers to unconsciously examine accentuated muscles. By playing with a viewer’s mind, Kowsari invites us to look at and experience these bodies very closely.

The athletes themselves are trying their best to impress the judges; while they are aligned in an arc facing inwards, their faces suggest the competitiveness, great effort and the manipulation of the audience attention. Two bodybuilders, standing on each side, show their teeth, which could be both a sign of tension while performing the pose or a smile to charm the audience. All athletes must compete for the attention of the audience as well - this is the another side of the competition. A smile on the athlete’s face might be false, though it works in their favor, because it draws attention away from their opponents. The object is to present your body as the primary focus of attention. Bronzed bodies intensified with photographic effects here are living embodiment of a Western standard of a perfect male body - except that they are standing here in a modern day Tehran.
The rest of the pictures in *Masculinity A* differ from the first, as they represent the sensual part of bodybuilding. The greatest contrast between the first and second photograph is scale and proportion. In the second picture, Kowsari decides to use a much closer vantage point on the athletes - from here on, the greatest part of the picture will be dedicated to the male body only. A man stretching his upper body with his back to the camera is depicted in the second picture. If the first photograph represented the spectacle on stage and the entertainment for the audience, before the giant starry curtain, Kowsari introduces us to the backstage world.


The second image is very intimate, as the man is not looking at the camera at all, and it is impossible to see his features. Not only does this create a concentrated environment, but it also produces mystery and intimacy. In the previous picture, everything was intended for the viewer - the men in bikini briefs, muscles flexed to the maximum, big smiles, and the lights, - but here,
everything is different: the athlete is not posing for anyone; he is left alone there to prepare for his show and be with his own thoughts. This quietness and stillness of the photo makes the audience “unnecessary” in this photo, which immediately makes the viewer become a voyeur. There is nothing that is being exhibited for them; it is the world which only bodybuilders see - a profession and nothing else. However, the composition of the photograph makes the audience feel as if their opinion or judgment is no longer important, yet they are still allowed to see - only this time as passive observers. The ignorance of the viewer in this photo makes it even more attractive - there is a secret hidden from the audience, which tickles their fantasies and leaves them wanting more. The photograph places the viewer in the position of staring at somebody while they don't notice it - in other words, Kowsari almost tries to spy on the stretching athlete. The result that follows, in the new secretive mood, has more adrenaline because it makes the male body an object of admiration for only one pair of eyes. It is almost a private show, where voyeuristic desires start to take control.

In this setting, the astonishing lateral and shoulder muscles look marvelous, even though they are not flexed. This appreciation of the strong body, while it is not in physical action here, recalls to the Boxer at Rest\textsuperscript{33} - a masterpiece from the Hellenistic period that praises the endurance of a male body. The bodybuilder, just like a boxer, exists in a situation where he does not look like a god, or embody perfection at its purest. Instead, the man is shown without an epic posture. In comparison to the poses that athletes strike on stage, his pose is much more sensuous, seductive and even vulnerable. The aspect of seeing vulnerability in an extremely masculine man might serve as the main reason of the existence of voyeuristic intentions in this picture.

\textsuperscript{33} I am referring to the statue \textit{Boxer at Rest}, Greek, Hellenistic Period, late 4th - 2nd century B. C., Bronze with copper inlays. http://www.thecultureconcept.com/ancient-bronze-masterpiece-at-the-met-nya-a-boxer-at-rest
Nevertheless, Kowsari’s choice to portray an athlete in this unexpected way could also be seen as a successful attempt to celebrate the body without imposing gender standards on it.

Throughout the remaining images of *Masculinity A*, Kowsari continues exposing the backstage world of bodybuilding culture, by capturing the athletes performing their poses and warming up with weights. Some of the pictures (No. 5 and No.6) are filled with competitive energy. Kowsari imparts it by combining different perspectives in one picture, such as a close-up of a silhouette of biceps, though in a background we can see another athlete rehearsing. The photographer is also using photo effects that indicate arm movements which add a sense of rush and unsteadiness to the picture. There are several other pictures of athletes performing their poses, but somehow Kowsari never includes another image with the starry curtain - instead, cheap, dirty yellow material\(^{34}\) appears as a background. This choice helps him to create a continuous line that unites different pictures, and it causes the first one to look like the theatrical overture to the whole series of *Masculinity A*.

The grandeur of the first picture never returns in the full work. Instead, the last two images in the series take the viewer to the least festive, attractive and luxurious place - a dirty bathroom decorated with white tiles. In the spotlight in this dirty environment there are two bodybuilders applying artificial tan to their bodies: as the pigment is not completely applied yet, different body parts have a different tan density and everything speaks about the the creation of the artifice on stage. Finally in the last picture, Kowsari decides to confront the first picture with an opposition, photographing an athlete in the bathroom, showing only the feet and a stream of water mixed with tan, flowing on the floor towards the drain. This makes the whole cycle feel symmetrical - starting with picture of athletes on stage, where he purposefully did not include

\(^{34}\) To be exact, there is two exceptions: in picture No.7 background material is printed with a landscape, and in No. 8 background is red.
their legs, here he reverses his view. Thinking about it as a gesture, it feels like checking somebody out - from head to toe, a common sight in any singles bar, yet in this case, male bodies are the ones being looked at as objects.


Indeed, Kowsari concludes his work in a very unexpected way, though *Masculinity A* can be read differently by different viewers. As early as the third picture, he captures two men, as they apply tan to one another. Tanning, an important part in competition, helps to maximize the visual appearance of muscle and its definition while performing on stage. Yet, this intimate scene can be seen as a controversial act to some, but strikingly, not all viewers; at some point, Kowsari is depicting a very homosocial sphere so naturally there are only males in the picture, but nevertheless the homosociality provides another opportunity to look closer and examine what Kowsari is highlighting for the public eye.
In general, bodybuilding as a sport formed in western culture and became extremely popular in the United States\textsuperscript{35}, although in Iran, the practice of bodybuilding might sometimes create a controversy. As Mohammadali Ghods describes it, bodybuilding, where the main subject is male aesthetics and exposure of the body, could be accepted in urban areas such as Tehran. However, in more conservative areas, the practice of bodybuilding would be looked down upon as too westernized and even perverted\textsuperscript{36}. Kowsari, naturally aware of this, so putting his choice in this specific social and cultural context, makes his work particularly striking to the conservative Iran.

As previously discussed, the Modern European concept of beauty is strongly feminized, so sometimes it makes it strange to speak about male beauty. Iran has a strongly patriarchal viewpoint on gender as well and that becomes the main target of Masculinity. Bodybuilders, as are many other athletes, typically represented as threatening, competitive and incredibly strong men. It might sound confusing, because in bodybuilding competitions, unlike weightlifting, the body strength has very little to do with winning. Here it is the beauty of the body that matters, and Kowsari captures it very clearly. These athletes do not strive to be the strongest; they strive to be the most beautiful and have the best body proportions. In Kowsari’s photographs, these bodybuilders are focused on the performance of exhibiting their bodies for the audience, which can cause a lot of mixed feelings in Iranian audience. Seeing the uncovered male body can strike the more conservative viewers as being obscene and salacious.

\textsuperscript{35} Modern bodybuilding started in England, and then spread to the United States, especially California, where Muscle Beach in Santa Monica became a destination for bodybuilders. Yet the popularity of fitness and healthy lifestyle found its place in American culture in the seventies, and from there it has spread worldwide, attracting many enthusiasts all over the world. Iran is not an exception.

\textsuperscript{36} It is worth noticing that even in the West, before the bodybuilding community achieved recognition in 1970’s, athletes were often treated with a lack of respect and seen as “young men, fueled by narcissistic voyeurism” -Thomas E. Murray \textit{The Language of Bodybuilding}, American Speech, Vol. 59, No.3 (Autumn, 1984)
There is an obvious potential for a photograph in which two bodybuilders are oiling and touching each other to produce strong sexual energy. The male body is an object of desire here, and nevertheless it is being gently touched by another male. This soft interaction might be overlooked through the prevailing stereotypes about the bodybuilders as aggressive alpha males, yet in this shot, Kowsari shows another side of masculinity. Here he depicts strong and extremely masculine men as gentle and caring individuals, applying tan to each other and in this way appreciating each other’s bodies. This photograph bends traditional gender stereotypes, but Kowsari leaves it up to the viewer to supply his own personal worldview and judgment: whether to recognize and admit this eroticism or not. Ultimately, even his choice to name the series Masculinity can be provocative. Kowsari is arguably capturing the most masculine of men, who grunt in the gym as they lift weights to achieve perfect results, but at the same time, the photographs imply the hidden side of gender, as they oil each other’s backs in gentle, soft gestures. Moreover, they do not seem ashamed - in fact, they seem to enjoy it.

Pushing the line a little further, in the current picture, where the admirer and the object of desire both belong to the same gender, raises questions of homoeroticism. Homoerotic actions and homosexual love is forbidden in Iran and is punished with cruel methods, so for Kowsari, to include a scene like this is quite unexpected and brave. Knowing that he has achieved international success, it is also obvious that his work will be analyzed worldwide and such an image could raise controversy not only in Iran, but in other places as well. However, it seems that provocation is what the artist wants to accomplish capturing this sexual tension within the context of Masculinity A just enough without saying too much. The fact that this is neither a photomontage, nor a specifically staged tableau with models, suggests how the photographer is
staying on the safe side. He could not be blamed for promoting homosexual behavior or any behavior at all - these are simply the images that he took as a documentarian.

In another picture that appears belong to the *Masculinity A* series, Kowsari depicts another man, wearing nothing but bikini briefs, leaning towards his male competitor for a kiss. As both the object of admiration and the admirer belong to the same gender here, this image is filled with homoerotic tenderness and desire, which would seem to create a conflict in the context of modern Iranian law, which shows no mercy for homosexuals. In the picture, the kiss is what Kowsari focuses on. The black curtain with stars works to help the viewer focus directly on their bodies. There is also a third athlete who seems to be very attentive and drawn towards them. The sexual tension is heightened by the fact that an observing bodybuilder has other athlete’s palm on his tricep, which makes it appear that all the athletes are touching or physically interacting with each other.

If this picture had been taken in the United States or any country in Western Europe, it would hardly create discussion - in places where homosexuality is a norm of everyday life, and is usually protected by law as a civil liberty. This is not the case in Iran, so how could this moment could openly take place in public in a country where which homosexual behavior is punishable by death? This particularly striking image makes a viewer think about the complexity of Iranian law and custom. A male would not risk kissing another male on the street, yet here, somehow it is completely acceptable, or at least that is what a westerner would think. Mohammadali Ghods explains, that in Iran, where society is based on a strong patriarchal tradition, for a man to kiss a man on a cheek is a completely acceptable gesture of greeting or congratulating. Yet in this case,

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37 Photograph does not appear on Kowsari’s website as a part of *Masculinity A*, and I was not able to find any more specific information about the image. I am making this assumption based on a similar style and effects used on the first photograph in a serie. Nevertheless, while I saw it at LACMA in the Spring of 2016, it was named as a part of *Masculinity A*. 
where the space of action is not a everyday life situation and where so much flesh is being
exposed at the same time, the kiss becomes a very important sign that artist is possibly offering a
form of provocation.

Interestingly, the kiss looks constrained and uneasy - indeed, it is not a romantic kind of
kiss. The athletes are holding their hands in a tight grip, but the firm handshake and bulging
muscles helps to achieve an enormous sensual intensity, in which it looks like the athletes are
trying their hardest to keep hands off each other adding tension sexual drive to the picture.
However, as these men are in a public realm, again, it is up to the viewer to recognize the sexual
side of it or not. Nevertheless, it can strongly be argued that Kowsari is challenging a very
important part of the modern concept of man.

*Masculinity* A provokes the thought that in a place where physical strength and
masculinity are highly celebrated, sexual behavior becomes of secondary importance. The ideal
of the strong and aggressive male seems to blossom at its brightest here: it is almost as if
bodybuilders are seen to be too “masculine” to ever feel a desire for another male. In the
photograph, the bodybuilder in the center appears to wear a wedding ring, though it does not
prevent this intimate act between them, nor raise awareness that he might be considered gay.
Furthermore, they are thought not only be incapable to feel a desire, but to feel and have feelings
in general. The restrainment of the athlete’s body language captured in the pictures help Kowsari
to ask the audience is it the inability to “feel” that makes one look stronger, more dominant, and
in control.

Bruce Dunne, is claiming that the concept of sexuality in the Middle East is strongly
influenced with the concept of control, as “sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual,
continue to be understood as relations of power linked to rigid gender roles\(^{38}\). Even though Dunne is speaking about the whole region of Middle East in general, the consequences and ideals that he is pointing out in his article might be seen very present in the Kowsari’s work. The kiss of two extremely muscular men lacks the emotional and romantic aspect, which reflects Dunne’s theory that dominance is the main axis that the modern view of masculinity is built around. Dunne also claims that idea of male dominance and the centrality of penetration works as the main factor of conceptions of sex\(^{39}\). So while the kiss in the picture is clearly not an emotional, romantic one, it embodies an attempt of one athlete to dominate the other, showing the competitiveness of male nature. The impression of sexual tension that might be felt in the picture is the result of these conceptions - the feeling of tightness of the musculature, the competing factor of the competition creates an effect, which in the viewer's mind collides with the term “masculinity” - a topic which Kowsari is challenging here.

As I am discussing the aspects in which these photographs might be interpreted, it all comes to who is looking at the picture - the viewer. The most valuable thing that Kowsari is playing here, is how different we all relate to art. A straight viewer would definitely see the series completely differently from a queer individual. A gay man is naturally more stricken by those images as a result of a sexual tension and attraction felt to the exposed male flesh - to put in contrast, a straight man would not relate to the bodybuilders in the same way, because in his eyes, a male body is never objectified as a desirable object. David Deitcher, in the first chapter of his book *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together 1840 - 1918*, is discussing Victorian photograph of two young men seated in a romantic way where one sits in the embrace

\(^{38}\) Bruce Dunne *Power and Sexuality in the Middle East* (1998), Middle East Report, No. 206, p.10, Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc. (MERIP)

\(^{39}\) Bruce Dunne *Power and Sexuality in the Middle East* (1998), Middle East Report, No. 206, p.9, Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc. (MERIP)
of the other. His essay is a perfect example of a different approach and effect art has on particular individuals; he states that he feels so passionate and drawn by these pictures mostly because of his own eagerness to find gay desire reflected in an artifact from the pre-gay past.\footnote{David Deitcher, \textit{Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together 1840 - 1918}, p.25} Deitcher, an openly gay man, writes that his sexuality lets him relate to the images on a completely different level than most of the people living in Victorian England would have, and yet his queerness motivates him to find as many facts as possible to prove that this image proclaims homosexual love. When a gay man approaches those pictures, for him it symbolizes a lot more: it serves as a historical proof of a existence and celebration of homosexual love, and nevertheless it stands out as a statement against the heterosexual love norms in today’s world.

The point by Deitcher, of the difference in relating to the images, applies to Kowsari’s \textit{Masculinity A}. It is impossible to claim whether the bodybuilders are gay or not, neither can it be taken for a fact, that Kowsari refers to the situation that homosexual people are facing in Iran today, nor that he is trying to criticize the government or society. However, it is obvious truth, that pictures of a series will strike every viewer differently based on many factors, such as political, religious views as well as sexual orientation. Despite that, it is undeniable that \textit{Masculinity A} has a huge symbolic meaning of masculinity and male sexuality which transcends the boundaries of culture.

The lack of emotional capacity in the concept of maleness, highlighted in Kowsari’s work, is clearly seen all over the world. The whole social construct is built around being tough, avoiding any kind of feelings and appreciation of beauty. Yet, in modern day bodybuilding, where the concept of beauty is being overpowered by the alpha male stereotype, it sometimes seems that the “fear of looking beautiful” is forming. As Adam Ragusea describes in his article “\textit{Has Gay Panic Ruined bodybuilding}?”}, this important switch in the appearance of bodybuilders...
throughout last decades, has been led by a fear of “looking gay”. He writes that the bodybuilding competition is a “manly beauty pageant that calls itself a sport so the other boys won’t laugh at it” but unfortunately, this pageant has started to undermine the importance of beauty. This is mostly because the most prevailing stereotype of “gay” is that gay males are both weaker and yet always better looking or more beautiful than straight ones. Having the “beauty” label attached to homosexual males automatically feminizes them. As a consequence, athletes have tended to pump their muscles beyond the limits of proportions and fitness, trying to highlight their stamina and physical endurance more as a primary reason for the show, instead of the perfection proportions of a male body. This insecurity may explain why the proportions of “Mr. Olympia” have changed radically over the years.

The *Masculinity A* series alone does not depict the changing appearance of the bodybuilders overtime, but it serves a great example in comparison to previously discussed Qajar paintings. The depiction of the male and the concept of masculinity portrayed in those paintings differ drastically from the ones of Kowsari’s series. We no longer see the emotional interaction or a passionate friendship between two males, depicted here. The beautiful moon face and the exaggerated attention to the form and shapes of the eyebrows are no longer to be found nowadays. Knowing the changes that the image of masculinity has faced, *Masculinity A* serves as a reminder of classic beauty ideals. But which ones: Western or Iranian?

In comparison to *Masculinity A* and its approach to the image of manliness, the work of Sadegh Tirafkan (1965 - 2013) contributes to this theme as well. Tirafkan, being one of the most

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41 http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/04/07/has_gay_panic_ruined_bodybuilding.html
42 The person who introduced bodybuilding as a form of body symmetry and aesthetics was Eugene Sandow. He started performing shows in 1890’s, which he would call “muscle display performances”, where audiences admired his beautifully symmetrical and densely muscular physique, which eventually positioned him as the first real bodybuilder and promoter of bodybuilding”. In addition, he also organised the very first modern bodybuilding competition (the “Great Competition”) in September 14, 1901 in Royal Albert Hall, London. The physique of Sandor is represented on the Mr. Olympia statue and the perfection proportions of the male body up until this day. - http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/drobson61.htm
celebrated contemporary Iranian artists, whose work is marked with the attempts to speak about the modern and national identity as well as the image of manhood and male psyche, has said: “I tried to convey the humanistic message embedded in these ancient symbols of manhood in my culture - lest they are forgotten.” As Kowsari’s work does not explicitly relate to the Persian beauty ideals and does not quote or directly reference Qajar art, the collision between nowadays and Qajar period does appear in the work of Tirafkan. The Loss of Our Identity #1 (Boy) presents the viewer with a portrait of a young Iranian man, wearing headphones; the whole upper part of the portrayed is filled with a reproduction of a battle scene from a Persian lithographed book from Qajar period, which covers the eyes of a man in photograph. As the headphones becomes a clear symbol of a Western culture and media, a sharp contrast between it and battle scene create a sharp contrast, leaving Iranian viewer wondering which part of the portrait is dominant in their identity today.

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The beauty ideals of Qajar period are captured in another series by Tirafkan called *Zoorkhaneh*⁴⁵ (2003-2004), where he depicts men practicing *varzeshe bāstāni*, which is a type of perfecting one's physique as well as a form of martial arts. Men in the photographs are holding clubbells; nevertheless their lean and athletic physique are radically different from the pumped bodybuilders seen in *Masculinity*. The unshaven bodies here look way more realistic and *real* in general that the ones in the bodybuilding competition. In addition to that, these men feature something that connects to the contemporary Iranian make to the Qajarian beauty ideals -

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⁴⁵ Persian: زورخانه (zurxâne, literally “house of strength”) - a traditional Iranian gymnasium.

- http://www.yourdictionary.com/zurkhaneh
connected eyebrows. The facial feature here is challenging the beauty ideals that prevail today, which makes this photograph an open form of critique which works as a direct reminder of Persian culture to today’s society.

In that the sport of bodybuilding as a sport being a product of Western culture, it represents strong Western ideals of manliness. In comparison to Kowsari, Western artists have produced photographies that construct a certain view on male gender. Thomas Eakins, the American realist painter and photographer, captured his naked male students wrestling in a photograph. Even though the primary intention in taking this photo was to capture the body in motion, yet art historian Randall C. Griffin is arguing that photograph have also manifested a culture-wide need to establish sharp gender distinctions as the depicted naked figures evoke such

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46 Sadegh Tirafkan, *Untitled* from the Zoorkhaneh series, 2003-2004, digital C-prints, 70 x 100 cm
a standard Victorian tropes for masculinity as action, competition and strength. It is possible to acknowledge the connection between the main subject in the works of Eakins and Kowsari; *Students Wrestling*, together with *Masculinity A* produces proof that the Victorian concept of maleness is still dominant. However, the geographical and time difference between those works also proves the complete replacement of the concept of masculinity of the Qajar period.

Qajar masculinity was surrounded by the concept beauty and divine - as written in a previous chapter, the beauty standards were almost the same for both men and women. However, *Masculinity A* shows that nowadays the beauty standards in Iran have changed, leaving space only for one example of a masculinity, which is more familiar with the Greco-Roman concept, rather than the Persian. It exhibits the change in the way that masculinity is being portrayed: there is no space left to celebrate young, adolescent looking men. The appearance of men is not the only aspect of masculinity that has been strongly influenced with a Western model; behavior rules have changed, as well. The athletes depicted by Kowsari represent a totally different aspect of masculinity, which is immune to the concept of beauty, or any emotion except anger, jealousy and possessiveness. The contemporary Iranian masculinity that Kowsari is portraying to his public leaves no space and chance for other types of gender expressions (amrad or mukhanna for example), and that is the shocking part about it. The series of *Masculinity A* raises doubts and questions, inviting the society to look back and reflect on itself, making sure those things are going in a progressive way.

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Following the Islamic Revolution, Iranian law dictated a strict dress code for women while in public. This law puts women athletes, bodybuilders especially, in a very tricky position where they have to choose between the performance required by their profession and state law. In addition to that, it is a very controversial subject when we are talking about jobs and professions that require a great physical strength as well. For example, working in police or secret service, outstanding physical performance and incredibly fast reaction is the main goal, because order and even people’s lives depend on it. This controversial topic attracted Kowsari’s attention as he decided to capture the graduation ceremony for policewomen in Iran in 2005 in the series Police Women Academy. The pictures were introduced to the public in 2015, as a part in the exhibition Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East at LACMA. Abbas Kowsari needed a permission from the Iranian government to photograph the graduation ceremony, which demonstrates the strict regime of the current government. As Kowsari is considered to belong to a new generation of Iranian artists who create art works where the audience can see subtle commentary on Iranian society, these poster-size photographs might be

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49 On January 19, 2017, The Daily Mail published an article about female Iranian athlete Shirin Nobahari, who was put in jail after posting pictures of her working out on social media. She was accused of showing nudity in public and in Iranian law ‘nude’ can refer to any woman who is not wearing a headscarf or is revealing parts of her body such as arms and legs, that must be covered in public. It is mentioned that Iran women sometimes are forbidden to watch male sports as well, which increases the gap between men and women rights in the athletic world. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4131472/Iran-female-bodybuilder-arrested-Islamic-photos.html

50 Police Women Academy, Abbas Kowsari, Iran, 2006. Photographs, Chromogenic print 27 9/16 × 39 3/8 in. (70 × 100 cm) Frame: 29 × 42 3/4 × 2 in. (73.66 × 108.59 × 5.08 cm) https://collections.lacma.org/node/2110444
the best example of that. The most unusual picture for the Westerner’s eyes depicts police women scaling a building using ropes. It is a scene one could see in action movies where secret service members, usually men, would perform with helicopter noise in the background. Here, two pairs of fully cloaked black figures are hanging in two columns in mid-air, which, together with the brown brick decoration of the building, gives the image a very vertical feeling. The square windows of the building strengthen the geometrical and sharp feeling about the whole picture. In between the groups of police women, there hangs a banner with four words written in Persian that translate as “We would like to welcome the head of the armed forces”.\(^{51}\)

The chador that the women are wearing completely eliminates the contours of their bodies, making them look abstract in a way. In contrast to the perfectly proportional shapes

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\(^{51}\) Translated from Persian by Mohammadali Ghods
existing on the building facade, these four levitating figures bring fluidity and sensuality to the composition. The women here are a perfect representation of extreme physical power, and here, unlike the bodybuilders, the image of strength is achieved without even portraying the body at all. As the policewomen are performing feats of strength and agility, proving their perfect physical preparation, the vagueness of the figures created by the black silk moving around their bodies also gives the image a strong feeling of grace. In this certain moment, policewomen appear graceful and elegant. The geometrical precision represented by the white wall and the rectangular and circular windows is opposed by four shapeless forms suspended in the air.

The fact that the women are not completely in sync here creates the feeling of strong teamwork, instead of making them look like a perfectly synchronized show performance. It supports the impression of the maximum effort put forth by every woman to achieve the goal of the team here; each of them is moving at a different pace. The values of the perfect police team member represented, such as the ultimate physical and mental strength, bravery, and and extraordinary discipline, become the main point of attention, making the gender of police academy graduates of secondary importance.

However, in one photo, Kowsari is capturing the information which in diverse Tehran will definitely inspire many different opinions and reactions. Journalist Catherine Wagley, writes about this photograph: You could almost overlook the strangeness of the situation the photo depicts, one in which conservative tradition clashes with a certain kind of progress … and that clash is already a thing of the past, since Tehran’s new police chief no longer allows women to climb, practice karate or jump out of windows”  

52 Most Museums See the Middle East as a Place of Relics. LACMA Sees It as a Place for New Art, Catherine Wagley, LA Weekly, Thursday, February 5, 2015.
equality. However, the fact that women are required to wear the chador shows the persistent conservatism of the country, with the prohibition to practice certain movements or sports for women police officers works to hold the progress back.

Mohammadali Ghods explains that Iranian society reacts differently to these armed units. Similar to the reactions to bodybuilding subculture, there is a very conservative and a more liberal approach to it. Yet, in this case the division of the approach to it is even greater, since conservative people can not completely agree among themselves. Those, with more pro-government political views see it as a huge step forward empowering women, yet the others see this phenomena as unsuitable for women and even perversion of what is natural. The latter view is mostly formed by the mullahs\textsuperscript{53} who claim that women should never perform these maneuvers and engage in this activity. Sometimes the opinions of Mullahs and the Iranian regime differ from each other, yet my source from Iran believes that the approach proclaimed by Mullahs is shared by the majority of Iranians.

It is necessary to mention that the chador is a requirement of their job - it is seen as proper clothing that police women must wear. Women on the streets are not forced to wear long black chadors\textsuperscript{54}, yet for a police woman, the black chador is the attire when they are on duty. Interestingly, the practice of wearing a full black chador in public is mainly practiced in the rural areas, so wearing it in Tehran might even appear old fashioned in the extreme.

\textsuperscript{53} Mullah (Persian: لا م ) (noun): an educated Muslim trained in religious law and doctrine and usually holding an official post. - https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mullah

\textsuperscript{54} The tradition of covering everyday clothing with a black veil (whether it is burqa, niqab, abaya) is mostly exercised in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.
Another picture represents two police women drawing their guns. Normally, when we observe police members with guns drawn, they are expected to be analyzing the surrounding environment very carefully, yet here they are blindfolded. This surprising detail might indicate that they are expected to find and aim at the target trusting only their hearing. Interestingly these women remind the western viewer of the Western allegorical figure of Justice. Though Justice holds scales and a sword, which would symbolize the objective judgment and powerful exercise of the law, in this picture, women hold guns, not scales. Comparing this photograph with the allegorical embodiment, it clearly sends a very different message; the policewomen in this photograph are presented as the enforcement of the law rather, than as the decision makers. In this context, the police women represent unquestionable loyalty and devotion, who, if necessary, would put themselves in deadly combat, without even a second thought. However, what Kowsari is portraying could create some controversy in Iran as the women here are portrayed in a masculine and therefore, not an “appropriate”, activity.
The demonstration depicted in Kowsari’s photograph would definitely surprise a Western viewer at first, as it would trigger questions of comfort, and the ability to move and act freely while at work. These questions can be easily understood as unfamiliarity with a different tradition than those of the West. Veiling in the Islamic world is considered to be a very private and intimate decision, yet as a traditional religious symbol, it is inseparable from femininity. Mohammadali also mentioned, from the modernist point of view, chador would be called a Shiite Islamic, not necessarily “Iranian” clothing - nevertheless, this point of view is more reflective of the situation in Tehran. However, the veil could also be seen as a gesture to celebrate femininity, showing that you do not have to become “masculine” to perform this job requiring great physical strength and stamina. In the review of the exhibition *Iran Inside Out*, which took place in Chelsea Art Museum, New York City in 2009, Kamran Rastegar pointed out *Police Women Academy* as the work which engagingly interrogated presumptions of masculine and feminine ideals in post-revolutionary Iran.

Seen from another perspective, in the eyes of the West, these police women can be perceived as a living symbols of the point at which state law coherently works and collides with religious law, tradition, and ideals. As is clear for a viewer from any cultural background, the chador is surely not the best or most comfortable clothing to improve one's physical performance - and that is probably the most striking aspect that Kowsari is capturing - yet as strange at it might sound, here it also shows that veiling in this case helps to maintain historical and cultural identification. On the other hand, this might be seem as an attempt to create an image of female empowerment in uniquely Iranian way, without blindly copying the West. In a very subtle way,

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55 The attire of female police troops in the West are similar to their male colleagues, which can be seen as a symbol of equality and fair opportunities to everyone regardless of their gender.  
Iranian police women become not only the guardians of the society and executors of the law, but also living reminders and embodiments of the ideology of new Iran.

A very important aspect that Kowsari is most likely triggering here is the Iranian revolution. Images like those in *Police Women Academy* became the visual symbols of the rebellion; Guity Nashat writes, “The image of the Iranian woman clad in the tradition chador, pointing her fist in the air or carrying a machine gun has become one of the hallmarks of the most recent revolution in Iran”\(^{57}\). As “many women who opposed the Shah’s regime began taking on the veil as a symbol of resistance to Western capitalism and in an effort to assert their agency in the wake of what they viewed as a neo-patriarchal state\(^ {58}\), women were the ones that first encountered the revolution’s backlash. After the new religious power had been established, the rules about women’s dress in public started to be enforced. The government’s decisions were followed by protests, but Khomeini released an official order requiring women to wear the veil.

Kowsari’s series plays upon a historical reminiscence of that. These pictures enjoyed great popularity in Iran - while talking Mohammadali Ghods, he shared the story that he can remember these images being on Iranian media, and even right now, he has a strong feelings about them as they reminds him of the history of the government’s actions towards his nation and culture. Perhaps that is the result that Kowsari is accomplishing here - his work is telling an extremely important and complicated story of Iran, as a quiet, yet provocative narrator.

From my discussion in the introductory chapter about Iranian gender representations, it is clear that visual representations of those concepts have changed. The subjects depicted in Kowsari’s work would never be seen as a depiction of a Western world, and this poves in some


\(^{58}\) “But What If Someone Sees Me?” *Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran’s Sexual Revolution* Author(s): Pardis Mahdavi Source: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 1-22 Published by: Duke University Press Stable
ways that the Islamic Revolution’s rebellion against the West has succeeded. However, he raises the question of whether society was forced to return to the old norms, or whether there were a new social construct created instead?

Comparing the Qajar images to Police Women Academy, it is possible to see, that modern concept of femininity differ from the Qajar period. Looking at the big picture, it seems that a distinction between the terms “modern” and “authentic” has been made. As Silvia Naef has noted, being modern was understood as adopting Western forms and concepts, however, in the Middle East it meant reconquering the past, which appeared to be an oppositions to the Western experience.

Yet Kowsari’s images show that Iranian modernity is most closely related to Islamization, has been achieved by creating radical methods in order to separate itself from any Western influence. Pictures like Police Woman Academy challenge viewers, both Iranian and Western, to question, what actually is the image of national identity, and is there a line between Iranian and Islamic?

As Bruce Dunne claims, “Reproduction of ideological Islamic sexual roles in the modern period [in middle East] has accompanied dramatic transformations, including the rise of modern state systems, Western colonial intervention, and various reform and nationalist movements.” This strong ideological shift has not left any sphere untouched in the life of Iranian society. Here, the remaining art from the past plays an important role proving the standards in past societies while comparing it to the present, where Islamization can be seen as a way to differ from the West. Concepts of Iranian identity imposed by the revolution encourage artists to rethink this in

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59 Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past, Silvia Naef, Source: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No.43, Islamic Arts (Spring, 2003), p.167, published by (ucpress)
60 Bruce Dunne Power and Sexuality in the Middle East (1998), Middle East Report, No. 206, p.10, Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc.
their works while looking for their place in society. This intimate communication between
individual and the surrounding world seems to hold the central role in the works of Kowsari.

Yet finding the place of Iranian modernity is a great challenge, especially considering
state censorship. Babak Elahi in his article about the art discourse in Iran, claims that the artist’s
freedom is regulated by the government in order to embody their representation of Iran: “Iranian
artists are often caught between the regulatory regimes of a state that reaches into everyday life
and the markets and discourses of the global north that attempt to recruit them or their work into
neoliberal geopolitics or neo-Oriental representation.”61 Knowing that the state of Iran plays the
role of a cultural guide, it is easy to imagine how easy it is to manipulate the career of a young
artist through various art reviews and publications, which Elahi mentions as the main factor in
regulating tendencies in Iran’s contemporary art. That helps us to understand “how self-aware
contemporary Iranian artists and their audiences are of their place in a complex set of social
relations - globally as well as locally62.”

In his article, Elahi also explains the complicated situation in Iran, where “state has the
power to censor, control, and guide discourse on the web and is both the provider of online
access and the controller of various forms of access to the net”. This level of governmental
control is evidence of how severely speech can be limited. For example, author introduces the
reader to the Tehran Avenue - an internet platform active between 2001 and 2011, which would
mainly focus on Tehran’s cultural climate. It did so primarily around the Khatami’s presidential

61 The Critic as Activist: The Art Review Discourse in Iran, Babak Elahi, Source: Alif: Journal of
Comparative Poetics, No.35, New Paradigms in the Study of Middle Eastern Literatures (2015), pp.178,
182, Published by: Department of English and Comparative Literature, American University in Cairo and
American University of Cairo Press.

62 The Critic as Activist: The Art Review Discourse in Iran, Babak Elahi, Source: Alif: Journal of
Comparative Poetics, No.35, New Paradigms in the Study of Middle Eastern Literatures (2015), 182,
Published by: Department of English and Comparative Literature, American University in Cairo and
American University of Cairo Press.
period\textsuperscript{63}, focusing on the art exhibitions in the private galleries, concerts and theatre performances, as well as various cafe reviews and new publications about Tehran itself. Elahi explains the importance of it: “\textit{Tehran Avenue} established itself not only as a website but as a counter-public, and through its links to the urban location of Tehran, and more specifically to the places and spaces of galleries, \textit{Tehran Avenue} created a web of interlocutors concerned with cultural questions in Tehran\textsuperscript{64}.” Elahi uses the term ‘counter-public,’ a term introduced by Michael Warner, which indicates the independence of this non-governmental organization.

However, since 2011, the activity of the website has been suspended, yet it is still available to be viewed by the public. Limiting the activity of \textit{Tehran Avenue} is a proof of state’s censorship, but on the other hand, the existence of this platform alone demonstrates an attempt to stand against the regime. Nevertheless, the “web of interlocutors” that it has created over the years, brings a lot of positivity and creates an atmosphere, where young Iranian artists, such as Kowsari, can be heard and understood.

This huge pressure placed on Iranian artists is a phenomenon that West is finally starting to recognize. Exhibitions such as \textit{Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East} at LACMA shows the growing interest in the contemporary art in Middle East. Nevertheless, various scholarships and prizes help encourage Islamic artists and bring their work to the international audience. Art Historian and curator of Middle East Department in Victoria and

\textsuperscript{63} Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943) - President of Iran 1997 - 2005.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{The Critic as Activist: The Art Review Discourse in Iran}, Babak Elahi, Source: \textit{Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics}, No.35, New Paradigms in the Study of Middle Eastern Literatures (2015), pp.184, 182, Published by: Department of English and Comparative Literature, American University in Cairo and American University of Cairo Press.
Albert Museum in London Tim Stanley claims, that the Jameel Prize that his department has encouraged helps combat the Western view that Middle East is “somehow a dead civilization”\(^{65}\).

Knowing the political arena in which Kowsari is working, his works acquire a special meaning in portraying Iranian identity. As the Iranian - born photographer Firooz Zahedi, has noted, “At the end of the day, these artists don’t have the same freedoms, you have to read between the lines”\(^{66}\).

Kowsari is surrounded by his contemporaries; artists who just like him have to work under the pressure of censorship and political control. Perhaps one of the most well-known Iranian artists, belonging to the same generation as Kowsari, is Newsha Tavakolian (b. 1981). A self-taught photographer, who started her professional career at the age of sixteen, after capturing the Iranian Presidential elections in 2009, she was forced to halt her photojournalistic work for a time. After that happened, Newsha Tavakolian claims to have made a turn in her photography as achieving more artistic way of speaking to Iranian society. Reaching the Iranian, as opposed to the international, audience is the main objective for Tavakolian, as she claims in the interview: “When we’re stuck on getting the West to understand Iran, our work remains on the surface, I want to tell Iranians' story to Iranians themselves, this is where I can challenge myself and go deeper into the more complicated layers”\(^{67}\). It is this reason, which puts Newsha Tavakolian and Abbas Kowsari on in the same group of artists interested in Iranian identity and the approach of gender there. These artists do not seem to be too interested in demystifying Iran to the West, as

\(^{65}\) Most Museums See the Middle East as a Place of Relics. LACMA Sees It as a Place for New Art, Catherine Wagley, LA Weekly, Thursday, February 5, 2015.

\(^{66}\) Most Museums See the Middle East as a Place of Relics. LACMA Sees It as a Place for New Art, Catherine Wagley, LA Weekly, Thursday, February 5, 2015.

\(^{67}\) Through Story, a Look into Iran: Newsha Tavakolian's Portraiture, Azadeh Moaveni, TIME Magazine April 23, 2013.
they are speaking to the people living in Iran right now - Silvia Naef notes: Artists today express their reality, their life in an Islamic society [...] as a reflection on self within society.”

Nevertheless, Kowsari is not as straightforwardly outspoken as Tavakolian, his practice as the quiet commentator, demonstrates his intelligent adaptability to the factors of the political climate of the state. Throughout his career as a photojournalist he has developed the ability to find the most provocative aspects of life in Iran that help him portray his controversial ideas. The controversy that Kowsari is trying to make is usually executed in a way, which in a way asks Iranian youth if that is that is what is it? Considering that it is much more subtle, but nevertheless as powerful as the works of Tavakolian. As he strikes the viewer and requests the answers with images like *Police Women Academy*, it also shocks the international public as well and raises the interest in the actual identity of Iran. Those little hidden clues in his depictions carry an extreme importance both locally and internationally, Kowsari remains a great force in Iran, a subtle commentator, which also brings the complexity of Iranian society on the international stage.

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68 Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past, Silvia Naef, Source: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No.43, Islamic Arts (Spring, 2003), published by (ucpress), p.173
IV. EPILOGUE

In this epilogue I would like to explain the process of writing this project, since it has a strong self-educational purpose to learn about contemporary Iranian art, as I have never been exposed to it before. Even though, I have experienced a hard time finding direct and suitable sources for researching my topic, I have learned more than I have expected about Iranian art and nevertheless the amazement that I felt towards Iranian - Persian history and culture has grown ever since I picked the topic.

As I saw Kowsari’s work in LACMA last spring, I have immediately felt a connection to it, which might have been strongly generated by the amazement I felt while observing of the exposed bodies of the bodybuilders. Yet, as I have started studying Persian art, Iran’s law and history, I have come to realize the tremendous value of those works. By analyzing and putting them in the context within modernity in Iran, which I have formed by reading various publications in English, they appeared to be brave and provocative statements directed towards Iranian society. However limited my perception of Iran might look compared to native Iranians, yet I strongly believe that what I have found in Kowsari’s work is valuable to an international society as well.

Now I have a better understanding about complicated and fascinating way which formed modernity in Iran. I have come to be familiar with many Iranian artists that I did not know a year before. Seeing their work and learning about their careers has completely changed my view about Iran. What I found extremely inspiring is the complexity of their experience reflected in art, which is focused on their national identity, rather than self-promoting. The search for the depiction of Iranian modernity and a strong love and dedication to their country and traditions
are outstanding. Nevertheless, learning about the censorship that regulates the produced art in Iran, helped me realize how important it is to talk about the works of artists such as Kowsari.

Another very important experience that I have endured while writing the third chapter of this project was the realization of my limitation and ability to relate to certain things. While my main project being to find how gender is depicted in contemporary Iranian art, I have especially struggled with photographs of Police Women Academy. The reason why I decided to stay only with visual analysis of it as a way of trying to see it as Kowsari’s attempt to show the controversy in Tehran, rather than trying to explain femininity in Iran nowadays is because I, as a white Lithuanian man, stand no chance in even trying to imagine what that might feel like. In other words I caught myself “whitesplaining” and that was the most eye-opening experience that I have recently felt.

Writing this project definitely expanded my understanding about the world as well as gave me valuable experience in the field of Art History and Criticism. I am thankful for Bard College Art History department for giving me this possibility and guiding me through it.
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