

# **BANAFSHEH SAYYAD'S *NAMAH*: Displaying/Displacing Feminist Identity and Politics**

By Diane Wawrejko, MFA, CMT, PhD  
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## **INTRODUCTION. *PLAY OPENING SECTION OF MIRRORS.***

Banafsheh Sayyad is dubbed by critics as “the ultimate Persian woman” (Baghbani in *Namah* 2008) who combines ancient Sufi traditions within contemporary dance improvisations. She was born in Iran during the Shah’s rule. A few years after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, she and her family fled to London as her parents are atheist and embrace Western ideas. Her father, an actor, theatre director, and writer, remains a noted filmmaker. Three years later, they relocated to Los Angeles where she took her first formal dance classes, even though she states she always has danced and always was interested in dance. Sayyad attended college and received her MFA in dance from UCLA. She tried her hand at filmmaking, performed in an ensemble and Flamenco work, and then finally formed her group *Namah* which is a pre-Sanskrit Avesta word meaning reverence and greeting, or more specifically the light within me and the light within you

(Sayyad 2008). I conducted an interview with Sayyad after a performance of *Namah* in Chicago with Iranian-European musicians *Zarbang*.

Susan Manning's ideological critique of nationalism and feminism can be a useful way to view Sayyad's dances as cultural identity and feminism rooted in religion and displayed through a nation's politics. Manning uses this method to look for "ways to conceptualize dance as a site of ideological contest, that is, as a cultural space" in which both "categories and judgments" of praxis and non-verbal ideas that connect us to dominant powers and structures are negotiated and transformed (Manning 1993:27). Her ideological critique is an approach to understanding dance as "social production" in which I use religion/politics as the ideological construct, and her definition of nationalism as "imagined community" also is useful (1993:10-11). The body-as-culture theories of Jane Desmond (1997 and 2001) and Janet Lansdale (2007) further illuminate their usefulness in examining Sayyad's works. In what ways do her dances and her female dancing body display and displace tensions between politics and identity?

## **DISPLACEMENT: DANCING IDENTITY.**

Sayyad's dancing identity is complex as it "challenges stereotypes about Iranian identity" (Ditmars in *Namah* 2008). Critics (Looseleaf 2003;

and Segal 1999) have called Sayyad's work a "sensuous" fusion of traditional and modern Persian dance, Sufi spinning, Flamenco, tai chi, and American modern dance. Sayyad comments that since she is trained in these genres, it is only natural that these are evident in her body and expressed in her works. Although she is from Iran and is drawn to her historical and cultural roots, her journey since then encompasses a global cultural awareness:

"I feel I am more of the world. I belong to the earth, and so that a form of dance that speaks to that invites everyone. At the same time, it honors [my] roots to branch out and be a citizen of the world. So that's really the aim of why all of these are coming together. And on the other hand, this is what I really love. I love these forms and so they are going to come together because I am them, too."

Sayyad 2008

Derrida, in *Politics of Friendship*, calls this undoing of the connection between birth and citizenship the deconstruction of genealogy and questions cosmopolitan democracy (Butler and Spivak, 2007:91). In contemporary European society, this is extended further to include the notion of a "cosmopolitan multiculturalism" that goes beyond differences in race and class (p 94). Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak (2007:33) suggest that the concept of "state" and/or "nation-state" can both bind and unbind to

produce a certain vision, which is seen for example through displaced persons and immigrants such as Sayyad; thus, thinking of a nation-state as a political formation is problematic since political control is unstable as exemplified by the current Iranian regime. These notions, along with Manning's 'imagined community,' are useful in understanding Sayyad and her works as she identifies collectively with her cultural roots by performing works that speak of her Persian tradition. This is similar to German and American modern dancers such as Wigman and Graham who danced both Woman and a connectedness to nation, "between individual bodies and the collective body of the nation" (Manning 1993:1). This further asserts Lansdale's (2007) claim that aesthetic and cultural moments are constructed and embodied in the act of performance.

## **DANCING RELIGION/DISPLAYING POLITICS.**

Although her parents did not approve, Sayyad states her early years and identity were influenced and shaped by her grandmother who was a devout Muslim. She brought a "form of Islam that was from the heart, and she lived that message . . . such purity" (Sayyad 2008). At a young age, Sayyad discerned that her grandmother's practice of kindness, love, individual acceptance, and community contrasted with the harshness of the

current government's *shariah* Islam, and this drew her in. The Islamic government's open oppression of women, individuality, and differing viewpoints caused Sayyad to question true Islam and to reject this expression of it, both politically and religiously. Her interest in the history, ancient roots, and religion led her to embrace her 2,500-year-old Persian (not Iranian!) identity and Sufism, which she calls the "heart of Islam" (Sayyad 2008). Through Sufism, she found the freedom and expression through their practice of dance and music that was lacking in and is at odds with the government's institutional religion with its external rules. This is similar to other women from Iran who have left or spoken out against their home country, such as *Persepolis* author Marjane Satrapi (2003) who emphatically identifies herself as Persian, not Iranian and resides in Paris; and formerly imprisoned human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi (1997) who was a judge and lawyer under the Shah but demoted to court clerk under the Ayatollahs and who chooses to live in Iran. In what ways does the relationship between politics and religion construct Sayyad's identity and dances?

Sayyad's spiritual forté comes from finding the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi mystic Rumi, or as she puts it, when she opened herself to his writings he "let me come in . . . and is an amazing teacher (Sayyad 2008)." What are

some of Rumi's teachings and practices, and how are these displayed in her dances?

Shaykh Jilani, or Jalal-al-din Rumi (1207 – 1273 AD), was a Muslim who fused and compiled tales or “ancient wisdoms” from the Greeks, Jews, Hindus, Persians, and Chinese with a non-literal or spiritual interpretation of the Koran (Kritzeck in Williams 1973:155). The *Mesnevi* is considered his greatest work of “rhymed metaphysical knowledge” (Schwartz 2008:9). These tales, or parables or doctrines, consist of truths that are present in all religions as God is the source (Fadiman & Frager 1997). These are woven into a mystical, contemplative life called ‘Sufism’ centered in simplicity, love of God, humility, remembering, and meditation that sometimes included flesh piercing and drug taking (Kritzeck in Williams 1973). Today, Sufis’ acceptance within Islam is problematic. Sufism is regarded by some as “folk Islam” and backward, while others view it as cultivated, elite, and the heart of Islam (Schwartz 2008:7). For Sufis, a necessary part of prayer is the trademark spinning in circles as it aids in centering themselves for meditation (Smith 1988) by inducing trance. Poetry, singing, dancing, and head-whipping movements are important as these are forms of embodied prayer. Symbolism is important as God is disguised in symbols to reveal Himself to those who believe. Whirling, as

most commonly done by Dervishes, represents the planets revolving around the sun; and to remind one that Islam is a circle, God is its center, and the law is its circumference (Smith 1988).

Using Desmond's (1997) notion of the body as a primary text in uncovering cultural history, in repeated viewings of the concert DVD, Sayyad employs a lot of spinning in her works such as *Mirror*, *Axis of Love*, and *Prayer #7*. During the interview (Sayyad 2008), she expresses that she wants to make choreography that speaks to this internal connection and tension between physical and spiritual. She says that the whirling and head bobbing, what she terms 'reverential bowing,' in combination with the music helps her to go into a trance state. Something else emerges or just happens that is not of the habitual self but a connection to one's essence or source. Even hair "has a life of its own and it's not a limb that knows what it is doing" (2008). There is an order from chaos that occurs without volition, and dervishes do both of these movements for hours which itself is a sort of confirmation of Manning's (1993) 'community.'

Because Sayyad overtly rejects Iran's current religious and political ideology, her dances and dancing body can be seen as a site of cultural and political protest (Wolff in Desmond, 1997). Her dances are both implicitly and explicitly woven with Rumi's verses, such as *Prayer #7* and

the opening section of *Mirror*. In *Axis of Love*, one of Sufism's core is a heart of love as opposed to the rules and practices of *shariah* law. She embodies this literally by working around and from her axis, her center which she states is "crucial" (Sayyad 2008). She confides that this dance is a prayer from the heart, and a spiral is happening internally which she takes into the body and structure of the dance, including the gobo projected onto the floor. This central spiral is also seen in *Prayer #7* in which the dances spin in and out of it (Sayyad 2008 and Concert Program 2008). She maintains a literal centeredness spatially within the work which parallels the centeredness occurring within the body.

#### *PLAY CLIP OF AXIS OF LOVE*

She states that the finish of *Axis of Love* in which she is turning and turning, then brings it into the center and down to low level is to show literally the midline of the body and her "feeling" of it, too. She further says that she is allowing the light in through the mid line and is trying to communicate that. All of her dances have that core which is "crucial" (Sayyad 2008).



## **DANCING POLITICS/DISPLAYING FEMINISM.**

Sayyad is unapologetic for her expressions of feminism and femininity in her dances. My notions of her female body in motion come from Jane Desmond and Judith Butler. Desmond (2001) argues that the dancing body is not just physical but political, social, mental, thinking, feeling, and historical through the embodiment of space and time. The female body can be studied, as it is a plausible text (Desmond 1997). Butler's (2004) suggests an embodied performance based on doing that involves improvisation. It is an incessant activity that unfolds without one's volition based on the agency of social and cultural norms that is actually "undoing gender." Using these two lenses, I argue that Sayyad's feminism unfolds as a disruption or displacement of an American ideal of hegemonic feminism.

It is ironic and unconceivable that in April 2010 the United Nation's placed Iran on its panel on Women's Rights. During my interview, Sayyad (2008) remarked that the current Islamic Republic of Iran bans the public dancing of women. Dance does not have a high place in Iranian culture as it is deemed "lowly and cheap . . . a sexy display . . . what floozies do" – not unlike some Puritanical views in the US. There were ballerinas under the

Shah but as she pointed out, this is a Western construct as her culture remains void of an acceptable dance tradition. Thus, her family was shocked and confused when she began dance training and pursued this as a career. Fighting against both personal and cultural associations, she projects a new kind of feminism not esteemed in the West, an image of the pure Sufi woman: strong and feminine with appropriate costuming and non-voyeuristic movements. Just as Manning (1993:xv) states that Wigman's dances displayed feminism because she "subverted the eroticization of the female performer," so does Sayyad. To Sayyad, displaying her dancing body as an object of desire is not her aim:

I don't want to appear like a sex object because that's a bad thing. Right now I feel so in touch in how I'm taking a step for women not only of Iran but of the Middle East and then of the world because we have limitations. In Iran of course the limitations are very obvious. Women have to cover, women can't express themselves freely, you know. In Saudi Arabia women can't drive cars, there are these veils that they wear that they have to be lifted in order to put a spoon up to eat food. Absolutely ridiculous. But I do understand that some women choose to do that . . . So now, cultural and social implications are huge and I feel I'm taking a step for women to really embrace their womanhood, to be the strong woman who is very sensual at the same time. But the sensuality isn't a weak one. Sometimes in belly dancing for example I feel that women are making themselves weak. The outfit being so revealing and then so much about pleasing someone . . . it leaves women weak and vulnerable.

Sayyad 2008

Sayyad subverts the eroticized body by displaying a dancing female body that is centered and strong, a “woman who’s strong and beautiful and sensual and connected to a spirit and who’s inviting you to connect with a spirit” (Sayyad 2008). She talks about Rumi’s dictum to “unfold one’s own myth,” to find your passion, and particularly for women to express themselves and live freely. She states there was no model to follow in her country. Men have a tradition of whirling dervishes and taking that onto the stage, which is a masculine construct. When she wore their hat during a spinning trance, she said she felt “bizarre” because she is a woman and that hat is worn by men. “I want to wear something feminine . . . [being feminine] is very important to me” as many Western women have appropriated masculinity, particularly in the work place, which she rejects as a woman. In her dances, she displays a feminism that is strong and percussive, centered, yet distinctly feminine with graceful “filigreed arm work” (Looseleaf 2003), “cascades of long, flowing hair” (Segal 1999), and sweeping gowns and veils “that would make Salome jealous” (Looseleaf 2003). In general, it is a type of feminism that contrasts with Western concepts of feminism and a feminist dancing body, similar to how Sarah Palin has disrupted the notion of what constitutes feminism in the US.

## CONCLUSION.

The value of this analysis is the performative display and displacement of feminism, identity, and politics. Like Manning's (1993) Wigman, Sayyad embodies feminism and nationalism and creates a collective identity that is idealized. Her dancing body displaces and deposits sedimented residues of history, culture, identity, politics, religion, and feminism. Sayyad problematises identity/feminism and place/politics by weaving mystical Persian traditions and Islamic religion with American modern dance and performative improvisation. She re-negotiates notions of politics and feminism through displaying embodied practices as spectacle. Sayyad is a pioneer in combining spirituality with strong-but-graceful movements within her cultural context, displaying femininity and thus problematising feminism.

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