**RESEARCH STATEMENT**

**The Contributions of Music and Painting to the Global Awareness of Human Rights Violations in the Ongoing “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement in Iran**

This statement outlines my past and future research interests, in support of my application for Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies. I believe that my research statement reflects an independent and innovative approach to the study of Art and Politics with a focus on the current movement in Iran.

My doctoral research focused on Iranian foreign policy under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Khatami’s foreign policy signalled a fundamental shift from a confrontational to a peaceful approach to both domestic and international communities. I argued that the cornerstone of this fundamental change rests on Khatami’s belief system. To capture the content of his belief system, I applied Operational Code Theory, a quantitative method that dares on textual analysis to several of his books, articles, speeches, and lectures. I argued that in addition to transforming Iran’s international relations, Khatami introduced concepts that had not been actively present in Iran’s public discourse; notably, “freedom, tolerance, and civil society”. This period witnessed a considerable relaxation of censorship and restrictive regulations on expression, along with a focus on respecting women’s rights. Presently I am finalizing my manuscript titled “The Presidential Leadership and Iran’s Foreign Policy under Khatami (1997-2005)” which is scheduled to be published in 2024 by Lexington Books.

During the presidency Khatami Iran witnessed a unique period where society began to experience a gradual process of democratization, while the government took steps in the opposite direction, attempting to regain control over the civil society. In this transformative era, artists emerged as prominent agents of change. They sought to challenge the authority of the government and push the boundaries of censorship through their creative expressions. Among those is Shadi Ghadirian whose artworks are influenced by her experience as a Muslim woman living in Iran. Her artworks with the themes of censorship, and the status of women were recognized internationally [1].

Soroush Lashkari, known as Hichkas, (nicknamed father of Persian Rap) emerged as a voice for the struggles of young Iranians in the face of unemployment, economic challenges, social inequality, and censorship. In 2010, during the Green Movement protests against alleged election fraud and in support of political freedoms, Hichkas released “A Good Day Will Come,” expressing hope for a brighter Iran. However, the post-protest tension forced Hichkas into exile in London, and this track marked his last recording within Iran, symbolizing his impact on the country’s youth, as evidenced by the graffiti of its message on Tehran’s walls [2].

The culmination point of the confrontation between Iranians and the regime was marked by the tragic killing of Mahsa Amini and the inception of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. This ongoing movement is a representation of a profound change across political, social, and cultural spheres in Iran.

I hold, as a political scientist, dedicated painter, and someone deeply familiar with the Iranian context, a unique position as I can engage in research across these fields with relative ease and competence. I intended to apply my comprehensive understanding to explore the role of music and painting with regard to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.

**Background**

Art in Iran, before the 1979 Revolution, was characterized by a rich diversity of styles, mediums, and subjects, ranging from traditional Persian painting and calligraphy to modernist and avant-garde movements. These artistic expressions were often influenced by Iran’s rich cultural heritage. However, after the revolution, the new Islamic government imposed strict rules on what could be portrayed in art. The government sought to promote Islamic values and restrict Western influences. The Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to maintain strict control over the arts, with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance playing a key role in regulating cultural expression. Artists must obtain permits to exhibit their work, and the government heavily censors any content deemed inappropriate or contrary to Islamic values [3].

Despite these restrictions, Iranian artists have utilized their artwork to challenge the prevailing and restrictive norms to shed light on the human rights violations they have faced. In the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, the artists inside Iran and in the diaspora utilized their artworks, mainly music and paintings/murals to raise awareness of the massive human rights violations as well as amplify the voices of the silenced.

**Music and “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement**

Shervin Hajipour, a young Iranian singer and songwriter, released the song “Baraye” which has become the “anthem” of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement. The content of this song is not political, in the sense that it is not about resistance to the United States, Israel or any other country in the world; rather, it is about the dreams and desire for a dignified and just society [4]. This song was seen more than 40 million times in less than two days on his Instagram page alone. Shervin was arrested on 29 September 2022. Shortly after his arrest, he was forced to remove this song from his social media platform by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Although he was under arrest, no one could ban this song from becoming a “hit” worldwide. “Baraye” has been performed by many Iranian and non-Iranian artists outside of Iran, in Persian and translation, including in English, German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish. Shervin's “Baraye” made history by becoming the first award-winner for a new Grammy Award category, “Best Song for Social Change”.

Another Iranian musician, Mehdi Yarrahi was arrested recently (August 28, 2023). Eighteen days after killing Mahsa, Yarrahi released a song called “Woman’s Anthem” (Soroud-e Zan). The song has 792 thousand streams on Spotify, 424 thousand views on YouTube, 259 thousand streams on Soundcloud and thousands of views and streams on other platforms [5]. Yarrahi released his latest song, titled “Your Headscarf,” to commemorate the first anniversary of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. The song was accompanied by a video showcasing women in diverse social settings without their headscarves, with some dancing to the music. The release of this song ultimately resulted in his arrest [6].

**Internationalization of “Woman, Life, Freedom” through Paintings and Murals**

Artists in the diaspora have drawn the international community’s attention to the killing and execution of innocent civilians, including children, in Iran. To this end, murals have been painted on the walls of many cities across the globe such as Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, New York, Kansas City, San Diego, Toronto, Berlin, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and London.

Among the striking murals, one is on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, which captures the spirit of Mahsa Amini, painted by Cloe Hakakian. The mural boldly displays the empowering motto of “Woman, Life, Freedom,” replacing the traditional reference to “Allah” [7].

In San Francisco, another mural was painted by Roshanak Rahimi and Farnaz Zabetian which resonates with the Iranian women and the ongoing movement in Iran, showcasing a powerful scene of a woman cutting her hair as a symbol of solidarity [8].

In Toronto, North York, at Mel Lastman Square, another mural was painted by Mahyar Amiri, an Iranian-Canadian artist. This vibrant artwork depicts a courageous woman in a red hijab, passionately raising her voice and proudly displaying a victory sign [9].

**Research Questions**

This proposed research aims to explore the following questions:

* What is the role of music and painting in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in both Iran and the diaspora?
* How music and painting over the last few decades have contributed to the democratization, advancement of women’s rights and gender equality in Iran and the diaspora?
* What challenges do artists and activists face when using art to promote social change?
* What strategies can be used to address these challenges and support artists and activists within the movement?

**Methodology**

The methodology of studying art, and politics is interdisciplinary [10]. In the case of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, I believe that cognitive approaches would be more suitable. This approach delves into cognitive science and theories of art to comprehend how viewers perceive and interpret the message conveyed. Nonetheless, solely relying on the cognitive approach would not sufficiently explain the complex dynamics of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement, as it would overlook a crucial element: the pivotal role of women. To overcome this limitation, I would incorporate the feminist approach into my methodology. By adopting a “Cognitive-Feminist” approach, I aim to comprehensively analyze the movement. This combined approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how women’s agency, and their creativity through artistic works both shape and impact the movement.

**Bibliography**

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