

Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora. Mehraneh Ebrahimi (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019). Pp. 224. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815636557

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Mehraneh Ebrahimi's *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* attends the aesthetics of the graphic novel, "photo-poetry, and poetic film" (p. 8), showing how they are critical sites through which their creators produce a "different, relatable, human portrait of the Other" (p. xiii). It is through this subversive, visual rendering of the Other, Ebrahimi argues, that their work creates the space for an ethical reading that combats the images circulating during the present War on Terror. Rather than adding discursive ammunition to this violence, Ebrahimi sees these visual texts as generating sites from which a democratic process may emerge. Through a cultural studies approach, she closely reads four cases—Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*, as well as two Shirin Neshat texts: the photographic series *Women of Allah* and the feature film *Women without Men*—to highlight the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and politics. The work is a much-needed, albeit ambitious, study on the relationship between women, diaspora, and representation that shows us the value and importance of studies on the Iranian diaspora. However, it could have done more to make its contribution more legible to the emerging field of Iranian diaspora studies, as well as adjacent fields such as Middle East studies, media studies, and American studies.

Following an introduction that grounds the reader in the political stakes and through-lines of the work, Ebrahimi's book is divided into two main parts. The first two chapters take on the genre of graphic novels, specifically Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) and Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road* (2009). Through a sustained analysis of visual panels that highlight encounters with the Islamic Republic in various forms, Ebrahimi emphasizes how Satrapi brings nuance to the state's various permutations in her graphic memoir. She similarly takes on Bashi's autocratical gaze of Islam in its religious and political form as a means to untangle its weaponization in Western media. The additional component of paratext and difference between the German and American editions of Bashi's graphic novel are particularly insightful, and I wished for a similar engagement in paratext with regard to the French and American editions of *Persepolis*. Missing in the analysis of these two texts was a sense of the ethical theorization that is present in the book's second part, which deals with Neshat's work and the modes through which it interfaces with ethics as understood by Levinas. Given the importance of ethics in Ebrahimi's theorization of *aesthetasy*—meant to assemble the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and politics throughout her work—an engagement with ethics throughout this first part would have strengthened the overall argument.

Part two of *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* engages with the work of Shirin Neshat through close readings of her *Women of Allah* (1993–97) series and the feature film *Women Without Men* (2009), based on the novel by Shahrnush Parsipur. These readings place Iranian Muslim women—specifically veiled women—as the (radical) Other from which Ebrahimi understands Neshat engaging in an "ethical response-ability" of their representation (p. 104). Neshat's oeuvre is analyzed through the written and visual work of Forough Farrokhzad, who Ebrahimi sees as Neshat's inspiration for embedding empathy in her representations of the Other. Ebrahimi does considerable work in tracing the imagery of Neshat's work into the poetic work of Farrokhzad. However, there could have been a deeper engagement with the close readings of the *Women of Allah* series, specifically the points made for Neshat's piece, "Standing in Awe." While Ebrahimi enumerates the "planes of imagery [that fork] into many possible fluid, interpretive dimensions," they cannot be thoroughly assessed and unpacked in the small space provided in her numerical list of these aspects (p. 118). I wished there would have been more time taken to closely read each visual marker, as well as how they worked together to generate an ethical aesthetic of democratic process.

The field of Iranian diaspora studies has been emerging over the past couple of decades. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the seminal special issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa*

and the Middle East on the Iranian Diaspora, edited by Babak Elahi and Persis M. Karim. Scholars have been working at the interstices of Middle East studies, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and American studies to explore the transnational flows of Iranians, both physically and discursively. Ebrahimi's book is a welcome addition to the work of Iranian diaspora studies because it examines how Iranian diasporic cultural production represents an Iranian/Islamic Other that holds political implications for their homeland. That said, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* would have been better positioned to further the field if it was more theoretically grounded with conversations taking place in the aforementioned fields and disciplines.

In her preface and introduction, Ebrahimi seems to be speaking to many fields. In this ambitious attempt, though, Ebrahimi is unable to build the intellectual genealogy of her work on a strong foundation. For instance, the introduction does important work in defining the differences between the terms exile, émigré, refugee, and expatriate, choosing instead to settle on the term "diaspora" in order to describe these cultural producers, stating, "Even the word *diaspora* has been used strategically in this book" (p. 21). However, there is no mention made of how or why diaspora is being used. This is particularly noticeable given the term's prominence in the title. Such a definition would have allowed for a greater understanding of how she theorizes diaspora, as well as if her understanding of it is informed by seminal scholars in the field, such as Homi Bhabha or Stuart Hall. Moreover, given the importance of visual culture to her study, an engagement with scholarship from cultural studies scholars like Kobena Mercer or Brent Hayes Edwards would have added additional depth to her arguments. The term "diaspora" is not without its own intellectual history and it requires further framing.

Similarly, I felt the absence of many scholars in this book that would have provided Ebrahimi with a stronger theoretical grounding upon which to make her arguments and analysis more persuasive. Throughout the work, Ebrahimi emphasizes that these cultural producers allow for nuance during the current era, when Western media demonizes and reduces Islam and its role in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In her analysis that explains this instrumentalization of Islam by Western media, there is no mention made of Edward Said or Mahmood Mamdani's work on political Islam. Each of Ebrahimi's chapters also engages to varying degrees with the veil and the Western preoccupation with it. Notably, however, intellectual feminist scholars such as Homa Hoofdar and—perhaps, more broadly—Chandra Talpade Mohanty are missing from the conversation. In her reflection on the work of photography and its potential to recuperate the Other, Ebrahimi mentions how this recuperation goes against the idea of "the modern spectator sitting comfortably before a screen [being] bombarded by images" (p. 96). This is precisely Nicholas Mirzoeff's understanding of the "banality of images" with regard to the United States' war in Iraq, yet there is no mention of him and his well-known work. Finally—and perhaps most noticeable—the work of Hamid Naficy is entirely missing from her final chapter on Neshat's film. As one of the most prolific scholars on Iranian cinema both within Iran and abroad, and in recognition of the groundbreaking work he has done to open the way for Iranian diaspora studies, I would think that Naficy would be her primary interlocutor, or that at least some mention of his work would be made.

Despite these absences, Ebrahimi's book adds to expanding the field of Iranian diaspora studies, as it tackles the relationship between aesthetics and politics through a liberatory lens. Given our current political moment, works such as Ebrahimi's are a welcome addition to thinking through the subversive potential of cultural representation in the Iranian diaspora.

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