



# Art, Borders and Belonging

On Home and Migration

Edited by  
Maria Photiou & Marsha Meskimmon

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## Parastou Forouhar: Materializing pain and beauty

Lydia Wooldridge

In her diverse body of work, Parastou Forouhar (b. 1962) uses distinctively textile means to interrogate and re-narrate perceptions of cultural difference between Iran and Germany. Textiles communicate. From an etymological perspective, the English usage of the word 'text' stems from the Latin *texere*, to weave, to braid, to join together or to fabricate. Forouhar uses textiles or textile construction techniques as a language through which to examine complex, discrepant and interrelated ideas simultaneously. Whilst analysis purely based on ethnicity is reductive, Forouhar's artistic practice is informed by specific personal circumstances relating to Iran's recent past. It is, therefore, necessary to interweave the personal, the national and the international in any analysis of Forouhar's work. In this way, my analysis aligns with postmigratory approaches in art history, which shift emphasis from migration and migrants as objects to study and focus instead on 'migration as a perspective'.<sup>1</sup> An initial frame for reading Forouhar's artistic practice is the assassination of her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, by the Iranian government in 1998. Consequently, her work is often read as a critique of the theocratic regime in Iran. However, Forouhar's artistic practice also concerns the transfer of culture and understanding between Eastern and Western cultures, in particular Iran and Germany (her chosen home). Whilst other critics have focused specifically on these approaches in her work, I use textiles or textile construction techniques to consider her practice from a new perspective. In this chapter, I analyse Forouhar's use of textiles or textile processes to materialize commemoration, cultural difference and identity. Looking specifically at *Eslimi* (2003), *Weaving Pain* (2013) and *Kiss Me* (2013), I examine how metaphors associated with

entanglement, weaving and appliqué can be used to read the heterogeneous works created by Forouhar. These works simultaneously communicate complex and often contradictory ideas concerning beauty and pain, religion and secularism, and tradition and modernity.

Forouhar was born in Tehran to Dariush and Parvaneh in 1962. Dariush was a politician in the Mohammad Mosaddegh era and Parvaneh a political activist. They both opposed the post-revolution (1979) theocratic regime in Iran and championed human rights and democracy. In the early 1990s, the Forouhars encouraged their children, Arash and Parastou, to seek asylum outside Iran. Parastou relocated and settled in Germany, studying for a masters degree at Offenbach College of Arts. On 22 November 1998, Dariush and Parvaneh were murdered in their own home in Tehran. Their assassinations formed part of 'The Chain Murders', which sought to eradicate intellectual dissidents in Iran. Their deaths provoked large demonstrations throughout Tehran with twenty-five thousand people taking to the streets to commemorate their lives and protest for dissident rights.<sup>2</sup> Forouhar's artistic practice has always been concerned with 'abstraction and the formation of metaphors' drawing on what she learnt from students who 'expressed dissent through highly coded and alternative methods.'<sup>3</sup> However, in the aftermath of her parents' murders, pain formed the central subject of Forouhar's artwork. *Eslimi*, *Weaving Pain* and *Kiss Me* all feature references to physical pain. Whilst it is tempting to read Forouhar's artistic practice as autobiographical, it is also important to look at the broader cultural themes raised in her work. These include mourning, martyrdom, ritual, language, dictatorship and democracy. Examining these themes allows Forouhar to interrogate supposedly different cultural practices in the Middle East and Germany, thereby providing a snapshot of the reciprocity and interconnectedness of cultural interactions in contemporary societies.

When viewing Forouhar's complete body of work, ornamentation appears to be the dominant aesthetic. It was whilst studying at the Academy of Arts in Tehran (1984-9) that Forouhar first understood the communicative power of ornamentation and subversive coding.<sup>4</sup> In addition, her subsequent education at Offenbach has situated her artistic practice within European histories of ornamentation, including the rejection of ornamentation by Modernists in the twentieth century. Her earlier textile work, *Eslimi* (meaning ornament), is a clear example of combining traditional Persian ornamentation and subversive

coding. Forouhar digitally creates complex patterns out of unexpected objects such as weapons and genitalia. These erotic and violent shapes are repeated and arranged to form intricate patterns, which disguise the individual motifs. Abbas Daneshwari suggests that the highly structured, repetitive patterns in *Eslimi* are metaphors for the 'intricate and sophisticated structures of [theocratic] control [in Iran]'.<sup>5</sup> He asserts that the works are more than just biographical; 'they are critiques of a society ruled by anachronisms'.<sup>6</sup> The full and half drop and mirror repeat patterns of *Eslimi* are printed onto woven cloth and displayed as a soft furnishing catalogue, intended to be flicked through. Russell Harris suggests that Forouhar's imagery and realization in the form of a sample catalogue 'makes a strong statement about harsh religious interpretations infiltrating the most banal and quotidian aspects of life'.<sup>7</sup> Any initial suggestion of the erotically charged Orient is challenged by this restricted daily reality and by the inclusion of delicate patterns created by instruments of torture.<sup>8</sup> Violence and intimacy are entangled (Figure 2.1).

In relation to textiles, entanglement describes the process of fibres, yarns and threads interlocking in chaotic and unexpected ways. Entangled imagery



**Figure 2.1** Parastou Forouhar, *Eslimi*, 2003, sublimation print on fabric, 594 × 420 mm.

Source: Artist's collection.

features prominently in Forouhar's later series, *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name* (2009). Here we see the familiar male genitalia and weapons of torture present in *Eslimi*, but the patterns are interrupted when we realize human figures in submissive positions intertwine with the ornate and macabre patterns. From a philosophical perspective, the notion of entanglement is commonly associated with postcolonialism and transcultural encounter. Édouard Glissant, the Martinican scholar, drew on Levinas's philosophy of entanglement to explain a postcolonial world view countering the reductive colonial processes of assimilation or annihilation. Glissant considers 'entanglements of world-wide relation' in his *Poetics of Relation*.<sup>9</sup> His model of entanglement highlights the web of encounters between all cultures (including peripheral-peripheral). As explained by Duncan Yoon, Glissant's model of entanglement respects the encountered difference in the 'other' and thereby protects the 'diverse'.<sup>10</sup> I argue that Forouhar entangles her specific experiences of two cultures (Iran and Germany) by subverting Persian ornamentation and miniature traditions. Her use of imagery depicting sexuality and torture disrupts the traditional Persian decorative techniques and challenges Western perceptions of the 'ornamentally beautiful Orient'.<sup>11</sup>

Ornamentation also captures the entanglement between Austro-German and Iranian cultures, as Forouhar makes direct associations between ornament and crime in the forms of torture and murder. *Ornament and Crime* was a seminal lecture by the architect Adolf Loos in 1910. As a backlash to the ornate decoration found in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art and design, Loos suggested that ornamentation was symptomatic of degeneracy and argued for a minimalist approach to design, its simplicity enabling a greater appreciation of the materials. He proposed a link between ornamentation and regression, urging instead for pure forms which express rational functionality.<sup>12</sup> *Ornament and Crime* is considered a fundamental discourse surrounding the development of modernism and the shift from ornamentation, particularly within architecture. In a solo exhibition of her digital drawings in 2013, Forouhar directly challenges Loos' concept outlined in *Ornament and Crime*. Her ironically entitled exhibition 'Parastou Forouhar: Ornament and Crime' recalls Loos' assertion of the link between decoration and degeneracy, but Forouhar instead champions the postmodern appetite for ornamentation whilst highlighting sociopolitical mechanisms of inequality and violence.

Forouhar's ability to draw on and entangle references to Austro-German and Iranian traditions through the lens of ornamentation demonstrates that there are convergences between supposedly different cultures.

In Forouhar's digital drawing series, *Papillon Collection* (2010), signifiers of both her Iranian and German identities are further intertwined. The butterfly motif is highly symbolic in Persian poetry and miniature painting; it symbolizes the ideal of beauty and freedom, whilst paradoxically connoting death. Butterflies, like moths, are attracted to bright lights or flames that in turn lead to their demise (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 Parastou Forouhar, *The Papillon Collection*, 2010, digital print, 1000 × 1000 mm.

Source: Artist's collection.

Forouhar's butterflies are created by symmetrically depicting human forms in both positions of exploitation and submission. This alludes to one of the overarching themes in Forouhar's practice – 'the simultaneity of beauty and harm and the ambivalence of their co-existence'.<sup>13</sup> Her experience of living in post-Second World War Germany has led her to experience the legacy of, and collective guilt for, the crimes committed during National Socialism. As Lutz Becker states, Forouhar sees 'historical and psychological parallels with the Iranian trauma, she invests her art with a sense of personal responsibility that clearly implies a collective dimension'.<sup>14</sup> However, in the same instance, her use of butterfly imagery can also be read as a link to her mother, as 'Parvaneh' in Farsi means 'butterfly'. Whilst purely autobiographical readings of Forouhar's work simplify the complex cultural critique inherent in her pieces, the assassination of her parents has strongly influenced her practice. In an interview with Saeed Kamali Dehghan, Forouhar states, 'Every time I produce one [butterfly], it's as if I'm creating an image of my mother'.<sup>15</sup> In a further acknowledgement of specific German histories, the butterfly also aesthetically recalls the inkblots created by the German physician and poet, Justinus Kerner. In 1857, Kerner compiled a collection of embellished ink blots and poetry, entitled *Klecksographien*.<sup>16</sup> Kerner's collection of poetry and inkblots drew on themes such as *memento mori*, with his inkblots creating symmetrical forms which he turned into 'creatures of chance'.<sup>17</sup> During the nineteenth century, *Blotto* became a popular parlour game across Europe. Drawing on Kerner's approach, customers would create or buy readymade inkblots to embellish with drawing or poetry. In the twentieth century, the game *Blotto* inspired the Swiss psychologist, Hermann Rorschach. He devised the well-known Rorschach technique for assessing individuals' psychological characteristics. Just as Forouhar subverts *Ornament and Crime*, she engages critically with Rorschach in her photographic series *Rorschach: Behnam* (2008). In the series, a man is dressed in the chador and his covered torso creates symmetrical forms reminiscent of the butterfly or inkblot. Forouhar's butterfly forms depict the 'simultaneity of beauty and harm' whilst also locating the imagery within historic Iranian and German poetic and artistic traditions.<sup>18</sup> Again, this entangling or intertwining of cultural references enables the artist to challenge the spectators' understanding of transcultural difference.

Weaving is another textile technique that Forouhar uses to convey the synchrony of beauty and suffering. In *Weaving Pain*, strips of Forouhar's drawings are woven together at right angles to create a wall hanging. The imagery on the strips includes figures entangled together, enacting scenes of torture, and recalls her digital drawings from *A Thousand and One Days I-III* (2012) and the *Papillon Collection*. The varying symmetrical patterns of the warp and weft threads are reminiscent of the mirrored yet organic inkblot or Rorschach drawings. However, Forouhar's plainly woven construction transforms the imagery into a highly intricate repeat pattern. The edges of the piece are left raw, making it easy for the audience to see her construction method (Figure 2.3).

Like entanglement, the textile process of weaving has often been used as a metaphor for explaining social structures or cultural encounters. Early uses of textiles as metaphor appear in Plato's dialogue, known as *Statesman* (360 BC). As outlined by Arthur Danto, Plato was aware of the different skills required to maintain sustainable political order. Weaving offered him a suitable metaphor for describing the way these 'disparate but necessary elements can be held together in a whole that offers shelter, protection, and fulfilment'.<sup>19</sup> The connective and constructive qualities of weaving have led to it being used as an analogy for describing postcolonial cultural relations between former colonizers and colonized peoples. Although Germany and the Middle East did not have a colonial relationship, Germany had colonies in what is now called Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Nauru and the Solomon Islands. Much the same as France, Spain and the UK, Germany's history of imperial expansionism cemented Eurocentric perceptions of the world. Eurocentrism developed a world view in which non-European countries, cultures and citizens were considered as subaltern. Furthermore, National Socialism fostered and endorsed public disapproval of difference in relation to race, sexuality and disability. Post-Second World War German politicians had to address these established and complicated public perceptions in the rebuilding of the Federal Republic. I acknowledge that the relationship between Germany and Iran is not based on colonizer/colonized interactions. However, as Anne Ring Petersen suggests, there are interconnections between scholarship on postcolonialism and postmigration, with both terms being used to criticize and renegotiate 'European colonial, postcolonial and national systems'.<sup>20</sup> She



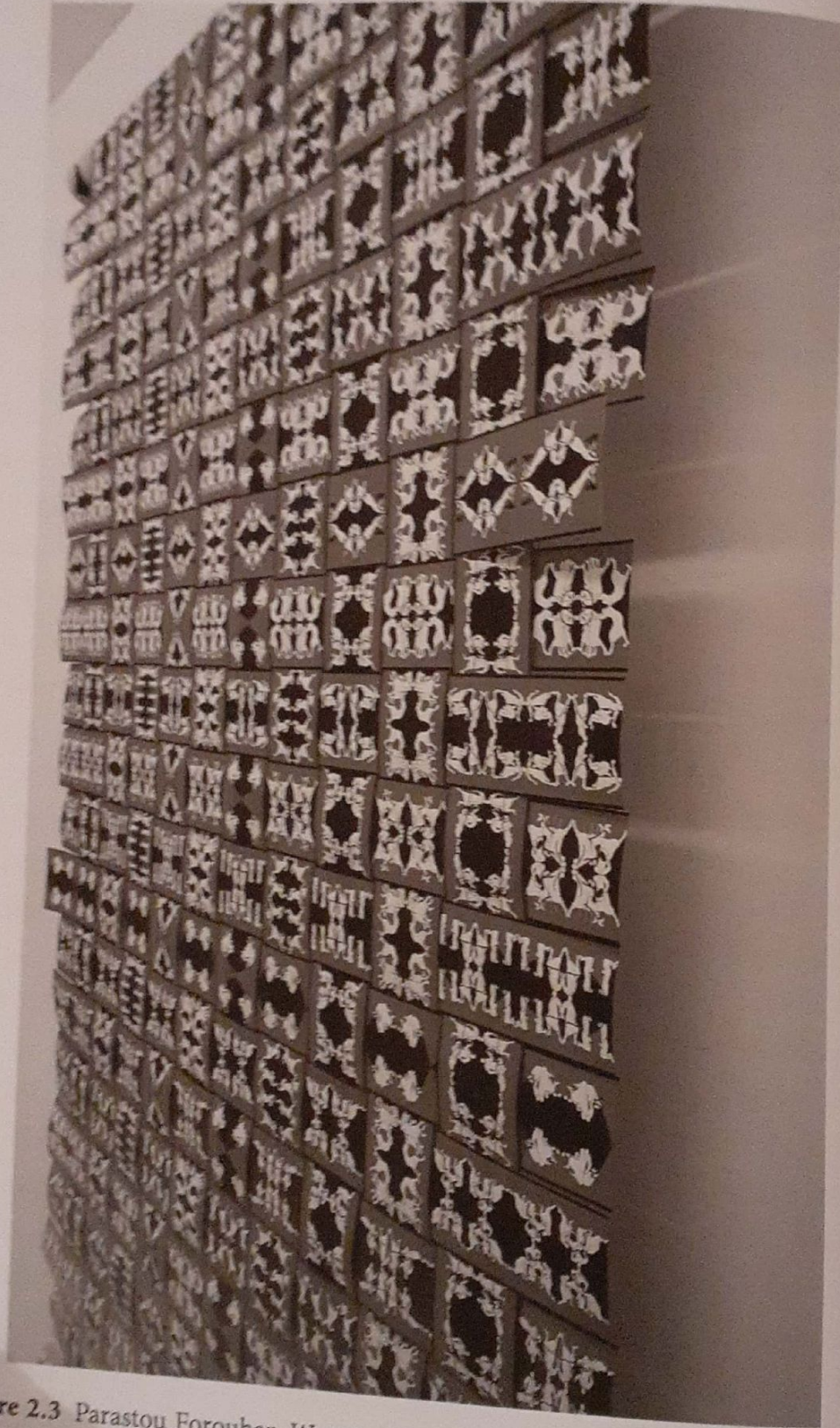


Figure 2.3 Parastou Forouhar, *Weaving Pain*, 2013, digital print on laser cut paper, 2350 × 1350 mm.  
Source: Artist's collection.

stresses that both theories engage with 'different aspects of repression' and that postcolonialism 'gestures towards a decolonial emancipation,' but in doing so it opens up a 'postmigrant perspective on society'.<sup>21</sup> Whilst I draw on research from the field of postcolonialism, as a vehicle for examining transcultural encounters, I use this scholarship to highlight the marginalization of minority groups within national structures. In her chapter, 'Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Saïd and Abdelkebir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison' (2011), Françoise Lionnet uses the weaving metaphor to explain Khatibi's concept of 'double critique'. Khatibi developed 'double critique' to disrupt binary ways of thinking such as Orient or Occident, Self or Other (colonizer/colonized). Lionnet highlights the unbounded, 'future-orientated' qualities inherent in the weaving metaphor: 'This motion is directed forward and back toward what precedes it so as to overlap with it, envelop it, and then point toward its exterior so as to move beyond it'.<sup>22</sup>

I suggest this weaving metaphor could also be applied to Helmbrecht Breinig and Klaus Lösch's transcultural theory of 'transdifference', which suggests that cultural identity is in permanent flux and oscillates between irreconcilable cultural differences. They distance their concept from other prominent postcolonial terms associated with cultural interactions, such as hybridity, and instead highlight its emphasis on 'a simultaneity of – often conflicting – positions, loyalties, affiliations and participations'.<sup>23</sup> As explained by the authors,

Transdifference ... denotes all that resists the construction of meaning based on an exclusionary and conclusional binary model ... It does not do away with the originary binary inscription of difference, but rather causes it to oscillate. Thus, the concept of transdifference interrogates the validity of binary constructions of difference without completely deconstructing them.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the individual threads (warp and weft) are analogous to the different and irreducible cultures, which are simultaneously held in close proximity (weave structure) but retain their independence. The weave, in its entirety, can be read as an illustration of the interactions between the different ideas, loyalties or affiliations during transculturation. The weaving metaphor is useful for analysing Forouhar's artwork, as it helps to explain how she renegotiates the binary oppositions of beauty and pain (and death), religion and secularism, and tradition and modernity without the expectation of resolution.

Forouhar follows a long tradition of associating weaving with pain and trauma. In Homer's *Iliad*, Helen is seen weaving a tapestry which depicts the course of war. At once her actions can be read as an output for processing pain, similar to the war rugs woven by female victims in the Soviet-Afghan war (1917–89). However, Helen's role is ambiguous as she is also portrayed as the weaver of the brutal scenes that unfold. Forouhar's *Weaving Pain* also makes direct reference to pain in the title of the artwork. The symmetrical patterns of torture that line the warp and weft threads have been likened by Joanna Inglot to the abuses in contemporary Iran and the revelations of violence and torture at American-run prisons in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay in 2004.<sup>25</sup> By weaving imagery that can be associated simultaneously with Iran and the United States, Forouhar emphasizes transcultural convergences that are often overlooked or ignored by the Western spectator. Therefore, *Weaving Pain* can be seen as representing the systematic, ingrained or even interwoven structures of power, abuse and violence that form part of Iranian and Western cultures.

In *Weaving Pain*, Forouhar's artistic practice is also strongly reminiscent of Penelope's weaving of Laertes' funeral shroud in *The Odyssey*. Both Forouhar and Penelope experience loss and engage with textiles as a form of mourning. Penelope weaves (or weaves and un-weaves) to delay remarrying after the presumed death of her husband, Odysseus. Instead, she agrees to marry once the funeral shroud for her father-in-law is complete. She weaves the cloth by day but at night unravels all of the day's labour, thus never completing the cloth or remarrying. Forouhar, on the other hand, weaves her digital drawings to create artworks that examine the abusive institutional structures in the world, including those that led to the assassination of her parents in 1998. Although mourning and ritual feature more prominently in Forouhar's artworks made from Ashura banners,<sup>26</sup> her use of weaving in *Weaving Pain* could thus be interpreted as a therapeutic or cathartic processing of trauma and grief.

In a similar manner to Forouhar's earlier work, *Weaving Pain* interweaves signifiers to both her Iranian and German identities. Again, the symmetrical inkblot imagery, alluding to historical German illustration and poetry, forms the central motif of Forouhar's woven artwork. Nevertheless, references to her Iranian heritage are evident through her critique of institutional abuses

of power. However, as explored above, this critique is not reserved solely for Iran's theocratic regime. Indeed, it returns the spotlight to Europe and America with their shared legacy of human rights abuses post-9/11. These polyvalent illustrations of torture, blindfolds and restraint straps, are repeated and intertwined, thereby creating intricate arabesque shapes that are reminiscent of Persian calligraphy.<sup>27</sup> The warp and weft strands which are decorated with repeating inkblot drawings intersect with each other at right angles. This over-and-under-lapping at ninety degrees emphasizes the woven construction of the piece, as well as the symmetrical structures of the individual patterns. For me, this recalls Catherine de Zegher's analysis of Cecilia Vicuña's work, in which she suggests that the crossing of warp and weft threads are the 'crux of [the] weaving, where change and interaction happens through encounter.'<sup>28</sup> This emphasis on encounter is reminiscent of my metaphorical reading of Breinig and Lösch's concept of transdifference, where cultural strands or elements interact, interlock, sit in tension, are transformed, yet remain independent. Therefore, weaving provides an effective material process to communicate the complexity of contemporary transcultural encounters and highlight the convergences between German (and Western) and Iranian cultural practices. Unlike her other work, where cultural signifiers are entangled or intertwined, *Weaving Pain* provides a more structured representation of how German and Iranian cultures overlap, interlock and interconnect.

It is not only perceptions of violence and torture that Forouhar holds in tension within her woven structures. Indeed, the binary of tradition and modernity is also interrogated through her material and process choices. Modernity is suggested through the artist's use of digital technologies, whilst tradition is evoked through her use of weaving and engagement with Persian ornamentation and calligraphy as well as historic inkblots.<sup>29</sup> By oscillating between traditional aesthetics, processes and digital technologies, Forouhar's work can be read as highlighting how global cultures and identities are dynamic and remain continually in flux. Neither culture nor identity are static, even if traditions, habits and practices signal to an imagined stable past.

Whilst weaving enables Forouhar to interrogate many themes simultaneously, including her German and Iranian identities, the tradition-modernity binary and the paradox of beauty and pain, its rigid and uniformed structure limits the freedom she has as an artist to evoke the complexities of transcultural

encounters. As the artist and researcher, Jill Magi suggests in relation to her own identity:

Instead of expressing a desire to be 'part of the weave', embroidery, as a model for subjectivity, presents the 'other' as capable of elaboration, proliferating beyond official or presumed status, working upon the surface of the cloth, piercing it with its presence in order to make something else that is not utilitarian, perhaps asking: are the benefits of full citizenship—integration into the weave, or melt into the melting pot—really the desired outcome?<sup>30</sup>

Instead, I propose that Forouhar's later work, *Kiss Me*, demonstrates engagement with another textile technique that more aptly describes her experience of transcultural encounters. Like Forouhar's other work, *Kiss Me* provides a platform for dealing with multiple, complex cultural themes simultaneously. What is particularly compelling is the artist's use of appliqué to stitch and layer these divergent ideas together. Stitch and suture have been explored by theorists as models for subjectivity. Stuart Hall considers the metaphor of suture to describe sociological identity construction. For Hall, 'identity thus stitches (or to use a current medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified.'<sup>31</sup> Although Hall applies the stitch metaphor to identity construction, the process is reminiscent of transcultural encounters, as both unify distinctive elements through joining or stitching. In *Kiss Me*, Forouhar uses stitch to manipulate individual components or material fragments to create a new fabric (her banner), yet each fragment retains part of its original characteristic. Moreover, stitching represents one of the paradoxes most prevalent in Forouhar's work, that of beauty and pain. The term 'suture' is a medical term, which implies pain, whilst stitching has commonly been associated with embroidery and decorative 'women's work.'<sup>32</sup> In like manner, Leon de Kock uses the seam analogy to describe how national identity is constructed when multiple cultures meet and interact. He describes the seam as 'the site of joining together that also bears the mark of the suture'; thus, the seam represents the process of connecting multiple cultures (the suture), whilst highlighting inherent convergences and divergences (through connection and juxtaposition of separate fabrics).<sup>33</sup> The German sociologist Andreas Ackermann takes the concept of the seam one step further by suggesting that

postmodern, multicultural society is reminiscent of patchwork.<sup>34</sup> Patchwork or piecing is the process of joining together geometric shapes to construct a larger fabric. As with de Kock's seam metaphor, the patchwork analogy conveys connectedness and interdependence. Yet, rather than focusing on the connection at one juncture, patchwork infers visible multidirectional joins to create the whole fabric. This multidirectionality inherent in the patchwork metaphor resonates with Corrado Fumagalli's concept of 'patchwork multiculturalism', which highlights the 'highly decentralised mix of discursive interactions' inherent in contemporary multicultural society.<sup>35</sup> However, using multiculturalism as a tool for describing the complex and nuanced interactions that occur during transcultural encounters is restrictive. In multiculturalism, multiple cultures live side by side but they remain distinct, removed from mutual understanding and unable to transgress barriers. In patchwork, fragments are only connected at the periphery, leaving the centre of the fabric pieces intact and unaffected by neighbouring fragments. Instead, appliqué offers a better tool for describing the complex relationships of 'selection and adaptation' that the postcolonial theorist, Mary Louise Pratt, introduces in her theory of the 'contact zone', which describes how 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture'.<sup>36</sup> Appliqué provides the artist freedom to work outside the lateral realm of patchworking or piecing geometric shapes. Instead, the artist can layer diverse motifs and fragments on top of each other, resulting in the concealment and exposure of different fabrics. Thus, the artist has autonomy over the selection and adaptation process and is in charge of what cultural associations are revealed and obscured from view. In her banner series, *Kiss Me*, Forouhar uses appliqué to represent divergent aspects of contemporary Iran, whilst challenging Eurocentric perceptions held by the largely Western audience of her work (Figure 2.4).

*Kiss Me* is a series of eight textile banners that are constructed using material fragments from Ashura banners and garish haberdashery elements, such as marabou feathers and faux-fur. Ashura is the Islamic mourning ritual performed by Shia Muslims. It is the day of commemoration for Hossein ibn Ali, a Muslim martyr and grandson to the prophet Mohammad. The commemoration ritual includes street processions of chanting and self-flagellation. The Ashura banners adorn the walls of the city and offer a



vibrant and colourful contrast to the black mourning garments worn by the participants. Over the years the banners have become increasingly gaudy and include depictions of mosques and traditional Persian ornamentation. Since 2003, Forouhar has created artwork using the Ashura banners, including *Funeral* (2003), *Safari* (2005) and *Countdown* (2008). However, *Kiss Me* is the only piece which refers to the banners' traditional forms. Whilst mourning is suggested through Forouhar's use of the Ashura banners as medium, the title of the artwork also suggests commemoration. *Kiss Me* or *Mara Beboos* was a secular pop song from the 1950s, written by an admirer to the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh.<sup>37</sup> The song is known as a mournful ballad about the separation of two lovers. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, it became emblematic of the failure or death of democratic rule. Mourning is, therefore, the link between the religious ritual of Ashura and the secular pop song *Mara Beboos*. By associating religious and secular approaches to mourning, Forouhar demonstrates the convergences between supposedly oppositional societal practices.

Although commemoration and mourning are evident as the central themes of *Kiss Me*, Media Farzin's analysis highlights Forouhar's more humorous and subversive engagement with these rituals. The Ashura processions bring together individuals (although men and women are separated) and have developed into an expression of collective identity for Shia Muslims and the theocratic regime of Iran. This does not mean that the social event is 'teenager proof'. As Farzin suggests, the Ashura processions provide an opportunity for young adults to interact and flirt with members of the opposite sex.<sup>38</sup> Appliqué enables Forouhar to select and adapt individual letters and accents from the original Ashura banners and flirtatiously rearrange them to form lyrics from *Mara Beboos*. By doing so she subverts the traditional sombre sentiments expressed during Ashura to indicate the modern manipulation of the religious procession by teenagers looking for romantic relationships.

The appliqué calligraphy of *Kiss Me* alludes not only to the personal romantic relations between Iranian teenagers but also to the lack of understanding across transcultural groups. To the Western spectators, who are predominantly non-Farsi speakers, each banner appears to say something different, due to Forouhar's use of tashkil and harakat accents. However, despite the visual differences, the imperative displayed on each banner remains the same: *Kiss*



Me. Non-speakers of Parsi remain unaware of the message the script conveys and, therefore, only engage with the aesthetics of the calligraphy. This process is reminiscent of Glissant's theory of opacity, where he argues for an acceptance of difference, even if the differences are opaque and untranslatable.<sup>39</sup> Glissant states,

If we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps judgements. I have to reduce. ... Accepting difference does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. ... For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.<sup>40</sup>

In relation to Glissant's concept of opacity, Forouhar's appliqué calligraphy prevents Western spectators from translating and thus fully understanding the phrases. This challenges Western thought and instead provides the spectator with the experience of opacity. However, untranslatability is not reserved for language; it is also highly relevant to the understanding of imagery and symbols. Forouhar's artworks are laden with culturally specific imagery, and these visual symbols are likely to be understood, or not understood but accepted, in different ways by her diverse audience.

Whilst Forouhar's use of calligraphic appliqué symbolizes untranslatability or the opacity and transparency binary, like in *Weaving Pain*, her use of materials in *Kiss Me* also represents the opposition of tradition – modernity. Traditionally men and women are dressed in black; yet, by contrast, over the years the Ashura banners have become increasingly colourful. Although tradition is signified through references to the historic ritual, modernity is suggested through Forouhar's use of contemporary commercial Ashura banners, with their showy neon colours created using modern synthetic dyes. Furthermore, Forouhar alludes to modernity through her use of synthetic backing materials, as well as manufactured haberdashery items, including faux-fur, lace, sequins and tasselling – materials commonly associated with fashion and clothing. By using modern Ashura banners as a medium, Forouhar embraces the contemporary developments of a traditional ritual.

The use of ornamentation to entangle references to her Iranian and European art education which we find throughout Forouhar's work is also important in *Kiss Me*. Whilst *Kiss Me* does not conform to the rigid, repetitive structures evident in *Eslimi* or *Weaving Pain*, the work does include dense sections of ornamentation that create symmetrical motifs. These decorative forms, with their longitudinal symmetry, are reminiscent of other Persian textiles, including the carpet. Forouhar selects and adapts different decorative patterns from commercial Ashura banners, and these material fragments are layered and pieced together to create dense and intricate sections of symmetrical ornamentation, which in turn resembles the original form of the commemorative banners. It is through appliqué that Forouhar has the ability to select, cut, layer, connect, reveal and obscure intricate sections of ornamentation that would not have patchworked neatly together. Just as in Pratt's description of the 'contact zone', Forouhar is in control of the visual elements she wishes to select and adapt, hide and reveal.

Overall, Forouhar's artistic practice examines and interrogates cultural difference between Iran and Germany by using multiple textile techniques. The plasticity of textiles means that as a medium it is uniquely placed to communicate the processes of transculturation and transcultural encounters. The use of weaving, stitching and patchwork metaphors to explain interactions and interconnection is prominent in cultural, literary and postcolonial studies, yet scholars engage with textiles in abstract ways. In contrast, my analysis shows how Forouhar provides material forms that concretely articulate the transcultural, relational and reciprocal process of cultural exchange. Entanglement is prominent in *Eslimi*, her earlier work printed on fabric. The repeated, interlocking and intertwined digital imagery remains a central motif in her subsequent work on paper and mixed media. It is through this process of entanglement that Forouhar examines the crossovers and divergences between her Iranian and German identities, thus challenging purely monolithic readings of either culture. Weaving is an ancient construction technique that has been metaphorically employed by philosophers over the years to describe politics and cultural interactions. Forouhar's use of weaving in *Weaving Pain* enables her to interrogate ornament as a cultural metaphor. The artist uses dense, interwoven ornament to examine totalitarian authority and the associated, but often obscured,

structures of pain and suffering. Finally, using stitch, patchwork and applique metaphors, my analysis of Forouhar's *Kiss Me* recalls Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' and her description of the selection and adaptation processes that occurs during transcultural encounters. Whilst appliqué is similar to patchwork, it provides the artist with creative freedom and autonomy, as it allows for the concealment as well as the exposure of certain material elements. Through a range of textile processes, Forouhar creates a nexus of discrepant yet interwoven loyalties, histories and identities.

### Notes

- 1 Regina Römheld, 'Beyond the Bounds of the Ethnic: For Postmigrant Cultural and Social Research', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 9 (2017): 69–74 (p. 73).
- 2 Catrin Lorch, 'Their Audacity Leaves Me Speechless', *Quantara*, 24 November 2017. Available online: <https://en.quantara.de/content/interview-with-the-iranian-artist-parastou-forouhar-their-audacity-leaves-me-speechless> (accessed 12 April 2018).
- 3 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Is It Art or Pain? Iran's Parastou Forouhar on Family, Death and the Failed Revolution', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2017. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/29/art-iran-parastou-forouhar-family-revolution-artist> (accessed 9 April 2018).
- 4 Parastou Forouhar, 'Veiled, Unveiled', [lecture] presented at *Fundamentalism in Art* (Dusseldorf, 2002).
- 5 Abbas Daneshwari, 'Amazingly Original', *Parastou Forouhar* [website], 2014. Available online: <https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/amazingly-original/> (accessed 5 April 2018).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Russell Harris, 'A Cultural Predicament', in *Parastou Forouhar: Art Life and Death in Iran*, ed. R. Issa (Saqi: Lebanon, 2010), pp. 10–13 (p. 12).
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