OTHER WAYS OF BEING—THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE IN SHIRIN NESHAT'S «WOMEN WITHOUT MEN»

Melissa Shani Brown
University of Nottingham

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of Shirin Neshat's film «Women without Men» (2010), devoting special attention to the issue of silence in its narrative. While exploring how the use of silence may represent diverse degrees of oppression, by resorting to Wendy Brown's and other authors' theories, it also suggests the ways in which silence may present a form of resistance as well as the embodiment of power, as shown through the figure of the garden in Neshat's film.

Key words: Silence, resistance, Shirin Neshat, «Women without Men», spaces of alterity.

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un análisis de la película de Shirin Neshat «Mujeres sin hombres» (2010), centrándose en la importancia del silencio en la narrativa. Mientras explora el grado en que el silencio se utiliza para representar la opresión, este artículo hace uso del trabajo de Wendy Brown y otros teóricos para explorar el grado en que el silencio también puede ser una forma de resistencia a la opresión, y la encarnación del silencio como un refugio de poder en la forma del jardín en la película de Neshat.

Palabras clave: silencio, resistencia, Shirin Neshat, «Women without Men», espacios de alteridad.

All that we wanted was to find a new form... a new way. Release.

Munis

PREAMBLE

It is common when discussing silence in terms of representations of women to correlate silence solely to oppression. However, it is also worth examining the circumstances in which silence may also be interpreted as a response to oppression, that is, as a flight from power. Silence may be agential, and may be a form of resistance in-so-far as it creates a space of privacy into which individuals with few other options can retreat. I shall be examining Shirin Neshat's film «Women Without Men»[1], and the extent to which it engages with the silencing, and silences of, the female

characters at the heart of the narrative. Neshat's film is an adaptation of Sharnush Parsipur's novel of the same name[2], but I wish to make it explicit that it is Neshat's film, and not the novel, that I am engaging with. The narrative is significantly different between the two versions, and while both are interesting, it is the extent to which silence comes to be very present in Neshat's narrative which makes the film a more useful vehicle for my discussion.

The narrative is set during the summer of 1953, in Iran just prior to the coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh. It follows four women, touching on their everyday lives, how three of them come to live together, and how they come to separate. Farrokh Legha (called Fakhri), is an older woman who buys a wild garden with a house at its centre, outside the city in Karaj. She is unhappily married to a general who would like to take a second, younger, wife. Zarin is a prostitute who is retreating into herself, and runs away from her brothel after having visions of men without eyes or mouths. She enters the garden and is found there by Fakhri and the gardener. Munis is almost thirty, and is largely confined to her home by her brother, Amir. She leaps off the roof of the house, is buried in the garden by her brother, but returns to life and becomes involved with pro-Mossadegh protestors. Faezeh is her friend, who unlike Munis has little interest in politics, but is secretly in love with Munis' brother. It is she who disinters Munis when she returns to life, but when she follows Munis through the streets, she is raped by two men. Munis leads her to Fahkri's garden, and leaves her there.

These women's stories are set against the backdrop of the civil unrest and eventual coup d'état against the democratically elected government of the Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a coup which was orchestrated and funded by the intelligence agencies of the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet to a great extent these events exist on the peripheries of these women's lives; they intersperse the narrative through the broadcasts from a radio turned on in a car, or playing in the corner of a room, or through the demonstrations on the streets which confines some of the women still more to their homes. This highlights the extent to which these women are separated from politics, but also to the effect of this separation: not all of the women are seeking involvement, the reasons for the demonstrations seem far away from the concerns of their everyday lives.

Much of my discussion[3] of this narrative will focus on the garden as the embodiment of silence, and also as a space of alterity that these women escape to. The narrative sets out a division between the public and the private spheres, a division in which the women are separated from the public, and while confined in the

---

[1] S. Neshat (dir.), *Women without Men*. Artificial Eye, released 9 Aug 2010.

[2] S. Parsipur, *Women without Men*. New York City, The Feminist Press, 2009.

[3] A consequence of my focus on the narrative is that there is less of an examination of historical context, both in terms of post-colonialism, Iran in 1953, the ramifications of the coup d'état, but also in terms of the issues surrounding women within Islam. Shirin Neshat has lived in exile from Iran since she was seventeen, and most of her work has been exhibited or screened in the United States and Europe, her work is necessarily in dialogue with these different discourses, as well as Western feminism.

private sphere, have little control over their lives within it. The garden comes to function as a third space, which is neither public, nor the confinement of the private. The garden functions as a metaphor for the political situation, the democratic government of Mossadegh which comes to be over-thrown, but it is its embodiment of these women's situations (the politics of their individual situations) which is the focus of this article.

1. SILENCING

I wish to touch on the binary created between speech and silence, and the overlaying of these onto freedom and oppression. Wendy Brown questions the automatic correlation of speaking, or «breaking silence», to being a state of freedom, particularly in reference to feminism. She explicitly recognises that resistance to oppression must include a demand for recognition and legitimisation of a voice; but despite the imperative in speaking against oppression, Brown is nevertheless cautious of fetishising the act of breaking silence[4]. She argues that the «presumed evil of silences»[5] is linked at least in part to the defining of silence in terms of censorship and silenc*ing*, a definition which reveals a great deal about what is presumed about speech. In debates about censorship, it is taken that speech, and representation, are forms of liberation, forming the means of putting one's own experiences and «truth» out into the world, or conversely, that *other's* speech and expressions are oppressive because they silence alternative view-points[6]. Brown argues that the depiction of speech as «expressive» and «repressive» translates voice into visibility and liberation, and indicates silence as its inverse. It is these presuppositions which Brown sets out to disrupt and question in her chapter. I shall return to Brown later in this work, but for the moment, I wish to engage with the narrative of the film, and the extent to which many of the initially evident silences are precisely those equated to oppression: silence as constraint, taboo, invisibility.

Silence is often reiterated as a form of isolation, or exclusion. If language founds community it is therefore integral to a concept of the public sphere. Silence becomes a symbol of confinement for Munis: from the first time we see her, she listens attentively to the radio, and its continuous broadcast of the political situation. It is not only Munis' connection to the events of the on-coming coup, but also ours; the broadcast allows the audience to place the private lives of these women into a historical narrative which they are largely excluded from. For Munis the sound of the radio (the broadcast voice) is a symbol of the world outside the house her brother has forbidden her to leave. It is her link to the demonstrations on the streets, and

[4] W. Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 83.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 85.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 86.

the political activism that she would like to be involved in[7]. She turns up the volume of the radio to drown her brother's chastisements and demands, and it is the radio that her brother breaks to force her to listen to him. The radio thus becomes a way of silencing her brother, in the first instance, and it is the radio that is silenced when her brother wishes to pull her away from outside events, and demand her to focus on the domestic sphere, the house, cooking, her need to find a husband, her need to «be decent». Her confinement is further reiterated in his threat to break her legs should she attempt to leave, a reinforcing of the threat of confinement, and also of «stillness». It is worth recalling the etymology of silence ties it to motionlessness, to be stilled is not only to be prevented from moving, it is also a command to be quiet. When her brother leaves, and Faezeh comes to the house, we find Munis attempting to fix the radio, to re-connect to the broadcast. This implies she has not started to cook, as her brother asked, though she does serve tea to Faezeh. In the company of her friend she does perform this domestic role, and also goes about the garden watering the flowers. Her rejection of her brother's demands is not identical with a rejection of the domestic, but of the demand that she do nothing beyond it. Though Munis does not answer her brother Amir, there is a recognition of the impossibility of refusal in her silence. She might not say anything, but she cannot say no.

This «impossibility of refusal» is experienced also by several other characters: Fakhri does not contradict or offer her own opinion in public against her husband, General Sadri, and in private is not permitted to object to his desire to take a new wife. Fakhri is privileged in comparison to the other women, her freedom of movement and the possibility of engaging in educated and politically aware circles is something she appears to take for granted, though it provides a distinct contrast to Munis' situation. It also distinguishes her from the character Zarin, though Zarin is another example of the impossibility of refusal. A prostitute in a brothel, she is chastised for «keeping her customers waiting», and the Madam's calling to her, over and over, punctuates the scenes in which we first encounter Zarin. Despite being being directly questioned, Zarin never answers. Zarin's silence pervades the narrative of the film, there are few occasions when she is seen to speak, and in these she either whispers, or is too far away to be heard by the audience. Neither Munis, Fakhri, nor Zarin answer when a demand is made of them, though their silence is not a refusal of these demands, it is an act of defiance: they refuse to act gladly. It is a response from a disempowered position, it is passive aggressive. As already noted, they are not permitted to refuse, but their silence does become a «speaking back» to a figure of power. It marks their unhappiness, and while Amir, or Sadri, or Zarin's Madam, are not overly concerned with what they feel about the demands, the women's silence remains exhibitive. It may be argued that an act of expression which goes unnoticed has failed to be a «true» communication (a tree falling without noise because none

[7] It is also the «silencing» of the radio by the military which marks the failure of the demonstrations against the coup in this narrative; we see soldiers storming the «Radio Iran» offices, and while broadcasting soon continues, it is a different voice, speaking in different terms, very much as Brown observes of censorship, the voice is both expressive and repressive in this instance.

witness it) but in most of these cases these women's silences are not unnoticed, nor are they actually ignored. Zarin's Madam continues to call out her name, both Amir and Sadri become angry when no reply is made. Their anger marks their reading of these silences as unacceptable responses, as acceptances that are nevertheless tinged with defiance.

The silence of Faezeh is less obvious than these previous examples, she apparently never speaks of Munis' suicide, she does not name her own rape, nor does she ever tell Munis' brother Amir that she loves him. Her silences trace out taboos, marking their preserve through what is seen, or known, but not spoken of. While «silencing» might be an auditory image of constraint, it also comes to stand for other forms of oppression. When Zarin scrubs herself raw in the public bath-house, the other women fall silent: they neither speak to her, nor to each other any more, and a child fixedly watching Zarin is pulled away. Silence is tied to visibility, or rather, concealment, through this sequence, just as other silences have also included a «turning away» of someone's face, or turning their back. Despite this correlation to silence as an attempt at diverting a gaze, Zarin is starkly visible throughout this sequence: she is naked, watched by the other women, and despite the gloom and steam of the bath-house, she remains in the light, in contrast to the shadow around her. The women's silence circles around the sight (it cannot be her voice since she says nothing) of Zarin, painfully anorexic and scrubbing at her skin until she bleeds, unsettling and rupturing their conversations. She also unsettles any presuppositions about representations of women in a bath-house, a highly exoticised and eroticised theme common throughout orientalist art. Neshat's depiction not only confronts us with children and women of all ages, but also with the figure of Zarin, a woman bathing, which interrupts the trope of passivity and «female beauty» with her freneticness and her evident pain.

This is not the only silence which preserves the unsettling or taboo within it. Faezeh turns her back while her grandmother muses on whatever might have happened to Munis; her silence about Munis' death maintains it as a secret, keeps it unknown. This is subtly different from when Munis finds her after her rape, when she averts her gaze and says only that she is «too ashamed». In the latter, Munis knows what to read in her friend's un-speaking, it is precisely through her silence that Faezeh gestures towards what has happened. A similar gesturing occurs when Fakhri tells an old friend that she no longer writes poetry, and sings «sometimes, but only for herself». The silence of her creativity points towards her dissatisfaction, her loss of what used to inspire her, though again, in not speaking against her husband, she is left saying nothing at all about causes, only symptoms (an analogous pattern to Faezeh naming her shame, but not what is behind it). In these examples, silence is a signifier, pointing towards the presence of some constraint, something marking off areas of speech as unacceptable.

The women's silences also function as a metaphor for a larger «lack of voice» both in and about Iran (little attention is often given in the West to the significance of 1953). Neshat dedicates the film to those who have lost their lives for freedom in Iran, including up to the Green Revolution in 2009. As the demonstrations are broken by the military, Munis muses «in all this turbulence and noise, there was

almost a silence underneath. The sense that everything repeats itself over time: hope, betrayal, fear». This underlying silence is precisely the apprehension that «everything will repeat»; it would be hopeless, and yet it includes the possibility of hope. The waiting silence is not ultimately about futility, but the possibility that cycles also permit change.

2. FLIGHTS FROM POWER

Having examined the extent to which silencing signifies oppression in this narrative, I wish to further examine silence as a form of resistance. The silences in this film are communicative, they both derive meaning from and add significance to their contexts. They function as replies and refusals and are often coupled with gesture: Fakhri and Munis turn their faces away when they are shouted at, Zarin physically pushes away a woman trying to help her in the bath-house, Faezeh often cries when she says nothing (of Munis' death, of her own rape, or at the end when Zarin dies). Brown's engagement with silence draws on Foucault to touch on the relation between speech, silence, and freedom. Taking a phrase from «The History of Sexuality», she notes that silence may be «a shelter *for* power», but also expands the question, asking whether or not silence may also be «a shelter *from* power»[8]. Foucault's silence in this instance is not the loss of speech, nor an instance of secrecy, but the empty spaces within and outside of discourses of power. Brown argues: «If, as Foucault insists, freedom is a practice (as opposed to an achievement, condition, or institution), then the possibility of *practicing* freedom inside a regulatory discourse occurs in the interstices of a given discourse, as well as in resistance to the discourse»[9].

I have already touched on silence as a response that simultaneously accepts and refuses a demand, but it is not such a silence that Brown is focusing on. She briefly acknowledges that silence is a powerful gesture of passive aggression[10], and while this is also a form of resistance, it is more the interstices in discourse that she is interested in, rather than individual acts of silence. Brown's exploration is useful because it allows for silence to be wilfully entered into. Silence may also be a position of power: when soldiers interrupt Fakhri's party, their commander's silence marks the fact that he is not obliged to explain, or give account of himself, especially not to a woman. When Fakhri identifies herself as the owner of the garden, his response is to ask where her husband is, and it is only when one of her male guests identifies her as the wife of General Sadri that the officer gives her a response, though still no real explanation. But what I wish to focus on is this «practicing» of silence as a «shelter *from* power», though I wish to do so in terms of silence as a «flight» from power, as a movement, as well as a destination. To this end I shall be figuring silence in terms of escape, withdrawal, and sanctuary.

---

[8] W. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 88.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 96.

There is an ambiguity in the word «flight»: it carries connotations of both the freedom of flying, and the defensive response to danger. It touches on both the joy and anxiety of journey, escape, exile. It allows both for coercion, to be forced to flee, and also for choice, the dream of flying. In referring to silence as a flight from power, I seek to explore silence as a response and as resistance to constraint. I shall begin with Munis, in part because the narrative of the film begins with her suicide, and because the «deathliness» of silence is related not only to the fact that the dead cannot speak, or move, but because all the focus on speaking in terms of social visibility and presence also likens silence to a social non-presence or death.

In the opening scene, we see Munis pacing slowly on the roof of her house, and hear the sounds of a distant demonstration, and also the call to prayer. Her leap resembles an attempt at flight, and she tells us: «Now I will have silence. Silence, and nothing. And I thought the only freedom from pain is to be free from the world». This already sets out a relation between the flight from power (pain) and an attempt at freedom, and the freedom in abandoning the world of pain to escape into death, silence, the unknown. The film eventually situates this scene after her brother has demanded that she remain in the house, and forbidden her to leave with Faezeh. When Amir and Faezeh find her body, she is laying, unveiled, in the street beyond their garden wall. But what is Munis' flight? Her leap from the roof does not immediately take her any further than just beyond the front door, when her body is found she is quickly brought back inside, and buried in the garden wrapped in a chador. But her death does provide her with an escape: both immediately in circumnavigating her brother's threats of hurting her by putting herself «beyond injury»; but also subsequently, when she comes back to life and is disinterred by Faezeh. Munis leaves the house and enters the world beyond, and (presumably since her brother believes her to be dead) she is not pursued, and she also appears to be invisible to most other characters. Again, it is the voice of the radio which draws her, and followed by Faezeh, she goes to a café full of men in order to listen, a place which her friend tells her she should not enter since «That's not a place for women!». While she appears to go unnoticed, sitting as though transfixed to the broadcast, Faezeh is seen hovering in the doorway, and her presence there is what attracts the attention of the men who follow and rape her.

It is Munis' invisibility in this second life which gives her the freedom to move about, to observe and listen. Though it was the desire to be free to listen which drew Munis into this flight, to be part of the events unfolding in the streets, her second life does not appear to give her more of a voice for herself. She says very little, though she continues to listen and observe; the audience hears her thoughts as she watches a demonstration, the roar of the crowd muted behind Munis' musings that she has come back «not just to watch but to see. Not just to be but to act.» When she does participate in the chants her voice cannot be distinguished amongst all the others. The silence Munis reaches for when she leaps is the removal of her brother's voice, which cuts through the radio and threatens and ties her to the house. The silence, the invisibility of her second life frees her to be in the world. But she is not like others who are in the world, like Faezeh who is seen in the doorway, nor like the young man who encourages her to get involved with the resistance movement, who

argues politics on the streets while giving out pamphlets, or speaks in secret meetings. Munis' flight from the roof, like her silence as she looks away from her brother and turns up the radio, is an attempt to escape from him, and the confinement he represents. While being defiant, it is not entirely equivalent with liberation: silence is her movement away, her separation, it takes her into the world, but does not give her a strong presence there.

The «flight» of silence acts also as withdrawal. To a great extent this fits with the representation of language and speech as being linked to visibility, presence and power, and silence to the inverse, though, I would argue, what freedom there is in invisibility should not be ignored. The extent to which silence comes to be a flight from the world is embodied in the character Zarin. She is by far the mutest of the women, she often averts her eyes from her customers in the brothel, and from the other women in the bath-house. She runs and creeps when she wanders the streets, and crawls through a gutter in the wall of Fakhri's garden in order to enter (in contrast to Faezeh, and Fakhri, who enter through the front gate). She is anorexically thin, and at the bath-house she withdraws from being touched. She runs away from the brothel because one of her customers appears suddenly to have no eyes or mouth, only a blank, though it is one of the few instances when she appears to look directly at any of the men who have visited her. Sightless and speechless, it is however not the man who is rendered invisible and mute, but Zarin. She cannot be seen, or spoken to, and she does not speak. Her only presence to a man who cannot see or speak to her, and to whom she does not speak, is whittled down to touch, and she generally keeps her own hands away from others, when she does not recoil from them. She runs from the city after wandering into a funeral, passing by a group of ululating women, and coming across a room full of men in prayer. It is unclear if, when they rise from their bow, all the men see her, or if what she sees is a crowd of blank faces[11] before she runs. Silence is a retreat for Zarin, a segregation of herself from other people around her. The faceless men, and the distress she exhibits in the bath-house, indicate the extent to which her experience of the world is tinged with pain. When Fakhri's party interrupts the quiet of the garden, Zarin appears to experience pain at the sound of all the guests in the rooms below, to suffer at the presence of their voices. Silence is an escape for Zarin, but it is also a sanctuary, insofar as it is a flight away from the world, creating a space of self-imposed exile.

The concept of silence as sanctuary is visually captured in Fakhri's garden outside of the city, to which Faezeh and Zarin come to escape. There are differences in how each of them comes to the garden, which is not only their different narratives up to that point, but also differences in class. Fakhri is chauffeur-driven to the garden, and purchases it as her own. Faezeh is led there by Munis, who leaves her at the gate before returning to Tehran. Zarin crawls through a gutter in the wall, following a stream of water. Though the garden is ostensibly Fakhri's property, it does

[11] We only see the men from behind once they have risen, though a film installation «Zarin» which Neshat displayed at the Gladstone Gallery October 15 through November 12, 2005, included the praying men with blank faces, and also with crowds of men on the street, also without features.

come to function as a shared space, and as a space in which each of the women there may attempt to find what their flights into silence were reaching for.

3. THE GARDEN

In an interview, Neshat describes the garden as «a place of exile; a place that these women could escape to... to be temporarily at peace. A shelter, a place of security, a new beginning, a second chance»[12]. The ambivalence between exile and sanctuary mirrors that in the two meanings of «flight»; the garden is an ambivalent place in this narrative. Neshat notes that the garden is neither geographically consistent, nor wholly separate from dream: «[t]here was a desert, and then there was this lush green. It was like the garden had no walls once they entered... we were playing with these paradoxical spaces; like heaven or like hell, but nothing that belonged on earth... maybe this is a place where all the women are dead»[13]. Faezeh wanders around the garden in her dreams as well as in her waking hours, encountering both Munis' voice, visions of herself, and Zarin. The audience is not shown what Zarin sees in the garden, if she sees anything other than the trees, though she lies in the water, and on the ground, a physical closeness which neither Fakhri nor Faezeh emulate.

Here, I wish to touch quickly on Aristotle, and his description of language founding the human community. While all animals have «voice» (*phônê*) to express pain and pleasure, humanity has language (*logos*) which can speak of justice and injustice, and found a community based upon this qualification of what constitutes a «good life»[14]. The silence of animals, of unspeaking nature, creates a metaphorical wilderness beyond this «city of men». As Heath notes in a discussion of this passage, to be human is thus conceived of as necessarily being *politicon zôïon*, «a creature of a polis», to be outside the city of humanity and language you must be «either a beast or a god»[15]. I am intrigued by the garden in the film, and the extent to which it is not simply a wilderness of silence into which these women have exiled themselves, but instead a liminal space *between* the city and the wilderness of the desert. Neshat notes that the topography is inconsistent, but the narrative presents us with a lush orchard bounded on one side by a wall separating it from the road, and on the other it comes suddenly to an end as it faces a desert that reaches to the horizon. When Faezeh comes to the garden, she wanders out into the edge of the silent desert, but is drawn back into the garden by the sound of a woman singing, the voice turns out to be Fakhri. The garden has become overgrown, but it retains traces of humanity:

---

[12] J. Guerrasio, «'Women Without Men's Shirin Neshat by Livia Bloom» (interview) January 23rd 2010. http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/01/women-without-mens-shirin-neshat-by-livia-bloom/#.

[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] J. Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 10.

[15] *Ibidem*.

a mossy table amid the trees, the straight lines of the acequia, and the house at the centre. The garden is very quiet, when Zarin is laying in the pond of water we can hear her breathing, though the sounds of the trees and birdsong also come to mark the garden, giving it an auditory presence. Neshat mentions this as a conscious decision: «we ... made it silent with just natural sounds because we thought even the garden had a voice of its own»[16]. I mentioned earlier that Neshat speaks of this as a place where the women are dead: one of the guests at the party asks others how Fakhri could have left the city for a place so lonely, and «left her husband, and her life». If the women are dead in the garden, it is because they have separated themselves from life: from their lives in Tehran, and also from the events unfolding there, the demonstrations, the coup d'état, though the latter is more a consequence than the intention of this separation. Like Munis' death (and it is worth recalling that Munis is buried and returns to life in her own garden) the garden does not ultimately confine the women, it is neither city nor desert, but it is also neither the public, nor the private spheres they have left.

Anne Carson's essay «The Gender of Sound» examines how women's voices are compared to animal sounds, or to sounds which a man would never make. Much of this comes down to the conflating of the sound of women's voices with the uses of the voice, and the correlation of women's sounds to lack of control, to the exhibition of emotions[17], rather than an expression of thoughts. Calls to modesty dictate not only what should be hidden of the body, but also regulates women's speech[18]. All of the women weep at some point in the narrative, though Munis cries only once, and at the very end, over the death of a young soldier. The crying is often unaccompanied by words, though it is also communicative, demonstrating pain and grief. None of the male characters ever show such emotion, they themselves are presumably confined by the same rules of propriety which compels them to withhold such displays. The devaluing of women's voices, and their use to communicate emotions, serves as a form of silencing, by de-humanising them. The exhibition of emotion through women's voices or acts becomes blurred in the narrative of the film, since the demonstrations on the streets are also exhibitive, but can still be distinguished as distinct from the ululations performed only by women, both at the funeral that Zarin wanders into (the men are praying silently in a separate room), and at the wedding preparations that are almost exclusively female which Faezeh encounters when she returns to Amir's house and unearths Munis. While women are shown at the demonstrations, there are certainly more men present, and Munis is the only woman present in all of the covert revolutionary activity. But this also reinforces the division between the correlating of women's voices to emotions (to the ritual cries at the funeral and wedding), and men's voices to thoughts (political demonstration). To an extent this mirrors the division between *phônê* and *logos* set up previously: the

---

[16] J. Guerrasio, *op. cit.*

[17] A. Carson, «The gender of sound» in A. Carson, *Glass, Irony & God*, New York, New Directions Books, 1995, pp. 119-126.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 129.

voice expresses pleasure and pain, and is linked to the speechlessness of animals, but speech expresses the just and unjust, and is foundational to being human.

But it is not only women's voices that are likened to nature, but also their bodies. Amir explicitly makes this correlation, inquiring how old Faezeh is, since «a woman's body is like a flower. Once it blossoms it soon withers away». Though not included in the narrative of the film, in the book Fakhri's husband tells her that after menopause, she is unlikely to «enjoy a garden»[19]. Less explicitly, all of the young women wear clothing patterned with flowers. Munis' dress is patterned with blossoms and leaves, Zarin's chador is pale blue with small buds, most of Faezeh's dresses, even her nightdress, have flower prints or embroidery. The dresses given by Fakhri[20] to Faezeh and Zarin are also flower-printed. Munis waters the flowers in her garden in the city, and the other three are, for much of the narrative, living in the garden in Karaj. While this ties the women to the societal clichés of being 'like flowers' (to blooming and withering) it also links them to the garden, not in being 'like nature', but being alive.

Water has a significant presence in this narrative: aside from Zarin's compulsive scrubbing in the bath-house, she trails a stream of water into the garden, and once there, lays in the pond. Munis submerges herself in the well in her own garden immediately after Faezeh has unearthed her. To be under water is to be partially deafened, the water blocks out the sounds from outside the water, or distorts them, but also amplifies sounds from beneath the surface. Water thus simultaneously silences, and opens the possibility for other sounds. I am provoked into wondering what Zarin hears (aside from the garden's voice and her own breath) when she is floating in the water. Zarin comes to be closely linked to the garden, as I have already mentioned, she lays in its waters, and on the ground, and Faezeh sees her wandering among the trees in her dreams. When Fakhri and the gardener first find Zarin, she is in the pond; though Fakhri may legally own the garden, Zarin found her way in first. In Faezeh's dream, Zarin sits at the edge of the desert, surrounded by vermillion flowers, and in the waking world the audience sees Zarin planting tiny flowers made of folded paper in the sand (paper is after all, a product made of trees). Fakhri mentions how incredible it is that the flowers in the garden should suddenly flourish, just as Zarin is getting better. But the tree which comes crashing down through the window of the house is also linked to Zarin, she was not in the room, and appears unsurprised at what has happened, and yet it seems impossible that she could have physically pulled down the branches. The garden reflects, embodies even, Zarin's states, her flourishing, her anger, her sickness.

The garden is symbolic of a retreat from the world, shelter or flight from power, a silent space, a place to be other, but each of the women come to the garden for different reasons, and what role it serves for them is also different. Despite the title,

---

[19] S. Parsipur, *Women without Men*. New York City, The Feminist Press, 2009, p. 62.

[20] We see Fakhri give Faezeh a dress with blue flowers to wear at the party, but I am presuming that the other dresses worn by both Faezeh and Zarin have been given to them, since they arrive with nothing but the clothes that they are wearing, and Zarin abandons her blue chador outside the wall.

the women are not seeking permanent segregation from men. Munis explicitly desires to engage with the men involved in the resistance movement, and in «male spaces». Fakhri and Faezeh also do not see the garden as a place of permanent removal from society. The garden itself is not wholly devoid of men: the gardener is inextricable from the garden, he says he has been there as long as he can recall, he is Fakhri's initial guide, and it is he who opens the gate for Faezeh. He is, however, remarkably quiet in comparison to the other men in the narrative, and remains placidly in the role of a caretaker. Zarin does not shrink from his touch when she first wakes. For Fakhri, the garden and the house in its centre is a space of her own, away from her husband, a place where she might reclaim what she wants to be. She begins to sing again, and is called upon to sing at the party for her guests. Both as a mother figure for Zarin and Faezeh, and as hostess of the party, she has an authority and interconnection with others which she lacked at the beginning of the narrative. If she finds these things in the garden, she wishes to re-enter the world beyond with them. The purpose of the party, of bringing so many people from the city out to Karaj, is precisely so they might see Fakhri, and what she has made in this place. Ultimately, what she wants to regain is the presence eroded by her husband's dismissal of her because of her age. In the end she does not win the man she loves, he chooses a woman who is younger, foreign, and blonde. Though she is changed by the garden, the world beyond has largely remained the same.

Faezeh also undergoes a transformation in the garden, though unlike Fakhri, she did not set out seeking to be changed. When Munis leaves her at the gate, she tells her that she will be safe here, though Faezeh's first wanderings through the garden are obviously anxious. The garden sounds quieter, her footsteps and the sounds of her breath and her whispered praying, marks the extent to which she does not initially feel safe in the strange space of the garden. Unlike Zarin, who abandons her chador before crossing through the wall, Faezeh does not remove hers even when she is inside the house. She wears it even in her dreamlike visions. I would argue that this is not solely about her original trepidation in the garden, but also a defensive reaction in the aftermath of her rape: the chador serves to create a boundary between her and the world. The garden also serves such a role, but it is not only a sanctuary that Faezeh finds, even if that is what she entered for. We see her praying in her room, still veiled, until she sees the gardener pruning bougainvillea beyond the window. When she slams closed the shutters she not only shuts out the world, but shuts herself in with her memories and dreams. In the darkness she confronts Munis' voice calling her name, and her own remarks about Amir's new bride not being a virgin. She runs through the orchard, chasing after another woman we presume to be Munis, she comes across herself, being raped. She sits among the trees, without her chador, and sees Zarin watching her. She follows Zarin, and we see her waking back at the house. She leaves the house in her nightdress, with her hair down and un-braided, and she goes out into the garden. After these scenes, she no longer wears the chador, even at the party, and afterwards, when she walks back down the road toward the city.

Faezeh stumbles upon herself in the garden, and while the dream sequence reiterates her trauma, the aspects of herself that she seems to have found by the time she leaves are not ones of either shame or fragility. She also encounters herself in a

mirror, brushing her hair, but then pausing to contemplate herself, to take off her shirt and touch her breasts, and to firmly meet her own gaze in the glass. When Amir appears at the party, he is shocked not only by the guests, but by Faezeh's transformation also. He asks: «what have you done to your appearance? Where is your veil?» when she makes no answer, he continues «I can't believe you have ended up in a place like this. Who are all these decadent people around you? Are you still praying?» He asks her age, and also proposes to her, telling her not to worry about his first wife, she'll be like a servant to her. Faezeh refuses him, and also says how grateful she is to see how lucky she has been. She does not make any mention of her rape, or why she left the city, she allows Amir to trace all her changes to the garden. In this she begins to create a narrative that acknowledges not what has been forced on her, but what she has chosen to do. After Zarin dies, Faezeh returns to the city. Why, for what, is not disclosed, but she chooses to go.

For Zarin, the garden provides a permanent exile, she demonstrates no desire to leave the garden, except to venture out into the desert, to retreat further into silence. Fakhri's decision to open the garden for the party causes her to relapse into her silent sickness. She goes out into the garden to lie under the trees; the narration muses: «What is it about people that their hunger, their desires, seem to eat everything: the light, the air, the quiet. Now the orchard was turning, breaking under this great weight as if it fell ill, and there was no retreat, no rest any longer.» For Zarin, silence, and the garden, are a cloistering from the world from which she does not wish to return, there is nothing in the world beyond the garden that she longs for, and when the «outside» intrudes in the forms of Fakhri's guests and later the soldiers, she physically suffers from the voices and sounds. If it is the world that causes her pain, its intrusion into the garden pushes her to a physical death.

4. SELF-REFLECTION

Neshat says of the character's preoccupations with their bodies that «[t]hey're very narcissistic things, yet very human»[21]. This creates a tension between the characters' focus on themselves, and the extent to which this focus is considered familiar and comprehensible. But what is this narcissism, and the humanity within it? The women's relations to their bodies are often of vulnerability: to violence, broken legs, rape, judgement, being too old, not a virgin, not blonde. What then is the significance of their narcissism? Narcissus died and metamorphosed into a flower after becoming too entranced with his reflection. In this context the myth speaks towards the danger of being re-formed into an object if one becomes too focused only on one's appearance. I have already noted that the women are linked to flowers, verbally and visually. But what of their reflections? Zarin appears very concerned with her body, she spends time in front of mirrors in the brothel, applying lipstick, and

[21] Neshat in Guerrasio.

perfume. Her compulsive bathing, her starvation and self-harm also gesture towards a preoccupation with her body. Fakhri also sits before the mirror in her bedroom, though to remove lipstick. Her appearance always speaks towards a meticulous care towards her hair, her makeup, her clothing. As she walks up a staircase to meet an old friend, she is surrounded by mirrors, reflected many times over. Yet both Zarin and Fakhri use mirrors not only to look at themselves, but to gaze over their shoulders, to watch men who are in the room behind them. It is also through mirrors that the audience sees Amir's bride, and Faezeh praying. These mirrors do not only reflect the body, but expand vision, allowing one to see in ways you otherwise could not. In calling them «narcissistic things» all focus is honed on their vanities. Liana Badr writes about the pressure to avoid «mirror-gazing»:

> [M]y mother warned me against standing for too long in front of the mirror... desire is a dangerous thing for a girl in our society, as is exploring the coverings which shield the body from the eyes and words of others that can so easily enclose it in their grasp... [the mirror's] cold eye has stared relentlessly at human beings and their bodies ... and, more dangerously, it has stared at their souls as well... For how can you communicate with yourself if not through some sort of mirror?... The mirror has a deadly charm... tempting you to look at yourself and examine how you relate to the world...[22].

This recognises the ambiguity of gazing at oneself, the narcissism or vanity, the «dangerous desire» and the need for modesty, to hide from eyes and speech which can *touch*, grasp. But also the gazing *into* oneself, entering into a dialogue about one's place in the world. Faezeh certainly does shield herself for much of the film, and yet also encounters her reflections in her visions and in the mirror, encounters which lead her to self-reflection, her evaluation of her world, her luck, and ultimately her own agency in regards to her body and actions. What do Fakhri and Zarin see when they gaze into their mirrors? They watch over their shoulders without directly looking, they not only see themselves, but themselves-in-the-world.

5. PRIVACY

So far I have been writing about silence in terms of flight, and of the garden as offering a physical manifestation of such a space. The issue that this has been circling around is privacy. By privacy I do not mean confinement to the private sphere, though apart from Fakhri, the women generally are excluded from the public, but my point in focusing on privacy is that it is not equivalent to domesticity. I began by discussing silence as signifying oppression, and also a flight from power, removing oneself from a dialogue one cannot otherwise control. This is a form of privacy. The

---

[22] L. Badr, «The story of a novel or reflections of details in the mirror: between awareness and madness», in F. Faqir (ed.), *In the House of Silence*, Reading, Garnet Publishing, 1998, pp. 27-28.

etymology of privacy links it to deprivation, to being without or removed from the public. But I think it is worth distinguishing between «privacy» and «privation» in their modern uses. The flights taken by these women, their silences and quiet places, reach towards having a space (even if its borders are co-terminate with the boundaries of their bodies) in which they might be separate, «free», authoritative. The narrative ends with Munis' fall from the roof, and it is ambiguous if this is a return to the first time she jumped, or if she has jumped again. As she falls, she muses: «Death is not so bad. You only think it is. All that we wanted was to find a new form, a new way. Release». She could as well be referring to the failed revolt against the coup d'état, as each of the women's flights away from the lives they lead at the beginning of the film. It is with this in mind (the desperate attempt to find a new form, another way of being) that I wish to return to the idea of privacy.

In remaining silent, these women keep their words to themselves, and while quietness is also tied to issues of appropriate speech and modesty, there is significance in the choice to separate oneself through silence. Wendy Brown writes that subjugation can be seen as a deprivation of privacy[23], to be surveilled, judged, and importantly, to be complicit in judging oneself and others. Faezeh judges Parvin for the rumour that she is not a virgin, and chastises Munis for saying it might not be important. Amir calls Munis indecent for ignoring him. Fakhri's husband mocks her for flirting «at her age». The women's verbal silences are a «keeping to themselves», Munis' activism is a defiance of confinement, and the retreat to the garden is an escape from the world which judges and compels them to judge themselves. Lochrie draws on MacKinnon's argument that women are kept private, but often do not have their own privacy. For Lochrie, this is the important distinction between *being* or *having* a secret, or privacy, in the first one is set aside, in the second, one has set aside a part of oneself[24]. Munis is confined to her house, and her brother struggles to understand her «restlessness», but she is not keeping a secret, even if he sees her moods or actions as unfathomable. Faezeh does not disclose that Munis has killed herself, or that she came back to life, nor does it appear evident that anyone other than Munis knows that Faezeh was raped. Zarin's unpredictability is also tied to the fact that she does not talk about her thoughts, even if they are made manifest in the garden: she says nothing, secreting herself in silence, even from the other women. Zarin sinks into silence, and yet Faezeh finds in the privacy of the garden a new way of being with herself, and a new relation to the world.

[23] W. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[24] K. Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 138.

6. FINAL THOUGHTS

Brown argues that, while there is an urgent need to bear witness to discrimination, fetishising the breaking of silence does not allow for the recognition of the desire for privacy, especially given a situation when privacy may be experienced as a way of resisting oppression. And yet, while silence may be a form of resistance in specific contexts, it does not ultimately represent freedom from that oppression: «... silence is a response to domination, it is not *enforced* from above but rather *deployed* from below...Yet it would be a mistake to value this resistance too highly, for it is... a defence in the context of domination ... rather than a sign of emancipation from it»[25]. Certainly many of the silences in this narrative are in direct response to the contexts in which these women find themselves, each to their own experiences of constraint, devaluing or violation. Silence may be resistance, but it is entered into precisely because of the social and individual experiences of oppression[26]. The narrative of Neshat's film uses silence to signify these different forms of oppression, through the motif of silencing, but also explores the silences which the women willingly enter into, which are embodied in the garden. The strategic silences of these women open the possibility for a space outside of the lives which constrain them; the garden offers both a physical manifestation of this third space, which is neither the public, nor the private sphere, and acts as a metaphor for it also. While the silences may be agential, and even transformative when coupled with self-reflection, they also illustrate the limits of the forms of resistance which they constitute.

[25] W. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[26] The question of if there are silences which are forms of freedom, and not only forms of resistance, is an interesting one, hinging on whether it is possible to conceive of a silence which is entered not into out of strategy or necessity. To some extent this is a moot question, since it is impossible to separate individual motivations from their experiences and constraints, but it does remind us not to limit a desire for silence or privacy to being only a response to oppression.