CONTESTED MEANING OF THE VEIL AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES OF IRANIAN REGIMES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of the veil and its changing social meanings in Iran. Embedded in the meaning of the veil is the erotic meaning of female hair. The symbiotic relations of the “cover” (the veil) and the “covered” (female hair) are central to this history. Iranian political regimes have assigned to the veil meanings corresponding to their own ideologies. Through imposed unveiling and re-veiling, these regimes have constructed an ideal image of Iranian women and in turn of Iran as a modern or an Islamic country. This essentialized singular image has led to the empowerment of some women while marginalizing others and violating their rights. Re-veiling has served as an impetus for the politicization of Iranian women, and they continue to contest the social meaning of the veil and protest its imposition.

Social and religious beliefs are central to the social construction of gender. As a dynamic construct, gender responds to social, cultural, and political changes and objects or artifacts that are associated with gender shift. In this dynamic of change, i.e. the construction and reconstruction of gender, the female body serves as contested terrain. In its totality or in
fragmented forms, the female body has been idealized, theologized, and politicized to suit the prevailing construct of gender. Hair has been an intriguing aspect of the social construction of the female image: both religion and politics have assigned meaning to female hair to justify the need for covering or exposing it.

This article explores the social meaning of female hair and examines the dynamics of revealing and concealing hair in Iran. The image of Iranian women has been politicized through the conventions of unveiling and re-veiling. Political regimes have been instrumental in assigning meanings to female hair and the veil and in constructing female images corresponding to their political ideologies. They have used the image of an ideal Iranian woman to symbolize the country. In constructing this image, the modernist Pahlavi regimes and the clerics’ regime of the Islamic Republic have used legal measures and physical force to impose their political will. These impositions, in turn, have inspired Iranian women to draw on the veil as a political metaphor in order to challenge those regimes.

THE MEANING OF HEAD HAIR

Throughout the world, there has been fascination with head hair and varying meanings have been assigned to it. Groomed, shaved, revealed, or concealed, hair communicates a social message and conveys a certain identity. While head hair in its physical form is sexless, the symbolism and meaning of hair is highly gendered, and female head hair has become a symbol of sexuality. Although there is nothing inherently sexual about female hair, most societies past and present have sexualized female hair.

Many scholars have noted the erotic nature of female hair (Ebersole 1998, 77; Lang 1995, 43; Olivelle 1998, 20–1) as a symbol of woman’s appeal and her power over men. Female hair has been sexualized, theologized, and politicized by men of high social and religious authority. Drawing on theological and legal texts they have written, these men have managed to justify the need to conceal female hair and popularized head coverings and the veil. Central to this justification has been the need to control female sexual power and, in turn, the male gaze, thus placing the responsibility entirely on women.
Many different societies have fashioned a range of veils and headgear as symbolic control of female sexuality. Men have used headgear as well, but the intent was not to curb their sexual appeal. Ironically, while partially concealing the hair, female headgear, depending on color and style, can further beautify a woman and enhance her attraction. Thus headgear has served a dual function. While headgear continues to be used in the East and the West, it is the veil that has been used as a political metaphor in some countries.

THE HISTORY OF THE VEIL

The veil has a long history in different parts of the world. Yet the meaning of veiling has varied from one society to another, depending on the cultural and political context. Many people associate the veil with Islam and with Arabic culture. However, research indicates that Islam did not invent the veil; indeed the veil is inauthentic to Islam (Ahmed 1992, 11–30; El Guindi 1999, 6–13; Keddie 1991, 3; Macleod 1991, 98; Reeves 1989, 45). The “first known reference to veiling” is believed to be in an “Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century B.C.” (Keddie 1991, 3). In the Assyrian, Byzantine, and Persian Sasanian empires, the veil was a marker of prestige and a status symbol (Keddie 1991, 3; Shirazi 2001, 3). Urban upper-class women, whose wealth afforded them the luxury of not working, led lives in seclusion; in public, they wore a veil that served as a shield to protect them from the “impure” gaze of commoners. The veil signified class distinction. Assyrian law prohibited peasant women, slaves, and prostitutes from wearing the veil, and violators were punished (El Guindi 1999, 11, 14; Keddie 1991, 3; Shirazi 2001, 3). Punishment served as a deterrent for women who would choose an identity different from that assigned to them by the authorities.

Jewish and Christian women observed the veil as well.1 The form and shape of the veil and the head cover varied, but the main objective was to conceal female hair. The Jewish and Christian cultures and religious texts provided different social meanings for concealing female hair. Wearing the veil and covering female hair symbolized modesty. One scholar notes that “texts from Judaism of the [first century] also reveal the conviction that the exposing of women’s heads to the gaze of men is a sexual violation” (D’Angelo 1995, 141). The female head cover was used
to conceal the “erotic allure” of feminine hair (Levine 1995, 79).

Veiling and the covering of female hair were prevalent in Christian communities as well. According to 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 7, every woman who prays “with her head uncovered dishonors her head,” but men are advised to expose their heads, “for a man indeed ought not to cover his head,” since “he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.” Revealed female hair was viewed as a distraction (Bryer 2000, 29), which explains why women had to cover their hair when attending church. Interestingly, men had to remove their hats, thus revealing their hair when attending church.

Contrary to common belief, veiling was not common in Arab communities before Islam. At the time of the advent of Islam in the seventh century, the custom of veiling was present in the Greco-Roman, Judaic, Persian, Byzantine, and Balkan cultures. Early Muslims adopted veiling as result of their exposure to the culture of societies they conquered (Nashat 2003b, 38).

Islamic scholars have long debated the source of the rationale for veiling in the Qur’an, the Muslim holy scripture. Two citations from the Qur’an have been pivotal to this debate and raise questions as to whether indeed the reference is to the “veil” or merely to modesty in clothing. The first citation is from Surah 33:59, addressed to the Prophet Muhammad and his family:

O Prophet! Tell
Thy wives and daughters
And the believing women,
That they should cast
Their outer garments over
Their persons (when abroad):
That is most convenient,
That they should be known
(As such) and not molested (trans. Ali 1997, 1077).

To be “known,” i.e. recognized, is an indication that others were not veiled. Covering themselves with an outer garment (jilbab) served to protect these women from unwanted sexual advances by men which were prevalent in the pre-Islamic era of jahiliyya (ignorance) in Arab society (Barlas 2002, 57). Surah 24:31 refers to a general rule of modesty:
And say to the believing women
That they should lower
Their gaze and guard
Their modesty; that they
Should not display their
Beauty and ornaments except
What (must ordinarily) appear
Thereof; that they should
Draw their veils over
Their bosoms... (trans. Ali 1997, 873).

These citations emphasize modesty and covering the bosom and neck. There is no reference to covering female hair or to the head veil. What is more, the word *hijab* (screen) in the Qur’an refers to the etiquette of interaction with the Prophet’s wives or covering for women (Surah 33:53). The use of the screen, according to Ali, “was a special feature of honour for the Prophet’s household.” He notes that “for Muslim women generally, no screen or *Hijab* (Pardah) is mentioned” (1076, n. 3760). Nevertheless, over time, covering female hair was promoted as part of Islamic tradition.

Veiling, which first started in the Prophet Muhammad’s family and the upper-class Muslim communities, gradually became a Muslim custom and was appropriated by other social classes. The practice of veiling was an urban phenomenon and the shape of the veil varied according to the local style of clothing. The Islamic meaning of the veil differed from the meanings assigned to the veil in the pre-Islamic era, marking neither social standing nor marital status. The Islamic veil signified modesty and was required for all women. Jewish and Christian traditions shared this notion of modesty.

Iran, as part of the Persian Empire, had practiced the custom of veiling but this was entirely an upper-class practice. Islamic veiling as a social and religious requirement for all women was a new concept that took a long time to become institutionalized and was for the most part an urban practice. Moreover, Turkic tribes who migrated to Iran between the tenth and the sixteen centuries mostly led a nomadic and pastoral life, and veiling was not compatible with their life style (Nashat
and Beck 2003, xiii-iv; Nashat 2003a, 5). Under Safavid rule during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious authorities gradually gained more power and pushed for the veiling of women. The chador, an all-enveloping piece of cloth that covers a woman from head to toe, became the prevalent form of veiling in Iran (Milani 1992, 20).

The practice of veiling did not spread to rural and tribal women in Iran who had an active role in socio-economic production; veiling would have curtailed their activities. They wore the veil only when they traveled to cities. Tribal and rural women practiced their own local forms of head covering. Historically, head covers have been part of ethnic and traditional clothing for both men and women in Iran. Head gear and head covers served to mark ethnicity and social status. Female head covers consisted of caps, shawls, and scarves or combinations thereof, which partially concealed the hair, while the shape, color, and decoration of head covers enhanced female beauty. Tribal women have some degree of freedom to adorn their head covering and in turn to beautify and express themselves.

CONTESTED MEANING OF THE VEIL IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN

Travel to Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exposed Iranians to European advancements, broadening their perspective on socio-economic progress and gender relations. The visible presence of unveiled educated women left a lasting impression on some of these Iranian travelers. Inspired by European models of progress, they sought reforms in Iran. They viewed the improved status of women as imperative to national progress. Many Iranian reformists, both men and women, shared this view. They identified seclusion, veiling, the lack of education, and gendered laws as sources of the inferior position of women in Iranian society.

Members of the reformist Babi (later Baha’i) movement also advocated improvement in the status of women (Paidar 1995, 36). In 1848, Tahereh Qorrat ol-Ayn (1817–52), a poet and an outspoken member of the Babi movement, appeared in public unveiled (Amin 2002, 8; Milani 1992, 3). She was arrested for her affiliation with this outlawed movement and for removing her veil; in 1852 she was executed (Paidar 1995, 37).
Reformists had different views on the meaning of the veil. Some were strongly opposed to unveiling (Najmabadi 2005b, 133). They believed it to be immoral, leading to social decay and corruption. They associated unveiled women with promiscuity. They viewed European women, who served as models for some reformists, as “European dolls” (arusak-e farangi) (Tavakoli-Targhi 1994, 99) engaged in social indecency. For those reformists who advocated unveiling, the veil represented seclusion, the oppression of women, backwardness, and fanaticism. They did not tie the moral character of a woman to her veil. Rather, they viewed unveiling as a necessary step toward the advancement of Iranian women. These differing views were influenced by the use of the veil as a physical and emotional barrier between men and women. As Najmabadi points out, the veil served as “a marker of homosocial homoerotic affectionate bonds among both women and men” (Najmabadi 2005b, 4). Thus its removal could change male and female interactions and cause societal change.

In the 1920s and 30s, educated upper-class women published many magazines and formed independent women’s organizations, demanding change in the status of women. Yet their disagreement on veiling continued (Najmabadi 2005b, 137). Some actively advocated unveiling and appeared in public unveiled (Amin 2002, 82). In 1927, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi, a woman activist, “was among the first women to appear on the streets of Tehran unveiled and in European attire” (Afary 1996, 187).

Proponents of unveiling found an ally in Reza Shah, the new king (r. 1925–41). He espoused a modernist vision entailing change in the public attire of Iranian men and women. Thus, “an abstract body” was politicized to serve this vision. “The signs of modernization were written” on what Moallem calls “the civic body” (2005, 65, 28). In his vision of modernity, Reza Shah was influenced by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, President of Turkey. As part of his secular reforms, Ataturk encouraged the unveiling of Turkish women (Delaney 1995, 54; Moghissi 1996, 39). Reza Shah shared Ataturk’s vision but implemented it differently. His interest in modernization, along with pressure from women’s groups, paved the way for unveiling in Iran (Moghissi 1996, 39; Nashat 1983, 26; Reeves 1989, 84). With support from some women’s advocates, Reza Shah established the Kanoun-e Banovan (Ladies Center) in 1935. The center was charged with various tasks to improve women’s lives but
its main objective was “to prepare the ground for women’s unveiling” (Paidar 1995, 105).

**UNVEILING**

On January 7, 1936, Reza Shah abolished the women’s veil or chador in Iran, an event commonly referred to as *kashfe hejab* (the unveiling). The shah initiated a number of reforms that benefited women, but it was unveiling that outraged the conservatives. Secular and religious conservatives vehemently opposed unveiling, viewing it as an assault on Islamic culture and Muslim women. The compulsory nature of unveiling further antagonized them. Although unveiling was a progressive measure and provided many women with choice in their public attire, the manner in which it was implemented was undemocratic and deprived some women of choice.

Aware of the opposition of conservatives and clerics to unveiling, Reza Shah employed physical force to accomplish the unveiling of women. Unlike in Turkey, where women were encouraged to unveil, Reza Shah’s soldiers were ordered to remove women’s veils. This was a major religious offense and an emotional challenge to many women who were not ready or willing to appear in public unveiled. For these women, “the veil was a source of respect, virtue, protection, and pride” (Milani 1992, 35). They viewed unveiling as a moral violation. Forcefully unveiled women felt as if they were naked (Reeves 1989, 85), and many women decided not to leave their homes (Moghissi 1996, 39; Reeves 1989, 85). Even wearing a scarf was not permitted (Nashat 1983, 27). Compulsory unveiling outraged conservatives and many violent confrontations ensued. Their opposition was suppressed (Moghissi 1996, 39).

To ensure that no veiled woman gained access to public places, the shah ordered the owners of businesses such as restaurants, hotels, and theaters to prevent them from entering and receiving services (Paidar 1995, 107). Compulsory unveiling led to the social isolation of women who refused to unveil. Among those who did not support unveiling were some who favored women’s education, but since girls were not allowed to attend school wearing the veil, these women refused to send their daughters to school. Even some teachers “who did not want to unveil resigned from their jobs or were dismissed” (Najmabadi 2005a, 226).
Thus in some cases compulsory unveiling had the adverse affect of limiting the educational opportunities of the female members of religious families. Underestimation of the impact of unveiling on women’s education stemmed from some reformists’ reluctance to separate seclusion from veiling. These were two different concepts and could have been addressed through different strategies.

Tying together all the elements of desired social change and placing unveiling at its core did not serve Iranians well. But it was a prevailing view at that time. As Tavakoli-Targhi points out, “the early twentieth century Iranian modernists tied the progress and moral strength of the nation (millat) to educating and unveiling of women, and encouraging their participation in the public sphere” (1994, 105). This was a singular vision that did not allow for another approach in achieving the reformists’ goals. Their desire to accomplish unveiling at any cost made them unsympathetic to the pain that unveiling inflicted on those women who considered the veil to be part of their identity, and compulsory unveiling “did not raise many objections among these reformists” (Paidar 1995, 116).

The reformists, mostly from the educated upper and middle classes, welcomed unveiling. Soon Iranian women were appearing in public unveiled and in Western clothes. Some women revealed their hair while others wore European-style hats. In fact, Iran was “the first Muslim country to impose Western dress on women” (Moghissi 1996, 39). Unveiling had financial implications as well and could affect one’s position on the issue. Bamdad remarks that it “was a period of great prosperity for dressmakers and hairdressers. One sign of the times was the appearance of milliners’ shops in the main streets of Tehran” (1977, 96). At the other end of the spectrum were the bazaar merchants, strong opponents of unveiling, who ended up losing lucrative sales of the veil or the black chador.

Unveiling women was an important part of Reza Shah’s modernization efforts to present a new image of Iran. For the shah and for modern Iranians, the image of veiled women was synonymous with backwardness, hence their desire to remove this image from the public scene. Those women for whom the veil was part of their identity were marginalized. With unveiling, modern and unveiled educated woman emerged as a symbol of the new Iran. They were compatible with the
image the regime wanted to present to the world. With their education and their modern appearance, they were well-suited to various government jobs. Veiled women were not allowed to work, even if they were educated. Thus the use of legal measures and physical force presented modern women with socio-economic opportunities and deprived veiled women of the same.

REVIVAL OF THE VEIL

In 1941, Reza Shah was removed from power by the Allied forces, and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi assumed power. Under the new king, compulsory unveiling, which had been in effect for five years, subsided. Many women voluntarily took up the veil (Sanasarian 1982, 75). Religious leaders encouraged women’s veiling and otherwise made efforts to re-impose the veil (Paidar 1995, 133). Some women chose to wear the scarf, a means of negotiation between the veiled and the unveiled state. From 1941 to 1978, women had a choice in their public attire and became part of the public scene. But the image and the social meaning that each group of women presented were totally different: although veiled women were seen in public, unveiled women had a social and political “presence.” The issue, however, was not just about the veil. Educated women who wore scarves were not perceived as modern. Dress became the focal point of identification with modernity (Moallem 2005, 65). Yet Western-style dress was not the only indicator of modernity. Another important physical indicator of modernity was “revealed” hair. Women in scarves, i.e. with “concealed” hair, were still viewed as “traditional” even if they were wearing modest fashionable Western clothes.

Since each form of attire communicated different meanings, women’s attire in public served as a yardstick for determining their beliefs, education, and social class. Veiled women were called chadori or ba hejab. These were religious women with limited education who mostly came from the traditional middle class. Some who belonged to low-income classes were more likely to hold traditional views. They were considered ommol (old-fashioned) by some Iranians. Unveiled women were called bee hejab (without hijab). They generally had more education (some had college degrees) and were more likely to be employed. The majority belonged to the upper and modern middle classes; they were
more inclined to hold Western views, wear fashionable Western cloths, use makeup, and keep their “revealed hair” stylish. They were the image of modern women that the modernist Iranians wanted to associate with. For the shah’s regime, these unveiled women served as the symbols of a modern nation. Every year the regime celebrated the anniversary of the unveiling with fanfare (Sanasarian 1982, 63).

The shah initiated a number of reforms in the 1960s and 70s that were not informed by a collective vision of Iranian society as a whole. His undemocratic rule did not allow for building consensus and generating public support. Nevertheless, his reforms and modernization efforts benefited women to varying degrees. Some of his policies led to uneven economic development and social disparity. Moreover, some Iranians disagreed with the shah’s form of modernization, specifically with the “Westernization” that accompanied it. In their view, Westernization was a new form of political dominance and cultural imperialism. Yet they had no outlet to voice their concerns. Oppositional voices were silenced and suppressed. Some opponents were framed as communists, thus liable to legal prosecution. In the era of Cold War politics, the secular and left-leaning opposition got the brunt of the shah’s repressive policy. Moderate religious organizations and mosques, however, managed to continue operating and to attract the disenfranchised.

In the 1970s many Iranians, dissatisfied with rapid social change and ever-increasing Western influences in Iran, turned to religion for a new social paradigm (Moghissi 1996, 59). Searching for an alternative in religion was a new yet prevailing phenomenon that could also be observed in other countries such as Turkey and Egypt (Macleod 1991, 104). Some political regimes espousing socialist, capitalist, and nationalist ideologies had failed to deliver socio-economic prosperity; disillusionment with these ideologies and political regimes led many to search for an ideal social system which they found in Islam. Yet Islam had not existed as a social system in recent history and had not had to address the complex socio-economic and political issues faced by contemporary societies. Nevertheless, believers, in their need for an ideal, glorified the Islamic social system as a remedy for all social ills. Islam provided them with a framework to reconstruct their ideal society and draw on their “authentic” cultures and beliefs to envision better socio-economic and political arrangements. They were the proponents of the Authenticity
Movement which spread in the Middle East, particularly in Turkey and Egypt (Macleod 1991, 129).

CULTURALLY AUTHENTIC MUSLIM WOMEN

To revive authentic Islamic beliefs as the foundation of a new society, it was necessary to re-educate Muslims, particularly women. Placed at the heart of the Authenticity Movement, women were expected to embody all of the desired characteristics of culturally authentic Muslim women. New interpretations of Islam were advanced. Ali Shariati (1933–77), a French-educated Iranian sociologist, was instrumental in promoting the concept of authentic Muslim women in Iran (Shariati 1980). Like many Iranian intellectuals, he believed that “cultural imperialism” was the source of women’s oppression, and that in order for women to change their values, it was imperative for them to break away from Western fashions and the Western way of life. They should preserve the integrity of their bodies and challenge the perception of the female body as a sex object. At the same time, women were encouraged to break away from the old notion of gender seclusion and to reject old practices and customs. As modern yet culturally authentic Muslim women, they should seek education and be active in society, working side-by-side with men. However, close proximity with men requires women to desexualize their bodies by wearing headscarves and loose-fitting clothing. This form of dress gained a new meaning: since it covered female hair and the female body, it was considered hijab even though it was not the traditional chador (veil) which came to be viewed as old-fashioned. Thus it represented a new image.

Shariati’s conception of culturally authentic Muslim women appealed to younger women, particularly those of traditional middle-class background who wanted to pursue education and have an active presence in society. The mid-1970s witnessed the ever-growing presence of female students in universities wearing the new Islamic attire. They were claiming their social and political space with a new self-concept and a new perspective on Islamic society.

For the advocates of the culturally authentic Muslim woman, modern Iranian women with makeup and revealed hair were culturally “inauthentic” to Iran. They symbolized the West; indeed they were the
image of Western domination. These women were viewed as “Western dolls,” obsessed with self-adornment, Western fashion, and revealing clothes (Yeganeh 1982, 49). In an effort to reclaim the authentic culture, many women took up the veil and the headscarf to mark their identity as authentic Muslim women. The veil or chador was no longer the symbol of seclusion and backwardness; rather, it now symbolized resistance. In the context of the Authenticity Movement, the chador and headscarf found a new political meaning, conveying rejection of the shah and his Westernization (Betteridge 1983, 121; El Guindi 1999, 175). Many secular and modern women took up the chador in solidarity with religious women (Betteridge 1983, 121). They did not necessarily believe in the values represented by the chador, but they used it as a political metaphor to register their opposition to the shah.

WOMEN AND THE REVOLUTION OF 1979

The Iranian revolution was the culmination of decades of mobilization by political forces espousing various political ideologies (Zahedi 1992, 328). Women participating in the revolution adhered to different political ideologies, some secular, others religious. They did not participate in the revolution as “women” and they did not put forward a political platform advancing their cause (Paidar 1995, 21). They subordinated their own cause to that of the revolution. In large part, this can be attributed to limited gender consciousness.

The shah’s undemocratic rule had prevented women from establishing their own organizations, questioning gender roles, and developing gender consciousness. What is more, conservatives and some secular men and women had continuously criticized feminism and feminist ideals as Western imports irrelevant to the lives of Iranian women. Conservative clerics had a vast network of mosques through which they were able to propagate the importance of traditional roles for women. Secularists supporting women’s causes glorified the revolution as the ultimate means of advancing women’s causes. For them the first priority was to unite for the revolution. Women’s issues were considered secondary and left to be addressed by the post-revolutionary regime.

The unity of diverse political forces secured the revolution, but the clerics’ regime managed to suppress them all except those in favor of its
Islamic rule. Women were no exception. While they had high hopes that the revolution would improve their status, the post-revolutionary regime of the Islamic Republic had a different political and religious agenda. Shortly after the revolution, the regime entertained the idea of re-veiling Iranian women. On March 8, 1979, thousands of Iranian women marched in the street, protesting the veil. They continued to protest and express their opposition to the veil with slogans such as “freedom of choice in clothes” (Paidar 1995, 324). The regime’s re-veiling campaign focused on hijab which included the chador as well as the headscarf and the manteau.

The regime tried to discredit these women as agents of imperialism and pro-shah Westernized women. Moreover, the regime framed the issue as a class issue. Working-class Iranian women who had always worn the chador were not opposed to veiling. In contrast, upper- and middle-class women, it was argued, opposed veiling because they wanted to display their wealth through clothing that would differentiate them from the masses. These women were labeled anti-revolutionary and anti-Islamic. Iranian television did not cover women’s protests against the veil, and thus many Iranians were unaware of the opposition to veiling (Sanasarian 1982, 125; Paidar 1995, 325). By not reporting on women’s opposition to the veil, the regime created a false consensus on the veil and hijab.

Women who had symbolically taken up the chador to support veiled women and the revolution came to the realization that they had no control over the meaning of the symbol and its institutionalization. They continued to protest and were often violently attacked by Islamic zealots. Ironically, their protest was not supported by the secular and leftist organizations that in principle were in favor of women’s rights and social advancement. In the name of revolutionary unity, these organizations viewed women’s protests as diversionary and chose not to support them (Moghisssi 1996, 142).

Secular forces provided a range of justifications for not supporting women’s opposition to compulsory hijab. Some argued that hijab is part of Iranian culture and that women should comply with that. Others maintained that many post-revolutionary regimes, such as that of China, had imposed dress codes and that Islamic hijab should be viewed in that light. Moreover, since working-class Iranian women wore the chador,
other women should wear the chador and observe hijab in solidarity with them, thus disempowering a symbol of class difference. For secular Iranian women, it was a sobering experience to face secularist justifications for observing hijab. Without the support of men and the secular political organizations, these women could not succeed.

In July 1980 the regime began to implement compulsory hijab (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982, 238). It was implemented in two phases. First, female government employees were required to comply with compulsory hijab. Those who did not comply were fired. The second phase covered all Iranian women, including members of the religious minorities. Even girls as young as nine years old had to comply. Those not observing hijab were punished and fined. Business owners were ordered not to serve women who did not observe hijab (Sanasarian 1982, 137). Violators were punished. Public spaces such as buses, restaurants, movie theaters, hospitals, and universities became sex-segregated and only women observing hijab were allowed access to these places.

Compulsory hijab was part of the regime’s agenda to institutionalize the female identity espoused by the Authenticity Movement which promoted the wearing of hijab as “moral cleansing.” Concealing female hair became the clerics’ immediate “political project.” The regime capitalized on all mediums of mass communication to justify hijab, propagating the link between hijab, morality, and Islamic virtue. Slogans such as “Veiling is divine duty,” “The worth of a woman is in her veil,” and “The stronghold of the Muslim woman is her veil” covered the walls of public places (Shirazi 2001, 106). Women who did not comply with hijab or who wore the hijab improperly were subjected to harassment and violence. Slogans such as “Death to the improperly veiled woman” or “The improperly veiled woman is a stain on the Islamic Republic of Iran who must be eliminated immediately” give a sense of the political atmosphere (Shirazi 2001, 2). The use of the word “eliminate” indirectly authorized some Islamic zealots to attack unveiled and improperly veiled women.

The meaning and symbolism of hair again took center stage, and the idea of female hair as seductive and alluring was propagated. According to a conservative Islamic view, “it has been proven that the hair of a woman radiates a kind of ray that affects a man, exciting him out of the normal state” (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982, 110). It is believed
that Iranian President Abolhassan Banisadr (1980–81) shared this view (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982, 110; Milani 1992, 39; Paidar 1995, 239). In reality, concealing female hair says more about men’s sexual anxiety than it does about the seductive power of women. As Delaney states, “women’s hair is a highly charged symbol of the power of female sexuality; men’s attempts to control the latter may be symbolized by their attempts to control the former” (1995, 61). In other words, “fear of the power of female sexual attraction over men” has justified any device that can protect men against female power (Mernissi 1987, 31).

The regime orchestrated a major campaign to institutionalize hijab. Secular and modern women resisted hijab, without success. Ironically, they received some support from high-profile and pro-regime veiled women such as Azam Taleghani and Zahra Rahnavard (Paidar 1995, 241). Azam Taleghani was the daughter of the popular reformist Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani and co-founder of the Women’s Society of Islamic Revolution. Zahra Rahnavard is a prolific writer and a strong advocate of hijab. For her, hijab is the “embodiment of Islam” (1990, 25). Though firm believers in hijab, Taleghani and Rahnavard criticized the compulsory nature of hijab and warned the regime of its “negative effects” on women (Paidar 1995, 241). Women who opposed hijab were taken to jail and faced further punishment, with the consequence that one of the primary occupations of the Iranian police has been enforcing hijab. Women continued to be taken to the police station section called komiteh (committee), admonished for their action, fined, and occasionally imprisoned.

Despite the regime’s efforts, compulsory hijab did not in practice lead to the imposition of the traditional veil or chador, the reason being that the female proponents of the movement for culturally authentic Muslim women had already popularized modest Islamic clothing. They had been wearing the headscarf along with the manteau or rupush, an oversize long coat which is meant to conceal women’s curves. A code of modesty also applied to the color of the scarf and coat, which had to be black, brown, gray, or navy blue. In a short period of time, rupush and rusari (headscarf) became the national uniform, along with the chador. For secular women, the headscarf served as a form of resistance to the veil. Once again, the scarf mediated between modernity and tradition.

Chador, headscarf, and manteau were meant to present an image
of “modesty.” Yet the regime’s obsession is not so much with modesty as it is with female hair. The slightest exposure of female hair, even for modestly dressed women, can lead to punishment. Self-appointed Islamic vigilantes and the “Anti-Corruption Patrol” continue to report violations of the Islamic code of modesty to the authorities. Violators can be fined and punished, according to the law, with 74 lashes (Paidar 1995, 342; Afshar 2005, 77). In the same way that Reza Shah sanctioned unveiling and the “revealing” of women’s hair by the use of force, the clerics’ regime has used force to impose hijab and “conceal” women’s hair and body.

THE VEIL AS A PARADOX: EMBRACING VERSUS RESISTING HIJAB

With the imposition of the Islamic dress code, veiled women came to symbolize the image that the regime sought to project. Modern women became socially and politically marginalized, facing a contradiction between their own identity and the emerging “female identity” constructed by the regime. They had to accept the image forced upon them in order to survive. Working women who expressed disagreement with the regime or pro-regime bosses were purged or demoted. They lost the social and political spaces they used to occupy, and many women lost their livelihood and experienced financial hardship.

For these women, hijab in the form of either chador or manteau and scarf is oppressive. They question the eroticization and sexualization of female hair and the justification for concealing it. Many raise issues with the decontextualization and dehistoricization of the Qur’anic verses that have been used to justify covering female bodies in order to shield men (Barlas 2002, 55). Rather than promoting respect for the female body, they argue, the proponents of compulsory hijab have been “displacing sexual misconduct of men to believing female bodies” (56). Accordingly, women have ended up being punished for not covering themselves and for causing men’s gaze and misconduct. As Mir-Hosseini points out, “there’s no Ruling to force men to ‘guard their gaze,’ so it becomes an ethical and personal choice for men.” She asks, “could [we] also discuss hejab in terms of an ethical and personal choice for women?” (1999, 94). Rather than questioning the culturally
and religiously justified uncontrollable sexual appetite of some Iranian men, the regime forces Iranian women to conceal their hair and bodies to protect those men.

These women find imposed Islamic attire suffocating as well as socially and politically unacceptable. They see this imposition as a violation of their rights. In fact, the imposition of hijab and the violation of women’s human rights have served as the impetus for gender consciousness among Iranian women who continue to challenge the imposition of hijab. Some have chosen a life in self-imposed exile, compulsory veiling being the main reason for their emigration from Iran. And with their migration, Iran has lost a large number of educated professional women, contributing to a significant brain drain in the country.

In contrast, women who believe in wearing the chador or manteau and scarf have emerged victorious, claiming liberation. The imposition of hijab not only has not led to their seclusion, it has in fact provided them with the opportunity to claim social, political, and economic spaces. Social organizations related to work, education, and politics, which according to the clerics were corrupt under the shah and were closed to veiled women, have now been “purified” and welcome veiled women (Najmabadi 1991, 50).

Wearing chador and Islamic hijab, women have turned to education and higher education in great numbers. Likewise, they have sought employment in various jobs. They have become involved in politics and held high offices. Many women, such as Azam Taleghani, have served in parliament, and women have even campaigned for the Iranian presidency. These are women whose parents or husbands would mostly likely not have allowed them to pursue education and employment without the chador or the modern Islamic hijab. The Islamic hijab has given them the opportunity to be socially active. The protective shield, in the form of either chador or manteau and scarf, has provided women with a personal space. This attire conceals the female hair and body and diverts attention from their sexuality. Islamic attire projects an image of inaccessibility, thereby reducing the possibility of sexual harassment (Afary 2005, 244).

Although the regime has been determined to uphold the Islamic dress code, it has occasionally softened its position on the color code by allowing women to wear a wider range of colors. Flexibility was
more pronounced during the presidency of the reformist Mohammed Khatami (1997–2005), who was elected in large part by women’s votes. Many women welcomed this change and fashioned different styles of head covering and manteau. Some women, inspired by tribal and ethnic head coverings, have fashioned new scarves and different ways of wearing them. Women’s creativity in fashioning trendy yet Islamic attire is a manifestation of their desire for self-expression and their quest for a new image. Many designers have struck a balance between fashionable style and the regime’s code of Islamic attire. Mahla Zamani, known for her use of color and traditional Persian design, created the first Persian fashion show and launched the fashion magazine *Lotus* in 2000. She has even designed for government institutions, e.g. uniforms for Iran Air.

The desire for self-expression through fashion is more intense among the younger generation, and they have taken the lead in changing the meaning of the manteau. Long gone are the dark-color loose jackets, dark stockings, and big scarves. In recent years, young women have altered every aspect of hijab. They sport shape-revealing manteaus in bright and patterned fabric. Long trousers have been replaced with caprice (three-quarter-length trousers). Bare feet shown in sandals, once subject to punishment, have been tolerated. The large, dark scarf has been replaced by a small, bright, transparent scarf that resembles a head wrap more than a scarf. Strands of female hair can be seen around the face and at the back of the head. Nevertheless, for the regime, it is still a scarf and it conceals female hair. Although these narrow wraps and transparent scarves do not fully serve the intended purpose of covering female hair, taking them off is a major religious offense. The lure of female hair is still strong and the regime is determined to enforce the head scarf, even if it only partially covers the hair.

With the return of the hardliners to power in 2005 and the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, control of women’s public attire has become much tighter. The regime continuously blames women for social corruption and the decline in morality, and a new wave of crackdowns on women wearing improper hijab has been carried out under the pretext of a campaign against this “symbol of public corruption.” Bazaar merchants, who have benefited from compulsory hijab and enjoyed annual sales of $30 million in chador fabric imported from Korea and Japan, support this campaign.
The regime has made a major effort to re-enforce a strict Islamic dress code. Shops selling Western fashions have occasionally been shut down. The Iranian parliament has entertained the idea of fashioning a new style of Islamic attire with a plan to design national Islamic costumes and combat the “corrupting influence of Western fashion.” In 2006 the regime sponsored an Islamic fashion show, *Zanane Sarzamine Man* (Women of My Country), with mannequins sporting colorful yet loose-fitting attire. Headscarves in different shapes and colors completely concealed the mannequins’ hair. Although the regime showed some flexibility in the design of attire, it was determined to keep women’s hair concealed. The authorities are planning to enforce some sort of national uniform in schools, universities, and government offices.

Keeping women in line with the Islamic dress code has been a major occupation for the police. According to Tehran police chief Brigadier General Morteza Talaie, “30 percent of complaints to police involve cases of women not covering up properly…” In just one week in August 2004, 200 women were arrested in Tehran, 183 were arrested in the northern province of Gilan, and 1,250 women received verbal warnings. This data is for only two of Iran’s 28 provinces. The crackdown on women has intensified with the new campaign for *Amneeyat-e Akhlaghi* (Moral Security) which began on April 21, 2007. In the first three weeks of the campaign, 17,135 women received a verbal warning from the police; others were fined or sent to jail.

Despite all the risks involved, women continue to challenge the regime’s imposition of hijab and to use hijab as a means of challenging the regime itself. The regime in turn views women’s challenge as a challenge to its very existence. The imposition of hijab is crucial for the regime, its image as an Islamic nation, and its Islamic religio-political ideology. This ideology has served to empower some women, yet it has had adverse affects on women who do not fit the ideal image of the country.

Iranian regimes of the past and present have used the image of Iranian women as the ideal image of the country and as a visual display of their political ideology. They have drawn on images of women with “revealed” or “concealed” hair to associate themselves with or to disassociate themselves from the West. By focusing on the singular image of
Iranian women, these regimes have empowered one section of Iranian women at the cost of marginalizing the other. In so doing, they have violated Iranian women’s rights. Iranian women have used hijab as a political metaphor to resist these regimes and the image and identity imposed upon them. Their resistance will continue to play out in Iranian society.

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NOTES

2. The Arabic word hijab is pronounced differently in Persian and commonly transliterated as hejab.

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