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Mythological Themes in Iranian Culture and Art: Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives

In Iran, ancient mythical elements are very much alive in the present as a part of the fabric of ordinary people's lives and worldview. This paper explores the relationship between culture, myth, and artistic production in contemporary Iran, using the specific examples of symbols and mythological themes evoked in the work of painter/writer Aydin Aghdashloo and photographer/video artist Shirin Neshat. The paintings of Aghdashloo, in which he deliberately damages beautifully-executed classical style Persian miniatures, convey a sense that the angelic forces have failed and that the world is succumbing to the destructive and degenerative activities of the demonic. The photographs, videos and installations of Neshat likewise draw heavily on cultic forms inherited from ancient Iranian tradition. It is important to note that in none of these cases does the artist use mythological themes and symbols to express their original cultural meaning; rather, they appropriate well-known elements of ancient Iranian culture and imbue them with new meanings relevant to contemporary issues and understandings. What these examples do illustrate is the persistent resonance of ancient Iranian culture among Iranians up to the present day. Iranian artists have demonstrated the effectiveness of evoking their target audience's deep sense of cultural identity to

convey contemporary messages using ancient cultural concepts, sometimes on a subconscious level.

Mythology is one of the elements that shape culture and identity in a society. This influence is felt in art, literature, philosophy, and other domains, often profoundly. From prehistoric times myths have been a means by which various peoples could explain for themselves the mysteries of natural phenomena, the beginning and end of things, their customs and value systems, and so on.¹ Humans saw themselves as being in a reciprocal relationship with the divine or supernatural forces inhabiting the cosmos, asking from them what they needed while simultaneously supporting them through their devotions. Customs and rituals generally developed as re-enactments of divine actions occurring in the divine world, the repeating of which was hoped to ensure the world's regeneration, as the phenomenal world was believed to be a reflection of the divine world and thus able to affect it. Thus, customs and rituals were originally purposeful, meant to achieve a specific result. With the evolution and transformation of human cultures over time, some myths along with their corresponding customs and rituals are lost or fade away. Others persist, but have lost their original meanings, often taking on new ones. As matriarchal societies gave way to patriarchal ones, goddesses were often transformed into heroes or sovereigns, but remained as characters in the mythological history of various nations.²

¹ Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978-85).

² Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

Recurring symbols of Iranian myth are seen in art as early as the Luristan bronzes of three millennia ago up to today.³ Artists, like anyone else, are affected by and imbued with the myths and symbols of the culture in which they grow up. Often, whether knowingly or unknowingly, they use mythological elements in their artistic production. The various art forms of Iran, past and present, offer ample evidence of this influence. The Persian miniature painting tradition, for example, is rich with reconstructed scenes from ancient Iranian myths. Often a divine figure from pre-historic times is re-imagined as a hero or a mythical king, with the myth associated with that particular deity being transposed to a greater or lesser extent onto the hero.

Ancient Myths and Later Traditions

An outstanding example of this phenomenon can be seen in a beautiful Safavid-era miniature by the painter Soltān Mohammad, depicting the court of “King Gayumars”. (figure1). No Persian painting evokes Zoroastrian symbolism more explicitly than this beautiful work from an illustrated version of the tenth-century Iranian national epic, Abo’l-Qāsem Ferdowsī’s *Shāh-nāmeḥ* (*Book of Kings*) commissioned by Shah Tahmasp in the early 1620s.⁴ But who exactly is this Gayumars so lavishly depicted by a Safavid-era Muslim painter? Looking at ancient Iranian myth, we find a ghostly figure by the name of Giye Martan—meaning “mortal being”—the sixth primordial element created by Ahura Mazda at the beginning of the world. In Yasht 13 of the Zoroastrian sacred text, the Avesta, he appears as the “Primal Man” who was created along with

³ S. J. Fleming, V. C. Pigott, C. P. Swann, and S. K. Nash. *Bronze in Luristan: Preliminary analytical evidence from copper/bronze artifacts excavated by the Belgian mission in Iran*. Iranica Antiqua: 2005.

⁴ Stuart Cary Welch, Jr., and Martin Bernard Dickson, *The Houghton Shahnameh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

water, soil, the first plant and the first cow.⁵ A kind of brilliant, oversized prototype, Giye Martan is killed by the evil deity Ahriman, but his sperm falls to the ground which, being an embodiment of female divine energy, receives it and conceives an embryo which is born as rhubarb (a kind of totem), from which the first man and woman emerge.

In the depiction of Muslim painter Soltān Mohammad, Gayumars sits at the centre of a lush garden scene evoking inter-species harmony and primordial bliss prior to its disruption by the evil deity Ahriman, an image well-known in Zoroastrian mythology. In fact, while the *Book of Kings* was the most commonly commissioned book by all Muslim dynasties who ruled Iran, the work is in fact celebration of pre-Islamic Iranian culture which champions recognizably ancient proto-Indo-European patriarchal and militaristic values, and throughout which Zoroastrianism is the formal religious framework. The origin myth associated with Gayumars has no obvious rapport with the Islamicized Iranian culture of the sixteenth century in which Soltān Mohammad lived, yet this “Islamic” culture retained Gayumars as its mythical first king. In fact, many of the “heroes” in the *Book of Kings* are originally proto-Indo-European or other deities. As such, Zoroastrian as well as common Indo-European mythological motifs and symbols are predominant throughout Ferdowsī’s epic poem, though Mesopotamian, Byzantine, Indian, and other influences are present as well.

Thus, illustrated versions of the *Book of Kings*, like other popular works of classical Persian literature, contain themes and symbols from not only Zoroastrianism and ancient Iranian mythology, but also Mesopotamian, Mediterranean, Chinese and other sources as well. The traditional miniature painter borrows each motif that he wants or needs from any available source or tradition, then adapts and integrates it into the Persian miniature tradition. For example, from

⁵ James Darmesteter, tr. *The Zend-Avesta*, (Delhi: Motilal Benarsidas, 1965).

the 13th century onwards Iranian painters borrowed cloud, tree, phoenix, and dragon motifs, as well as the use of oblique perspective, from Chinese paintings brought to Iran by the Mongols. Moreover, these influences went in different directions. For example, the ancient Iranian symbol of divine investiture (Pers. *farr*), which began in ancient Mesopotamian art as a halo of light, becomes stylized in Christian art as a sign of sainthood, and in Islamic art as flames leaping up about the subject's shoulders—in some illustrated texts, even the Prophet Muhammad is depicted in this way.

We can identify many characters in Persian miniatures who exist not only in the *Book of Kings*, but also in the Avesta and in the Hindu Vedas (which are the oldest surviving Sanskrit texts). For example, Yama in the Vedas, Jam in the Avesta, and Jamshīd in the *Book of Kings* are the same character. Yama and Jamshīd are presented as rejected by the gods. Following the separation between Indo-Iranians into Iran and India during the second millennium BCE, most of their gods lost their prior mythological status, but their influence remained as many were re-conceived as heroes. (The same analysis has been applied to other Indo-European mythologies including the Greek and the Roman.) In other words, such originally divine figures were re-imagined as humans but with special, super-human features. For example, Siyāvash, a heroic figure in the *Book of Kings*, appears to have originally been a local Central Asian deity. Another example is Zahhāk, portrayed as a human-dragon in both the Avesta and the Vedas, who in the *Book of Kings* is transformed into a tyrannical king with snakes coming out of his shoulders. Zahhāk is depicted in this way in virtually every illustrated manuscript of the *Book of Kings*.

A similar and far more frequent example in Persian painting is the image of a demon, or *dīv*. What exactly is a “*dīv*”? According to Georges Dumézil, prehistoric Indo-European societies had three classes of deities corresponding to the three classes of human society (priests/rulers,

warriors, and producers).⁶ The deities associated with the warrior class were known as *dāevas*. Over time this particular class of deities became distanced as the gods of foreigners, then, with the emergence of Zoroastrianism, reconceived as the gods of the enemy, and finally, demoted to the status of demons. Thus, in the Persian painting tradition they are depicted as monsters. The Persian word for demon is *dīv*, from Proto-Indo-European **deiwo*⁷. In ancient times the term seems to have only meant “deity,” and was later given a negative meaning by Zoroaster. In modern Persian the word means a kind of monster, and is the root of the Persian word for “crazy” (*dīvāneh*; cf. Arabic *majnūn*, “be-genied,” English “bedeviled”).

Yet another figure is Yūsuf, equivalent to the biblical Joseph, who is the subject of the only extended narrative in the Qur’ān. There exist numerous representations of him in the Persian miniature tradition, showing him to be the paragon of male beauty. One may note some basic similarities between his story and that of a martyred plant deity from Mesopotamia—a tempting connection which requires further research. We can also see traces of characters from Greek mythology in the *Book of Kings*, such as Esfandiār, who shares a number of features with Achilles. Esfandiār, too, is frequently depicted in illustrated manuscripts.

A more recent iconographic transformation can be seen in the Iranian appropriation of dragon imagery from China following the Mongol conquests of the 13th century. Ignoring the fact that in Chinese culture dragons are a symbol of blessing and power, later Iranian paintings such as Mirzā Ali’s “Goshtasp Slays the Dragon of Mt. Sakila” depict dragons in a Chinese visual style, but with an Iranian meaning which is the *opposite* of the Chinese. In the Iranian context, it is not dragons that bring blessing and fertility, but rather the gods—Goshtasp,

⁶ Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

⁷ In linguistics, a reconstructed but unattested word is signified by an asterisk.

Bahrām, Fereidūn, Rostam and other dragon-slayers being originally gods who are later reconceived as heroes—who ensure blessings and fertility precisely by *killing* dragons. As with rituals in general, the killing of dragons in Iranian mythology is an eternally recurring act meant to ensure fertility through the regeneration of cycles. In ancient Indo-Iranian mythology the warrior deity Indra kills the drought-inducing dragon Varathra, earning thereby the title Varathraghna, or “Varathra-killer”. After the separation of the Indo-Aryans from the Iranians, Indra was demoted to the status of a demon, and in subsequent Iranian mythology he becomes the opponent of the good deity Ordibehesht (Aša Vahišta), upholder of the cosmic order. Interestingly, however, Indra’s dragon-slaying aspect becomes separated out into a new hero-deity, Bahrām. Dragon-killing is an oft-depicted theme in illustrated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kings*, and even in Iran today, children’s stories are full of demons and dragon-killing heroes.

Myths survive in many aspects of cultural practice, of which art is only one example. Many customs are performed without knowledge or understanding of how they originated or what their original meanings were. To cite but one example, Iranians today still throw water at the backs of travelers. If asked why, we can only say that it is something our ancestors did. Another example is at the beginning of every spring on the occasion of Nō Rūz, when we jump over fires and sprout greens which we later cast into flowing water. Iranians also commonly burn wild rue (*esfand*) to ward off the “evil eye,” without any real notion of exactly how this effect is achieved. Most of us Iranians have no idea why we do these things or what their original meanings were, yet we know exactly how to perform these rituals and we have no doubt whatsoever that we *must* do them.

Another significant aspect of Iranian ritual culture is *azā-dārī*, mourning ceremonies, which are full of ancient elements. This is interesting and in a way ironic, since crying per se is frowned upon in Zoroastrianism, Iran's main religion in pre-Islamic times. In fact, religious *azā-dārī* rituals, which involve much crying and sometimes self-flagellation and recur every year, seem to have been borrowed from the Sumerian, Semitic, and Mediterranean cultures with which Iranians came into contact, along with the myths and mythological figures associated with those rituals. This particular aspect of Iranian ritual culture, which survives until the present day, is particularly important to understanding the mourning imagery in much of the work of contemporary Iranian photography and video artist Shirin Neshat, as will be discussed below. But terms of the influence—whether conscious or unconscious—of ancient myths on the production of contemporary art, Neshat is far from a unique case. In a general sense, the collective rituals and customs of Iranians, with their deep, often forgotten roots, have a clear and profound presence in the work of contemporary Iranian artists.

Borrowed Techniques

The presence of incompletely understood mythical influences in art is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, but could be said to apply to artistic tendencies throughout history. There is usually a visible continuity of how mythological themes are represented artistically both over time and across cultures, though such themes are often re-interpreted and given new meanings and significations.

Apart from the use of established themes, artists also appropriate techniques from earlier traditions. For example, Parthian-period wall-paintings from Dura-Europos in modern Syria depict the Iranian god Mithra engaged in a hunt. The composition of this scene has been used

over and over again by subsequent Iranian artists to portray royal hunts, the figure of Mithra simply being replaced by an image of the particular king being memorialized. Similarly, the model for floral arabesques so well-known in Islamic art can be found in earlier paintings illustrating Manichaean sacred texts. Finally, we should recall that the most oft-illustrated text in Persian painting is the *Book of Kings*, which is at the same time the richest existing source of pre-Islamic Iranian mythology. Persian miniature painting—a style adopted by artists in many parts of the world—draws on a wide range of influences, symbols, and iconography from diverse cultures and historical periods. It may seem somewhat ironic that the *Book of Kings*, which celebrates Iran’s pre-Islamic past, has for centuries been the text most often illustrated by *Muslim* miniaturists, but within the context of Iranian culture the fusion seems natural enough.

Iconography and Comparative Mythology

Although the visual sources for Iranian culture over the past thousand years—especially Persian miniature paintings—are well-known to the world of art history, they have never been systematically analyzed from the perspective of comparative religious traditions. In particular, it is important to investigate how pre-Islamic symbols and themes are “islamicized” within the context of Persian miniature paintings and Islamic Iranian culture. As has been mentioned above, illustrated versions of the *Book of Kings* and other poetic works provide prime examples of this. A thorough study of this phenomenon, however, is beyond the scope of the present article. Rather, I will focus here on the contemporary period in order to highlight the presence of mythological themes Iranian art today.

In many respects the world of Iranian art changed dramatically during the 20th century, with the introduction of Western techniques, themes, and other influences. Iranian artists

explored realist, modern, and post-modern art forms, while a few continued to master and preserve traditional techniques. In the post-revolutionary period, Iranian artists have faced certain constraints in terms of what they may depict and where they may display their work, yet the Iranian art world today has much that is vibrant and original.⁸

I will discuss here the examples of two of Iran's most important and successful living artists, Aydin Aghdashloo (born in 1940) and Shirin Neshat (born in 1957). Aghdashloo is a painter, illustrator, and art critic who lives in Iran. Neshat is a photographer, video and installation artist who has lived in the United States since the age of seventeen. My purpose here is not to critique their artistic production, but rather to illuminate the use of mythological themes and elements, intentional or otherwise, which are present in their work.

Aydin Aghdashloo

The influence of traditional Persian painting in the work of Aydin Aghdashloo is clear. He employs traditional Persian styles such as *tazhīb* and *tashīr* as components of his contemporary paintings, often making a very exact copy of a well-known miniature then altering it to add some contemporary meaning, though he sometimes makes copies devoid of such alterations. In fact Aghdashloo has completely mastered the techniques of both European and Persian painting styles, as well as their histories. His own style, recalling both of these traditions, is extremely precise. In recreating then deliberately damaging works done in these classical styles, Aghdashloo evokes the pathos of impermanence and degradation. His work highlights the majesty and grandeur of the high cultural traditions of centuries past, his respect for which is clear, while simultaneously demonstrating that these traditions have now become obsolete.

⁸ For the modern period see Rūn Pākbāz, *Naqqāshī-ye Īrān* (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e zarrīn va sīmīn, 1379 [2001]), chapter 3; for the contemporary period see chapter 4.

Trying to express his own inner discovery through his art, Aghdashloo, a distinctly contemporary painter, is obviously under the influence of the classical Persian painting tradition.

One of the interesting points of Persian miniature painting is a tendency to borrow motifs, styles, and conceptualizations from very ancient paintings and rock inscriptions. One example of this, as previously mentioned, is scenes depicting a royal hunting expedition, which have very ancient precedents and are found throughout the long history of Iranian art right up to the present. Aghdashloo, not surprisingly, makes use of this theme in some of his works. In a general sense, Aghdashloo uses elements of traditional Persian painting to express his perception of the contemporary world. By first replicating paintings in the traditional style and then crumpling, burning, or otherwise mutilating them, he offers a kind of lament for the destruction of value, value which has either been destroyed, is in the process of being destroyed, or is merely hanging faceless in limbo (figure 2). Thus, he makes use of tradition to make a point about contemporary reality.

Aghdashloo's painting "Years of Fire and Snow" (1980) depicts a faceless figure in Oriental clothing against a flat, formal background reminiscent of the dry, decorative "frozen moments" preserved in ancient Iranian stone engravings. Traditionally such royal depictions include some symbol of divine blessing above the figure's head. Above the figure in Aghdashloo's painting, however, we instead see a suspended dagger.

In a later group of paintings, the "Fallen Angel" series (2000), Aghdashloo creates a dark, scary world in which it seems that cultural value, symbolized by brightly coloured fragments of traditional Persian miniatures, is on the verge of being destroyed, along with the artist himself. The cheery radiance of the beautiful miniature fragments in these paintings, however, seems to counter the sombre effect of the overall tableaux. The most horrifying image in this series depicts

the naked back of a man—presumably the artist—the flesh ripped open by lashings (figure 3). Beneath the raw, peeled skin, we again see the colourful fragments of Persian miniatures. The jarring beauty of these fragments almost makes us forget the horror of the scene. This paradox recalls a quality often seen in traditional miniature paintings, that what ought to be horrifying scenes of violence are painted in bright, cheerful colors in a way that transport us from the messy world of reality into a calming, other-worldly order of perfection.

Like the Fallen Angel series, one of Aghdashloo's earlier "Memories of Destruction" paintings (1980) offers a bleak background with ominous clouds and a drought-stricken landscape, but with a bright red bird and flower suspended in the air, representing again the happy "other world" of perfection and beauty (figure 4). A lovely but meaningless decorative object lies upon the stricken earth, perhaps symbolizing the artist's view of traditional art's place in the upside-down contemporary world. The bright elements contained within an otherwise dark painting seem to offer a solution to the image's overall pathos. On a level which is perhaps even subconscious, for all his pessimism about the world the artist cannot escape the heavenly images imprinted upon his psyche from his Iranian childhood, beginning with the first crawlings of an infant upon Persian carpets with their scenes of garden paradises.

Surely one of the most uplifting colors on an artist's palette is turquoise, a color which simultaneously evokes sky and heaven (figure 5). The color of brilliant mosque domes throughout the Iranian world, the colors of which are otherwise often muted at best, it is perhaps the most striking and calming color in the Iranian imagination. Aghdashloo's paintings "Victoria's Death" (1980) and "Sandstorm" (1980) both feature the use of turquoise against otherwise sombre and depressing backgrounds.

Thus, while in using deeply-rooted Iranian styles and symbols Aghdashloo invariably damages and de-contextualizes these traditional elements, ultimately his message is one which gives them enduring respect and value. His use of these traditional elements thus differs dramatically from that of other contemporary Iranian artists, who employ them in a merely decorative sense. Aghdashloo's treatment, in contrast and somewhat paradoxically, is deeply reverential and spiritual. The sorrow and worry in his paintings are ultimately sublimated beneath the harmony, brightness, precision and perfect order expressed by the miniature tradition, which promises the viewer that like the very order of nature, it will persist and ultimately prevail. For those who know something about the pre-Islamic Iranian Zoroastrian religion, this hopeful message of the ultimate triumph of light over shadows, beauty over ugliness, good over evil, is strikingly familiar.

Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat, a photography, video and installation artist based in New York City, is perhaps the best-known contemporary Iranian artist in the West. She began her career with black-and-white photographs of veiled women which she covered with Persian writing (figure 6). In contrast to the familiar body decorations used by women in some Muslim countries (though not so much in Iran), Neshat's technique of overwriting a visual image is not primarily decorative. Rather, it serves as a kind of narration, recalling the juxtaposition of word and image in the Persian miniature paintings of illustrated manuscripts.

Neshat's more recent video and installation work, also generally in black-and-white, typically evokes customs and rituals against sombre backgrounds, suggesting that for her, these customs and rituals are somewhat frightening. These works show segregated groups of women

and men in an archetypical way, usually simply dressed in black, performing mysterious ceremonies. While the rituals and customs depicted draw to some extent upon authentic religious practice, as such they do not exist and are thus creations of the artist. For example, Neshat shows women and men engaged in dramatic mourning rituals (*azā-dārī*), which are of course very present in traditional Iranian culture and date back to the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia, but the actual way the figures perform their mourning in Neshat's videos does not resemble the mourning behaviours of real-life Iranians past or present.

The traditions of all cultures develop out of a history of cultural exchange. Iran absorbed and adapted many elements of myth and ritual from ancient Mesopotamia, whose civilization reached an advanced stage of development long before Iran.⁹ In looking at the mourning rituals present in Iranian culture which are evoked in Neshat's videos, it is possible to recognize their Mesopotamian roots. One of the central themes in Mesopotamian mythology is that of an important goddess—known by several different names—whose son dies or is killed and then reborn each year, symbolizing the annual regeneration of plant life so important in this agricultural society.

One of the main components of the annual ritual cycle connected with this myth was mourning and lamentations over the death of this divine son, who was considered to have died the death of a martyr. Women were prominent in these mourning ceremonies, screaming and beating themselves in grief just like the goddess herself who has been deprived of her son. Yet these grief rituals, dramatic as they were, at the same time served as a kind of ushering in of the

⁹ For purposes of discussing cultural history, the term “Iran” is used broadly to refer to lands where Iranian political power was present, including the empires of the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sasanians, which extended from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor to Central Asia and northwestern India, an area obviously much larger than contained within the modern-day Islamic Republic of Iran.

martyred god's subsequent rebirth. Groups of villagers with blackened faces, representing the martyred god, would appear to herald his return. In some cases they would wrap up a tree in a shroud, then raise it up and recite prayers and invocations.

In this way we can see that Iran's mourning rituals have developed over time from ancient—and in this case, non-Iranian—precedents and taken on new meanings and association in different historical contexts. Neshat's evocation of such rituals should be seen in this context.

In her film "Passage" (2001), we see a group of men carrying an enshrouded corpse while a group of women attempt to dig a grave in parched soil with their hands (figure 7).

Simultaneously, a single girl performs her own ritual by building a pile of stones (figure 8); in the end both the male and female groups are engulfed in a sudden conflagration. All are dressed in black; only the little girl wears colourful clothing. In this film, Neshat leaves the sociological themes of her earlier work and concentrates instead on expressing a cyclical philosophical message of death and return. The final conflagration thus has a positive meaning, recalling the Zoroastrian notion of fire as a purifying and illuminating force which assists the sun in bringing about rebirth. In this film, the portrayal of abstract, unreal mythological themes to express philosophical notions about the cycle of life and death is obvious.

Neshat's earlier film, "Rapture" (1999), also features two groups, one of men and one of women, make their way separately through a sombre, parched wilderness before finally arriving at the sea (figure 9). In *Fervor* (2000) we again have men and women in segregated groups, this time listening to an inflammatory lecture on the expulsion from Eden (figure 10), a theme common to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The speaker riles up his dual audience, who explode in collective fear of God and hatred for Satan. The impression is that of an unreal, scary,

symbolic society, devoid of time or place. One feels vividly how myth and ritual stimulate and control the hearts and minds of human beings.

Diverse mythological themes are present in Neshat's other work as well. Cult is the prevailing theme in her art, mostly in her videos. For example, in the film *Touba* (2002), we see an old woman, whose body merges into that of a tree, recalling ancient shamanistic notions of shape-shifting and the unclear boundary between human and non-human.

In fact, it seems that in general Neshat's world occupies a middle space between myth and reality. She uses modern techniques such as photography and video to evoke a mythological world of ritual. The fact that the rituals portrayed are not actual representation but rather her own variants shows that her intention is not ethnographic but rather cathartic. In these films she is confronting her own fear of a ritualistic and Islamicized society from which she feels distanced yet unable to separate herself from. A psychologist would likely surmise that these fears go back to childhood, the typical childhood of an Iranian girl first introduced by her mother or other female relatives into the frightening world of religious rituals such as those mourning for the martyred Imams, a world seemingly filled with blackness, grief and anger.

Conclusion

In Iran, ancient mythical elements are very much alive in the present as a part of the fabric of ordinary people's lives and worldview. This paper has explored the relationship between culture, myth, and artistic production in contemporary Iran, using the specific examples of symbols and mythological themes evoked in the work of painter/writer Aydin Aghdashloo and photographer/video artist Shirin Neshat. The paintings of Aydin Aghdashloo, in which he deliberately damages beautifully-executed classical style Persian miniatures, convey a sense that

the angelic forces have failed and that the world is succumbing to the destructive and degenerative activities of the demonic. The photographs, videos and installations of Shirin Neshat likewise draw heavily on cultic forms inherited from ancient Iranian tradition. It is important to note that the meanings attached to cultural artifacts tend to evolve and change over time, and in neither Aghdashloo's nor Neshat's case does the artist use mythological themes and symbols to express their "original" content or message. Rather, these artists appropriate well-known elements of ancient Iranian culture and imbue them with new meanings relevant to contemporary issues and understandings. What the example of these two artists *does* illustrate, however, is the persistent *resonance* of ancient Iranian culture among contemporary Iranians. Iranian artists have demonstrated the effectiveness of evoking their target audience's deep sense of cultural identity to convey contemporary messages using ancient cultural concepts, sometimes on a subconscious level.

Myths survive within and across cultures through adaptation. Gods and goddesses may die, but their traces remain in customs and rituals as well as in literature and art. In the Iranian cultural tradition no work brings together art and literature more richly than the *Book of Kings* in its many illustrated versions over the centuries. While the days of lavish, hand-copied royal manuscripts are gone, representations of ancient Iranian cultural themes and symbols through new fusions of word and image live on in the work of contemporary Iranian artists.

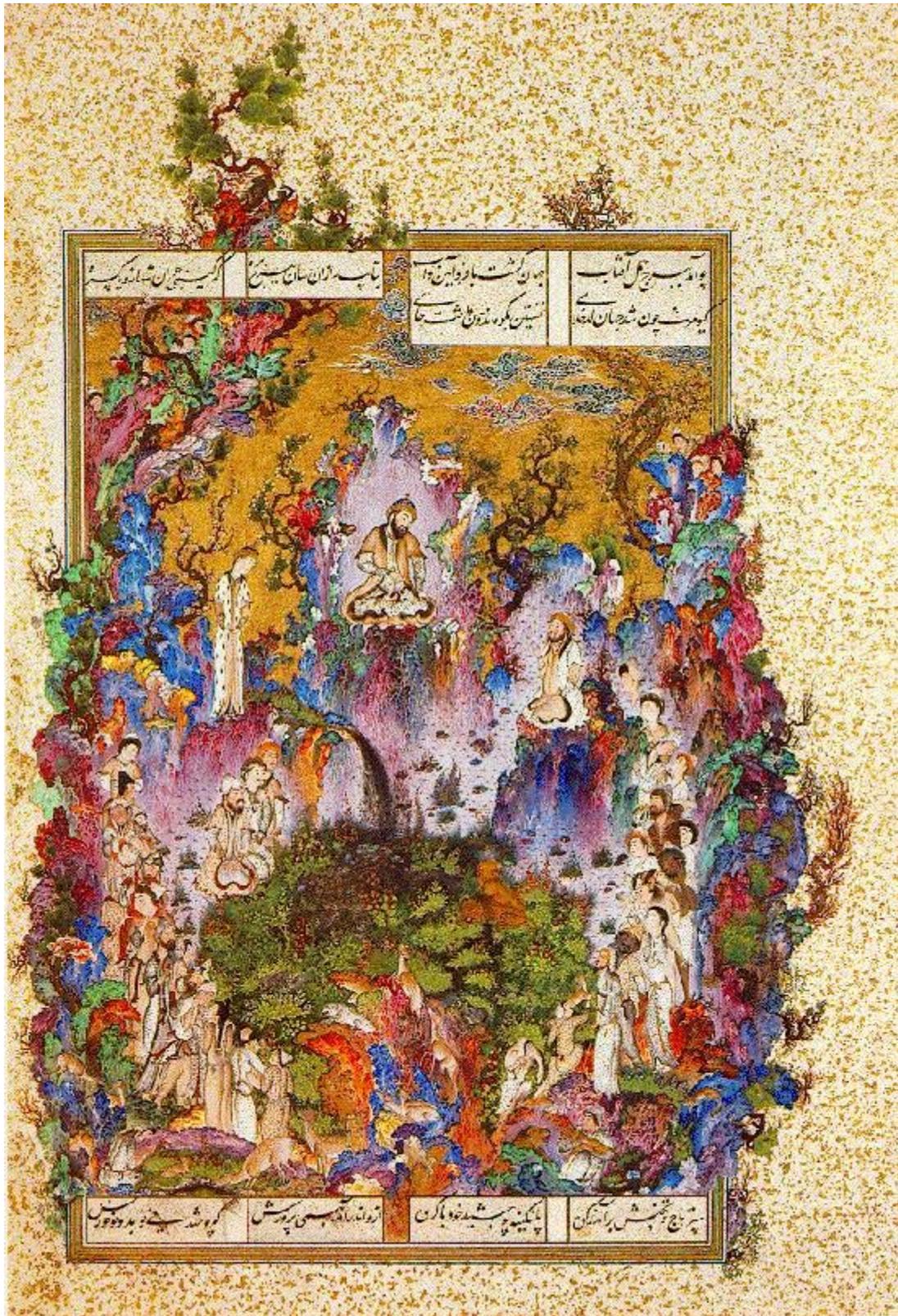


Figure 1, Soltan Mohammad, The Court of Gayumars, ca. 1525.



Figure 2, Aydin Aghdashloo: Victorious dead, 1980



Figure 3, Falling angels III, 1993



Figure 4, Memories of destruction, 1980



Figure 5, Broken beauty, 2006

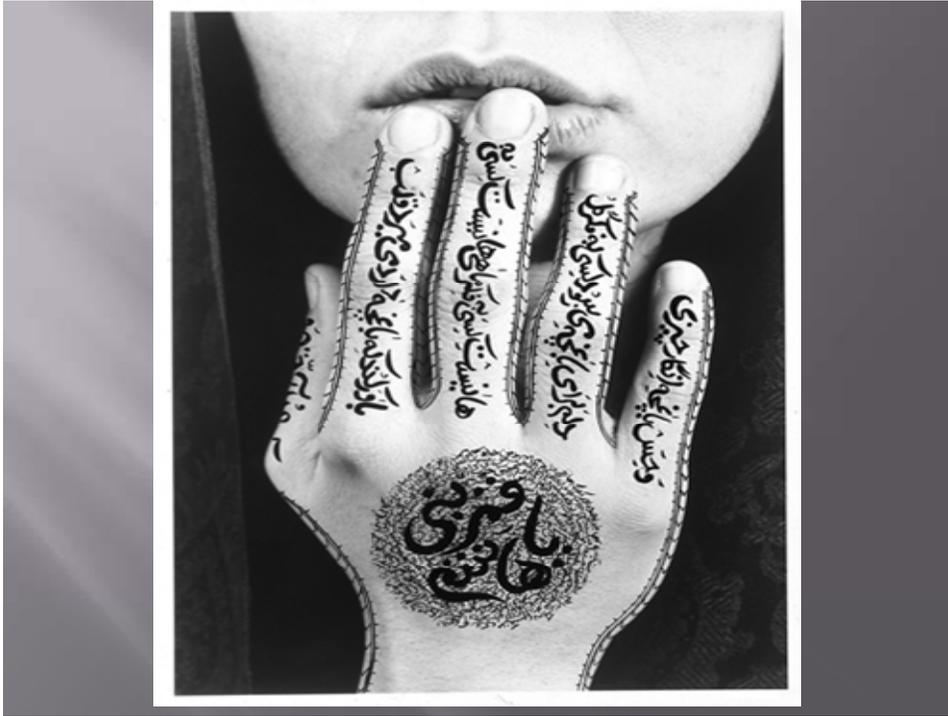


Figure 6, Shirin Neshat: Photograph



Figure 7, "Passage", 2001



Figure 8, "Passage", 2001



SHIRIN NESHAT
Production still from *Rapture*, 1999
Photo taken by Larry Barns
Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery
(c) 1999 Shirin Neshat
Lent by James-Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach

Figure 9, “Rapture” 1999



Figure 10, “Fervor”, 2000