

A Comparison of Women's Representation in Modern Iranian and Malaysian Women's Paintings

Abstract

Although women's participation in the visual arts has increased substantially over the past century, their historical exclusion from dominant art-historical narratives remains insufficiently explained, particularly through comparative analyses of non-Western contexts. This study addresses this gap by comparing the representation of women in selected modern paintings by Iranian and Malaysian women artists. It examines how shared cultural expectations concerning gender intersect with distinct religious, historical, and sociopolitical contexts to shape women's artistic visibility and self-representation. Employing a comparative art-historical approach and close visual analysis, the study explores themes, symbols, identities, and representations of women's social roles in works from both contexts. The findings indicate that Iranian and Malaysian women artists use painting to negotiate tensions between cultural tradition and modernity, while challenging passive or idealized representations of women. Despite these commonalities, Iranian works more frequently foreground questions of social restriction, identity, and political experience, whereas Malaysian works more visibly negotiate cultural plurality, religious identity, domesticity, and modernization. These differences demonstrate that women's artistic representation cannot be understood through a universal account of patriarchy or modernity. The study contributes to feminist and comparative art history by bringing Iranian and Malaysian women artists into closer dialogue and by showing how culturally specific artistic practices challenge the historical marginalization of women. It also highlights the importance of including women artists from diverse regions in art-historical curricula, exhibitions, and scholarly research.

Keywords

Women's Representation, Women artist, Malaysia artist, Iranian artist, Contemporary painting

Introduction

Representation is not a transparent reflection of reality. Within Stuart Hall's (1997) constructionist approach, meaning is produced through language, visual signs, cultural codes, and the social contexts in which they are interpreted. Images therefore do not merely reproduce women's lives; they participate in defining what femininity, beauty, sexuality, domesticity, and social identity are

understood to mean. Hall distinguishes between reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches to representation. While the reflective approach treats representation as a mirror of reality and the intentional approach emphasizes the meaning intended by the author, the constructionist approach understands meaning as generated through systems of representation. This study adopts the latter perspective because it enables paintings to be examined as culturally situated signifying practices rather than as neutral records of women's experiences.

Within feminist art history, this argument is associated particularly with feminist institutional critique, feminist social history, and critiques of the male gaze. Feminist scholars have challenged the assumption that the historical absence of "great women artists" resulted from women's lack of talent. Nochlin and Grant (2021), for example, demonstrates that women's artistic exclusion was shaped by unequal access to education, professional networks, patronage, exhibitions, and artistic institutions. Similarly, feminist analyses of visual culture have shown how women have often been positioned as objects of vision while men occupy the role of active subjects (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). Pollock (1988) further argues that gender is embedded in the spatial, institutional, and social organization of modern art. These perspectives do not imply that every male artist represents women in the same way or that all women artists produce emancipatory images. Rather, they provide analytical tools for examining how gendered power relations influence artistic production, viewing practices, and art-historical interpretation.

Historically, women's participation in art was constrained by social, political, religious, and economic institutions. Access to formal artistic training, life drawing, professional academies, independent income, public exhibition, and elite patronage was frequently restricted or unequally distributed. The formation of art-historical canons also privileged particular definitions of artistic genius, originality, and public achievement—definitions historically associated with male artists and institutions (Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1988). Religious patronage, court culture, colonial administration, capitalist markets, and state institutions further influenced which artists received visibility and which subjects were considered worthy of representation. Consequently, the limited number of women represented in canonical art history reflects institutional structures of selection and exclusion as much as the number of works women produced.

The increased visibility of women artists during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should therefore be understood as the result of changes in education, cultural institutions, feminist activism, art result of changes in education, cultural institutions, feminist activism, art markets, and In Iran, women participated in the development of modern art during the mid-twentieth century, although their contributions were often overshadowed by male-centered narratives of modernism. Following the 1979 Revolution, changing regulations concerning dress, public visibility, and gender relations created new conditions within which women artists negotiated identity and representation (Meskimmon, 1996). Contemporary Iranian artists such as Shirin Neshat, Parastou Forouhar, and Shadi Ghadirian have used the body, self-portraiture, text, domestic objects, and historical references to question imposed identities and competing local and global representations of Iranian women (Karami, 2024; Moridi, 2024).

In Malaysia, women artists' representations have developed within a different historical and cultural formation shaped by Malay and Islamic traditions, colonial legacies, postcolonial nation-building, ethnic plurality, and modernization. Malaysian women's paintings have addressed national identity, family, religion, cultural memory, domestic life, and women's changing social roles (Zakaria et al., 2022). Studies of Malaysian women's art indicate that these artists do not simply reproduce a fixed notion of Malay or Malaysian identity; instead, they negotiate identity through visual references to tradition, ethnicity, gender, and modernity. Nevertheless, the institutional history of Malaysian modern art has also been affected by the perception that the field was predominantly male, making women's artistic contributions vulnerable to marginalization (Zakaria & Legino, 2022).

Gender stereotypes provide an important bridge between these historical conditions and the analysis of visual representation (Gallego Morcillo et al., 2026). From a social-constructionist and feminist perspective, stereotypes are not natural descriptions of men and women. They are culturally produced classifications that associate bodies with particular identities, behaviors, virtues, and social roles (Butler, 2004). Repeated through family structures, education, religion, media, and artistic conventions, stereotypes can appear natural even though they are historically variable. They may reduce women to categories such as mother, wife, virgin, erotic object, or symbol of national tradition, thereby obscuring the diversity of women's experiences and agency.

Visual art has played an important role in circulating and contesting these conventions. In many traditions, women have been represented primarily through their physical appearance, sexual availability, domestic function, or symbolic value (Parker & Pollock, 2020). Feminist criticism has shown that such images may transform women into objects designed for visual consumption, particularly when the female body is fragmented, idealized, or presented for an implicitly masculine viewer (Berger, 1972). However, this pattern should not be treated as universal or historically uniform. The meanings of the female body vary according to genre, patronage, religious context, class, ethnicity, nationality, and the circumstances of artistic production.

Women artists have consequently contributed to the expansion of representational possibilities. Their work may portray women not only as objects of observation but also as subjects who remember, desire, resist, work, create, and interpret (Carson & Pajaczowska, 2016). This does not mean that women artists share one unified style or automatically produce feminist art. Rather, their artistic positions can enable alternative negotiations of the body, domesticity, sexuality, religion, memory, and public identity (Betterton, 2013). In Iranian contemporary art, for example, the female body may become a site where questions of visibility, veiling, state regulation, exile, and cultural stereotyping intersect (Karami, 2024). In Malaysian art, women artists may negotiate national and Malay-Muslim identities alongside family relations, cultural plurality, and modern social change (Zakaria & Legino, 2022). These differences complicate the notion that modernity produces a single “new identity” for women. Instead, modern representation may be understood as a plural and contested process through which women’s identities are reconfigured in relation to specific cultural histories.

Although existing studies have examined women’s representation in Iranian or Malaysian art separately, comparatively little research has placed modern Iranian and Malaysian women artists in a single analytical framework (Nourmohammadi, 2019). In particular, the ways in which artists from these two contexts use visual signs to negotiate gender stereotypes, religious-cultural expectations, national identity, and modernity have not been sufficiently compared. Iran and Malaysia provide meaningful comparative cases because both societies have significant Islamic cultural traditions and histories of modernization, yet they differ in political systems, colonial experiences, ethnic formations, state policies, and artistic trajectories (Chowdhury et al., 2024).

This combination of cultural proximity and historical difference makes comparison useful for identifying both shared gendered conventions and context-specific representational strategies.

Accordingly, this study examines how women are represented in selected modern paintings by Iranian and Malaysian women artists. It asks how these works reproduce, negotiate, or challenge established ideas about femininity, beauty, sexuality, domesticity, religious identity, and national belonging. The analysis uses Hall's constructionist theory of representation as its principal framework. It also draws on feminist art history and visual-culture scholarship to examine how meaning is produced through composition, bodily posture, clothing, facial expression, spatial arrangement, symbolism, and the relationship between viewer and represented subject.

The study employs comparative art-historical and semiotic analysis. Following Fiske (1990), paintings are examined through their representational codes and ideological meanings rather than through experimental research techniques. The analysis considers how visual elements operate at denotative and connotative levels and how they participate in broader discourses of gender and power. This approach recognizes that artists' intended meanings are important but that interpretation also depends on historically available cultural codes and the viewer's position. In Hall's constructionist perspective, meaning is neither wholly imposed by the artist nor simply discovered in the image; it is produced through the interaction of signs, social contexts, and interpretive practices.

Literature Review

Theory of Representation

Since representation has several applications in a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, art, and politics, it has acquired multiple interpretations. Representation also provides a means of uncovering the underlying meanings embedded within texts and visual images. The representation of women in artwork may reveal the viewpoint of the artist as well as the common perception of women in society.

Hall et al. (2024) argues that representation is constitutive of culture and occupies a central position within the cultural circuit. Hall argues that meaning is not inherent in objects or events but is produced through systems of representation.. He presents representation as one of the primary

mechanisms that meaning is produced and disseminated among people in a society. The process by which a social reality is represented, exhibited, and emerged is, therefore, what is meant by representation.

In his theory of representation, Hall et al. (2024) links meaning and language to culture. He identifies three interrelated dimensions—meaning, language, and culture—that shape representation. Through his analysis, Hall et al. (2024) reconceptualizes representation; an idea that, in his own words, is a complex and dynamic process. According to Hall et al. (2024), representation theories may be divided into three general categories in order to convey the link between representation, meaning, language, and culture.

1. A reflective approach: language serves as a mirror, reflecting reality. This approach is comparable to the Greek concept of “mimesis,” which describes art and language. They believe that Homer’s poems are exact replicas of epic events. This approach assumes meaning already exists in the object., and what is shown actually exists in the real world as the actual thing, person, concept, or event.
2. An intentional approach: the painter reveals anything he wants. meaning is imposed by the author. There is no reflection or reality, and everything is controlled by the painter’s desire.
3. Constructionist approach: things do not have inherent meaning; rather, we create meanings through mental and cultural presuppositions. This approach holds that the media are not like a mirror that reflects what is happening in society, nor are they fully oriented and the result of will; rather, this type of representation must be understood within social structures, and all the contexts and circumstances of the represented event must be noted.
4. it is important to keep in mind that even someone who creates something—like an artist—cannot be totally free from their social bonds, and in any case, the social climate that is in place pushes itself on them.

In conclusion, Hall et al.’s (2024) three categories—reflective, intentional, and constructionist—provide a comprehensive spectrum for understanding the mediation of meaning. Crucially, the constructionist perspective accounts for the fact that no creator can operate in total isolation from their social environment. Because the prevailing social climate exerts a continuous influence on the individual, the resulting representations are inherently products of their cultural context.

Therefore, any analysis of representation must acknowledge that the ‘authorial intent’ is always mediated by the social and structural conditions of the time.

Fiske (1990) advocates for the application of semiotic analysis—utilizing methods such as content and semantic differentiation analysis—to evaluate research hypotheses and derive generalized findings. According to Fiske (1990), seeking meaning within a text or image is not a search for intrinsic content, but rather an investigation into the relationships between signs, as ideas are established within a semiotic system through their reciprocal ties. Within this symbolic system, the most significant elements are binary oppositions, such as nature and culture, femininity and masculinity, and public and private. Accordingly, this study employs binary oppositions as a research model to analyze the representation of women in paintings by female artists from Iran and Malaysia. By comparing these two societies, which share specific cultural and civilizational characteristics, this research seeks to understand the perspectives of women artists and the evolving social position of women in both contexts over time.

Table 1. the stereotypical or non-stereotypical perception of modern female artists in Iran and Malaysia.

Non-stereotypical Representation of Women	Stereotypical Representation of Women
Older women	Young women
Non-idealized appearance/ unattractiveness	beauty
De-emphasis of sexualized body features	Sexualized representation of the female body
unfeminine attire	feminine attire
short hair	long hair
Obscured facial features	complete facial features
Partially concealed body	whole body parts
Women’s positions & actions	Women’s environment

Representation of women in modern paintings by Iranian and Malaysian first-generation female painters

Iran and Malaysia have undergone profound social and political transformations in the modern age. The Islamic revolution in Iran and Malaysia’s independence and emancipation from colonialism, which coincided with broader processes of globalization and modernization, brought about numerous political and social upheavals.

With the emergence of modernism, Iranian society experienced a number of important upheavals, such as the constitutional revolution and the subsequent change of government (Rahnema, 2023). Modernism also had a profound influence on Iranian contemporary painting. While some painters considered the cultural and social settings of their own cultural and social contexts to find fresh methods of artistic expression, others simply adopted Western methods and attempted to employ forms and colors in their works in the manner of Western artists.

Malaysia is recognized as a rapidly developing nation that has undergone significant shifts in its political, administrative, economic, and socio-cultural landscapes (Mazlan et al., 2022). However, the scarcity of qualified art critics remains a challenge, potentially stemming from specific Malaysian cultural and customary norms. Over the past several decades, the Malaysian art scene has experienced a profound encounter with Western styles; while some argue this has led to a marginalization of traditional heritage, others view it as a complex period of stylistic transition (Liang et al., 2023). Although the influence of Malay-Islamic traditions has faced new pressures from Western thought and contemporary technological shifts, many modern Malaysian artists have proactively sought to negotiate these influences. Rather than a total departure from tradition, these artists work to reinterpret Western aesthetics through the lens of local identity, striving to forge unique artistic voices that bridge their cultural heritage with global contemporary trends.

Since its founding in 1958, the National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia has been collecting works of visual art from all across the nation as the principal institution responsible for collecting and preserving Malaysian visual art for the collection of visual art works (Geng et al., 2023). This gallery offers a collection of historical documents on the evolution of the visual arts in Malaysia based on earlier research on the topic of art in Malaysia. Visual artists and their works are documented in Iran by a number of organisations, including the Institute of Visual Arts. In recent years, there have been a growing number of female painters, and most of them have devoted at least a portion of their works to the representation of women, as the analysis of the painting works of both Iranian and Malaysian communities reveals. The study corpus of this research includes paintings of women created by some contemporary female artists from Iran and Malaysia who are from the first and second generations of the last 50 years (after Malaysia's independence and the Iranian revolution) and are more interested in painting women. Through the aforementioned

organizations, it was able to access the information on the artworks and their artists and their artists needed for this research.

The selection of female artists for this study is predicated on the premise that their artistic identities were fundamentally shaped by the socio-political environments emerging after major national transformations: the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the post-independence era in Malaysia. Participants were chosen based on specific criteria: their formal education within established art institutions in their respective nations, the prevalence of women as the central subject matter in their oeuvre, and a demonstrated record of participation in international exhibitions. It is essential to note that while these artists explore gender-specific themes, they do not self-identify as feminist artists.

In the Iranian context, this study categorizes the ‘first generation’ of post-revolutionary painters as those who began their professional practice immediately following the 1979 Revolution, a period characterized by a shift in state-sanctioned aesthetics and the institutionalization of art education. Representative of this group are Farah Usuli, Shohreh Mehran, and Mitra Ebrahimi, whose collective works consistently center on the female experience.

Farah Usuli’s practice, in particular, explores the complexities of the female condition, frequently navigating the dichotomies of the wife and mother roles through a juxtaposition of aesthetic beauty and harsh socio-political realities (Husna et al., 2025). Over a forty-year career, Usuli has synthesized technique, subject matter, and narrative into a cohesive personal style. By integrating modern conceptual frameworks into traditional Persian miniature painting, she transcends the limitations of the medium. Notably, in her series *Fazilat-e Zakhmi* (The Wounded Virtue), Usuli critiques gender-based violence and systemic discrimination. Created over a three-year period, this collection reinterprets canonical Western compositions, utilizing what can be described as a hybrid aesthetic. Her work employs the postmodern strategy of ‘multiplicity’—the simultaneous layering of disparate narratives—alongside contemporary ‘fusion,’ wherein abstract geometric planes are reconciled with traditional figurative miniature settings. This synthesis effectively bridges Iranian and Western narratives, as well as the rational and the intuitive, creating a visual language that is both culturally specific and globally engaged.

A defining characteristic of Usuli's practice is her strategic appropriation of the Iranian miniature to facilitate a dialogue between conflicting paradigms: the historical constraints of traditional Persian aesthetics and the complex demands of contemporary global modernity. By incorporating traditional iconography—such as the motif of the bird, which carries deep cultural resonance—Usuli grounds her visual vocabulary in an explicitly Iranian identity, even while deconstructing that identity through modern lenses. Furthermore, her focus on violence against women transcends mere subject matter; it functions as a critical interrogation of systemic power structures. Rather than simply documenting acts of brutality, Usuli utilizes the medium to expose the dissonance between societal ideals of the 'ideal woman' and the stark, often painful, reality of female existence. Her work effectively captures the 'traces of existence'—not as a physical record, but as a meditation on the interplay between collective memory, the fragmentation of personal history, and the precariousness of the human experience within a rapidly shifting social reality.

The paintings of Shohreh Mehran capture the intricate textures of social reality, utilizing detailed objects and figures to document the traces of human experience—specifically the intersection of memory and the mundane rhythms of everyday life. As a member of the first generation of post-revolutionary painters—defined by her emergence into the professional sphere during the immediate post-1979 era and her formative training within the restructured Iranian art institutions—Mehran focuses her figurative practice on the female presence within her society.

This is exemplified in her *'School Girls'* collection, where she depicts students in uniform to capture a specific socio-cultural epoch. In these works, Mehran employs the element of wind not merely as a natural phenomenon, but as a symbolic force; the movement of wind against the women's clothing serves as a visual metaphor for the external socio-political pressures that buffet and shape the female form.

Central to her visual strategy is the systematic manipulation of the female visage. By intentionally omitting faces, or obscuring them with hands, clothing, or scarves, Mehran moves beyond simple portraiture into a complex study of representation. This technique functions as a powerful tool of semiotic negotiation: the obscured face acts as a signifier for gendered invisibility and the erasure of individual identity within a highly regulated social structure. In alignment with Hall's constructionist approach, these absent or hidden faces suggest that identity is not an inherent,

visible truth, but is instead something constantly being mediated, concealed, or reconstructed by the prevailing cultural and political gaze.

Like Shohreh Mehran, Mitra Ebrahimi adopts a figurative approach that consistently centers on the female form, enriching her compositions with cultural signifiers and elements borrowed from traditional Iranian miniatures—such as *gol-o-morgh* (flower and bird) patterns, intricate tile-like geometry, and decorative architectural frames (Pakbaz, 2000). Rather than functioning merely as decorative or compositional choices, Ebrahimi's deliberate use of strict frontal and profile perspectives carries profound symbolic weight in her representation of women. The frontal view establishes a direct, confrontational gaze with the viewer, asserting female agency and disrupting the passive, voyeuristic positioning historically assigned to women in visual culture (Mulvey, 1989). Conversely, the profile orientation evokes the stylized conventions of classical Persian painting, creating a contemplative distance that signals introspection and the tension between individual interiority and rigid socio-cultural frameworks (Grabar, 2000).

This visual strategy directly reflects Ebrahimi's understanding of Iran's modern art history. As she asserts in an interview, 'in our paintings, the presence was not allowed until sixty or seventy years ago, and they mostly focused on the depictions of nature, flowers, birds, and the art of carpets and tiles; so poses and figures in our paintings are still young'. By combining these deliberate orientations with historical symbols, Ebrahimi highlights the emergent, evolving vocabulary of female embodiment within a visual tradition that historically displaced human presence onto decorative motifs.

Ebrahimi is known for constructing symbolic relationships; She creates symbolic relationships between objects and human beings, among objects themselves, and between humans and poetry, mythology, and legends.. Her works are filled with symbolic motifs associated with femininity.; for example, a tree often signifies a woman and a horse refers to a man. In the collection of "Women and Knots" she represented ordinary women's faces among the knots. In several works, the women's faces are partially concealed or intentionally obscured.

While Malaysian female painters have consistently engaged with the female figure, earlier cohorts often operated within prevailing cultural scripts that framed women primarily through maternal archetypes, domestic harmony, and idealized ethnic signifiers. Consequently, locating artists from

the early post-independence era who explicitly departed from these dominant patriarchal narratives—and from the conservative visual conventions inherited from colonial and academic painting traditions—presents a distinct historical challenge. Rather than mounting an overt, radical break from conventional gender roles, many first- and early second-generation Malaysian women artists negotiated female identity subtly from within established socio-cultural and domestic frameworks. Only in more recent decades have contemporary artists systematically disrupted these boundaries by challenging both the male gaze and the state-sanctioned idealization of female domesticity.

As a pivotal figure among the first generation of post-independence (*Merdeka*) Malaysian painters, Datin Halimah Mohd Said constructs a distinctive visual vocabulary that interrogates female subjectivity within a pluralistic society. Rather than offering purely decorative portraits, her work actively negotiates the intersections of gender, ethnic pluralism, and religious identity.

Within this study's analytical framework—grounded in Stuart Hall's theory of representation and signifying practices—Saied's work is characterized by two key semiotic strategies:

1. **Pluralistic Inclusivity vs. Monolithic Ideology:** By intentionally depicting women both with and without the *tudung* (hijab), often accompanied by unbound, flowing hair across diverse settings, Saied codes the female body as a dynamic site of multicultural coexistence. In contrast to monolithic religious representations, her works visualize the fluid negotiation of modern Malaysian womanhood amid competing secular and Islamic resurgence (*dakwah*) discourses.
2. **Facial Occlusion and Universalizing Agency:** In many of her compositions, Saied deliberately obscures, partially conceals, or omits individual facial features. Far from rendering women passive, this selective facelessness functions as an allegorical device: by withholding individualized portraiture, she resists the voyeuristic male gaze and elevates the female figure into a collective, universal signifier for Malaysian women's shared, yet contested, socio-cultural realities.

Consequently, Saied's visual practice contributes crucially to our comparative framework by demonstrating how early Malaysian modernists utilized formal ambiguity and bodily semiotics to

articulate female agency without resorting to Western-centric or purely confrontational modes of resistance.

Noor Mahnun Mohamed is distinguished by an evocative, metaphorical visual language that critically interrogates female subjectivity and social conformity. In her compositions, Mohamed utilizes distinct visual strategies: she either isolates a solitary female figure within dense domestic spaces and symbolic still lifes, or arranges multiple female figures in structured tableaux to examine the tensions between collective gender expectations and individualized selfhood. In works featuring groups of women, Mohamed explores the dialectic between institutionalized uniformity and individual resistance. A prominent example is *Picture of You, Picture of Me*, in which three women are clad in identical garments yet distinguished by individual hairstyles. Stripped of conventional markers of commodified femininity—such as smiles, decorative accessories, or cosmetics—the figures confront the viewer with piercing, emotionally neutral gazes.

Artistically, this compositional choice carries profound semiotic significance: by imposing identical attire, Mohamed highlights the societal pressure toward female conformity, while the nuanced differences in posture and styling signal subtle assertions of individual agency. Furthermore, the figures' unsmiling, direct gazes actively refuse the patriarchal demand for female passivity and decorative pleasantness, disrupting the voyeuristic pleasure of the traditional male gaze. Throughout her broader oeuvre, Mohamed repeatedly deploys this aesthetic of emotional restraint and formal tension, transforming the canvas from a site of passive female display into a critical space for interrogating modern female alienation, solidarity, and autonomy.

Janiz Chan consistently positions female subjectivity at the center of her visual practice. In her celebrated series *Rhythm of Life*, she depicts youthful female figures constructed through culturally established signifiers of conventional femininity (Bray, 2024). Features such as long, flowing hair and soft, stylized garments function not merely as descriptive physical traits, but as semiotic codes that evoke classical cultural ideals of grace, modesty, and decorative beauty. By rendering these markers with delicate aesthetic polish, Chan engages directly with the visual tropes historically used to construct idealized female identity in East and Southeast Asian visual culture.

However, Chan complicates this traditional iconography by juxtaposing these figures with natural motifs—specifically birds and butterflies—and by consistently portraying the women with averted gazes. Symbolically, butterflies and birds carry dual signifying resonance: historically emblematic of transformation, delicate beauty, and metamorphosis, they also operate as potent visual metaphors for freedom, spiritual transcendence, and psychological flight. Coupled with the figures' refusal to engage in direct eye contact with the viewer, this natural imagery disrupts the potential objectification of the female form. The averted gaze rejects the voyeuristic gaze of the external spectator, directing attention instead toward the subject's interiority and emotional reverie. Consequently, Chan's inclusion of fluttering winged creatures does not serve a purely decorative purpose; rather, it articulates an unspoken desire for emancipation and autonomy, subtly contrasting the physical stillness and domestic containment of the female figure with the dynamic, unbound motion of the natural world.

Representation of Women in Contemporary Paintings by Second-Generation Iranian and Malaysian Female Artists

Among the second-generation female painters who emerged after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Simin Keramati, Afareen Sajedi, and Sarah Jafari have placed women at the center of their artistic practices. Their works do not merely include female figures; they portray women as subjects whose bodies, identities, and lived experiences reveal the tensions between personal agency and the social, cultural, and political structures that shape gendered life in contemporary Iran. This focus is significant to the present study because it demonstrates how representation functions as a constructionist process: through visual choices such as posture, facial expression, bodily presence, and symbolic context, these artists actively construct and negotiate meanings of femininity rather than simply reproducing an already established image of women. Accordingly, their paintings provide an important basis for examining how contemporary Iranian art challenges, reworks, or reinforces dominant representations of female identity after the Revolution.

Simin Keramati is a multidisciplinary artist who uses painting, drawing, video art, and new media to explore sociopolitical themes (Noori Shirazi, 2023). She frequently represents women in her works. In her "Identity" painting series, Karamati has represented women sometimes in combination with symbols of nature, without a face and even without a head in a number of the pieces in this collection.

Afareen Sajedi is a female painter of the second generation who emerged in Iran after the revolution, and her paintings capture the loneliness and bewilderment of modern individuals, and women constitute the central subject of most of her paintings. Sajedi fashions colorful clown faces, sometimes utilizing motifs from Western religious art or drawing inspiration from Japanese theater, but always with an eye toward the modern era. Sajedi frequently represents women with their faces covered with masks or spectacles, pierced with forks and scissors, or merged with animal forms.

Although Sarah Jafari is a contemporary artist, her work draws heavily on traditional artistic elements. Sarah Jafari represents women in the majority of her works by fusing tradition with modernity; Women appear either in the middle ground or in the background of the composition. However, when they are in the foreground, they are shown as small-scale figures, and when they are in the background, they are partially depicted with frequently obscured sections of their faces.

Yau Bee Ling is one of the second-generation Malaysian artists of the post-independence period, and she pays much attention to the representation of women in her works. She deals with societal themes, including family and tradition in her works, and she focuses on the complicated roles that women play in the modern world. Her abstract paintings represent a significant turning point in her creative career. She uses a metaphorical approach in these works to explore life and womanhood.

Bee Ling's works that represent women are divided into two groups: women in recent post-modern paintings that represent women in close association with nature, and women in abstract paintings that show them alone, with family, or in society. The women in Bee Ling's abstract paintings, created before 2000, are defined in relation to their surroundings yet do not seem to be any different from the real women in society. They have fully visible faces with feminine traits like long hair and wear typical women's clothing like skirts. Even if they have feminine characteristics, the women, represented after 2000, are portrayed in a fragmented postmodern style. Tan Gaik Hoon is a Malaysian painter a second-generation Malaysian artist of the post-independence period, and the majority of her works represent women realistically. She places considerable emphasis onto the local society, customs, mythology, and symbols in her works. In Tan's "Embroidery" painting, a woman is represented sitting immersed in her embroidery work while wearing pink traditional

attire. The tea set, represented on the table next to her, indicates that embroidery is done as a pleasure while drinking tea. This picture, which illustrates an traditional domestic practice, also features wooden chairs and other household furnishings.

Yee I-Lann, a prominent second-generation post-independence Malaysian artist, utilizes digital photomontage as a deliberate site of post-colonial deconstruction (Antoinette, 2014). Rather than treating historical memory and indigenous motifs as static thematic elements, I-Lann employs them as active instruments to disrupt the patriarchal and colonial narratives embedded in historical visual archives. Through the technique of photomontage, she reconfigures the representation of women by layering archival imagery with motifs from Borneo's indigenous civilizations. This strategy does not merely 'add' culture to the portrait; it effectively rewrites the female subject's historical placement. By juxtaposing indigenous symbols against colonial-era structures, she grounds the female figure in a specific, non-Western landscape, forcing the viewer to confront the woman not as a passive recipient of history, but as an active agent of cultural memory and sovereignty. In this sense, the indigenous motifs serve as semiotic anchors that reclaim the female identity from the homogenized, 'exoticized' representations typical of colonial archives, successfully centering the indigenous woman's subjectivity within the shifting narratives of contemporary Malaysia.

In Yee I-Lann's work, female representation operates at the intersection of indigenous myth and contemporary cultural reinterpretation (Nor & Abdullah, 2017). Her seminal piece *Huminodun* centers on the Kadazan-Dusun myth of the titular maiden who sacrificed her life to deliver her people from famine, her body miraculously transforming into the staple crop of padi (rice/wheat). Visually, Yee constructs a figure characterized by pregnancy and flowing hair that dissolves into stalks of grain, conflating the female body with the regenerative forces of nature.

This visual fusion of feminine traits with natural elements operates ambivalently. On one hand, it risks reinforcing the classical essentialist trope that historically binds womanhood to passive fertility, self-sacrifice, and organic maternal duty. On the other hand, within the context of indigenous reclamation, this synthesis critically challenges patriarchal colonial histories by re-centering female agency and bodily sacrifice as the foundational, active source of communal survival, culture, and collective sovereignty.

Through Stuart Hall's constructionist approach to representation, Yee's work does not merely mirror a static historical myth; rather, it actively constructs new cultural meaning by deploying cultural codes and indigenous signifiers to speak to modern post-colonial realities. Rather than an essentialist relic, the mythic female body becomes a signifying practice through which contemporary identity, ecology, and resistance are mediated.

This creative strategy closely parallels visual practices observed among contemporary Iranian female artists, such as Farah Usuli and Mitra Ebrahimi. Much like Yee I-Lann's invocation of indigenous folklore, Iranian painters frequently integrate female figures with traditional botanical and mythical motifs—most notably the *gol-o-morgh* (flower and bird) patterns and allegories from Persian classical literature. In both contexts, female artists do not simply replicate ancestral folklore; they strategically reconstruct mythological and natural tropes within the constructionist framework, transforming inherited cultural codes from passive decorative symbols into vital, contemporary commentaries on female resilience, sacrifice, and socio-political agency.

Conclusion

Artistic styles of the first and second generations of painters following the Iranian revolution, as well as the first and second generations of painters after Malaysia's independence may be used to further explain the differences between their respective bodies of work. However, there have also been a few slight variations among them.

Examining the works of contemporary female painters in Iran and Malaysia, who have represented women in their works, shows that women painters contemporary female artists do not emphasize the gendered representation of women, and they rarely attempt to show the beauty and youth of women, although there is no evidence of the representation of ugly women in these works. In the bulk of their works, especially those created by the second generation artists from both target populations, they have made an effort to avoid emphasizing the physical beauty of women. The gendered appearance of facial features like the lips and eyes is less obvious in these paintings, and the bulk of the women are represented with piercing, exhausted, or lifeless looks.

A comparative analysis across generations reveals a notable divergence in how the female body is materialized on canvas: while Malaysian artists frequently depict the female body in its entirety,

Iranian painters across both the first and second generations systematically obscure, fragment, or omit facial and bodily features. This disparity is rooted in the distinct socio-political and legal structures governing bodily visibility in each society.

In post-1979 Iran, the female body became a central ideological site for state identity and moral discourse, institutionalized through mandatory veiling laws, strict public modesty codes, and state censorship of visual arts that historically banned explicit figuration. Consequently, Iranian female artists (such as Shohreh Mehran and Mitra Ebrahimi) developed a coded visual vocabulary. In their work, the occlusion of the face or the fragmentation of the body is not mere omission; it functions as a critical semiotic strategy that reflects the lived experience of bodily surveillance, gendered erasure, and public invisibility, while simultaneously serving as a subtle critique of systemic containment.

Conversely, in post-independence Malaysia, the socio-cultural regulation of the female body operates primarily through multi-ethnic negotiation, Islamic resurgence (*dakwah*), and colonial visual legacies, rather than a monolithic, state-enforced visual prohibition on figuration. Because Malaysian artists navigate a pluralistic public sphere—negotiating Malay-Muslim, Chinese, and Indian cultural frameworks alongside rapid modernization—their critique of patriarchy and post-colonial identity is often articulated through the overt presence, cultural hybridity, and re-signification of the embodied subject rather than its visual concealment. Thus, while both cohorts challenge patriarchal hegemony, their bodily aesthetics reflect different institutional realities: Iranian artists mobilize absence and occlusion to critique institutionalized invisibility, whereas Malaysian artists deploy the fully visible body to negotiate cultural pluralism and post-colonial agency.

A comparative examination of post-conflict artistic production reveals marked differences in thematic orientation: while post-1979 Iranian female painters explicitly register systemic violence, socio-political unrest, and the coerciveness of mandatory dress codes, post-independence Malaysian artists tend to frame female subjects within relational, domestic, and community-oriented matrices. This contrast stems from the fundamentally divergent historical traumas and state-building ideologies of the two nations. In Iran, the first and second generations of painters were shaped by the abrupt structural rupture of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, followed immediately

by eight years of the devastating Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) and the strict codification of female bodily conduct under state law. In this environment, the female body became the primary ideological battleground of the state. Consequently, Iranian artists (such as Farah Usuli and Shohreh Mehran) deploy fragmented compositions, violent visual allegories, and motifs of confinement as an urgent aesthetic response to collective trauma, state surveillance, and the sudden loss of individual bodily autonomy.

Conversely, post-independence Malaysia (*post-Merdeka*, 1957 onward) pursued modernization, social stability, and inter-ethnic nation-building following British colonial rule. Within the official developmental discourse, female identity was largely mobilized around notions of family harmony, maternal guardianship, and cultural preservation as pillars of the emerging modern nation. Early generations of Malaysian female artists often engaged with domestic environments (such as kitchens and family homes) and conventional maternal roles not to reproduce passivity, but to negotiate female agency within the parameters of cultural pluralism, the *dakwah* (Islamic resurgence) movement, and rapid capitalist modernization. Thus, while Iranian artists mobilize themes of explicit disruption and violence to resist state-imposed bodily control, Malaysian artists frequently operate within domestic and relational spaces to subtly interrogate the gendered expectations of post-colonial nation-building."

Rather than adhering to classical compositional harmony, contemporary female painters from Iran and Malaysia deploy visual asymmetry and formal imbalance as deliberate counter-hegemonic devices. In conventional visual culture and academic portraiture, symmetrical balance and harmonious proportions have historically functioned to construct an idealized, docile, and decorative female archetype—one that is static, commodified, and visually contained for the viewer's consumption.

By intentionally disrupting structural symmetry—through off-center figuration, destabilized focal planes, and fractured spatial boundaries—these artists symbolically externalize the psychic and socio-political tensions inherent to modern female existence. In this context, asymmetry operates as a semiotic refusal: it rejects the patriarchal demand for effortless, polished femininity, visually translating lived contradictions, psychological dislocation, and the rupture of rigid cultural scripts. Thus, while Iranian and Malaysian artists arrive at these compositional strategies through distinct

socio-political trajectories, both deploy formal disequilibrium not as a mere stylistic idiosyncrasy, but as a shared visual strategy to dismantle monolithic stereotypes and assert the complex, fragmented agency of contemporary women.

In these paintings, women are visually framed through an interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary lived experience. While the artists incorporate natural symbols (such as trees and birds), folklore, and traditional garments that signify collective memory and cultural identity, they juxtapose these elements with tangible interior signifiers—such as desks, books, domestic furnishings, and mundane spatial boundaries. Rather than functioning as a direct contradiction to the presence of mythological motifs (such as those seen in Yee I-Lann's work), this spatial juxtaposition operates as a deliberate demythologizing strategy. By grounding mythical archetypes and folkloric allegories within ordinary domestic environments, these painters do not eliminate myth entirely; rather, they strip it of its passive, romanticized idealization. Consequently, they reconstruct the female subject: the woman is no longer an abstract, untouchable emblem of folklore, but an active, contemporary agent navigating the everyday material realities of modern life.

The findings of this research show that modern Malaysian female artists are in the process of redefining women's identity, even though naturalistic, poetic, mythical, and ornamental representations are more prevalent in their works. This research also confirms that painting is an arena for facing the subjectivity of women and female artists work to dismantle the stereotyped and aesthetic aspects in the society. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the artistic production of contemporary female artists in Iran and Malaysia functions as a complex site of negotiation between ingrained social structures and individual agency. While these artists do not produce art in a vacuum—often navigating the psychological weight of internalized gender stereotypes and societal norms—they do not merely replicate these realities. Instead, as Hall's theory of representation suggests, they engage in a process of 'meaning-making' that challenges the reductive, often patriarchal, signifiers traditionally used to define femininity in their respective cultures.

The comparative findings of this research reveal a significant convergence: despite the distinct religious, political, and historical trajectories of Iran and Malaysia, female artists in both nations

utilize similar semiotic strategies to recontextualize the female body. Whether through the manipulation of traditional motifs or the subversion of domestic spaces, these artists transform the 'represented woman' from a passive object of cultural tradition into an active subject of social inquiry. The similarities observed between these two disparate societies suggest that the struggle for female visibility is a shared phenomenon in post-colonial and post-revolutionary Asian contexts, mediated by common pressures of tradition and modernity. Ultimately, this study offers a novel theoretical contribution to the scholarship on contemporary Asian art by providing a comparative framework that transcends national boundaries. By bridging the specificities of Iranian and Malaysian visual cultures, this research illuminates how women artists employ representation not as a mirror of a fixed reality, but as a transformative tool to negotiate, resist, and redefine their identities within the shifting social landscapes of the 21st century.

References

- Antoinette, M. (2014). Contemporary 'Southeast Asian' Art: Regional Interventions. *Cross/Cultures*, 178, 3–77.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books.
- Betterton, R. (2013). *An intimate distance: Women, artists and the body*. Routledge.
- Bray, A. (2024). *Dis... Miss Gender?* MIT Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender* (Vol. 9). routledge New York.
- Carson, F., & Pajaczkowska, C. (2016). *Feminist visual culture*. Routledge.
- Chowdhury, J. S., Vadevelu, K., Jamir Singh, P. S., Mohd Saad, M. R., & Hatta, Z. A. (2024). *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh*. Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74300-9>
- Fiske, J. (1990). *Television Culture*. Methuen.
- Gallego Morcillo, C., Gutiérrez Almazor, M., & Moreno Cano, A. (2026). Gender stereotypes in documentary cinema: A comparative analysis of women's representation in historical conflicts. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-07-2025-0437>
- Geng, W., Wan Mohamad Daud, W. S. A., & Tahir, A. (2023). The influence of Cultural Congress on the preferences of the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. *Ideology Journal*, 8(2), 90–103.

- Grabar, O. (2000). *Mostly miniatures: An Introduction to Persian painting*. Princeton University Press. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1970586434856825242>
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 2(3), 13–74.
- Hall, S., Evans, J., & Nixon, S. (2024). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Husna, F. M., Wahyuni, I., & Masuwd, M. (2025). Gender construction in the classical fiqh book *Masāil al-Nisā'*: Analysis from Judith Butler's perspective. *An-Nisa' Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(2), 133–146.
- Karami, P. (2024). Redefining Women's Bodies from the Perspective of Iranian Contemporary Female Artists. *Arts*, 13(6), 167. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/13/6/167>
- Liang, B., Hashim, H., & Ahmad, A. L. (2023). The dynamic role of visual arts in Malaysian Chinese films: A study of cultural representation and knowledge transfer within film culture. *Arts Educa*, 37.
- Mazlan, M., Ismail, N. A., Yusof, M. J. M., & Aziz, F. A. (2022). The Dilution of Peri-Urban Socio-Cultural Identity: An Insight into Policies and Strategies in Malaysia and the European Commission. In H. Abdalla, H. Rodrigues, V. Gahlot, M. Salah Uddin, & T. Fukuda (Eds.), *Resilient and Responsible Smart Cities* (pp. 15–30). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86499-6_2
- Meskimmon, M. (1996). *The art of reflection: Women artists' self-portraiture in the twentieth century*. Columbia University Press.
- Moridi, M. R. (2024). *How Women Artists Shift Visual Culture in Iran: An Interview with Professor Mohammad Reza Moridi*. Centre for Feminist Research, York University.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (pp. 14–26). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3
- Nochlin, L., & Grant, C. (2021). *Why have there been no great women artists?* Thames & Hudson.
- Noori Shirazi, S. (2023). *Negotiating Identities: Embodied Experience as Resistance to the Orientalist Gaze in the Artworks of Three Contemporary Women Artists from Iran*.
- Nor, S. F. M., & Abdullah, S. (2017). Through the western eyes: Analysing the strategy of subversion in Yee I-Lann's *Picturing Power* (2013) photomontages. *Jati-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22(1), 204–219.
- Nourmohammadi, N. (2019). *Revitalising the representation of Iranian women: A critical and creative exploration of gendered identity in the contemporary art of Iran*. [PhD Thesis]. The University of Waikato.

- Pakbaz, R. (2000). Encyclopedia of art [Dayerat-ol-ma'aref-e honar]. Farhang-e Mo'aser. In *Farhang-e Mo'aser*.
- Parker, R., & Pollock, G. (2020). *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rahnema, A. (2023). *The Political History of Modern Iran: Revolution, Reaction and Transformation, 1905 to the Present*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Zakaria, M. S., & Legino, R. (2022). Influences of the Western Abstract Art on the Visual Art Movement in Malaysia. *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, 7(SI9), 229–232.