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Soudabeh DESIRES:
Gender Performativity and Performance of Gender, from Ancient Mythologies to Present Street Performances

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Abstract

This research investigates how ancient female figures, particularly Soudabeh/Phaedra, inform Iranian artists and activists in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Focusing on the myth of Siyavash from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Biblical Joseph and Zuleikha, and Greco-Roman Phaedra and Hippolytus, I challenge patriarchal master narratives to reimagine gender identity and the politics of desire in contemporary protest performances of women. I investigate if the marginalised past is projected in the present creations of a new vision of gender identity and desire from a non-patriarchal perspective. Therefore, the real question to explore is how we may transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing. Adopting a decolonial lens, I critique Western theories of gender performativity, therefore examining how Iranian women disrupt such epistemologies in their performances of gender in their practices of everyday life.

Keywords: gender performativity; protest performance; gender studies; decolonial studies; *The Shahnameh*.

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In 2021 I published a paper on a project I was a dramaturg for; a performance loosely inspired by myths of Siyavash[1] and Hippolytus, put together by a performance group from Iran (2013-2017)[2]. The project was called *Persian Hippolyte* and was informed more than anything by the young performers' thirst for imagining democracy and justice, as a result of a stolen election by the state. After that research I was left with one major question: what happened to the woman? As did our international audiences in Paris, Berlin and Tangier. Inspired by that query, here in this essay, I shall therefore focus on the woman; Phaedra/Soudabeh, and her desire from a decolonial perspective.

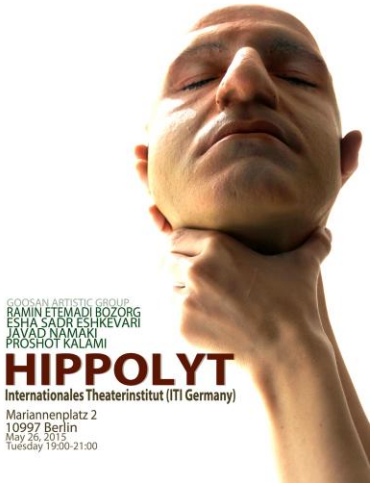


Fig. 1 – Poster.

Persian Hippolyte heavily relied on audience participation. The first 'encounter' between the spectator and performers takes place when the spectators arrive outside the space of the

[1] Siyavash, a well-known and popular name in the Persianate world, has appeared with various pronunciation and spelling in the Avesta, Shahnameh or other literary sources. The spelling I have chosen to use in my research is the closest to Avestan Siyāvaxš. Encyclopaedia Iranica provides more information on myths and stories surrounding this famous name, including a possible meaning; the handsome male with black stallions. Please see Skjærvø, P.O., "KAYĀNIĀN xiv. The Kayanids in Western Historiography", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. (2000), https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-xiv/, Accessed 1 April 2025.

[2] For more information, please see: Proshot Kalami (2020) 'Persian Hippolyte', Performance Research, 25:6-7, 282-288, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2020.1900530

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performance, where they are asked to be fingerprinted and signed in. In the initiation, each spectator would be handed the Hippolyte's death mask, to put on and be photographed. A slideshow of these pictures would be played for the duration of the performance, on a monitor visible to the audience. Tehran, Paris and San Francisco audiences each reacted to the process differently—some went through without any question, some rejected it, some questioned it—which resulted in a 45-minutes process in Tehran, 1 hour in San Francisco and 90 minutes in Paris. I will get back to the importance of this flexibility and even its chaotic result in my conclusion.



Iran participants who took pictures with the mask of the dead in the Iranian production of *Hippolyte*
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Fig. 2 – Masks.

Spectators were then led to a deathbed. If willing, they would then lie down like a corpse and be photographed and documented. Then they would see a series of pre-recorded performances to which members of the ensemble would react. The main performer would usually wear a mask to hide their identity, at times enacting the character of Siyavash. At the end the audience would be asked to vote whether Siyavash is guilty or not, casting their yellow or green paper ballots into clear blue boxes. Regardless of their choice, the ballots in the box would turn into a similar colour.

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Fig. 3 – Ballot Box.

In a post-show Q&A at the ITI Berlin and after my talk at Sorbonne Nouvelle III, the international performance and theatre scholar community were most vocal about the absence of Phaedra or Soudabeh from the performance, questioning why an Iranian performance group erases the female character from their performance (Kalami, 2020, P,6-7).

This present research, inspired by those reactions on the one hand, and on the other, the Woman Life Freedom movement of Iranian women which was sparked by the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini in September of 2022, is an attempt to address that question. Therefore, I pose the following claim: the corporeal absence of Soudabeh/Phaedra is a performative presence that is brought to the foreground by the very act of erasure. In her absence she breathes an existence that invites an intellectual interaction between the audience and her persona, which is embedded in the history that defines her character. The cultural forces already in existence in that liminal space, in turn give rise to a global (virtual and actual) space of performance—in case of Iranian women—where they reclaim their absent body from the political arena of Islamic Republic (hereafter referred to as IR) in their performances of everyday life practice. In this regard, I would like to argue that her desire,

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her "hair" and her "body" are at once the stage, the corporeal presence, and the signifier of her performance of gender.



Fig. 4 – Soudabeh (*The Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp), ca. 1522. Western sources up until middle of 20th century have chosen to spell the word *Shahnama*. Iranian authors and sources record the title of the book as *The Shahnameh*, as I have done. However, I have respected the spelling of sources I have used or quoted, hence seeing 2 different spellings here.

In order to understand such erasure, I find it imperative to dial back and explore the politics of desire and cultural gender construction in antiquity and ancient times from where the Iranian performance group took their inspiration. Keeping the focus on Soudabeh, therefore, I offer a close study of the myth of Siyavash from Ferdowsi's *The Shahnameh*, Biblical stories of Joseph & the nameless wife of Potiphar, Yousuf & Zulaikha from Jami's poetry, and the Greek myth of Phaedra & Hippolytus in Euripides, Seneca and Racine's plays[3], where all three heroes are seduced in identical manners by a woman of prominence whose desire brings forth cycles of disaster. To explore how the masculine pen manipulates the notion of desire as well as gender construction I shall provide a decolonial reading of these master narratives in hope of creating a vision anew, in which the cultural performance

[3] While I acknowledge that there are other version of the myth/legend in other cultures, for the sake of discussion, I am bound to limit my scope. This indeed invites much needed further scholarship on the matter to free the way these women have been judged from a perspective that is greatly informed by postcolonial theoretical hegemony.

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of gender identity and politics of desire can be accessed from a non-patriarchal perspective. I shall then put this in the context of Iranian uprising in the Woman Life Freedom movement.

It is important to note here that these women are written by men into myths of religion and culture in order to be consumed by men mainly. Soudabeh is the only one of them who may have faintly preserved her roots in history, hence her central importance—for she is based on an actual Yemenite prince (aka Hamavaran)[4] married to the court of Iran, whose land was freed by the Persians from the occupying Abyssinians.



Fig. 5 – "Rustam Overpowers the King of Hamavaran", Folio from *The Shahnama* (Book of Kings).

[4] "Abu'l Qasim Firdausi | 'Rustam Overpowers the King of Hamavaran', Folio from a *Shahnama* (Book of Kings)." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/446290. Accessed 23 March, 2025.

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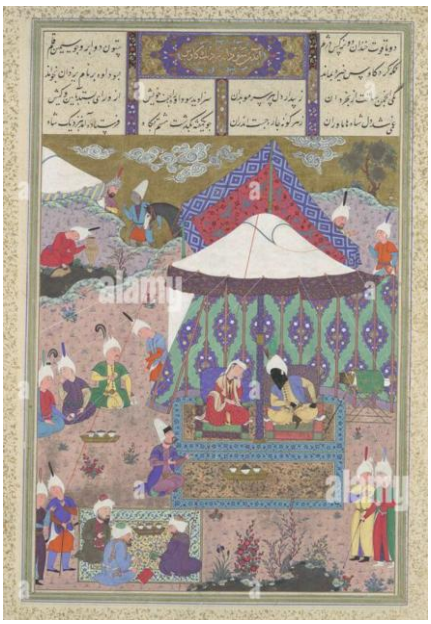


Fig. 6 – "The Marriage of Soudabeh and Kai Kavous", Folio 130r from *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings of Shah Tahmasp 452129).

Here the performance of desire informs cultural values, religious rules and historical destinies. While the Mesopotamian religious myth elevates the man who defied the intoxicating female desire to the level of a prophet, the Persians and Greeks make the young man an innocent victim of the female treacheries. This complicating twist renders the understanding of gender and desire yet another layer of importance belonging to the fabric of gender performativity, which may help us establish a counter narrative.

If we agree with the observation of Khaleghi-Motlagh in his perception of *The Shahnameh* and Ferdowsi's poetic power, where he states that "[T]he dialogues in *the Shahnameh* are realistic and frequently argumentative, and the poet uses them to good effect as a means of portraying the inner life of his characters,"[5] then we can look at Soudabeh's conversations with Siyavash at a deeper level, beyond the menial interpretation that has so far dominated the way we see her; a seductress.

[5] Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem (حکیم ابوالقاسم فردوسی), i. Life," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i. Accessed September 21, 2024

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Ferdowsi gives us a glimpse of the trust that is bestowed upon the Queen, by the King:



Fig. 7 – (Abbreviated translation mine: there is nothing but assurance, a mother, a queen who is going to introduce her daughters, Siyavash's half-sisters and other children of the court to him. They meet the prince and leave. Afterwards Soudabeh asks him, while praising his unrivalled beauty, whether he has found any of the women of the royal court a suitable match).

Amongst scholars who have written on the story of Siyavash in *the Shahnameh*, Hamid Dabashi gets closest to the point of view I am trying to offer here. In his summation "we encounter a mother figure who wishes to conspire with a son figure to overcome the father and place the son king over the father king. But the son refuses and ends up going through hellfire. Seyavash's[6] refusal is much less moral than political, all his moral protests (are) in fact a clear indication of 'protesting too much.'" (Dabashi 2019, 91-92). However, I would like to expand on this performative moment of political encounter by pausing on dialogues– and there are many of them–Soudabeh and Siyavash engage with during multiple visits of Siyavash to the Pardeh Saray[7] (aka the innards of the palace). During these conversations

[6] The name has been spelled differently by different scholars in various sources. I have stayed faithful to the spelling from the source where I have sued or quoted from in each stance.

[7] I purposely avoid using the term Harem for the mere loaded connotation that has so far been injected to the term by the colonial "Western", 18th century, Orientalist, middle class morality. Pardeh Saray connotation a private space where public politics are not performed. It is where the dynamic of family, prince and princesses and behind-the-scene affairs, as it were, are in the making. This while Harem conveys a sexually charged meaning that immediately reduces the woman into a mere object of desire by the male / king. Additionally, there has not been any official archaeological / historical document indicating that keeping a Harem was a commonplace affair in courts of ancient Persian dynasties. (Madreiter and Jacobs 1997, 1121–1137).

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we can observe Soudabeh as a Queen, who has not succeeded in producing a male offspring, and now feels threatened by the new prince who is predicted to be the heir of the throne. Naturally she seeks alliance by trying to first seducing him into a marriage with one of the women of the nobility, but Siyavash does not show any interest in that knowing that his position is secured, hence no need of a political marriage through her[8].

اگر با من اکنون تو پیمان کنی — نپیچی و اندیشه آسان کنی
یکی دختری نارسیده به جای — کنم چون پرستار پیشت به پای
به سوگند پیمان کن اکنون یکی — ز گفتار من سر مپیچ اندکی
چو بیرون شود زین جهان شهریار — تو خواهی بُدن زو مرا یادگار
نمانی که آید به من بر گزند — بداری مرا همچو او ارجمند
من اینک به پیش تو استاده‌ام — تن و جان شیرین تو را داده‌ام
ز من هرچ خواهی همه کام تو — برآرم نپیچم سر از دام تو

Fig. – 8 (Abbreviated translation mine: Soudabeh offers any of the women to Siyavash from any family he desires. She promises to make her obedient to him, if when on the throne he treats Soudabeh exactly as she is treated now, a queen. Or even if he desires, she is ready to offer herself to him).

نه من با پدر بی‌وفایی کنم — نه با اهرمن آشنایی کنم
وگر سرد گویم بدین شوخ چشم — بجوشد دلش گرم گردد ز خشم
یکی جادوی سازد اندر نهان — بدو بگرود شهریار جهان
همان به که با او به آواز نرم — سخن گویم و دارمش چرب و گرم
سیاوش ازآن پس به سودابه گفت — که اندر جهان خود تو را کیست جفت
نمانی مگر نیمهٔ ماه را — نشایی به گیتی بجز شاه را
کنون دخترت بس که باشد مرا — نشاید بجز او که باشد مرا
بر این باش و با شاه ایران بگوی — نگه کن که پاسخ چه یابی از اوی
بخواهم من او را و پیمان کنم — زبان را به نزدت گروگان کنم
که تا او نگردد به بالای من — نیاید به دیگر کسی رای من
و دیگر که پرسیدی از چهر من — بیامیخت با جان تو مهر من

"Until now, however, there has been neither written nor archaeological confirmation of a secluded harem.' Likewise there is no evidence for the large number of women, to which the classical sources attest."

[8] See figures 8, 9 and 11 where all indicate that Siyavash is not interested in women Soudabeh introduces him.

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Fig. 9 - (Abbreviated translation mine: Siyavash responds, while reflecting that he will not go against his father, the King. He also has to oil Soudabeh's palm, makes sure that his actions never aggravates her or the king. He reassures Soudabeh that in beautify she has no rival, like a jewel that only kings are deserved. To assure her, he says that you have a daughter that may suit me. He asks that Soudabeh should tell the king that if the day comes her daughter will be the only one that suits him. But if she asked about his heart, it desires no one but Soudabeh.

In "Siyavash" chapter of *The Shahnameh*, Soudabeh is a silent character until she becomes aware that Siyavash may end up on the throne, because the King, pleased by his achievements, has started to prime him for the job. Soudabeh's first invitation is very much for the purpose of getting to know this new heir, possible future king. Right after that initial encounter, when Soudabeh realises that Siyavash is not really concerned with making a pack with the Queen or securing positions for one of the princesses, his half-sisters, or any other matchmaking effort that she seeks to secure future alliances, she performs, like a Queen. Her conversation with the King on how to prepare Siyavash for what the court offers a prince at his level, in knowing the ways of the Parde Saray / innards of the palace, is pure diplomacy[9]. Dabashi also mentions the indifference that Siyavash shows is not by any means the evidence of a passion that is not reciprocated.



[9] Siyavash not wanting to make her an enemy, confesses to his admiration for Soudabeh while rejecting any idea of betraying his father, the King, agrees to make alliance with any woman of her choosing (Dabashi 2019, 91-92).

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Fig. 10 – (Abbreviated translation mine: Key Kavous is impressed by his conversation with Siyavash. He praises the King's court and royal household, declaring King's command is his desire. In an intimate conversation with Soudabeh, the king asks her to keep an eye on the prince and reports pack to him on how she finds Siyavash. This shows his depth of trust in Soudabeh, since he lets her know that his decision on making Siyavash the heir relies on her observation.)

The poem unravels a potent performative moment of history and politics when the Queen becomes an active player in the theatre of diplomacy. Siyavash is as devoid of innocence as is Soudabeh, for both are thinking about the power each may assume in the future of the land. Here the position of Soudabeh takes a considerable distance from the helpless and sinful Phaedra that Racine paints of her (Racine 1910, 57). She is not the nameless wife of Potiphar nor is the seductress Zulaikha who is burning in tameless passionate desire to bed with Siyavash, portrayed by Jami.[10] In his version of the narrative, she is very close to Phaedra[11], except he allows a happy ending by bringing god into the triangle, who helps Yousuf to see her love and take her in. In this iteration, she is at best a property that now has exchanged hands. However, this Queen, Soudabeh, is planning to rule. Whether she is a successful player or not is a different matter. She is obviously not madly in love nor is she helpless. Ferdowsi does not make a victim of her character. Naturally he builds her character in a way that when we get to learn about the demise of Siyavash and his unfortunate end, her death in hands of Rostam becomes justified. For he blames her as the one who puts his misfortune into motion (Jāmī 2018, fol. 224r).

[10] Jāmī, N. ad-D. 'Abd ar-Rahmān. *Trinity Hall: Yūsuf Va Zulaykhā*. *Cambridge Digital Library*, 2018. https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224. Accessed April 2, 2025.
Provenance: The manuscript belonged to the library of ʿAlī Murād Ṭalpur (d. 1894), the second ruler of the Mankani Ṭalpurs state of Mirpur Khas, as seen in the seal dated 1230/1814. Acquisition: Presented to Trinity Hall by Geraldine Essayan in memory of her uncle, Lawrence Strangman (1907–1980), in 1996. Date of acquisition: 1996.

[11] The series of illustration included in this particular edition of Jami's poetry visualises the process of lust, seduction, and submission from page 171 (Folio 80b) to 224 (Folio 107a) very vividly show the process. For copyright purposes, I cannot reproduce images here. They can all be accessed here *Yūsuf Va zulaykhā*, *Cambridge Digital Library*. 2018, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224

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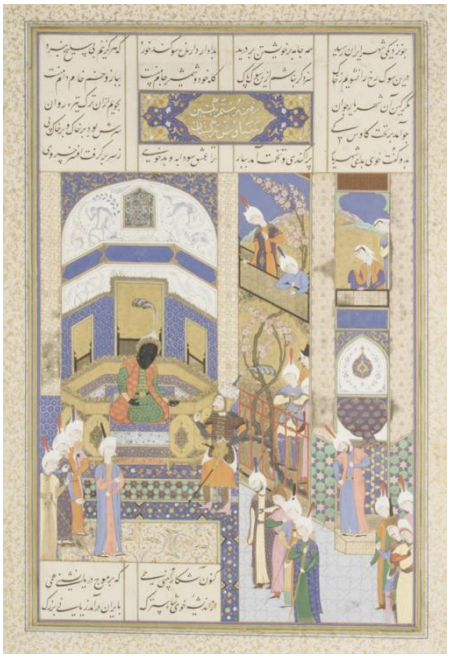


Fig. 11 – "Rostam Blames Kai Kavous for the Death of Siyavash", Folio 202v from *The Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp ca. 1525-30.

In every research one takes measures of the work to be shared. At such a moment *The Shahnameh* by Hamid Dabashi revealed my previous challenges in situating the rise of this woman from the bed of history into theoretical frame of European and Western feminist theories. The fundamental questioned is why seeking refuge in such wisdom when in fact the entirety of the question of this research breathes in the performance of identity in the ancient Persian court, myths and legends around it, Iranian women of the antiquity and what a particular Iranian performance groups had done with such ideas in regards to the notion of the performance of democracy and human rights in a way that relates to their reality. The legitimacy of thought and argument I have been so rigorously seeking, I realised, does not solely lie within the wisdom of the masters to whom I owe the entirety of my academic enlightenment. It instead thrives in a world that has only been seen through a colonising Western lens, a post-Enlightenment European middle-class morality. And through the imperial hegemony of English—or any other colonising language through which Western knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, literature and the arts have been

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transmitted to us, its colonial subjects—or the appropriation of it. Soudabeh, unlike Phaedra does not suffer from the burden of the Catholic sin and such religiously incited regrets and lamentation that Racine, for instance writes into her character or as we see in Seneca's[12] *Phaedra* from a Roman patriotic lens:

> PHAEDRA: Hold! I will myself confess.
> THESEUS: Why dost turn away thy sorrowing face and hide with veiling robe the tears that suddenly o'er flow thy cheeks?
> PHAEDRA: Thee, thee, O sire of the heavenly gods, I call to witness, and thee, bright radiance of celestial light, on whom as founder of this house of ours depends – though sorely tempted, I withstood his prayers; to sword and threats my soul yielded not; yet did my body bear his violence. This stain of shame shall my blood wash away.
> THESEUS: Who, tell me, was the destroyer of my honour?
> PHAEDRA: Whom thou least thinkest.
> THESEUS: Who is he? I demand to hear.
> PHAEDRA: This sword will tell, which, in his panic terror, the ravisher left behind, fearing the gathering of the citizens.
> THESEUS: Ah me! What villainy do I behold? What monstrous thing do I see? The royal hilt of ivory, embossed with tiny figures, gleams before me, the glory of the Athenian race. But he, whither has he escaped?
> PHAEDRA: The slaves, here, saw him speeding swift away in headlong flight.
> THESEUS: O holy Piety, O ruler of the heavens, and thou (Neptune) who with thy billows dost sway the second realm, whence came this infection of infamy in our stock? Was that man nurtured by the land of Greece or by the Scythian Taurus and Colchian Phasis? The breed reverts to its progenitors and debased blood reproduces the primal stock. This, truly, is the madness of that warlike race (the Amazons), to contemn Venus' laws and to prostitute the long-chaste body to the crowd (Seneca 1917, lines 885-903)

Soudabeh, as we have seen here, is not disrespected, diminished, or called a sinner by Ferdowsi, Siyavash, Key Kavous or even Rostam—who cannot help but blaming her for the origin of Siyavash's misfortune. And the reason for that cannot be accessed by the discourse that has already decided on how to perceive the women of "beyond the West", the veiled woman.

[12] Seneca, *Phaedra*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), line 885-903, https://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaPhaedra.html. Accessed 1 March 2020. Seneca the younger, was a Latin playwright and philosopher who flourished in Rome in the late C1st A.D. during the reigns of the emperors Claudius and Nero. His surviving work includes ten tragedy plays, nine of which are based on mythological themes.

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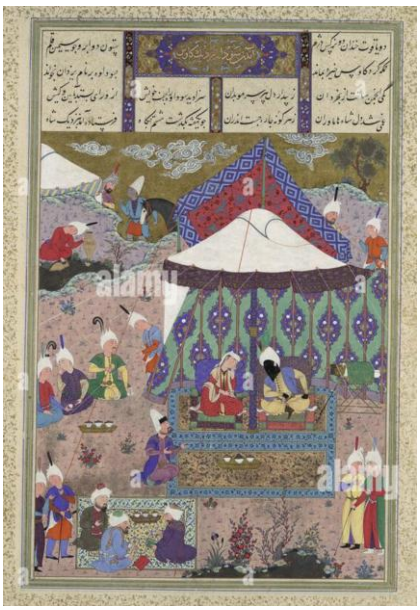


Fig. 12 – "The Marriage of Soudabeh and Kai Kavus", Folio 130r from *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp 452129.

So here, in my attempt to access Soudabeh, the woman seductress, it is important to ask "[i]n what way do classical texts like *the Shahnameh* carry the imperial memories of their past into the postcolonial history of their future? *The Shahnameh* is not a 'modern' text. The very temporal or spatial or ideological designation of 'modernity' does not apply and is in fact entirely irrelevant to the Persian epic. But how does the fate of a literary masterpiece of a once imperial pedigree reflect on the aggressive theorization of 'modern epic' as 'the form that represents the European domination of the planet'?" argues Dabashi (Dabashi 2019, 143). And by the same token, I question why her performative dialogues of diplomacy have been erased and replaced by notions of seduction and objectification into a mere carnal desire? Hence the importance of decolonising the patriarchal narrative around the women who desires to rule as an active player on the theatre of politics of her land.

In dialogues that Ferdowsi has written for Soudabeh, gender performance in the political arena of the Persian court, the greatest empire of the world at the time, is at its best. She first appears as an aside, an observer who has the ear of the king; a good queen who

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sees the importance of respecting the prince who may carry the line of Kay Kavous. Siyavash is not the son of the royal Queen but born to one of the royal wives, of a Touranian descend. So naturally at the beginning he is no threat, hence the absence of Soudabeh's direct engagement with him. Soudabeh herself is the princess of Hamavaran. Beyond the respect she demands in her own right, she is the symbolic and guaranteed bond between Iran and the king of Hamavaran who once took Key Kavous and his close council, hostage. Soudabeh in her very essence, is the arena of the politics of the region, and she plays it. Her body, in other words is at once her gender identity when marked by interpretation of passion, and the stage of the politics of the empire; an actual queen who had lived it. She is not a myth and stands on the shoulder of many other women who were active in ancient Persianate societies[13].

Unlike the Greek or Biblical myths, no god or superpower is there to take the responsibility of the demise of these characters. They do it to themselves. Ferdowsi gives Soudabeh and Siyavash the agency of a doer, a player on the scene of his theatre of politics and history. That is the significant difference between Soudabeh and her Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Greek counterparts. Her body and persona both, are embedded in a sociopolitical frame narrative based on gender equality in civil and human rights[14]. Yet in

[13] For more information on women rights and the role of women in the organisation of the empire, women as Foremen and business owners see sections under "Female Workers" and "Representation of Women" in Brosius, M. (1996). *Women in Ancient Persia, 559-331 BC*. Oxford University Press, USA. Similar and more concentrated information can also be found here: Brosius, Maria. "WOMEN I. In Pre-Islamic Persia." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 1 Jan. 2000, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/. Accessed 14 May 2018. Under i. *Achaemenid period*. 4 & 5, iii. *Sasanian period*, 5 for archaeological and historical documents regarding women equal pay, paid maternity leave and children allowance, women in workforces, women merchants, governors and women admirals and military commanders in ancient Persia (600 BC) and antiquity (until 650). It is noteworthy to mentions that Iranian women under the rule of Greeks and Romans (Seleucid and Parthian) were treated like pawns and practicing polygamy was the way of court. This interrupted order was again restored during the Iranian Sassanid empire for the commoners according to surviving civil documents and religious hermeneutic text, but not the royal court.

[14] Additionally in the following Tooran Shahriary Bahrami provides an insight into legal and ideological rights of women in Ancient and antiquity Persia that is more rooted in Avesta (Bahrami 2008, 25-30). Britanica introduces Avesta as the "sacred book of Zoroastrianism containing its cosmogony, law, and liturgy, the teachings of the prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster)".

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the imaginary of the generations to come, gradually Soudabeh's performative agency was reduced to the level of a type character, a seductress, a femme fatale. Jami's narrative based on the Quranic story of Yousuf played a significant part in the formation of that image.

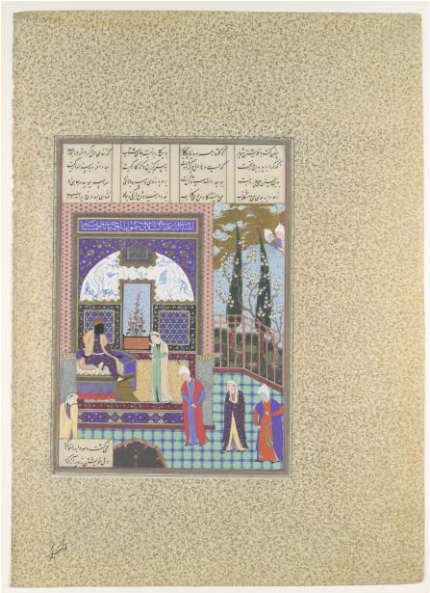


Fig. 13 – Siyavash Stands Accused by Soudabeh before Kai Kavous, Folio 163v from *the Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp ca. 1530-35.

It may be possible to look at the performance of gender in the stories of Greek and Mesopotamia based on what Judith butler has established in her seminal essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (Butler 1988, 519-531).

Where she argues that "reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently. In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief." She then by drawing from "theatrical, anthropological, and philosophical discourses", and phenomenology,

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demonstrates that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"(Butler 1988, 520).

The patriarchal master narrative, in constructing the identity of these women allowed them to take on a role, or better say, given a role to them, which produces a series of effect. Their stories create an internal reality or truth for that matter, which I will argue is produced and reproduced in all these tales, reinstating what is to be expected from a woman in position of power—considering that they all have been wives of men of authority (social sanctions). In the same vein I'd suggest that the case of Soudabeh may provide us with more than that; a glimpse to the political structure of ancient Persia, foreign policies and the not too passive role of women as actors in the sociopolitical scene, which puts the Iranian woman in a slightly different theoretical frame as far as feminist movement is concerned. This is one of the reasons based on which I argue the recent movement of Iranian women demands a narrative of its own and cannot be fully understood within the paradigms of Western philosophy.

Cultural performativity — embedded in Persian history and heritage — I argue, is the driving force of formation of resistance movements. Because when tapping into the archive of ancient figures, myths and legends, we re-discover and accentuate them in a strange temporality, that Kristeva calls "future perfect," where "the most deeply repressed past gives a distinctive character to a logical and sociological distribution of the most modern type" (Kristeva 1981, 13-35). Butler[15] defines critical genealogy of gender as "conception of an 'act' which is both socially shared and historically constituted, and which is performative" (Butler 1988, 530). She also acknowledges that it ought to be "supplemented

[15] Please see: "[…] reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently. In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief. In the course of making my argument, I will draw from theatrical, anthropological, and philosophical discourses, but mainly phenomenology, to show that what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler 1988, 520).

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by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be" (Butler 1988, 530). While Iranian young girls, during Women Life Freedom uprising, and in their practices of everyday life, protest the existing gender identities, they are not shy of redescribing ancient models in order to offer the kind of identity that has already become. Reappearances of images or historical figures of women warriors of ancient Persia or intentional celebration of Zoroastrian festivals as protest performance, historically constitute, are socially shared, and actively resist the gender apartheid of the IR.

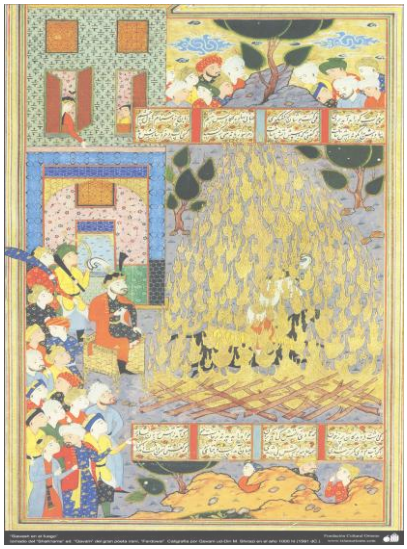


Fig. 14 – Siyavash on Fire, *The Shahnameh*, Qavam Edition, by Qavam ud-Din M. Shirazi Fundació Cultural Oriente islamorient.com ©

This very active gender performativity however has been appropriated within *The Shahnameh*'s master narrative and more so in Jami's hermeneutic poem based on the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha[16] — where the woman is reduced to a lustful seductress. These texts

[16] Nūr al-Dīn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Yūsuf Va Zulaykhā*, MS Trinity Hall 88, Cambridge Digital Library, 2018, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224. Accessed 1 March 2020.
The poem is written in Epic Poetry meter in 1483 in Farsi. Originally written in the 15th century by the Persian poet Jami, this poem narrates the story of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaikha. Griffith's English translation was first

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were produced centuries after the Arab conquest of Persia under a different ideological discourse than that of which the ancient Zoroastrian Persians once submitted to. Unravelling this palimpsest of politics of gender therefore invites the question originally promised in this research, on the construction of gender and desire. The becoming of this woman and her collective identity, unlike what Butler has established, is constituted based on a different anthropological, philosophical and theatrical model that of her western counterparts.

The curiosity of the western audience in noticing the absence of the woman asks for an investigation, for that audience too is submitted to a particular notion of gender construct when nations like modern Iran in particular and the Global South in general is concerned. Hence the necessity of examining myths of the ancient Greeks and the Middle Eastern Abrahamic religions, against the ancient Persian's, while questioning gender performativity and the construct of gender identity. A construct that was reinforced in various ages and stages, then through each translation and rendition, these stories were influenced by the hand that held the pen. This is where, I argue, the notion of female desire lurks in disguise. She can only breath if accessed outside the Western and Islamic colonial ideologies and theories. While Zuleikha or Phaedra need emancipation, Soudabeh's agency puts her outside such formula of objectification (taboo).

Here, I offer us to assume a different angle in order to look at the woman who desires. As Dabashi indicates in the conclusion of *The Shahnameh*, while I acknowledge that I am operating within the very structure of a Western tradition of research, thinking and writing in English, I have to be cognisant of the fact that the culture in which my subject is embedded embraces dimensions that surpass the boundaries of this tradition.

published around 1882. Later, in 1980 David Pendlebury provided another translation very close to the 19th century version titled *Yusuf and Zulaikha : An Allegorical Romance*. London: Octagon Press, 1980. It is important to note that Jami gives the nameless woman in Quran a name, Zulaikha and he fictionalises and expands the story to an eventual happy ending and lovers' fulfilment, hence the addition of "romance" into the title by Pendlebury.

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Dabashi too acknowledges that:

> What am I doing writing these lines in English, or Fanon in French, or Spivak and Said in English? None of us are European or of European descent. We are all colonials turned into postcolonial theorists. When they translate a Chinese or Arabic or Persian literary text into English or French they have not translated it into a European language but into a colonial language, a language read and understood far more by Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans than by Europeans — or those of European descent. The world did not learn these languages at a Berlitz school, or on an Ivy League campus. The world learned these languages at colonial gunpoint, in the trenches of anticolonial battlefields […] (Dabashi 2019, 198).

By the same token I would also offer similar approach towards the missing woman in the performance of the *Persian Hyppolite*. While it was difficult then to imagine a woman whose agency and desire could be a part of the political arena for a contemporary Iranian ensemble, who was concerned with their democratic rights, now, Iranian women whose performances as practice of everyday life we witness today, call for a different narrative. While the ensemble of *Persian Hyppolite* were comfortable with allowing so much vulnerability, unpredictability and freedom of participatory expression based on audience participation in various countries, they could not shift their focus from the victimhood of Siyavash to the performative power of Soudabeh's desire. Not a passionate or sensual one, but a desire to rule and to control the fate of the politics of the land. For that is what has been actively erased from her 'desire' throughout time by pens of male writers such as Jami, Seneca or Racine.

The *Persian Hippolyte* was all about 'presentness', everyday life, everyday judgement and the contemporary human condition: "What the spectators see and hear in the performance is always present. Performance is experienced as the completion, presentation, and passage of the present." (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94).[17] What was missing in that performance, now has come to the foreground. Iranian women in their intentional practices of everyday life on the stage of streets of Iran, by unveiling their hair and body as performance of protest.

[17] See Kalami 2020, 282-288.

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So here in our attempt to access Soudabeh, we should ask how that past is now projected in the present performances of women. Especially when this veiled woman beyond the West, burns her compulsory hijab, inspiring women like Michelle Obama and many other celebrities to join the movement, to take it to the stage of the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to force the United States Congress to pass Mahsa act (March 2024), to have Juliette Binoche and Isabelle Huppert cut their hair in protest on camera, to move European women parliamentarian like Hanna Neumann or Ye-One Rhie to fight for the freedom of imprisoned musicians and artist from the dungeons of IR. Abir Al-Sahlani's[18] performance made Iranian women's hair visible, especially because of who she is and where she performed, as did all other celebrities who appeared on Binoche's Reel (such as Anna Karin Faccendini, Présidente de l'association la Voie de la Justice, Anne-Cécile Mailfert, Présidente de la Fondation des Femmes, Isabelle Huppert, and 47 other women)[19]. As Reinalt and Rai have stated, "the role of public space as a staging ground for political legitimacy and contestation" (Rainalt and Rai 2015, 10) in this case connects the political struggle of Iranian women who are dealing with gender apartheid with a heightened spectacle and clandestine efforts of IR to filter internet access or block social media to stop the performance (on the stage of the streets of Iran) from being seen (on the screens of the world). For this was (and still is) a political uprising and a gendered performance, both, at once.

[18] Simon Johnson. "Swedish MEP Cuts Hair during Speech in Solidarity with Iranian Women." *Reuters*, 5 October, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/swedish-mep-cuts-hair-during-speech-solidarity-with-iranian-women-2022-10-05/.

[19] See Juliette Binoche Instagram Reel, 5 October 2022 https://www.instagram.com/reel/CjURS9tI8CF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

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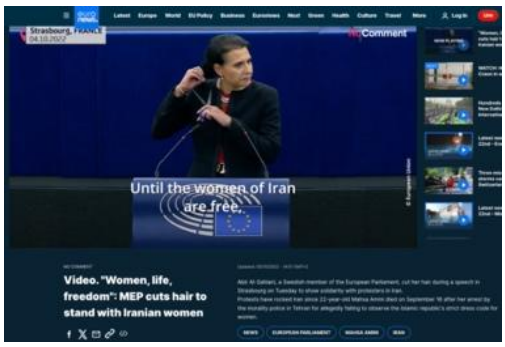


Fig. 15 – Abir Al-Sahlani, Swedish Member of the European Parliament, 5 Oct 2022

In Conclusion

When we toured with the play *Persian Hippolyte*, a decade ago, the performance group could not shift their focus from the victimhood of Siyavash to the performative power of Soudabeh's desire. On the global arena of post Mahsa's death, however, Iranian theatre and cinema actresses, along with other women, are taking their imposed hijab off, claiming not only their gender identity through their hair, but also the basic human rights of marginalised Kurd, Baluch or LGBTQ communities and going to prison for it. Iranian teenage girls had not started their nocturnal street dances, burning their compulsory hijab, and women practicing their everyday lives in an intentional performance of removing compulsory hijab and cover. But they are here now. Iranian women have shifted 'life' on the political arena of freedom. This is gender performativity constituted on their anthropological, historical and cultural identity.

It is still difficult to imagine a woman, a Middle Eastern woman, a woman who is immediately assumed to be Muslim, whose agency and desire are already a part of the political arena. As Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*, says opacity offers a potential for social movements to challenge and subvert systems of domination (Glissant 1997, 193)[20]. And like him, the contemporary Iranian women who are concerned with their democratic rights,

[20] In *Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997),* Édouard Glissant develops the concept of *opacity* (*opacité*) primarily as an ethical and political stance against the demand for total transparency and assimilation imposed by colonial and Western universalist discourses: "Opacity is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy, but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."

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demand the right to opacity, leaving these brackets and definition for the white West, hoping, maybe the world also start to rid itself of the colonial perspectives, informed by white-supremacy of thoughts—and maybe the guilt that western intellectuals carry—to allow the voice and the breath of *the other* to be heard without the fear of another patriarchal oppressive perspective. In other words, this woman is fighting a double battle, both rooted in patriarchy. Therefore, the real question to ask is how do we transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing?

Iranian women have been vocal that hijab and Islam do not have any roots in Persian culture, moreover, they have always been considered imposed, occupying, and of colonial ideologies—ones that are now utilised and mobilised by the gender apartheid of IR to take the entire nation hostage. Nazanin Bonyadi along with Masih Alinejad and other women activists, in an effort to raise awareness regarding what cultural wealth supports the uprising of Iranian women, where their courage stems from, and how this culture is in opposition to the imposed rules of the fundamentalist regime, have documented their claims on multiple social and political grounds such as the United Nations, the US Senate, and the European Parliament[21].

I am reminded here of what Janelle Reinalt and Shirin Rai in the introduction of their seminal work *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (2015) have stated: "Democracy works through the assertion and affirmation of claims to represent others. Such 'representative claims' (Saward 2010) require cultural performances… [which] is not a marginal curiosity or epi-phenomenal aspect of a more fundamental idea of representation – rather, it creates and reinforces representation itself" (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 10). An obvious analogy is easily drawn here: in the absence of such privilege, therefore any attempt to represent the *other* will be crushed by IR, rendering any performance, political at once. What I am interested in,

[21] See Nazanin Bonyadi's speech on 3 November 2022, at the United Nation Security Council meeting on the issue of Iranian Women Uprising after the death of Mashable Jina Amini (https://www.instagram.com/reel/Ckgb1iBJ3qu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, Accessed 3 Nov 2022

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however, is not this obvious analogy but another one. The claim to represent is common to both performance and politics, especially in a democracy. Would the democratic space of discourse entertain similar power of representation for this woman without looking at her, receiving her, framing and defining her through what our ever-illuminating W.E.B. Du Bois acknowledges as the veil? Without the invisible barriers that prevent genuine understanding of her? Iranian women who are performing protest in their practice of everyday life, are aware of how they are perceived or theorised by the dominant theoretical and academic discourse along with imposed ideological traditions they resist. The question is if we, embedded in the western traditions have achieved double consciousness in questioning how we might transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing.

And I shall end with a few words by Erika Fischer-Lichte:

> Artists are working towards exposing people to performance situations that shatter the spectators' safe positions and require them to become co-participants in the action. By setting up extreme conditions and exposing themselves to deadly risks the artists call on the spectators' sense of responsibility and provoke them to act. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 171)

Soudabeh's desire demands the spectators' sense of responsibility and in performing her gender identity, provokes them to act.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Proshot Kalami, Ph.D. (University of California, Davis, 2007), is an artist-practitioner and scholar specialising in Iranian cinema, performance studies and digital media, particularly in the context of gender and ethnicity. An Associate Professor in Performance Studies and Media Studies at NSU, she has taught at UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis in the US, and at Loughborough University in the UK. Proshot is an award-winning playwright, theatre director, dramaturg, documentary filmmaker, radio drama director, poet, visual artist and voice actor. Her plays and installations have received residencies, grants and sponsorships nationally and internationally, touring in the US, UK, Europe, India and Morocco. Kalami's scholarly work is concerned with the interaction of body and technology with specific focus on gender performativity and civic resistance. She sits at the editorial board of *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, and has served as guest editor and associate editor for journals including *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Survey*, *International Journal of the Image*, and the journal of *Women & Performance*.

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