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Where Dance Fights with the Devil

A Report from Inside the First Female

Revolution in Iran

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Abstract

Iran is currently experiencing one of the largest anti-government protests since 2009. The protests were ignited by the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman detained by the morality police on accusations of violating the hijab mandate, which compels women to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothing. Women have led the demonstrations, with some ripping off their scarves and waving and burning them while men applauded. How did hijab become politicized in Iran? This case analysis provides an overview of the “worlds’ first feminist revolution,” based on a new formulation of the importance of veiling in the construction of power in the Islamic Republic. Considering the veil as a patriarchal political technology to control the female body, this paper argues that the current movement, centered on the “Women, Life, Freedom” slogan, is challenging the basic governmentality of the Islamic Republic, and the dancing of unveiled women reveals a new political orientation to bring down the patriarchy.



Introduction

Michel Foucault in his famous writing on the 1979 Iranian revolution calls Iran the “spirit of a spiritless world.” But as an anonymous critic, an Iranian woman under the pen name “Mme. Atoussa H” counters that this spirituality was masculine and soon summons the old traditional patriarchy in the new body of possessed modernized Pahlavi state.¹ One of the first revolutionary mandates of Ayatollah Khomeini was compulsory veiling (hijab). Mandatory veiling sparked large protests by women in the early years of the revolution, and gradually evolved into an oppressive system of female body control through a multilayered disciplinary, juridical, political, cultural, and intelligence institutions that supported the morality police against a trivial loosening of women’s scarf.

On 13 September 2022, a 22-year-old Kurdish girl who was visiting Tehran for a few hours, was arrested by the so-called morality police and died in police custody. Since then, Mahsa Amini has become a symbol of women’s fight against patriarchal oppression in Iran, with her death sparking demonstrations across multiple cities in Iran. A month after her death, anti-government protests persisted all over the country. Although internet and access to the global cyberspace has been restricted almost completely, and the police is suppressing any activities by the protestors, streets, universities, schools, local urban areas, cars, and rooftops have become the main stages for women protestors to perform their acts of defiance. While there have been many anti-government protests in the country regarding economic and environmental concerns, this one stands out because young women and girls are on the front lines, supported by young men. Women are taking off their scarves, spinning them in the air, cutting their hair, burning their veils, and dancing in the streets. The main slogan of this new movement is “Woman, Life, Freedom,” which is being chanted everywhere. Similar to the deaths of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and George Floyd in the United States, Mahsa Amini’s killing triggered widespread outrage. The source of the uprising was not the usual ideological, economic, racial or ethnic conflicts, but rather women’s persistent oppression and subordination in the country. According to prominent feminist academics, this time we should “listen to the voices of a feminist revolution in Iran.”² To better understand the political importance of the recent Iranian revolutionary phenomena, we need to examine the significance of the veil, and to properly understand what the Islamic Republic state sees the “woman problem.”³

The Islamic Republic and Veiling

Until recently, in Iranian intellectual and political public spheres, the veil was seen as a minor concern of women. Although the protests against compulsory hijab were the first anti-government protests

¹ B. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

² J. Butler, J. Rancière, A. Y. Davis, S. Ahmed, and S. Benhabib, “A group of Iranian Feminists and others (2022), Listen to the Voices of a Feminist Revolution in Iran,” <http://bit.ly/3Ajwa1r>.

³ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).



three weeks after the Islamic Revolution on March 8, 1979, elite men paid less attention to this feminine concern. The political debates always centered on masculine so called “serious” ideological, political, and economic problems. In Habermasian terms, the veil was categorized under secondary cultural issues in important public discussions, in which women with improper hijab are considered loose, even among opposition politicians and elites. Even some feminists, consider the veil as a trivial girlish concern about clothing, which should be disregarded in order to tackle the more “serious” problems about women’s legal rights. Nevertheless, in all these years, the veil was a central part of an administrative “system” and family “life-world” marking the structure of real power, away from discursive discussions. In fact, despite the existence of other regulations that limit their access to the economy, security, education, and healthcare, women in the Islamic Republic are subject to policing of their bodies through the imposition of the veil. The veil is a red line for the state, and it has not backed down from its mandatory veiling policy.

How can we understand the position of the veil in the Islamic Republic, this apparently trivial piece on women’s head for which people are being killed in streets? According to critical social theory, this dilemma is related to the epistemological gap between politics and technology, culture and rationality, discourse and materiality, lifeworld and system, episteme and power in modern philosophical, political and social theory. Women are experiencing the veil existentially as a powerful entity that directs their life in practice in the latter parts of these dichotomies. The former parts of these dichotomies reduce the veil to an immaterial, power-free cultural concept in a symmetric network of equal values of clothing. To understand the nature of the veil, we need to change our focus from cultural representations of clothing to the embedded power codes. Andrew Feenberg calls this approach “technical politics,” which reveals actual power relations hidden in technical codes.⁴

In our case, the veil is always considered as a theological regulation of women’s dress. It is assumed that the technical code of the veil is directly deduced from epistemic theological arguments. But by shifting our focus from theology to technology, we can reverse the relationship between the veil and religious arguments. The veil is not an application of Islamic law; rather, Islamic law is an epistemological formulation of the veil. In this new genealogical understanding of the knowledge-power relation in Islam, the rational Western political question of who has the natural/philosophical/theological superiority and authority to rule others, has become a question of ways of ruling. Different from Michel Foucault’s famous archetype of Panopticon as disciplinary machinery of the modern rationality-power relationship, Islamic disciplinary machinery is patriarchal and its political technology is veiling. Both the veil and Islamic law are products of a special historical patriarchal understanding of being and the Holy Quran, which are directly focused on the female body.⁵

⁴ Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵ L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).



Viewed from this perspective, it is clear why controlling the female body is the main platform and most strategic pillar of constructing an Islamic state. According to Fatema Mernissi,⁶ if “the man of reason” in the Western tradition considers nature as raw material, a neutral object of making technical civilization including women,⁷ then in the theory of the Islamic man of reason, Muslim women are more than raw material, a dangerous enemy against whom all patriarchal machinery is designed to exile and neutralize her. The veil is a political tool used to keep women out of the public eye and social contact while purging the masculine public sphere from femininity. Simultaneously this apparatus works with a theological regime of truth to reproduce ancient patriarchal mythology of women as a source of all sins.⁸

A Feminine Revolution

According to Karl Schmitt, every state has boundaries which provide “the political” needed for sovereignty by separating friends from enemies.⁹ The state’s boundaries become physical due to its nature. Usually, this boundary corresponds to national diplomatic borders; sometimes it emerges like the Berlin wall as a symbol of cold war ideological blocks; in racist regimes, ethnicity and race make the political curtain; and in the Islamic state, the headscarf segregates pure masculine society from feminine impurity. In this structure, it is clear that the hijab problem is more complicated than the external assumption that portrays it as a struggle over “the right to choose what to wear.” The primary goal of the Islamic State is to save its identity and apparatus of power. Every patriarchal cultural, economic, political, educational, and juridical construction derives its model and metaphor from the traditional family pattern of father/husband superiority on women. In this structure, the male subject is the ruler, while the female and children are subordinates. The battle between women and the Islamic Republic over the veil is a crisis in the foundation of patriarchal governance, unlike previous ideological or economic protests. In other words, femininity is the ontological alternative of the masculine order.

This new feminine agency is the reason why we cannot talk about this female revolution in conventional terms of movements and revolutions. From the French to the Russian Revolution, and even the Iranian Revolution, we were only familiar with one type of revolution: The masculine type, which is political, equipped with an ideological manifesto, party, flag, charismatic leader, strategic plans designed by professional revolutionaries and an armed core of revolutionary men who are ready to fight the official army to overthrow the regime and establish a new one. It seems that this model would reproduce a more radical patriarchy in the new established state by following changes from above through top-down state engineering, as pursued by Robespierre, Lenin, and Khomeini

6 F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamic in Muslim Society* (London: Saqi, 2011).

7 G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

8 N. S. Abu Zayd, *Circled of Scare, Women in Islamic Discourse*, trans. Edris Amini (Tehran: Negah Mo’aser Publication, 2018).

9 C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).



in these three modern revolutions. Disagreements between the enlightenment, Marxism and Islamism, the man of reason and his platonic idealism, as well as militant violation tainted the idea and practice of revolution.

Nevertheless, here in the current movement in Iran, we lack aggressive violence, weapons, ideology, party, flag, charismatic leader, professional revolutionaries, hierarchical organizations, political headquarters to plan strategies, and propaganda to influence mass population. Instead, a new free world is revealed through the flourishing of the female body despite the existence of disciplinary forces, which have, through compulsory hijab, concentrated all their will to suppressing in a piece of fabric. Chucking the scarves in the fire and unveiled women dancing in the streets, which are still under strict surveillance and occupation of patriarchal forces, is the sacred rite of this feminist revolution. In Foucauldian terms, Iran is witnessing a new spirituality being born by brave young Iranian girls and women: the feminine embodied spirit that is tearing wide breaches in the curtains of a spiritless patriarchal world by simply throwing out the scarves and dancing in front of the devil.