

**MEHRANEH EBRAHIMI, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019). Pp. 183. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper. ISBN 97808156363359.**

REVIEWED BY SEAN WIDLAKE, Independent Scholar, email:  
[swidlake@uw.edu](mailto:swidlake@uw.edu)



Opening with an invocation to the ethical and necessary benefits of true democracy, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* by Mehraneh Ebrahimi is an ambitious text. At its broadest, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* is an analysis of three Iranian female artists, including two graphic novel authors—Marjane Satrapi and Parsua Bashi—and one multimedia artist—Shirin Neshat. In these analyses, Ebrahimi attempts to describe the creative process of these artists in their reclaiming of the “other” not as an object but as a subject. What remain constant throughout the narrative are the ethics to which this artistic production speaks. That is to say, intrinsic to Ebrahimi’s analysis is the ability for diaspora artists, such as those described in the book, to be a platform for change. Furthermore, that the artistic productions she reviews highlight the ways in which aesthetics, ethics, and politics are linked together in “Borromean knot chains,” for which she coins the neologism “aestextacy” (xiii). For Ebrahimi, it is the addition of the ethical that plays the largest role within these knot chains or intersections. Within the narrative that Ebrahimi puts forth, she will in various points make moralizing statements about the nature of terrorism, authoritarianism, and the Iranian government.

In a lengthy preface, Ebrahimi asserts that Iranian artists in the diaspora have endured war, trauma, racism, and more, such that it enables them to identify the “other” in their artistic production as a means to counter established or dominant norms (xi). For Ebrahimi, this artistic production becomes embedded in the democratic process. Focusing on the tenuous nature of democratic governments and their ability to fall into the realm of authoritarianism or fascism (xv), Ebrahimi brings attention to the works of diaspora artists as a voice of dissent, or what Foucault refers to as “parrhesia” or truth-telling (xvi). Ebrahimi sees dissensus and the ability to create images of the “other” in contrast to the dominant narrative as essential in art that is produced

under troubled governments, or, as she sometimes states, “failed democracies.” A term she uses to describe this literary or artistic production is *Ghorbat* (غربت) literature (19), which she employs in place of “exile literature.” As each artist Ebrahimi addresses deploys a form of longing for an Iran they knew but cannot return to, she focuses on the literal meaning of *Ghorbat*—loneliness or homesickness. This is especially true of the graphic novels, as we shall see, and in Shirin Neshat’s film adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur’s novel *Women Without Men*.

Part one focuses exclusively on the two graphic novels. Tracing a historical timeline for the importance of text and visual combinations, from biblical reliefs to the widely successful graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (31–34), Ebrahimi argues that the combination of text and visual portrayal is uniquely powerful. From an aesthetic point of view, Ebrahimi points to the “bi-ocularly” of graphic novels (29–30). In other words, that in blending text with images, these works prioritize neither one over the other. By extension, Ebrahimi casts light on these two works and their visual elements, which stand in contradistinction to other widely produced narratives by Iranians in the diaspora (most notably the prison memoir).

Chapter one delves into the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. In this chapter, Ebrahimi asserts that the graphic novel as a form has the unique ability to shape insights into the humanized “other.” In addition, Ebrahimi points out that what makes *Persepolis* an example for her model of “aestextacy” is how the characters, particularly the protagonist, display subjugated knowledges in their narrative. Borrowing from Foucault, Ebrahimi proclaims that Satrapi’s emotive and compelling autobiographical coming-of-age narrative tells a story from the bottom-up; providing a space outside either the Western-controlled or Islamic Republic of Iran-controlled narratives about life in Iran. In a similar vein, chapter two analyzes the graphic novel *Nylon Road* by Parsua Bashi. To broaden her narrative about the praxis of graphic novels and their inextricably linked “Borromean knot chains” of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, Ebrahimi contrasts these two written experiences. First, by outlining the ways in which they are similar and the ways in which the United States marketed the books as similar. Second, Ebrahimi diverges from their apparent similarities, specifically focusing on how Bashi’s novel is more intently focused on the ways in which it forms an autocritique (74–79).

In part two, Ebrahimi transitions away from the graphic novel as a form of expression into the broad world of photography and video

through the work of Shirin Neshat. Part two is longer and more extensive than part one and focuses on the interplay of text and image within Neshat's oeuvre, as well as the influence of Forough Farrokhzad on that work. As well, Ebrahimi continues to tie together her larger narrative about aesthetic free play, radical alterity, and reframing the "other." Ebrahimi asserts that what makes Neshat's work so critical in the course of her analysis is Neshat's intentional subjectification of the "other" (in this case the veiled woman) through the visual language of objectification.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter three focuses on Neshat's photography, with a particular interest in Neshat's arguably most famous photographic collection *Women of Allah*. Chapter four moves into Neshat's films, most notably *Women Without Men*, an adaptation of a work by Shahrnush Parsipur. However, for Ebrahimi, it is the influence of Forough Farrokhzad's film *The House is Black* on Neshat that is a leitmotif of part two. At this point, Ebrahimi finds her analytic stride, and in extremely detailed fashion, describes the film in its entirety. Struck by the interplay of the characters as well as their symbolism in Iranian history, Ebrahimi argues that Neshat's film is a visual culmination of the ways in which Neshat's photography and Satrapi's and Bashi's novels create "aestextatic" spaces through the combination of text and picture. The series of metaphors presented in the film are homages to the poetic influence in Neshat's life and work (148–49).

In her conclusion, Ebrahimi suggests that her book has proposed a new ethical approach to analyzing art and literature (158). Ebrahimi laments however, that more hasn't changed in the academic world to take a moral or ethical approach in scholarship leaving the only avenues she sees for political criticism to exist in the literary and artistic production by "othered" peoples. She reasserts her belief that the only way significant changes to the dystopic world we live in can happen is through the dissensus created by these artistic movements.

Although provocative, Ebrahimi's arguments suffer in several places throughout the text. On the one hand, Ebrahimi's prose is dense, filled with an academic vernacular that obfuscates rather than elucidates her broader theoretical arguments. These theoretical sections are also reliant on figures in critical theory and philosophy such as Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault, and others to build and maintain the moral imperative within her argument. If the moral imperative of art is to act as critique of the state and state practices, then Ebrahimi herself embodies the dissensus against the academy. Ebrahimi sees the academy as upholding the state when she asserts,

“[A]cademia . . . quite contrary to its claims to challenge the reason of the state, successfully manages to either profess neutrality or, in most cases, to reproduce the sanctioned government stance” (163). This is a contentious claim to make as Ebrahimi, within the course of her book, does not engage with the broader literature on the Iranian diaspora such as Neda Maghbooleh or Amy Malek, whose own works and public engagements have shifted the discourse on the aspects of race, skin color, immigration status, among other political themes.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, is not to speak to the very general passages in the book written about Iranian history (44) or even Middle Eastern scholarship, where Ebrahimi lumps together several scholars, including Sara Ahmed, Farzaneh Milani, and Hamid Dabashi (156). Perhaps then it begs the question: Who is the intended audience of this work?

A book as profound as it is problematic, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* is nonetheless an important addition to the discourse on Iranian diaspora, one that focuses heavily on the aesthetic potential of diaspora artists. This area, according to Ebrahimi, is underexplored. While large portions of the text would have benefitted from more explanation and from a broader engagement with the current scholarship on Iran and the Iranian diaspora, this book offers a strong visual analysis and critical lens on the works of Marjane Satrapi, Parsua Bashi, and Shirin Neshat.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This analysis is framed strongly by Ebrahimi, “Images by Shirin Neshat, for example, bring the radical Other – the armed Muslim Woman – to point-blank immediacy, demanding an engagement through the faculty of imagination, beckoning an encounter, a response-ability,” (88–89).

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Neda Maghbooleh, *The Limits of Whiteness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).