

THE MULTIFACETED SIGNIFICANCE OF VEILING IN IRAN:
BEFORE AND AFTER THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

by

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This thesis discusses the significance of veiling in Iran within its sociohistorical context. From the governmental banning of veiling prior to the Islamic Revolution to the obligatory veiling policy that followed it, state reform has been tied to women's dress reform. As political and religious leaders in Iran have defined the meaning of the veil differently to further their own agendas, women's reactions to these definitions have varied depending on religion, socioeconomic status, and political involvement.

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Introduction

Women's dress has long been a popular topic of discussion among feminist theorists, anthropologists, and historians, to name a few. Differences in women's dress across time and place speak to the complex way in which women are perceived as well as how they negotiate their position in society. Veiling in Iran is one of many subjects that reflect this complicated relationship between women, dress, and society at large.

This thesis focuses on veiling in Iran for several reasons. First of all, it impresses me that a simple piece of cloth has such a complex history. An analysis of veiling illustrates the point that dress is bound to its cultural context, and the various meanings of veiling over time reinforce this link between dress and culture. According to Faegheh Shirazi, a professor in Islamic Studies at the University of Texas, in Iran the "political and religious agenda has continually redefined the image of a woman's body, her clothes, adornment, make-up, and attitude" ("Islamic Religion" 122). From the governmental banning of veiling prior to the Islamic Revolution to the obligatory veiling policy that followed it, state reform has been tied to women's dress reform.

Debates over the oppressive versus emancipatory nature of veiling have often taken place among Western and Islamic feminists. Unfortunately, focusing on the differences of opinion between those in the West and those in Iran obscures the diversity of beliefs about veiling that have existed within Iran. It is too simplistic to frame this issue in that of a Western/Islamic dichotomy; rather, Iran's internal controversies over veiling, both past and present, are much more complicated. In this thesis, my main goal is to illuminate the complexity of veiling in Iran with the hope that what I discuss can contribute to the larger dialogue taking place among Western and Islamic feminists, particularly by educating Western feminists about the multifaceted aspects of this issue.

Much of my interest in veiling in Iran stems from its interaction with religious, political, and social factors. How veiling relates to changes (whether progressive or regressive) in women's status and power also intrigues me; therefore this thesis attempts to situate veiling within the context of Iran's political situation as well as the dynamic area of women's rights. For instance, the abolition of veiling in the 1930s correlated with increased liberties for women while mandatory veiling in the 1980s went along with the restriction of certain rights.

We cannot fully understand the significance of veiling outside of its sociohistorical context; as political and religious leaders in Iran have defined the meaning of the veil differently to further their own agendas, women's reactions to these definitions have varied depending on religion, socioeconomic status, and political involvement.

The Significance of Dress and Veiling

There are many definitions of the term 'dress' which vary in their degrees of specificity. I am starting with the rather general definition given by Linda Arthur in her discussion of dress, culture, and identity: "The term 'dress' is used in the most global sense to refer to all of the ways the body is used in the expression of identity" (Religion 1). Clothing in particular plays a large role in this expression, for what we wear can take on much more significance than the mere reflection of personal taste. The meanings of clothes are embedded in a social context; they are open to interpretation and susceptible to change. According to Arthur, dress functions as an important aspect of social interaction in three distinct ways. First, the body and dress can be used as a social resource in that dress can manipulate certain social situations; second, dress is a means of non-verbal

communication and shared vocabulary among people; and third, dress reflects a person's personal and social identity (Undressing 3). Arthur also argues that dress can be seen as a symbol of social control because it literally controls the external body (Religion 1).

According to Beverly McNamara, adornment and manipulation of the body are common to all societies (25). However, while the general functions of dress may be universal, it is necessary to understand the cultural context of clothing. In many Muslim communities veiling has been, and often still is, a key component of female dress.¹

In Islamic culture, veiling (hijab)² is understood as "concealment donned by women as a religious obligation and practiced by Muslim women" (Shirazi, "Islamic Religion" 115). Women begin veiling with the onset of menstruation and are supposed to be veiled in the presence of all unrelated men (Naficy 137). Hijab can range from the most orthodox form, *chador*, which is a long black garment covering women from head to toe, to simply a colorful headscarf. The term "good hejab" commonly refers to proper

¹ Veiling also plays an important role in the Muslim communities of non-Muslim countries. In fact, much has been written recently about women in Western countries who assert their right to veil, often facing discrimination as a consequence.

veiling while "bad hejab" means improper veiling (i.e. hair showing). The varying types of veils as well as their acceptability are highly context-specific and therefore will be discussed more in depth throughout the thesis where applicable.

Though veiling has complex meanings and has been used for different purposes, traditionally its roots lie in Islam and the Qur'an's mandate that women and men be modestly dressed. Despite the reference to both men and women, women are the ones usually constrained by a dress code. It is important to point out that many people believe the Qur'an itself does not necessarily restrict women but rather, patriarchal interpretations of it are responsible for dictating how women are to dress and behave (Shirazi, "Islamic Religion" 124). The actual phrase in the Qur'an referring to female modesty does not explicitly advocate veiling: "Say to believing women that they should observe modesty of the eyes and guard their sexual parts and let them not display their attractions except those naturally exposed - and let them cast down their headscarves onto their bosoms" (as qtd in Rahman, 40). Haleh Afshar, who grew up in Iran and now teaches at the

² In the literature, "hijab" and "hejab" are often used interchangeably. The main distinction, I think, is that "hijab" refers to the veil itself while "hejab" refers to the act of veiling. I have tried to make sure that my use of both terms reflects this distinction.

University of York, argues that in Iran as elsewhere there are many interpretations of this verse. Although most agree that women should cover their breasts, opinions vary in terms of how this should be done. Some Islamists believe that a simple headscarf and modest clothing is adequate while more traditional thinkers uphold the chador as the most appropriate form of concealment (Afshar 198).

According to Haideh Moghissi, an Iranian scholar living and working in Canada, the practice of veiling is embedded in a cultural context that emphasizes the danger of female sexuality³ and the need to ensure both male and female chastity by controlling women's appearances (20). Fadwa El Guindi, who has done extensive fieldwork on the contemporary Islamic movement in the Middle East, softens Moghissi's assertion by pointing out that Islam does allow for the enjoyment of sex in the context of marriage without limiting it to the purposes of procreation, but in the public realm the behavior of men and women must be desexualized (136).

While women are supposed to be covered, men are discouraged from looking at women. The system of looking/veiling in Islam is, according to Hamid Naficy,

³ The fear of female sexuality is not limited to Islam; we can find similar themes in Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism.

inherently aggressive; 2) female sexuality is so powerful it can corrupt all; 3) men are weak and cannot fight women's sexuality; and 4) women are innately exhibitionistic (141-142). Though men and women are both at risk of sexual corruption, Moghissi maintains that it is women who bear the burden of containing sexuality. Supposedly their seductive powers distract men from paying attention to God and threaten the social order; men are seen as victims of female sexuality with little control over their desire (Moghissi 24).

Thus far I have attempted to sketch out the traditional ideology behind veiling. However, these concepts are not static; particularly in Iran, the religious motivations for veiling have often interacted with political and social agendas.

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

From 1925 to 1941 when Reza Shah Pahlavi was in power, Iran went through a period of rapid modernization⁴. The Shah's attempt to westernize Iran had some advantages for

⁴ This included socioeconomic reforms, bureaucratization of government, expanded infrastructure, and the secularization of Islamic law and culture.

women; according to Haleh Esfandiari⁵, their educational and employment opportunities increased, and women's organizations, usually headed by female members of the royal family, flourished (23-25). However, mostly urban, middle- and upper-class women enjoyed these benefits. In rural communities, women missed out on education (the majority remained illiterate) and could not even participate fully in agricultural reform, as men were the ones being targeted for absorption into industry and mechanized farms (Tohidi). Even though the Shah had intended to expand social services to incorporate the rural population, such efforts were often unsuccessful. This was one of the reasons for the increase in rural-to-urban migration. Some came to the cities in search of employment, some came out of curiosity, and some came hoping to find an easier life. However, life for the urban poor held contradictions. On one hand, they had access to more social services, and there was seasonal employment, at least, to provide cash for consumer goods. But on the other hand, permanent employment and housing were not available for everyone, leaving many people crowded into slums (Bauer 142-143).

⁵ Haleh Esfandiari left Iran in 1978 and has since lived in the U.S. During the 1990s she returned to Iran to interview professional and working women about their experiences before, during, and after the Islamic Revolution. Most of the personal quotes in this thesis come from her interviews.

While the Pahlavi era brought some improvements in the lives of a minority of women, overall their political and legal status barely changed. Many authors (Shirazi, Tohidi, Esfandiari) cite as an example of this, the fact that polygamy was still accepted and practiced, even by the Shah who had three wives. The secularization of Islamic culture and the Westernization of Iran under Reza Shah reflected political motives more than a genuine interest in women's advancement (Shirazi, The Veil Unveiled 89). Reza Shah's main concerns had to do with maintaining his power over that of the clergy and convincing the international community of Iran's modernization. Any benefits for women seemed merely to be secondary.

In 1936, Reza Shah made the dramatic decision to abolish the veil. This act, following earlier attempts to reform the dress of both men and women, reflected the Shah's drive to make Iran appear more Western to the rest of the world. The anti-veiling policy had widespread effects on both men and women. Civil servants and military officers were encouraged to be in public with their wives unveiled, and school girls and teachers were actively discouraged from veiling. Many women of the younger generation welcomed this new policy, as did the Westernized women and men of the upper and middle classes. However,

the clergy was adamantly against the measure, and women from traditional families found it difficult to comply. For the most devout, being in public without a veil was tantamount to being naked (Mir-Hosseini 153). Also, many religious men were reluctant to allow their wives outside without a veil, convinced that by doing so they would be failing to protect their honor (Esfandiari 24). Those women who refused to unveil faced the humiliation of having their chadors ripped from their bodies by police; consequently, many women stopped leaving the house (Shirazi The Veil Unveiled 90-91). Another problematic aspect of this policy was that it posed a financial difficulty for those who could not afford Western clothes (Esfandiari 24). As with the Shah's other social reforms, this one privileged women of the upper class who had the resources to adapt to changing societal expectations.

When Mohammad Reza Shah came to power in 1941, the government suspended the ban on veiling, and the chador became a common sight once again. However, as there was still an emphasis on modernization, veiling continued to be looked down upon. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who has done fieldwork in urban and rural Iran, explains: "It [hijab] was a real hindrance to climbing the social ladder, a badge of backwardness and a marker of class" (153). For instance,

"fashionable hotels and restaurants refused to admit women with chador" (153). Shirazi points out that modernization efforts and the subsequent connotations of veiling created a "visible schism" among women in Iran:

Unveiled educated women living in towns tended to belong to "Westernized" upper and middle classes; veiled women living in towns were educated at home, often by tutors, in religiously sanctioned subjects; and veiled women living in rural areas were mostly illiterate, having been taught only the rudiments of Islam. (91)

However, women did not always fit neatly into the dichotomy of unveiled/Western/rich versus veiled/traditional/poor.

Even though being westernized was often synonymous with being wealthy, not all upper-class families discarded the practice of veiling. Fatemeh Moghadam, a university professor, reminds us that "under the Pahlavis it was not necessarily poor women who wore chador. Rich women from the traditional bazaar, elite religious, and many landowning families also wore chador" ("Online Discussion" 139). Conversely, in some traditional households, mothers would observe hejab while allowing their daughters to be bare-headed, as this woman from the provinces recalls: "My family was traditional. My mother wore the chador, but I was free to dress as I liked" (Esfandiari 94). Therefore, while veiling was most common among the traditional and

lower classes, there were clearly exceptions to that general rule.

Throughout the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah, women were slowly gaining more rights despite the growing power of the clergy, who voiced their opposition to such changes. The Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) played a major role in the advancement of women.⁶ Focusing on education as well as legal advocacy, this group targeted traditional, working class women in particular, with the idea that women of the middle and upper classes were in less need of their aid. Though the WOI paid attention to Western feminist movements, it had its own way of promoting feminist views in Iran that were compatible with Islam: "Each piece of legislation sponsored by the WOI was drawn up after long and detailed consultation with Islamic jurists, although inevitably such legislation reflected a modern definition of Islamic law" (Esfandiari 33). During the 1960s and 1970s the WOI put increasing amounts of pressure on the government to enact legal reforms for the benefit of women.

In 1963 women won the right to vote and some took positions in the government. The Family Protection Law, passed in 1967, was another triumph for women. This law prevented husbands from unilaterally divorcing their wives

and automatically getting custody of the children, allowed women the opportunity to sue for divorce, required husbands to ask for their wives' permission before taking a second spouse, and raised the marriage age for girls from 13 to 15 (Esfandiari 28-30). Furthermore, the Family Protection Law instituted special Family Protection Courts to deal with marriage, divorce, and child custody issues. The WOI was active in educating the public about these new developments and made free legal advice and advocacy available to those women who needed it (Esfandiari 32). Depending on one's economic status, however, the Family Protection Law varied in its degree of influence. As one Iranian woman pointed out, "I believe it [the Family Protection Law] helped the less privileged class. At least they got access to courts and women lawyers... As for the middle- and upper-classes, despite the law men still managed to do what they wanted" (Esfandiari 79).

By the 1970s women seemed to have made considerable progress. They occupied some prestigious positions in government, owned their own businesses and worked as judges, lawyers, doctors and engineers. By 1978 almost 2 million women were in the labor force while over 1.5 million girls attended school. Many educated, privileged

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the WOI, see Esfandiari 31-34.

women felt equal to men, as this woman describes: "I grew up in Tehran, in a Westernized, educated, and civilized family.. I never felt at a disadvantage because I was a woman"(Esfandiari 86). Another woman asserts, "Before the revolution... I never felt that my gender was an obstacle to my progress"(Esfandiari 104).

Some women of the same class were not quite as glowing in their reports of gender equality. One agrees that women had many opportunities, but she also alludes to a glass ceiling:

At the university where I worked, I knew men and women had equal chances for advancement. But I also knew that women did not have much of a chance of becoming chancellor or even vice-chancellor of a university. Even the chancellor of the women's university in those days was a man.(Esfandiari 79)

Though women were making progress in the 1970s, clearly there was still more work to do to ensure total gender equality. Nevertheless, according to Esfandiari, "the aspiration to education, independence and economic betterment was no longer exclusive to a small group of women"(34).

Under the Pahlavis, Westernization correlated not only with women's educational and economic advancement but also with a new image of what it meant to be a modern Iranian woman. Anne Betteridge, an anthropologist who lived in

Iran from 1976 to 1980, asserts that women were encouraged to follow "the path indicated in the mass media - being beautiful objects, fashionably dressed and made up" (114). A popular women's magazine at the time, *Zan-e Ruz*, reflected this mentality, for example sponsoring an annual "teen princess" contest. Furthermore, the Shah himself once said in an interview that "in a man's life, women count only if they are beautiful and graceful and know how to stay feminine..." (as qtd in Betteridge 115). Like his father before him, Mohammed Reza Shah contradicted his fairly liberal policies regarding women with a sexist personal view. This point is especially salient considering how often the assumption is made that an expansion of women's rights is inherent to Westernization or liberalization. In fact, a system which appears to benefit women on the surface may be just as oppressive to them as a more blatantly sexist one.

Not everyone appreciated the changes in women's roles; within some segments of society, a backlash against women's empowerment was growing. Men, and some women, were uncomfortable with the increase in women's presence in public and the ease with which the two sexes could mingle. Also, those who moved from villages to the cities were shocked by the modern billboards and advertisements

featuring women's somewhat exposed bodies. The expanded rights and independence of women coincided with what many perceived to be negative effects of modernization, and the two concepts became linked in people's minds (Esfandiari 36).

During the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, more and more Iranians decried the Shah's policy of modernization. Along with the influx of Western culture came economic problems, and people began to feel that their national and religious identity was being threatened. By 1979 millions of Iranians were participating in demonstrations, calling for an overthrow of the monarchy. All kinds of people were involved in this movement - the religious and the secular, the wealthy and the poor, the urban and the rural, etc. - but it eventually became clear that the particular views and goals of the clerical leaders were to dominate (Esfandiari 37-38).

Within the revolutionary movement there were clerics and nonclerical thinkers alike who tried to reconcile modernization and women's rights with Islam, arguing that Islam supported women's active participation in education and work. The basis for the constitution that would later be adopted by the Islamic Republic can be found in the ideologies of Morteza Motahari and Ali Shariati (Darrow

310). Both men attempted to show how Islam could be compatible with women's rights. Of the two, Motahari was more conservative. He was in favor of women observing hejab and advocated a public realm in which women could continue to enjoy a diversity of economic opportunities, as long as they were segregated from men (Darrow 313).

Shariati, on the other hand, was a bit more liberal though he too challenged the modern notion of female emancipation.

As the Westernized followers of the Shah and the traditional clergy became more polarized, some women were caught in a double bind, one which Shariati discussed. On one hand, the traditional woman was considered backward and ignorant, but on the other hand modern women were seen as "Westoxicated." This identity crisis, according to Iranian journalist Camelia Entekhabi-Fard, particularly affected the younger, educated women from the traditional class. These women appreciated their education and independence, but rejected media images of highly adorned, Western women. This rejection influenced many to incorporate veiling into their dress and behavior (as I will discuss in more detail later on).

Shariati supported an alternative image for these women and upheld Fatima as the model. The daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatima was revered for her virtues as a

daughter, wife, and mother as well as for taking an active role in fighting tyranny. Thus, her traditional roles within the family did not prevent her from participating in public life (Darrow 311-312). Shariati's ideal for women, as well as Motahari's call for a "separate but equal" public sphere, set the stage for a revolution that could easily incorporate women.

According to Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, professor of political science at the University of Paris, the Islamic Revolution was the first Iranian social movement to generate the involvement of women from all over the social spectrum, who came together to protest the failure of Westernized monarchy(127). From participating in marches to organizing strikes, women played a significant role in supporting the revolution (Esfandiari 39). This is an especially salient point, one which challenges a common Western stereotype of the eternally passive and oppressed Muslim woman. Regardless of the revolutionaries' actual agenda or how things turned out later on, one fact seems clear: the impressive participation of women in the Islamic Revolution "stressed their own importance as social and political activists"(Kian-Thiebaut 127).

Two groups of women in particular were active in the early stages of the revolution: religious, middle class

women with limited education and university students (Bauer 156). The women of the middle class had information as well as financial security behind them as they began challenging the Shah's regime. Universities were sites of growing religious and political expression, and at this time "there was a marked increase in mosque attendance among students" (Esfandiari 37). Later on, especially as news spread of the government's violent reaction to demonstrators, more and more women, including the rural and urban poor, became involved.

For the majority of women at this time, activism included veiling, though its meaning was different for different women. For instance, traditionalists observed hijab as a display of their Shi'ite ideology and culture. According to Betteridge, "in general, religious women accepted the view that modest dress is necessary because its absence excites men's attentions and leads to undesirable consequences" (117). For some of these women, veiling had as much to do with their own behavior as that of men; veiling could help discourage "their passion for jewelry, ornamentation and the latest fashions" (Betteridge 117). Not only was veiling a sign of religious devotion, but it also inevitably took on political meaning as

religion became the main framework in which people expressed opposition to the current regime.

Secular women also used the veil as a political tactic, signifying nationalist and anti-Shah sentiment. These women took up veiling temporarily for a specific cause, and assumed that once the revolution succeeded, they would be able to continue dressing however they pleased. The following quote, from a woman who was skeptical of the revolution, illustrates how superficially some women used the veil: "I was annoyed at upper-class women who put on a scarf and took part in demonstrations and marches in the morning and went to parties in their usual dresses in the evenings and discussed politics in an abstract way" (Esfandiari 56).

Islamist students made up another group of women whose veiling had both religious and political significance. Like older, traditional women, many students incorporated veiling into their behavior, using it as a tool to keep their minds off of superficial matters (Betteridge 117). For others, though, the veil was more of a symbol and simply served to mark their identity as protesters of the Shah (Kian-Thiebaut 128).

The multiple reasons for veiling, as well as the varying degrees to which women advocated hijab, illustrates

the actual complexity behind a symbol that so many Westerners have equated automatically with Islamic fundamentalism. According to Kian-Thiebaut, "in Western eyes, veiling and subordination correlate" (128). However, there is a definite distinction between women choosing to veil as a political tactic before the revolution and then being forced to veil by the government after the revolution.

The varying degree of significance which religious leaders and female followers of the revolution attributed to the veil demonstrates the lack of clear communication between the two groups. This lack of communication may have had a lot to do with why women so fervently supported a revolution that made no explicit promises to protect their independence. It was obviously in the best interests of the revolutionaries to include women in their struggle. Though some of the more fundamentalist thinkers may have disapproved of women's active role, they were dependent on their support and therefore made vague assurances about the future of women's equality. Most of their discussions about women, however, were centered on the need to end their objectification and exploitation under Western influences (Darrow 308).

So why did so many women assume that an overthrow of the monarchy would lead to a better society, one in which their advances would be upheld, even though the actual discourse of the revolution shied away from making any such promises? Part of the explanation, simple as it may seem, had to do with getting caught up in the excitement of such revolutionary fervor without necessarily looking at the movement critically. One woman attributes her involvement to being "young and full of idealism," (Esfandiari 60) while another says, "I was swept off my feet by the revolution" (Esfandiari 56). Yet another woman describes the year before the revolution as one permeated by "a deep and palpable feeling of brotherhood, equality, solidarity, and unity among the nation" (Esfandiari 65).

Some women, especially less traditional ones from the middle class, may have supported a revolution cloaked in such heavy Islamic terms because they thought that "Islam, clerical leadership, and the invocation of Ayatollah Khomeini's name were merely an instrument to facilitate the overthrow of the monarchy... Very few imagined the revolution would lead to the establishment of an Islamic Republic" (Esfandiari 53). These were the same women who may have taken up veiling as a temporary measure, assuming

that in the future they could return to dressing as they pleased.

While the Islamic Revolution did operate in a religious context, many of its female supporters were not reactionaries or fundamentalists; rather, they believed in a reconciliation of Islamic values with their current rights, thinking this could be achieved through the revolution (Betteridge 113). However, as would become clear soon after Khomeini came to power, other supporters of the revolution did not have such liberal visions for the future of women in Iran.

After the Revolution

Once the Shah was overthrown, the secular revolutionary groups splintered and in the meantime religious leaders established control (Nashat). Ayatollah Khomeini came to power as the ruler of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Almost immediately the position of Iranian women began to change. Though the new regime exalted women for their contributions to the revolution, now that the Shah was ousted and Khomeini safely in power, women were expected to return to their proper place: the home (Nashat). The Islamic Constitution reinforced Khomeini's ideology of domesticity for women. According to

the constitution, which only addressed women specifically in four small sections, women should primarily be concerned with family life. The constitution went on to denounce the previous regime as being exploitative of women, reducing them to mere sex objects or targets for consumerism; however, only vague assurances were made as to the protection of women's rights in the new order (Darrow).

Very soon after the revolution, Khomeini suspended all laws that had been enacted under the Shah, although he did allow women to keep the right to vote, to be elected to parliament and to hold cabinet positions. They could not become judges, however, and the regime launched a public campaign promoting women's maternal roles (Esfandiari). Khomeini suspended the Family Protection Law, which resulted in the dismantling of the Family Protection Courts as well as the regression of certain rights for women. For instance, polygamy was once again acceptable, men could unilaterally divorce their wives, and the marriage age for girls was lowered from 18 to 13, in keeping with Islamic custom (Tohidi). In addition to these changes in the law, sex segregation also became increasingly common. Primary and Secondary schools were segregated by sex as were the seats in university classrooms and on buses. Though total sex segregation on university campuses and in the workforce

the Shah. Before the revolution, Parsa had been a doctor, then a principal, and finally the first woman elected to parliament. In 1968 she was the first female cabinet minister, in charge of higher education. However, after the revolution, Khomeini removed her from office and had her executed (Nafisi).

Many of the same women who had so passionately supported the revolution, now questioned what good it had done them. As one Iranian businesswomen explains,

I was hoping that the revolution would open new doors and frontiers for us. But my disappointment began when the government started clamping down on women. First the authorities lowered the age of marriage, then they blamed the failure of population control on women. The list can go on and on. (Esfandiari 71)

It seemed that the reverence of women, so common during the revolution, was starting to decrease.

In fact, the first few years following the revolution seem to be full of contradictions. On one hand, the suspension of certain rights, forced sex segregation and veiling, and the promotion of maternal images reflected the new government's attempt to push women back into the private sphere. However, the presence of some women in public actually increased. For example, doors opened for more traditional women to work now that sex segregation and veiling in public legitimized their presence in the eyes of

their families (Mir-Hosseini "Divorce, Veiling and Feminism" 149). In fact, sex segregation created many jobs; all-girl schools required female teachers, and more women became doctors since male doctors were no longer allowed to see female patients (Esfandiari). Furthermore, the purges of both men and women from government jobs made room for other women to take their places. This trend continues, as one woman asserts: "In many families the only breadwinner is the woman. In spite of all the obstacles and difficulties, women continue to work... The revolution has failed to keep women at home" (Esfandiari 141).

Much of the new government's policies regarding women were in direct opposition to those of the Shah. Khomeini's call for obligatory veiling was a large part of his agenda to "protect" women from the exploitation they had suffered in the previous regime. However, as UCLA professor Nayereh Tohidi points out, in this regard Khomeini actually shared the same motives as the Shah whom he had so militantly denounced:

Reza Shah used women's bodies and dress code as a symbol of Westernization/modernization; Khomeini used women's bodies and dress code as a symbol of anti-West Islamization. Both governments (one 'modern' and secular and the other Islamist and 'traditional') used women as identity markers, as symbols of the ascendancy of the official ideology, and neither cared what women themselves wanted in this regard. ("Online Discussion" 142)

Just as some women in the 1930s had refused to give up the veil when Reza Shah tried to ban veiling, many women after the revolution resisted Khomeini's early attempts to make veiling mandatory.

On March 8, 1979 a demonstration in Tehran commemorating the International Day of the Woman turned into a protest against the new regime. Women called not only for gender equality, but also the right to choose their own form of dress (Nafisi). Initially, Khomeini backed down, but eventually he resumed his plan, step by step. First, only government workers were required to observe hejab, with the black chador being the official dress of women in high positions (Esfandiari); then all women in public had to do so, and finally veiling was established as obligatory for all women in Iran. Some protests continued, though they were broken up, often brutally, by the police, and three main sectors of society took up the cause of enforcing hejab: Khomeini's revolutionary guards, the Party of God members, and Islamist pupils and students (Afshar 203). By the early 1980s all women in public were veiled (Nafisi).

As with Khomeini's other policies, mandatory veiling had both negative and positive effects. On one hand,

imposing the veil made it harder for women to do certain jobs, like surgery, and it served as a reminder for women of their "place" in the new society (Nashat). According to Ayatollah Ahmed Azari-Qumi, a conservative cleric whose discourse on women shaped gender policies of the Islamic Republic, there may not have been a way to keep women out of public life, but at least through hejab, they could be controlled. Denouncing the display of women in the west, Azari-Qumi promoted the "culture of hijab" as an anti-cultural invasion tactic (Mir-Hosseini "Islam, Women and Civil Rights" 171).

On the other hand, veiling had the potential to emancipate women by "legitimizing their presence in public life," (El Guindi 175) making it possible for them to be accepted in the workforce and develop economic autonomy. In fact, though conservatives may have hoped veiling would make women invisible, Moghadam argues that "forced hejab has undermined the traditional gender-related dividing line between private and public spheres" (140). For women who had already participated in both spheres before the revolution, mandatory veiling may have been more of a hindrance to their independence than a liberatory tool; however, other women who had been restricted to the home no

doubt had many new opportunities available to them through the "culture of hijab."

Under Khomeini, the place of women was full of contradictions. On one hand, the government praised women for their active support of the revolution, and their policies, perhaps inadvertently, allowed some women more freedom in the public sphere. On the other hand, women were expected to adhere to their roles as wives and mothers. Such contradictions continued during the war with Iraq in which many women participated, some even as revolutionary guards. Despite women's involvement in the war as well as their growing numbers in the workforce during this time, the media kept perpetuating the state ideology of a good woman being a mother and housewife. The war also overshadowed any debates over women's social problems (Kian-Thiebaut 129).

At the same time, the government's focus on veiling grew even more intense. As Shirazi points out, "criminalization of offending public chastity by not veiling properly coincided with Iran's mobilization in 1980 for war against Iraq" (The Veil Unveiled 94). In Iran the image of veiled women permeated society. Even the promotion campaigns for the Iran-Iraq War used this image - on posters, billboards, and even stamps. Some images even

depicted a veiled woman with a gun in order to fuse the concepts of hijab and jihad, religion and war (Shirazi The Veil Unveiled 103). Along with this image came the pressure for Iranian women to support the state and send their male relatives into battle. Again, Fatima was upheld as the model, inspiring women to emulate her piety (Shirazi The Veil Unveiled 96).

Interestingly, "while up until 1980 the veil was exploited to distinguish the Muslim woman from the 'Western' doll, during the war with Iraq the veil was used to distinguish the Shi'i from the Sunni Muslim" (The Veil Unveiled 94). Not only had hijab come to symbolize Islamic revivalism, but in particular it had to stand for Shi'i Iran. Shi'i Muslims were not restricted to Iran; in fact, they constituted over half of the Iraqi population as well. However, their political and economic status was extremely low whereas the ruling class was made up of Sunnis. Tensions between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims had mounted during the Islamic Revolution in Iran when Khomeini had urged Shi'i Muslims in Iraq to follow Iran's lead and rebel against their Sunni rulers. Throughout the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian religious leaders tried to rally the support of the Shi'i Muslims in Iraq, although their attempts seem to have been unsuccessful (Shirazi, The Veil Unveiled 95). The

Iranian government's focus on veiling to distinguish not only Iran from the West, but Shi'i from Sunni Muslims as well reinforces the political nature of hijab.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war and after, Khomeini maintained his policy of mandatory veiling. Afshar asserts that the state was clearly invested in keeping women veiled for political purposes since "women have become the major emblem of Islamification and their dress code the most significant identifier of revolutionary success" (197). In 1983 the official punishment for being unveiled in public was up to 74 lashes; this was changed in 1995 to a jail sentence of 10 days to 2 months (Afshar 197). Regardless of women's varying opinions on the subject of obligatory veiling, according to Mir-Hosseini, "in 1994 there was not a single bare-headed woman to be seen in public anywhere in Iran" ("Divorce, Veiling and Feminism" 154). This does not signify, however, that all Iranian women had fully embraced the "culture of hijab." In fact, the whole issue has merely taken on a new spin. Since the late 1980s the concern over bad hejab, or incorrect veiling, continues to dominate the political scene, particularly among the younger generation who may veil but not necessarily in the ideal way.

In 1989, while Khomeini was still in power, the Social Affairs Division of Tehran's Governor's office conducted an investigation of the veiling practices of 3,030 random women. They rated women's hejab from good to moderate to bad. Good hejab encompassed the orthodox black chador, a colored or slightly patterned chador, or the magna'eh, a scarf secured over the forehead and under the chin. Moderate hejab referred to a plain scarf and tunic, and bad hejab consisted of a colored or patterned scarf. Other factors, such as tightness of clothing, amount of hair shown, and heaviness of makeup, also contributed to the ratings. The report revealed that 23% of the women were good hejab, 29% were moderate, and 48% were bad (Mir-Hosseini "Divorce, Veiling and Feminism" 155). Clearly, although the government managed to enforce hejab, women were negotiating its expression in different ways.

The debate over veiling did not stop with the 1997 election of Mohammed Khatami as president. Azar Nafisi, a former English professor at the University of Tehran, argues that although touted by many in the West as a moderate cleric, Khatami has carried on the restrictive, patriarchal legacy of Khomeini. According to Afshar, the government's continued insistence on veiling reflects religious leaders' fear of female sexuality as well as

their attempts to resist western influences (199). Along with imposing the veil on the general public, the government also regulates the media's depiction of women. For instance, in 1996, the Ministry of Culture published codes for Iranian cinema that included the forbidding of tight feminine clothing, showing of body (other than face and hands), and physical contact. The justification for this proscription consisted of two main arguments: protecting women from objectification and depriving men of sexual pleasure outside of marriage (Shirazi The Veil Unveiled 64).

Another more recent example of the Iranian government's determination to promote Islamification has been their "deportation" of Barbie, a doll that epitomizes Western standards of beauty. Apparently she is to be replaced with "Sara," a chador covered doll whose veiling, in the eyes of scholar Farzaneh Milani, "represents a community striving to define itself as a cohesive religious entity." Many Westerners have accepted this definition, believing that everyone in Iran shares the same religious and cultural values. However, according to Nafisi, the "tension between the Islamic ruling elite and Iranian society at large has been vastly underestimated by Western

observers of Iran." Veiling is one such issue where opinions are divided.

Mir-Hosseini asserts that women in Iran have always had different opinions about hejab, and the debate over its significance and implications continue to this day. Proponents of veiling cite reasons ranging from the practical to the symbolic. As mentioned earlier, compulsory hejab has undoubtedly facilitated the ability for traditional women to enter universities and the workforce (Mir-Hosseini "Divorce, Veiling and Feminism" 156). In terms of the censorship in Iranian cinema, Shirazi suggests that it has "made filmmakers skillful, resourceful, and determined," (The Veil Unveiled 65) as the focus of movies has to rely more on dialogue, plot and symbolism rather than just sex⁷. Mir-Hosseini also makes the argument that hejab has the potential to combat Western standards of wealth and beauty by reducing the visible class differences among women and promoting their solidarity ("Divorce, Veiling and Feminism" 156). For similar reasons, many Islamist women take pride in the veil as a symbol of their culture and a tool for resisting Western influence: "They maintain that the veil enables

⁷ Not only is the subject of sex removed from films, but so too is the topic of romantic love. For a more detailed discussion and analysis of Iranian cinema and veiling, see "Chapter Three: The Cinematics of the Veil" in Shirazi's book The Veil Unveiled.

them to become the observers and not the observed; that it liberates them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands of the beauty myth" (Afshar 124).

Furthermore, some Islamists argue that hijab protects women's modesty and honor and is seen as a sign of respect for women (Afshar 200). As for the most orthodox, according to Gelareh Asayesh, veiling is tightly linked to respect for Islam, and "a common reference to poor hejab... is that the culprit is 'stepping on the blood of the martyrs'" ("Online Discussion" 138).

An ambiguous aspect of veiling is its potential to keep women from being overly preoccupied with their appearance (as I alluded to above). In comparing Iran with the U.S., where women's bodies are very much on display in the media, psychologist Daisuke Akiba found that Iranian women had higher body self-esteem than did their North American counterparts (539). However, an article by Minoo Nobakht and Mahmood Dezhkam found that the prevalence rates for eating disorders among female adolescents in Tehran were comparable to prevalence rates in Western countries (265). While this similarity is most likely accounted for by a variety of factors, it still throws into question the idea that veiling protects Iranian women from the troubles faced by Western women.

Just as the supporters of veiling have a multiple justifications for their position, so do those who oppose it. Moghissi echoes a common concern when she asserts that in the writings which view the veil as a tool of empowerment, the element of choice is taken for granted, while, more often than not, the element of coercion, be it in the form of using brutal force or intimidation, or social, cultural, or political pressure, is not even mentioned.(42)

Secularists cite this coercion as an infringement on their personal liberty, and even some Islamists who would adopt the veil voluntarily disagree with it being forced on everyone: "For some traditional women, the imposition of the veil was an affront to their religiosity - changing what had been a freely chosen expression of religious faith into a rote act imposed on them by the state"(Nafisi). These Islamist women, with the support of a few religious leaders and intellectuals, have tried to challenge the legitimacy of mandatory veiling in Islamic terms (Afshar 198).

Others, such as Moghissi, point out very concrete flaws with the ideology of hijab that the Iranian government espouses. For example, she questions how much the veil actually protects women from sexual assault and harassment. Rape⁸ still happens in Iran, and she suggests

⁸ Unfortunately, statistics on violence against women in Iran are rare; however, a BBC news article recently claimed that "new statistics in Iran show an alarming increase in the number of rapes and murders in the

that such an emphasis on hiding women's bodies actually draws more attention to them (Moghissi 46). Moghissi challenges another possible myth about the veil's liberating nature by arguing "the notion that hejab fights consumerism and erases class distinctions is also wishful thinking at best" (45). Reminding us of the widening gap between rich and poor in the Middle East, Moghissi describes how in Iran upper-class women commonly buy expensive imported clothing to wear under their chadors, and that even the material of the chador itself can signify clear class differences (45). Furthermore, Fatemeh Moghadam observes that "in today's Iran, wearing several layers of hejab is the sign of being an elite, conservative woman... Ordinary devout Muslim women do not adhere to such elaborate hejab and express resentment when they see these women" ("Online Discussion" 139).

Challenging mandatory hejab is not restricted to intellectuals writing about Iran; within the country women are using a range of tactics to resist this policy. According to Afshar, in the 1990s urban, middle-class women in particular made efforts to wear modest clothing rather than the billowing chador. These women protested the fact

capital Tehran," and that these statistics "suggest that in every six days a woman in Tehran is raped and murdered" (Saba).

that a woman's job security was jeopardized if she did not veil, and a few resorted to the shocking tactic of self-immolation to attract attention to the cause. One such person was Homa Darabi, a former Professor at Tehran's National University who in 1991 had been dismissed for not adhering to the dress code. In 1994 she unveiled herself in public and lit herself on fire; her death sparked protests in Iran and abroad (Afshar 205). Homa Darabi's self-immolation and the protests that followed did not bring about dramatic change on the governmental level, but officials did alter their stance somewhat. For instance, at a seminar organized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Relation in 1995, there was discussion about taking the harassment of improperly veiled women more seriously and condemning overzealous guards' brutal tactics of intimidation (Afshar 206).

While the above mentioned example is an extreme one, there are countless other instances of more subtle defiance. As Esfandiari states of the Iranian women she interviewed, when "asked how they would define women's resistance against the impositions of the state over the last seventeen years, most women assured me with one word: hejab" (133). Again we see the veil as holding political

significance; whereas during the pre-revolutionary years women donned the veil to protest their government, now they are, if not taking it off, altering its style in another attempt to challenge authorities.

Urban women seem to defy the stricter versions of hejab more so than rural women. For instance, "in wealthier north Tehran, raincoats and overcoats have replaced the robe" (Esfandiari 133). As an Iranian university professor attests, "the government has had great difficulty in imposing the proper hejab on women, at least in a city like Tehran. In the provinces more and more girls have to wear the chador to go to university" (Esfandiari 138).

Age plays an even greater role than geography when it comes to resisting hejab. Ironically, it is not just a "handful of 'Westernized' women" who object to forced veiling, but rather the younger generation, "children of the revolution," are most active in their protest:

Of the 802 men and women the vice squads detained in Tehran in July 1993, 80% were under the age of twenty. The suppression of culture in the name of defending against the West's "cultural invasion" and the attempts at coercive "Islamization" have made these youths almost obsessed with the culture they are being deprived of. (Nafisi)

Esfandiari echoes this statement in her description of female students: "Young girls around the campus of Tehran University wear colorful scarves, disclosing the tip of a ponytail or flaunting their famous kakols, a fringe or bob of hair showing beneath the scarf, in the face of revolutionary guards"(133). Older women, on the other hand, do not always show such rebelliousness, as one businesswoman explains: "I am personally too old to put up a resistance against the hejab. Not that it is not important for me. But it is not a central issue in my daily life"(Esfandiari 142). Nevertheless, this same woman as well as others, acknowledges that "the way women defy observing the complete hejab, the way they dress, the way the wear their makeup is a symbol of women's resistance"(Esfandiari 142). Another older woman declares she is "full of admiration for these young women who show their kakol despite all the punishments the government inflicts on them"(Esfandiari 149). Regardless of the Iranian government's attempt to enforce the Islamic dress code, many women who were raised in post-revolutionary Iran refuse to embrace Islamization fully.

In contemporary Iranian society the issue of hejab continues to symbolize women's resistance towards their government. As one woman insists, "Hardly a week passes

without a statement by someone in the government about women's attire. If the authorities had solved this problem, why do they talk about it so much?" (Esfandiari 147). Another woman attests to the ultimate failure of the government to intimidate women by making veiling mandatory: "At first I tried to go out as little as possible. But you can't give into these pressures. That is what they wanted - for women like me who do not feel comfortable wearing the scarf to stay home. We defied them by wearing the scarf and being everywhere" (Esfandiari 146). The struggle now, according to Nafisi, is one between "the people of Iran and all representatives of the government. And at the center of this struggle is the battle over women's rights." And, at the center of this battle, symbolically, is the debate over hejab, which continues to this day.

Conclusion

Whether banned or enforced, veiling in Iran has long been the focus of political, religious, and societal attention. In the last century it has taken on a variety of meanings for a variety of purposes. Reza Shah abolished veiling as part of his attempt to Westernize the country. With the onset of the Islamic Revolution, many groups of women voluntarily donned the veil to protest the Shah's

regime. After the revolution, Khomeini made the veil mandatory in his attempt to ward off western cultural invasion and promote Islam. Since then women have challenged this policy in both direct and subtle ways, continually asserting their agency within a society that attempts to control them.

The veil has been a hindrance to social mobility, a sign of political resistance, an excuse for traditional women to enter the workforce, a tool for keeping women "in their place," an object of wartime propaganda, an anti-Western symbol, a signifier of Iranian national pride, and a powerful point of discussion in relation to women's rights.

Understanding hijab in its sociohistorical context allows us to avoid framing this issue in simplistic terms of Western versus Islamic values. Instead, we can examine the ideological struggles taking place within Iran itself. I hope that by illustrating the complexity of veiling, this thesis has also demonstrated the complexity of Iranian women's lives as they continue to negotiate their political, religious, and social agency.

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