

# The Emergence of Social Issues in Contemporary Iranian Art

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to investigate the process of the emergence of the reflection of social issues in contemporary Iranian art. In order to understand it, this paper examines the trend of its increase and the reasons. The aim is to better understand contemporary Iranian art, away from the common stereotypes.

To do this, the paper examines selected artworks of Shohreh Mehran, Samira Alikhanzadeh, Khosrow Hassanzade, Nazar Mousavinia, Leyli Rashidi Rauf, Peyman Shafieezadeh, Amirhossein Zanjani, and Mojtaba Amini by employing the use of social semiotics. It employs social semiotics which deals with meaning in a social context as a research method to read the works of the artists.

The findings show that social and political conditions and technological progress are important factors in the emergence of social issues in contemporary Iranian art. Furthermore, in a society where direct criticism is not possible, art becomes a means to critique issues indirectly.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Art, Contemporary Iranian Art, Art and Society, New Generation of Iranian artists, social semiology.

## Introduction

Addressing social issues in Iranian paintings does not have a striking historical background. Throughout history, Iranian paintings were more of a contribution to literature. Gradually, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the association between paintings and literature decreased and artists tended to paint mostly single faces with calligraphy and illumination. This decline has provided an opportunity for painters to take a look at everyday life and portray what they observed, such as women, doctors and dervishes. However, there was still no trace of social issues in their artworks. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, economic prosperity created a link between Europe and Iran, and from then on, one can witness partial imitations of European naturalist paintings. In this respect, the interest in figurative art and illustrating people doing daily work have received more attention. At this point, if one can see a trace of society in the artworks, it was only a reflection of the people's daily lives.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the groundwork was laid for the entry of Western thought into Iranian cultural spheres. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mostazrafe school was established by Kamal al-Molk<sup>1</sup> in Tehran (1911). The school taught late 19<sup>th</sup>-century French art and traditional oriental studies. One of the important features of this period was the change in the subject of the painting, from depicting court culture to the reflection of modern middle-class urban life (Daftari and Diba, 2013). Then, two significant historical events took place: namely, the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), which brought about many

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<sup>1</sup> Kamal al-Molk (1848-1940) is one of the influential painters of the Qajar and Pahlavi eras in contemporary Iranian painting.

changes to art in the region. Before the revolution, formalism was the dominant aspect of Iranian paintings while after the revolution, due to government support, artistic productions based on revolutionary and propagandist ideas increased.

However, from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main concern of most Iranian painters has been a combination of tradition and modernity. Indeed, the artists have attempted to represent their cultural past in modern forms. During this period, intellectuals as well as the artists have attempted to create new concepts. During these developments, painters moved away from naturalism, relied on personal experiences and created abstract art. Pakbaz (2009) considers the majority of painters in this era of art as non-committed artists. He believes that artists in this period are separated from the reality of society.

With the change in social and political conditions after the revolution, which came as a result of different governments coming to power with different policies, the conditions for art also changed. These changes, along with the other changes made with the advancement of technology have changed the perspective of the artists, resulting in the increase of attention by artists on social issues and the eventual reflection of such issues in their artworks. Thus, unlike the previous artists, the new generation of Iranian painters is focused more on social issues when creating art, than otherwise. Not only do they portray Iranian society in their works, but they also criticize it. This article addresses the various reasons for this approach.

This paper examines the political and social influences from the post-revolutionary period (since 1989) until the present on artistic processes to better understand how this new concern has emerged. It should be noted that other issues have also been considered by the artists in this period. However, the purpose of this study is to investigate the predominant concern of contemporary Iranian artists which has so far been inadequately addressed. In this regard, Severi (2015) declares that after the revolution (1979), as a result of the government's lack of support for the arts and humanities, most scholars prefer historical and traditional research to contemporary Iranian art.

In this context, this research investigates contemporary Iranian art by focusing on selected artworks which critique social events and make people rethink them. The reason for selecting these works was to address social issues away from common stereotypes. While the use of signs such as calligraphy and women's hijab in some of the works of contemporary Iranian artists has become a stereotype, this article deals with works of art whose signs have emerged from the heart of the society. In fact, this article has selected artists or works that have not been discussed so far.

Therefore, this article is important for gaining a better understanding of contemporary Iranian art far from the common stereotypes and addressing the works of contemporary and younger generation artists that have received little attention so far. At this point, questions are raised regarding the reason(s) why the new generation of Iranian artists are more concerned about the social issues, and how they represent such issues in their artworks.

## Review of Literature

Few studies have looked at contemporary Iranian art, some of which are more relevant here. Daneshvari (2015) examines the deconstruction in contemporary Iranian art and concludes that many contemporary Iranian artists undermine the principles of metaphysics by means of physical force. He believes that contemporary Iranian art rejects the transcendental claim of understanding the world and defines all concepts and values in the field. However, Daneshvari (2013) investigates the changes in contemporary Iranian art from the 1940s to 2013 and acknowledges that the new generation of Iranian artists views historical narratives and cultural identities with skepticism and concern. He states that contemporary Iranian artists, both directly and indirectly, scrutinize conventional narratives and oppose them. It is thus evident that there are fundamental changes in the concerns and ideas of contemporary Iranian artists.

Keshmirshakan (2010) interprets these changes in terms of self-expression. He argues that from 1997 until 2010, the concept of identity has changed to various forms of self-expression and self-representation, and these represent historical and social commentary based on personal experiences. According to this view, the new generation of Iranian artists represent

their interpretations and experiences of social issues, and sometimes even their history and culture. In fact, the change in the artists' viewpoints, on the one hand, has caused the artists to move on to other issues and concerns, and on the other hand, has changed the way they express their views on these issues. This means that the artists also took a different approach to representing identity and tradition.

In terms of the influence of politics on art, Eimen (2013) examines the relationship between power (government institutions) and art in Iran. By choosing the Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) as a case study to examine this relationship, he concludes that the museum is an important institution of identity struggles in Iran and has a significant relationship with political struggles. However, the focus of Eimen's research is during Khatami's presidency, and as he emphasizes in a short section of his article, in the following periods, government control over the museum increased so much that it can never be considered as an institution for political struggle. Therefore, the claim that the museum has a significant connection with political struggles is only related to a limited period that cannot be attributed to all periods.

Furthermore, Severi (2015) links the lack of academic and scholarly resources about contemporary Iranian art to politics. He states that the main reason for this lack is the government's pessimism about the arts and humanities. Then, research in the field of contemporary Iranian art is not safe and researchers in the field of Iranian art often prefer to do their research on the historical period and traditional arts. This paper examines contemporary Iranian artists whose concerns are social issues, a subject that has so far been inadequately addressed.

Grigor (2014) is more focused on the political state of Iran and the position of Iranian artists in these conditions. Nevertheless, in the second part, most of the attention of the "the studio" is drawn to contemporary Iranian artists in the social and political context. Grigor (2014) has divided Iranian artists into four broad groups according to their relationship with major social and political events in recent Iranian history as follows:

- 1) the various avant-garde artists of the Pahlavi era, whose characteristics are defined as secularism, cosmopolitanism and heavy regionalism;
- 2) the so-called Revolutionary Painters, who were engaged in the struggle against the hegemonic forces of the monarchy, and the politicization of Shi'ism as a form of protest. This group was supported more by the government;
- 3) the 'children of the 1360s' who were impacted by the brutality of the Iran-Iraq war and the isolationist policies of the first decade of the republic; and
- 4) the young artists emerging now. These artists have a better situation through the new government's (headed by President Mohammad Khatami) support of art which has led to the development of art, art education and the art market at the same time. Although the researcher does not mention this point, in the examples provided, the act of representing social and political issues in the third and fourth groups is clearly seen. This paper addresses this issue too.

Among the researches that have dealt with contemporary Iranian art in general, there are limited research that have studied social issues in Iranian art. For instance, Mohajeri (2017) examines the impact of community on the artist's work by using a reflection approach. However, the main point is that the samples taken by the researcher represent only the society, and that the artists were encouraged and supported by the government for their artworks. The purpose of his research is to examine the works, which criticize the society despite not having any support and so use signs and metaphors to work safely.

As mentioned before, the presence of social issues in contemporary Iranian art is seen now more than ever. This can be related to several factors that this article addresses. How artists deal with social issues is another issue investigated in this paper. Earlier studies in the field of contemporary Iranian art often examined the condition of Iranian art in social and political contexts, although none of them has specifically addressed social issues in the aforementioned art. There are also no direct references to the subject. This article focuses more on the artworks to obtain a better understanding of contemporary Iranian art.

## Research Methods

For this purpose, the social semiotics approach is used. Thus, it is necessary to give a brief description of the social semiotics approach before addressing the main issue. Social semiotics is one of the approaches in the field of semiotics. The keyword of social semiotic is 'resource', which is both at once the products of cultural history and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages.

By and large, social semiotics is about how we use material resources to produce meaning. However, there cannot be a how without a what. We need to look at the meaning itself as well. This study, by using social semiotics, decodes selected Iranian paintings including Shohreh Mehran, Samira Alikhanzadeh, Khosrow Hassanzade, Nazar Mousavinia, Leyli Rashidi Rauf, Peyman Shafieezadeh, Amirhossein Zanjani, and Mojtaba Amini to provide a deeper insight into how contemporary Iranian artists reflect the social issues in their artworks. The criterion for selecting these artists is that these artists were selected from the young and contemporary and professional artists of Iran. Social issues are clearly seen in the works of these artists and all these artists have dealt with the contemporary social issues.

## Social Semiotics

Semiotics is an approach which asks two fundamental questions:

- 1) what do images represent and how? and
- 2) what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in the images stand for? (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001).

Semiotics answers these questions with the study of signs to find the relationship between the signifier and the signified. According to Saussure, who worked on a particular methodologically exemplary semiological system, the signified is a concept, the signifier is the acoustic image (which is mental) and the relationship between concept and image is the sign (Barthes, 1972).

In social semiotics, which is one of the sub-branches of semiotics, signs and messages should always be placed in the context of relationships and social processes. The focus of social semiotics has shifted from signs to the use of semiotic resources. In other words, the term 'semiotics resources' is a key term in social semiotics that originated in the work of Halliday (1978) who argues that the grammar of a language is not a code nor a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a 'resource' for making meanings.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), the creator of the sign grew up in a socio-historical and cultural context as well, and in the process, use the sources of the sign which are derived from the social structure. Furthermore, they believe that meaning is dealt with and understood in a social context, not in a closed, simultaneous, fixed and static system. In other words, individuals play a participatory and active role in creating and understanding meaning, in which individuals collectively represent their perspective of the world.

In a similar vein, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) consider three meanings for reading images: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and composition meaning. In the representational meaning, the constituent parts of the images are examined in two different narrative and conceptual structures. The interactive meaning examines the relationship and interaction between the image and the viewer and composition meaning reads images according to components such as the information value, salience, and framing (Kaltenbacher, Kress and Leeuwen, 2007). This research uses Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotics to read the works of artists and better understand the contemporary Iranian art.

## Findings Analysis and the Discussion

### The Trend of Contemporary Iranian Art Since 1989

To better understand how social issues are reflected in the contemporary Iranian art and how this concern arises among the young artists, it is necessary to examine the political and social context in relation to the art issues. This is due to the fact that governments apply different policies towards art and these policies have not only a direct impact on the development of art in certain areas but can also cause the emergence of various concerns among the artists.

Therefore, cognition of the political and social conditions of Iran is necessary to better understand the contemporary Iranian art. In this respect, this article, with a brief look at the political and social currents and their impact on the contemporary Iranian art, examines the emergence of different viewpoints and concerns of the new generation of Iranian artists by employing the use of social semiotics.

Despite great support from the government institutions for revolutionary art, we are witnessing a decline in such artworks after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). This decline was the result of the political, cultural and social changes that took place at that time. The end of the war and the coming to power of the new government (Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani-from 1989 until 1997) were among the most important factors of these changes. On the one hand, the new policies of the government have caused a change in the domestic and foreign priorities along with a change in Iran's relations with the international system (Soltani and Amiri, 2010). On the other hand, population growth has caused the emergence of the young artists as well as women at the time. Changes in government policies have led to the emergence of several non-governmental organizations in support of the arts and have provided opportunities for the artists to participate in the international arena (Grigor 2014). Eventually, all these events provide favourable conditions for more artists to work in different artistic areas and Iranian art has started to flourish after a period of recession.

However, during this period, the artistic atmosphere was still influenced by the revolution, and despite holding numerous artistic events, most support was geared towards the revolutionary art. For instance, in 1991, for the first time after the Islamic Revolution, the painting biennale began to operate. With the exception of the first exhibition (1991) when policies were not yet very bold, in the later exhibitions (1993, 1995 and 1997), the artworks were categorized in catalogues and art galleries in such a way that the preference for revolutionary painters was clearly visible. Thus, a large number of dissident artists refused to participate in these kinds of biennials and exhibitions. Therefore, art support from the government during this period was limited to revolutionary art. Hossein Khosrojerdi, Naser Palangi, Kazem Chalipa, Habibollah Sadeghi and Iraj Eskandari are considered the revolutionary artists of that period (Keshmirshakan, 2006) (Figs. 1 &2).



**Fig.1:** Kazem Chalipa, Jangavaran Jebheye Noor (Warriors of the Light Front), 1980, 70\*200 cm. Source: <http://Tajasomi.ir/>



**Fig. 2:** Habibollah Sadeghi, Rami Jamarat (Stoning of the Devil), 1987, Oil on canvas, 110\*160cm. Source: <http://sadeghi.gallery/>

Nevertheless, the dominant art form was different from what was seen at the governmental biennials and exhibitions. Most of the artists of this period were neo-traditionalists. Mostafa Darreh-Baghi, Hamid Nikan and Mohammad Mahdi Rasouli were such artists. It should be mentioned that this style was common among the artists before the revolution (1960s and 1970s) too (Keshmirshekan, 2006). It means that the artists have returned to pre-revolutionary themes and concerns from when formalism was the dominant aspect of Iranian painting and that the artists have represented ancient Iranian mythology and mysticism.

The next presidential term (Mohammad Khatami), from 1997 until 2005, provided better conditions for the active presence of artists of different spectrums. During this period, along with the economic growth, came the creation of open space for the press and book publishing (Abrahamian, 2018). Moreover, during this period, revolutionary ideas were more clearly criticized, and more freedom of thought and art was demanded by the people due to fewer restrictions (Callamard, Grillo, & Redmond, 2006). The foundation of social and intellectual freedoms arose during this period. In the same spirit, Grigor describes the Khatami era:

“Khatami believed that a new voice, the voice of artists, writers, intellectuals, and creators, must be heard... In effect, what Khatami did for the arts was to crack open the closet door.”

(2014:79)

Although no fundamental changes have taken place since the end of Khatami's presidency, and many intellectuals have concluded that real power is elsewhere, this period is a turning point for the artists (Sohrabi, 2006). Scholars also attribute the TMOCA's developments during this period to the president as Eimen claims:

“While there are many sociopolitical factors at play in the museum's transformation, an important turning point is certainly the 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami (elected 1997–2005) ... A new director was then appointed to head the museum and therefore the Visual Arts Center, Dr Ali-Reza Sami-Azar (1999–2005).<sup>35</sup> Like Khatami, this new director similarly pushed conventional boundaries.”

(2013:92)

In a similar vein, concepts such as the relationship between religion and modernity, the maximum participation of different sections of society, the participation in the world community and civil discourses were introduced during this period. In addition, the prominent presence of women in political, social, and artistic arenas came into being as one of the unique characteristics of this period. This popular contribution turned the uniform atmosphere of belief of the past into an atmosphere of unprecedented multiplicity and diversity, both in the field of socio-politics and art. Thus, the possibility of dialogue and the exchange of ideas was provided, which opened the field for the activities of different artists.

Meanwhile, management of the biennale was given to those who had been marginalized in the previous periods. We are witnessing the presence of dissident artists in the fifth and sixth painting biennials who refused to participate in such exhibitions during the previous periods. Obviously, when the possibility of dialogue for artists with diverse perspectives is provided, artists would discover a different perspective on the world around them on the one hand, but on the other hand, it creates a critical view. Therefore, in this period, changes in the subject of artworks are evident. These artists dealt with subjects such as identity, tradition, and political and social issues in their works. Within this context, as Keshmirshekan articulates:

“There are themes which artists look at as important issues of their time; among these are environmental and ecological issues, the role of women in society, and issues relating to religion and spirituality.”

(2007:349)

Another aspect of the artistic developments of this period is found in the government's policies in international relations. During this period, the government worked to improve relations with other countries, which increased the presence of artists in the international arena. Some of the most significant results of these international communications include holding the first exhibition of modern and contemporary Iranian art after the revolution in Britain and then in the United States in 2001, and the first appearance of Iranian artists at the Venice Biennale in 2002 after the revolution. Unlike the previous period, a considerable achievement of this period was the activity of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) in various fields without any focus on a particular style. Items included in the aforementioned activity were Iranian photography (2002), Abstract expressionism (2003), British sculpture (2004), Gerhard Richter (2004) and Japanese Art (2005) (Grigor, 2014).

Among all these opportunities to associate with the outside world during this period, the role of the development of communication technology should not be overlooked. At this time, the advent of mass media enabled artists to communicate with the outside world. The availability of up-to-date information plays a pivotal role in opening artists' minds about the issues. In addition, electronic communication made geographical distance meaningless and thus allowed communities to interact with each other. Domestic artists can easily connect with Iranian immigrant artists and other artists around the world and exchange information. The result of these exchanges, in addition to raising awareness, is the creation of a kind of critical perspective which is derived from comparing oneself with others. It can be claimed that being in a position between "self and another" was one of the striking factors that caused artists to look at themselves critically at this time. This "self" could be the culture, common traditions, society or even the policies and laws that govern society. The appearance of this critical attitude can be seen in the artworks of Massoud Arabshahi, Nikzad Nodjoui, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Farah Ossouli, Rozita Sharafjahan, Samira Eskandarfar (Keshmirshakan, 2010) (Fig. 3 & 4).



**Fig. 3:** Nikzad Nodjoui, To Point Out, 2003, Oil on canvas. Source : <https://www.lacan.com/>



**Fig.4:** Rozita Sharafjahan, Untitled, 2005, Mixed media, 120\*240cm, Source: <https://darz.art/>

During the next period, with Iran under the power of the new government (headed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) from 2005 until 2013, the conditions of Iranian art changed again. The advancement of Iran's nuclear program, despite international pressure, led to economic sanctions. In addition to economic problems, these sanctions have isolated Iran in the international arena. Thus, international communications declined significantly. During this period, the government imposed many restrictions on science, culture, and the arts by claiming a return to revolutionary ideals. Some of these restrictions included the removal of critical professors and students from the universities and the removal of newspapers critical of the government. During this period, the number of newspapers significantly dropped, and the critical newspapers were prevented from continuing their activities under the pretext that they had been spreading lies and rumours. In this regard, the government's domination of non-governmental organizations and the public media had turned them into government propaganda tools (Tarjoman and Ghafari, 2020). Thus, people turned to mass media more than ever.

The arts arena was not immune to these restrictions. Changes in government policies had turned the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art into a static space that in some cases held exhibitions of miniatures or calligraphy instead of displaying works related to modern art, which is the main purpose of the museum. During this period, the management of the biennale again fell into the hands of revolutionary painters, and supervision and restrictions again overshadowed this artistic movement. The point that stands out more than ever in this period is the stark distinction between the works displayed in the private and public galleries. Despite all the restrictions, most private galleries focused on displaying works by contemporary artists who represent society and take a critical look at it. Thus, private galleries were the only communication platforms for artists.

The remarkable matter here is that despite the various restrictions that existed in this period, there is no change in the way of expression the artists—even the critique of the existing situation is stronger than before. This is how Grigor describes this period:

“After the election of the conservative government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, even if artists are pressured and galleries are closed down, the constitution enables the ownership and running of private galleries, the production of all sorts of art, the selling and buying of that art, the establishment of institutions preoccupied with artistic discourses, the publication of art journals and magazines, the teaching and learning of art, and above all the flourishing of artists’ studios in which the nude, in its most fascinating and disturbing, its most tender and vulgar form, is ever-present.”  
(2014:79)

Therefore, it is evident that contemporary Iranian artists continue their artistic activities despite all the restrictions. However, there are artists who perform their artistic activities in the direction of representing and criticizing society. Shohreh Mehran is one of these artists. Mehran in her “School Girls” series focuses on young girls and their status in society (Fig. 5). In terms of presentational structure, the artwork has narrative and action structures. It has two main participants two teenage girls. One participant is the Goal, while the other is the Actor. As a result, the artwork's narrative visual proposition is transactional. The Goal participant is in the middle of the image, which is in the centre of attention. Moreover, her black jacket creates contrast and attracts attention. The black colour of the jacket signifies sadness and limitation, and the red colour of the background has signified blood, life, and vitality. Thus, the artist has emphasized the contradiction of concepts such as life/vitality and limitation/sorrow.



**Fig.5:** Shohreh Mehran, from “schoolgirls “series, 2009, Oil on canvas, 100\*150cm. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/shohreh-mehran-untitled>.

Another girl is an Actor and both her hands and her body rotation are directed toward the Goal. The two participants are connected by their hands and oblique lines in the background. Moreover, vectors such as walking and symbols such as school uniforms make their connection stronger. This type of school uniform is a familiar sign for all Iranian audiences, especially women. A sign of an era with excitement, joy, and anxiety at the same time. The girls' hands and the diagonal lines of the background cause the rotation and movement in the artwork. The movement which is also reflected in the folds of their clothes shows femininity, softness, and freshness.

Although the main participants in this work are humans, the fabric is the most prominent element. Fabric is a sign of covering and concealing. In this regard, we can see that the participants cover their faces and have no interest in revealing their identities. They feel ashamed and afraid of being seen. Similarly, bracelets have no decorative aspect and are wrapped around the Actor's hands several times, which signifies closure and limitation. The hand of another girl, who is the Goal participant here, has a feeling of astonishment and half-life.

According to Holliday & Matthiessen (2013), in interaction with the viewer, this work is an 'offer'. There is no contact between the participants inside the work and the audience and the displayed participants provide the viewers with social and cultural information. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) state, by choosing the front angle, the artist shows that what you see is part of our world and what we are dealing with. Furthermore, according to the syntagmatic analysis of Saussure, the coexistence of concepts such as adolescence and vitality along with being covered and limited indicates that the artist represents the cultural and social limitations of girls in society which causes the loss of vitality of the society.

Alikhanzadeh also addresses women's issues in Iranian society from another point of view. Alikhanzadeh emphasizes the customs and misplaced cultures in society. Fig. 6 is from the “Double” series of Alikhanzadeh which has a conceptual and classification structure. It has three participants who are two girls and one boy. The position of the participants in this work can be examined in a tree structure. In the tree structure, the superordinate participant who is more important is in a higher position. Two girl participants are shown in the subordinate position. This kind of position of the participants indicates the superiority of the boy over the girl, and the repetition of the girl and the larger size of the boy emphasize that she is less valuable than the boy.



**Fig. 6:** Samira Alikhanzadeh, *From the Double series*, 2011, digital print on Plexiglas, mirror fragments and acrylic on board, 100 x 150 cm. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

Moreover, the boy who is in the center, has the most information value in the artwork. On the other hand, the position of the girls in front of the image and the type of attention to detail indicate the highest degree of salience in the composition of the artwork. The contradiction of the image of the two perfectly adorned girls and the black and white image of a boy, while in a higher position than girls, indicate this cultural contrast in society.

Regular background holes on girls' clothes and headdresses are also repeated. These holes signify the rules of society that affect only the lives of the girls. Rules such as the equality of a man's ransom with two women are also emphasized by the title of the work. The girls' artificial smiles show their dissatisfaction and pressure from these rules and common customs of society. They communicate directly with the audience and according to Holliday (2014) the artwork considers 'demand'. Furthermore, the choice of the front angle emphasizes that they share a part of their world with the audience, and they attempt to involve the audience. In this vein, the holes that signify the laws governing the society are mirrors so that when the audience is in front of the artwork, they see the reflection of pieces of their faces in them. In fact, the main point here is that these social rules are created by the people in the community and the artist makes the audience review them.

The remarkable point here is that the subject of most of the new generation of artists is borrowed from the world around them. With regard to this, the concern of these artists is not only the narrative of the world around them but also looking at the subjects from a critical point of view. In other words, these artists are not unconcerned as to what is happening around them, and it can be said that this is why political and social issues affect Iranian art to such an extent. In fact, the artist reviews issues related to self, traditions, the cultures of society and the governing laws, and in this review, tries to challenge the defects and the limitations. In the same spirit, one of the most significant roles that Gaztambide (2008) defines for artists is the challenging of boundaries, rules and expectations, and disturbing the social order to promote social transformation and reconstruction.

Likewise, "Prostitutes" by Khosrow Hassanzadeh is an artwork that represents social issues and makes the audience look at them from a different point of view (Fig. 7). It has a conceptual and classificational structure and the covert taxonomy is also obvious. Kress and Van Leeuwen maintain that an important feature of covert taxonomy structure is that the subordinates are placed in a symmetrical composition with the same size and the same orientation relative to the horizontal and vertical axes at equal distances from each other and at the front angle (Kress, and Van Leeuwen, 2020). As in this work, the symmetrical and equal representation of women indicates that they are subordinates. Moreover, the faces of women are presented as simply and concisely as possible to emphasize this subordinate and

insignificance. Hence it is highlighted here that these women are from the lower classes of society.



**Fig. 7:** Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Prostitutes, 2002, Painting on silk-screen print. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

The title of the work has added a new meaning to the work, as Barthes calls this type of text-image relationship Relay (Barthes, 1977). In a similar vein, by referring to the title, the identity of women is determined. Thus, the main point here is that society considers these women as the lower and worthless stratum of society. According to Saussure's syntagmatic analysis, the term "prostitutes", along with the concept of inferiority as well as signs such as car's plate number, creates a different meaning in the minds of the Iranian audience. They are reminded of the news of the murders of the prostitutes. The artwork refers to the murder of 16 prostitutes in Iran, which the killer did because of his religious beliefs. In fact, they are victims of society's beliefs.

Like 'demand' images, participants who are prostitutes here, look directly at the audience. Hence, a strong social interaction between the artwork and the audience is created. Moreover, selecting the front angle causes the viewer to be completely involved with the artwork. Colours have also been reduced as much as possible to emphasize more hidden truths. By and large, the artist intends to confront the victims in front of the audience, who are the people of the society, so that they can look at the issue again and from another angle. In this context, it can be seen that the artist invites the community to review their beliefs.

Unlike previous periods, with the coming to power of the new government (headed by President Hassan Rouhani) from 2013 until 2021, there have been no fundamental changes in the field of culture and art as well as the lifting of the restrictions. With the increasing proliferation of mass media and various social networks, the connection of artists with the outside world is increasing to the point that today, many artists prefer to share their works in cyberspace. In other words, every artist has a medium that can communicate directly with their audience. These media have advantages that include the lack of censorship and restrictions, thus enabling artworks to be viewed by a general and specific audience all over the world, which creates a wider critical atmosphere.

Nazar Mousavinia is one of the artists of this period whose narrations and references to literature, cinema, philosophy, history, and myths are some of the most remarkable qualities of his paintings. Mousavinia's artwork from the "Parrot and Merchant" series has a narrative and action structure with two main participants (Fig. 8). Furthermore, it has a transaction structure and participants are connected by the act of cutting the tongue. The person in the center of the artwork, who is much larger than the others, is the Goal participant. The scissors that stimulate action are the Actor participant. Cutting one's tongue signifies stopping to talk

and averting the disclosure of a secret. Here the cutting of the tongue is done by the person herself, which indicates self-punishment and self-censorship.

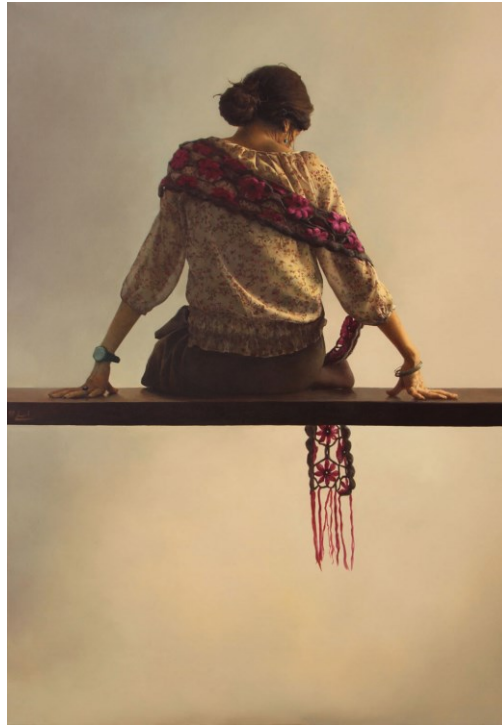


**Fig. 8:** Nazar Mousavinia, From parrot and merchant series, 2013, Acrylic on canvas, 100\*100cm. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

The title of the work is like a text that defines and interprets the image. This is what Barthes calls “Anchorage” (Barthes, 1977). The title refers to the story of Rumi. In the parrot and merchant story, the merchant blames himself for his words which leads to the loss of the parrot. Then, the title of the work emphasizes concepts such as blaming and loss due to talking. Moreover, in the background, the pulled-back curtain indicates the revelation of a secret and changes. The butterfly, which is a sign of change, also emphasizes the occurrence of an event. In terms of the syntagmatic analysis of Saussure, it is found that a change has taken place and a secret has been revealed. In fact, the person has become self-censored for fear of losing. Since the parrot is attached to the scissors, it indicates that the parrot is attached by a cutting tool. The loss of a parrot implies the loss of a person's material and spiritual assets.

Likewise, based on the paradigmatic analysis of Saussure, a contemporary woman being substituted for the story's merchant changes the artwork's concept. Mousavinia considers Rumi's story to be a metaphor for today's society, in which women of this society are forced to censor themselves in order to preserve their assets. Furthermore, another important concept which is the focus of this story is the concept of freedom, since the merchant's talk causes the merchant to lose the parrot, but on the other hand, it has led to the release of the parrot. Consequently, the significant concepts that the artist highlights are freedom and censorship in the contemporary era.

Leyli Rashidi Rauf is another young contemporary Iranian artist who focuses more on the status of women in her artwork. The “Unstable” series is one of these kinds of artworks with this theme (Fig. 9). “Unstable” has a conceptual and symbolic attributive structure. One of the characteristics of symbolic attributive, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen, is that the object can look out of place (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020). As can be seen in this artwork, the woman is in an unusual place. The background has no details to draw all the attention to the woman. The woman is the Carrier and other details are considered Possessive Attributes. Possessive Attributes are a board and feminine elements such as floral dresses, skirt, shawl, and ornaments that are carefully addressed to present her as an elegant and staid woman. Furthermore, a harmony of shapes and colours can be seen well in the clothes, ornaments, and hair of the woman. Indeed, Possessive Attributes define the identity and the characteristics of the girl as a symbol of the ideal woman.

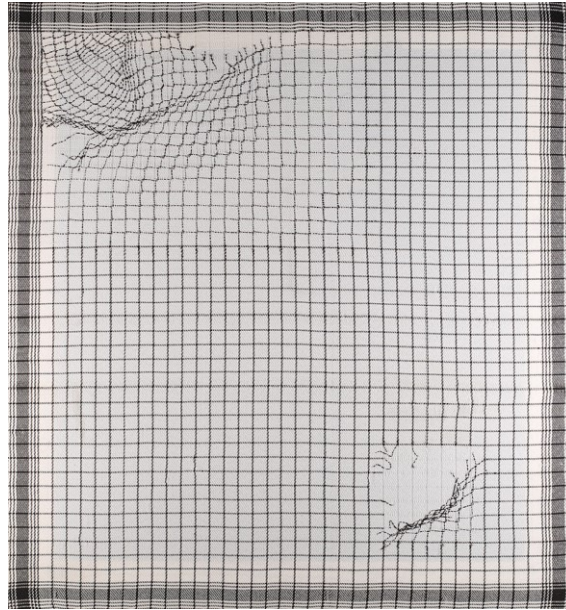


**Fig. 9:** Leyli Rashidi Rauf, From Unstable series, 2013, Oil on canvas, 125\*180cm.  
(Source: courtesy of the artist)

The shawl, which is emphasized by creating a colour contrast, is made of interwoven flowers. It seems that the warp and woof of the shawl come out from the woman and the worried look towards the end part of the shawl also emphasizes this issue. Besides the rotation of her neck, the position of her hands indicates that she is concerned about losing her stability and falling. The title of the artwork, “Unstable”, and the lack of a sign attached to the ground, such as the base of the board and the invisibility of the woman's foot, all emphasize the woman's instability. However, this instability is presented in the form of a symmetrical and static composition. In fact, everything seems calm, but there is an apprehension behind this calm and silence. Moreover, as mentioned, the participant's position in the central and symmetrical composition as well as the vertical angle shows her dignity and ideality. There is a contradiction between the ideal girl and her being in the wrong place. According to Holliday et al., this artwork is an ‘offer’ because the participant is behind the audience and there is no direct connection between them (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Likewise, the selection of the long shot frame showed the participant out of reach and only to be seen from a distance. Therefore, in this work, Rashidi Rauf indicates the suspended and ambiguous situation of the women with an ambiguous feeling and with fear of the future. She emphasizes the deterioration of the situation by creating contradictions.

Another artist is Peyman Shafieezadeh who deals with the beliefs in the “Middle Beliefs” series (Fig. 10). The artwork has a conceptual and symbolic suggestive structure and only one participant which is the Carrier. The only participant in this artwork is Chafiyah. The image of Chafiyah may not be reminiscent of a specific subject for audiences around the world, but for the Iranian audience, Chafiyah is the symbol of revolutionary and religious beliefs. What can be seen in this artwork is a fragmented Chafiyah. In fact, it is the warp and woof of the beliefs and ideas of a society that is fragmented. This symbol no longer has the power of the past and is collapsing from within. The dark colored frame, which is also a part of the Chafiyah design, surrounds the artwork. The closure of the space indicates the limitation and lack of freedom. Then, Shafieezadeh has presented and challenged the concepts of limitation and belief

together. In fact, in this work, the artist looks at the beliefs and values of the past in a critical way.

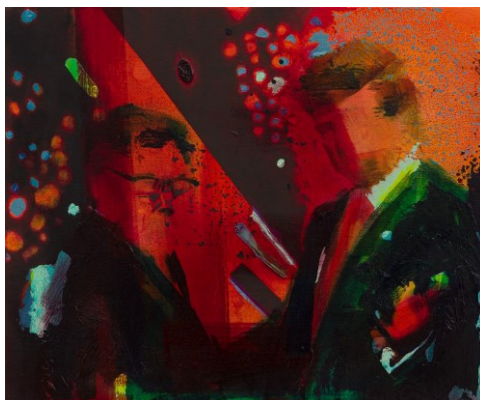


**Fig. 10:** Peyman Shafieezadeh, From “Middle Belief” series, 2018, Stitch on Kaffiyeh, 95\*95cm. Source: <http://www.peymanshafieezadeh.com/exhibitions/back-fist/>.

Amirhossein Zanjani is an artist who expresses social issues more concretely and clearly (Fig. 11). “Keeping a Friendly Distance” has a narrative and action structure with two main participants. The handshake action connects the two participants. The Actor participant is identified by the larger size, the white collar and the red spot on the coat. The oblique vector of the Actor’s neck depicts that his hand is pointing to the Goal participant. The act of shaking indicates the concept of negotiation and agreement. The two great politicians of the world, Donald Trump<sup>2</sup>, and Kim Jong-un<sup>3</sup> can be recognized based on the semiotic elements such as the shapes of the faces, glasses, hair color, and styles. According to the paradigmatic analysis of Saussure, the succession of two politicians instead of two ordinary people negotiating has created a different concept. Furthermore, when this work is produced in the context of Iranian society, this concept becomes deeper and more challenging.

<sup>2</sup> Then President of the United States

<sup>3</sup> Supreme Leader of North Korea



**Fig. 11:** Amirhossein Zanjani, “Keeping a Friendly Distance”, 2020, Oil on canvas, 30\*40 cm. Source: <http://amirhosseinzanjani.com/>.

In the contemporary era, US sanctions against Iran have caused great economic problems for the Iranian people. Indeed, the living conditions of the Iranian people have become somewhat dependent on the political situation and the negotiations of politicians. Undeniably, the world's political news is more tied to the daily lives of the Iranian people than ever before. As a result, for an Iranian audience, this artwork has a distinct concept. A concept that includes anxiety about the future and enduring the present. Signs of these concepts are quite visible in the colored spots created in the background and the type of brush strokes. Colors and forms have been reduced as much as possible and have been considered abstractly to make the concept clearer. Red, which is the predominant color of the background, refers to the concepts such as danger, and anxiety. In this vein, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) consider reduction and abstraction as the necessity of revealing hidden and inner truths.

From the perspective of representation interaction, both participants look directly at the viewer and contact him. Holliday et al. called this type of image ‘demand’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). In this case, the viewer is the object. In fact, the audience is shown an important part of this negotiation. Participants look at the audience while their bodies are tilted to the other side, in which case they show us that they are from a different world but communicate with us. However, this connection is accompanied by a sense of humiliation. A look from a position of power to inferiority.

The title of the work, “Keeping a Friendly Distance”, opens a new window for reading the work. As Barthes (1977) calls one kind of image and text relationship Relay. In this type of relationship, the text adds a new or different meaning to the image. The title of the work refers to the concept of peaceful communication between the heads of power. As mentioned, the meeting of the powerful US and North Korea is indicated. The meeting ended some of North Korea's sanctions. Therefore, this negotiation is a metaphor for the leaders of Iran and the difficult economic conditions of the Iranian people.

Following the difficult economic, political and social conditions in Iran during this period, widespread protests took place in various fields in the country, all of which were suppressed. The remarkable point in all these protests was the leading and powerful presence of the girls of the young generation. Mojtaba Amini addresses these girls in his artwork (Fig. 12). The “Tear on town” series has a narrative and reactional structure with three participants. The two participants are connected by the action vector chanting as well as by the white vector that connects their hands. They are Actor participants. The other participant is a Reactor who accompanies the Actor participants with her gaze. This reactional structure is non-transactional since the phenomenon is not seen in it and the eyes look out of the frame.



**Fig. 12:** Mojtaba Amini, From “Tear in Town” series, 2020, Collage, 52\*63.5cm. Source: <https://mohsen.gallery/series/mojtaba-amini-teer-art-fair-online/>.

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) declare, in this structure, a sense of identification and empathy is created between the audience and the participants because it is left to the viewer to imagine what the participant is looking at. Furthermore, the type of clothing of the participants is quite familiar to an Iranian audience. This type of clothing and hairstyle for Iranian girls is in public and on the street. The colour and texture of the background also emphasize concepts such as public and urban space. Moreover, technically, the artwork is presented in a way that is very close to graffiti. In this way, concepts such as protest and repression are further emphasized.

Participants are chanting in public, and Persian texts in the background “Payande bad Iran (Viva Iran)” signifies street protests. According to the paradigmatic analysis of Saussure, the replacement of young girls instead of men/boys in these demonstrations has a different concept. With this means, the artist has emphasized the significance of the role of women in Iranian society.

## Conclusions

Through the investigation of the social and political circumstances of Iran from 1989 to the present and their effects on contemporary Iranian art, this paper concludes that a gradual reflection of social issues with critical perspectives has emerged in the artworks of Iranian artists since the late 1990s. These critical views can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s when artists started to care about the concept of their artworks and art had become a means of expression. This point of view later expanded and reached its peak during the Khatami presidency. These changes have two main reasons: first, the government's policies to provide a possibility for dialogue and the exchange of ideas, and open political and social spaces for artists to work and critique in; and second, the growth and advancement of technology. The remarkable point here is that the power and influence of technology and mass media were so great that in the following periods, despite increasing restrictions and censorship, not only did the reflection of social issues in the works of the artists not decrease, but these issues are also one of the main subjects of the artists of the new generation.

From another point of view, it can be claimed that in situations where it is not possible to directly criticize issues due to restrictions and censorship, art will become a tool for indirect criticism. Through the perusal of the semiotics of the selected artworks, it is understood that the young generation of Iranian artists often uses signs in their artworks. Indeed, these artists portray their life experiences in this society through many layers and signs, which is their way of challenging and criticizing its faults.

This paper thus concludes Iran's contemporary art is more involved with Iran's social, political and social issues and events. In fact, today, new-generation Iranian artists have considered art as a tool to express and criticize social issues in order to use art to challenge various issues including traditional views, and political, economic and social issues. Future researchers can examine the reflection of social issues in artists' works from the audience's point of view, and whether the reflection of these issues has an effect on the audience's view of the world or not, and if so, what is the effect. Also, future researchers can examine the concerns of contemporary Iranian artists in the international arena.

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