

State/Religion: Rethinking Gender Politics in the Public Sphere in Iran

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Abstract

Gender politics and the public sphere have been two key areas of intervention on the part of both the secular Pahlavi monarchy of Iran and the religious government under the Islamic regime. One of the consequences of Reza Shah's modernising project, which allowed for more open and progressive gender norms and gave women access to education, work and other opportunities, was the alienation of the vast majority of conservative Iranian families who no longer recognised the new secular public sphere they found outside their door. Unsurprisingly, while a small number of Iranian women managed to benefit from the changes that were supposedly enacted for their benefit, for the vast majority these reforms were hardly liberating and family life remained fairly traditional.

Public Sphere in Iran

In the late-nineteenth century, before the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), in the male-dominated society of Iran, women were confined to the home and rarely venturing outside. If a woman did need to go outside for a particular reason, she would have to cover herself from head to toe with a heavy veil. Thus, women were essentially prisoners in their own homes, or, in the case of concubines, the harem; at the very least, they were under the veil or cloak.¹ There was no opportunity for women to socialise or gather aside from rare occasions when they could meet in mosques, at baths, at times of religious mourning, or within their neighbourhoods in the small alleys between their houses. It is important to note that this limitation for women was based on traditional beliefs among Iranian families that encouraged a male-dominated public space, a highly segregated space for men and women.

The homes of Iranian notables reflected the segregation of space within that time period. Their houses were divided into two sections: the outer apartments for the master and his man servants and the inner apartments for the wives and their maids.² Men and women entering the divided space had to notify one another by making some sort of noise or sound. For instance, men entering the inner quarter had to say loudly *ya allah* to announce their entry, and, in return, women passing through the outer quarter would walk quickly and nervously wrapped from head to toe in chadors. As it appears, the division was very strict; walls, veils and constantly keeping men and women away from each other were daily practices in Iran, in both the public and private spheres. This situation continued until the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. With a representative government and educational

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"To cover" or "to veil" are the equivalent of the Farsi words *poshesh* or *hijab*, meaning that the hair and body of women should be concealed by fabric. *Hijab* from the word *hojb* means "modesty" and "shyness". A *bi-hejab* woman lacks such propriety.

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Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*. New York, NY: Verso. 2001. pp. 251-259.

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Badr ol-Molul Bamdad et al. *From Darkness into Light: Women's Emancipation in Iran*. ed. and trans. F.R. Bagley. Irvine, CA: Mazda Publishers. 1980. p. viii.

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Khiabany, Gholam and Sreberny, Annabele. "The Women's Press in Contemporary Iran: Engendering the Public Sphere in NOAMI SAKR". In *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power Through Self-expression*. London: I.B. Tauris. 2001. p. 18.

reform and modernisation chief among the objectives of the constitutionalists, this was a great time for women's awakening. Indeed, women's education was seen as a critical part of reforms that would pave the way for the creation and development of a modern Iran.³

A group of educated and enlightened women, including feminist activist and journalist Sediqeh Dowlatbadi and Al-Saltaneh (the daughter of Naser al-Din Shah of the Qajar Dynasty), played a very strong role in this time in terms of the schools and societies they founded, the articles that they wrote and the journals they published. In such a traditional society, promoting women's education was not an easy task to take on, but despite all the setbacks, the movement endured and, around 30 years later, the government finally gave its official support to the schools for girls the women founded (Act of Unveiling, 1936). The aim of these passionate women was also to make cultural and educational material, both from a Western and traditional perspective, accessible to Iranian women. From 1925 onwards, two magazines were published, namely *Nameye Banevan*, *Dokhtarane Iran* and *Etelaate Banevan* (by Etelaat, one of the great publishing houses).⁴

The women who were active in the new political and educational realms that were created were the wives, daughters and sisters of male politicians, who could support and protect them in their endeavours. Thus, the presence, or possible presence, of women in Iran can be said to have been started by bourgeois families and was not a grassroots movement. These elite or upper-class families had the means to travel abroad and have their daughters, sisters and wives educated there. The progress they made during 1907-1926 was later built on by a larger network of middle-class women that attended their gatherings, classes and events. By the mid-twentieth century, women from different social classes and ethnic groups had become part of the movement's activities and the male-dominated society slowly opened to women, culturally, politically and socially.

It is important to note that this was the time that also marked the birth of secularisation (1924-1941) in Iranian history. Secularism in Iran was established as state policy shortly after Reza Shah was crowned king in 1924. He was very much against any kind of traditional or religious ceremony or public gathering. For instance, he banned any public

display or expression of religious faith, including the wearing of the headscarf (*hijab* or *chador*) by women. The Islamic clergy were forbidden to preach in public, and mosque activities were heavily restricted and regulated. Badr-el-Molok Bamdad calls the first Pahlavi monarch “the Daybreak” and points to the “momentous decree” delivered by the Shah on January 7, 1936 that banned the veil in public. On this day, Reza Shah attended a graduation ceremony at the University of Tehran and gave a powerful speech in support of women generally.⁵ In it, he encouraged women to be more active in society, considering them to be valued members, in particular stating that he wanted to see more women being educated. He believed that, since women made up half of the Iranian population, their education would not only benefit them but also society as a whole.⁶ He set out a vision for the future in which women were as active and powerful as men, giving them a higher status than they had ever enjoyed before. At this point, it seemed that Iranian women would emerge out of a situation where they had been kept in ignorance to one where they would become enlightened. In fact, following the ceremony, Reza Shah actually changed the rules regarding women’s attire in public, imposing a Western-style dress code of skirt and blouse while banning the veil or, indeed, any type of *hijab*.

This act can be seen as a kind of widening of the boundaries of the domestic to the public. One of Reza Shah’s aims in passing the Unveiling Act was, in fact, to democratise gender roles, in imitation of the Western model, by unveiling women and encouraging mixed social gatherings. Prior to this decision, the space outside the home was a male-dominated area; only a very limited number of women were to be found in places such as cafes, workplaces, educational settings and shops. The Act of Unveiling thus forced women to become active participants in life outside the home. In this way, women gradually became more independent and participated alongside men in society, meaning that society became a more balanced and mixed-gender environment.

At the same time, following Reza Shah’s decree, any woman found covered in public was to be forcibly uncovered. One must remember that for many years previously women had been covered, and this sudden change was unsurprisingly perceived by some as an act of violence against women. Indeed, feminists like Badr-el-Molok Bamdad noted the verbal and physical harassment that veiled women were subjected

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Badr ol-Molul Bamdad, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-23.

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This speech more or less echoed what Taj al-Sultan had said in 1906. See Abbas, Amanat (ed.). *Taj Al-Saltana: Crowning Anguish: Memories of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity 1884-1914*. trans. Anna Vanzan and Amin Neshati. Washington DC: Mage Publishers. 2003.

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Badr ol-Molul Bamdad, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-23.

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Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”. *Social Text*. Nos. 25/26. 1990. p. 62.

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Daragahi, Haideh and Witoszek, Nina. “Anti-totalitarian Feminism? Civic Resistance in Iran”. In L. Trägårdh, N. Witoszek and B. Taylor B. (eds.). *Civil Society in the Age of Monitory Democracy*. Oxford: Berghahn Books. pp. 231-254.

to as Reza Shah’s soldiers forcibly unveiled them. As a result, the Unveiling Act ultimately ensured that women who had spent their entire lives wearing the veil would, in fact, remain in the private confines of their homes since, for them, walking the street unveiled was tantamount to walking the street naked.⁷ They perceived the “new” street as a dangerous and disconnected space (*namahram*) and, in order to maintain their safety and modesty, chose to stay away from this domain. Thus, after this seminal day in Iranian history, women became policed by men, and their bodies became a site of enforcement. This situation is very similar to the situation that exists in Iran today, except that now, as a result of Khomeini’s decree, women must cover themselves. This was the point at which he consolidated his power and effectively turned Iran into an Islamic state. Whoever is in power, it seems that a woman’s body is perpetually a site of state control.

Despite the level of violence and aggression surrounding the Act of Unveiling, the dominant feminist response at the time was celebratory. It was seen as such an important milestone that Reza Shah made 7 January “National Women’s Day”, replacing International Women’s Day on 8 March. In essence, Reza Shah was modernising the country by destroying the boundaries between the *andaroni* (the private and inner domain) and the *bironi* (the public and outer domain). It can be said that, in a way, the official bourgeois public sphere was an institutional vehicle for major historical transformation in the context of political domination.⁸

Slowly but surely, progress was made in terms of women’s rights and status in Iran; however, this progress was not consistent. For instance, while women readily had access to birth control pills and abortions, to travel abroad they still needed written permission from their husbands.⁹ Reza Shah, and later Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, essentially pushed through quick dramatic changes without any real platform that would allow women to negotiate their life outside of the home. On the surface, these changes might appear progressive, but the core structure was not stable and much was still needed to be done for women’s rights. Under the iron rule of Reza Shah, the judiciary was secularised in 1931, but family law was left to the jurisdiction of the clergy and the dictate of Sharia law. This said, one great achievement during Reza Shah’s son’s subsequent reign was the passing of the Family Protection Law in 1967,

which set up special courts to deal with family law matters and put useful safeguards in place with regard to the minimum marriageable age, divorce and child custody.¹⁰ On the other hand, it was during Reza Shah's reign that the first instances of Islamic extremism also appeared in Iran as a backlash against his secularist policies.

Government and Public Life

In 1941, Reza Shah was dismissed from his position and a new era in the Iranian secularist movement began. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah took power and made outstanding changes to the restrictions in place from the time of his father's rule. From 1941 until 1953, a form of democracy was restored to Iran that improved relations with the religious clergy and softened the rules for women's dress. This did not last long, however, as Mohammad Reza Shah gradually started to increase the level of regulation again. After 1953, the Iranian government became less democratic but increasingly secularised. In that context, it began to reduce the influence of the Shi'a clergy and organised religion in government and public life.

One of the most controversial actions by Mohammad Reza Shah was in the late 1960s, when he forced the Shi'a clerical novitiates to attend public state-run universities in order to gain religious certification and license to preach, similar to the requirements on Christian schools of theology. The imposition of this new requirement was seen as extreme action towards religious members of Iran. In response to these developments, Islam really started to become a powerful force in Iranian politics in the 1960s. During this time, Shi'ite fundamentalists started to become more active, encouraging students to stand up and fight against the modernisation of society (and, in turn, against the Pahlavi monarchy). This movement was started by Ayatollahs Najafabadi and Khomeini. Their aim was to halt modernisation and establish an Islamic idealist culture. Eventually, the Islamic Shi'ite fundamentalist movement succeeded in initiating the 1979 Revolution and they have governed the country ever since. There was a short break of eight years during Mohammad Khatami's reformist presidency (1997-2005), but apart from this fairly brief period, since 1979, Iran has been ruled

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Ibid.

11
Based on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, a total theocratic control of all aspects of individual existence is being referred to as totalitarianism. The Islamic Republic of Khomeini in post-revolutionary Iran did not leave any area of life—political, social, private, public or otherwise—to the discretion of its citizens. The comparison is made in this context, but the author is aware that Arendt's description of Hitler's state as totalitarian is a contested matter and that it is more likely based on *Gleichschaltung* (the process of Nazification); thus, any comparison between the Nazi regime and Islamic Republic might be somewhat controversial.

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Motahhari, Morteza. *The Problem of Hijab*. Tehran: Basir Publication. 1986. p. 29.

13
At the same time, there were many other changes to women's lives in Iran. Most notably, sweeping reforms to family law saw the legal age for marriage for girls lowered from 18 to just 9; this shocking reform was perceived as opening the way to legalised child abuse. The number of women in the workplace also fell dramatically within three years. Between 1979 and 1981, women who did go to work (where they were kept separate from men) were checked at the gates of their workplace to make sure they were properly veiled and not wearing make-up. A *de facto* gender apartheid

segregating men and women was also established in the streets, extending to public transport, cinemas, queues, and so on. Film and tv were heavily censored, with unveiled female actresses having to be blacked out. The morality police could forcefully break into private parties at any time to check who was present and what was going on, and no socialisation was allowed between unrelated men and women. Primitive laws, including flogging and stoning, were also passed, in response to the re-actualisation of the concept of "an eye for an eye". National Women's Day was set as 12 June, the birthday of Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Gradually, the Islamic government also started to demolish local cultural centres (*marakeze refahe khanevade*) where women would meet to learn about childcare, housework and other pursuits. Due to the disappearance of these places, the National Unity of Women's Associations decided to run private sessions in Tehran and beyond, to keep trying to educate women and pass on the most up-to-date information available, away from the control and interference of the Islamists.

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Razi, A. *Complete History of Iran (Tarih-I-Mofassal-I-Iran)*. Tehran: Eghbal and Shorakaee Publication. 1956. pp. 659-664.

15
Craik, Jennifer. *Fashion: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg. 2009. p. 42.

by Islamic fundamentalist Shi'ism. While Reza Shah and his son had established a dictatorship prior to the dominance of Islam, a form of totalitarianism was at the heart of the Islamic Republic.¹¹

In 1979, after the deposition of the government of Prime Minister Shahpor Bakhtiar in February, an interim government was established headed by Mehdi Bazargan, but just a few months later, in November that year, most of that government resigned *en masse* after the US Embassy takeover by a group of radical students (the Iran hostage crisis). It is important to note that the end of Bazargan's government officially marked the end of state-directed secularism in Iran. By February 1980, the Islamic Republican Party of Iran was officially in power, with Ayatollah Khomeini as its supreme leader. Inevitably, any secular opposition to the new Islamist government was suppressed and dismantled. In fact, it took no more than four years for all secularist activity to be eradicated (by 1984). The people behind this secularist activity were branded "heretics" and "apostates" by the clerical hierarchy, and eventually jailed, executed or exiled. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 called for the foundation of an Islamic state based on Islamic principles and the upholding of Islamic law. Islamic fundamentalists believe that women should cover themselves in order to prevent sexual tension in society, because men are not capable of controlling their sexual desire.¹² They, therefore, imposed the veiling of women as a visible symbol of that commitment.¹³

As previously mentioned, the compulsory wearing of the veil to hide the hair and body of women has been introduced and repealed many times throughout Iran's history, beginning with Reza Shah's 1936 ban on the headscarf and *chador* as part of his Westernising and secularising project.¹⁴ This position is, of course, in stark contrast to what occurred some 40 years later when, following the 1979 Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini reversed this decision and decreed that women should now cover their heads. Wrapped in a black *chador*, these women became icons of the Islamic Revolution and, two decades later, their more relaxed, colourful and vibrant *hijabs* became the symbol of a new era of progress and reform in the Islamic Republic. The restriction on clothing for women in Iran is based on governmental "authoritative politics", which turns fashion into a political statement.¹⁵ Attention may be drawn to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, a work which

looks at *Gleichschaltung* (the process of Nazification) in Germany.¹⁶ With its total theocratic control of all aspects of individual existence, Khomeini's state had a similar approach to Hitler's state as described by Arendt, although it was not, of course, the same. In other words, the Islamic Republic (Khomeini) did not leave any area of life—political, social, private, public or otherwise—to the discretion of its citizens.

One hypothesis is that the Islamic Republic's humiliation and suppression of women in Iran is a policy designed to control society as a whole. As such, the Iranian women's movement should be viewed as a form of civil resistance, with implications far beyond the national boundaries of Iran itself. If this holds, the Iranian women's movement is thus an anti-totalitarian movement. Upon close examination, it appears that the focus of the feminist movement in Iran has always been about reclaiming human dignity for all people. While Swedish and Dutch feminists, for instance, ask for more and better childcare facilities for their children so that they can go out to work, and gain more leadership positions for women in industry, Iranian feminists, in contrast, are still struggling to achieve basic human rights in their own country.¹⁷ It is instructive to note that women were the first to notice the totalitarian threat of the Islamic government, a fact that was expressed clearly and unambiguously on 8 March 1979. As already noted, the emphasis of the feminist movement in Iran is on human dignity, and opposition to theocratic power. Such a movement transcends cultural and gender boundaries, which is why both men and women, and people from other countries and cultures, were so keen to become involved and show their support.

The new veil worn following the Revolution soon came to represent the "state". It was no longer simply an expression of religious belief and, as such, it was seen in a different way to the traditional covering. Before 1979, women who had worn a veil had done so of their own volition, since, at that time, what women wore was a matter of personal choice and was not stipulated by law. In other words, women could choose what they wore as long as they respected certain broad conventions, for instance, with regard to what type of clothing deemed suitable for their social class. However, after the Revolution, women who had previously chosen not to wear the veil were suddenly branded "infidels" (bad *hijab*).¹⁸ Veiling soon became indissociable from a wider Muslim identity and the veiled Iranian woman's own religious belief became subsumed to her status as an Islamic icon.

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Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*, London: Penguin Books. 1963.

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Daragahi and Witoszek, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-254.

18
Amir-Ebrahimi, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

19
The unifying theme of the papers contained in this volume is women's traversal of public space and the process of negotiation of their gendered identities that this entails. Many of the papers detail women's exploration of avenues that enable self-empowerment. The notion of empowerment here connotes the idea of the carving out of public space by women for themselves, sometimes paradoxically by not even leaving the home; they are able to benefit from this and impose their presence on society as a whole.

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Peirce, Leslie. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1993. p. 45.

21
Afsaruddin, Asma. *HERMENEUTICS AND HONOR: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. 1999. p. 10.

On the other hand, the veil is now perceived by women as more than just an instrument of segregation as it has come to facilitate their access to the public arena and given them a means to renegotiate boundaries. Veiling has been particularly useful for traditional women who now actively participate in public spaces and institutions they did not have access to before.¹⁹ This has deeply changed the existing class hierarchy, since, historically, within the Iranian context, public inaccessibility was an indicator of both male and female high social status ("conventional notions of public and private [were] not congruent with gender"; rather, they were related to the social class of the individual).²⁰ Similarly, Asma Afsaruddin reflects on the dichotomy of private/public and questions the misconception that power is equated with visibility by citing examples of upper-class women's seclusion from public space contrary to lower-class women's participation in it as a result of the "new" compulsory dress code.²¹ Thus, the enforcement of the dress code in Iranian society since 1979 has, in fact, been an empowering tool for traditional women.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam refers to Islam as a *via media* between the authoritarian status quo in Iran (and the Arab world) and a liberal order that would ensure democracy, freedom of belief and religion and ultimately a liberated society. Adib-Moghaddam continues that in "all theories of Islam, freedom comes first and religious ordinances are relegated to individual choice." The question that arises here is, how could Islam be secular or, indeed, how could freedom be interpreted under Islamic fundamentalist beliefs? There is a constant underlying notion of superiority within the Islamic belief system that does not let the existence of democratic form evolve. Adib-Moghaddam notes that "at base, secular Islam remains an 'identitarian' project that does not sufficiently connect the Muslim 'self' to the rest of humanity." Other religions such as "Bahais, Christians, Jews, Heathens, Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, etc. continue to linger on the side roads of the Islamic highway." Thus, there is not much space for "free" choice within the Islamic hermeneutic structure.²²

If Islamic secularists exist in any form in Muslim society, they "share with their ideological, Islamist counterparts the conviction of superiority despite the nascent philosophical and critical content of their ideas." They strongly stand for this united view point that "Muslims

hold the holy grail of truth and that they are obliged to invite and persuade others to understand it.” Thus, Islam, even in its provisional liberal garb, could be contaminated by different forms of hegemony. Therefore, within Islamic fundamentalist culture, convincing others to follow Islam, enforcing a dress code and killing infidels is all seen as “civilising society” and not as war or aggression.²³

Metaphorical Public Space in Iran

The restrictions on clothing for women in Iran are based on governmental “authoritative politics”, which turns fashion into a political statement.²⁴ Frantz Fanon notes that one of the most significant elements of Muslim society is the Act of Veiling for women.²⁵ Visitors to a Muslim country may not necessarily be aware that Muslims do not consume pork, or that Muslims avoid sexual relations during Ramadan, but, for the majority, it is the veiling of women that represents and symbolises Islamic culture.²⁶ Veiling, therefore, is a clear and distinctive political statement in Muslim society. We can argue here that women of today in Iran are appropriating the most visible political statement at their disposal, i.e. clothing, in order to express their resistance against the conditions imposed on them. Over the past 80 years, the condition of unveiling (1936) or veiling (1979) has been violently imposed on women in Iran by political/religious powers. Even when away from such powers, the manners, behaviours and views attached to years of wearing or not wearing the covering cannot be done away with so easily, and certainly not overnight.

The *hijab I iffat* (hijabisation of behaviour) is another form of veiling that exists within Iranian society. The *hijab I iffat* is not a piece of cloth external to the female body, but rather “an invisible form of veil to be acquired through modern education, as some internal quality of self, a new modern self, a disciplined modern body that obscured women’s sexuality, obliterated its bodily presence.” Therefore, it seems as though, aside from the physical veil, there is also an invisible/metaphorical veil for both men and women in Iran, between what *is* and what *could be* seen, heard or experienced. The values that keep this invisible veil in place were established by the Islamic religion long

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Arshin Adib-Moghaddam.
“Islamic Secularism and
the Question of Freedom
in Iran”. *Middle East Cri-
tique*. Vol. 25. No. 1. 2016.
pp. 71-82. doi: 10.1080/
19436149.2015.1101873.

23
Ibid.

24
Crailk, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

25
Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying
Colonialism*. New York, NY:
Grove Press. 1967. p. 162.

26
Ibid.

27
Milani, *op. cit.*

ago, and have been protected and passed down between families (tradition) and societies (authoritative power). The strength of these values differs between families and is dependent mostly on social class, but for the majority of modest Muslim Iranians it is customary to be surrounded by walls and veils. An Iranian woman is expected to be constantly aware of and respect her boundaries and to keep herself protected by the interior walls of her home or by the fabric walls of her veil or covering. Farzaneh Milani notes, “[w]omen have been veiled and unveiled by force but they will remain enfolded and covered by physical and psychological traces of their modes of acceptance or rejection of the veil.”²⁷ This description of women responding to veiling in its physical and metaphorical forms raises a very contemporary concern about veiling. I myself can very much relate to this quote, in that I live in a comparatively free society in the UK and yet struggle to unfold layers of immaterial veil that cloak my every behaviour.

Language and Architecture

It can be said that veiling is perhaps one of the most symbolically significant structures of a complex cultural heritage that expresses, among other things, Iran’s prevailing attitude toward the self and other. Veiling and unveiling have had much more of an impact on Iranian society than simply covering and uncovering women. For instance, in architecture and urban planning, the need to keep the genders away from each other has necessitated particular re-arrangements, notes Professor Fataneh Farahani. In this regard, the basic architecture of the city of Tehran could be viewed as providing a glimpse into Iranian veiling culture, with Farahani stating that “the normative regulations of veiling, similar to other social, cultural and political characteristics, are embedded in architecture conventions as well as in aesthetic features.” For example, windows in houses must be above 170cm from the ground to prevent passers-by from looking in, i.e. the stipulation provides a form of protection and privacy for the people living inside the house. There are, of course, many situations where the sexes are segregated, with women typically being expected to sit at the back of the classroom and bus (as well as other modes of transport) and behind men in the mosque, as well as walking close

to the wall.²⁸ At the same time, veiling is also visible in the language used in post-revolutionary Iran. Various words have been replaced in favour of a more shielded/guarded and covered form of expression that has become common in both written and verbal communication. For example, *pestan* (breast) is now *sineh* (chest), *pestan-band* (bra or, literally, breast holder) is now *sineh-band* (chest holder) and *kun* has become a more innocuous version of *basan* meaning bottom.

In recent years, there has been a major shift in the way the veil is perceived by women. In post-revolutionary Iran, women are allowed to appear in the public realm so long as they are separated from it by their veil (shield).²⁹ No longer solely an instrument of their segregation, the veil has, therefore, come to facilitate women's access to the public arena and given them a means to renegotiate boundaries. The traditional equation of veiled = absent is no longer as clear or immutable as it once was, because a woman can now be veiled and also have a public voice and presence at the same time, meaning that the situation today is double-edged.³⁰ There is no state of full or absolute "veiled-ness" or "unveiled-ness"; whether veiled or unveiled, there is a constant duality.

The protection zones and boundaries created by veils and walls suggest a general lack of trust among Iranian men. The veil or wall expresses their "possession" of a particular female body, and, as such, their masculinity drives them to protect or hide it from other men.³¹ "Insiders" and "outsiders" are categorised as *mahram* and *namahram* respectively. This means that fathers, brothers, husbands and uncles are allowed to see the woman without her veil, but others are not. However, these traditional beliefs are no longer held by a new generation, and many youngsters have found a way to transgress all these barriers, albeit strictly underground. It is important to note that this observation is set within an urban middle-class vision and might differ between the social classes to a certain degree. My visit to Tehran in 2015 differed greatly from the picture I had in my mind of my previous visits in 2012, 2013 and 2014. I encountered open and relaxed male/female relationships being conducted behind closed doors in homes and in private companies (as opposed to state-owned companies). Parties in the lobbies of modern apartment blocks in West/North Tehran are now attended by men and women alike, who will dress up for the occasion. Comparisons can be made to London's

28 Farahani, Fataneh. *Diasporic Narratives of Sexuality: Identity Formation among Iranian-Swedish Women*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. 2007. pp. 145-149.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Milani, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

31 Naficy, Hamid. "Veiled Version/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema". In R. Issa and S. Whitaker. *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*. London: NFT. 1999. p. 53.

32 Urf: a custom or practice that forms part of a secondary source of Islamic law, which is established by high-ranking Islamic scholars based on the primary source of Islamic law (the Qur'an and Sunnah) to determine acceptable ways of doing things in an Islamic society. The issues covered by Urf are not explicitly or directly mentioned in the Qur'an or Sunnah and that is why supplementary guidance is needed.

33 Amir-Ebrahimi, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

35 Jenks, Chris. *Transgression*, London: Routledge. 2003. p. 8.

36 *Ibid.*

Soho on a Saturday night, the only difference being that in Tehran, these parties take place clandestinely, out of sight of the moral police. When inside people's homes I was reminded of the London lifestyle, but its Islamic counterpart does continue to prevail on the streets of Tehran. Each time I visit my home town I seem to encounter more and more conflicting and bizarre combinations of fashion, trends and lifestyles.

Public space in post-revolutionary Iran does not only encompass physical space; virtual space and blogs are also important liberal platforms for public expression. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, a noted Iranian feminist and sociologist, remarks, "[i]n the past two decades, gradual transgressions of Urf³² and Shari'a have become a sign of modernity and resistance for many women and young people who wish to generate changes in their situation."³³ She further explains that, "If 'improperly veiled' women in urban public spaces are considered a challenge to Shari'a and the rules of public conduct in the Islamic Republic, the acts of self-narration and self-disclosure in 'Weblogistan' are considered a transgression of Urf and the rules of patriarchy."³⁴ Transgressing Urf, a common practice among urban middle-class women and youths in Iran, refers to resisting the Islamisation of society. The English sociologist Chris Jenks defines transgression as "that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries".³⁵ As such, he considers it an indicator of modernity: "A feature of modernity, accelerating into postmodernity, is the desire to transcend—limits that are physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, national, legal and moral... Modernity has unintentionally generated an ungoverned desire to extend, exceed, or go beyond the margins of acceptability or normal performance."³⁶ Even though women are fighting on this common and shared web platform, the movement is largely based upon individual acts of pushing these boundaries and restrictions.

The women of today's Iran publicly express their resistance in the form of an aesthetic rather than actual protest, appropriating the object of oppression and turning it into an object of aesthetic pleasure. It is interesting to note that the *hijab*, which is the primary signifier of the Muslim faith in the field of visibilities, has now been turned into an "accessory", that is, something that can be added to and complements an outfit. _____