

A POETIC DEFIANCE: THE BIRTH OF WOMEN'S POETRY IN IRAN

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of “motherhood” in the works of renowned Iranian poet Parvin E’tesami (1907-1941). E’tesami’s poetry bequeaths inspiration to Iranian women who search and have searched for the possibilities of revealing their true selves in the face of oppressive cultural practices and political machinations. E’tesami was one of the first poets in the recent history of Iran to advocate an equal and empowered place for women. Through the concept of “motherhood,” she probed female identity, emphasizing and endorsing women’s fostering position, maternal instincts and unique nurturing capabilities. E’tesami expanded the consciousness of a vast number of Iranians by illuminating the roles of women in the political, social and religious spheres. She depicted the female essence through biology and natural characteristics, but at the same time her verse embraced the seemingly contrasting idea of the social construction of women. The notion of “motherhood” in E’tesami’s poems offers Iranian women the foundation for a common voice or a collective goal, but also stimulates the inward—individualized—revitalization of the autonomous self for each reader based on personal beliefs and aspirations. By reconstructing the normative practices of motherhood, E’tesami’s poems generate awareness that helps redraw female consciousness and thereby initiate agency, helping women become agents of resistance who challenge the dominating powers. E’tesami produced a poetic language that is personal and realistic, juxtaposing the uproar of an artist with the anguish of Iranian women. This humanist and feminist approach to poetry introduces readers to liberal themes that challenge social and religious ideals through direct and specific examples of mothers’/women’s positions in Iran.

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is rooted in my personal experiences of the summer of 2009. At that time, just after Iran's controversial presidential election that returned Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power for a second term, an unforgettable period of radicalism began. The growing boldness of the protestors provoked the brutal practices of the theocratic Islamic Republic—beating, torturing and killing—that undermined the democratic advances (or at least, the confident new vision of a viable and free Islamic nation-state) gained in the early days following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After witnessing the cruel crackdown by the Iranian authorities that summer, I returned to the University of Tehran, where I noticed that on the university campus liberal ideas and political opposition were being expressed in new ways. Poetic verse had become one voice of the oppressed, written on blackboards, “texted” through students’ mobile phones, tagged on Facebook pages, written on weblogs, and recited in small gatherings. I noticed a strong reliance on poetry, especially among the female students. Since Iranian women, especially the younger generations, have only inadequate and dangerous avenues for expressing themselves, poetry had become one of the more accessible and vital tools of political and social discourse. Poetry was one of the few possible means through which female students were able to express themselves with relative safety. This blossoming reliance on women’s poetry raises the question of how exactly verse can become a political and social instrument for liberation. How can it spread among the public and expand women’s awareness, and how does it unify and strengthen the role of women in Iran?

The use of poetry by the students in the summer of 2009 demonstrated two intertwined aspects that are examined in this thesis. Most poems used by the students for political activism predated the students, at times by a hundred years, illustrating the transcendent nature of women’s poetry in Iran. My thesis examines one of the pioneer female poets of Iran, Parvin

E'tesami (1907-1941), whose verse was used frequently by the students during the post-presidential elections period. Iranian history has witnessed episodic actions by other women's rights advocates, such as the publication of the periodicals *Danesh* (knowledge) in 1910, *Zaban Zanan* (women's voice) beginning in 1919, and another outspoken magazine, *Nameh-ye Banovan* (women's letters) in 1920. E'tesami's poems, however, have been among the most influential writings in terms of generating self-awareness among women who came to challenge patriarchal institutions.

For E'tesami, a powerful transformative element in her poetic discourse was the empowerment of women to become active instigators of social change rather than just creators of art (a reflection of corresponding developments in Iranian society). And the female readers of E'tesami and other female poets who followed in her steps, developed their "female" identity into active subjects of the poems rather than mere contemplators of aesthetic works, as they had been previously in relation to male poets. For E'tesami, poetry was a humanistic approach to depict the characteristics of Iranian women. It also offered a voice to unveil the struggles for equality faced by women. In short, E'tesami rewrote the identity of Iranian women through verse, replacing the traditional selfless depiction with a poetic rendering of a disposition of affection and devotion that was vital and fundamental to women's private and public spheres.

E'tesami produced a language that was particularly personal and more realistic than the romantic and symbolic approach of the traditional forms (Kianoush 1996). E'tesami's verse began a female tradition of poetry that juxtaposes the outcries of the creative artist and the desires and frustrations of Iranian women. She said in an interview that "to be a poet is to be human" (Yarshater 1988:359). The earthly or human way of seeing the world differs drastically from traditional poetry's supernatural, spiritual and moralistic viewpoints. More importantly,

poetry for E'tesami was a mirror image of her personal desires and needs; for her, verse became a reflection that imparted a woman's perspective, representing the veiled voice of women commenting on the larger Iranian society. While at its core E'tesami's poetry remained romantic and traditional, she introduces the reader to liberal or even radical themes that challenge social and religious ideals through direct and specific examples of mothers'/women's positions in Iran, and also through allegory, symbolic language and muffled ambiguity.

For centuries, Iranian women have been harshly deprived of personal and social freedom by strict cultural restraints imposed by a powerfully patriarchal public sphere and ubiquitous, dogmatic religious institutions. Poetry, therefore, can be a window into the social lives and the daily practices of Iranian women. In fact, verse may be one of the best possible ways of examining Iranian women's aspirations, since historically many socio-cultural, political and religious restrictions have been placed on them, limiting their expression and thwarting their desires. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the methodology of this thesis lacks an in-depth ethnographic examination of this subject; the absence of detailed interviews, a fundamental part of any anthropological research, is noticeable throughout the document. I was unable to provide any direct perspective from today's Iranian women because of the Iranian government's restrictions on permits for conducting social science research inside Iran. The presence of these government restrictions in itself demonstrates the importance of female poetry. The nervousness of the authorities about Iranian women's desire to be liberated, as well as the conservative orthodoxy of pockets of hostile men within the fabric of the society who base their thinking on masculine socio-religious dogmas, hinder the progress of Iranian women as they strive to be liberated from the patriarchal web of male/state domination.

As a result of the lack of access to female interviewees, my thesis centers around numerous Western theoretical frameworks uncovered through library research. While my thesis is situated upon Western concepts of feminism, like that of American philosopher Judith Butler, it would have been richer, and perhaps more appropriate, to have used more Iranian feminist thinkers, but there is little material of this sort available. This lack of home-grown Iranian scholarship, and the corollary immediacy of generating and exploring grassroots feminist theories in Iran, makes the subject of my thesis that much more meaningful. I hope this thesis may help expose this lack and the need to develop concrete and advanced Islamic feminist theories in Iran. At the same time, my goal is for the thesis to shed light—both in Iran, and abroad—upon the systematic oppression that Iranian women endure, and the sacrifices they must make when they speak out against this tragic situation.

Freedom of speech through artistic expression, including in the work of E'tesami, has been challenged regularly in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Exploring the power of poetry and its cultivation through the perceptions of Iranian women will help uncover how the roots of women's resistance have been nourished by cultural interaction and dialogue via a literary movement. My goal is to highlight how marginalized groups, such as Iranian women, in the quest to gain their rights, can harness the power of poetry. This examination of female poetry in Iran as a vehicle for voicing women's desires and resisting male hegemony is a new topic of scholarly research in Iran. No scholar has discussed female poetry in Iran in relation to feminist thinking, exploring how verse can become a mechanism that generates women's self-determination, which in turn results in the self-consciousness that allows women to rebuild their identities according to newly formed beliefs and understanding. Women's poetry gives voice to women's desires, and draws away the veil from their autonomous selves.

This thesis is a modest first step on the topic of verse and women's freedom little examined by anthropologists. I witnessed the significance of verse in 2009, as it revitalized young university students who wanted to voice women's aspirations to take control of liberating themselves from the web of male domination and state domination in Iran. While realizing that my research alone will not change the socio-political or cultural circumstances facing women in Iran, I have learned from the women protesting during the 2009 post-election rallies that their defiance has centered on the idea that "each one of us [women and men] can make a difference when unified." By keeping their slogan in mind, I hope that my thesis can be a small, yet important, step in creating awareness of the veiled voices of women in Iran, and can illustrate the vital role verse has played in representing women's aspirations, unfolding into a poetic discourse that depicts the struggles in today's Iran, and the hopes for a prosperous future.

My thesis research has benefited greatly from my association with the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Professor Patrick Moore's expertise in linguistic and oral anthropology has assisted invaluablely in exploring women's trauma, suffering and distress as manifested through poetry. Professor Moore's knowledge of language and its relation to authority, social change, identity and representation has assisted me in examining the historical and contemporary practices of empowering women's voices through verse in Iran. Moreover, Professor Alexia Bloch's expertise in exploring relevant feminist issues within the ethnographic region in question has been an immense benefit to my thesis. Professor Bloch's interest in women and gender relations, the politics of knowledge and representation, and gender and transnationalism has been critical in guiding the development of a comprehensive analytical and historical framework of Iranian women and relevant issues. I am also grateful to Professor

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Dedication

*To Parvin,
and all who have dedicated their lives to freedom for women.*

A POETIC DEFIANCE: THE BIRTH OF WOMEN'S POETRY IN IRAN

Iranian women's quest for liberation evolved rapidly throughout their participation in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), during which they "began to forge a more explicit political and social identity," and when the "prospect of the establishment of a constitutional government and the rule of law generated high hopes for social change that would also provide women with a decent, more humane and equitable life" (Moghissi 1994:29). The process of national struggle had another deeply meaningful impact, as it provided a context in which "many women transformed their self-image and consciousness of their place in Iranian society. Women's activism for liberating the country shifted to struggles for liberating themselves" (Najmabadi 2000:31). It was at this juncture of Iranian history that female literature, specifically poetry, became an important vehicle for women's struggle for freedom (Shafi'i Kadkani 2007). Poetry's ability to convey socio-political double entendres with non-definitive interpretations provided a veil of security for women's aspirations for change. Poetry was largely safe from condemnation, because for centuries it had been considered expressive of morality, central to ideas of wisdom and Islamic philosophy, and closely linked to accepted ways of being.

One of the first figures of the burgeoning literary movement and its embrace of women's issues was the influential and renowned Iranian poet Parvin E'tesami (1907-1941), who utilized the culturally meaningful nature of poetry to generate wide-reaching change in women's consciousness, and to challenge patriarchal traditions. E'tesami was born in the northwestern city of Tabriz, into an educated middle-class family. Her father, Mirza Yussef E'tesami (1874-1938), was an author, and translator of several books from English into Farsi. E'tesami's mother, Akhtar-i Footohi (1887-1973), was an educated housewife, who devoted her life to her family. E'tesami's formative years were spent in Tehran, where her family had relocated. She received

her formal education attending the American high school for girls, Iran Bethel, in Tehran. There, she learned English and became familiar with the writings of numerous Western intellectuals. After graduating in 1924 from Iran Bethel, she stayed on as an instructor for a short period of time.

The most disappointing event of E'tesami's life—according to herself—is her marriage in 1934 to a cousin of her father, Fazlolah-i Homayon-Fal (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). E'tesami wrote that her husband “was a police officer, lacking any understanding for the world I lived in...even though I loved him at first sight, we lived in two separate worlds” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:xii). Her marriage lasted only two and a half months. While E'tesami experienced loneliness and faced the “taboos” of being a divorcée in Iran's religious and masculine culture, her father was a constant source of inspiration. He was her teacher and mentor in life, and recognized his daughter's talent from an early age. He was instrumental in teaching her the Arabic language, and also acquainting her with Persian literature. E'tesami's father associated with renowned poets of his time, who “gathered for weekly meetings of their literary circles every Monday in his house” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:xi). E'tesami participated eagerly in these gatherings. Mohammad Hossein Behjat-Tabrizi,¹ a well-known Iranian poet, recalled that “Parvin used to come from school, drop her veil, and then greet us and join the gatherings” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:xii). This literary circle offered E'tesami exposure to the works and thought of many influential poets and intellectuals of her time.

E'tesami's father founded a literary magazine, called *Bahar* (spring), which only had two sets of annual publications (1910 & 1920-21) (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). During the second

¹ Mohammad Hossein Behjat-Tabrizi (1906-1988) was a renowned Iranian poet of Azeri origin, who wrote in Farsi and also Turkish language. He is often referred to by his pen name, “Shahriar.”

set of publication of *Bahar*, E'tesami became a regular contributor, publishing some of her “poems, translating short English stories, [and] writing simple informational articles on topics of general interest, particularly on or from Western cultures and traditions” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:xi). E'tesami, publishing her poems in *Bahar*, became a medium for promotion of female poetry in a male-dominated culture, and her humanist themes began to resonate with her audiences. Even at a young age, E'tesami's poetry often dealt with Iran's poverty, injustice, illiteracy, and the plight of Iranian women.

In 1938, E'tesami's father died. He had best appreciated and nourished her literary gift. In Iran's masculine society, it was not easy for a young female poet to uphold on her own the inspiring contact within the literary circles that her dad held. E'tesami became increasingly secluded in spite of the notoriety she had already achieved. She lamented her father's death:

*“O Father, death's axe struck its grave blow;
By that same axe my life's tree was felled.
He who bedded you down in the earth,
Would that he could settle my unsettled life”* (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:107).

After her father's death E'tesami lived a tumultuous last three years. She worked as a librarian in the University of Tehran. This provided the opportunity to publish some of her poems, but she nonetheless became increasingly isolated. E'tesami died on April 5, 1941, of a typhoid fever. She was buried next to her father on the grounds of the city of Qom's holy shrines. E'tesami's shocking death was mourned by women's groups, intellectual circles, and her poetry became more prominent as various newspapers and magazines published her verse to celebrate her life.

E'tesami's poetry was fundamental in laying the groundwork for a feminist discourse in Iran that questioned male hegemony by representing women as liberated and autonomous individuals who are equal partners to men. The *Divan-e Parvin* (Collection of Parvin's Poetry),

was published in Tehran a few months after her death. It included fifty-three poems and is the most complete collection of her works. No exact date of composition can be determined for many of the poems (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). The earliest publication dates back to her father's literary magazine, *Bahar* (1920-21), when E'tesami was only fourteen.

E'tesami's audiences were mostly educated upper- and middle-class women, who since the events of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) had begun to publish their writings, hold public gatherings and events, and even protested alongside their male counterparts. For example, Bibi Vazirof, head of the Maidens' Elementary School in Tehran, invited "women to attend regular political meetings at her house on weekends" (Afary 1996:195). Reading of E'tesami's poetry was popular at women's gatherings in Tehran, a source of "inspiration and even politicizing women's issues" (Shafi'i Kadkani 2007:11).

As Iranians experienced increased modernization and urbanization, women voices became more prominent through out the Iranian society. E'tesmai became one of the symbolic voices of Iranian women's subordination in a male-dominated culture; her poems were published in newspapers and recited by other poets, and she had the posthumous honor of her work—as the first women in Iran's rich literary history—becoming part of the Farsi literature components of the school curriculum. E'tesmai's poetry also appealed to male intellectuals, who after the Constitutional Revolution had become the "defenders of the people's rights and narrators of their misery," and "[p]olitical themes of patriotism, freedom and social progress replaced the old individualistic pseudo-mystical religiosity" (Shafi'i Kadkani 2007:12). E'tesami's work has also played an influential role in shaping the perception of many contemporary female Iranian intellectuals, in particular the waves of female poets that followed a generation after E'tesami, including the renowned modernist and controversial poet Forugh Farrokhzād (1935-1967).

While almost all of E'tesami's poems follow the traditional forms of Iranian poetry, and exhibit typical characteristics of Iranian narrative (featuring fabulated and allegorical elements), five of her poems introduce a topic that became central to the development of female poetry in Iran and catalyzed Iranian women's self-consciousness and awareness. In these five poems, E'tesami uses the concept of "motherhood" to explore the nature of Iranian women, and to highlight the differences between the sexes, promoting the idea that the fundamental nature of women, and the female way of being, makes women capable of defying the antagonistic and destructive elements of the male-dominated society.

This thesis examines the significance and implications of the concept of "motherhood" in E'tesami's poems. The result of traditional male dominance and chauvinism in Iran has been a distortion and devaluation of Iranian women, a predisposition that E'tesami's poetry began to ameliorate by encouraging a collective viewpoint that considered certain features and cultural experiences as necessarily constitutive of members of a group, and group membership as a source of identity and strength (Fuss 1989). E'tesami's poems are expressions of womanhood by virtue of women's nurturing character as mothers; her verse identifies a feature or experience that most women could share. E'tesami's poetry invigorates the idea that Iranian women have the exclusive right to describe and evaluate womanhood in their own terms, thus splitting from the historical web of male supremacist culture in which women have been defined and represented by men (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). In this way, E'tesami seems to have thought, the basis, or the cause, of women's needs as women could be justified. She settled on the familiar concept of "motherhood" to convey this message. Although she never became a mother herself during her short marriage, E'tesami's bond with her own mother, who had sacrificed all for her, shaped her thinking about woman as mother (Madelung & Moayyad 1985).

E'tesami elegantly and strategically blurred the perception of motherhood, using a concept that was religiously pious—motherhood is strongly advocated in Islamic doctrine—and socially admired to create a newfound consciousness prompting women's emancipation *by* women, a process that in turn continued to shape their understanding of their role. E'tesami's verse is a representation of how women are subjected to oppression *as women*. The first chapter of this thesis is called "The Unheard Voices," and examines the socio-political environment in Iran during and immediately after the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). I explore the nature and significance of E'tesami's challenge to Iran's patriarchal society. More importantly, I consider how E'tesami's poetry challenged the perceptions and behavior of her readers by creating unity and awareness among different groups of women, and some men.

The symbolic analysis of "motherhood" draws on the Iranian school of literary thinking that views the nurturing role of women as a harbinger of peace and morality. The powerful "symbol of motherhood demands righteousness and peace...motherhood entails responsibility, 'untainted humanity' for life and not death" (Afshar 2003:187). The cultural symbolism of motherhood in the literary history of Iran characterizes motherhood as reinforcing the "pillars of society by being 'strong forts of virtue and chastity' and by 'raising brave and enlightened men and meek and united women'" (Afshar 2003:183). Moreover, for some Iranian women, the symbolic strength of "motherhood" arises from "giving birth that enables [them] to keep hold of reality, of pure and absolute love, and a significant member of the household" (Afshar 2003:187). What E'tesami was able to accomplish—while depicting the righteous and peaceful characterization of motherhood—was to develop the social construction and idealization of motherhood to celebrate women's femininity and highlight the humanizing aspect of Iranian women.

In the second chapter, “Redefining Motherhood,” I argue that E’tesami’s notion of “motherhood” offered a new representation to Iranian women that deconstructed the normative practices of motherhood (woman as obedient, compliant to men’s sexual desire, his child bearer) by constructing a novel form of female identity (self-valuing, fostering of the private and public spheres, educated, respected within society). At first glance, the idea of “motherhood” appears to imply an essentialist perception, a biological representation that positions women according to a naturalist perspective. Through E’tesami, motherhood became a rallying point, a locus of alliance helping different groups of Iranian women generate awareness about women’s inadequate position in Iranian society. E’tesami’s strategic choice of the topic of motherhood allowed her to discuss women’s issues while maintaining religious and cultural acceptability. While her representation of women at one level conforms to an essentialist perception, a nuanced reading of her poems reveals a serious challenge to the male authorities’ vision of what a woman should be. This reassessment of E’tesami’s verse allows the reader to also observe an opposing view of the universality of women’s essence. This thinking represents a shift from collectivism to an individualistic terrain in which all definitions of motherhood are disputed. E’tesami’s approach advances a form of discursive thinking that constantly redefines what it means to be a mother/woman.²

The third chapter of the thesis, “The Value of Individuality,” argues that E’tesami’s depiction of motherhood stands in opposition to the male-dominated proclamations characteristic to Iranian society by declaring women as individuals. Individualism offers self-reliance and relative independence from the web of male domination, highlighting the sovereignty women

² I define “discursive thinking” in this context as a manner of reasoning and judgment grounded in individual consciousness and understanding, and stimulated by new knowledge. It originates from rational thinking and embraces the practice of independent thought.

possess as individuals with their own needs, goals and desires. By opposing naturalizing claims, individualism stimulates discursive thought, self-determination, and a broader realization of women's importance. By underlining the social importance of what defines women, E'tesami draws on a notion of gender identity that begins to shape a new consciousness of women's identity. According to American philosopher and feminist intellectual Judith Butler, this new type of consciousness produces novel forms of action by "performative" actors who through evolving understanding of their identity explore unique approaches to reshaping their characteristics (Butler 1997, 1993, 1990; Butler & Salih 2004).

In the fourth chapter of the thesis, "A Legacy of Poetic Resistance," I argue that E'tesami's poetic invocation of motherhood invigorates women's agency and resistance. Her poetry is a form of subordinate discourse that explores women's social definition within the confining structure of the normative powers. Judith Butler points to the unfixed and fluid nature of identity within the confines of norms, arguing that agency is the production of, or a relationship between, discourse and power (1997). E'tesami's poetry stimulates discursive thinking that challenges the power/structure of normative culture, while stimulating the structure to produce actors with the agency required to explore new actions outside normatively defined boundaries. The identities of actors are always in flux and flexible, even though constraints upon novel action within the normative structure are immense. Each actor possesses agency, and "motherhood" invokes a type of thinking that channels new actions according to each individual's calling. Through E'tesami's poetry, the outpouring of individual women's voices localizes and diversifies female discourses, rendering them more powerfully resonant on the personal level, which translates into gender politics as women more strongly resist oppressions that threaten their discourses and related ways of life.

1 THE UNHEARD VOICES: “A MOTHER’S SWEET TROUBLE”

*Even though my nest is of clay and I am poorly,
I count no one as rich as myself.
If I leave, I fear these treasures may be stolen.
If I fly away, I fear the nest may catch fire.
Even though I’ve suffered terribly, feathers and body torn,
Surely all my pain and suffering will be rewarded.
No work is as sweet as a mother’s trouble.
I’ve seen no learned book as auspicious as this. By Parvin E’tesami (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:70).*

The sweeping socio-political transformation of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) saw factions fight to shape the course of events, including women whose “language of parity broke out of the bounds and bondages of male domination and moved toward the language of equality” (Najmabadi 2005:230). The Constitutional Revolution was not only a political revolution; more importantly, it was a social and cultural revolution with momentous grassroots dimensions that mobilized different social classes within Iranian society (Afary 1996). As a result of this shared struggle, the Constitutional Revolution offered Iranian women of different religious sects and social classes a novel identity and representation, which catalyzed the creation of assemblies—public and private—of advocates for women’s rights, who gradually took “back the segregated streets, claimed new space for women in the newspapers, [and] created safe educational and political organizations where women’s ideas, resources and creative energies were galvanized and channeled into new projects” (Afary 1996:208). Iranian women, for the very first time, were able to disclose their desires and let their voices be heard, most commonly through their writing, revealing themselves as sovereign individuals with a liberated spirit (Najmabadi 2005:98).

The most powerful transformation elements that resulted as a consequence of the Constitutional Revolution were the writings of intellectuals who debated the idea of constitutionalism and individual liberty as opposite to (monarch) autocracy. For women, this

train of thought offered the potential of justice, equality, individual autonomy, and a call for nationalism that saw them as equal stakeholders in Iran's future. In addition, The Constitutional Revolution created social and cultural institutions—such as girls' schools, adult education classes, women clinics, and theaters—that were inspired by elite and urban middle-class women who were fighting alongside their male counterparts. The Revolution offered such women—often elites—a voice to incite change amongst more religious and less educated women in the lower class and working class of the Iranian society. There was an overwhelming call by women searching “for [a] greater recognition for women's right to education,” where gradually a “number of radical male journalists, parliament delegates, and poets supported the women movement” (Afary 1996:5). This awareness gave a public presence to women's activists who began to discuss themes such as the unlawfulness of polygamy, easy male access to divorce, domestic violence, abortion rights, motherhood, the segregation of women, the right to vote, education, nationalism, and even sexuality.

At present, the majority of women in the Middle East are increasingly calling for—or awakening to the thought of—equality and active participation in political discourses. It is no surprise that Middle Eastern women have been leading opposition movements and taking positions on social and political issues, especially after the recent wave of the Arab Spring, or the 2009 Green Movement in Iran. Women have been fighting for their civil rights, especially the right to vote, and their rights to education, employment and equal wages. The Middle Eastern women have been influential in the process of reform and modernization. While they have been central in nurturing family life and the “inner” aspects of society, and they have been becoming increasingly predominant in the public sphere, many of their basic rights are neglected in societies dominated by men. Sharing struggles induced by masculine cultural practices and male-

oriented policies, the majority of women throughout the region are part of a consensus regarding the need to continue their struggle for domestic and civil rights.

Since the success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have worked relentlessly to construct new understandings of gender and Islamic discourse that challenge the clergy's monolithic power. The actions of Iranian women diverge from the endeavors of other Muslim women, because the former have introduced "a new trend in Islamic feminism that reinterprets traditional Islamic theological and legal sources" (Ahmadi 2006:34). This reinterpretation is based on classical Islamic thinking concerning *ijihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) (Khosrokhavar 2004). Iranian women are now equipped with a feminist Islamic consciousness distilled from decades of struggling to resist the dogmatic theology of Iran's ruling clerics. The theoretical sources of inspiration for most Iranian women in the post-revolutionary era, whether they are explicitly aware of it or not, are based on political and philosophical viewpoints that characterize them as a new wave of *Rawshanfekrah-e dini* (Religious Intellectualism). This is an Islamic reformation movement informed by Western ideals of liberty and by Sufism, while inspired mainly by Islamic thought and interpretations of its relationship to democracy, civil society and religious pluralism (Khosrokhavar 2004). Iranian women emphasize the influence of temporal contingencies on religious "knowledge" in their efforts to reconcile Iranian Sufi mysticism, Western liberalism and Shi'a ideologies in their opposition to the core ideology of Iran's autocratic state. Using moderate interpretations of Islam to justify their social and political agenda, their discourse frames religion as a transformative emancipatory ideology. In addition, Iranian women use other powerful discourses to complement their Islamic discourse, such as

“methods and tools of linguistics [in particular poetry], history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc” (Ahmadi 2006:36).

E'tesami's poetry has become significant for post-revolution feminist thinkers in Iran, because her verse speaks of women's ideals based on the values of moderate Islam. What has brought many Iranian women closer to E'tesami is her utilization of linguistic symbolism founded on Islamic morality, Sufi mysticism, and virtues of Iranian culture, while presenting a novel depiction (some argue “modern” and based on Western thinking) of Iranian women's desires and needs that diverges from traditional, and especially masculine, perceptions. E'tesami's approach has also galvanized younger generations of Iranians, for whom her verse has become symbolic of freedom, a model that exemplifies what it means to be emancipated, Muslim, Iranian women. Moreover, Iranian women have used this poetic discourse to introduce their desires to society through “modern” conduits of political representation—such as universities, courtrooms, radio and television, newspaper columns and the Internet—that are transforming the social, cultural and political understandings of many Iranians.

Recognizing the alternative sets of meanings for Iranian women promulgated by E'tesami's verse, and the consequent negation of any claim of “privileged” access to liberation among men, lays the foundation for viable democratic feminist-Islamic viewpoints in Iran. The significance of E'tesami's poetry resides in how Iranian women have used the verse as part of their social struggle and political discourse, while the authorities have effectively quashed all overt women's organizations. At the core of E'tesami's poetry, and the goals of women who recite her poems, is the idea of democratic participation for Iranian Muslim women in social and political discourses, rather than their obliteration from active participation. The majority of Iranian women believe that E'tesami's poetry reflects their desire to find an alternative to

dogmatic interaction between masculine practices and relentless Westernization. The shared moral and political claims, modes of asking and answering questions, construction of identity, and critical interventions present in the verse have offered disparate groups of Iranian women a platform to strengthen their presence in the societal discourse. This approach projects a democratic message to all constituencies, affecting the future of young Iranians, and ultimately the trajectory of social thought and political discourse in Iran.

1.1 The Power of Women's Pens

*Her life she spent in isolation; she died in isolation.
What was she then if not a prisoner?" By Parvian E'tesami (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:107).*

The above poem by E'tesami represents the strong sentiments surrounding women's rights, and women's constant struggle for freedom. Without the eloquence and socio-political double entendres of poetry, E'tesami (or for that matter any other Iranian woman) would not have been able to freely, in any public forum, express women's desires and concerns. This raises the question of how and why Iranian women came to frequently depend on verse to express their needs and aspirations. Due to the domestic and public oppression of Iranian women prior to, and even throughout, the Constitutional Revolution—the *direct result* of strong male/religious hostility and antagonism—many of the “pro-women's rights societies or organizations initially began to operate in secrecy” (Sanasarian 1982:29). One of the most prominent, effective and secure approaches for women to communicate their aspirations to the Iranian public was through anonymous writings, or their poetry, the ambiguity of which helped shield them from reprisal. Women's social struggles came to be enacted primarily through literary means, and soon laid the foundation for women's claims to equality. From that point on, the Iranian women's “literary movement” continued to challenge “the status quo through the power of the pen” (Shafie-

Katkanie 2007:21). The literary movement was naturally embraced by female poets, leading to the prominence of women's poetry.

1.2 Beyond Cultural Borders

Having said that, it is helpful to understand that the cultural symbolism and importance of poetry extend well beyond the borders of Iran. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod examines the role of gender and women's positions and status in Egypt's Awlad 'Ali Bedouin community (1986). She analyzes what it means for women to live within a patrilineal system, and how a particular style of short song, the *ghinnawa*, expresses women's emotional dependence and desire rather than modesty. Abu-Lughod explores how the discourse of modesty and honor based on autonomy can be expressed through a poetic, private discourse of dependence and desire. Moreover, anthropologist Steven Caton's examination of North Yemeni tribes' performances of oral verse, known as *balah*, reveals other facets of poetry, highlighting usage related to political ambition in tribal conflict (1985). Perhaps the most significant aspect of verse in this region is its performative component. Anthropologist Michael Meeker analyzes poetic performance as a "glorious deed" of honor (a form of "social action"), hence a "poetic construction of identity and the self" (Meeker 1976). Meeker characterizes these social acts as related to the creation or maintenance of honor (the "glorious deeds") among clans of Levantine Arabs (*hamula*) and the Black Sea Turks. Within these groups acts of hospitality and generosity, or of animosity, are manifested through feasting; gift exchange; violence, demonstrating courage, martial prowess, physical strength or endurance; *and* the performance of public oratory, verbal contests of any sort, and the recitation of poetry (1976).

Poetry's history extends well before the dawn of Islam in the Middle East, and is enriched with various languages and cultural practices known to this region. Verse is central in

affecting the behavior and perceptions of different communities, who are shaped by unique socio-cultural understandings of their world (be they Arabic, Turkish, or Persian, to name a few). For example, the Bedouin, pastoral groups, tribes, and city dwellers all perceive verse to carry the aura of an original people central to the political and cultural mythology of Islam and their heroes. Poetry is primarily an oral tradition. Oral transmission makes poetry accessible to the listener, and its rhythmic nature makes it simple, even for an illiterate audience, to memorize it and relate to its meaning.

Over the past century, poetry has become an instrument for portraying socio-cultural suffering and individual aspirations in the Middle East. Whether in reciting *nabati* (a vibrant tradition in Gulf countries dating to pre-Islamic times), or the Farsi *ghazal*, poetry is no longer solely about mythical and moralistic Islamic virtue. Poetry addresses relevant and current social and political issues such as intermarriage, criticism of power (albeit often obliquely), masculine social norms, and even consumerism and Westernization. Verse is also shrouded in the techniques of linguistic symbolism, such as metonymy (a figure of speech in which a word is replace by another with which it is closely related); allegory or parable (a narrative or story with alternative possible meanings); paradox (statements or situations containing apparently contradictory elements); hyperbole (a bold, deliberate overstatement not intended to be taken literally); understatement (under-emphasis in order to achieve a greater effect); and irony (a figure of speech that expresses thought opposite to those of the poet). These linguistic tactics make poetry pleasant to read and meaningful, and make it difficult for political authorities and the religious establishment to counter the verse's rich artistic-content. Finally, the use of poetry in the Middle East is a source of cultural inspiration. Poetry connects with audiences as a reassurance of identity.

In her autobiography, E'tesami underlines certain feminist intellectuals and cultural theorists as critical to the development of her thinking. She explicitly mentions reading influential books such as Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Man-Made World* (1911), and even the radical writings of the *Woman's Bible* (a two-part book published in 1895 and 1898) by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). Following prominent Western literary writers and intellectuals, Iranian female writers and especially poets turned verse into a way of voicing the needs of neglected Iranian women. Generally speaking, poetry represents a way of saying something innovative and often critical without really saying it. Universally, poetry at its best "gives voice and perhaps life to new sentiments that go beyond what has already been said and felt" (Abu-Lughod 1986:258). Poetry's aesthetic qualities, relevance and popular appeal have allowed Iranian women a platform for resistance through validation of their self-constructed female identities and female value. In this sense, "poetry may be not just a symbol of the individual's freedom to defy culture's power to define and delimit experience, but also a tool to be used in that defiance" (Abu-Lughod 1986:258). Poetry's oral form of transmission has traditionally been a powerful and effective method for sharing messages with the broader public. From the time of the Constitutional Revolution, as more and more women became literate and able to understand the meaning of female writings (including verse), the socio-cultural undertones of women's writing came to be transmitted more effectively (Najmabadi 2005:130).

1.3 The Dawn of Female Poetry in Iran

E'tesami's poetry is often described as "simple, unexciting, and without any significant or sensational events" (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:xi). In a considerable number of her poems, women are presented as having an active role. Her verse illustrates themes that engage and

corroborate Iranian women—for the very first time in popular poetry—as stakeholders in domestic affairs, and to a larger extent mutual partakers in everyday society. To a large degree, E'tesami's poems resemble the traditional Persian form of stanzas that encompass rigid prosody and metric structure. Her poetry is perceived to be “finely honed Persian verse in the traditional forms.... her mode of narration is the fable and the parable. Thus on the surface her poetry seems to hark back to predecessors, old traditions, and established literary forms” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:202). Yet, E'tesami introduces her reader to the essence of Iranian women, a novel representation that was not only neglected throughout hundreds of years of rich poetic history in Iran, but also absent from most other forms of creative and intellectual writings.

E'tesami's verse depicts women not merely as inconsequential objects of male sexual obsession, or the reproductive objects of male ego and arrogance (a notion reinforced throughout years of the historical bias of male supremacy), but instead illustrates Iranian women collectively, through their shared experience of motherhood as the indispensable cradle that forms and nurtures Iranian society as a whole. E'tesami's legacy of redefinition of “Iranian women” under the shared experience of “motherhood” is a deconstruction of all concepts of “woman;” it exposes misogynist representations of women by redefining them as agents of cultural and social importance, and eradicates the ontologically misrepresented nature of women constituted by the social constructions of their society. E'tesami believed that female poetry must be a reflection of women's experiences, a narrative of their lives and aspirations, while insisting that poetry embraces and exploits a language of inherent fictiveness (the production of fictionalism) in relation to Iranian women (Shafie-Katkanie 2007). This representation of Iranian women was a central step in stimulating them to recreate their own identities at their own will according to their understanding and beliefs.

2 REDEFINING MOTHERHOOD: “A WOMAN’S PLACE”

A home without a woman lacks amity and affection.

When one’s heart is cold, the soul is dead.

Woman was an angel the moment she showed her face.

How ironic, then, that Satan slanders the angel! By Parvin E’tesami (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:132).

As discussed in the introduction, five of E’tesami’s poems make use of the notion of “motherhood” to delve into various female issues in Iran. These particular poems represent Iranian women, by virtue of their biological, linguistic, psychological and even metaphysical qualities, as equal partners to men. The poems probe the differences instead of the similarities between the sexes, advocating that the essence of women, and the female way of being, can challenge the aggressive, oppressive and destructive features of Iran’s male-dominated society. At first glance, E’tesami’s poetry is based on an essentialist perspective that advocates the collective experiences of women: their maternal nature. E’tesami’s verse is founded on the collective experiences of Iranian women; what empowers and emancipates Iranian women are both their universal qualities of shared knowledge and their every day realizations.

Essentialism at its most basic level can refer to what “unites women,” to what is fundamentally “common to all women in their experience of male oppression” (LeGates 1996:3). Essentialists believe that as a result of “their social conditioning, women emphasize relationships and responsibilities to others; they learn to value sharing and nurture, co-operation, and connection” (LeGates 1996:3). E’tesami’s essentialist viewpoint—prominent in cultural feminist thinking and closely associated with the works of intellectuals such as Fuller (1845) and Stanton (1898)—advocates “the ideology of a female nature or female essence re-appropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes” (Alcoff 1988:408). E’tesami utilized motherhood as a socio-culturally accepted approach for women to revitalize the unrealized qualities of women in Iran.

The philosophical understanding of essentialism is centered on the view that all things have essential properties. Aristotle describes “essence” and “essential” as “*what* an object is and *how* it is” (Audi 1999:281). Essentialism, then, can be described as certitude in the true essence, that which is irreducible, constant, and consequently constitutive of a given individual or object. Essentialism is typically defined in “opposition to difference; the doctrine of essence is viewed as precisely that which seeks to deny or to annul the very radicality of difference” (Fuss 1989:xii). Re-conceptualizing this within a feminist framework, “essentialism [then] becomes the view that there are properties essential to women, that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all” (Stone 2004:139). The definition of essentialism is closely related to that of universalism, where common properties and characteristics are shared by collective groups (Fuss 1989). For essentialists, there are collective properties possessed by women that are vital to their identity and representation. E’tesami explores Iranian women’s essence through its most collective and common experience: that of motherhood. According to this thinking, essentialism can be “located in appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (through perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order” (Fuss 1989:2).

This universalist perception of essentialism that depicts women’s shared aspirations through their collective nature is rejected by some feminist intellectuals for its implication of biological differences between men and women that can entail further incarceration of women in household duties, or other normative oppressive practices defined by men (see Brownmiller 1975; Daly 1973). Opponents of essentialism—most often supporters of constructionism—argue that features “essential” to women have been the central cause of their societal systematic oppression; women are socially constructed as “a priori nurturing and life giving, and ... men are

a priori corrupt and obsessed with death” (Tong 1989:135). The idea of constructionism is grounded in the philosophical view that “the essence is itself a historical construction” (Fuss 1989:2). Thus, the constructionists are concerned above all with “the *production* and *organization* of difference, and they therefore reject the idea that any essentials or natural givens precede the processes of social determination” (Fuss 1989:2-3). Constructionists often argue that the essentialist view of women can be considered reductionist, as it reduces women to their fundamental experiences, or certain “accepted” social structures, limiting women’s abilities to a few known—mainly biological— life trajectories (Fuss 1989).

Essentialists cherish and rally in support of the shared experience of motherhood, where as constructionists view such biological factors of identity as a social constraint imposed upon women directly as a result of male’s desire to control. For the essentialist, the natural “provides the raw material and determinative starting point of the practices and laws of the social” (Fuss 1989:3). On the other hand, constructionists argue that the “natural is itself posited as a construction of the social,” therefore, that even “sexual difference is discursively produced” (Fuss 1989:3). For essentialists, the natural (biological) creates the social, while constructionists believe the natural to be produced by the social (Fuss 1989). E’tesami creatively highlighted the biological essence of Iranian women (the essentialist view); nevertheless, her utilization of motherhood was founded on a belief that the biological takes its representations *from* the constructions of male social realities. She relied on the essentialist view in her poetry because of stringent social surroundings. For E’tesami, highlighting the nurturing position of mothers was a clever approach to obtaining socio-religious leverage and cultural immunity in representing Iranian women. It was a shield from male harassments and harms while she embarked on a discourse about women’s issues and concerns and, most importantly, sought to create an

understanding and a sense of unity between different groups of women. Above all, and for the first time, a woman was in control of redefining womanhood and reintroducing the reader to women's characteristics and societal position. E'tesami's verse is a powerful form of writing by a woman who sets out to recuperate a more accurate and collective feminist description and reappraisal of Iranian women.

The universality of essentialism claims that women have the exclusive right to describe and evaluate womanhood on their own terms. Proponents of essentialism “argue that the problem of male supremacist culture is the problem of a process in which women are defined by men, that is, by a group who has a contrasting point of view and set of interests from women, not to mention a possible fear and hatred of women” (Alcoff 1988:406). According to essentialists, the result of male supremacist culture has been a distortion and devaluation of women's essence that must be rectified by more precise and collective feminist descriptions and appraisals—in part through writings, such as E'tesami's poetry. Underlying this support of essentialism is a vision of matriarchy dating back to the nineteenth century that champions “the idea of a society of strong women guided by essentially female concerns and values” (Donovan 1985:32).³

Essentialism for E'tesami was a way of awaking women to new self-representations, a form of self-determinism. At the same time, motherhood's universal appeal reappraised “women's passivity as her peacefulness, her sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectiveness as her advanced self-awareness, and so forth” (Alcoff 1988:407). E'tesami intentionally used the known biological facts, the familiarity of motherhood, to build a representation of women that distanced her from the social construct of prior masculine definitions. For E'tesami, working within the normative context of a male definition of

³ Some scholars argue that matriarchy was an example of utopian thinking, an idea that arose in opposition to the “masculinist ideology of Social Darwinism” (Donovan 1985:32).

motherhood required—to a large degree—highlighting women’s sentimentality as an inclination arising from her biology and nurturing role. For example she wrote:

*“In times of felicity she is comrade and tender friend.
In time of adversity she shares the trouble and is helpmate” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:133).*

She depicted mothers as passive toward their most common rights, sacrificing all for the welfare of their family, yet highlighted them as the caretakers who were the cradle that generated successful and powerful men.

E’tesami simultaneously highlighted the inequality and the injustice, the systematic violence and oppression, that had been exerted upon Iranian women socio-culturally. E’tesami stated:

*“The men’s attitude betrays corruption to [their] family, not dignity.
This conduct represents abjection, not glory” (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:134).*

Even in this context, women’s position as nurturers provided a great degree of socio-religious leverage; motherhood in Islam is seen as an act of nobility and devotion. In fact, throughout Iran’s Shi’a history harmonious family-building is indisputably advocated in the Islamic creed, and all Islamic clerics in Iran encourage the ‘self-righteous’ position of motherhood—a character that is sentimental and forgiving, a being who maintains the wellbeing of her family (Tabari 1982).

E’tesami’s essentialist depiction supports an ontological representation of Iranian women that stands removed from the web of cultural influences and historical productions. Part of E’tesami’s dexterity is found in the way she used *the* essence of Iranian women to represent and generate change, but the essence itself (the nurturing role of women, and their representation as mothers) was not changed or challenged. In other words, she used the notion of motherhood, a concept that was well defined by the masculine society, to generate a liberated spirit of women. Whilst E’tesami’s poetry depicts women as a collective of powerful individuals, essentialism for

Iranian women in its poetic form offered a sense of entitlement, an appeal to acquiring a female voice and generating discourse. E'tesami's essentialist view insinuated a renewed appreciation of women's distinct traits and roles as an antidote to counter patriarchal oppression in Iran, but within the limits and boundaries of cultural practices.

2.1 A Shift Away from Collectivism

E'tesami redefined women's position through the concept of "motherhood" within the framework of Iran's masculine models known to her. However, she created a new representation of woman that discarded most previous representations—beyond the biological, naturalistic role of motherhood laid the social construct. The significant accomplishment in E'tesami's poetry was to adeptly use a universalist perception of women on the surface, while beneath each verse offered women a chance to redefine themselves. E'tesami's strategic use of motherhood was a form of deconstructing old and common models (obedience, compliance to men's desire) and reconstructing a new women's position (fostering and vital to the growth of society, educated, and liberated). She wrote:

*"Wherein lie man's strength and sustenance? In his wife's support.
If life becomes restive, like an unruly horse,
Husband and wife assist each other in drawing the reins"* (Madelung & Moayyad 1985).

Her verse redefined women, presenting a new understanding of what it really is to be a woman, using the most familiar and revered feminine aspect recognizable, that of motherhood. For example, in the wake of emphasizing the nurturing role of the mother, E'tesami discussed how women could be nation-builders, how each girl needs to be educated so she can have a viable private and a prosperous public life, how each woman should have equal rights, how a marriage responsibility for both partners is not an exploitation nor an obligatory life contract for women, how women should have rights to child custody, how domestic violence must cease, and how

Iranian women should break through their veiled faces and hidden selves (Madelung & Moayyad 1985).

E'tesami's reconstruction of women's role redefined, and also blurred, the boundaries of cultural practices, offering Iranian women a new understanding of their position. By highlighting their anguish and championing their desire, E'tesami granted her reader a chance to rethink her position and imagine alternatives, ways out of the web of male hegemony. E'tesami's reassessment of motherhood reaffirmed women's importance. It portrayed motherhood as imperative and emphasized that Iranian society needs nurturing, a role that woman are capable of fulfilling. At the same time, E'tesami had a blunt and straightforward approach that illuminated the sacrifices and prejudices Iranian women had to deal with in their everyday lives. For example, in the epigraph to this chapter, she writes "Woman was an angel the moment she showed her face. How ironic, then, that Satan slanders the angel!" (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:132). E'tesami expertly uses the idea of a mother's purity and angelic nature to oppose the dark Satan of male oppression, and the evil behaviour of men who have slandered the very existence of this angel. The slandering is historical; it arises from a culture of male hegemony. E'tesami made (and makes) her reader see in a new way the onslaught of verbal abuse, physical punishment, lack of legal and civic rights, and social segregation (to name a few problems) that women faced daily (see Madelung & Moayyad 1985).

Moreover, the notion of motherhood highlighted the dichotomy between right and wrong, good and evil. Traditional Iranian poetry drew continuously on the dichotomy between the ultimate 'truth' (founded in male wisdom, often religiously focused and culturally venerated), and 'falsehood' (evil, untruth, and the morally unaccepted) (Shafie-Katkanie 2007). Yet, E'tesami's poems conveyed truth through the concept of "motherhood," depicting Iranian

women as sources of fidelity and truth, acceptance and integrity, as opposing male deception, and as challenging father-like figures. While E'tesami presented men as equal partners, her illustrated victimization of women points to men's characteristics of falsehood, evil or untruthfulness.

E'tesami's approach is best illustrated in her reconstruction of the expected and irrevocable submission by women to men's sexual desires and men's prosperity, advocating instead the power of women's self-determination. E'tesami challenged the so-called attitude of the Iranian male to create form out of woman's allegedly formless materiality. Furthermore, E'tesami's concept of "motherhood" stood in opposition to traditional ideas of what has been called the "practice of fatherhood" (Boone 1992). The theme of fatherhood is evident in countless Iranian works of literature, where a male figure—an older man, such as a grandfather, father, older relative, brother, epic (war) hero, religious cleric, or *sufi* devotee—is viewed as the ultimate source of inspiration and wisdom for others (Shafie-Katkanie 2007). The male character in Iranian literature is always depicted—due to the omnipresent notion of "fatherhood"—as commanding, influential and dominant, an authoritative (if not always physically the strongest) person at the pinnacle of the pyramid of morality and knowledge.

Traditional ideas of fatherhood focus on "man's theory of man and mankind, [where] woman remains in her function as biological baby maker, reproducing herself for future mothering functions, and sons for glorification as the father, the son, and the holy God" (Boone 1992:3). According to critic and journalist Rebecca Boone, E'tesami's special style of essentialism hiding non-essentialism view of motherhood is a challenge to centuries of patronizing fatherhood, where "the child is an *idea*, something he imagines. Only out of man's imagination can a [male] child, under the father's tutelage, be molded into a decidedly civilized,

human being of heroic character and godlike attributes” (1992:3). E’tesami opposed the common Iranian literature into which male writers had cleverly, if not maliciously, woven their theory of fatherhood, penetrating each legend and narrative. Iranian literature has an extensive tradition of male domination. Iranian texts most often align closely with what Boone regards as a problematic perspective in which “man’s theory of himself as lord and master of women and the human race is most flamboyantly applied in the commercial and political ‘worlds’ of man” (1992:3). Boone adds that “the way to knock man’s theory of himself out of our social institutions and citadels of learning is to displace it with a better and demonstrably more accurate theory of motherhood” (1992:3).

E’tesami challenged the logicality and deceitful supposition of traditional notions of fatherhood. Her verse was absorbed by the idea that motherhood is explicitly an act of human being, involving individuals with free souls and will. It derives from the notion that “‘human motherhood’ is an intelligent identification of herself as mother, and [her] sovereign [self] over men at all times” (Boone 1992:4). For E’tesami, the redefinition of motherhood was a challenge to the “necessary governance” of men resulting from masculine social constructions that delineated a “logical analysis” of biology (women remaining in their oppressed position by functioning only as ineffectual baby-makers), religion (the Truth that binds all) and philosophy (the permutation of religious/mystical knowledge forming cultural values) (Boone 1992).

In response to these masculine social constructions, and under the cover of essentialism, E’tesami followed the train of thought that “replacing woman-as-housewife with woman-as-supermom (or Earth mother or super-professional) is no advance” (Alcoff 1988:407). E’tesami did not replace Iranian women with supermoms. She did not mystify the concept of motherhood, but instead redefined its true and mundane quintessence. Through E’tesami, women found power

in the everyday, and the 'basic' role they were biologically designed for, and socially challenged by. This response to essentialism is that this universalist thinking "does not criticize the fundamental mechanism of oppressive power used to perpetuate sexism and in fact re-invokes that mechanism in its supported solution" (Alcoff 1988:409). Exploring this idea of a mechanism of power, the feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff refers to the construction of the subject by a discourse that "weaves knowledge and power into a coercive structure that forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way" (Alcoff 1988:409). Hence, according to Alcoff, an essentialist formulation of "womanhood, even when made by feminists, 'ties' the individual to her identity as a woman and thus cannot represent a solution to sexism" (Alcoff 1988:409).

For feminist supporters of essentialism, the logic of neglecting collective experiences "misses the basic point, which is that without a shared experience of oppression—an identity—political demands cannot be articulated in the first place" (Lloyd 2005:56). By utilizing the concept of motherhood, E'tesami enunciated an identity for Iranian women that portrayed them as liberated souls, individuals with genuine and free essences, who were harmed by centuries of systematic male authoritarian socio-cultural, political and religious practices. The opponents of essentialism believe that, "the politics of gender or sexual differences must be replaced with a plurality of differences where gender loses its position of significance" (Alcoff 1988:407). E'tesami understood well that no awareness or unity would have originated from an initially pluralistic approach. Redrawing and exploring of the concept of "motherhood" redefined the value and essence of each woman as an individual. This inward inquiry about individuality for each woman—a shift from collectivism to individualism—advocated autonomy, where each woman could reevaluate and reinvigorate her identity according to her own free will and beliefs.

3 THE VALUE OF INDIVIDUALITY: “MOTHER’S LOVE”

In creation’s edifice woman has always been the pillar.

Who can build a house without a foundation?

On the mothers rests the greatness of the sons By Parvin E’tesami (*Madelung & Moayyad 1985:132*).

It is tempting to resist an account that defines women as having certain features essential to their being (such as the possibility of motherhood), since Iranian women, like all others, are vastly diverse in their experiences and beliefs. E’tesami was aware that Iranian women shared immensely different experiences both culturally and regionally. Yet, her outward essentialist representation—a form of collectivism—was a shared appeal that offered women a unified voice. Nevertheless, she allowed a great degree of sovereignty for each woman to revalue her position both privately and publicly. If E’tesami’s essentialist presentation of women offered them a common voice or a collective goal, it also put forward a notion of inward—individualized—revitalization of autonomy for each of her readers based on their personal beliefs and aspirations.

The term “motherhood” in Iran is often used in Iran (especially by men) with cunning references to the traditional masculine institutions historically created in a socio-cultural structure dominated by patriarchal standpoints, and is thus embedded in oppressive connotation. While motherhood as a practice is religiously devotional and culturally revered, reading various definitions of this term in Farsi dictionaries allows one to notice the subtle, yet powerful nuances this concept carries, nuances that prompt misogynist subjugation of women. For instance, definitions of “motherhood” have been focused on or included: a sense of ownership by men (e.g., mothers as the caregiver to *men’s* children), male prosperity (e.g., the mother carries *his* children), and sexual compliance or obedience (e.g., the motherhood role is to give birth and nurture *his* sons) (Tabari 1982). In this section, I argue that the notion of “motherhood” in

E'tesami's poetry does not conflict with female "personhood" or autonomy, but rather offers an expression of individualism, encouragement for each woman to seek her authentic self.

For E'tesami, "motherhood" was a reference to a liberated woman with agency who chooses her own path to well being and her own future. In fact, motherhood is in opposition to the male-defined characterizations of what it means to be a mother. E'tesami's representation of motherhood grants autonomy to each woman, deeming her an individual who takes action and constructs her own identity. American philosopher John Dewey argues that, "liberalism knows that an individual is nothing fixed, given ready-made. It is something achieved, and achieved not in isolation but with the aid and support of conditions, cultural and physical: including in 'cultural,' economic, legal and political institutions as well as science and art" (1934:291). The idea of "motherhood" as employed by E'tesami portrays a strong sense of dignity, strength, independence, care, contentment, and even tolerance to a considerable amount of pain and harassment. E'tesami's great achievement is that at the same time that these collective values seem to pose each woman as a determined character, they also offer sovereignty to each individual to possess her own needs, goals and desires.

E'tesami depicted the notion of "motherhood" as an unfolding from within women and not a learned and dictated practice handed down to women by men for men. She wrote:

*"A mother's lap is first teacher of the child.
No ignorant mother ever raised a scholar.
Despite our helpless plight let each one of us take flight to the moon! (Madelung & Moayyad 1985:192).*

This train of thought allowed E'tesami to redefine the normative practice of male oppression of women, and also led the way for each woman to take on her new identity according to her own beliefs. The organic development of individualism meant that although women may not come to rule over their male counterparts, and also may not seek to do so, they could enjoy a natural growth as partakers in, and equal members of, Iranian society. Motherhood meant that women

had developed, or could develop, organically and according to their own will, the power to grow and advance as sovereign beings and emancipated souls.

The concept of individualism for E'tesami was a way of overcoming essentialist claims about Iranian women's innate inferiority to men. This notion of "individualism" creates greater awareness and unity for each individual reader. In *The Second Sex* (1949), the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir states that, "maleness is understood to be the norm—as neutral or universal" (1949:12). She adds that the situation or the perception of men is, by "default, taken to be the universal position. To explain the human condition is to explain, by and large, what is in fact a masculine position" (Chanter 2006:9). As a result of this prejudiced perspective on the sexes, women must write about their condition. Furthermore, women are forced to stress the moral worth of their individuality, to value their self-dependence and desire and recognize that all humans as individuals are worthy of the struggle toward and dream of liberation. Simone de Beauvoir explains that "woman is the Other, the inessential, while man is the absolute, the subject, the essential" (1949:15). E'tesami's notion of individualism viewed women not partially, comparatively, or in relation to their male counterpart—not their bodies, their sex, their reproductive capacities, or their nurturing inhibitions, but their character and essence as a whole. This sense of individualism was in defiance of what had determined their natures; it opposed common perceptions. It was a viewpoint that parted from the normative practices, by embracing a newfound agency that disentangled, or even dismantled, the social construct, resulting in a self-consciousness for each woman that reshaped her identity according to her own will.

3.1 Redrawing Performance Practices

E'tesami's concept of "motherhood" was partitioned from conventions. It was a discursive social understanding that brought forth a new idea of what it means to be a woman.

This social understanding and redrawing of the parameters of what defined women produced and claimed a distinction between what it means socially to be a man and woman. It created a social boundary between the sexes. Motherhood meant a separation from biology—anatomy was not destiny—and the embracing of a new societal understanding that exposed the rift between men and women by attending to women’s needs and aspirations. Motherhood meant “becoming” women, not an obligation to the misogynist culture, nor designation as a sexual object. Motherhood referred no longer to subjugated individuals, but to autonomous individual subjects. This “becoming” in E’tesami’s poetry is much like when de Beauvoir famously claimed that “one is not born but becomes a woman” (1949:15).

The becoming of women is a socialized concept that created a split in the social characterization of men and women. This demarcation between the two sexes, I argue, can be seen as the overture to understanding sex and gender identity in Iran. It is through emphasizing such gender associations in E’tesami’s verse (for example, in relation to education, bodily integrity and autonomy, civil rights, and marital, parental and religious rights) that women started to recognize themselves as sovereign from men. It was a point of departure socially, whereby each individual was able to redraw her position based on the insights of such a gender role. Although E’tesami took great steps toward popularizing this thinking as early as the time of the Constitutional Revolution, scholars often view the early seventies as the beginning of any viable understanding of gender issues in Iran (Najmabadi 1999, 2000; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Moghissi 1999).

The distinction between sex and gender, as the philosopher and feminist intellectual Judith Butler states, has been “crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; *sex* is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic

aspect of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that the body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation" (1986:35). E'tesami worked to eradicate the boundaries that had been acculturated in the psyche of Iranian culture by emphasizing that women can create and recreate their identity according to their own choices. Moreover, gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1988:519). E'tesami recognized a profound obstacle in the "normative" practices of women, who were faced by and also confined to conduct acts of oppression that reinforced women's subjugation as normalized and ideal through an Islamic or cultural guise. Poetry, however—oral and written—reinvigorated a reiteration of women's desire and an affirmation of their needs. E'tesami's verses were "graceful and accessible to almost all sects of the Iranian society, being read and recited at schools, in private gatherings and often published in newspapers. It was as if her poetry became part of the new understanding and gestures of women in Iran" (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). Through constant recitations and repetitions of verse, a mechanism is formed that reshapes the thinking of the reader, triggering the self-consciousness, prompting the individual to reconstruct new models of behaviour and action over time. E'tesami's poems began to "become a popular tune amongst women" (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). Her verse became a form of resistance against the male culture simply because it was read and recited frequently, making it a constant reminder that eventually reshaped the psyches of her readers. Such repeated acts reinforce and restructure the perception and behaviour of the audience. Poetry is a medium that can convey its message organically, through recitation becoming a stylized action that repeats its message to the reader, a message that over time becomes part of the new social understanding and behaviour of an individual.

One of the principal arguments made by feminists has been that “there is *something* internal to women which determines gendered identity and that produces female subject” (Lloyd 2005:25). This internal feeling of commonality could be, “*inter alia*, a maternal nature, a specific mode of reasoning or a specific erotic nature. It is this essence that is given expression in our gendered behavior” (Lloyd 2005:25). A triadic relationship is found in E’tesami’s poetry, where femininity, motherhood, and women’s (redrawn) social position provided an inclination toward self-creation and experimentation as opposed to convention or popular institutionalized attitudes and behaviors. The appetite for human self-formation and exploration is a form of individualism that opposes social constructs by constantly recreating new behavior that breaks free from previous impositions. The power in E’tesami’s poetry is that it construes women in two divergent, yet complementary, ways. On the one hand, women are depicted in accordance with collectivism and the universal appeal of the interdependent, ensemble, communal and relational. Alternatively, women’s position is cultivated by a French post-structuralist notion of individualism based on personal autonomy, and possession of the agency to break away from the web of cultural constructs. Each of these two notions is a separation from submission to and compliance with men; it is a redrawing of gender boundaries, and therefore a challenge to the power structure and a form of resistance.

For E’tesami, motherhood was a matter of gender construction, a strategic concept meant to materialize new normative practices and reposition women’s role in Iran. E’tesami was able to portray this emancipated representation of women because she was fully aware of biological “destiny,” and also the social perception embedded in the nurturing role of Iranian women. But to be reconciled with the normative masculine claims, she thought, was to surrender to limitations, to deny the *possibility* of change. E’tesami believed that motherhood is a collective

inspiration that shapes womanhood, and yet, much like de Beauvoir, E'tesami distinguished sex (biology) from gender (social construct), believing that “gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired” (Butler 1986:36).

Butler states that the relation between sex and gender is not necessary but arbitrary, arguing that gender is “performative” (1993). She defines performative gender as “what we take to be an internal essence of gender manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (1999: xv). This form of thinking deflects attention away from the natural (the bodily representation; the reproductive power of the female body), towards “the idea that femininity is something that we are taught, something that is constructed or learned” (Butler 1999:33). It also veers from collectivism toward individualism, since any idea taught, or imitated, is responded to and executed differently by each specific actor. This means that gender creates actors who perform the acts; thus, it is the individual under transformation and not the group. E'tesami's perception of motherhood parted from the bodily account (the objective physical presentation that was socially constructed by men) and conceptualized a new—arbitrary—understanding, where each woman was to become a performer based on what she understood as beneficial to her cause. Butler has “collapsed the sex/gender distinction,” asserting “that gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (Salih 2002:62). This results in actors who perform actions that are fluid and constantly changing based on their awareness and understanding of women's issues.

Motherhood, in essence, is performative. Motherhood was a matter of socialization, and constantly changing, because women carry out and define each act according to their own understanding. In other words, due to cultural perceptions embedded in the ideas of femininity

and masculinity, the materialization of new social norms will construct gender differently, and this act will repeat itself constantly, yet differently for each individual. Therefore, at its core, motherhood was to attain (through E'tesami) an individualistic approach through a collective representation for women. This created individual agency and diversity in exploring women's issues and desires. The social definition of women as redrawn by E'tesami did not focus on a particular distinctiveness, but rather a host of aptitudes and capabilities that characterized women, allowing each the freedom to set in motion individual freedom, and, accordingly, her identity. If "gender is something that is acquired through socialization or acculturation, it is also therefore something that can be unlearned, or reshaped" (Chanter 2006:16). The use of motherhood was E'tesami's way of facilitating change and drawing gender differently; it shaped the unspoken desires of women. E'tesami's verse generated new social understandings for women, by reshaping the thinking of her female readers. E'tesami's rewriting of identity was not concerned with offering concrete steps toward defining what a woman is, but rather was a redrawing of the social practices that shaped the ability to act in a manner corresponding to what was acceptable to her audience. This is why E'tesami's poetry is still seen as a significant influence on Iranian women's aspirations and desires (especially related to the value of knowledge and education for women); it transcends time and place, because it offers each individual woman a chance to reevaluate and reenact her needs.

The production of gender identity "relies upon the repetition 'through time' of those acts, gestures, modes of behavior and so forth [the] gendered is inherently imitative, a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real [the] gendered self has no ontological status apart from the acts which compose it" (Butler 1990:141). Motherhood for E'tesami was a discursive practice that generated new and flexible forms of representation. For instance, in one

of her poems she questions a mother's legal rights to her children, and a spouse's obligation to his wife (Madelung & Moayyad 1985). While different groups of Iranian women would naturally perceive these two issues to carry a range of meanings and actions according to their beliefs and cultural backgrounds, it is nevertheless action that generates discursive thinking, allowing a separation from previous ideals of womanhood and the creation of new modes of behavior. The concept of "motherhood" situated women as performative subjects; women's subjectivity came under question, and her essence was explored, reclaimed, and asserted as liberated. As much as E'tesami's poetry was a catalyst for women to renew their identity and confront the male social order, she also challenged and transformed the mind, the outlook, and the manner of her readers, compelling them to reinvigorate their position in Iranian society.

While the notion of "motherhood" did bring a shared realization, it redefined the boundaries and performative consciousness of what it is to be a woman. Motherhood for E'tesami was not an ideology; it was a harsh truth, a reality. This nurturing role resonated with different groups of Iranian women, depicting them as autonomous individuals, because "mothers know *who* they are and they understand *what* they are for" (Boone 1992:89). This essentialist claim was an attempt to redraw the identity of women by changing the "performance of gendered behavior" (Butler 1990) common in Iranian culture. As Butler explains, particular gendered behaviors are accepted and expected, and individuals are anticipated to acknowledge these performances of gendered behavior. The common perception associated with masculinity and femininity, therefore, is an act of sorts, a performance imposed upon a culture by normative heterosexuality (Butler 1990). E'tesami eradicated, or at least limited, cultural impositions, the expected cultural perception. Her poetry served as tutelage for each reader, and led the way for future female poets to be bolder and more audacious in their address of women's issues.

4 A LEGACY OF POETIC RESISTANCE: “IRANIAN WOMEN”

All a mother did was to struggle through dark and distressing days.

Her life she spent in isolation; she died in isolation.

What was she then if not a prisoner?

No one ever lived centuries in darkness like her.

None was sacrificed on the altar of hypocrisy like her By Parvin E'tesami (*Madelung & Moayyad 1985:132*).

In a society in which the ideological values are dominated and controlled by men, E'tesami's poetry was (and still is) an instance of subordinate discourse. This form of “subaltern gendered agency” is what Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy refers to as a model for the “cultivation of women's consciousness” (Boddy 1989:345). E'tesami's concept of “motherhood” is part of a counter-hegemonic process; it confronts the normative social construct of womanhood by setting dynamic boundaries that challenge and invoke new positionality. Motherhood in E'tesami's verse involves an assertion that consciously and strategically manifests itself against the “instruments of their [women's] oppression” (Boddy 1989) to declare female values. Her poems offer performative actors the awareness to negotiate or re-contemplate their social position through the generated discursive thinking on female issues. The notion of motherhood is a reenactment intended to initiate agency, helping women become agents of resistance who set limitations upon the dominating power.

Motherhood is an avenue through which the “subject-in-process” continually rewrites her identity (Butler 1990). By “subject-in-process,” professor of women's politics Moya Lloyd means, “a subject that has no essential nature but is constituted in various, always incomplete, ways” (2005:14). Lloyd states that “feminists, like other political ideologies, have assumed that only a stable, coherent subject (perhaps with the benefit of consciousness-raising) can make political demands and act autonomously to challenge the oppressive structure confining women”

(2005:27). In fact, a stable subject would jeopardize the opportunity to create change; it cannot oppose the societal structure (Lloyd 2005). Acknowledging that

the subject is permanently in-process does not mean that politically feminists cannot act, at times, *as if* women share features in common, even an essential, unchanging womanliness.... There are times where there is no choice but to temporarily reify certain features of identity in order to make political demands: to performatively invoke an identity, which though it may appear to be essential, is in actuality provisional. To argue that subjects are not unified and do not pre-exist discourse, society, or power, is thus to offer a necessary challenge to the idea that the stable subject precedes, and is independent of, politics, but not to deny that feminist politics are possible. (Lloyd 2005:27-28)

A woman reading E'tesami's poems (a subject-in-process) is an actor who embraces distinctive forms of being, as long as they are liberating for her. While the idea of "motherhood" enables the claim that women collectively search for a stable subject, for something authentic, transcendent, historical and communal, this does not necessitate a universal position or similar identity for each individual. Instead, a subject-in-process is triggered by its catalyst (for example, E'tesami's verse) to form and reform in search of becoming a stable subject. The subject-in-process probes the self, and the experiences of being an Iranian woman, but the stable subject is never reached, since identity is continually rebuilding the individual's position as long as this poetic discourse generates forms of consciousness and new understanding.

The subject-in-process searches constantly for new knowledge and encounters. This means that identity is never fixed. Motherhood presents the possibilities of denaturalizing, proliferating and unfixing identities in order to reveal the constructed nature of women; in essence it produces and reproduces new positionality for women. The awakening to persistently searching for new identity through E'tesami's poetry presents each woman with agency in a social structure that is not stable, and yet is confined to norms, reproducing individuals who possess identities that are fluid and fragile. The patriarchal social structure is analogous to an egg. It is surrounded by a thin, hard shell, no matter how hard it is pressed from the top and the

bottom the shell does not break, but the finest of touches from the side can break the egg. This is what E'tesami succeeded in. She exposed the weakness of the patriarchal structure, and broke the shell of male hegemony from its most vulnerable spot. By cultivating women's self-consciousness and self-determinism the shell was fractured. The ability to reshape their identity and challenge the status quo points to agents who possess agency. Agency is developed when the subject-in-process realizes that women's interests are in tension with social institutions, normative practices, certain societal rituals, transcendental religious ideals, and other impediments (Mahmood 2005).

Prior to the discursive thinking stimulated by E'tesami's poetry, women were following or enacting what was dictated to them, but this enactment was for the most part compliance, submission to male hegemony. These actions by women were often entanglements to the same scripts that relegated them to positions of sexual obedience and made them objects for male pleasure and prosperity. This is not to say that agency—and resistance—did not exist prior to E'tesami, but rather, that the performative actors who became familiar with her verse began to search beyond the one-dimensional process of determinism or imposition of gender identity. Having said that, as Butler explains, agency could nonetheless at times miss the liberal humanist concept of the individual and find itself subordinated (1997).

E'tesami's poetry advocates an understanding that gender identity is not based on the "quasi-permanent structure," but rather that it "should be thought of as the *temporalized regulation* of socio-symbolic norms and practices where the idea of the performative expresses both the cultural arbitrariness or 'performed' nature of gender identity and also its deep inculcation in that every performance serves to reinscribe it upon the body" (McNay 1999:176). The theory of agency can be outlined in the following terms: configuration of the quasi-

permanent structure conceptualizes certain performatives as actions, yet such “constraint is constitutive but not fully determining of gender subjectivity” (McNay 1999:176). An actor can potentially choose to explore different forms of action that oppose the structure. While the capability of an individual to step outside the defined boundaries always exists, consciousness provides incentive to enter a process that materializes new identity. Although agency exists within the societal structure, the critical element is not an independent act of one individual who opposes a certain form of being, but rather a collective way of challenging a structure individually.

This form of “performative agency,” which searches for actions external to normative constraints, is an “understanding of temporality not as a series of discrete, punctuated moments, but rather as a *process of materialization* in which the constraints of social structures are reproduced and partially transcended in the practices of agents” (McNay 1999:177). As Butler explains, the “construction ... is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms” (1993:10), but, the subject-in-process faced with the normative practices develops the ability to resist—if not fully oppose—these norms through the process of materialization (a realization of what a self consists and is capable of). The process of materialization is enhanced and channeled through a discursive conduit (e.g., E’tesami’s poetry); it gradually builds consciousness and a new understanding to voice concerns and challenge the status quo. Therefore, the capability to perform actions is the byproduct of women’s ability to reshape their identity; the nature of performative actions infers a certain aptitude or ability of individuals, who thus possess agency. Butler draws an analogy between agency and the ability of performative actions to oppose normative structures, stating that “an account of iterability [repetition of

action] of the subject...shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned” (1997:29).

If the normative practices are the sediments, or historical layers, of reiterative and ritualized behavior materialized through time, where the subject “partially” takes on the constraints of the social structure, then the subject is flexible—to a degree—and unbounded to concrete representation of norms. This would mean that the structure is limited to partial influence on individuals. Power within the structure is enduring but imperfect, which allows for the capability to step outside defined constraints and resist dictated actions by—at least to some extent—preferring a different set of actions. The motherhood discourse created the consciousness that women need not surrender to the sediments of reiterated and ritualized social structure, nor be marginalized by conforming to the historical hegemony of male social definitions delineated for them. E’tesami poems also reveal that the normative practices could be halted, because the structure itself is inadequate to the task of constantly maintaining defined sets of identities if female consciousness and knowledge is reinvigorated. Butler locates the possibilities of agency within “the structure of power (rather than outside of it) and, more importantly, suggests that the reiterative structure of norms serves not only to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its *destabilization*” (Mahmood 2005:20). Motherhood offered and allowed for a women’s consciousness that embraces the possibility of materializing different forms of reiterated and ritualized actions. Therefore, there is “no possibility of ‘undoing’ social norms that is independent of the ‘doing’ of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability” (Mahmood 2005:20).

The conceptualization of agency for the subject-in-process is the relation of the subject to subordination. Butler views the performativity of gender as acts that have been socially

practiced, similar to actors who render a given script into reality by repeating or performing certain actions (Butler 1999). Therefore, performativity could imply actions of dependency or interrelation; it is the “forced reiteration of norms, an act of compulsion and containment which sustains a particular form of cultural intuition” (Butler 1993:94). However, this act of compliance is not stable, and the reiteration of norms is often a burden on the shoulders of its actors. The concept of “motherhood” catalyzed new sets of performances by women with agency. The “cultural necessity for a performative reiteration of these symbolic norms highlights the extent to which they are not natural or inevitable and are, therefore, potentially open to change” (McNay 1999:138). Motherhood opened a window of new potentiality for change; it offered women alternatives to the unnatural positionality to which they were confined in Iran.

E'tesami was fully aware that the social construction of women's identity by men was not natural, but rather fragile and unstable. This is why Iran's male socio-religious culture constantly reiterates and highlights particular sets of actions, often under the “legitimate” disguise of Islamic doctrine. The authorities and others with power are fully aware that if other forms of actions are highlighted, women—and most of the general public—would largely set aside the masculine ideals. Motherhood offered women a way forward through discursive thinking, because “change arises from the constitutive instability of the symbolic and discursive structures which invest the body with meaning” (McNay 1999:138). E'tesami was aware that women's identity based on her poetic discourse could present opportunities to gradually reshape its actors. Motherhood opposed the assumption that women's “identity is simply there and fixed and final” (Salih 2002:23). Identity would always be in a state of flux, and, the end goal, therefore, was not an ideal form of identity, but rather, a constant process of change by individuals who had the agency to create these changes.

Performativity in itself is a conceptualization of agency; Butler uses the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of "iterability" (the capacity to be repeatable in different contexts), and states that "the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency" (1999: xxiv). This means that individual performativity and enactment creates and maintains social norms, rather than social norms creating the individual. Nevertheless, the actions of the performers are dynamic; they can diverge and create new forms of actions. The American anthropologist Saba Mahmood states that "the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment; agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms" (2005:19). For E'tesami, the formation of women's oppressed identity was based on social production through the reenactment of social norms. Such superficial formations are vulnerable, and such reenactments can fail. Therefore, the formation of each social construction brings with it the possibility of its downfall (Butler 1997).

Agency exists by virtue of individual action within the normative structure, but it is manifested primarily through a discourse that constitutes subjects as active agents of power. Power exerted on Iranian women arises not only from direct control by the male religious authority; it is also embedded in socio-cultural structures and engrained in the normative practices of Iranians. Power is not an independent force, but rather is coextensive with the social body, interwoven in social structures and decentralized, ubiquitous, immanent, strategic, mobile, and unstable (Foucault 1980; 1978). Power is not only understood "solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others, with a singular intentionality, structure, or location that presides over its rationality and execution" (Mahmood 2005:17). Male domination in Iran is as embedded in the fabric of

cultural practices as it is in the socio-political sphere. According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, power is a premeditated relation of various forces that pervades a way of being for individuals, and is also generative of unique forms of relations, desires, perspectives and discourses (Foucault 1978; 1980). Moreover, Foucault argues that “the subject does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility” (Mahmood 2005:17).

Central to the establishment of power is what Foucault refers to as the “paradox of *subjectivation*” (Butler 1997, 1993; Foucault 1983, 1980). The paradox of *subjectivation* is the fact that the “very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination [are] also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent” (Mahmood 2005:17).

Motherhood was a condition that had historically been associated with subordination, but E’tesami’s highlighting of women’s issues was a way in which women became self-conscious agents. Therefore, “sets of capacities inhering in a subject—that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency—are not the residue of an un-dominated self that existed prior to the operation of power but are themselves the products of those operations” (Mahmood 2005:17).

Women’s challenge to patriarchal oppression—instigated effectively through poetry—came to be exhibited through resisting the very power exerted on them by men embedded in the daily socio-cultural practices of Iran. Foucault states that “where there is power, there is resistance.... These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network... by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations” (1990:95-6). Moreover, such understanding of “power and subject formation encourages us to conceptualize agency not simply as a synonym of resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable” (Mahmood 2005:17-18). The idea of “self-

interested action” not only alludes to agency as a reactionary force in opposition to domination, but also as a force embedded within daily cultural, social and economic trajectories (Mahmood 2001; McNay 2000). Agency, in this sense, is a form of action that aims explicitly to undermine hegemony through resistance, but it also materializes through active engagement in society—in a process known as “embedded agency” (Mihelich & Storrs 2003)—that creates consciousness and offers an autonomous space within which women can outline their goals and self-interests. Therefore, agency derives not from the lack of constraints or the annihilation of outside forces, but instead from a direct relationship to structures of subordination (Mahmood 2001).

The question remains of how agency is probable if subjects themselves are the effects of E'tesami's discourse. Butler contends that it is “the very fact that utterances have to be reiterated that creates the space for change, transformation and resistance” (Lloyd 2005:97). As mentioned earlier, performativity proceeds and shapes actors through reiteration by drawing on sedimented rituals and practices. Butler explains that, “‘agency’ is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed.... Discourse is the horizon of agency (1995:135). This would mean that agency is not related to any theory of the self, but rather it is an effect of the operations of the discourse/power structure through which subjects are motivated to act. While an actor is entangled in flexible—and often fragile—forms of recreating identity through, for example, E'tesami's poetic discourse, agency cannot be separate from the context of power relations. Motherhood was a process, or relationship, of the discourse/power structure; it was a discursive juxtaposition that opposed the very existence of normative powers. Butler regards “agency not as the possession of the subject but as a phenomenon that exists in its operation; that can be located at the site where discourses are renewed” (Lloyd 2005:99).

The idea here is not to romanticize resistance, nor to claim that E'tesami's concept of "motherhood" materializes into "resistance as signs of ineffectiveness of systems of power and the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). The intention is not to view power as a reductionist concept in a weak and unrealizable structure. It is to claim that E'tesami's verse moves beyond the binary of resistance/subordination, where agency and actors who resist "need to be located within fields of power rather than outside of them" (Mahmood 2005:9). There is a universal desire to be free from relations of subordination, but motherhood offered, as the British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern states in her feminist studies, both a "*diagnosis* of women's status across cultures and a *prescription* for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated, or oppressed" (1988:26-28). Motherhood, in E'tesami's poetry, was a concept that diagnosed women's issues and suffering in Iran, and, at the same time, offered prescriptions for how an ideal or a desirable way forward for women could take shape. The readers of E'tesami's five powerful poems became familiar with the diagnosis of, and also the prescription for, their needs. The verse resonated within them, leading them to act in different ways. Each individual Iranian woman who read E'tesami became a creator, an agent who by virtue of the deficiencies in the normative structure that could not maintain a stable subject became performers, possessing agency based on a concept of "motherhood" that is treasured.

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