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Sugar Blessing

Leila Zahiri

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Through ritual, and the ambiguous and metaphorical language of ritual, gender ideologies can be at the same time projected and renewed, yet also challenged, destabilized and ridiculed.¹

In her new work titled *Sugar Blessing*, Leila Zahiri investigates the rapidly changing views on gender roles in Iranian society through the lens of a familiar collective ritual: the wedding ceremony. Using performance and video while drawing on personal experience, Zahiri examines the cultural and social implications of the materials and objects used during this Iranian ritual, and by taking them out of their festive context, invites the viewer to reflect on some of the more disturbing contradictions that lie beneath the surface. As Azam Torab points out in her book *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*, “rituals are a key to understanding some of the most crucial social, economic, political and cultural processes in Iranian society and are important arenas for the women in their struggle over social accomplishment and the legitimate definition of their social reality”². Having lived through the experience of arranged marriage herself in a patriarchal society, Zahiri focuses on the very object that is believed to symbolize and ensure the sweetness of conjugal life during the often elaborate Persian weddings; the sugar cone.

The contemporary wedding traditions, like many other rituals in Iran, are rooted in the ancient Zoroastrian customs and contain an abundance of symbolic material. As Turner explains in his study of rituals as symbolic action, a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual, a “storage unit” filled with a vast amount of information, which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior.³ In this work, Zahiri chooses to isolate and unpack the sugar cone as one of these symbolic units. Her performance in the video directly references the use of sugar during the first half of the Iranian marriage ceremony called *aghd*. During *aghd* two cones made out of hardened sugar are softly ground together above the bride and bridegroom's head by a series of happily married female relatives. The sugar drops on a silk scarf held over the couple's head by a few unmarried girls. In *Sugar Blessing* the artist re-stages *aghd* but cleverly inverts some of its core elements.

¹ Torab, Azam. *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. P. 5.

² Ibid.

³ Deflem, Mathieu. "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30.1 (1991). P.21.

The video is stripped of colour, and a white background replaces what is usually a scene of over-the-top euphoria and celebration. A solitary individual, placed in the center of the frame, is repeating the same meditative action ad nauseam. There is no sound but the continuous grinding of the sugar cones. The bride is staring right at the audience as the sugar covers her dark hair in white dust. She is dressed in black and seems to be in mourning. Everything points towards perpetual struggle rather than a happy ending. In this way sugar moves from material to metaphor, becoming a site for negotiating the relationships between self, society and politics.

Cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, looks at rituals as structures of control, “storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community”⁴. By upsetting the structure of a specific ritual, Zahiri challenges the crippling values and costumes that it promotes in order to reclaim her autonomy and assert her agency as an Iranian woman. In silence, she condemns the ritualistic behavior that has for so long preached principles and beliefs that have affected her own life, as well as the lives of many Iranian women. In her work, Zahiri attempts to resist the perpetual reproduction of traditional ideologies around gender roles and moral codes, and uses the layout of a widely practiced ritual to point to its inherent absurdities. Finally by removing the sugar cones from the alien hands of “happily married” female relatives and holding them in hers, Zahiri is resisting the rather passive image of the naïve, young bride who is being showered in sweetness by older females who have been labeled “successful” in their married lives by their community.

In *Sugar Blessing*, despite her struggle to free herself from the unspeakable trappings of the visual codes of her own culture, the protagonist has at least taken matters in her own hands. Throughout the work, the artist is challenging the values of her own culture, while connecting with a wider audience.

-Parastoo Anoushahpour

⁴ Ibid. P.24.