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An Analysis of “My Mother’s Room”: An Artwork by Aidin Aghdashloo

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Abstract

Aidin Aghdashloo, an Iranian prominent artist, paints and repairs artworks as well as critiques them. His collections are such titles as “*Years of Fire and Snow*”, “*Memories from Malek Garden*”, “*The Apocalyptic Calamity*”, “*The Riddle*”, “*The Angels’ Pleading*”, and “*The Memories of Destruction*”; “*My Mother’s Room*” is a work from the latter made in 1981, which, thematically, is very close to the artist himself and is an indispensable part of him. This paper aims to decipher this work in order to reach its underlying levels and thus its underlying meaning. The following questions are to be answered in the paper: What was the painter’s purpose of painting his mother’s room in her absence? What is the semantic relationship between the miniature (Iranian/Persian painting) on one side and the painter’s mother and her room on the other? What are the overt and covert elements in the work that help the artist to communicate his meaning to his audience? What are the similarities between his “*My Mother’s Room*” and his “*My Mother’s Face*”? What are the similarities between the painter’s two works of his mother and mother-themed portraits by other well-known painters? With which of his other works can these two mother-themed paintings be compared?

Keywords: Aidin Aghdashloo, “*My Mother’s Room*”, “*My Mother’s Face*”, “*The Memories of Destruction*”, *Iranian painting*.

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Introduction

Aidin Aghdashloo (Image 1) was born in 1941 in Rashtⁱ, Iran to a civil engineer father (Mohammad Aghdashloo or Hajiev), who had graduated in Germany, and a Ghajariⁱⁱ mother, Nahid Nakhchivan. The little Aidin lost his father at 10 (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 18; Aghdashloo, 2016 b: 55). Back then, the family lived in Rasht as Hajiev's occupation necessitated, yet after the tragedy, the cause was buried with him; thus, they moved to Tehranⁱⁱⁱ, settling at Aidin's maternal aunt's residence in Zargandé, an area in the capital city, awaiting the pension to be relayed (Aghdashloo, 2017; Aghdashloo, 2016 b: 80). Aidin's father, his support, was gone and there was no one but his mother to fall back on, whom he always admires: *"a humble angel I don't know where she hid her wings. She was a symbol of modesty and hard work, as an Iranian woman, the one who never borrowed money but brought me up through thick and thin"* (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 26).



Image 1. Aidin Aghdashloo

"The Memories of Destruction"

This collection is one of the artist's most renowned, depicting his views on death and the destruction and demolition of values (or life in his opinion). To elaborate the idea further, he states that death is the absolute concept in the world while birth is not and is dependent (Aghdashloo, 2006: 46). Undoubtedly, his father is his first and bitterest experiences regarding the notion, and it is undeniable that this memory has played an important part in his thoughts about death. He believes that among family members it was his father who affected him most only during those ten years (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 25). Thus, he observes an important position for death and believes that it is a complex and sensitive matter. He wishes himself a decent, easy death where he would not cry for help (Aghdashloo, 2014: 142).

However, Aghdashloo erects a high wall between his ideas about death and those put forward by Sadegh Hedayat^{iv}. He considers Hedayat as the preacher of death who welcomed it. In

contrast, he does not sing the praise of dease but sees it as something irreparable and deplorable; to prove the feeling, he asserts that most of his compiled articles are about those loved ones whom he has lost. He is involved with a regret caused by death and filing a lawsuit in the court of his conscience against the unjust, unquestionable fact (Aghdashloo, 2006: 46). In his view, though, suicide is the most contemptible trip to the hereafter; it is indeed something he has always condemned and driven out of his thoughts about demise: *“one must not break others’ hearts by the selfish act of self-murder, leaving them alone forever, staring at them with contempt through their hanging picture frame”* (Aghdashloo, 2016 c: 96).

The collection *“The Memories of Destruction”* is the fruit of his outlook on the end of the journey. He gives life to this collection by burning, tearing, and crumpling values, and in his own word: *“I have always gazed at the exfoliating paint on old doors, the cracked surfaces of old paintings, the decaying flowers, and the ageing ones I loved. I have followed decay and observed destruction, trying to illustrate this doomed transformation: ruined values and esteem, loss and damage, uselessness and insolence, ageing, destruction, and ultimately death”* (Aghdashloo, 2016 c: 225).

The first works from the collection go back to an exhibition in 1976. Back then, Aidin had picked up his themes from the 15th and 16th century European portraits by Flippo Baldinucci^v, Antonio del Pollaiolo^{vi}, Jan van Eyck^{vii}, and Sandro Botticelli^{viii} (ibid.). The artworks changed dramatically after the Islamic Revolution^{ix} where Iranian and Oriental themes replaced those western ones (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 64) (image 2). The starter was a work painted in December 1981 (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 225), followed by another which has Reza Abbasi’s^x Iranian painting style burnt and disdained and left hanging and there is smoke from bombardments in the background sky, which in fact is telling the story of the war between Iran and Iraq at the time (image 3).



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“My Mother’s Room”



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This collection continued to be built up by tearing, burning, and crumpling Iranian paintings and calligraphy, symbols of Iranian tradition, up until a month after the first work of the collection was made, when the artist adopted a different theme for destruction: the mother’s room (image 4).

The deceased Nahid Nakhchivan suffered heart problems in the last years of her life. Her son, for that matter, had bought a house on Niavaran Street, Tehran and had built another floor on top for his mother to live with them there. The room thus found itself a particular concept for the painter. *“Whenever I went up to pay her a visit, she was in her bed or sitting next to it. The blanket was crumpled on a side. There was nothing on the walls... That room always had a very special meaning to me: it was strangely cold, it was undecorated. There was nothing redundant there though, and you could only see her small medicine cabinet resting on a corner”*, he reports her and her sanctuary at the time (Aghdashloo, 2017).

The artist points to the cold room but paradoxically aims to express how much he needed warmth; however, he embarks on meeting the need by painting warm colors like cobalt or ultramarine. But the warmth of the Iranian painting aside, he is preoccupied with angels, which of course frequent Iranian paintings. Indeed, he has always been after this concept, especially in his *“The Angels’ Pleading”*. It is a concept that means pleading the angels for his mother’s health which he puts on a hemistich from *Shahnameh Tahmasbi*^{xi}, *“Shall the God of the universe keep thee safe”*.

As a matter of fact, he gives more warmth and meaning to the room through such an appeal; in his view there is a valuable creature in the room and that she needs to be protected. Thus,

the purpose of adding a painting of an angel hanging in the air is for requesting health and protecting and reviving the mother and the room (Aghdashloo, 2017).

“*My Mother’s Room*” looks very symbolic at first glance while, according to the painter, except for a painting on the basis of *Shahnameh Tahmasbi*, all the other existing elements and their composition are nothing but recording a memory of the last scene from the room in the absence of the mother. Aghdashloo talks of his compassion and regret towards the rooms of the elderly and the sick, stating that these places will not be the same after their residents depart; indeed, their existence is totally dependent upon those who spend their life there and “*put their medicine cabinet there*”. Yet his purpose of painting the room without his mother, as he puts it, is recording the last obtainable picture as it will remain the same for a while after her death but change immediately; and it was what really happened, as he mentions (Aghdashloo, 2017).



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As mentioned above, the Iranian artwork is a part of the Iranian painting of *Shahnameh Tahmasbi* (image 5). Looking at the original painting, one would easily find that the theme goes back to the story of “*Fereydoun*^{xii} and *Zahhaak*^{xiii}”, where Fereydoun, to rescue Jamshid’s^{xiv} daughters, rides to Zahhaak’s castle and chains him. But Soroush^{xv}, the legendary angel, descends telling him he ought not to decapitate Zahhaak but detain him in the mountains. The portrayed angel in Aidin Aghdashloo’s painting represents the idea of Soroush descending to Fereydoun. In the original version, the angel is on the top, left-hand corner and Fereydoun, standing within the frame, is staring at the angel who has a message for him. In this Iranian painting, the angel is perceived as such a heavenly creature that does not degrade to set foot on land and for this reason it is painted on a golden margin of the work not on the ground.

However, Mr. Aghdashloo has painted his angel as part of his “*My Mother’s Room*” on a desert-like ground and that a part of the inscription, containing the aforesaid hemistich in his crumpled painting, appears on the bottom, right-hand corner of the frame. The painter asserts that only the angel has been his concern not the background (Aghdashloo, 2017). And although the plain golden background fades into the desert color, it seems he has used the desert to make the angel, with its happy and warm colors, stand out in the khaki desert which may remind the mother’s undecorated room.

Surprisingly, the hemistich “*Shall the God of the universe keep thee safe*” has not been said by Firdausi^{xvi} but comes from a couplet^{xvii} by Saadi^{xviii} and that the artist has not been aware of the mistake, which seemingly has not distorted his meanings and intentions. As a matter of fact, analyzing the *Shahnameh Tahmasbi*, one could come to the conclusion that the calligrapher added this hemistich to the inscription and, to avoid confusion between Firdausi's epic lines and this one, he/she used larger fonts and inserted it inside a special inscription and thus set it apart from the body of the work. It may sound unimportant upon first sight; however, Aghdashloo had believed the lines beside the angel were Firdausi's and that they happened to coincide with his demand: an appeal for his mother's health (Aghdashloo, 2017). Indeed, our painter imagined he had not changed the function of the poetry in *Shahnameh Tahmasbi*, but the point is that a calligrapher from the Safavid era had picked up this line from Saadi and used it as a prayer in his/her work. Simply put, Aidin had unwittingly benefitted from another artist's search and creativity for his pleading purpose by this poetry.

Like all the works in “*The Memories of Destruction*”, “*My Mother’s Room*” is torn and disdained; by disdain, he means when the time comes, people must depart and only memories stay, this is actually a shame in his idea. “*I have always regretted that people go but objects remain*” (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 65); this is humiliation, he says. This, in his view, is the loss of values and the story of the portrayed room is replete with this preoccupation; a room that is supposed to keep on when the owner has departed, with its painting that is supposed to plead health for the mother but faces destruction.

Yet, as mentioned, the painter of the room has not been heavily involved with metaphors and symbols but he wished to illustrate the room in exactly the same way as it was, so that he could simply record a memory. This precision can be seen in such elements as the room door which is ajar (this, he says, was because she was always afraid of her room's closed door), the crumpled blanket, and the two pillows in the bed, all of which, hand-in-hand, try to replicate the memory of his mother (Aghdashloo, 2017). However, another differentiating factor is the type of composition and structure in the frame. The observable space inside the room that can be viewed through the half-closed door and also the painting of *Shahnameh Tahmasbi*

hanging on the wall are placed right in the middle of the rectangular frame and somehow the white walls of the room and the painting itself appear like a wide white margin which reminds the viewer of an aura of light around a sacred place, as though his mother's room is a temple or a shrine.

Comparison between “*My Mother's Room*” and “*My Mother's Face*”



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After a year of the painting “*My Mother's Room*” in 1982, the son of Mohammad and Nahid gave life to “*My Mother's Face*” (image 6), a work very similar to that of the room in terms of theme, content, coloration, and technique. Both works are 55.5×75.5, painted by the combination of color pencils and gouache (Aghdashloo, 2017) where the theme is made by the former and the following details by the latter. According to the artist, the memorialized nature of his mother's face and her room made him adopt color pencils so that he could create vague elements in the background but the complementary elements were made by gouache as they were more recent and needed to be radiant (Aghdashloo, 2017). In other words, the mother and the room are primary elements but painted in the second plan of the work and, vice versa, the secondary elements of the vase and the Iranian painting are part of the first plan. Based on the number of the work inserted next to the painter's signature, “*My Mother's Face*” is the 14th artwork but it is the first from the collection “*The Memories of Destruction*”, a destruction which has been created by cracks and fractures on the glazed vase. It is worth mentioning that contrary to other works of this collection, this time a vase, not a face, is responsible for transferring feelings of burning and crumpling. “*Probably, Aidin, at least subconsciously, has not been able to reproduce his parents in paintings except as perfect Renaissance images on the verge of collapse. Death has covered their faces*”, believes Bahram Beyzai^{xix} (Beyzai, 2009: 328).

But why is the vase responsible for such an idea? Aghdashloo says one could see Karim Taherzadeh Behzad's^{xx} signature on the vase and that it was one of the very few items his mother brought with her to Tehran from Rasht after she lost her husband. Thus, this antique object meant greatly to Mrs. Aghdashloo, who was about to taste a life of hardship in Tehran with her son, and although they could have badly needed money, she did not even think of selling it; her son seems to be aware of its significance. He has, metaphorically, benefited from the cracks and the glued pieces of the vase to signify his mother's wrinkled and old face. And as mentioned earlier, he is also famous for repairing artifact but ironically he has never fixed this one but simply glued everything back together (Aghdashloo, 2017) (image 7).

Earlier it was said that the artist painted the room as it was, meaning intact, not as he wanted it to be. As he wanted to keep the memory alive, he painted whatever he saw: the unturned bed, the partly open door, and the bare walls. He did not manipulate it so that he could eternalize the memory, even if the element is a glued, antique vase. The same thing goes with his mother's face: no make-up. He insisted that she not wear any make-up so he could record the reality as it was (Aghdashloo, 2017).

Interestingly, by analyzing other famous works by artists like Vincent van Gough^{xxi}, James Whistler^{xxii}, Lucian Freud^{xxiii}, and David Hockney^{xxiv}, it seems that all of them, upon making pictures of their mothers, have observed a unanimous rule that is making simple backgrounds. Certainly, this is because of the significant value of the subject in the eye of the artist; indeed, they focus on that valuable subject so that other accompanying elements do not stand out over that asset (Aghdashloo, 2017). In most of these works old mothers have been painted inside a closed space, perhaps a residence, who are staring away or sometimes at the artist. Sometimes there is closed frame portraying their upper body and sometimes there is open frame where their whole body is painted. In most cases, they are sitting. Their face is sometimes sad and indifferent and sometimes there is a smile on it.

Undoubtedly, all these common elements share hidden stories, e.g. a sad look may indicate sorrow over losing a husband and the artists' portrayal may be to trigger some enthusiasm and of course to record the memory. The latter can illustrate the artists' worries concerning losing the mother. This case is clearly observed in the British Lucian Freud's collection (Wilkinson, 2014) who painted his mother in recumbent position or while she was sitting upright, looking sad and looking outside the frame (image 8, 9, and 10). Old single mothers living with their children, on the other hand, enter the artists' life making frequent subjects for them. The famous "*Whistler's Mother*" by the American James Whistler depicts that idea. He examined different sketches before coming up with the final version when he found the old mother would be more comfortable sitting in a chair (URL 2) (image 11).



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Sometimes the artist makes a portrait from the picture of the mother not a live one, as in the case of Vincent van Gogh who wrote his sister a letter complaining about the black and white picture of their mother and wished to paint her face colorful the way he really wanted and he did it (URL 1) (image 12).



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David Hockney, the English painter, made pictures of his mother frequently. He has a variety of paintings, drawings, and photographs of his mother among which one stands out: his mother in the ruins of Bolton Abbey^{xxv}. This is particularly evidence of his anxiety about losing his old mother. Hockney painted his mother until the last days of her life and three years before she passed away, he painted her in the bed where she died (Livingstone, 1999) (image 13, 14, 15, and 16).



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As discussed, the painters' aims of painting mothers were recording memories of them and they were taken as responses to their nervousness of loss. Losing their fathers and having old mothers double the pressure and it makes them paint a face that is about to go away too.

There is great difference between painting real figures and photographs. Vincent van Gough portrayed his mother's photograph while our artist and others experienced with live figures and this experience intensifies the presence of the mother. As a matter of fact, this presence of the figure causes some limitation to the work of the painter which strengthens the memory. Perhaps there is some unique selfishness in van Gough's portrait; Freud has to portray his mother with her dejected face as she is not looking at him, although her son may not have liked her looking away. Whistler paints his mother while she is sitting, although he wished her to be standing, but the old age did not allow for this but at least he has painted her in the real and perfect possible form. Aidin Aghdashloo's *"My Mother's Face"*, however, is not an exception.

Aghdashloo made his *"My Mother's Face"* in two weeks as she got tired soon being his model while his room painting was completed within 3 to 4 days. The mother felt like wearing some make-up to look more attractive but it seems it was not his intention as he has been after recording immediate memories (Aghdashloo, 2017). Although her making-up could be considered as recording a reality, the painter felt her plain face was the real 'reality'. He first painted his mother's room and then her face which shows he has been thinking about death and this echoes in his works. He looks at the empty room of his mother and imagines a day without her and tries to register the moment. In fact, he looks at death before it comes, tears up the Iranian painting of Shahname Tahmasbi in his mind, and imagines his mother's empty room. But his *"My Mother's Face"* could be the only work of his that is empty of imagination and fantasy but based on facts of the moment.

Comparing "My Mother's Face" with his "Tara's Portrait" and "Firoozeh's Portrait"



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Aidin believes he has to illustrate what he loves faithfully (Aghdashloo, 2016 a: 65). Apart from his mother, he has taken other family members as his subjects: his wife and his daughter. The following is a comparison of the three important women in his life.

In 1988, he portrayed his wife, Firoozeh At`hari, by means of pastels and crayons on a 68×54 board (URL 3). It is a unique work in that there is no destruction or dummy. It is clear that this work follows his ‘faithful recording of love’ theory (image 18).

He also portrayed his daughter, Tara, in 2009 using gouache on a 75×75 canvas (URL 3). This work belongs to his collection “*The Memories of Destruction*” beside the portrait of his mother’s face and, using cracks on the background, he demonstrate destruction. Tara’s profile has been made by imitating Renaissance works by Pollaiolo (image 17).

He has had three different views towards these three important women of his life: his mother’s registered memory analogous to the old cracked vase gives the work a type of oriental and Iranian aura; the portrait of his daughter with its Renaissance and western painting style shows the generation gap he felt at the time; and the exclusion of his wife’s from all other collections and the idea of destruction is a sign of a different attitude he had towards her.

Aghdashloo has made only two mother-themed works; his mother’s face still looks at him from the golden widely-margined frame in his studio in Tehran, Iran but he has no idea where his snapshot of his mother’s room might be as it was sold many years ago (Aghdashloo, 2017). And Nahid Nakhchivan finally left his 42-year-old son in 1983.

Conclusion

The work “*My Mother’s Room*” is unique among others in his “*The Memories of Destruction*”; it has a close link with the artist’s insight and his life. He sees it solely as a recording of a memory that has come together with the destructed Iranian painting in this collection. However, as explained above, there are elements in the work that add to its attraction even if they have not meant by the artist himself. But as it is thematically related to his views, memories, and even subconscious, it is possible to interpret it both with the help of the artist and based on personal readings.

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- URL 3: <http://www.aghdashloo.com>

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- ⁱ A city in north of Iran
- ⁱⁱ An old Iranian dynasty (1789-1925)
- ⁱⁱⁱ The capital of Iran
- ^{iv} Iranian black literature writer (1903-1951)
- ^v Flippo Baldinucci (1624-1697)
- ^{vi} Antonio del Pollaiolo (1429-1498)
- ^{vii} Jan van Eyck (1390-1441)
- ^{viii} Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510)
- ^{ix} People's revolution against the Shah (1979)
- ^x Iranian painter living during Safavid time (1565-1635)
- ^{xi} An exquisite version of Firdausi's epic Shahnameh which was made at Shah Tahmasb Safavi's workshops
- ^{xii} A fictional, mythological character of Firdausi's Shahnameh signifying good
- ^{xiii} A fictional, mythological king of Firdausi's Shahnameh signifying evil
- ^{xiv} A fictional, mythological king of Firdausi's Shahnameh
- ^{xv} A Zoroastrian guarding angel
- ^{xvi} A celebrated Iranian poet (940-1020)
- ^{xvii} The complete couplet is as follows:
Shall the world be on thy side.
Shall the creator be with thee.
Shall thou be prosperous.
Shall the God of the universe keep thee safe.
- ^{xviii} A celebrated Iranian poet (1210-1291)
- ^{xix} An Iranian contemporary writer and director (1939)
- ^{xx} An Iranian engineer and architect (1888-1963)
- ^{xxi} Vincent van Gough (1853-1890)
- ^{xxii} James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
- ^{xxiii} Lucian Freud (1922-2011)
- ^{xxiv} David Hockney (1937)
- ^{xxv} A historic site in the UK