

Original Research Article

Analysis of Feminist Discourse in Contemporary Iranian Photography Based on Gillian Rose's Theory*Farzad Hamidimanesh¹, Mohsen Marasy^{1**}**1. Art Research Department, Faculty of Art, Shahed University, Tehran, Iran**

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Abstract

Problem statement: The Feminist movement in Iran has been reconstructed not only as an imported discourse but also as an entity influenced by the complications of the cultural ecosystem and femininity structures of contemporary society. In this regard, the art of photography, as a representational medium, has created a ground for expressing the lived experience of female artists. The present study has deeply analyzed the content and issues raised in feminist discourse, which were shaped under the influence of contemporary social conditions both in the territory of Iran and around the world, and have influenced the contemporary visual culture in Iran, relying on the analysis of the existing feminist photographic artworks.

Research objective: The research aims to identify the implications of feminist discourse appeared in contemporary works of feminist photography in Iran to further analyze the concepts behind it. The main question of the research here is: According to Gillian Rose's discourse analysis method, what concepts are included in contemporary feminist photography in Iranian discourse?

Research method: This research study has adopted a qualitative approach based on the discourse analysis method. The social philosophy of Gillian Rose, containing a four-part analytical framework, including 1. production, 2. image itself, 3. circulation, and 4. audiencing, was used for the systematic analysis of the target works. To increase the accuracy of the discourse patterns, the 'content frequency' was applied as a scientific index. These percentages are not extracted as mere confirming statistical data; rather, they have been applied as a tool for measuring discourse level and explaining the weight of each concept in the semantic structure of the artworks to analyze the hierarchy established in representation.

Conclusion: The research findings show that contemporary photography in Iran has moved from mere depiction of the situation to a critical act and dynamic representations. The discourse dominance of "direct representation of femininity typecasts" (57%) indicates a transition from passive subjectivity to active confrontation with hegemonic structures. Moreover, 'redefining the identity in the local context' (28%) and 'hidden resistances' (18%) reveal complex layers of intervention that indicate the formation of a plural feminist identity that is aware of Iran's socio-cultural demands. These results indicate that the art of photography in Iran has become a platform for the conscious reproduction of women's rights and identity by connecting "form" and "social criticism".

Keywords: *Image Analysis, Gillian Rose, Discourse Analysis, Contemporary Iran, Photography, Feminism.*

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Introduction

Contemporary society has encountered an explosion of visual production in photography. The immediate and multisensory impression of photographs makes photography a unique area, transforming people's communication. By turning humanistic discourse, the theorists such as Tagg and Sekula, inspired by Foucault, have established a structure for analyzing photographs beyond their mere function as a medium, to represent a discursive practice having material, institutional, and ideological implications. The art of Photography, as the only language that would be perceived by most people firming communication with other human beings, has become a dynamic means for feminist activism; thereby, this medium has been applied by women to challenge typecasts, parodies of femininity, and create hybrid images. The deep connection between feminism and photography has made the visual art a platform for emerging emotions, narrating alternative stories, and trying to change social perceptions of women.

Feminist discourse in photography has become a powerful tool for critiquing violence and female inequalities, allowing Iranian photographers to address socio-political and cultural challenges, and get their message across to society. Despite numerous studies on the subject of women's representation in the media, whether in cinema or television, a comprehensive study to systematically analyze the visual components and visionary currents in contemporary photography in Iran is needed. Therefore, to fill this gap, the study raises the following main question: According to Gillian Rose's idea for discourse analysis, what concepts does the feminist photography discourse include in the contemporary society of Iran? The study aims to identify the visionary developments and discover the feminist concepts hidden in contemporary Iranian photography. It is expected that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and achievements of women in Iranian art and society.

Research Method

This research study has applied qualitative content analysis based on Gillian Rose's discourse analysis method. Research data were collected relying on library and documentary resources, using the card observation tool. The validity and reliability of this tool were ensured through the Delphi technique and by acquiring feedback from a group of experts. For data analysis, the qualitative content obtained from the observation cards was thematically coded and organized using MAXQDA software. The process of content analysis and final interpretation of the findings was carried out based on the multiple stages of the methodology shown in Figs. 1 & 2, based on the feminist discourse as a theoretical framework. The relative frequency percentage of categories was calculated by considering the frequency of components found in the photographic works and calculating their ratio to the total sample size to estimate the percentage.

Research Background

The literature review showed that despite the existence of case studies on the works of individual artists, no comprehensive study has been conducted so far to specifically analyze the discourse of

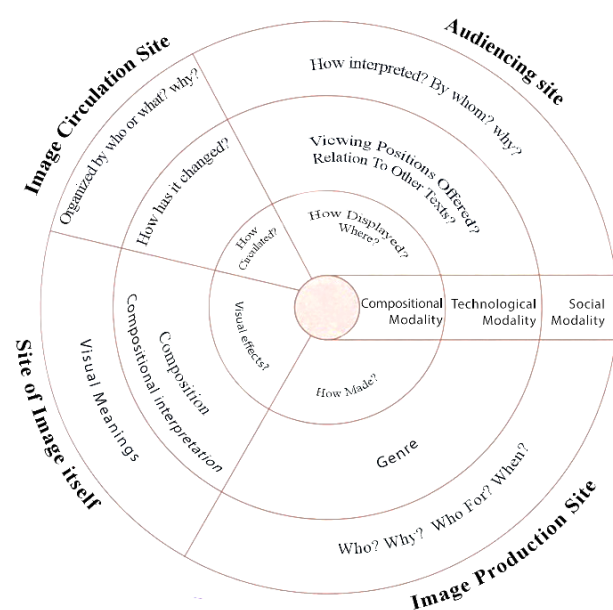


Fig. 1. Sites and methods for interpreting visual materials. Source: Rose, 2023, 67.

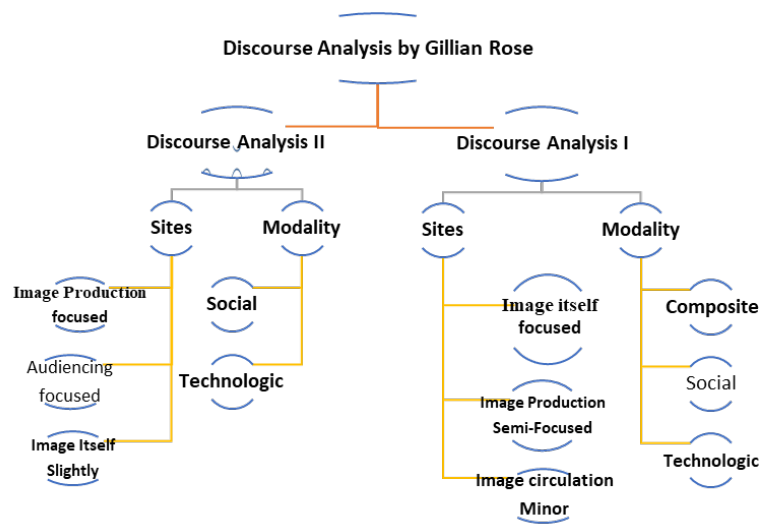


Fig 2. The composite structure of discourse analysis by Gillian Rose, adopted from the book titled “Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials”. Source: Authors.

feminism in contemporary Iranian photography. Azari (2011), in an academic thesis, by analyzing the themes of post-revolutionary photography relying on the socio-political context and feminist art, showed that clothing and violence are considered the most important issues that acquire political implications in the social context. Zare (2017), by studying the ideas of feminism, phenomenology, the nature of women, and politic affair, states that contemporary Iranian photographers, instead of focusing on the representation of a woman as a female, absolutely represent femininity as a political issue. Haring (2017), in a study on works by Shirin Neshat, believes that she has opened the dialogue between Islamic feminism, Iranian tradition, and European modernity and has depicted prejudiced aspects to expose dual contradictions under the banner of her multicultural identity. In another study, Rahbari et al. (2019) has addressed the representation of women’s bodies in nationalist discourses. He also added that relying on Michel Foucault’s Idea of biopolitics and Islamic nationalist discourse, the female body was used as an introduction for constructing the nation in Iran. Dizaji (2023) considers the presence of women in patriarchal artistic activities as an indication of the important role in the field of art; she also studied

the characteristics of Iranian portrait art by targeting social issues such as gender inequalities and the identical aesthetic politics of the female artworks. In a similar doctoral dissertation, Noori Shirazi (2023), by analyzing the role of Iranian female artists in using digital media, has provided an interpretation of the link between feminism, intercultural practice, and digital imagery in Iran, and focused on the artists’ influence on the socio-political and environmental issues of women’s lives. These reviews indicate the research gap in analyzing the feminist discourse on the conceptual field in contemporary Iranian photography; however, the current study has tried to provide achievements in this field as much as possible.

Theoretical Foundations

Feminism, as a socio-critical movement, has made an attempts to increase women’s awareness, eliminate gender discrimination, criticize traditional stereotypes, alter society’s view of women, achieve legal equality, and to address challenge economic, socio-political power relations that benefit men. This movement, which has expanded over time into multiple theoretical branches such as liberal, radical, postcolonial, and ecofeminism (Tong & Botts, 2024, 23-38), is based on the analysis

of several key concepts as below: 1) Patriarchy, as a social order in which men monopolize power and women are placed in a subordinate position, 2) Gender, as a social construct that considers male and female roles and behaviors not as inherent and biological, but as a product of education and culture (Tyson, 2015, 166). 3) Sexual objectification, which refers to the reduction of women place to objects level for male pleasure. This structure emphasizes that feminine and masculine behavioral characteristics belonging to categories that are perceived and learned and it is the culture, not biology, that shapes the sexual identity. The first emergence of feminist ideas in Iran dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (Mashrooteh), which was a turning point in Iranian society, influenced by the intellectual developments of European countries (Rahbar, 2003, 43). The Iranian feminism, in its specific form and content, has been naturally constructed from the macrostructure of the social hierarchy, and it can be referred to as a historical, religious, political, and cultural reality, which is not known as a pre-established plan or scheme in the activist's mindset (Abbasi, 2021, 40).

• Discourse analysis of photographs based on the ideas of Gillian Rose

Establishing discourse, as a way of conversation and perceiving the world, plays a dynamic role in creating and changing identities, and also in making social relations (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, 1). Critical discourse analysis has characteristics more than a mere verbal one (Durmaz & Yoğun, 2022, 26) that targets the role of discourse in creating and challenging domination (Mohammadi, 2014, 26). Due to the critical dimensions and discursive approach of the feminist movement and the visual context of photographic works, critical-visual discourse analysis of Gillian Rose has been used in this fundamental research; that is, an approach developed in response to the "cultural turn" and the centrality of the photograph in the social sciences. "She believes that discourse analysis is a powerful means in revealing the hidden reasons for

creating and using photographs, and to understand their role in perceiving concepts and ideas" (Ravadrad & Mousavi Haghshenas, 2022, 17-20).

Based on the achievements of thinkers such as Foucault, Kristeva, and Barthes, Rose goes beyond one-dimensional analyses to provide a comprehensive structure for understanding the way a concept is produced and exchanged through images. She argues that a full critical analysis is required to address visual material from four sites and three modalities including: 1) The production site that includes: the conditions and factors influencing image production, 2) The site of the image: the content and composition, 3) The circulation site: the paths an image goes through and the meanings it acquires along the way 4) The audiencing site: it means the way the viewers interpret and perceive the image. Each of these sites can be analyzed from the following modalities: 1. technological modality, 2. compositional modality (formal and aesthetic characteristics of the image), and 3. social modality (the relations governing foundations and dominant ideologies) (Table 1).

The analytical composite structure of Rose idea, allows for a multi-layered analysis by separating discourse analysis into two approaches of visual works; "discourse analysis approach 1" focuses on the image itself and the process of its production with compositional and social dimensions. This approach, influenced by Foucault's ideas, exploits concepts such as "discursive formation," "power/knowledge," and "intertextuality" to analyse discourse as something represented in visual and verbal texts; it pays less attention to the practical actions between foundations (Rose, 2016, 192).

Alternatively, "the discourse analysis approach 2" emphasizes the social dimensions of production and "addressability" (Fig. 2). This approach is focused on the "material practices of foundation" rather than the mere context, and is almost established on an implicit methodology (ibid., 193). By combining these two approaches, the current research study has made an attempt to achieve a comprehensive

Table 1. Sites, methods, and approaches for interpreting visual data. Source: Rose, 2016, 50.

Sites	Modalities		
	Technological	Compositional	Social
Production	Ethnography	Ethnography	Ethnography discourse analysis I
Image itself	Compositional analysis	Compositional Analysis Content Analysis Semiology Cultural Analytics Psychoanalysis	Ethnography social semiotics discourse analysis II
Circulation	Digital methods	Compositional analysis	Ethnography
Audiencing	Ethnography	Ethnography	Ethnography audience studies digital methods

analysis of photographs and the contexts of their production and perception. The Gillian Rose discourse analysis is a comprehensive, critical, and applied method that relying on thinker’s idea like Arnheim and van Leeuwen in understanding visual concepts, Barthes, Hall, and Panofsky in semiotics, Lacan in psychoanalytic criticism, and Foucault in analyzing the discourse of authorities, has become a multidisciplinary approach that can be used to analyze all types of images such as photographs, paintings, films, and advertisements in the area of the social sciences and humanities.

Results

Based on the content analysis of the photographs, the research findings have been classified into three main levels: 1. The way of representation (subjectivity, body, outlook), 2. The critical-political dimensions, and 3. The use of intertextuality.

Photography, due to its popularity and inherent connection to issues of identity and self-expression, has become the primary medium for Iranian feminist artists to reflect their social experiences. It focuses in particular on the representation of the images of women with hijab as “the most dominant embodiment of Iranian visual arts” (Harati, 2014, 12).

By studying the common point of feminism, photography, and sociology, a deeper understanding

of the ways in which visual culture is shaped by social structures will be acquired.

The main focus of discourse in these works is the “realization of women’s rights,” which manifests itself through engagement with multiple areas of public/private boundaries, censorship, othering, embodiment, sexuality, and the critique of violence. This research study shows that artists strategically employ cultural and historical elements to represent complex and displaced female identities and express their feminist perspectives on these social issues.

• Woman as the center of meaning: subjectivity, body, and the politics of the gaze - The centrality of the female subject, and the subject/object duality

Reviewing the photographic works shows that the focus of the human subject (53%), with certain centrality of women and the significant absence of men (87.1%) (Table 2), is a key discursive strategy to challenge the masculine look or ‘gaze male’ according to Rose (Rose, 2016, 165) and to create an independent space for defining female identity, regardless of reference to masculinity. The qualitative analysis of this presence, with an equal frequency of representation as both “subject” and “object” at 29% (Table 2), confirms a cultural transition in contemporary Iranian photography; a situation in which traditional approaches in making objects are challenged by new discourses that

Table 2. Social discourses in the images with the centrality of women. Source: Authors.

The purpose of image production from a social perspective		Frequency	Percentage	
Any intertextual references?	Yes Frequency 47 Percentage 82.46	Reference to other artworks	33	23.08
		Historical events	31	68.21
		Literary references	18	12.59
		Cinematic references	16	11.19
		Religious and cultural references	15	10.49
		Cultural texts	15	10.49
		In-text references	15	10.49
	No	9	79.15	
	To some extent	1	75.10	
	The type of social discourses in the image centered on women?	Gender equality	49	13.57
Women's independency		37	10.25	
The role and representation of women in various spaces		34	9.42	
Attention to the body as object and subject		29	8.03	
Gender and power discourse		26	7.20	
Self-determination		24	6.65	
Challenging sexual typecast		22	6.09	
Challenging dual identities in Islamic society		21	5.82	
Women's place in the family and society		19	5.26	
Resistance to harassment		18	4.99	
self-exoticization		17	4.71	
Critique of reductionism and exotism		14	3.88	
Disapproving of consumerism and the commercialization of Western culture		12	3.32	
Personal and daily spaces		10	2.77	
Body art		8	2.22	
Rejection of stereotypical or typecast standards of beauty		8	2.22	
Top-down		7	1.94	
Volunteering activities		3	0.83	
Other		3	0.83	

emphasize women's agency and subjectivity. Visual preparations, such as looking directly at the camera and powerful gestures, transform the woman from a passive object to an active subject with an inner world (Table 3). The main approach of these artists has created a space for active interpretation and interaction of the viewer (Table 4) in constructing the female subject (37%). By refusing to provide definitive meaning, they consciously invite the viewer from the position of passive consumer to an active participant in the process of making a concept. This strategy raises the representation of women from a visible object to a complex and interpretable subject, which finally decreases the power of the male dominant look.

- Representation of the female body

According to the research findings, the artists have used the female body as a socio-political canvas to align with or rebel against social norms. Based on the feminist discourse, the body has gone beyond a purely aesthetic form and has become a vital space for critiquing power and negotiating complex sexual categories and cultural identities. The results show that the female body has become the main focus of these negotiations in contemporary Iranian photography, in which the artists represent it through complex visual strategies (Fig. 3). One of the most dominant of these strategies, found as the concealment of the body (77.8%), was not

Table 3. Content analysis of photographic works based on discourse analysis by Gillian Rose. Source: Authors.

Target criteria	Freq.	Percentage (%)
The influence of photography in conveying messages and cultural aspects	58	5.66
The theme of the work focuses on feminist issues and challenges.	58	5.66
The focus of feminist discourse on seeking rights and opportunities for women	58	5.66
considering social and cultural issues affecting women's lives (violence, discrimination, inequality)	58	5.66
Criticism of social hierarchy that favors men and disadvantages women	58	5.66
Challenging sexual and social typecasts	57	5.57
Challenging misconceptions about women	57	5.57
The contribution of photographic work to developing women's self-awareness	56	5.47
The effort for equal rights for women and men in politics and society	56	5.47
Using art as a means for social change and raising public awareness about feminist issues	55	5.37
Focusing on public and private matters related to women	54	5.27
Efforts to eliminate sexual discrimination	49	4.79
Criticizing political systems that favor men and hurt women	46	4.49
Emphasizing the importance of collaboration and cooperation between women and feminist movements	45	4.39
Struggling for equal rights for women and men in the field of art and culture	45	4.39
The role of photography in conveying political messages and aspects	36	3.52
Presenting women as active and independent characters	33	3.22
showing women as powerful figures	33	3.22
Presenting traditional roles (typecasts) of women in the workplace	29	2.83
Focusing on the biological contradictions and differences between men and women	28	2.73
presenting women as dependent or weak beings	24	2.34
Valuing women's non-biological merits	22	2.15
Criticism of economic systems that favor men and disadvantage women	9	0.88

Table 4. The view of artists on objects based on the standpoint of the image and the discourse analysis of Gillian Rose. Source: Authors.

Target criteria	Frequency	Percent (%)
Providing an active space for interpretation and interaction between the viewer and the artwork	37	13.60
Focusing on the human aspects	28	10.29
Bold and dare	28	10.29
Self-exoticization	26	9.56
A sign of the imposition of male authority on the body of the object	22	8.09
Purity and innocence	21	7.72
Trapped between the forces of tradition and modernity	20	7.35
Imposed aesthetic principles on women	15	5.51
A sympathetic look	14	5.51
Free from typecasts	14	5.51
Captivity in narration	14	5.51
Women as symbols of life and survival	13	4.78
Women as Guardians of Culture and Tradition	10	3.68
Women as symbols of resistance and perseverance	7	2.57
Active and powerful actors	3	1.10

limited to the veil (45.57%), but beyond this was covered with calligraphy (15.19%), or hiding the face (12.66%), known as a multi-aspect action (Table 5). These representations are not a mere expression of suppression, but a complex situation of entanglement between tradition and modernity (7.35%) and resistance against the power (8.09%) (Table 4). Esfandiary (2018) has pointed out that hidden bodies are a field for the insertion of personal space as political resistance (p.40). In the collection entitled "Women of God," a face covered in poetry is placed next to a gun, showing a complete embodiment of the tension between tradition, political violence, and individual expression. From this viewpoint, the hidden or wounded body is a kind of emotional testimony against bio-power, in which the woman is represented not as a mere passive victim, but rather as a symbol of resistance and endurance (2/57) (Table 4). Another dominant visual strategy found in images was the fragmentation of the body through close-



Fig. 3. The photographs representing female characteristics. a) The feminine feature is covered “Swan Rider, 2004” by Parastou Forouhar, b) Representing the feminine feature “Tina, 2010” by Tahmineh Monzavi, c) The feminine feature is emphasized “Miss Hybrid, 2005” by Shirin Aliabadi. Source: Author’s archive.

up framing (25.32%). This approach removes the female body from a unified entity and focuses more on individual components (Table 5). According to Gillian Rose idea, such framing can serve a dual function: From one hand, the reduction of the body to a fetishistic object and on the other hand, the creation of a personal and sensual narrative emphasizing the vulnerability or activism of a component; By considering the significant absence of the masculine outlook/male gaze in most of these works, the second interpretation seems more likely, that is, focusing on the lived and sensual experience of the female body, rather than displaying it for the pleasure of another person (Rose, 2016, 121).

In some works (43.2%), the feminine feature is emphasized, reflecting the artists’ ongoing debate between reproducing feminine typecasts and attempting to redefine them. In other cases, this emphasis is consistent with traditional typecasts, such as the interest in home decoration (12.12%), which reproduces the interior as a feminine domain (Table 5). On the other hand, the emphasis on features such as displaying the unclothed body (25.46%) and the feature of seduction (42.5%) in this female-centered context can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim the body, sensual action, and a sign of breaking conventional taboos (Table 5). According to a recent study, contemporary feminist art has transformed the female body from a passive object into a powerful symbol of resistance and identity (Karami, 2024, 1). In a society with certain limitations in the public area, this kind of representation in the artistic space is

almost known as a disruptive act. Representing identity in this space is a type of performance that, according to Goffman, is carried out to have a maximum impact on observers as an ultimate goal (Akbarzadeh Jahromi & Ahmadi, 2020, 140).

- Discriminating between the masculine and feminine mindsets of photographers

The works of photography by female artists, with their emphasis on body language and exploration of the psychological and emotional realm of the subject (34%), display an introspective approach that aligns with the concept of the female outlook in feminist theory (Table 5). It has been cleared that the artists’ attempt to destabilize the power dynamics of the look. The dominant approach is “creating a space for active interpretation” (13%), which transforms the viewer from a passive consumer to a participant in the process of making concepts. This strategy is often achieved by a complex employment of oriental typecasts through making critical “Self-exoticization” (9/56%) (Table 4). The artists, by presenting performative acts of identity, challenge the dominant perspectives that define Middle Eastern art (Keshmirshakan, 2013, 180).

A clear example of this approach can be observed in photographic works by Hoda Afshar (Fig. 4), in which she has exploited a humorous combination of the hijab and the European icons of Mickey Mouse ears, teasing orientalist look while representing the hybrid identity of the contemporary Iranian woman. By intentionally adopting and repositioning cultural symbols—with no fixed meaning (Hoodfar, 1992, 25)—these artists invert the Western

Table 5. Image Semiotics based on the place of the subject and the image itself. Source: Authors.

		Semiotics of the image itself	Freq.	Percentage (%)		
The main subject	Human 53.2 %	Human and animal	1	0.9		
		Natural landscape	1	0.9		
		Urban landscape	7	6.3		
		Objects	43	38.7		
		Any male character? If so, is he unclothed?	No man	29	87.1	
			Clothed	3	12.9	
		Any female character? If so, is she unclothed?	She is unclosed, but there are some precautions for covering.	13	23.64	
			Unclothed	1	1.82	
			Clothed	41	55/74	
			No	6	4.58	
Is the main character exposed by other elements?	Yes	Other elements are positioned in the background in relation to the main character	8	6.11		
		Referring to the main character	The direction of other elements refers to the main character	15	11.45	
			Size of other figures compared to the original	No figure in the image	39	29.77
				Golden points	30	22.90
			The position of the main character in relation to golden points and ratios	In golden points	22	16.79
				Outside the golden points and ratios	4	3.05
			Ratio of the main character in the composition	Totally dominant	8	6.14
			Character size relative to the overall composition	Large	11	8.36
			The size of the main character relative to other components	Proper	8	14/6
			If there is a female character in the photo, are the feminine features of the body emphasized?	Female feature covered 33.6 %	Covering with lighting	1
Covering with a veil	36				45.57	
Covering with calligraphy	12	15.19				
Use of image framing	6	7.59				
Placing the figure behind other elements of the image	10	12.66				
Using the body parts	1	1.27				
Covering with other visual elements	6	7.59				
Covering with painting, masks, bandages, and similar effects	7	8.86				
The feminine feature of the body is represented	13	23.2				
The femininity is focused	Female body language and gestures	34			14.17	
	The multiple and complex identities of Iranian women	22		9.17		
	Female relationships and intimacy	24		10		
	Sexually autonomous	7		2.92		
	Disobedient	19		7.92		
	Fashion enthusiast	21		8.75		
	Protesting against female typecasts	34		14.17		
	Women as housewives are portrayed	7		2.92		
	The portrayal of women as the second sex	8		3.33		
	A display without clarity and a lack of emphasis on femininity	21		8.75		
Presenting female characteristics of fertility	4	1.67				
Showing details of the female body	13	5.42				
Symbolic expression	26	10.83				



Fig. 4. Photographed images with a focus on women's centrality. a) Discourse on Femininity & Power, Collection of "Women of Allah, 1998" by Shirin Neshat, b) Critique of Reductionism and Exoticism, Collection "Under Western Eyes, 2014" by Hoda Afshar, c) Attention to the body as object and subject, From the series "My Isfahan, 2001" by Ghazaleh Hedayat, d) Gender Equality, "Women of Eyes, 1998", photographic series by Shirin Neshat, e) Women's Independency, "Look, 2011", by Newsha Tavakolian. Source: Author's archive.

gaze and reflect the power from the audience to a target subject. This daring approach (10.22%) represents an attempt to define an independent and multi-layered identity, beyond the available enforced typecasts (Table 4).

• Analyzing the critical and political dimensions of the works

The analysis of power relations reveals a significant contrast between the representation of "unequal" (5.66%) and "equal" (5.47%) relations (Table 3). This critical approach indicates challenging existing hegemonic structures through three main strategies: first, a blunt or ironic critique of economic and political systems that perpetuate gender inequality (1%). Second, an anti-essentialist approach that emphasizes women's capabilities and achievements by valuing non-biological competencies (2.15%) (Table 3); and third, the representation of women as powerful, demanding, and active figures (11.03), which is in direct contrast to the typecast of the passive woman (Table 4).

One of the most outstanding findings of the research is the use of photography as a critical and political act (Table 3). The high frequency (36%) data shows that these works dynamically criticize discriminatory political structures and go for demanding equal rights. This approach, which is consistent with the concept of "visual activism", represents women not as passive victims, but as symbols of resistance and perseverance (7%) (Table 4) who are demanding and independent individuals (10.25%) (Table 2). This activism is also reflected in the redefinition of social spaces. By focusing on the presence of

women in various spaces (34%) (Table 2), the artists have challenged traditional boundaries between the public and private areas, whether by reclaiming public space or by transforming private space into a place of creativity and power.

Due to the limitations for raising critical issues in public spaces, artistic fields as a medium have become an alternative space for shaping critical discourses. The dominant strategy of artists to convert public spaces to an arena for active interpretation (13%) represents art not as a mere end product, but as the beginning of a social dialogue (Table 4).

So, the limitations of socio-political criticism turned photography into a powerful tool for silent resistance, and visual strategies such as emphasizing body language, gaze, and excluding men from the image frame convey powerful feminist messages without any words, just by means of complicated semiotics.

- Deconstructing the Gaze

Classifying the gaze as "bold and dare" (10.29%) and the tendency to "Self-exoticization" (9.56%) (Table 4) are conscious discursive strategies to break the typecasts of the passive woman and present a multi-layered image of her who is often "caught between the forces of tradition and modernity" (35.7%) that finally presents an honest and multilayered image of social reality (Table 4).

This daring approach directly links photography to the "Politics of Gaze." In this context, the woman's direct gaze into the camera is not referred as a mere gesture, but a political act to disrupt the power

hierarchy govern the viewer and the observed subject (Karimi, 2013, 118) (Fig. 4e); As a result, the research data confirm that the “gaze” in these works is a tool for self-expression and the convey of complex psychological states, rather than a passive invitation to be watched.

• Identity features & the denial of typecasts

The analysis of identity features reveals the dominant strategy of creating an independent feminine space by excluding men from the image frame. In this space, a woman’s identity is defined not in relation to men, but in relative to her own lived experiences; in a brave photographic work by Newsha Tavakolian, a woman with boxing gloves (Fig. 4), the conventional definition of elegance and dependence are completely inverted; A powerful symbol of feminine independency and a daring approach, that alone is a powerful feminist statement toward feminine independency.

The statistical contrast and equality between the representation of women as “free and unrestricted from typecasts” while engaging in “psychological captivity” (Table 4) (15/5%); on the one hand, conveys the confusion of the feminist artist in matching imported models with local culture, and on the other hand, represents a dialectical process in which the attempt at freedom is depicted concurrently by admitting the continuation of social pressures.

On the one hand, it conveys the feminist artist’s confusion in absorbing imported patterns with native culture, and on the other hand, it is evidence of a dialectical process in which the effort for liberation is depicted together with the acknowledgement of the continuation of social pressures. This approach is consistent with the theory of “intersectionality”¹; rather than creating a one-dimensional ideal of the “free woman,” artists represent multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory “femininities” that are the product of the intersection of multiple identity factors. Ultimately, these works represent the “multi-layered and complex identity of the Iranian woman” (17.9%) not as a fixed essence, but as a fluid and evolving subject (Table 5).

This research, by addressing these “liminal” spaces - in which women are at the same time subject and object, powerful and oppressed - challenges feminist theoretical literature to move beyond simplistic dualities and shows that feminist aesthetics is, in practice, much more pluralistic and fluid than in theory.

• The role of intertextuality in the narrative structure of images

- Intertextuality as the dominant artistic language

The extensive and purposeful use of intertextual references (82/46) as a discursive strategy found in most works (Table 2) consciously situates the works in an extensive complex of cultural, historical, and artistic texts. This approach transforms the female body into a “Context” that major narratives ranging from contemporary historical events to literature, cultural-religious references (Akhlaghi), and art history (Afshar) are inscribed on her entity (Fig. 5).

This strategy makes art part of a commemorative policy in which calling the past creates emerging concepts in the present time; therefore, intertextuality is not simply an artistic technique, but rather is a political means for connecting individual female experience to collective memory and historical narratives, which makes art a medium for narrating this connection between present and past bodies.

Conclusion

Analyzing the target works according to a feminist discourse shows that contemporary Iranian female photographers, based on complex visual strategies, are creating an independent visual language to critique dominant discourses and represent the multi-layered identity of women. The institutional apparatuses of this dynamic and political artistic movement redefine the female body as a central entity for representing historical memory and political resistance. In this approach, the body goes beyond a mere passive object as it becomes an area for figuring and negotiating concepts such as power, identity, and history.

The key strategies of established technologies, such



Fig. 5. Intertextual references of photographs. a) References to historical events, “Resurrection, 2009” by Katayoun Karami, b) References to literature, “Miss Butterfly” by Shadi Ghadirian, c) Religious and cultural references, “Me as the Other prefers, 2016” by Azadeh Akhlaghi, d) References to other works of art, “Under Western Eyes, 2014” by Hoda Afshar. Source: Author’s archive.



Fig. 6. The artist's view of the target objects. a) Creating a space for interpretation and active interaction between the viewer/audience and the artwork, “The Brides of Mokhber al-Dowleh, 2015” by Tahmineh Monzavi, b) Focus on human aspects, “Witness, 1979” by Hengameh Golestan, c) Daring & Bold, “ Under Western Eyes, 2014” by Hoda Afshar, d) Women as symbols of resistance and perseverance, “Witness, 1979” by Hengameh Golestan, e) Beauty standards imposed on women, “Miss Hybrid, 2005” by Shirin Aliabadi, f) Free from typecasts, “Under Western Eyes, 2014” by Hoda Afshar, g) A woman caught between the Forces of Tradition and Modernity, “Qajar, 1999” by Shadi Ghadirian, h) Purity and Innocence, “Girls in Car” by Shirin Aliabadi. Source: Author’s archive.

as the deliberate exclusion of men from the frame, the suppression and fragmentation of the body, together with the clever use of intertextuality and humor, all assist in deconstructing the dominant conventional type of looks (gaze), and Orientalist typecast. These visual means, derived from discourse analysis II, convey powerful feminist messages without exploiting any word, just through complex symbolism, and challenge the one-dimensional image of Iranian women in Western media to portray women as subjects with complex agency and subjectivity in the role of power apparatuses. Given the limitations of explicit critical expression in Iran, photography has become a powerful means

for quiet resistance by designing a complex spatial arrangement. This approach, by focusing on the inner world of women rather than objectifying their bodies, has challenged the typecasts presented of Iranian women in Western media. Finally, these works have created a dialogic space or ‘contact zone’ rather than presenting a single feminist statement, in which opposite discourses intersect, such as tradition and modernity, agency and constraint, and subjugation and resistance, creating a spatial and psychological tension between the subject and the audience. Presenting an idealized image is not an ultimate goal here; it has been tried to depict female identity as a fluid, fragmented,

evolving subject. By creating polyphonic works defying deterministic concepts, these artists invite the viewer to active and participatory interpretation; Therefore, this kind of photography is not simply a reflection of reality, but is a discursive act, actively constructing new institutional apparatuses for perceiving and imagining the presence of a woman in contemporary Iran. In continuation, it is recommended to other art researchers to target and focus more on areas of contemporary Iranian art in their future study, with a critical perspective, to further understand the current feminist movement in Iran.

Endnote

1. Contemporary feminist theories increasingly emphasize the concept of "intersectionality," introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, which represents a complex and multilayered understanding of the experiences of inequality that women face. This concept, which emerged from Black feminism, examines the intersection and overlap of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other markers of identity (Di Renzo, 2023, 443-450).

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