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This article presents a critical analysis of six photographs by the Iranian-Canadian artist Kiana Hayeri, whose documentary work focuses on the representation of women in contexts of sociopolitical vulnerability in Afghanistan. Particular analytical attention is given to two of these: one portrays women in conditions of incarceration, while the other depicts a group of women lined up to receive humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an examination of the visual compositions — including framing, body expression, gestures, setting, and context — as well as a consideration of the social, political, and religious environments in which the images were produced, the study proposes a reflection

on the symbolic and subjective layers embedded in the photographs. The theoretical framework draws on the studies of Walter Benjamin (1994), who discusses the function of photography, and Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991), who introduces the notion of "simulacrum" and explores the boundaries between representation and reality. From these perspectives, a paradoxical inversion between freedom and imprisonment is observed: the incarcerated women appear to experience a certain sense of relief by being distanced from external social pressures, whereas the women outside prison, although formally free, exhibit signs of oppression and control, arising from sociopolitical and religious structures that shape their lives. The study thus highlights a dichotomy in the experiences of freedom and imprisonment, questioning how the photographic image contributes to the construction of meaning and the reproduction of cultural norms. Through documentary photography, Hayeri reveals not only the material living conditions of these women but also symbolic and affective dimensions that challenge traditional narratives about gender and freedom. The article concludes by underscoring the critical role of the image as a means of resistance and a tool for interpreting power relations that permeate women's everyday lives in contexts marked by structural inequalities.

Keywords: Kiana Hayeri, photography, narratives, power relations

Fotografia Como Resistência: Entre Aprisionamento e Liberdade em Kiana Hayeri

Este artigo realiza uma análise crítica de seis fotografias da artista iraniana-canadense Kiana Hayeri, cuja produção documental se concentra na representação de mulheres em contextos de vulnerabilidade sociopolítica no Afeganistão. Com foco analítico aprofundado em duas fotografias: uma retrata mulheres em situação de encarceramento, enquanto a outra mostra um grupo de mulheres enfileiradas para receber auxílio humanitário durante a pandemia de COVID-19. A partir da análise das composições visuais — incluindo enquadramento, expressão corporal, gestualidade, cenário e contexto —, bem como da contextualização dos cenários sociais, políticos e religiosos em que as imagens foram produzidas, a pesquisa propõe uma reflexão sobre as camadas simbólicas e subjetivas presentes nas fotografias. O referencial teórico fundamenta-se nos estudos de Walter Benjamin (1994), que discute a função da fotografia, e de Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991), que propõe a noção de "simulacro" e discute os limites entre representação e realidade. A partir dessas perspectivas, observa-se uma inversão paradoxal entre liberdade e aprisionamento: as mulheres encarceradas aparentam experimentar certa sensação de alívio ao se encontrarem afastadas das pressões sociais externas, enquanto as mulheres fora da prisão, embora formalmente livres, demonstram sinais de opressão e controle, derivados de estruturas sociopolíticas e religiosas que moldam suas existências. O estudo evidencia, assim, uma dicotomia nas experiências de liberdade e aprisionamento, problematizando os modos como a imagem fotográfica participa da construção de sentidos e da reprodução de normas culturais. Por meio da fotografia documental, Hayeri revela não apenas as condições materiais de vida dessas mulheres, mas também aspectos simbólicos

e afetivos que desafiam as narrativas tradicionais sobre gênero e liberdade. O artigo conclui destacando o papel crítico da imagem como meio de resistência e ferramenta de interpretação das relações de poder que atravessam o cotidiano feminino em contextos marcados por desigualdades estruturais.

Palavras-chave: *Kiana Hayeri, fotografia, narrativas, relações de poder*

Introduction

Images, as cultural and social artefacts, constitute privileged means of symbolic mediation. They not only represent but also construct worldviews, actively participating in the production of meanings about subjects, bodies, and territories.

In this process, they may both reinforce stereotypes and hierarchies or destabilise them, functioning as devices of denunciation, contestation, or silencing. When articulated with hegemonic discourses, images tend to consolidate asymmetries of power; however, in specific contexts, they may also operate as tools of resistance, enabling counter-hegemonic readings that problematise social issues marked by structural oppressions. In the field of gender-based violence, the image acquires an ambivalent role: it may both denounce structures of domination and reinforce stigmatising representations, because

> the derealisation of loss — the insensitivity to human suffering and death — becomes the mechanism through which dehumanisation is accomplished. This derealisation occurs neither inside nor outside the image, but within the very framing in which the image is contained. (Butler, 2004/2019, p. 179)

In discussing the vulnerability of bodies and the regimes of intelligibility that determine who deserves mourning, attention, or protection, Judith Butler (2004/2019) argues that violence against women is naturalised within normative systems that authorise or disauthorise certain bodies to be seen. Visibility, therefore, is not neutral: it is linked to power relations that regulate what can be shown, by whom, and with what effects.

This article proposes a critical analysis of a series of six photographs by the Iranian-Canadian artist Kiana Hayeri, with analytical focus concentrated on two images depicting women in contexts of repression in Afghanistan — one taken inside a women's prison and the other during the distribution of humanitarian aid amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the visual *corpus* comprises six photographs, these two receive detailed attention, as they condense the central elements of the discussion proposed. Through these images, the aim is to investigate how photography contributes to the construction of meaning regarding the female condition, institutional violence, and the invisibility that affects women's bodies in circumstances marked by sociopolitical conflict.

The theoretical framework is based on two principal axes: the studies of Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991), especially the concepts of "simulacrum" and "hyper-

reality", and those of Walter Benjamin (1994), with his reflection on technical reproducibility and the politicisation of art. These authors enable a critical reading of the image as a means of symbolic contestation, capable of influencing the way reality is perceived and interpreted. Thus, the study contributes to understanding how Hayeri's images expose normative discourses and participate in the construction of new forms of understanding of the feminine in contexts of domination.

Representation and Reality: The Visual Foundations of the Social

The photographs analysed in this study are works by the Iranian-Canadian artist Kiana Hayeri, produced in Iran, a country experiencing an intense sociopolitical crisis marked by popular protests and State repression. Officially known as the Islamic Republic of Iran, the territory is home to one of the world's oldest civilisations, with origins in the Persian Empire (6th century BCE). The 1979 revolution radically transformed its power structure, replacing the monarchy with a hybrid theocratic system in which the *Supreme Leader* (the Shi'a religious authority) and the *President* (an elected office) share governance.

This singular political configuration also reflects a regional religious divergence. According to Stephen Kinzer (2008), while 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni, Iran stands out as the principal Shi'a nation, with 90 to 95% of its population adhering to this branch. This particularity has generated historical tensions with neighbouring countries, as the schism between Sunnis and Shi'as dates back to the early years of Islam. Hayeri's photographs captured not only everyday Iranian life, documenting current conflicts, but also the reverberations of centuries-old disputes that shape identities and politics in the Middle East.

The division between Sunnis and Shi'as dates to 632 CE, shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, resulting from a succession dispute. While the Shi'as argued that Ali should inherit leadership — Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law — the Sunnis maintained that the caliph should be elected from among the Prophet's most experienced companions. This divergence led to the selection of Abu Bakr as the first caliph, marginalising the Shi'a line, which came to regard Ali as the first of the 12 legitimate imams (Kinzer, 2008).

In Iran, this Shi'a tradition assumes a messianic character. Believers hold that the 12th imam, who disappeared during childhood, remains alive in "occultation" and will return as the *Mahdi* (the redeemer) to restore universal justice. Meanwhile, rulers are expected to guide society according to the principles of the hidden imam — an expectation that, when unmet, is viewed as both religious and political betrayal. This belief underpins the Iranian theocratic system, where laws are interpreted through the Shi'a lens of the Qur'an, permeating all spheres of social life (Kinzer, 2008).

This contextualisation is essential for the analysis of Kiana Hayeri's photographs, in which religion does not function merely as a backdrop but as a structuring axis that shapes social norms, forms of resistance, and even the aesthetics of everyday life in Iran. Images depicting protests, rituals, or seemingly ordinary scenes reveal, either implicitly or explicitly, the persistent tension between the divine ideal and human imperfections in the exercise of power.

The 1979 Iranian revolution not only transformed Iran into a Shi'a theocracy but also redefined the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, inspiring Islamist movements and straining relations with the West. The current conflict between the State and its population is particularly evident in civil rights protests, notably following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. Amini, a young Kurdish woman, was detained by the *Gasht-e Ershad* (Guidance Patrol or "morality police") for allegedly violating *hijab* laws, and her death while in police custody became a global symbol of repression against Iranian women.

The *Gasht-e Ershad* viscerally embodies State control over bodies and behaviour. Responsible for enforcing compliance with Islamic norms — such as mandatory veiling — this force represents the boundary between religious imposition and demands for individual freedoms. Its prominence in public spaces reveals a contradiction: while the regime uses it as an instrument of coercion, its presence also fuels waves of protests led by women who risk their lives by openly defying dress codes.

Repression has intensified in response to the protests. Data from *The Guardian* (Parent & Kelly, 2024) records 87 executions in July 2024 alone, as part of a Government strategy to suppress dissent, providing the context in which Kiana Hayeri produces her documentary work. Her photographs do more than denounce violence; they sensitively capture the everyday resilience of a population navigating between religious devotion and aspirations for social transformation. By portraying everything from public demonstrations to scenes of domestic life, Hayeri reveals the fusion of religion and politics, highlighting contexts in which political dynamics inevitably traverse the personal sphere.

Images, Simulacra and Politics: Theoretical Contributions to the Analysis

In a scenario dominated by the logic of post-truth, in which images may function as simulacra detached from concrete reality, Hayeri's work resists this dynamic. Her photographs sustain a relational density with the subjects depicted and avoid the aestheticisation of pain as spectacle. Instead, they produce fissures that interrogate normative regimes of representation. The tension between what is visible and what remains unsaid, between the captured gesture and the absent context, turns photography into a symbolic field of contestation.

Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991) proposes an understanding of the image through the

idea of the "simulacrum", which designates a form of representation disconnected from objective reality. The simulacrum does not copy the real but substitutes it with a system of signs that come to operate as though they were real, thus establishing hyperreality. In this regime, the image ceases to be a representation of the world and begins to function as an autonomous model of signification, displacing the original referent.

Photography, then, is not a reflection of the real but the construction of a visual world in which authenticity dissolves. This is particularly significant in times of post-truth, when visual narratives impose themselves with affective and symbolic force, often proving more persuasive than facts themselves. Images of suffering, war or vulnerability may, in these terms, be reappropriated, decontextualised or aestheticised to the point of losing their bond with concrete reality, becoming circulating signs for visual consumption.

The concept of "hyperreality", formulated by Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991), radically complexifies the interpretation of contemporary images, requiring an analytical gaze that transcends the immediately visible. In this universe, representations supplant veracity, generating simulacra that become "more real than the real". This dissolution between the factual and the fictitious allows constructed narratives to prevail over objectivity, creating a social fabric where signs circulate, recombine and generate new layers of meaning.

The implications of hyperreality extend to the media, society and patterns of consumption, as these simulations not only supplant the real but also remodel the social fabric, shaping individual perceptions, behaviours and collective experiences. In this scenario, photography consolidates itself as a privileged medium for the construction and dissemination of hyperrealities. By capturing and reproducing images susceptible to manipulation and reinterpretation, the photographic record surpasses its documentary function to become an active agent in the production of new layers of visual reality, as Helena Arantes (2010) observes:

> reading a media photograph implies reconstituting its subject in time, tracing it back into the past and conjugating it with a virtual future and, finally, as a genre, it is particularly privileged because it fixes itself in the imagination of the reading public, endowed with persuasive power, with its own grammar, and with a peculiar aesthetic and ethic. (p. 1)

This capacity to lodge itself within collective imagination reveals the power of the image as a narrative instrument, able both to distort and to amplify the perception of reality, becoming central to the configuration of social experiences. Such a phenomenon underscores the mutable nature of contemporaneity. Walter Benjamin (1994) had already anticipated this debate when analysing the critical and social character of photography. He emphasises that the mass technical reproducibility of images, by democratising access, radically transformed not only the relation with art but also the very mechanisms of constructing culture

and collective memory.

In the field of image theory, Roland Barthes (1980/1990) introduces the categories of *studium* and *punctum* to conceptualise the relation between spectator and photograph. The *studium* refers to the cultural field, to general interest and the intellectual decoding of the image — that which may be read through a gaze informed by conventions. The *punctum*, by contrast, is what "pricks", what escapes the control of the rational gaze and produces a rupture: an emotion, a memory, an unexpected detail that strikes the viewer in a singular way.

In his classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility", Walter Benjamin (1994) reflects on how technical means of reproduction — such as photography — transform the social function of art. For Benjamin, the loss of the "aura" of the unique work, resulting from reproducibility, does not represent the decline of art but the possibility of politicisation. The technical work disrupts the cult of authenticity and aesthetic distance, operating instead as a critical tool, accessible and reproducible, embedded in ideological struggles and social conflicts. The author contrasts two movements: the aestheticisation of politics, practised by totalitarian regimes that use images as instruments of symbolic domination, and the politicisation of art, which places the image at the service of social transformation. In this sense, photography acquires a critical function when it can interrupt the logic of passive contemplation and provoke reflection on structures of power.

The technical reproducibility of images entails an expansion to other objects, since photographs are subject to manipulation and resignification in contexts detached from their original production. At the same time, technological advances in photography have transformed aesthetic perception, revealing nuances previously imperceptible to the human eye and underscoring the political uses inherent to the medium: its capacity for mass dissemination makes it a powerful tool for spreading ideologies and constructing social imaginaries.

The photographer, as a visual narrator, exercises curatorial power over what is recorded and how it is represented, always involving intentional choices — whether conscious or not. As Benjamin (1994) observes, "the experience that is passed from person to person is the source to which all narrators resort" (p. 198), which highlights the role of the photographer as a mediator of stories. Kiana Hayeri exemplifies this role by describing herself as a "visual storyteller", and her work, focused on communities affected by conflict, transcends documentary recording to become an ethical testimony: in capturing experiences of violence and resistance, each framing is transformed into a political narrative about bodies and territories in struggle.

Visual Constructions: A Critical Analysis of Four Works by Kiana Hayeri

Born in Tehran in 1988, Kiana Hayeri is an Iranian-Canadian photographer whose work is dedicated to documenting life in regions marked by conflict and sociopolitical tensions. After migrating to Canada during her adolescence, she found in photography not only a means of expression but also a tool to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers: "faced with the challenges of adapting to a new environment, she took up photography as a way of bridging the gap in language and culture" (Hayeri, n.d., para. 1).

In 2014, Hayeri returned to the Middle East, settling in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she developed engaged work on themes such as migration, identity, childhood, and the impacts of violence and religion on everyday life. Her almost 10-year stay in the country enabled her to document decisive historical moments, including the United States occupation and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This event forced her to leave Kabul due to worsening insecurity. Below, we present a selection of her photographs, available on her social media (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4).

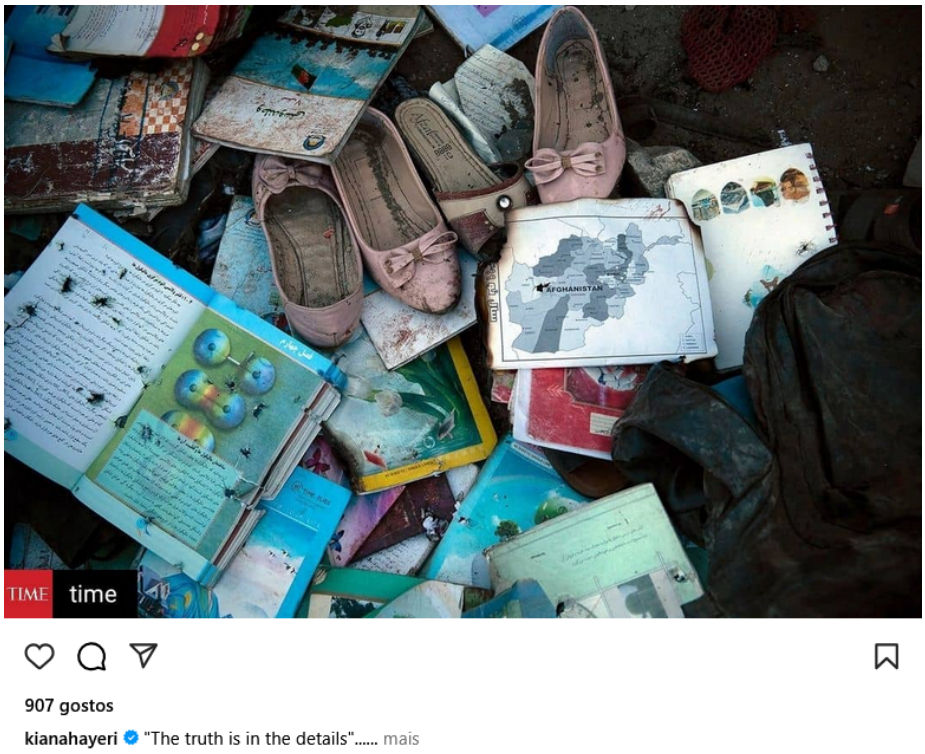

Figure 1: "*Truth is in the details*"
Source. From *Truth Is in the Details* [Photograph], by Kiana Hayeri (@kiana-hayeri), 2021c, Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CYB_sNkL3oX/)

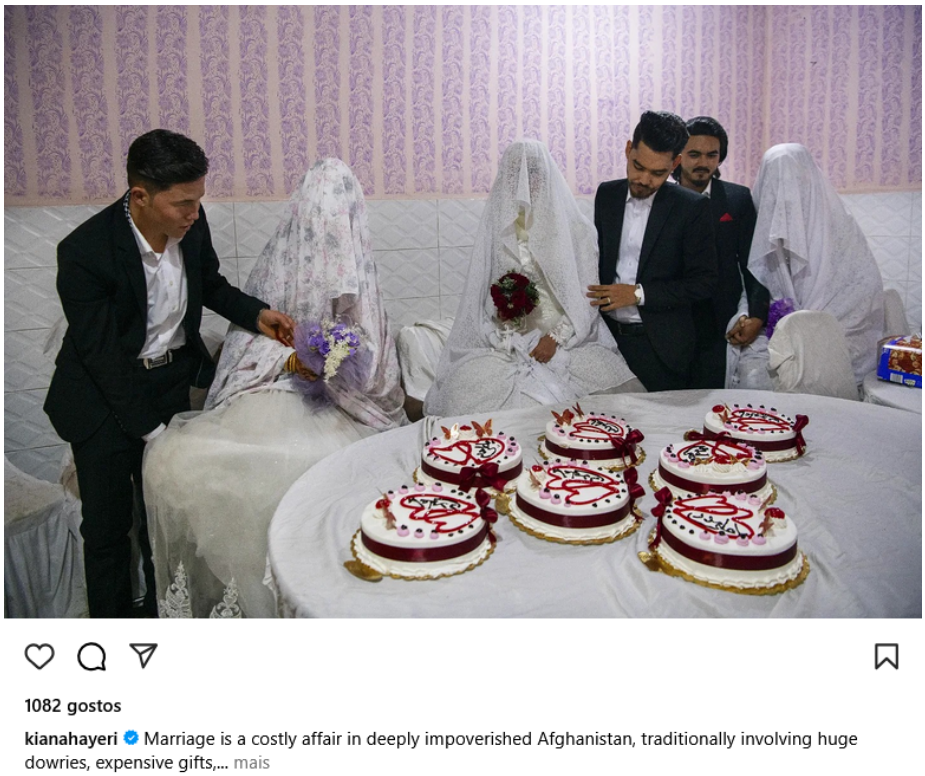

Figure 2: *Marriage is a costly affair in deeply impoverished Afghanistan, traditionally involving huge dowries, expensive gifts, and lavish parties. A national NGO organizes a mass wedding for a dozen couples in a humble wedding hall in western Kabul.*
Source. From *Marriage Is a Costly Affair in Deeply Impoverished Afghanistan, Traditionally Involving Huge Dowries, Expensive Gifts, and Lavish Parties. A National* [Photograph],by Kiana Hayeri (@kianahayeri), 2023b, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C1CcPV1sFTd/)

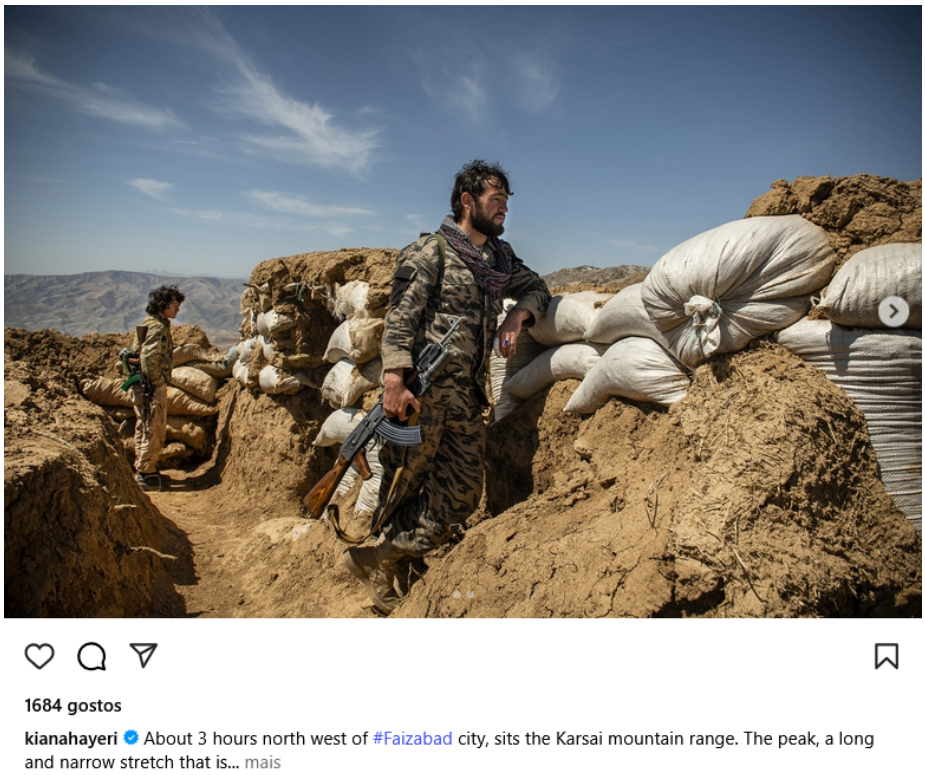

Figure 3: *About 3 hours north west of #Faizabad city, sits the Karsai mountain range. The peak, a long and narrow stretch that is connected throughout the range, overlooks both sides. Faizabad city was on one side, and just below the peak on the other side, was #Taliban controlled Yaftal district. The stretch had served as a frontline for at least 2 years. A dozen outposts throughout the mountain range hosted the ANA soldiers and a militia unit led by Commander Assadullah. All the fighters had one mission: to keep the Taliban away from Faizabad city.*
Source. From *About 3 Hours North West of #Faizabad City, Sits the Karsai Mountain Range. The Peak, a Long and Narrow Stretch* [Photograph], by Kiana Hayeri (@kianahayeri), 2021b, Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ8ol7-MgUY/?img_index=1)

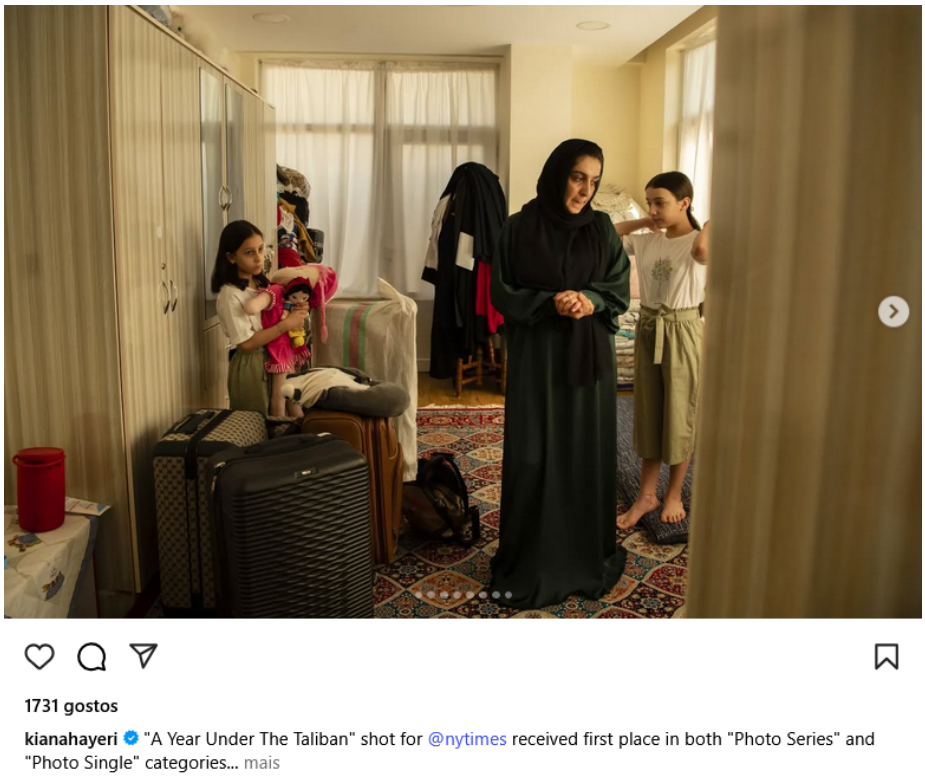

Figure 4: *"A Year Under The Taliban" shot for @nytimes received first place in both "Photo Series" and "Photo Single" categories for Human Rights Press Awards, organized by @humanrightswatch and Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. The news came out on #WorldPressFreedom day which coincides with my second day back on the ground, in Afghanistan; How bittersweet!*
Source. From *"A Year Under The Taliban" Shot for @nytimes Received First Place in Both "Photo Series" and "Photo Single" Categories for* [Photograph], by Kiana Hayeri (@kianahayeri), 2023a, Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CryHHVLsK20/?img_index=3)

Each of the selected images synthesises, through compositional and symbolic choices, the aesthetic and sociopolitical complexities that portray contemporary Afghanistan. The first photograph reveals the traces of an attack on a school environment, with scattered objects and marks of destruction that communicate violence without the need to show bodies or blood. The absence of human figures intensifies the impact, suggesting a structural violence that persists even after the traumatic event.

In the second image, the predominant use of white in the brides' burqas creates

a visual contrast with the austerity of the matrimonial context. The colour, traditionally associated with purity, is here rendered ironic: the female figures, uniformed and anonymous, become metaphors for the erasure of identity under Taliban rule. The photograph not only documents a ritual but also exposes how religion and culture are superimposed on the individual, reducing ceremonies to acts of social conformity. The third photograph captures a soldier amidst barricades, with another man in the background observing a devastated landscape. The composition balances the individual and the collective. While the military uniform situates the subject within an organised context of conflict, his gaze lost on the horizon humanises the experience of war. Hayeri subverts traditional war iconography, which often glorifies or sensationalises violence, opting instead to dramatise exhaustion and waiting — elements frequently rendered invisible.

The fourth image stands out for its rarity in contexts of repression: unveiled women, with uncovered faces, protesting publicly. Here, the exposure of the face is a political act, a direct denial of the laws that render them invisible. The photographer emphasises gestures and facial expressions, transforming each face into a manifesto against oppression. Natural light falling upon the figures reinforces the idea of visibility as resistance. Unlike the logic of punctual, external coverage typical of photojournalism, her production is grounded in direct coexistence with the subjects portrayed and in participation in the events documented. This proximity allows her images to emerge from relationships built over time, which directly impacts compositional, thematic, and narrative choices. Although she depicts elements frequently associated with journalistic coverage — such as armed conflicts, dress codes, and situations of oppression — her work transcends mere reportage.

By structuring her framings around the tensions between body, space, and sociopolitical context, Kiana Hayeri adopts a visual approach that transforms photography into an instrument of meaning-making. Her work establishes a dialogue with fundamental theories of the image, exploring how visual records produce, distribute, and intend meaning. On the one hand, it aligns with Jean Baudrillard's (1981/1991) concept of "hyperreality", showing that images function as signs that organise and reconfigure social experience. On the other hand, it engages with Walter Benjamin's (1994) ideas on technical reproducibility, making use of the possibilities of image circulation to amplify its political force.

As Benjamin (1994) states, "the reproduced work of art increasingly becomes the reproduction of a work designed to be reproduced" (p. 167), which alters its social function. In this context, Hayeri's photographs do not merely document or record; they operate as critical devices that intervene in the symbolic and political production of reality. By discussing how mass reproduction transforms the nature of art, Benjamin argues that the loss of the "aura" — understood as the uniqueness and irreproducible presence of the work of art — creates space for new social and political functions of the image.

Within the context of Hayeri's documentary photography, this technical reproducibility allows for an expansion of the reach and circulation of images,

enhancing their impact as denunciation and as instruments of resistance. Thus, when disseminated through journalistic and digital platforms, the photographer's images not only record events but also participate in mobilisation circuits, becoming part of a symbolic struggle over the meaning of oppression, freedom, and justice. From this perspective, her photography assumes a critical function: it does not merely represent the world — it intervenes in it.

Veils and Unveilings: The Complexity of the Female Condition in Afghanistan Through Kiana Hayeri

The first image selected for detailed analysis is part of the award-winning report in *The New York Times*, originally published on 26 February 2020 and updated on 17 August 2021, titled "They Killed Their Husbands. Now in Prison, They Feel Free" (Hayeri & Jeong, 2020), produced by Kiana Hayeri in collaboration with journalist May Jeong. The documentary work, carried out at Kabul Women's Prison, reveals the paradox experienced by dozens of Afghan women who committed homicide against violent husbands: many report feeling freer behind bars than they did in their own homes under a system that naturalised domestic abuse.

The photograph in question (Figure 5), showing prisoners in a room during a gathering, gains depth when contextualised with the detainees' testimonies — some sentenced to death for crimes committed in legitimate defence against aggressors who were their husbands or family members. Published one week after Kabul fell to the Taliban, the report gained historical relevance by capturing the last days of relative autonomy for Afghan women before the return of the fundamentalist regime.

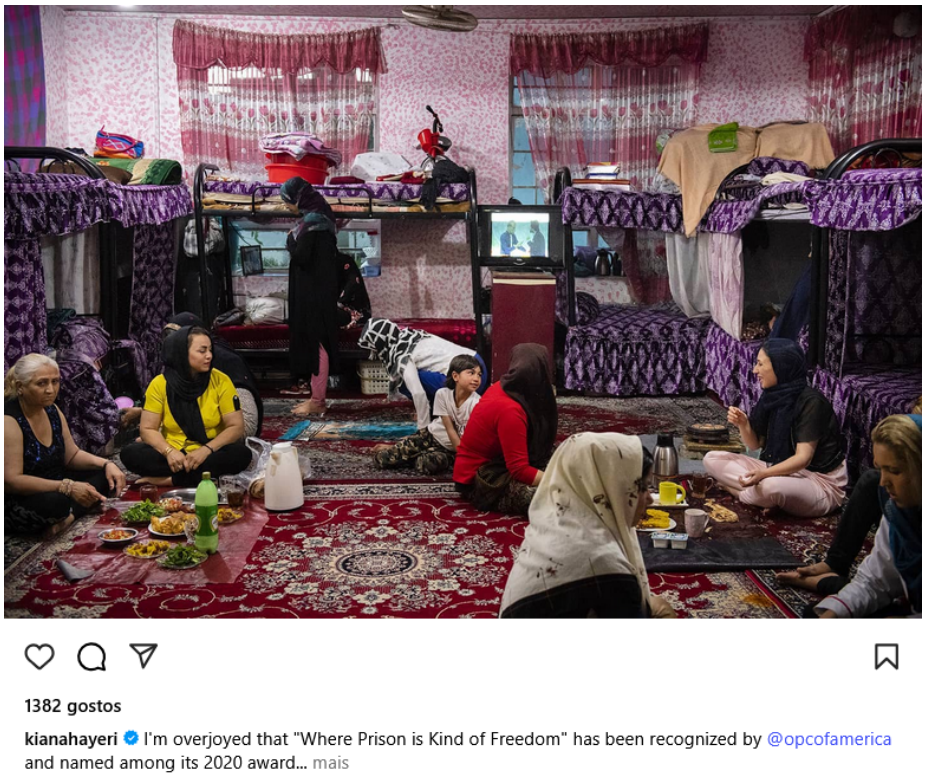

Figure 5: *During Ramadan, the inmates at Herat Women's Prison break their fast together. They share the meal in their rooms, which they have decorated; every year, a council is chosen by prisoners and staff members that decides the paint color and pattern.*
Source. From *I'm Overjoyed That "Where Prison Is Kind of Freedom" Has Been Recognized by @opcofamerica and Named Among Its 2020 Award* [Photograph], by Kiana Hayeri (@kianahayeri), 2021a, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/CNWwEvUMHqI/?igsh=a2xxMGl5aTIzOWp5)

At first glance, Hayeri's photograph appears ordinary: women gathered in a space, some wearing *hijab*, others with parts of their bodies uncovered, all surrounded by food in an apparently calm atmosphere. However, this superficial normality conceals a disturbing reality once the context behind the image is known.

This photograph was taken at Herat Women's Prison, Afghanistan, and is part of a *The New York Times* report. The women depicted are prisoners — but their stories challenge any simplistic notion of crime and punishment. Many are incarcerated for having killed husbands who abused them daily, or for "moral crimes" such as fleeing forced marriages or reporting abuse. The paradox is stark: for these women, prison often represents more safety and freedom than

their own homes. Differences in clothing, which might go unnoticed, reveal brief moments of autonomy within a system that seeks to control even the smallest gestures of women.

Kiana Hayeri captured this moment in 2021, during a brief period when the prison was still administered by a woman, Alia Azizi. Shortly thereafter, with the Taliban's return to power, Azizi disappeared, and the conditions for prisoners deteriorated drastically. The image thus becomes a historical record of a transitional moment, when the relative freedom these women experienced in prison would soon be suppressed.

What strikes the viewer is the contrast between the apparent serenity of the scene and the traumatic stories behind each face. Some of these women were sentenced to death for defending their own lives. Others are imprisoned simply for having been victims of sexual violence. The calmness of their expressions does not negate the suffering, but perhaps reveals a rare moment of peace in lives marked by oppression.

At first glance, Figure 6 shows a seemingly ordinary scene in some Middle Eastern contexts: women wearing blue and black burqas, lined up in front of a brick wall inscribed with a religious message. The composition is austere — the uniformed figures, their hidden faces, and the empty space save for the wall text: "surely, it is with the remembrance of God that hearts find peace". A scene that seems to confirm Western stereotypes about female oppression in Islamic societies. Published in May 2020, at the height of the pandemic, the image captures Afghan women waiting for humanitarian aid at a food bank.

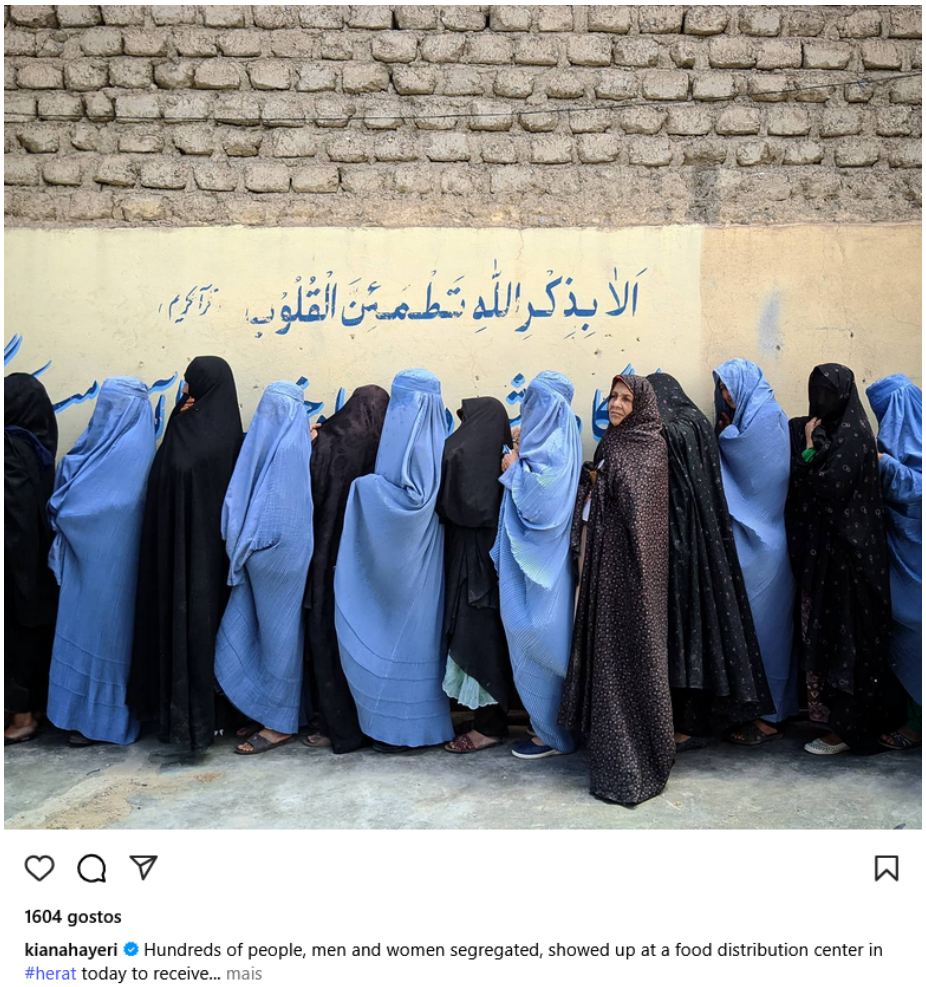

Figure 6: *Hundreds of people, men and women segregated, showed up at a food distribution center in #herat today to receive emergency relief made of a bag of flour, a bag of split pea and 2 packs of salt. The aid was only available for 280 families, others were held up behind the gate and eventually rejected.*
Source. From *Hundreds of People, Men and Women Segregated, Showed Up at a Food Distribution Center in #Herat Today to Receive Emergency* [Photograph], by Kiana Hayeri (@kianahayeri), 2020. Instagram.
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CAVEaACgvGY/)

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted pre-existing conditions faced by certain women in contexts marked by legal, cultural, and socioeconomic restrictions. For many, mobility limitations, precarious access to health services, and economic dependence were not new challenges imposed by the health crisis, but structural

aspects of their everyday realities. The pandemic situation, therefore, contributed to making these inequalities more visible. The act of queuing, far from signifying submission, can be understood as an expression of the search for essential resources within a system that has historically imposed barriers to full social participation.

The woman in the foreground, slightly turned at a three-quarter angle, stands out for having her face partially visible, even under the burqa. This subtle detail breaks the visual uniformity imposed by clothing and the arrangement of figures. Her ambiguous, hard-to-decipher expression may indicate exhaustion. The juxtaposition of the wall inscription and the bodily presence of women in line reveals a tension between spiritual discourse and material reality. Even in extreme vulnerability — such as awaiting food aid — female bodies continue to be shaped by rigid norms of visibility, anonymity, and social control.

When contrasted with another photograph by Hayeri (Figure 5), depicting women in a festive environment, this image acquires greater interpretative depth by highlighting internal contrasts within the same sociopolitical regime. Juxtaposing scenes of conviviality and food abundance with the representation of a silent line of burqa-clad women allows reflection on how contexts of apparent normality coexist with dynamics of scarcity and control. Formal elements such as the monochromatic palette, geometrically ordered composition, and absence of personal objects contribute to a visual atmosphere suggesting depersonalisation and uniformity of female bodies.

The presence of the religious message on the brick wall introduces a discursive element that intensifies the scene's ambivalence. While evoking a spiritual dimension of comfort, it contrasts with a material reality marked by deprivation. In this sense, Hayeri's photograph can be interpreted as a symbolic construction in which architectural elements function as narrative devices, contributing to the visual elaboration of relationships between faith, poverty, and social invisibility experienced by these women.

Despite its apparent simplicity, the image invites complex reflection on multiple factors structuring the scene. Beyond an isolated critique of religious oppression, the photograph intertwines different forms of vulnerability, including socioeconomic inequality, the health crisis, and humanitarian neglect. The women depicted, arranged in line, do not appear merely as passive figures but as subjects experiencing — and resisting — a multifaceted system that the photographer captures with aesthetic precision and symbolic density.

Visual experience is selective, conditioned not only by the information visible in the image but also by the dispositions, references, and interests of the viewer. This process directly influences modes of interpretation, affecting both individual perception and the social criteria that determine which visual representations gain visibility and legitimacy in public space.

In the two photographs analysed, a significant chromatic distinction is noticeable: inside prison spaces, vibrant colours predominate; in external environments,

neutral and sober tones dominate. This difference, however, does not result from a direct aesthetic choice by the photographer, since in documentary contexts like Hayeri's, the colour of women's clothing is beyond her control. Nevertheless, these visual contrasts acquire interpretative value when considered part of the image's narrative construction. Colours function as signs of different regimes of control and visibility: outside prison, moral norms impose anonymity and uniformity on female bodies; inside, at certain times, the environment reflected relative freedom, which manifests, for example, in the variety of attire and the individualised expression of the women depicted.

The withdrawal of United States troops and the Taliban's return to power marked a setback in women's rights, as reported by the BBC: women's support centres were closed, and protection against domestic violence was replaced by mere recommendations that men "refrain from committing abuses" (*Afeganistão: O Drama dos que Fogem da Ofensiva do Talebã*, 2021). This political context renders Hayeri's images notable visual documents of Afghan women's situation. Nevertheless, her work goes beyond documentation: although anchored in concrete realities, her photographs do not merely record events, but interpret and, in a way, question them.

As Coutinho and Santos (2022) observe, there is always a gap between the real narrative behind a photograph and the interpretation we make of it. Images are polysemous, carrying multiple meanings, and function as active agents in social relations — not mere passive reproductions of reality. In Hayeri's case, this polysemy is intentional: her prolonged immersion in the contexts she photographs and engagement with her subjects confer consistency and critical depth to her images. They not only document but also interrogate and destabilise established meanings around gender, culture, and power.

Observing the expressiveness of faces and the subtle gestures captured by Hayeri, it is possible to see that her photographs approach the logic of portraiture — not in the classical sense of a highlighted individuality, but as a procedure of subjectivation within the collective. Even when bodies are often covered or uniformed — as in the silent line of women — minor shifts in gaze, head inclination, or posture become significant elements breaking the homogeneity imposed by regimes of visibility. Such gestures function as silent resistance strategies, capable of inscribing the subject within the image even when identity is partially or entirely hidden.

Within this logic, photography does not merely document oppression but mobilises affects. As Walter Benn Michaels (2015) highlights in *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, the image becomes a field of aesthetic and political contestation between form and content, emotion and ideology. Rather than simply eliciting empathy, portraiture can reveal how structural inequalities are aestheticised and naturalised in visual culture. In Hayeri's case, the choice to emphasise ambiguous expressions and carefully composed bodies may not aim at the spectacle of pain but at producing critical affects — those that challenge the viewer and confront them with moral, political, and ethical dilemmas.

Thus, photography functions as an ideological device, not by directly manipulating content, but by organising the visible according to symbolic and narrative structures. By avoiding shock or excess, Hayeri constructs an image demanding decoding and positioning. This mobilisation of the viewer's gaze — which must fill gaps, interpret silences, and perceive shifts — transforms the image into an active space of negotiation between visible and hidden, personal and collective, trauma and resistance.

Lucía Santaella (1996) warns against the illusion that photography faithfully reflects the world. It does not capture reality, but recreates it, mediated by technique, framing, and the photographer's subjectivity. The depicted object disappears the instant the shutter clicks, leaving a representation conditioned by countless factors — from lighting to camera limitations. This distance between the real and its representation is amplified in the digital era, where the images we see are, in fact, binary codes simulating shapes and colours. As Santaella (1996) questions, what are we really seeing when we look at a screen? Not the object itself, but a digital sign evoking it — always incomplete, always mediated.

This reflection is crucial for analysing Hayeri's work. Her photographs are not transparent windows into Afghan reality but constructions revealing both the social context and the possibilities and limitations of visual language. On the one hand, they document a specific moment; on the other, they transcend time and space, inviting the viewer to question not only what they see but how they see — and which stories remain hidden beneath the surface.

This relationship between visible and invisible leads to this section of this analysis — "Veils and Unveilings". In the two photographs, Hayeri constructs visual narratives directly engaging with this metaphor: in one, women are covered by burqas, their bodies and faces almost entirely hidden under layers of fabric and social norms; in the other, though imprisoned, they appear without full veils, allowing glimpses of expressions, gestures, and individual choices in how to present themselves. The veil here extends beyond physical clothing, encompassing layers of invisibility imposed by the regime, tradition, and historical circumstances. Unveiling does not necessarily signify complete freedom but opens temporary and fragile breaches through which subjectivities, affects, and resistance emerge. Placing these images side by side, Hayeri not only documents distinct realities but also challenges the viewer to reflect on the multiple, complex ways in which the female condition in Afghanistan is veiled and, at times, partially unveiled.

Final Considerations

The analysis of Kiana Hayeri's photographs reveals that the image is a dynamic field of meaning production, where signifiers and signifieds — both explicit and implicit — intertwine in complex ways. The two works discussed in depth in this article display multiple narrative layers that demand attentive reading, situated and informed by historical, cultural and political references. This interpreta-

tion demonstrates how photography can be simultaneously documentary and questioning, record and critical reflection.

The image taken inside the prison highlights the boundaries between physical confinement and subjective freedom, destabilising expectations surrounding punishment and incarceration. By presenting women convicted of crimes related to domestic violence and survival, the photograph subverts conventional logics of oppression, showing that, in specific contexts, imprisonment can represent a paradoxical form of protection and autonomy. Meanwhile, the image depicting women lined up in front of a wall with a religious inscription illustrates how the standardisation of female bodies is visually expressed through uniformity, full coverage and visual silence. Even in moments of extreme vulnerability, such as waiting for food during the pandemic, these women remain regulated by mechanisms of invisibilisation.

At this point, it is crucial to revisit Jean Baudrillard's (1981/1991) contributions to understand how these images operate within the contemporary regime of representation. The photograph of the line, for example, evokes a hyper-real aesthetic: the act of waiting, the hidden bodies, the inscription promising spiritual peace — all compose a scene in which the signs of faith and obedience replace the concrete experience of deprivation. The image does not merely document an event; it constructs a subjective narrative that presents itself as more real than the real, displacing the observer's gaze to the plane of belief and simulacrum. In this case, Hayeri's photograph exposes this displacement by highlighting the gap between the spiritual promise and the materiality of scarcity — thereby breaking with the naturalised logic of the image as truth.

Walter Benjamin (1994), in turn, provides a crucial reference for understanding the critical potential of photography when considered through its technical reproducibility. The expanded circulation of these images in digital and print media — such as newspapers, magazines and social networks — allows the experience of pain, resistance and contradiction of Afghan women to exceed local limits. As Benjamin stated, reproducibility removes the "aura" of the unique work, but also democratises access to the image and inserts it into broader political disputes. In Hayeri's photographs, this reproducibility does not diminish the impact; on the contrary, it reinforces its political function by allowing the records to escape the aesthetics of compassion and enter the realm of figurative contestation. By constructing visual narratives based on women's experiences, the photographer acts as a mediator between lived experience and visibility, provoking a politicisation of art that confronts traditional mechanisms of domination and silencing.

The polysemy of the images — as discussed by Barthes (1980/1990) and Coutinho & Santos (2022) — requires that reading goes beyond the visual surface, attending to the cultural and affective codes underpinning each composition. In Hayeri's case, there is no linear or definitive narrative, but rather an overlapping of meanings that illuminates the fractures and contradictions of the context in which these women live. By articulating image, context and subjectivity, the

photographer challenges the limits of conventional representation and proposes critical reflection on how the feminine, violence and resistance are visually constructed and distributed.

Thus, her images not only record but also interrogate. They contribute to the construction of a visual memory that challenges hegemonic narratives, reconfigures ways of seeing, and renders historically marginalised experiences visible. Through the aesthetic and political incorporation of tensions between visible and invisible, presence and erasure, Kiana Hayeri's photographs activate the viewer's gaze and summon interpretive responsibility. This ethical gesture transforms photography into a critical tool for reading the world.

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