

Unveiling The Veil: Self-Representation in Contemporary Muslim Female Art

Author:

Hammad, Amber

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Unveiling The Veil

Self-Representation in Contemporary Muslim Female Art

Amber Hafeez Hammad

<https://www.amberhammad.com/>

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

UNSW



Supervised by

Dr Verónica Tello, Dr Diana Baker Smith and Dr Phillip George

School of Art & Design

Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture

September 2021

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Abstract (Draft 350 words maximum)

Contemporary Muslim feminist artists, such as Cigdem Aydemir, Sarah Maple and Shirin Neshat, tackle the representation and misrepresentation of Muslim women, within both patriarchal Muslim cultures and the Islamophobic Global North. As this thesis shows, such artists often use the veil to perform Muslim womanhood and their unveiled bodies to claim agency both in and outside of Islamic countries.

This practice-led research MFA, developed by Amber Hammad, positions itself in the field of veiling and unveiling Muslim woman's bodies, building on the work of the aforementioned artists. Drawing on Hammad's experiences of living in Pakistan and Australia, it analyses the politics of performing Muslim womanhood from a feminist standpoint, utilising strategies of the performance lecture and video art in particular. In the video work *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture* (2021) Hammad draws on the work of Hito Steyerl on the politics of images and Andrea Fraser's work on gendered institutional critique to galvanise her agency as a Muslim female artist. In particular, the work examines the female nude in Islamic art history. In *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1* (2021) Hammad builds on Shahzia Sikander's techniques of animation and appropriation and Sara Ahmed's intersectional feminist theories to connect ideas of visibility and invisibility with the sounds of the Quranic phrase "lower your gaze." Through these works Hammad expands understandings of Muslim female artists' engagements with hypervisibility and the politics of veiling.

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Glossary

Azaan اذان	The call for prayer, performed five times a day in all Muslim cultures.
Babishti Zewar بہشتی زوار	Translated as <i>Heavenly Ornaments</i> , this book was written by Mawlānā Ashraf Ali Thanvi in early 20 th century India.
Dupatta دوپٹہ	This word is a combination of two words: دو (<i>du</i> , derived from <i>do</i>), which means two in Hindi and Urdu; and پٹہ (<i>paṭṭa</i>), which means “a strip of cloth”. The word can refer to a scarf that is doubled over the head, a shawl, or a scarf of doubled cloth. A dupatta is a long scarf often worn by South Asian women of all religions. It can be worn on the head, covering it fully or partially, or across the shoulders and/or bosoms.
Hamd حمد	This is a poetic praise of Allah. This is a poetic and musical genre featuring religious chants, and their melodic recitation and singing are popular practices in South Asia.
Khatoon خاتون	In Hindi and Urdu this means a noble lady or a woman with a rank.
Khalas خلاص	In Arabic it means “enough.”
Na‘at نعت	This is poetry in praise of the prophet Muhammad. Like <i>hamd</i> حمد, this is a poetic and musical genre featuring religious chants, and their melodic recitation and singing are popular practices in South Asia.
The Book of Khatoon خاتون نامہ	This idea is borrowed from the tradition of the arts in the era of Muslim empires, where royal books were handwritten and illustrated, glorifying the lives and achievements of kings. They were often titled <i>The Book of the King</i> or with the name of the king, e.g., <i>Badshahnama</i> , <i>Akbarnama</i> , etc.
Tawheed توحید	This is the concept of “oneness” that sits at the core of Islamic thought.
“We Sinful Women” ہم گناہگار عورتیں	“We Sinful Women” is a poem by Pakistani feminist poet Kishwar Naheed, written in 1977 in Urdu. The poem highlights the transgressive position of women in Pakistan.

Introduction

“A story always starts before it can be told”¹

Amber! Fix your dupatta!

عنبر! دوپٹہ ٹھیک کرو!

Those were the words that my mother whispered to me, firmly, as we approached my cousin’s wedding venue. The three-metre-long, two-toned translucent green and gold organza dupatta was trailing on the floor behind me, hanging loosely through my elbows. There were some men standing at the entrance, trying to hide a drink when they saw us. She glanced towards me. I silently lowered my gaze and shuffled the fabric across my chest.

ماسٹر جی یہ قمیض سلیو لیس بنا دیں۔ لیکن بغل سے اس دفع ڈھیلی نہ ہو! اچھی طرح سے بیٹھے۔

Master Jee make this shirt sleeveless. But make sure it is not loose this time from underarms! It must sit nicely!

With these words, I instructed my tailor in his low-roofed basement workshop, which was always hot and stuffy, reeking of stale cigarettes. He was dressed in his usual crisp white shalwar qameez, busy making notes with one hand while stroking his long black beard with the other.

Did you have to wear a Burka when you lived in Pakistan? asked my new Aussie friend curiously. He wasn’t the first person inquiring about my dressing routine when I lived in Pakistan. *No*, I said gently and took a deep breath before organising my thoughts to correct his idea of Muslim women’s oppressed image, thinking:

Now, where should I start from?

اب میں کہاں سے شروع کروں؟

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

Background

The memories I describe above are just a few of the many that I recall when I think about my identity and its relationship with my body, history, and womanhood.² My brown Muslim female body is associated with and characterised by ideas of its concealment, so much so that they have become difficult to separate.

Muslim women's veiled image has become an instant signifier of Islam in the post-9/11 world. These images engage with a range of ideas including the heightened visibility of veiled Muslim women on the one hand, and the legitimisation of white male chivalry and the West's war on terror on the other. Muslim contemporary artists, such as Shirin Neshat and Sarah Maple, address various aspects of this issue. For example, Neshat addresses Iran's extremist patriarchal regime using veiled self-portraits in her works, while Maple uses her body to highlight the gender bias within Islamic and Western art institutions. For the white viewer, these works can either advance Islamophobia with confronting and threatening subject matter or confirm their cultural imperialism. For Muslim viewers, they can evoke feelings of otherness from Western culture or raise debates within the Muslim spheres around the concealment of women's bodies. Burqa-clad bodies are presumed to be Muslim female subjects, and they also tend to be instantly visible compared to any other unveiled Muslim women present in a public space. In contrast, images of the unveiled bodies of Muslim women are hardly visible or given importance, because they neither serve the Western agenda against Islam in the Global North, nor assert the right-wing fundamentalist patriarchal ideas within Muslim cultures. However, the practice of making unveiled female images has existed within arts of Islamic cultures since the first Islamic caliphate.

My subjective lived experiences and subsequent memories inform my identity, and vice versa; my identity of being a Pakistani Muslim woman has been an integral part of my subjective lived experiences and memories.³ My attire, and the veiling and/or unveiling of my body, has been an intrinsic part of my lived experiences, including both my creative practice and this MFA project,

² Sara Ahmed argues, "Feminist work is often memory work. We work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede. While thinking about what it means to live a feminist life, I have been remembering; trying to put the pieces together... It is not that memory work is necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather, you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect." Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 22.

³ Pakistan remains one of the countries in the world with the strongest gender gap and has a highly gendered and globalised culture. In the gender parity index published by the World Economic Forum in their Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Pakistan was ranked 153rd out of 156 countries. I experienced personal struggles and fantasies of gender equality while growing up there. World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2021," 31 March 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/ab6795a1-960c-42b2-b3d5-587eccda6023>.

which I share with the wider community of Muslim women worldwide. Muslim women's attire and representation has been an increasingly problematic topic in the last few decades globally, within both the Islamophobic Post-9/11 Global North and patriarchal Muslim cultures. The enforced veiling laws in Afghanistan and Iran, the enforced unveiling of Muslim women in Europe, Pauline Hanson's 'burka stunt' in the chamber of the Australian Senate, and the willful adoption of the hijab as a symbol of personal empowerment: these are some of the themes that pervade discussion of Muslim women's attire globally.⁴ Mona Eltahawy, in "Too Loud, Swears Too Much and Goes Too Far," writes:

Muslim women are especially vulnerable to what I call a trifecta of oppressions: misogyny (faced by all women), racism (faced by women of colour) and islamophobia (faced by Muslims) ... Muslim women are caught between a rock—an Islamophobic and racist right wing... —and a hard place: our Muslim communities that are eager to defend Muslim men... Both... speak over our heads—literally and figuratively. Our bodies—what parts of them are covered or uncovered... both the rock and the hard place agree and are enabled by patriarchy.⁵

Analysing my own lived experiences, with issues surrounding my attire and looking at Muslim women's problematic representation regarding their attire, I consider the topic of veiling and unveiling of female Muslim bodies as a feminist issue. Sara Ahmed, who takes her definition of feminism from bell hooks, describes it as a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression (from which racism cannot be separated). The ideas brought forward in this thesis encompass feminist ideas. I feel pleasure when Sarah Ahmed recognises in her texts that Audre Lorde gave her the courage to make her own life experience as a brown queer woman into a resource for her feminist works, and to build theory from the description of where she is in the world. Like her, my subjectivity as a contemporary Muslim woman artist of colour from Pakistan remains core to this research project, in which I investigate two key questions: How do

⁴ Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world, with about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. However, religious illiteracy about Islam is common and leads to misunderstandings, hostility, and even violence. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the use of face masks to veil the mouth and nose became necessary, criticism arose over the hypocrisy of the Global North regarding burqa bans and security issues associated with facial recognition. Katherine Bullock, "We are all Niqabis Now: Coronavirus Masks reveal Hypocrisy of Face Covering Bans," *The Conversation*, 28 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/we-are-all-niqabis-now-coronavirus-masks-reveal-hypocrisy-of-face-covering-bans-136030>; Harriet Sherwood, "Religion: Why Faith is Becoming More and More Popular," *The Guardian*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>.

⁵ Mona Eltahawy, "Too Loud, Swears Too Much and Goes Too Far," in *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race*, ed. Mariam Khan (London: Picador, 2019), 4.

contemporary Muslim women artists address and negotiate self-representation in contemporary art practices? What is the politics of the veil, and unveiling, in the work of contemporary Muslim artists?

Aim

Being a Muslim woman, I am always being defined by my attire, always associated with ideas of veiling, and unveiling, and always mediating the politics of visibility and invisibility. This is the feeling I have whether in Pakistan, where I was born, or in Australia, where I have been living for the last six years. I continually witness generalised assumptions, misrepresentations and misunderstanding surrounding Muslim women and our attire. This highlights the need to reimagine Islamic cultures and the place of women not just for the increasingly Islamophobic North, but also for the Islamised right-wing ideologies within Muslim cultures. In response, this research project aims to examine how veiling and unveiling can offer critical and feminist readings of what it means to represent Muslim womanhood (within both the Islamophobic West as well as patriarchal Muslim cultures) in contemporary art. In doing so, this thesis examines how performances of veiling/unveiling, as enacted through contemporary art, can offer a feminist reading of Muslim attire and womanhood. It also explores how the female Muslim body, as represented by my own body, and Islamic and Western art history open up a space to critique both patriarchal Muslim culture and the Islamophobic West.

Scope

The representation of Muslim women has been increasingly gaining traction in the last few decades. Fāṭima Marnīṣī (1940–2015, Morocco), for example, critiques the idea of women's subjugation and veiling within Islamic cultures. Lila Abu Lughod (b. 1952, USA) and Leila Ahmed (b. 1940, Egypt) highlight the West's neocolonial, racist, and Islamophobic tendencies in misrepresenting Muslim women's veils. Khurram Hussain reimagines Islam as a critique of the West and uses past and present Muslim voices to investigate the modern condition.⁶ Building on the work of these scholars, this thesis extends their thinking into the field of contemporary art. It builds on their work by drawing on a range of artists as well as theorists working in the fields of contemporary art and visual culture. Key to this thesis and its investigations of the politics of

⁶ Khurram Hussain, *Muslim Speaks: Islam as an Immanent Critique of the West* (London: Zed Books, 2020).

Muslim women's agency regarding practices of veiling and unveiling are Sarah Ahmed's ideas about feminist wilfulness. Ahmed's writings have helped me understand the wilful subjectivities present in the artworks that I was studying and making, and thus to examine my own Muslimhood being played out as a feminist life.⁷ Salima Hashmi's ideas about how contemporary Muslim women artists use the unveiling of their bodies in their artworks as a resistance movement, and Linda Nochlin's texts addressing colonialism from a feminist perspective have also influenced the development of this written document. In lieu of apostacy, which in Islam a complex and dangerous idea often punishable by death, throughout this thesis I consider artists and scholars who self-identify as Muslim.⁸

Overview

This thesis is accompanied by two creative works, which are discussed in detail in this written document. In chapter 1, "Veilful Subjects," I present a short survey of theorists, artists, exhibitions, and ideas pertaining to this thesis topic, including objectification, the male gaze, and veiled and unveiled Muslim female bodies in the history of the visual arts. In addition to the art practices of Shirin Neshat, Hoda Afshar, Cigdem Aydemir, Sarah Maple, Hiba Schahbaz, and Hayv Kahraman, I also discuss Edward Said's ideas about Orientalism, Linda Nochlin's gendered reading of his theory, and Salima Hashmi's views about Muslim women artists' use of concealment and unveiling of the body in the face of an Islamised military regime in Pakistan.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the two major artistic works produced as part of this research. In chapter 2, I discuss my artwork *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1* (2021). This work is an addition to the small field of contemporary Muslim women artists who use the veiled and unveiled body to reimagine the representation of Muslim womanhood. In this chapter I address how I test and understand the boundaries of my self-representation as a Muslim female artist and its relationship with attire, using memories, sounds, video, animation, and appropriated imagery.⁹ I elaborate on my sources and the methods used in the making of this work, including verse 30 from chapter 24 of the Quran, which addresses the male gaze;

⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 15–17; I draw on the inspiring writings of Sarah Ahmed, who made it clear to me how I had been already living a feminist life—a Muslim feminist life. Like Ahmed, I have followed a citation policy in this thesis (that I try to stick to mostly) i.e., I chose not to cite any white men. The reasoning behind this decision is explained by Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*: "Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow."

⁸ S.A. Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2006), 2.

⁹ For ease, I sometimes refer to this work as simply *Lower the Gaze* in the following document.

imagery from the Mughal miniature paintings that is appropriated and animated for the visual construction of this work; Shahzia Sikander's artworks and her use of animated miniature paintings; and Rashid Rana's use of grids and pixelation in his creative practice.

In chapter 3 I analyse my work *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture* (2021). This work is a single-channel video-based performance lecture that includes video, audio, screen recordings, texts, and both still and animated images. It engages with real and fictive histories of Islamic art and a fictional narrative called خاتون Khatoon, which is a metaphor of Muslim womanhood. This work aims to simultaneously critique both the politicisation of veiled Muslim bodies in the Global North, and the misogyny within socio-cultural institutions of radical Islam. I discuss my use of images of nude female bodies from Islamic art history, and the hypervisible politicised image of veiled Muslim woman in our post-9/11 world.¹⁰ I also discuss my engagement with the art practices of Andrea Fraser and Hito Steyerl to analyse and problematise the veiling and unveiling of the Muslim female bodies, and their subsequent visibility and invisibility. While Fraser's works—especially her performance lectures—provide me with a method to critique Western and Islamic art practices and institutions, Steyerl's ideas on circulationism, which addresses the problematic nature of digital images, help structure the work (e.g., the use of green screen, screen recording, etc.). Drawing on the art practices of these non-Muslim artists not only provided me with tools used by feminist artists at large outside of the Islamic circles, but also help bridge the gap separating Islamic feminism and Western feminism.

The conclusion reflects on the thesis aim and research questions. Both veiled and unveiled representations of Muslim women are first and foremost entrenched in feminist ideas around objectification of female body and male gaze, before they are manipulated for colonial, Orientalist, political, capitalist, or religious purposes.

¹⁰ For ease, I sometimes refer to this work as simply *The Nude Dupatta* in the following document.

Chapter 1: Veilful Subjects

“If feminist will is will that is wanting, feminist will is also will that is unwilling”¹

Contemporary Muslim women artists’ nuanced subjectivities are key to understanding the politics of representing Muslim women. Since 9/11, these artists have been increasingly questioning and redefining their representation and visibility. They engage with these ideas within both patriarchal Muslim cultures and the Islamophobic Global North. While more and more of these artists have been using the veil as an instant signifier of Islam to highlight their ideas, many have also been using their unveiled bodies in order to claim agency. Using a feminist lens, in this chapter I survey theorists, artists, exhibitions, and ideas that address the veiling and unveiling of Muslim women. Though ideas about objectification of the female body and male gaze are central in the following texts, their entanglement with Orientalism, post-colonialism, world politics, and art history, have also inevitably been discussed.

I coined this chapter’s title, “Veilful Subjects,” by appropriating the title of Sara Ahmed’s book *Willful Subjects* (2017).² I take my definition of feminism from her: that it is a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression, from which racism (and in the contemporary context, Islamophobia) cannot be separated. I also draw upon her ideas of feminist will, as the works of chosen artists and theorists discussed in the following pages portray their unwillingness to conform to the expectations of misogynist patriarchal Muslims and the racist Islamophobic West. In addition, Edward Said’s seminal ideas about Orientalism—along with Linda Nochlin’s gendered approach to his theory—and Salima Hashmi’s concepts about Muslim women artists’ use of concealment and unveiling of the body are also discussed.

¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 83, 84.

² As mentioned in the introduction, in this document I assume individuals born in Muslim families or with Muslim surnames to be Muslims, unless they have stated otherwise.

Images Of Muslim Women Under Western Eyes³

“There is nothing essential or timeless behind Western representations of the Muslim woman; they are products of specific moments and developments in culture.”⁴

In order to understand the position of veiled and unveiled images of Muslim women in contemporary art practices of Muslim female artists, it is important to briefly survey the history of the representation of Muslim female bodies in Western art history. It is also important to use a feminist lens to view these images under the colonial gaze, and tease out the underlying feminist concerns regarding the representation of veiled and unveiled Muslim female bodies that lead up to the contemporary self-representations of Muslim female artists. To limit the scope of this section, I focus on the Orientalist painted images of Muslim women produced by European male and female artists.⁵

The term *Orientalism* (with a capital O) denotes the colonial politics between European colonisers and the colonised North African, Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures. Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said theorised this in his seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978).⁶ Even though Orientalist painting was used in its cover, the text did not contain any discussions on art. However, the book paved the way for postcolonial and Orientalist discourses within the arts and humanities, as can be seen in the work of Linda Nochlin, a prominent feminist art historian.⁷ Nochlin used Said’s theories to analyse Orientalist paintings, highlighting the stereotypical misrepresentation of Muslim cultures in her influential essay, “The Imaginary Orient” (1983).⁸

³ This subheading refers to the titles of two very different texts: Chandra T. Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/13950541988>; and Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes: A Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911).

⁴ Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 2.

⁵ Europeans have frequently used depictions of attire in art as propaganda to assert their cultural superiority. Apart from Orientalist paintings, another example is *casta* paintings by Spanish colonisers of African people.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1–2.

⁷ In addition to Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart McPhail Hall, and Homi Bhabha also highlight the importance of reading history and culture from a non-European, non-coloniser’s perspective. However, discussing their work is beyond the scope of this text. In regards to Muslim women’s Orientalist representation, theorists and writers who have tackled the subject include Valerie Behiery, Mohja Kahf and Linda Nochlin; see Valerie Behiery, “Pictures and Polemics: Muslim Veiling Practices in Contemporary Art,” in *A Companion to Textile Culture*, ed. Jennifer Harris and Dana Arnold (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2020), 257–273; Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*; and Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” *Art in America* 7, no. 5 (1983): 119–131. In this 1983 essay, Linda Nochlin highlighted the importance of assessing the power and political dynamics at play in artworks, basing her arguments on the theory of Said’s *Orientalism*. She initiated her reading of art history from this point of view.

⁸ Nochlin, Linda. “The Imaginary Orient.” *Art in America* 7, no. 5 (1983); Julia Kuehn, “Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination,” *Frontiers* 32, no. 2 (2011): 31–32.

Both Said and Nochlin suggested that Orientalist approaches towards cultural production in the Western imagination are based on hegemonic distinctions between the two cultures, European fantasies, pastiche, and narratives depicting the Orient as both exotic and inferior.⁹ Nochlin highlights this with the example of French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme's oil painting *The Snake Charmer* (1879), the work used for the cover of Said's book, teasing out the stereotypical aspects of Orientalist paintings. Gérôme and other celebrated Orientalist painters, such as Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, often composed a pretty image while using various elements drawn from the Middle Eastern colonised world, but one that did not do any favours to the colonised, and only exoticised them.¹⁰ Modern inventions from the late industrial revolution era (the time when most earlier Orientalist paintings were produced) were never included, and the architecture was often shown as decrepit, a metaphor for the decay of that nation or race.

To signify the Orient's cultural inferiority to the Occident, the trope of the feminine was frequently deployed. Nudity and the veiling of Oriental women depicted the alleged desire of Middle Eastern lands and cultures to be colonised and tamed by the superior white Europeans. Orientalist artists created myriads of Oriental and/or Muslim women, depicted in private harems and baths, in reclining and seductive positions, or in public places, portrayed as dancing or erotically displayed as slaves. Nochlin also argued that Orientalist paintings were not truthful representations of the cultures depicted, in spite of their painterly realism. Her argument is validated by the fact that most European Orientalist painters had never actually travelled to the Orient themselves—and even if they had, they probably would not have had access to those private spaces. In addition, the sexualised women depicted in those painting often matched European ideals of beauty, instead of those of Middle Eastern women.¹¹

In contrast to the eroticification of the Oriental Muslim women in the paintings of European male artists, the lesser-known Orientalist works by female artists represent Oriental female subjects quite differently, due to the obvious reason that instead of being based on the

⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 1, 2 and 29; "I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations."

¹⁰ French artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) was perhaps the most famous of Orientalist painters, who set the hallmarks of this genre's painting style: academic, technical, romantic, and obsessed with almost hyperreal textiles and landscapes.

¹¹ Nimet Elif Vargi, "The Imagery of Woman in Nineteenth Century Orientalist Photography" (MA diss., Bilkent University, 2010), 36–37; Wijdan Ali, "Muslim Women: Between Cliché and Reality," *Diogenes* 50, no. 3 (2003): 78.

speculations of male fantasy, these female artists actually had access to the segregated and gendered harems and hammams of the Muslim world.¹² In spite of using some Orientalist tropes (for example, racial classification depicted as white skinned women being bathed by dark skinned slaves) they were able to transform the Orientalist imagery of Middle Eastern women's harem's from an erotic phallocentrism into depictions of respectable gynocentric places. Examples of this can be seen in *Fiesta en Tanger* (c. 1872–1880) by Alejandrina Gessler y Lacroix, and *A Visit: Harem Interior, Constantinople* (1860) by Henriette Browne (fig 1.1).¹³

Images Of Women in Works of Contemporary Muslim Female Artists

“When we are not willing to participate in racist culture, we are wilful.”¹⁴

In a departure from the Orientalist representation of Muslim women in Western art history, and the lack of female artists' representation within Islamic art histories, in the last few decades, contemporary Muslim female artists have been increasingly engaging with the politics of their representation. They often use bodily concealments, or its absence, to contest the gendered systems prevalent in global art institutions and art markets.¹⁵ Shirin Neshat (b. 1957, Iran) is perhaps one of the most celebrated contemporary Muslim female artists today. Using photography, film, and literary fiction, her work aesthetically examines the condition of contemporary Muslim women, often for Western viewers.¹⁶ She explores gendered bodily concealments—particularly the veil or the chador—in the context of the fundamentalist Islamic culture of Iran, using various media. Her works illustrating ideas around Muslim women and feminism are a simultaneous critique and assessment of the oppressive patriarchy within Muslim cultures, as well as their neocolonial perception: “I see my work as a visual discourse on the

¹² Megan McDaniel, “Re-Presenting the Harem: Orientalist Female Artists and the 19th Century Ottoman Empire” (Hons. diss., Florida State University, 2014), 45; During middle of the nineteenth century, due to European public's interest in evidence-based accounts and depiction of Eastern domestic life, and men's limited access to the private spaces in the Orient, French poet and critic Theophile Gautier suggested exploration of the Orient specifically by women travellers.

¹³ Kuehn, “Exotic Harem Paintings,” 39.

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 83, 84.

¹⁵ Ahmed, 55–56. “A gender system is not at work simply in how you do or do not express gender: it is also about how you perform within a wider system that matches meaning and value to persons and things.”

¹⁶ Iftikhar Dadi, “Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 127–28: “The video work feels safer to the Western viewer because it largely sidesteps issues of tension and conflict between the West and the Muslim world, focusing instead on aesthetically examining the dilemmas of Muslim women within Muslim societies, which the Western observer can empathize with yet maintain comfortable distance from. By contrast, the photographs threaten the Western viewer and unavoidably delineate terrorism and gender as key contemporary geopolitical fault lines; therefore, they have become invested with renewed significance.”

subjects of feminism and contemporary Islam—a discourse that puts certain myths and realities to the test, claiming that they are far more complex than most of us have imagined.”¹⁷

Neshat’s ideas brought her international recognition through one her earliest photographic series, *Women of Allah* (1993–1997) (fig 1.2), black and white portraits of women in black veils (mainly self-portraits), calligraphic Arabic texts, and weapons. These works at once are both an embodiment and denunciation of Muslim women’s agency and its relationship with the veil. Another important part of these highly confrontational, static and nonnarrative works is their engagement with the *gaze*—the veiled women gazing back at the viewer intervene with the male gaze and the objectification of female bodies in the histories of both Orientalist and Islamic art. While Neshat draws upon the repertoire of images of the veiled women in art histories, she shifts them away from being passive objects to active subjects that gaze back at the viewers.¹⁸

Neshat’s works also offer various possible interpretations and critiques. For example, on one hand her works are praised for being more than just self-portraits as they reflect the literal and allegorical status of women in traditional Muslim cultures.¹⁹ On the other hand, her use of the veil has been deemed both as a symbol of repression and of resistance to Western influence, bringing her under scrutiny for promoting a negative image of Muslim women.²⁰ Neshat has also been accused of profiting immorally from her irresponsible, Orientalised and oppressed representations of Muslim women, allowing the Western viewers to fetishise these images while simultaneously legitimising their war against terror.²¹ However, before labelling Neshat and her works to be either dangerously Orientalising or applauding them for advocating the liberation of Muslim women, it is important to probe the models of agency of Muslim women, and their relationship with her subjectivity.²² Neshat comes from Iran where, post-revolution, women are

¹⁷ Shirin Neshat, *Shirin Neshat* (Wien: Kunsthalle, 2000), 11.

¹⁸ Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” 125–150.

¹⁹ “While Neshat draws upon the repertoire of classic Orientalist images of the veiled figure, she displaces their charge from being the passive object of the erotic gaze toward a confrontational modality. The photographs emphasize flatness, affectlessness, contemporality, and veiled threats, enacting a mode of spatial allegory. By deploying a minimalist aesthetic, Neshat removes temporality from her photographic frames and avoids possible references to a stagist and developmental judgment regarding modernization, in which the West can be seen as temporally ahead of backward Islam.” Dadi, 146.

²⁰ See, for example, Mitra M. Abbaspour, “Trans-national, Cultural, and Corporeal Spaces: The Territory of the Body in the Artwork of Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum” (MA diss., University of California, Riverside, 2001); Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories”; and Scott MacDonald and Shirin Neshat, “Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 621–659.

²¹ Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” 125–150.

²² S. Horsburgh, “The Great Divide,” *Time* 156, no. 9 (2000): 44–7; Adair Rounthwaite, “Veiled Subjects: Shirin Neshat and Non-Liberatory Agency,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008): 165–180.

²² Rounthwaite, “Veiled Subjects,” 165–180.

still fighting against compulsory hijab laws enforced on them by the state. Removal of headscarves (especially as a form of resistance) can result in harsh punishment, and many anti-hijab protestors and activists have been detained, fined, tortured, and faced jail time.²³ Neshat's use of images of veiled women is a point of departure to engage with the condition of contemporary Muslim women, their agency, and their representation.

In the Australian context, the representation of Muslim female bodies intersects with discussions around identity, home, migration, race, racism, white multiculturalism, and white neofascism.²⁴ Since the 2005 racist Cronulla riots, there has been an increased interest in Middle Eastern and Muslim-Australian artists. Shirin Neshat's works were exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2006, and Shahzia Sikander had a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, in Sydney in 2008. Art exhibitions, including خلاص *Khalas: Contemporary Australian Muslim Artists* (2018), *Faith, Fashion, Fusion* (2012), *Burqas, Veils and Hoodies: Identity and Representation* (2013) and *Women in Shadow* (2011) are significant examples of attempts made to show the diversity of Australian Muslims via art institutions, repeatedly using the trope of the Muslim women's veil.

Cigdem Aydemir is an Australian contemporary Muslim female artist with a versatile, humorous, and provocative art practice. She makes use of performances, installations, and video works to engage with the veiling, unveiling, and re-veiling of her Muslim female body. She writes, "Whilst artists have gone a long way towards dismantling racist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims more broadly, representations of Muslim women's subjectivity, that challenge (rather than reinforce) mainstream perceptions of Muslim women and the veil remain limited."²⁵ In her video performance *Whirl* (2015) (fig 1.3), she can be seen wearing a long and undulating purple printed veil, with a black burqa underneath. She is holding a hair dryer towards her face, blowing her veil sensually in the air. The veil "represents her will,

²³ "Jailed Iranian Rights Lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh Hospitalized amid Hunger Strike," *Arab News*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1736961/middle-east>; Some recent examples include Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was sentenced to receive 148 lashes in addition to 38 years and six months in prison for defending women's rights and protesting veiling laws in Iran, and Yasamin Aryani, who was sentenced to 16 years in jail for handing out white flowers without a headscarf in a women-only train carriage. Another example of resistance is the online movement My Stealthy Freedom, started in 2014 by Masih Alinejad, <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/>

²⁴ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 246–7: "For White multiculturalists today, White neo-fascism represents the latest technology of containment and problematisation of Third World-looking migrants. Pauline Hanson has enabled White Australians to unleash a new phase in the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, aiming to transform the increasingly demanding and 'arrogant' migrants into decent 'debatable problematised objects,' safely positioned in the liminal spaces of inclusion/exclusion."

²⁵ Cigdem Aydemir, "Image and Voice: Muslim Women in Contemporary Art" (MA diss., University of Sydney, 2015), 44.

constantly moving and being moved.”²⁶ Using the visual aesthetics of shampoo commercials and the trope of liberation they use for promoting their products, Aydemir critiques the popular assumptions about unveiled women symbolising liberal societies versus veiled women from oppressed cultures such as Islam. Works like these demonstrate that Aydemir is an artist who prioritises the importance of female participation in discussions of race and Islamophobia, and believes in the potentially transformative quality of art.²⁷

Hoda Afshar (b. 1983, Iran) is another Australian-Iranian Muslim female artist whose works are charged with compelling content. In her series of digitally manipulated photographs, *Under Western Eyes* (2013) (fig 1.4A, 1.4B), she addresses the stereotypical practices of Middle Eastern/Muslim artists in the Western contemporary art market, which often brings them recognition in the global platforms. These often include repetitive themes around Muslim women’s identities struggling between tradition and modernity, using the trope of the veil. Afshar says:

Realising this led me to engage in a deeper reflection on the intersections between postmodern exoticism and the commodification of culturally different artworks and artists. ‘Under Western Eyes’ was born out of these reflections, and this explains the Warhol-esque aesthetic. But there is a more serious side to this work too, and this concerns the way in which the constant production of images of the female Islamic subject (as at once suppressed and secretly fashion-loving or sexually free: an object of fear and fascination) is bound up with a cleverly disguised form of cultural imperialism.²⁸

By subverting the purpose of veil, while also showing the breasts and meeting the gaze of the viewer, Afshar’s own photographs critique the veiled and exoticised representation of Muslim women.

Afshar’s investigation into exoticism and commodification led her to coin the term *veil art*, evokes it as a white thing, referring to the mainstream representation of the veil that Muslim women wear.²⁹

²⁶ “Whirl,” *Cigdem Aydemir*, accessed 30 August 2021, <http://cigdemaydemir.com/whirl.html>.

²⁷ Aydemir, “Image and Voice,” 57.

²⁸ Nur Shkembi, “Hoda Afshar,” *Artist Profile* 45, 2018, accessed 31 August 2021, <https://artistprofile.com.au/hoda-afshar>.

²⁹ Karen Green, “Pictures of A Thousand Silences,” Curtin University, 19 March 2019.

Under the Western gaze, the veil also signifies otherness, colonisation, fetishisation, and post-9/11 it also signifies a threat and oppression, confirming the ideas of white male chivalry. These ideas evoke the postcolonial arguments of Edward Said, which highlighted the West's view of itself as civilised and enlightened, while viewing "The East" as exotic, irrational and dangerous. According to Said, under the Orientalist gaze of the West, Muslims are presented as a monolithic entity, identical with terrorists and religious hysteria.³⁰ Since 9/11, the heightened sentiments of saving Muslim women from their androcentric Muslim oppressors has been an Orientalist act of exploitation used to justify the war on terror.³¹ The veil has been depicted as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women who are often deemed without voice in a world that privileges the Christian, male and white normative perspectives. However, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod challenges this Western behaviour of representing a victimised image of Muslim women, and through her scholarly works, especially her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2015), highlights that issues of misogyny, patriarchy and gender equality are not exclusive to Islam, nor should Muslim women be viewed through a monolithic, misogynistic Western lens.³² Cigdem Aydemir writes:

As the veil trope is congealed into the quintessential symbol of civilisational backwardness and oppression, unveiling becomes a sign of progress and emancipation. The desire to unveil the Muslim woman is driven not only by colonial patriarchs, in their fantasies of invasion and sexual conquest, but also by missionaries and feminists.³³

<https://news.curtin.edu.au/stories/pictures-of-a-thousand-silences>.

³⁰ Said, Edward W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

³¹ David Stout, "A Nation Challenged: The First Lady; Mrs. Bush Cites Women's Plight Under Taliban," *New York Times*, 18 November 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/18/us/a-nation-challenged-the-first-lady-mrs-bush-cites-women-s-plight-under-taliban.html>.

³² Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³³ Aydemir, "Image and Voice," 34.

“We Sinful Women”³⁴

ہم گناہگار عورتیں

Around 1905, two books were published on the Indian subcontinent by two seemingly disconnected people: Mawlānā Ashraf Ali Thanvia, a celebrated Muslim religious scholar; and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Muslim feminist writer, educator and political activist. While Thanvi’s *بہشتی زہر* *Bahishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments) (which is still published around the world in multiple languages) was a stringent instructional guidebook for Indian Muslim women on the practice of purdah (female seclusion), Begum Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (celebrated as one of the earliest feminist science fiction texts) detailed her fantasy of women living without purdah.³⁵ Both of these books are from the Indian subcontinent, from which Pakistan was born, where both these concerns are still active and alive.

While surveying the field of Muslim female artists’ engagement with their representation and the veiling and unveiling of their bodies, it is essential to highlight the case of Pakistani female artists, who have been actively creating a vernacular feminist discourse and engaged with human and women’s rights movement for decades.³⁶ While feminism in Pakistan is a contested term, the history of Pakistani art celebrates its female artists and academics, who have been a conscientious group of creative, educated, and progressive women. (One argument in relation to this is that, due to its association with femininity in Pakistan, fine art is not a profession fit for men.³⁷) During the 1980s, General Zia-ul-Haq attempted to Islamise the country, and altered state policies under his military dictatorship.³⁸ He introduced laws that limited people’s freedom of

³⁴ “We Sinful Women” ہم گناہگار عورتیں (“Hum Guneghaar Aurtain”) is a poem by Pakistani feminist poet Kishwar Naheed, highlighting the transgressive position of women; Rukhsana Ahmad, *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 1994). “In 1977, Kishwar Naheed’s translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* was banned by the Pakistani government for three reasons: first, she had translated and published the book without government permission; second, she had violated copyright (although Pakistan does not honor copyright laws); third, the translation was considered pornographic and vulgar.” Shahla Haeri, *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 287.

³⁵ See “Sultana’s Dream,” *Chitra Ganesh*, accessed 30 August 2021, <https://www.chitraganesh.com/work/sultanas-dream>; Hossain R. Sakhawat, *Sultana’s Dream* (Brookfield, WI: Charles River Editors, 2018); and M.A.A. Thanvi, *Heavenly Ornaments* (Karachi: Zam Zam Publishers, 2018).

³⁶ Sadia P. Kamran, “Exploring Female Identity in and through Art in Pakistan: Experiencing De-Colonial Feminism,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 22, no. 3 (2021): 132–141.

³⁷ Sadia P. Kamran, “Women, Art and Politics in Pakistan: Rethinking Feminism Through Feminist Art,” *People: International Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2019): 712–719.

³⁸ Martial law was imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq and stayed in effect in Pakistan from 1977 until 1985, after which time he remained in power until his death in 1988. This period is marked by the advent of Islamisation in the country.

expression and also minimised women's roles and participation in society, and the phrase چادر اور چار دیواری (chader aur char dewari)—“veil and four walls of the house”—became a colloquial metaphor for Pakistani women's restricted status.

Women artists, however, were at the forefront of the resistance movement, seeking female emancipation. In 1983, when a law was introduced decreeing that a woman's legal testimony would only carry half the value as that of a man, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) came into being. These women used art activism to highlight ideas of “individualism or essentialism in society concerning femininity, Feminism, and Feminist art and aesthetics.”³⁹ During the National Exhibition in Lahore in 1983, fifteen women artists got together and signed a manifesto (which could not be made public under martial law) to empower the women “to become more outspoken in their art against misogyny.”⁴⁰ Analysis of their works reveals feminism as a central concern. Though the works varied in personal styles, each stressed the condition of women and their place in art and the society of Pakistan at the time.

Salima Hashmi, an active member of WAP and an academic, writer, curator, and artist has mentored a generation of feminist artists in Pakistan. Before Martha Rosler used the kitchen as a space occupied by females laden with feminist concern in her performance work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Hashmi had used it for a sarcastic critique of women's gendered performativity in Pakistani society in her performance *Handa Hubaalna (Boiling an Egg)* from the early 1970s (fig 1.5 A and B). Hashmi writes:

As a symbol of fecundity, the female body was a prime site for provocation, an abode of sin and forbidden sensations. For women artists, the female body, its containment, concealment, and visibility became a matter for meaningful exploration. A world away, feminist artists in the West were rejecting female nudes as one of the obvious repositories of male-dominated art canons. For the Pakistani woman artist, the uncovering of the female body became a rallying call to the barricades.⁴¹

³⁹ Kamran, “Women, Art & Politics in Pakistan,” 712–719.

⁴⁰ Ibid ; “The artists included Zubaida Javed, Abbasi Abidi, Salima Hashmi, Lala Rukh, Talat Ahmed, Shehrzade Alam, Rabia Zuberi Jalees Nagi, Birjees Iqbal, Riffat Alvi, Nahid Raza, Mehr Afroz, Qudsia Nisar, Mamoon Bashir, Veeda Ahmed.”

⁴¹ Salima Hashmi, “Unveiling Artistic Feminism,” an extract from Salima Hashmi and Yashodhara Dalmia, *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), available from <https://www.boloji.com/articles/4563/unveiling-artistic-feminism>.

As mentioned in the introduction, Pakistan has one of the most severe gender gaps in the world. In Pakistan, women's conditions and position are constantly shaped by patriarchal domination, right-wing nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and capitalist exploitation.⁴² Along with other South Asian women, women in Pakistan constantly mediate their agency through a mindful engagement with cultural and nationalist attire.⁴³ The double standards of the patriarchy, demanding separate social status and gender roles in the aftermath of a misconstrued Islamisation enforced by military dictatorship, triggered Pakistani women artists to actively engage with feminist acts of unveiling the injustices towards women within the social practices and institutions of the state-sponsored patriarchy. The aspect that stands out as being of the greatest importance for this thesis project is that these artists continue to push the space occupied by the female bodies, and they keep doing it by veiling an unveiling their bodies. In the following pages I provide a brief survey of the unveiled female bodies that have been produced by Muslim artists.

Muslim Artists and the Female Nude

“When we are not willing to participate in sexist culture, we are wilful.”⁴⁴

In the case of Pakistan, due to the restrictions placed on representation of body associated with the misinterpretations enacted by increasingly Islamised state policies (as discussed above), many women artists turned towards a symbolic representation of the body; however, there are many who choose to push against the current and even depicted nude female bodies in their works. Salima Hashmi painted nudes that appeared abstractly and aesthetically engaged in and veiled by “an air of encountering the surroundings if not of sovereignty.”⁴⁵ In *The Life and Times of...* (1983) Hashmi painted a female figure in an interior setting. Shown from the back, she is depicted as looking at news clips of war (fig 1.5 C). Pakistani-Australian artist Summaya Durrani's *Faceless Nude* series (1995) were tongue-in-cheek statements about women's bodies served for male consumption using mixed media images and printmaking techniques.⁴⁶ Naiza Khan's works, especially *Henna Hands* (2003), intervene in public spaces with stencilled nude

⁴² Nazia Hussein, introduction to *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia*, ed. Nazia Hussein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴³ Hussein, 11.

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 83, 84.

⁴⁵ Kamran, “Exploring Female Identity in and through Art in Pakistan,” 132–141.

⁴⁶ Hashmi, “Unveiling Artistic Feminism.”

female silhouettes created using henna over the top of existing graffiti and posters on the walls of Karachi. These works interject abstract and uneasy female bodies into these predominantly male public urban spaces.⁴⁷

Hiba Schahbaz is a Pakistani-American female artist, who chooses miniature painting aesthetic to connect to her Muslim and Pakistani roots, instead of using the over-deployed signifier of the veil. Using tea stains, watercolour, and gouache on handmade vasli paper, in the style of Mughal and Persian illustrations, Schahbaz creates stylised nude self-portraits. She says, “I don’t want to make political paintings, but I wanted to make something which felt safe for women, a beautiful space for women to be in.”⁴⁸ In the manner of Pakistani feminist art practices, where subjective styles and the romanticisation of painting was used during the 1970s and ‘80s, Schahbaz explores simple themes of self-healing, spirituality, and femininity as she advances her naïve desire to create nurturing spaces for women. But as she borrows the visual language of Indo-Persian painting (fig 1.6) and engages with the practice of painting female nudes from European art history, her South Asian Muslim female background makes her a rare occupant in the history of this type of image making. Schahbaz and her works can be located in the middle of the almost empty field of Muslim women artists who negotiate agency through unveiling their bodies. In our world, where the veiled Muslim bodies ironically become hypervisible (defeating the purpose of the veil), Schahbaz counters the invisibility of the non-veiled Muslim female subjects by unveiling her body completely to become visible, and boldly asserts her right to occupy spaces, both figuratively and literally.⁴⁹ Instead of critiquing the misogyny present within Islamic patriarchal cultures or using humour or sarcasm to address ideas of the male gaze within art institutions at large, Schahbaz uses her nude female form unapologetically.

In contrast to Schahbaz, Sarah Maple uses loud satire to address gender issues in her works. She deconstructs the stereotypes of female Muslims and of female artists, using self-portraits, appropriation, subversive affirmation, and use of humour. Through her versatile art practice, she engages with resistance against patriarchy within art institutions and with the politics of veiling

⁴⁷ Hammad Nasar, “Pakistan: An Art of Extremes,” *Orientations* 40, no. 1 (2009): 38–48.

⁴⁸ “Hiba Schahbaz on Painting the Nude: Overcoming Cultural Obstacles and Achieving Artistic Breakthroughs,” *Art She Says*, 11 September 2020, <https://artshesays.com/hiba-schahbaz-on-painting-the-nude-overcoming-cultural-obstacles-and-achieving-artistic-breakthroughs>.

⁴⁹ Bedatri D. Choudhury, “The Boldly Feminine Gaze of Hiba Schahbaz,” *Hyperallergic*, 29 September 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/591100/hiba-schahbaz-dreaming-debuck-gallery>,

and unveiling Muslim female bodies.⁵⁰ This is evident in her work *Signs* (fig 1.7) in which she directly targets misogyny, class, and islamophobia by representing her body in various stages of being veiled and unveiled. From left to right, she is wearing a shalwar kameez and dupatta as she holds a sign that says, “I wish I had a penis.” In the next image she is wearing red underwear and lipstick holding a sign saying, “because then I’d fuck you.” In the far-right images, she is wearing a pant suit with a tie and holding a sign that says, “then steal your job.”

Maple’s subjective identity as a contemporary Muslim female artist from the United Kingdom is also aligned with the global feminist interventions and art practices that play an integral role in social justice and emancipatory movements. Feminist artists do not necessarily follow any style, medium, tools, tactic, or even subject matter. However, they often deconstruct stereotypes, and even weaponise, gendered tools, spaces, and media. They also sometimes make use of subversive affirmation and sarcasm, such as the work by Guerrilla Girls, Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin, Tracey Moffatt, Lynda Benglis, and many others.⁵¹ Like the Guerrilla Girls, Maple makes great use of pastiche, as she uses the most iconic gendered attire, such as the Islamic veil and red lingerie, to critique gendered systems.⁵² But her satirical criticism of Muslim womanhood has brought her death threats from members of London’s Muslim communities.⁵³ The idea of using the female body, in particular a Muslim female body, for consciousness-raising and to question patriarchal systems is disconcerting to many Muslims.

Hayv Kahraman is an Iraqi-American artist who works with ideas of displacement, diaspora, the otherness associated with migration, memory, and her deeply personal experiences as a woman.⁵⁴ Using a montage of artistic elements from various tradition, such as Japanese ink paintings and Persian miniature paintings, along with Arabic text, she creates semi-autobiographical near self-portraits as nude female bodies. In her work *Person nummer* (2015) (fig 1.8) two expressionless women can be seen lifting their skirts. One figure is sitting while the other is standing holding a

⁵⁰ “My ‘feminist awakening’ was at art school. I often talk about how frustrated I was during that time, it really felt that the women artists were not taken as seriously as the men—like our ideas were deemed silly or trivial (to be honest, I still have that problem).” Balasc Takac, “Deconstructing the Stereotypes: An Interview with Sarah Maple,” *Widewalls*, 24 January 2019, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/sarah-maple-interview>. See also “The Marvellous World of Mis Maple,” *Reorient*, November 2016, <http://www.reorientmag.com/2016/11/sarah-maple>.

⁵¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 31.

⁵² James Payne, “Humour is a Feminist Issue,” *Huffington Post UK*, 20 March 2012, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/james-payne/sarah-maple-humour-is-a-feminist-issu_b_1285107.html.

⁵³ “Muslim Artist gets Death Threats,” *BBC News*, 31 October 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7701168.stm

⁵⁴ Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Martin Daughtry, Walter Mignolo, and Octavio Zaya, *Hayv Kahraman* (New York: Rizzoli, 2018).

small piece of paper. Below the figures, Arabic texts says: “When you arrive to Sweden you are given a personal identity number ‘person nummer.’ That is pronounced ‘peshoon nummer.’ In the Iraqi dialect *peshoon* means vagina.” This work comments on her Iraqi migrant female identity, and the urgency of seeking intimacy through a shared experience.

The element of using personal experiences and subjectivity stands strong in the works of Muslim female artists. In the following section, I address the different ways in which male and female Muslim artists engage with the nude female body.

Male-Female Dynamics⁵⁵

While the patriarchy within Muslim cultures is obsessed with containing and concealing women’s bodies, nude and semi-nude images of women are scattered through the history of Islamic arts, created mostly to please the male gaze, and produced by male artists. An early example includes the nude women in frescoes at Qusayr Amra, which was the pleasure palace of al-Walid II (743–744 CE). (A longer discussion of these works is beyond the scope of this thesis). The gazes of Muslim men seeking female nude bodies is also evident in contemporary times, as Muslim countries top the charts for internet pornography searches.⁵⁶ It is also important to highlight here the religious text that is often quoted when justifying women’s veiling: Quran’s chapter 24, verse 31.⁵⁷ But what is almost never mentioned is the verse right before it, which is addressing men and the male gaze, and is laden with the potential to redirect this conversation toward the topic of the male gaze.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ This title draws from Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Saqi, 2011).

⁵⁶ “Pakistan tops List of Most Porn-Searching Countries: Google,” *Express Tribune*, 18 January 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/823696/pakistan-tops-list-of-most-porn-searching-countries-google>.

“According to the data released by Google, Pakistan tops the list of most porn-searching countries... six of the top eight porn-searching countries were Muslim states. The country at number two in the list was Egypt, while Iran, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Turkey came in at numbers four, five, seven and eight, respectively.”

⁵⁷ Translation by Dr Laleh Bakhtiar: Quran, chapter 24, Surah An-Nur (The Light), verse 31: *And say to the females, ones who believe to lower their sight and keep their private parts safe and show not their adornment but what is manifest of it. And let them draw their head coverings over their bosoms; and not show their adornment but to their husbands or their fathers or the fathers of their husbands or their sons or the sons of their husbands or their brothers or the sons of their brothers or the sons of their sisters or their women, or what their right hands possessed, or the ones who heed, imbued with no sexual desire among the men or small male children to whom was not manifest nakedness of women. And let them not stomp their feet so as to be known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to God altogether for forgiveness. O the ones who believe, so that perhaps you will prosper.*

⁵⁸ Quran, chapter 24, Surah An-Nur (The Light), verse 30: *Tell the believing men to lower their looks (and do not look lustfully) and guard their private parts. That is purer (and better) for them. God is well aware of what they do*

While analysing male and female artists' engagement with Muslim female bodies, a pattern can be observed in both Orientalist art as well as art produced by Muslims (highlighted earlier regarding Orientalist tropes). The representation of the female nude in the works of female Muslim artists, such as Salima Hashmi, Hiba Schahbaz, and Sarah Maple, tend to represent the Muslim female body from a personal and subjective point of view, in contrast to the eroticification of female bodies in the works of many male artists. From fifteenth and seventeenth century artists, such as Reza Abbasi, Muhammad Mamun and Muhammad Qasim (fig 3.9), up to present day artists, including M.F. Hussain, Jamil Naqsh, Saeed Akhtar, and Rashid Rana, have produced works that contain nude, erotic and even pornographic images.⁵⁹ For example, in Rashid Rana's *Veil* series (2004) (fig 2.6), images of women clad in Afghani burqas have been created out of a digital montage of pornography. Rana himself explains his use of the veil: "Westerners think all Muslim women are veiled; Muslims associate Western women with pornography. I wanted to challenge these prejudices from both sides."⁶⁰

While many art critics (e.g., Kavita Singh) appreciate the paradoxical approach of representing women, others, such as Waheeda Bano Baloch, consider his choice of imagery simply reflects male sexual fantasy, and perpetuates the objectification of the female body in art.⁶¹ Other celebrated male artists who make female nudes even in countries like Pakistan and India, such as M.F. Hussain, Jamil Naqsh, and Saeed Akhtar, also receive praise and criticism simultaneously.

Chapter Conclusion

Within the contemporary global art markets, Orientalised, exoticised and 'otherised' images of veiled Muslim women fluidly oscillate between some concerning nodes. These include first and foremost the male fetish with passivity and the objectification of female bodies. Secondly, they engage with the political manipulation of public perceptions of Muslim women, symbolising the oppression of women located at contemporary geopolitical fault lines—that is, being Muslim women equals being in need of saving—which legitimises white male chivalry and the West's war

⁵⁹ See Sussan Babaie, "Visual Vestiges of Travel: Persian Windows on European Weaknesses," *Journal of Early Modern History* 13, no. 2 (2009): 105–136; Ashley M. Burns, "The Development of the Seated Female Nude in Seventeenth-Century Safavid Painting" (MA diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2016); Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015); Garth Fowden, *Qusayr 'amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); and Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif, eds., *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2017).

⁶⁰ N. Lankarani, "Going His Own Way, a Pakistani Artist Arrives," *New York Times* 13 October 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/14/arts/14iht-rartrana.html>.

⁶¹ Waheeda Bano Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil: The Case of Contemporary Art Practice in Pakistan Proposed," 3rd Kanita Postgraduate International Conference on Gender Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 16–17 November 2016; Kavita Singh, "Meaning, in Its Fragments," in *Rashid Rana* (Mumbai: Chatterjee & Lal, Chemould Prescott Road, 2010), 24–31.

on terror.⁶² In addition to that, the commodification and postmodern exoticism associated with culturally different artworks and artists in the contemporary global art markets, directs the production, circulation, and consumption of these artworks. In recent years, with the rise of Muslim women fighting for their rights in the Global North, these images also have come to symbolise a resistance to Western influence. This has resulted in these images being perceived by white viewers as confronting and threatening subject matter on one hand, while commended by right-wing Islamic feminist thought advocating the liberation of Muslim women on the other. Another aspect addressed in the works of many contemporary Muslim artists, such as Hoda Afshar (and also Lalla Essaydi, Shadi Ghadirian, Shirin Aliabadi and Mahsa Alikhani) is the use of images of Muslim women for neocolonial imperialism in disguise; representing them as suppressed and secretly fashion-loving and sexually free beings, confirming the supremacy of Western culture.

Salima Hashmi points out that the configuration of gender difference has been crucial to the works of Pakistanis women artists, because it is a country where the female body was (and is still) a prime “site for provocation, an abode of sin and forbidden sensations”. Many contemporary Muslim artists are breaking barriers and making bold works with their nude bodies. One of the most recent examples of this is Pakistani-American artist and designer Misha Japanwala, who is on the rise with her wearable sculptures, made out of body casts. Apart from using her own body, she has dressed various celebrities, including Cardi B in the music video for Lizzo’s 2021 single, “Rumors” (fig 1.9).⁶³ For her, “There’s nothing more honest than a physical representation of who a woman really is.”⁶⁴ Japanwala has been suffering from depression which she shares with thousands of her followers on Instagram) perhaps brought on due to the fact that she has received a lot of hate speech from Muslims for being a woman from Pakistan engaging with the nude.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Rashid Rana has received the Sitara-i-Imtiaz (star of excellence), the third-highest honour and civilian award in the State of Pakistan, in spite of using highly controversial imagery in his works. This biased attitude towards individuals based on their

⁶² Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

⁶³ Shamani Joshi, “Why this Artist who Sculpted Cardi B’s Pregnant Body gets Hate,” *Vice.com*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wx5pqz/cardi-b-pregnant-misha-japanwala>.

⁶⁴ Misha Japanwala – *Embodying Realities*, 1Granary <https://1granary.com/designers-3/schools/parsons/pakistani-designer-misha-japanwala/>

⁶⁵ Misha Japanwala (@mishajapanwala), Instagram post, 18 June 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQOjgRbL8Dq>: “This week marks 1 month since I started therapy. I’ve fallen in and out (mostly in) depression for most of this past year, and it took getting to a dangerous place for some of the people in my life to intervene, before I finally realized that I needed to get help. It’s felt a little dishonest to have continued posting photos of work + press when there’s been months where I couldn’t get off the couch, but I also didn’t feel able to share what I was going through until now...”

gender is a product of deep-rooted misogyny in Pakistani culture. However, this burdening of woman and the female body is not limited to Pakistan but is a problem for all female bodies. This burden is heavier for Muslim female bodies under both the Western gaze and Islamic regimes. Ideas surround the politicised, fetishised, and Orientalised veiled Muslim subject, who is required to be both the monolithic homogenised non-white heteronormative uncivilised other in need of saving, as well as being the nude female body consumed by the male gaze, and dehumanised to the status of sexualised subject matter in art. For contemporary Muslim female artists, the female body's *containment*, *concealment*, and *visibility* has become a call to mediate and reclaim their agency and representation.⁶⁶

There is a lack of feminist studies on the use of veiling and unveiling of the female body as a matter of mediation self-representation in the contemporary practices of Muslim women artists. In this chapter I have provided a feminist reading of the female body's veiled and unveiled representation in the contemporary practices of Muslim female artists. These representations are entrenched first and foremost in feminist ideas around objectification of female bodies and the male gaze. There is a danger in addressing these issues as only being colonial, Orientalist, or political as these terms can act as potential disguises for patriarchal tendencies to take power away from the feminist debate in the political domain. While Linda Nochlin denied separating the cultural production of art and the field of aesthetics from colonial politics, I refuse to position political and colonial discourses as domains that precede feminist theory, especially in regard to the representation of Muslim women's veiled and unveiled bodies in arts.

While representations of Muslim women in art remains a problematic topic, contemporary Muslim women artists' nuanced subjectivities and creative practices are keys to understanding the misrepresented and misunderstood ideas about them. In the following chapters, I will address my own works in detail, along with introducing some other creative practitioners and theorists who have been influential for my creative practice and research process.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Hashmi, "Unveiling Artistic Feminism."

⁶⁷ This research project has been influenced by many feminist artists, not all of whom could fit in the body of this dissertation. Around ideas of female body, I have been inspired by Tracey Moffatt's intervention into voyeuristic practices of looking at the female body; Guerrilla Girls' use of quantitative data and posters to bring forth the persistence of sexism in the art world since 1980s; feminist ideas of white possession and occupation of spaces and bodies that are changing the way history is perceived and documented, such as Hannah Brontë's works engaged with the ideas of colonised bodies of people of colour; and Marth Rosler, Salima Hashmi and Lizzie Borden's subversion of spaces from being means of subjugation to dialogical spaces, among many others.

Chapter 2: Male Gaze and the Female Veil

“Feminist work is often memory work.”¹

In this chapter, I discuss my work *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1* (2021) (figs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4). Through this work I test the boundaries of my representation as a Muslim female artist and its relationship to attire, using memories, religious texts, languages, sounds, video, animation, and appropriated imagery. In the following pages I elaborate on my sources and methods used in the making of this work, including my use of verse 30 from chapter 24 of Quran, which addresses the male gaze. I discuss Shahzia Sikander’s artworks and her use of animation within contemporary Islamic/South Asian miniature painting practices, as I unpack imagery from the Mughal miniature paintings that is appropriated and animated for the visual construction of my work. I also build on Rashid Rana’s use of grids and pixelation—a tactic often deployed by Muslim artists.

Sarah Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life* about the importance of memories, not just for recalling forgotten things, but also in the context of revisiting, in order to “make sense of how different experiences connect.”² My mind is filled with memories of growing up in Lahore and learning to accept gendered roles in its society (as discussed in the introduction to this thesis). The process of my *girling* started early and everyone seemed to take part in it happily. Ahmed explains this process:

Girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed as a girl, but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl, we can do this to you. Violence too is a mode of address. ... if you are not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you (look at what you were drinking, look at what you wearing, look at where you were, look look).³

Ahmed’s words remind me of my own experiences. I remember being shamed for wearing a shirt with short sleeves, and being told not to cover my head with the dupatta at a formal event

¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 22.

² Ahmed, 22.

³ Ahmed, 26.

by my older cousins and aunts because it looked weird and unfashionable. I remember being told to cover my head with the dupatta because if you didn't look modest enough at the place you were at, people looked at you judgmentally. I became sensitive of my body's visibility and of the other's gaze. My Muslim female identity continues to be questioned even after moving thousands of miles away from Lahore. I am often asked by my white friends in Australia why, as I am a Muslim, don't I cover my head. I feel weary of always being associated with my attire.⁴ As a Muslim woman of colour, I feel burdened daily by what parts of my body are veiled and unveiled, visible and invisible, both in my daily practice of dressing up, and within my art practice.

I draw on Ahmed's ideas on the importance of memory in order to make sense of how memories and experiences connect through my works.⁵ I vividly remember how one night my mother ran into our front garden without her dupatta during the 9 p.m. news. She called upon our neighbours and sighed "Zia-ul-Haq has died!" I remember her gasp loud and clear, and my inability to recall whether she was happy or sad about the news still befuddles me. I was born in Pakistan during the times when Zia-ul-Haq enforced Islamisation in the country with an anti-feminist agenda. As discussed in chapter 1, Pakistani female artists played an integral role in the resistance movement during his regime (from 1977 to 1988). Salima Hashmi, who has been my personal hero since growing up in Lahore, pointed out that in Pakistan, while the female body was burdened as the prime site of provoking forbidden sensations for men, women artists turned its containment, concealment, and visibility into integral subject matter for exploration. During that era, while Western feminist artists were rejecting the male-dominated practice of making female nudes, many Pakistani woman artist, turned to using the unveiling of the female body as a symbol to reject the patriarchal ideas shrinking their place and role in the society.⁶ This spirit to use the unveiling as well as veiling of the body, is still around in the works of many Muslim women artists around the globe.⁷ And they practice it not strictly in order to retaliate a martial

⁴ Ahmed, 26: "to become girl as becoming wary of being in public space, becoming wary of being at all. Indeed, if you do not modify your behavior in accordance, if you are not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you (look at what you were drinking, look at what you are wearing, look at where you were, look look)."

⁵ See Laura U. Marks, "Taking a Line for a Walk, from the Abbasid Caliphate to Vector Graphics," *Third Text* 23, no. 3 (2009): 229–240; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (2009): 82. Carrie Lambert-Beatty: "This is precisely the territory of parafiction, which at once reveals the way things are and makes sensible the way we want them to be; and which offers experience of both scepticism and belief"

⁶ Hashmi, "Unveiling Artistic Feminism."

⁷ While contemporary Muslim female artists such as Shirin Neshat, Shirin Ghadrian, Lalla Essaydi, Ayesha Khalid, and Cigdem Aydemir make use of the veil, other artists like Sarah Maple, Saira Sheikh, Salima Hashmi, Naiza Khan, Hiba Schahbaz and Nadia Waheed use the unveiled bodies. This idea is discussed in the context of Pakistan in the chapter 1 section "We Sinful Women."

law, but also in order to resist Islamophobia in the West and the extremism within Muslim cultures. Salima Hashmi's ideas about the veiling and unveiling still stand tall in the art practices of contemporary Muslim women, particularly in my artworks, where the female body, its attire, and its uncovering has become a rallying call to the barricades.⁸

Pixelation and Animation

Lower the Gaze is a single-channel video installation, which explores ideas of Muslim women's veiled and unveiled bodies in order to revisit and reimagine their representation in both Islamic and Western contexts. In this work, I present my body as two figures unfolding side by side in front of the camera, almost mirroring each other's actions and movements. One figure is in the state of being completely veiled under a black burqa, while the other is completely naked. During the course of work, I alter, subvert, and connect these two female Muslim bodies—one hypervisible and veiled, the other invisible and unveiled—by using the trope of pixelation. By doing so, I simultaneously deny satisfaction to the Orientalist viewership intent on consuming the veiled Muslim bodies or the general male gaze accustomed to consuming nude female bodies in art. Conceptually, in addition to using pixelation as a method to disable the viewing of my body as naked and veiled, the use of pixelation and the grid is deeply connected with my Muslim roots. The use of geometry, grids and pixelation features widely in the art practices of classical as well as contemporary creative works that comes from Muslim worlds, and are connected with Islamic aesthetics and philosophical thought.⁹

In pixel-based graphics, the minimal part itself can be the basis of an unimaginably extensive line that will, in time, reveal the contour of every thing, a secular variation on the infinite knowledge of God.¹⁰

A pixel is the basic unit of the digital image and/or virtual space, and is also reminiscent of the **الكعبة** Kaaba (cube) that manifests and symbolises the earthly centre of the Muslim universe.¹¹ A singular pixel, a cube, and the concept of **توحيد** *tawheed* (oneness) that sits at the core of Islamic thought offer easily exchangeable creative symbols and ideas. While these ideas are manifest in

⁸ Hashmi, "Unveiling Artistic Feminism." For further quotes and discussion, see chapter 1, "We Sinful Women."

⁹ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

¹⁰ Marks, 239.

¹¹ Marks, "Taking a Line for a Walk," 235: "Square atoms in philosophy. Square (or rhomboid) points in calligraphy. And now, square pixels in the contemporary screen. Each of these shapes is the basic unit of a potentially infinite extension. Yet, as a minimal part, it does not admit of internal extension."

the works of multiple Muslim artists, the practices of Aisha Khalid and Rashid Rana are important for my work as they both not only use veiling and unveiling of the female body in the context of Islam, but also often use geometry, grids, cubes and pixelation.¹²

Khalid (b. 1972, Pakistan) uses traditional tools and customary methods of miniature painting, and a spiritual approach to create her works.¹³ Deploying the centuries-old technique of *pardakht*, she painstakingly manually renders her paintings with geometric repetitive textile patterns simulating camouflage and pixelation, along with veiled bodies.¹⁴ In doing so, she adds nuance to the idea of the veil, as can be seen in her work *Silence with Pattern* (2000) (fig 2.10). In this work, the figures in black burqas are geometrically aligned atop the background of geometric patterns. These figures simultaneously are instantly visible and stand out from the background, yet, due to their geometric alignment, seem to be part of the background.¹⁵ These figures refrain from hinting at veiled women's oppression or strength, instead evoking a sense of mystery. Her works took a turn towards another aspect of the veil that draws on Sufi Islamic thought. This idea of the veil is symbolic and spiritual in essence: the veil of knowledge, the veil between the human and the divine, the veil covering the Kaaba, and so on. In her recent works, she has been engaging more with the material that construct the veil, such as fabrics and garments, and uses pins and needles to replace the *Pardakht* method of rendering the surfaces (fig 2.11).¹⁶ Khalid's art practice, of engaging with the female body and the bodily concealment—that is, with the veil—using intensive labour and time is a feminist practice, and her use of the veil, pixelation, and geometry manifest quite differently to that of her male contemporaries.

Rashid Rana (b. 1968, Pakistan) uses composite photomontages to addresses worldly dualities and reductive binaries in his works.¹⁷ Instead of the hand-rendering technique of *Pardakht* deployed by miniature painters like Khalid, Rana is well known for his digitally rendered composite works with thousands of tiny images.¹⁸ His 2004 *Veil* series (fig 2.6) has received a lot

¹² See chapter 1 for a discussion on these Pakistani-born artists regarding the use of the veiling and unveiling of the body in their works.

¹³ See Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* (Islamabad: ActionAid Pakistan, 2003); Salima Hashmi, *The Eye Still Seeks: Pakistani Contemporary Art* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books India, 2015); and Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

¹⁴ Caroline Turner, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005).

¹⁵ Maiko Hara et al., eds., *Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists, 1984–2012* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 2012).

¹⁶ Valerie Behiery, "An Interview with Pakistani Artist Aisha Khalid: The Divine is in the Detail," *Islamic Arts Magazine*, 27 October 2013, http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/the_divine_is_in_the_detail.

¹⁷ Nasar, "Pakistan: An Art of Extremes," 38–48.

¹⁸ Anna Sloan, "Embodied Space: The Miniature as Attitude," in *Beyond the Page*, ed. Anita Dawood and Hammad Nasar (London: Asia House, 2006), 31.

of international controversies as well as appraisal.¹⁹ In these works, he created pixelated images of burqa-clad women using collage of hundreds of pornographic images, highlighting the stereotyping and objectification of women. His other works comment on the condition of art history as he appropriates history paintings using same or similar methodologies:

Every image has its own historical context and baggage. I wanted to liberate myself and my viewer from the specificity we give to any one image—by taking European paintings and rearranging their fragments I’m trying to see the possibilities beyond that one particular image, and free them from a specific time and place. By transliterating them, we liberate ourselves and see beyond their original contextual frameworks.²⁰

In this sense, although Rana and Khalid engage with similar concepts, the techniques, processes, and essence of their subjective engagement with the works are very different. Rana pushes the limits of an image’s potential to create meaning, using pixels, collages, and appropriation, whereas Khalid nuances the process of art making with personal and spiritual meaning.²¹

Both of these artists have been influential on my own practice for decades, as they both live and work in Lahore, where I grew up. Building on Rashid’s works by pushing the medium and structure of works, while borrowing Ayesha’s sense of self-seeking and drawing from subjectivity, the pixelation and appropriation of miniatures paintings in my work developed out of my experimentation in the studio. It started while I was looking at images of nude female bodies in the arts of Islamic worlds, and also the veiled images of Muslim women in the media, in order to tease out ways to address my creative inquires. An example of this is my small experimental pencil drawing *Veiling Unveiling* (2019) (fig 2.7).²² I drew solid pixels on top of sensitively hand-drawn images appropriated from Mughal miniatures, imitating a kind of digital process. Another example is *Self Portrait number 101* (fig 2.8), in which I address identity politics and issues around the veiling of Muslim women in relation to current-day digital surveillance.²³ In both of these works I experimented with the use of pixelation and veiling.

¹⁹ Bano Baloch, “Gendered Images of Veil.”

²⁰ Anna Wallace-Thompson, “Rashid Rana: Transfiguring History,” *The Art Newspaper*, 15 March 2017, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/rashid-rana-transfiguring-history>.

²¹ Singh, “Meaning, in Its Fragments,” 24–31.

²² This work has been exhibited at “Australian Muslim Artists Art Prize Recipient 2019” in Sydney, Australia.

²³ This work has been exhibited at “Kudos Emerging Artist & Designer Award 2019” in Sydney, Australia.

Due to my inquisitive and experimental nature, while experimenting with still images I also started experimenting with moving images and animation as I learned more about contemporary feminist creative practices.²⁴ Being a newcomer to the media gave me certain liberties to experiment rather than adhering to its norms, and Pakistani-American Muslim artist Shahzia Sikander's practice, especially her animated works, demonstrated a range of audiovisual strategies including animation, appropriation, and new media trajectories for using traditional Islamic miniature painting.²⁵ While Sikander's practice is entrenched in traditional miniature painting techniques, it has expanded to embrace multimedia and large scales audiovisual installations in the last few years. Drawings, paintings, maps, and other images are scanned to be mobilised and animated digitally in abstract, dreamlike, and surreal floating forms, designs, and visual vistas in her works. They allude to historical, geographical, colonial, and political aspects of the Indo-Pakistani region, and are layered with audio tracks of recitations and other sounds. For instance, in *The Last Post* (fig. 2.9), she examines the history of colonial dominance and its contemporary implications of these colonial legacies, using animated visuals of the trade routes of the East India Company.²⁶ I build on Sikander's works as she pushes traditions of Mughal and Persian miniature painting and contests the boundaries of so-called 'Islamic art' and 'Muslim artists' by deploying moving images, animation, and appropriation. Like Sikander, I use layers of animations, images, and pixelated Muslim female bodies. As they slowly unfold, they create an abstract audiovisual narrative, questioning and connecting the veiled and unveiled bodies of Muslim women with ideas of visibility and invisibility.

I would like to add here briefly that because the essence of my work lies within the ideas of visibility and invisibility associated with the veiling and/or unveiling of the Muslim female body, I also draw upon Hito Steyerl's art practice and her ideas around circulationism and invisibility in the age of surveillance.²⁷ In her work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) she offers viewers ways to avoid detection, such as hiding in plain sight, shrinking to a size smaller than a pixel, and occupying low-resolution spaces. Building on her suggestions, in my work I transform into a pixelated figure.

²⁴ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 182–192. "For women, the devices of camera and monitor carry the burden of their own material and philosophical relation to the history of technology, wherein the 'bachelor machine' has been imbued with a masculine auto-eroticism and the feminine has been instrumentalized."

²⁵ See, for example, her works *The Last Post* (2010), *Parallax* (2013), and *Disruption as Rapture* 2016.

²⁶ Claire Brandon, "Drawing in the Digital Field: Shahzia Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010)," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 3 (2015): 492–504, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-3426349>.

²⁷ I discuss her ideas and works in chapter 3.

Appropriation

In *Lower the Gaze*, floriated images appear in the form of a decorative border and are animated to float around the surface of the image taking over the entire visual span of the work. These decorative elements appear not only in the style of Mughal miniature paintings but are actually borrowed and appropriated from them. In addition to these images, part of the title of this work is also an appropriation of the traditional titles of royal manuscripts of Muslim emperors. نامه خاتون *Khatoon Nama* literally means ‘The Book of Khatoon.’ *Badshahnama* (*The Book of the King*), royally commissioned and produced by the royal ateliers of male artists, were works of art and literature glorifying the lives and achievements of kings (sometimes this generic title was replaced with the name of the king, e.g., *Akbarnama*, *Tuzk-E-Jahangiri*).

Appropriation in art refers to direct or indirect use of images and/or ideas that already exist, while acknowledging the reference. It is a way of recontextualising the meaning of the objects, ideas, images, or artworks it originally borrows from, and can also be used to critique the myth of originality.²⁸ I have been using appropriation in my creative practice for almost two decades to address and explore my subjective contemporary globalised South Asian Muslim womanhood. In my work under discussion here, I appropriate both the images and the title of the work in order to address the relationship that exists between the politics of power and the Muslim female body. By using the title associated with male rulers and using the border painting originally commissioned and painted by men, fragmenting, and animating the flowers traditionally associated with femininity, I poetically and abstractly subvert the gender roles prescribed by patriarchy within Muslim cultures and frame my work within my personal migratory geographic history.

While in my video work *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, I discuss European influences on the artistic practices of Isfahan, Iran (see chapter 3), in *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from* نامه خاتون *Khatoon Nama* #1, I appropriate and animate the floral border of a royal Mughal miniature painting produced in seventeenth century India, where my ancestors came from (fig 2.5). This painting, *Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas of Persia*, is *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, Or: Memoirs of Jahangir* (from St. Petersburg album), produced around 1618, and is attributed to Abu'l Hasan,

²⁸ Hélène Trespeuch, “The Feminism of Sherrie Levine through the Prism of the Supposed ‘Death of the Author,’” *Archives of Women Artists Research and Exhibition*, accessed 31 August 2021, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/feminisme-de-sherrie-levine-prisme-de-pretendue-mort-de-lauteur>.

the master painter of Jahangir's imperial atelier.²⁹ The image is an allegorical representation of Emperor Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas of Persia (later Iran). Jahangir can be seen as the stronger and better-dressed figure, comforting (almost squishing) the meeker figure of Shah Abbas. This was a fabrication of their real political relationship as they were rivals in reality, and this artwork is an example of state-sponsored propaganda art. Symbolism is used to affirm the politics of power under the feet of these rulers: Jahangir has a lion, which seems to be nudging Shah Abbas's lamb out of Persia, the seat of their contest.³⁰

Art has been used to render the grandiosity of those in power throughout history, and Mughal emperors mastered this tactic, employing for centuries to assert their dynastic powers.³¹ Mughal court paintings, along with many other royal artistic practices, served to legitimise the political powers under the guise of cultural and artistic exchange. Under the reign of Jahangir, the Mughal King of the Indian Subcontinent during the seventeenth century, multicultural integration and its related narratives were strengthened more than during the time of his predecessors.

Recontextualising the state-sponsored fictional power play exhibited in this painting between the two political giants of that era, in *Lower the Gaze* I replace the figures with two images of myself: one completely veiled, the other completely unveiled, but both pixelated. This creates an abstract visual narrative, where both figures seem to be mirroring each other at certain points in time and resisting at others. They dance under the guise of being seen in their full form as I pixelate the representation of my body in both states of being totally veiled and unveiled.

Audio

The audio track of *Lower the Gaze* is comprised of recordings of me reciting translations of the verse from Quran that instructs Muslim men to lower their gaze. I have been careful not to synchronise any figural images with the recitation in Arabic and used only translations of Quranic verses, due to the danger of irritating right-wing Muslims. Traditionally, Quran's Arabic version is considered the word of Allah, and demands diligence and supreme respect.³² I have

²⁹ Abu'l Hasan painted several allegorical representations of Jahangir, but Muhammad Sadiq painted the border of this painting.

³⁰ Mika Natif, *Mughal Orientalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580–1630* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Conceit of the Globe in Mughal Visual Practice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 751–782.

³¹ Beyond the temporal liminalities of technology and media, it can be easily observed that the fabrication of truths have been always intertwined with the politics of power through the use of art, language, written and spoken word, film, media, and so on.

³² Failure to do so can bring accusations of blasphemy and can even result capital punishment in Muslim countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia. According to the Pakistan Penal Code, the punishment for blasphemy (قانون توبین رسالت) can be

used delay to enhance my whispering voice, mimicking and subverting the undecipherable echoes of male voices I grew up listening to. This tactic comes from Sara Ahmed's method of using memory work as a sponge to mop different experiences and make sense of them.³³ She regards using memories as an integral aspect of living a feminist life.

In order to make sense of the reasons why representation of Muslim woman is important for me to conduct research into, I evoke and engage with my personal memories and lived experiences. This subjective element is deeply rooted in my personal memories associated with not only learning how to embody my gender, but also various kinaesthetic triggers that surrounded me during the formative years of my life. Growing up in Lahore during the 1980s and '90s was a very sensory experience. The sounds of *aḏān* أَذَان (call for prayer) loudly echoed five times a day, every day. In addition to the (sometimes) melodious male voices on loudspeakers, on special days (such as Friday noon times, dawns and sunsets during the month of Ramzan, and Eid), the sounds of selected verses from Quran being recited, lectures, sermons, and tuneful *na'at* نعت and *hamd* حمد from the various mosques simultaneously overlapped, echoing all around my house.³⁴ I grew up like most other Muslim children in South Asia, learning to read Quran and memorising numerous verses and chapters in Arabic without understanding the meaning of the words. As a result, whenever there was a question about understanding a religious issue or point of view, people often turned to asking a seemingly religious figure (often a male person) or referred to books that were mostly written by men. I regularly noticed how the female perspective of Islam was missing and disregarded in that whole situation.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in discussions of the idea of Muslim women's veiling, verse 31 from chapter 24 of Quran is often quoted, which instructs women to lower their gaze

death, and severe amendments were made to these laws during Zia's regime. For an overview, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blasphemy_in_Pakistan.

³³ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 22: "Feminist work is often memory work. We work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede. While thinking about what it means to live a feminist life, I have been remembering; trying to put the pieces together. I have been putting a sponge to the past. When I think of my method, I think of a sponge: a material that can absorb things. We hold it out and wait to see what gets mopped up. It is not that memory work is necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather, you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect."

³⁴ *Na'at* نعت, is poetry in praise of the prophet Muhammad, and *hamd* حمد is a poetic praise of Allah. Both poetic and musical genres featuring religious chants, and their melodic recitation and singing are popular practices in South Asia.

and cover their breasts.³⁵ However, what is often left out of these discussions is the verse directly before it, which addresses men to lower their gaze:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ

Say to the believing men, to lower their gaze and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely Allah is well aware of all what they do.³⁶

In *Lower the Gaze*, I use the Urdu and English translations of this verse. These multiple translations highlight the relationship between the male gaze and the female body (and the veiling or unveiling thereof) as interconnected ideas and actions. While the fascination of the Global North with images of veiled Muslim women has been embedded with Orientalism and passive eroticism since the nineteenth century, the heightened and politicised consumption of these images in our post-9/11 world is also deeply intertwined with ideas of looking and spectatorship.³⁷ American writer bell hooks (b. 1952) discusses the politics of racialised power relations, the enslaved gaze, black female subjectivity and spectatorship, white feminism within feminist film theory, and the male gaze, in her 1992 essay collection *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.³⁸ She writes that she remembered being punished as a child for staring, highlighting the idea that the gaze is political and retains power, highlighting the power inherent in the act of looking.³⁹ She writes, “Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.”⁴⁰

hooks’s ideas around the power of the gaze and its reversal by the one being gazed upon can be easily applied to the fetishised, othered and politicised consumption of the veiled Muslim female bodies here, since Islamophobia borders the domain of racism. I evoke hooks’s ideas of turning around the male-dominant field of gendered gaze, urging the agency of the female gaze to counter the patriarchal surveillance in my work under discussion here.

³⁵ Quran القرآن is believed by Muslims to be a revealed from Allah ﷻ to the prophet Muhammad مُحَمَّدٌ. It is divided into 114 chapters called *surah*, *surat* or *sura* of varying lengths. They are further divided into rhyming verses called *ayah* or *ayat*.

³⁶ Quran القرآن, chapter 24 *Surah Al-Nur*, Ayat 30.

³⁷ Although the discussion of the bodies of women of colour in art and as artists is a complex field of its own, and beyond the scope of this text, Edward Said’s discussions on Orientalism, and Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt’s creative practice (in a local Australian feminist woman of colour context) addressing Indigenous people’s representation are of relevance here. See also Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” 125–150.

³⁸ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

³⁹ hooks, 119.

⁴⁰ hooks, 131.

Chapter Conclusion

In *Lower the Gaze*, I combine several tactics to make creative inquiries brought forward by this thesis. I use the trope of pixelation to signify the geometric elements found in Islamic arts. Building upon Hito Steyerl's ideas on invisibility, I present my body as pixelated.⁴¹ I animate and appropriate images from South Asian Mughal manuscripts to connect with my background from Lahore, of which miniature painting is a strong signifier in the field of contemporary art. I use sound in the form of translated verses from Quran to highlight not only the absence of a feminist perspective in my memories of growing up in the male-dominated Islamic culture of Lahore, but also to echo the Arabic verses played out in male voices from the mosques around my house in Lahore in the 1980s. Through this work I aim to connect two seemingly varied approaches towards the female body: the totally veiled and the totally unveiled/nude. This work is an effort to connect the personal and communal memories of being a Muslim woman, and to suggest that representations are constructed, and can therefore be dismantled. Pixelation here is used as a binding element, as both the veiled and unveiled figures appear pixelated in a similar fashion.

Taking these ideas forward, in the next chapter I discuss the second major work produced for this MFA, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, in which I engage with the hypervisible politicised images of veiled Muslim women in the contemporary Global North, and the rarely seen or discussed images of nude and semi-nude female bodies from the art history of Islamic worlds.

⁴¹ Steyerl's concept of circulationism has informed my works and writing, and is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Performance Lecture

“Her intellectual labor is hidden by a joke; how it is hidden is performed by the joke.”¹

In this chapter I discuss my work, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture* (2021) (fig 3.1 a, b, c) and its various structural and conceptual elements. This work is a pastiche of performance lecture, built around the fictional narrative of خاتون Khatoon. In this work I highlight ideas that are also central to *Lower the Gaze*, discussed in chapter 2. These ideas revolve around the representation of Muslim women’s veiled and nude bodies, and the male gaze. In this work, I make references to images of nude female bodies from the history of Islamic arts, which is a genre of art history often ignored by scholars. In this chapter I also unpack the format of performance lecture, which is a useful method of critiquing the condition of art, society and of knowledge.² My interest in critiquing the politicisation of Muslim women’s veiling, unveiling and representation, makes performance lecture a relevant tool to my work. In order to analyse and problematise the veiling and/or unveiling of Muslim female bodies, and their subsequent visibility and invisibility, I build on the artistic practice of two artists: Andrea Fraser (especially the feminist institutional critique in her performance *Official Welcome*), and Hito Steyerl (particularly her theory of circulationism and ideas of invisibility brought forward in her work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*). I will begin by discussing the work, and the fictions it entails.

The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture

The second major work produced for this MFA, *The Nude Dupatta*, takes the form of a single-channel video-based performance lecture, including video, audio, screen recordings, texts, and

¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 153.

² Performance lectures—artworks blending lecture and performance beyond academic formats and engaged with performing and visual arts—are relevant to my ongoing research and practice. This kind of work is often located at the cusp of art and academia, pushing, and challenging the established modes, insemination, transmission, and production of artworks, knowledge, and the institutions that hold them. In art theory and criticism, numerous terms have been used to describe these practices, including performance-lecture, lecture-performance, performative lecture, and lecture as performance. There has been a resurgence of performance lectures in recent years. For example, in 2009, Tate Modern held the conference *Characters, Figures and Signs* incorporating lecture performance; MoCA Belgrade dedicated an entire exhibition to lecture performance in 2013; and Mark Leckey’s *Cinema in The Round*, which included a performance lecture as part of his installation, won the Turner Prize in 2007.

still and animated images. The video begins with some texts presented in the form of an online search, followed by visuals simulating a digital conference room awaiting the start of a session. The screen splits into nine smaller windows shortly before the protagonist appears. She is completely veiled under a black burqa, and addresses the viewers directly through the camera. As the performance progresses, she slowly starts to take her clothes off (including a face mask, which has been mandatory in many places due to the pandemic and raises serious debates about burqa bans associated with security threats in regard to Islamophobia), before putting the clothes back on in the same order that she took them off. All the while she keeps delivering the monologue, unaffected by the act of undressing and dressing, in an appropriation of Andrea Fraser's performance that I discuss later in this chapter. But unlike Fraser, her fully naked body does not become completely visible to the viewers due to camera angles that only show the body to just below the shoulders (fig 3.2).

All characters in this work are performed by me. Self-portraiture and using my own body in the works is a continuation of my creative practice spanning two decades. Much of this work has involved appropriating iconic images from Western art history and recreating them from a South Asian Muslim point of view, using photo-based print media, engaging, and highlighting the condition of the post-9/11, post internet, urban glocalisation of culture in Pakistan, as can be seen in figures 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7. Although live audiences are often part of performance lectures, in my work I remove the audience altogether.

During the second half of this MFA, which coincided with global 2020 pandemic crisis, I became increasingly interested in methods of making and sharing my creative works on digital formats. Utilising an online platform (or its simulation) for this performance seemed appropriate as it not only mirrored the global shift to working remotely via digital solutions, but also allowed me to participate in the widely prevalent transfer of labour onto digital platforms. The earlier tests of this performance-based work were conducted at a few public and private places (without an audience) including a UNSW Art & Design lecture hall, and an open garden space in Sydney's lower north shore (fig 3.4). Speculations of the final work included a live performance, but by the end of 2020, the performance space and its structure had moved completely to an online format. As the global pandemic made social interactions more and more unpredictable, I decided to locate myself and this work within the heightened digitality of our pandemic-ridden world at the moment and chose online methods of displaying and sharing the work that would be feasible

under restricted lockdown conditions (while also being displayable in a physical gallery space if and when the situation eases).

خاتون نامه *Khatoon Nama* (The Book of Khatoon)

خاتون Khatoon was a legendary superhero who received her powers from the nude females of Islamic art history.³ While her heroic tales have existed in the oral histories of various cultures around the world for centuries, fragments and separated folio pages of a digitally illustrated manuscript depicting her chronicles called خاتون نامه *Khatoon Nama* (The Book of Khatoon) was discovered a few decades ago.⁴ An extensive body of research has emerged in recent years giving a new life to this forgotten legendary hero of our feminist history. This research paper discusses two art historical images that appear on Khatoon's cape/dupatta, and it was presented at a recent online conference titled *Khatoon Nama*, that aimed to celebrate and bring together the diverse research around the manuscript.⁵

The text above is the introduction that accompanies this performance lecture. The contents of this performance are built around the fictional narrative of خاتون Khatoon, which is an allegorical representation of contemporary Muslim womanhood. In this performance, I present a research paper, presented at a fictional online conference about the illustrated manuscript خاتون نامه *Khatoon Nama* (The Book of Khatoon).⁶ Although the narrative of Khatoon, *Khatoon Nama*, and the conference are all fictional, the performance seeks to legitimise these fictional narratives. This validation is pursued through the art historical discussions of two nude or semi-nude female bodies from the history of Islamic worlds that takes place within the lecture. In contrast to the fictional narrative, these discussions are based on actual academic research.

³ See glossary.

⁴ Though the term *Khatoon Nama* خاتون نامه literally means, "The Book of Khatoon" but the idea is borrowed from the tradition of the arts of the book from Muslim empires, where royal book of kings were handwritten and illustrated, glorifying the lives and achievements of Kings. They were often titled "The Book of the King" or with the name of the king, e.g., *Badshahnama*, *Akbarnama*, etc.

⁵ See glossary.

⁶ The other work produced for this MFA, *Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1* (2021), loosely corresponds to this work through the title that suggests it being a page from the manuscript.

Within the fictional narrative of Khatoon are eleven images of nude or seminude female bodies that come from Islamic worlds, produced or commissioned by Muslims between the seventh century CE the late twentieth century. After briefly introducing all 11 images, I discuss two of these images in detail, from an art historical perspective, using a feminist lens. The first work I discuss in the performance lecture is *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (2008) by Sarah Maple (fig 3.8). This work appropriated that of another British female artist, Sarah Lucas's *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996), and I discuss how this appropriation makes Maple's work a dialogical engagement with time and socio-cultural debates in art and society addressing women's bodies. The second work I discuss is from 1659, titled *Lover's Dalliance*, attributed to the Persian painter Muhammad Qasim (fig 3.9). It is a rare mid-seventeenth century surviving miniature painting from the Safavid Dynasty depicting a female nude. While the depiction of a female full-frontal reclining nude was a very common subject matter in paintings created in Europe during that era, it was an infrequent sighting in Islamic arts, hence this work is an example of the fusion of Safavid and European artistic traditions known as *farangi-sazi*. I compare this work with Titian's *Venus and Cupid* from sixteenth century Europe. After subtly pointing out in this performance that Muslim women's attire and their representation is problematic in both the Islamophobic post-9/11 Global North as well as within patriarchal Muslim cultures, I wrap up the performance lecture connecting women's nude images in Islamic art history with Khatoon's dupatta.

Lastly, the time-period and geographic locations of both Khatoon and of the presenter are not defined, but there are various clues that suggest the presenter is set in our times, or in the near future. These clues include reference the COVID-19 pandemic, PowerPoint slides, and the deployment of widely used digital communication solution formats of online meetings during the global pandemic, along with the technical glitches that often occur during such events, like lagging internet, loss of audio or visuals, and so on.

"There is no outside ...the institution is inside of us."⁷

The performance lecture is a productive platform for examining the resistance of institutional frames of power within art practices and social cultures, and therefore helpful for me in presenting from the position of a Muslim female artist. Many artists who use this method maintain an unstable and/or destabilised position within the institutions of art, of which both

⁷ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *ArtForum*, September 2005, accessed 31 August 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200507/from-the-critique-of-institutions-to-an-institution-of-critique-9407>.

Hito Steyerl and Andreas Fraser are prime examples. Particular aspects of Fraser's feminist creative practice has been crucial in inspiring ideas for this project, especially in my decision to explore the performance lecture as a method for this project, including her appropriation and sampling of words (e.g., how she uses excerpts from real speeches and interviews), deployment of humour and sarcasm, and her engagement with her own body to critique the gender bias within both artistic and social institutions.⁸

I became fascinated with Fraser's work *Official Welcome* (fig 3.2), and how she humorously criticises the ethics of the art world and the exploitation and exhibitionism of the female body in art institutions, beautifully intertwining it with her archival research.⁹ During this performance, she mobilises her agency by taking control of how she presents her ideas and her body within the conceptual and physical space of the institution (of art) through an act of unveiling and veiling. In front of a room filled with people at a gallery in Hamburg, Germany (2003), Fraser started her live performance dressed tastefully in a black dress and shoes, and slowly took all her clothes off until she was fully naked; then she slowly puts them all back on. Meanwhile, her lecture continued unaffected by her actions in which she personified various people from the art world. Through the act of unveiling and veiling, Fraser mobilised her agency over the presentation of her own body.

I appropriate this element of Fraser's performance in my work. As described earlier in this chapter, mimicking Fraser, I slowly start taking my clothes off one piece at a time during my performance, and then put them all back on, while continuing to deliver the paper. However, unlike Fraser, my nakedness is not fully visible to the viewers, as the angle of the camera only allows my head and shoulders to be seen. The reasons for doing this are manifold. The first reason why my nakedness is not fully visible to the viewers is a pragmatic one. It saves me from igniting the religious sentiments of a conservative Muslim viewership. (An example of this in regard to Misha Japanwala is discussed in the conclusion of chapter 1.)

⁸ Zoë Lescaze, "Have We Finally Caught Up with Andrea Fraser?" *New York Times*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/t-magazine/andrea-fraser.html>: "*Official Welcome* is a case study in the intellectual rigor, physical bravura and satirical wit Fraser brings to diagnosing the collective delusions, material excesses, fraught politics, grandiose rhetoric, bumptious egos, ingrained biases and sundry pretences of the art world. For the past 30 years, she has reigned unchallenged as the doyenne of institutional critique, a branch of conceptual art concerned with the internal machinery of museums and other social constructs." The use of appropriation is also a continuation of my past practice, as discussed in detail in chapter 2

⁹ Lescaze, "Have We Finally Caught Up with Andrea Fraser?"

The second reason is connected to the limitations around the exhibition of my work due to the covid lockdowns; I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, but I will explain it a little more here. Due to the effects COVID-19, starting in 2020, the performativity of everyday workplace now often take place through the camera and on the digital screens between the sites of people's homes. This has allowed people to take liberties with the corporeality and visibility of their bodies, because they have been physically removed from their workplaces, which are often public places. The internet is crowded with funny videos of Zoom workplace wardrobe mishaps where people are dressed formally from waist up but wearing not much from the waist down. This act of selective dressing for the camera, with viewers on the receiving end, evokes ideas around the body's performativity and its relationship with location. As Rike Frank, a writer, academic and curator of contemporary arts asks: "How...is the notion of 'our relations to a site'—an essential component of knowing, yet difficult to quantify—articulated in lecture-performances?"¹⁰ I utilise this idea of selective performativity, the body's relationship to a site, and its visibility in my performance lecture. I addressed and experimented with my relationship to the digital site, which is the primary site where the work was decided to be performed and viewed. In doing this, I examined and pushed the limits of self-representation through the veiling and unveiling of my body to illuminate the gendered gaze and its institutionalisation within art, academia, and Islam. I undressed in front of the camera, controlling what parts of my body were visible, and which were not. Although it looks like I take all the clothes off, the viewers never really get to see past my head and shoulders. The question that has repeatedly come up from my test viewers during the trials of this work is whether I really took my clothes off or not. And I do not want to answer this. My resistance to either justify, confirm or negate this question is embedded in my resistance to satisfying the gaze in search of female nudes (in art or otherwise).

The third reason is embedded in a more abstract idea of the gaze. Although Fraser is totally in charge of how she chooses to present her body, she has no control over how she is perceived/viewed/looked or gazed at.¹¹ The ideas around the gaze and spectatorship are not neutral by any means even in an art institutional context—even for Fraser. Linda Nochlin's critique of the hegemony of white males in art institutions supports the urgency and need to deal with these ideas.¹² I use the following quote from Linda Nochlin within my performance lecture:

¹⁰ Rike Frank, "When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances," *Afterall* 33, no. 1 (2013): 9.

¹¹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹² See *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015); and Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* [1971] (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2021).

In Utopia—that is to say, in a world in which the power structure was such that both men and women equally could be represented clothed or unclothed in a variety of poses and positions without any implications of domination or submission—in a world of total and, so to speak, unconscious equality, the female nude would not be problematic. In our world, it is.¹³

Because the female nude is a problematic issue, it needs to be dealt with carefully. The female “newd” raises caution for the implicit and violating male gaze.¹⁴ Fraser’s becoming nude is a matter of risk here — the risk of re-institutionalising the fetish of female nudes in artworks, art history, and art intuitions. “It takes a lot of courage to do what she does,” she says in her performance while she takes off her clothes and stands speaking in the nude, mimicking the voice of an appreciative male critic. Instead of legitimising the use of female nudes in art, I only insinuate nakedness, and use the veiling of my body to illuminate the same idea. Since I do not wear a burqa or hijab, for me the complete veiling and complete unveiling of my body both seem to be equally violating my body’s viewership. Thus, appropriating elements from Fraser’s work, and building on Sara Ahmed’s idea of feminist killjoy I put on a burqa and strip down naked in front of the camera during this performance, attempting to kill the joy of those (the Islamophobic West and the patriarchy in Muslim cultures) intent on limiting or manipulating my visibility, invisibility, and presence, on the basis of my gender, race, or religion. Lastly, by using the performance lecture that sits at the cross section of art and academia, through this work I also mock the lack of Muslim women’s representation within the Western canon, where gender, religious, and racial bias continues to prevail.¹⁵

“This is not Research. This is not Theory. This is not Art”¹⁶

In her video work *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (fig 3.3), Hito Steyerl suggests many ways to become invisible, including trying on an invisibility cloak,

¹³ Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, 30.

¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, “Offbeat and Naked,” Artnet, accessed 20 April 2021, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/nochlin/nochlin11-5-99.asp>; “I like that word ‘newd’ because it brings together the idea of nude and lewd in an entirely satisfactory way. Not that a naked body has to be lewd to be offbeat and anti-classical.”

¹⁵ Despite the inclusion and diversity rhetoric in academia, in the USA only one in every 25 top academics in universities are non-white.; Denise Lu et al., “Faces of Power: 80% are White, even as U.S. Becomes More Diverse,” *New York Times*, 9 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/09/us/powerful-people-race-us.html>.

¹⁶ This heading is a play on words from Hito Steyerl’s lecture at the conference *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism* (2013), “This is not Research. This is not Theory. This is not Art.”; Frank, “When Form Starts Talking,” 4–15

becoming a superhero, or to be a woman over fifty years of age. As noted previously, while the burqa or other forms of veiling is intended to make women invisible or less visible, its association with Islam in the Global West contradicts this aim and makes women instantly highly visible. A misrepresentation of the image of veiled Muslim women has come to symbolise Muslim womanhood today. Steyerl's queries, such as "Are people hidden by too many images? ... Do they become images?" make me think about the role that the constantly reproduced images of veiled Muslim women play in defining, stereotyping, and fetishising Muslim women.¹⁷ I cannot help but wonder if the post-9/11 politicised hypervisibility of veiled Muslim women's images somehow render all unveiled Muslim women invisible? Do the overconsumed veiled images of Muslim women consume all Muslim women? I don't know, but I find Steyerl's ideas of appearing and disappearing, and of visibility and the invisible, in the contemporary digitised world extremely relatable to my inquiries about the heightened visibility of veiled Muslim women and the invisibility of unveiled Muslim female bodies. In her essay "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" Steyerl proposes the concept of *circulationism* that makes these ideas clearer:

Circulationism is not about the art of making an image, but of post-producing, launching, and accelerating it. It is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible.¹⁸

This implies that the more an image circulates in the world, the more power it accumulates; conversely, the less visible it is, the less power it has. Building on Steyerl's discussions on the problematic nature of the modern-day digital circulation of images, I highlight the visibility and invisibility of Muslim women. While the content of my work focuses on the ignored images of nude and semi-nude women from the art history of Islamic worlds, I also build on Steyerl's art-making tactics. I use humour and overlap facts with fabulation, intersecting art and academia. Following her work *How Not to be Seen*, I make use of the green screen as a tool that makes one question the reality of images as they appear on screens. (Responding to another suggestion in this work, I become pixelated figures in *Lower the Gaze*, as discussed in chapter 2.)

¹⁷ Göksu Kunak, "Interview // Hito Steyerl: Zero Probability and the Age of Mass Art Production," *Berlin Art Link*, 9 November 2013, <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2013/11/19/interview-hito-steyerl-zero-probability-and-the-age-of-mass-art-production>.

¹⁸ Hito Steyerl and Nick Aikens. *Hito Steyerl: Too Much World* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2014).

Chapter Conclusion

The conflation of real and fictive histories in the narrative of خاتون Khatoon is a metaphor for Muslim womanhood, faked so as to be validated in my work *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*. I use the form of the performance lecture as a Muslim woman to simultaneously critique both the politicisation of veiled Muslim bodies in the Global North in the post-9/11 world and the misogyny within socio-cultural institutions practicing radical Islam. In this work I build on Hito Steyerl's satirical suggestions and ideas about visibility and invisibility, and also Andrea Fraser's humorous critique of gendered hierarchies within institutional frames, through the act of the veiling and unveiling of my own body during this performance-based work. By taking off my clothes from being fully clad in a burqa, it highlights and further problematises the politicised and heightened visibility of veiled Muslim female bodies in our contemporary world and the invisibility of the unveiled female bodies in Islamic art histories.

I will again refer here to the ideas brought forward by Salima Hashmi, discussed in chapter 1. That for contemporary Muslim female artists, our body's *containment, concealment, and visibility* have become a call to reclaim our place, presentation, and representation in society.¹⁹ Adding art and academic institutions to the sites in need of reclamation by women, this work brings forward the complex issue of the representation of Muslim female bodies. The practice of making the Muslim female nude bodies, the practice of veiling these bodies, and their misrepresentations are interconnected ideas embedded in ideas of patriarchy and the male gaze. This work aims to highlight that the veiling and unveiling of female bodies is a complex topic in need of further exploration.

¹⁹ Hashmi, "Unveiling Artistic Feminism."

Conclusion

On the 15th of August 2021, the Taliban took over Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani left a message on social media informing the public about the situation as he fled the country. Soon after, women's images in Kabul were painted over and vandalised (fig 3.10). During the last regime of the Taliban (1996–2001), women's images, both literal and social, were put behind the veil. They had to cover their faces and be always accompanied by a male relative in public spaces. Fearing similar restrictions would return, many Afghan women (who have been able to slowly regain some of their agency in the last few years) have been desperately voicing their concerns on social media.¹ Reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the current situation of Afghan women is a reminder of their vulnerability at the hand of patriarchy.² Minimising women's visibility and of their images in the public place is its oldest and grimmest symptom.

This MFA thesis is built around the problem of Muslim women's representation, and how contemporary Muslim female artists mediate their representation through veiling and unveiling their bodies. The problem that this thesis set out to address has not faltered during or due to the worldwide pandemic lockdowns. Islamophobia and Islamisation are on the rise around the globe (the situation in Afghanistan since August 2021, and in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 are just two examples), and Muslim women's representation remains in dire need of evaluation through a feminist lens. The concealment and revealment of women's bodies, especially Muslim women's bodies, continue to be problematic since they remain entrenched in a socially constructed gender performativity based on their sex. In response, this thesis examines Muslims women's representation as a feminist issue, directed at contemporary art. It addresses the veiled images of Muslim women in connection to their unveiled images, both under the umbrella of intersectional feminism, seeking refuge from misogyny and patriarchy, within and beyond the confines of the art world. Proposing that contemporary Muslim women artists' practices are key to understanding this vast and complicated topic, this thesis focused on addressing only one aspect of it, exploring how these artists use the veiling and unveiling of their bodies to mediate self-representation.

¹ Chiara Giordano, "Ads depicting Women 'Painted Over' after Taliban enters Kabul", *The Independent*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-taliban-women-rights-adverts-b1902922.html>.

² Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

In chapter 1, “Veilful Subjects,” I discussed the problematic nature of Muslim women’s veiled and unveiled images in Islamic and Western art histories. I also provided a brief survey of the field of contemporary Muslim creative practitioners who use the veiling and unveiling of the body to negotiate self-representation, and selected theorists, artists and exhibitions that address and ideas of objectification of the female body, the male gaze, and veiled and unveiled Muslim female bodies in the history of the visual arts. These included Shirin Neshat, Hoda Afshar, Cigdem Aydemir, Sarah Maple, Hiba Schahbaz and Hayv Kahraman’s artworks, Salima Hashmi’s analysis of Pakistani women artists’ use of unveiled female bodies in the face of an Islamised military regime in Pakistan, Edward Said’s ideas about Orientalism, and Linda Nochlin’s gendered reading of Said’s theory. Along with this written thesis, these ideas are manifested in two major creative works produced for this MFA.

In chapter 2, “The Male Gaze and The Female Veil,” I described my video work *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1* (2021). In this work, I tested the boundaries of my self-representation as a Muslim female artist and its relationship with attire, using memories, religious texts, languages, sounds, video, animation, and appropriated imagery. I engaged with a passage from Quran that addresses the male gaze; imagery from Mughal miniature paintings that is appropriated and animated for the visual construction of this work; Shahzia Sikander’s artworks and her use of animated miniature paintings; and Rashid Rana’s use of grids and pixelation in his creative practice. Referring to Sarah Ahmed’s ideas on the importance of memory discussed in the introduction, about looking at memories to make sense of how different experiences connect through my works, I revisited some of my own memories in this chapter. In line with the aim of this thesis, this work is an experimentation and investigation of using performances of veiling and unveiling, offering a feminist reading of Muslim attire and womanhood. It is an attempt to open up a space to critique both patriarchal Muslim culture and Islamophobic West. Reflecting upon this work makes me realise that this it is also a celebration of my womanhood, as I embody my body’s nakedness and ‘veiledness’ in full. This work pays homage to all Muslim women who honour their womanhood and agency, whether by standing up against radicalised Islamists or the Islamophobic West.

In chapter 3 I focus on my work *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture* (2021) and my use of fiction and the conventions of the performance lecture. The work is based on a fictional narrative of خاتون Khatoon, which I have used as a metaphor for Muslim womanhood. The performance lecture is activated to simultaneously critique the politicisation of veiled Muslim

bodies in the Global North and the misogyny within Muslim cultures. I discussed my use of overlooked images of nude female bodies from Islamic art history and the hypervisible politicised image of veiled Muslim woman. While doing so, I also examined the art practices of Andrea Fraser and Hito Steyerl to analyse ideas around veiled and unveiled female bodies and their subsequent visibility and invisibility in contemporary feminist art practices.

From engaging with my own wardrobe, reflecting on my experiences of performing a ‘Muslim Woman’ that shapes my sense of self, to looking at art historical and media images, exploring performance and self-portraiture, and experimenting with creating a fictional narrative, before delving into moving images while living through the strange times of the COVID-19 pandemic, my journey through this MFA has been an exhilarating one. Through this research project I addressed how contemporary Muslim women artists—including myself—use the veiling and unveiling of the female bodies to mediate self-representation in art practices in order to add a new perspective on the misrepresented and misunderstood ideas surrounding Muslim women (within both the Islamophobic West as well as patriarchal Muslim cultures), using a feminist lens. Inhabiting a Muslim female body and reflecting upon my lived experiences in it, I have been pushing the limits of my self-representation by putting on a burqa (which I do not normally do), and by stripping naked (which I do not normally do) for the performance-based works produced for this MFA. Through this written document and the creative works, I hope to present the idea of reading both the veiled and unveiled Muslim female bodies as a matter of feminist issue and offer the viewers the opportunity to reflect upon their own ideas of the Muslim female body.

The introduction to this thesis begins with some of the memories that stand out for me when I think of my body’s relationship with its attire. I have opened each chapter in this thesis, apart from this concluding chapter, with a quote from Sara Ahmed as a homage to her writings, which have been my companion while practicing living a feminist life. Because my brown Muslim female Pakistani-Australian body has always been made to feel uncomfortable due to the gender assigned to me at birth, I will close this thesis with another of Ahmed’s quote that recalls the continued uncomfortable encounter occurring between my body and my attire: “Feminism can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Things don’t seem right.”³

³ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 22.

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Figures

Fig 1.1. Henriette Browne, *A Visit: Harem Interior, Constantinople*, 1860. Oil painting.

Fig 1.2. Shirin Neshat, *Speechless* 1996. RC print and ink. Photo by Larry Barns.

Fig 1.3. Cigdem Aydemir, *Whirl*, 2015. Single-channel HD video with sound, duration 6 min 56 seconds.

Fig 1.4A. Hoda Afshar, *Westoxicated #2*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 104 x 90 cm, edition of 5.

Fig 1.4B. Hoda Afshar, *Untitled*, 2011. Archival pigment print.

Fig1.5A. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. Performance video.

Fig 1.5B. Salima Hashmi, *Handa Hubaalna (Boiling an Egg)*, early 1970s. Short film/skit.

Fig 1.5C. Salima Hashmi, *The Life and Times of...*, 1983. Mixed media on paper.

Fig 1.6. Hiba Schahbaz, *Self Portrait as Olympia (After Manet)*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches.

Fig 1.7. Sarah Maple, *Signs*, 2007. Photographic triptych.

Fig 1.8. Hayv Kahraman, *Personnummer*, 2015. Oil on linen, 96 x 73 x 2 inches.

Fig 1.9A & B. Misha Japanwala, sculpted body casts, 2021.

Fig 1.9C. Misha Japanwala, gold Breastplate for Cardi B, in Lizzo's music video "Rumors," 2021.



Fig 2.1. Amber Hammad, *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1*, 2021.
Audio visual installation, 5 minutes.
<https://www.amberhammad.com/>



Fig 2.2. Amber Hammad, *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from خاتون نامه Khatoon Nama #1*, 2021.
Audio visual installation, 5 minutes.
<https://www.amberhammad.com/>



Fig 2.3 and 2.4.

Amber Hammad, *Lower the Gaze: Manuscript Page from* خاتون نامه *Khatoun Nama #1*, 2021.

Audio visual installation. 5 minutes.

<https://www.amberhammad.com/>

Fig 2.5. Abu'l Hasan, *Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas of Persia*, in *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (*Memoirs of Jahangir* from the *St. Petersburg Album*), c. 1618.
Opaque watercolour, ink, silver and gold on paper, 23.8 x 15.4 cm.

Fig 2.6. Rashid Rana, *Veil* series, 2004. C-Print + Diasc. 51 x 51 cm.

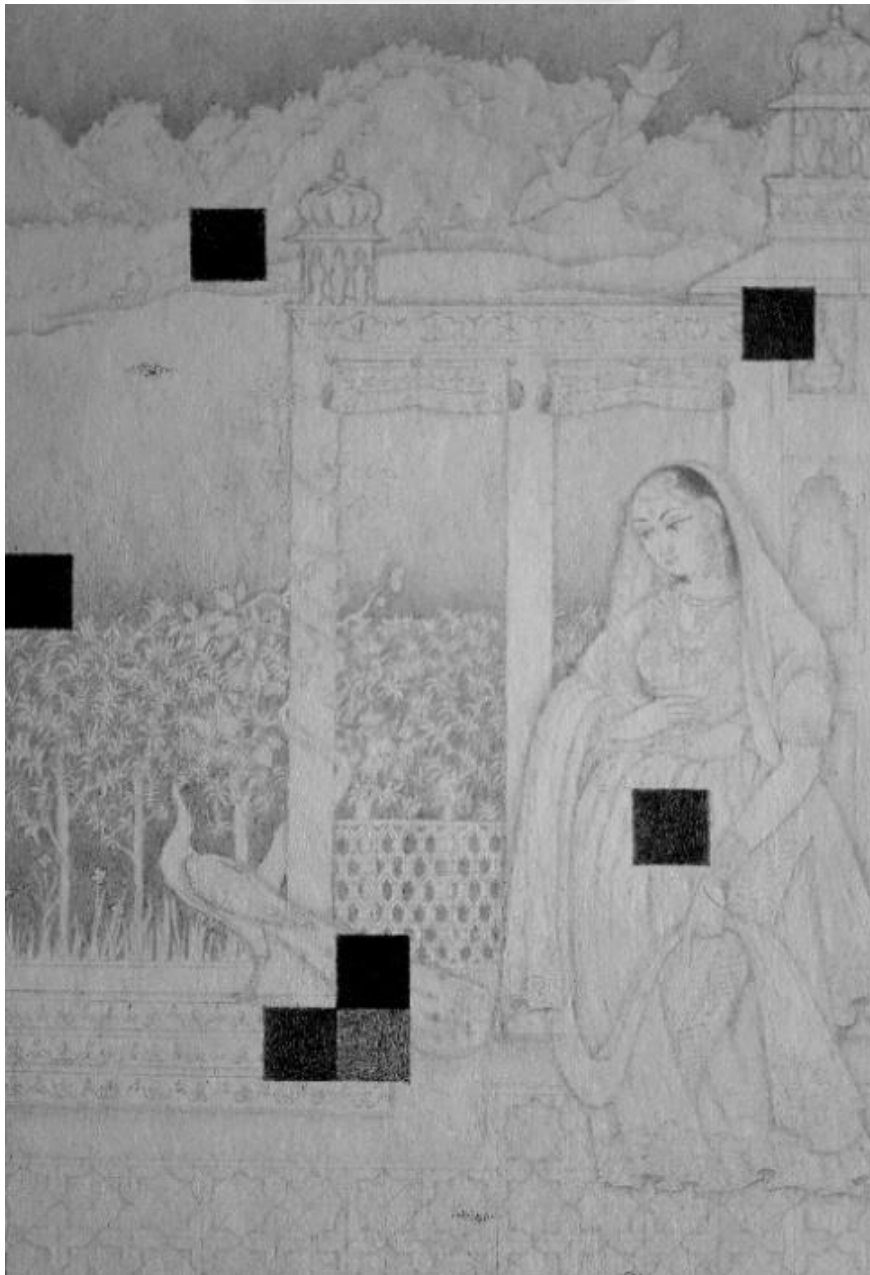


Fig 2.7. Amber Hammad, *Veiling Unveiling*, 2019.
Pencil on paper, 13 x 18.5 cm.

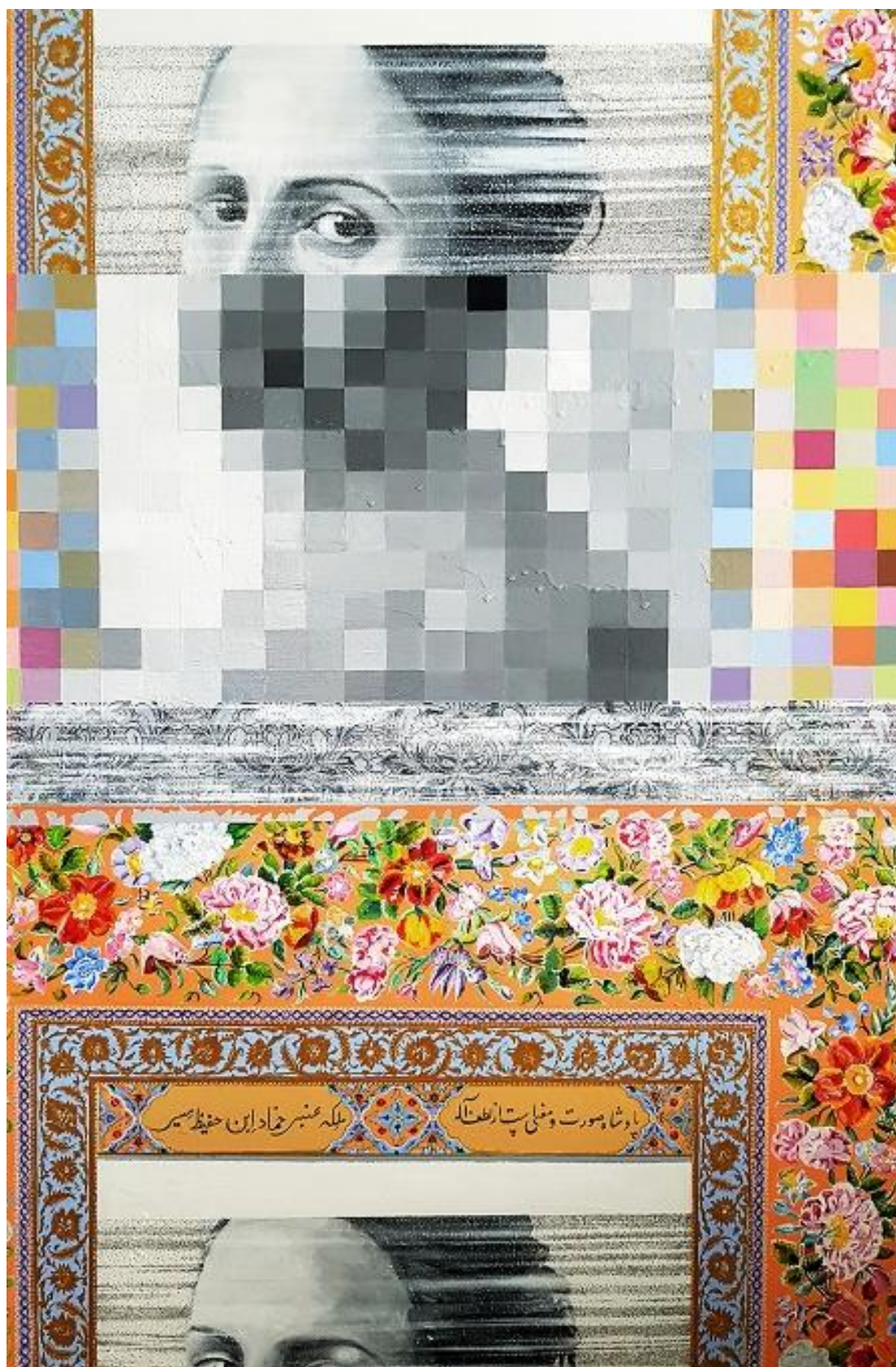


Fig 2.8. Amber Hammad, *Self Portrait number 101*, 2018.
Oils and acrylic paints on canvas, 122 x 76 cm.

Fig 2.9. Shahzia Sikander, still from *The Last Post*, 2010. HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound by Du Yun. Duration 10 minutes.

Fig 2.10. Ayesha Khalid, *Silence with Pattern*, 2000. Watercolour on wasli paper 36 x 25.9 cm.

Fig 2.11. Ayesha Khalid, *Yourself Of Yourself*, 2013. Fabric and needles, 88.9 cm length.



Fig 3.1A. Amber Hammad, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, 2021. HD video with Sound. 12:15 minutes.

<https://www.amberhammad.com/>



Fig 3.1B. Amber Hammad, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, 2021. HD video with Sound. 12:15 minutes.

<https://www.amberhammad.com/>

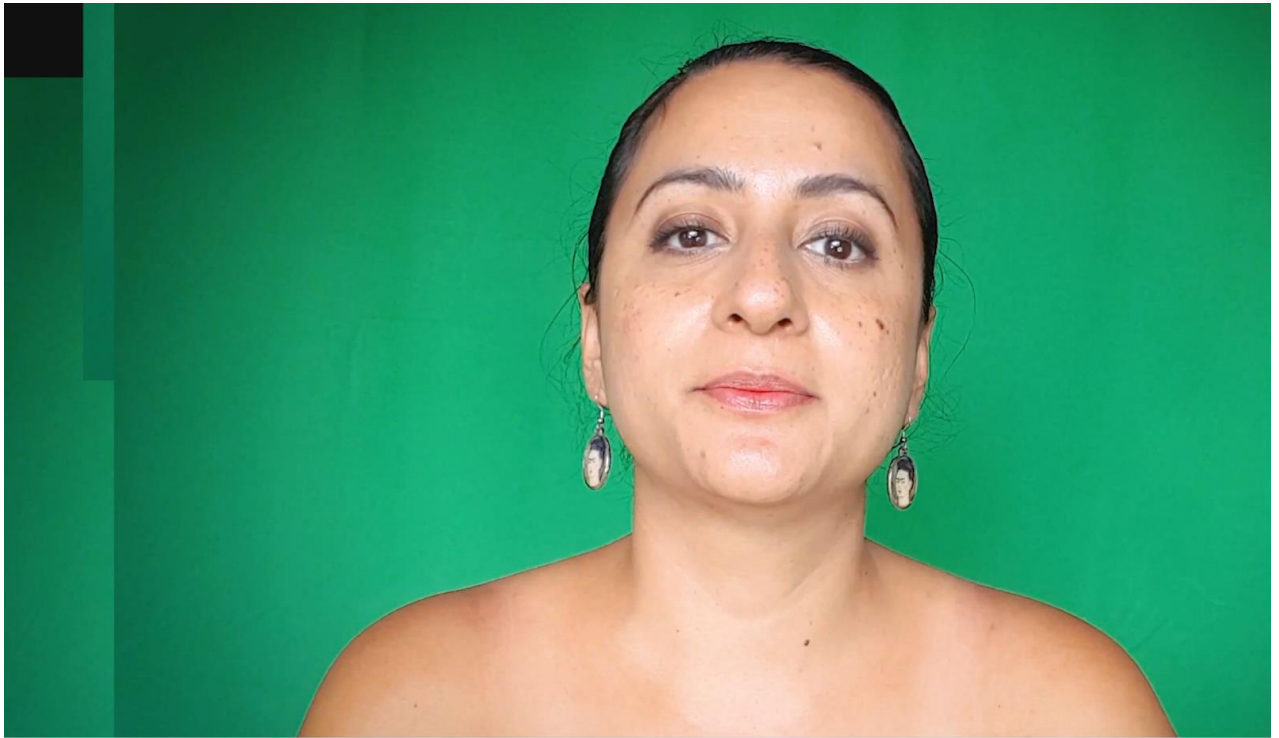


Fig 3.1C. Amber Hammad, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, 2021. HD video with Sound. 12:15 minutes.

<https://www.amberhammad.com/>

Fig 3.2. Andreas Fraser, *Official Welcome (Hamburg Version)*, 2001–2003. Single-channel colour video recording of live performance.

Fig 3.3. Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013. Video (color, sound). Duration: 14 minutes.

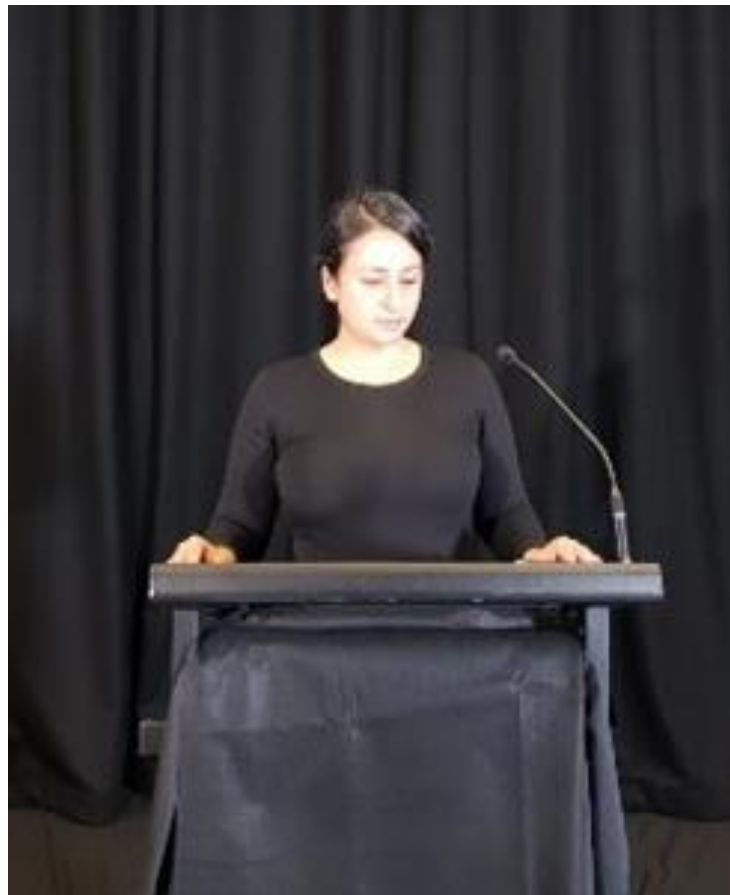


Fig 3.4A & B. Amber Hammad, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, 2020. Film stills from various test performances.



Fig 3.4C & D. Amber Hammad, *The Nude Dupatta — A Performance Lecture*, 2020. Film stills from various test performances.



Fig 3.5. Amber Hammad, *Brown Mem Sahib*, 2012. Archival print on canvas.



Fig 3.6. Amber Hammad, *Mona Liza* series, 2006. Archival print on paper.



Fig 3.7. Amber Hammad, *Unveiling the Visible*, 2012. Archival print on canvas.

Fig 3.8. Sarah Maple, *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 2008. Photographic print on paper.

Fig 3.9. Muhammad Qasim *Lover's Dalliance*, 1659. Painting on handmade paper.

Fig 3.10. Shortly after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, images of women in public spaces were painted over or vandalised. From Chiara Giordano, “Ads depicting Women ‘Painted Over’ after Taliban enters Kabul,” *The Independent*, 15 August 2021. Photo: Lotfullah Najafizada, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-taliban-women-rights-adverts-b1902922.html>.