The Veil: an Embodied and Structural Practice in Iran

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In this article, drawing on Butler, Bourdieu, and Foucault, I examine the veil as an embodied and structural practice. More particularly, I look at the way in which embodied subjectivities are (re)constructed and contested in the process of socio-cultural and political developments. I trace briefly the politics of the veil in the Iranian context in three historical periods. In light of the notion of embodied subjectification, I seek to reveal the meanings that are ascribed both to the veil imperatives enforced by the Iranian state, and to the diverse ways in which these imperatives have been (re)appropriated and subverted. In so doing, I depict the relations of power that the embodied subjectivity of women is depended upon, and redefine women's subjectivity as their capacity to act in ways that may entail specific relations of subordination.

Keywords: Iranian women; embodied practices; the veil

Introduction

The veil has stimulated myriad scholarly investigations and debates among Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals. On the one hand, the veil has come to be associated with terms such as fundamentalism, women's subjugation and cultural backwardness. Many empirical studies conducted on the topic of veiling and traditional gender norms have espoused this perspective (Kenneth & Monk-Turner 2015, Navai 2014, Dragadze 1994, Afshar 1985). On the other hand, the veil is considered to be an exercise of individual autonomy and the freedom and choice to practice one's faith (Baerveldt 2015, Smith 2015, Abu Bakr 2014, Brenner 1996). My purpose in this article is not to support or discard the practice of donning the veil as an embodiment of either female emancipation or subjugation. I disrupt this binary by offering a re-definition of embodied subjectivity in which the capacity to act would not be locked into the feminist teleology of

emancipation (Bordo 1993, Barkty 1999), rather it is shaped through historically and culturally specific disciplines which are integral to the women's self-realisation (Mahmood 2005). This approach allows me to investigate and problematise the oppositional discourses and practices by linking the socio-cultural and historical experiences to the contemporary relations of power (Pedwell 2007). My aim, thus, is to study the veil as both an embodied and structural practice and examine the way in which Iranian women's embodied subjectivities are (re)constructed and contested in the process of socio-cultural and political developments.

To highlight the interconnection between the veil, the body and social world, I define the veil as an embodied and structural practice. Along with Entwistle (2000), I assert that the veil, as a form of dress, is both a personal and a social experience that operates in and on the body, and constitutes it with meanings. Simultaneously, the veiled body engages with specific social and historical contexts within which it is located and actively (re)appropriates and subverts the meaning attached to the veil. To illustrate these complex interrelations, I draw on poststructuralists' theories of embodied subjectivity such as Michel Foucault (1979, 1988b), Pierre Bourdieu (1990), and Judith Butler (1988, 1993, 2004).

Throughout the article I employ the identity category 'woman' in order to ground my theoretical claim. By assuming the category 'woman' my aim, however, is not to produce an ontological fact of women's subjectivity. As Butler (1993) asserts, identity claims such as 'being a man' or 'being a woman' involves reproduction of dominant discourses. 'They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications' (p. 126). Following Butler, I acknowledge the category woman as a non-essentialised discursive term defined through its diversity.

In the same way, the concept of the veil cannot be understood in a singular and essentialised way. The discourses and meanings associated with the veil are varied among Muslim countries depending on their cultural and political context. For instance, while the practice of wearing the veil is prescribed by law in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, etc., it is a choice in most other Muslim countries. These culturally diverse practices of veiling affect the way the veil is interpreted within a specific Muslim society and also the way women choose to dress and their motivations for veiling. Thus, depending on the context where the veil is practiced, it has taken on different meanings and purposes, including being a mere religious practice, a form of compliance, a form of consumption and fashion, or a political stance (Shirazi 2001). In the Iranian context, the compulsory practice of wearing the veil and the way in which it has been used as a site of political struggle over oppositional ideologies makes the veil profoundly entangled with subjectivity of Iranian women as compared to that of other Muslim women who have a choice to wear or not to wear the veil (Zalipour 2011).

According to Sadeghi (2008), during the last few decades, social attitudes towards veiling, heterosocial relationships, and traditional family norms have changed significantly in Iranian society. Despite the government's effort to portray an Islamic visual display of Iran, today Iranian youth culture does not seem as Islamic as the government had expected it to be (Sadeghi 2008). Practices such as wearing fashionable colourful veils, over-emphasising makeup, promoting cosmetic surgery, and breaking gender segregation policies are very common among younger Iranian women. In this article, I examine Iranian women's subjectivity in relation to these practices. The question, thus, is how we should conceptualise the agency of the women who participate in these practices. Do these practices merely strengthen structures of patriarchy, sexism and capitalism? How can the women practice freedom in the limits of

the culture they are immersed in? Through an analytical tool drawn from poststructuralist feminist critique of humanist subjects (such as Saba Mahmood 2005, Judith Butler 1993, Lila Abu-lughod 1990b), I propose a rethinking of the women's capacity to practice freedom that is not locked into liberal key conceptions of freedom, autonomy and equality. In doing so, I reveal the relations of power that women's embodied subjectivity is depended upon.

Enquiring into Iranian women's embodied subjectivity would be unfinished without understanding the embodied reproduction and reconstruction of power relations in both social and political realms. For this reason, I will briefly trace the specificity and politics of the veil in the Iranian context in three historical periods. In light of the notion of embodied subjectification, I will seek to reveal the meanings that are ascribed both to the veil imperatives enforced by the Iranian state and to the diverse ways in which these imperatives have been (re)appropriated and subverted.

The veil as a historical and theological practice

The question of women's rights in general, and veiling practices in particular, is a complex and contentious issue in Islamic societies. The obligation to wear the veil is mainly grounded in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*); a legal science developed over centuries by male Islamic jurists (*fuqaha*) who extract explicit legal codes from basic reading of major Islamic texts, including the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* (the *Shari'a*). In these legal discourses gender inequality is viewed as pre-determined, and women's status is founded on natural and family law in which they are perceived as sexual beings rather than social beings (Mir-Hosseini 2003). With the rise of secularism and the emergence of feminism in the Islamic world, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *fiqh* lost its authority and an urgency in establishing a commitment to Muslim women's

rights and liberation began to flourish. This early feminist movement, called 'secular feminism', questioned women's status and gender relations within the context of modern nationalist discourses, advocating the application of universal human rights for all women regardless of their religion. In the late twentieth century, growing distrust of the universal model of Western feminism led to the rise of 'Islamic feminism', which established its assertion in the specificity of Muslim women's struggle and required a reappreciation of Islam and a feminist reading of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*. Despite stressing the spiritual dimension of the *Qur'an*, Islamic feminism does not shy away from confidently exposing its patriarchal and misogynistic limitations, which they believe have been assimilated into Qur'anic verses through Islamic thought (Rhouni 2010).

Among feminists who engaged in such a shift in their approach, Fatima Mernissi is regarded as one of the pioneers who advocated a contextual reading of the Qur'anic verses on the veil in her book '*The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*' (1991). Tracing back the history of the veil in jurisprudence sources, Mernissi argues against a reductionist approach towards the veil, asserting that the meaning and function of the veil should not be reduced to a piece of cloth imposed on women by men, rather the veil has subtler meanings and applications, which have both negative and positive implications. For instance, the veil is interpreted negatively when it implies a block between Muslims and divine knowledge—God, and it is conceived positively when it separates and protects the prophet from the companions who violate his privacy. Her conceptualisation of the veil through visual, spatial and ethical dimensions brings extra depth and layers to the analysis of the veil. The first two dimensions are tangible. The spatial dimension refers to the demarcation of space, marking out borders; the visual dimension indicates hiding something from sight; and

finally the ethical dimension refers to the functions of the veil, the ways in which the veil is used in different occasions and situations in respect to others. For instance, she reveals historical contingency of the Verse 53 of surah 33, which is regarded as a reference to the institution of the veil, by looking closely at the spatial, visual and ethical dimensions through which the verse was revealed to the prophet, and concludes that the verse's main concern was rule of etiquette rather than upholding women's modesty: it was meant to guide the prophet's companions on certain niceties that they seemed to disregard (p. 92). I find Mernissi's attention to the variety of meanings and applications of the veil precisely helpful and in line with my approach to Iranian women's practices of veiling. Her insight on the historical contingency of veiling practices enables a reading of the veil that goes beyond binary positions, and places the veil within a broader social, cultural and political context.

In what follows, I attempt to expose the patriarchal limitations of some Qur'anic verses that refer to clothes as a means for upholding modesty. These verses, which have become the only possible reference to the justification of veiling and seclusion, offer little guidance on how and to what extent women should cover their bodies. A closer reading of these verses reveals the mechanism through which the female body has become a site of contention through the exercise of power and control.

> Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity: this will be most conducive to their purity—verily, God is aware of all that they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms in public beyond what may decently be apparent thereof; hence, let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms. And let them not display [more of] their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, … [list of those who are allowed to see a woman without the veil]; and let them not swing their legs [in walking] so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. And [always], O you believers—all of you—turn unto God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state (24:30–31).

There are several significant points regarding the formation of a woman's embodied subjectivity on which these two verses are built upon. To begin with, it is implied that both men and women are subjected to the norms of modesty. However, they are positioned differently on these discourses. Acquiring modesty for a woman requires meticulous attention to the body parts, including breasts, legs, head, and chest. Modesty as a disciplinary practice is exercised directly on the body (Foucualt 1979). It is imposed in small details through disciplinary practices such as veiling and controlling the most intimate detail of bodily behaviour, such as 'lowering gaze,' 'drawing head-coverings on the bosoms' and 'not swinging legs'. Exempting men from veiling highlights the way in which men are perceived as disembodied and therefore connected to the soul, whom shall be steered away from women's active sexual desires. Disciplining the female body, thus, involves a process of 'subjectification', in Foucault's (1982) words, it is a process through which 'a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (p. 208). Becoming constitute as a subject involves disciplining the body, soul, thoughts and conduct. This process of self-formation, according to Foucault, is initially mediated by an external authority figure. Here, this figure is portrayed as God, who 'is aware of all that they do'. The omnipresent character of God who watches men and women believers, who is everywhere at any time, makes the force of self-formation feasible. The body is forged to become 'docile' through the internalisation of norms of modesty; the women then become 'mindful of their chastity'. However, besides God, there are other authority figures, those who are not allowed to see the woman's body: unrelated men outside the immediate family. The formation of the woman's embodied subjectivity, thus, involves a process of becoming constituted through disciplinary technologies that forge her body to transform into 'docility' (Foucault 1979, p. 198).

Similarly, the third verse guides women on how to engage in the self-disciplining process; however, it contains a caveat that a function of veiling is to protect women from harassment.

> O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful (33:59).

Whereas in the previous verses, preserving modesty mediated by God, an all knowing gaze, who gently and forgivingly guides the woman to engage in the act of self-subjugation, and 'repentance' (or confession) is suggested in the moments of stumbling over 'a truth'. Here, it is implied that deviations from the norms of modesty might entail punishment and violence. Technologies of power, in the words of Foucault, thus, 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivising of the subject' (Foucault 1988b, p. 18). Self-subjugation, then, becomes an act of self-protection from sexual abuse and harassment.

There are a few more verses on clothing that are overlooked as they have less application for preservation of modesty. Among these, the following verse centres on clothes in relation to the female's reproduction and ageing body:

> As for women past child-bearing, who have no hope of marriage, and those of post-menstrual age who have no desire for marriage, it is no sin for them if they discard their (outer) clothing in such a way as not to show adornment. But to refrain is better for them. Allah is Hearer, Knower (24:60).

In this verse, a woman's sexuality is perceived as less destructive as her body gets older and loses its fertility. This implies that an older woman, who presumably has lost her sexual desire, cannot be a threat to a male's modesty.

The predominance of women's bodies in attaining modesty illustrates the ways in which men and women are gendered on the grounds of their anatomical and sexual differences. Since discourses of veiling are connected to discourses of gender and sexuality, women's bodies are determined and shaped differently in these discourses compared to that of men.

The politics of the veil in Iran

The embodied and structural practice of veiling plays a significant role in the lives of Iranian women. Iranian women have occupied multiple complex positions in a constellation of historical, cultural, social, and political discourses in society. Discourses on gender in general, and women's modes of clothing (veiling, unveiling and re-veiling practices) in particular, have gone through radical shifts in Iranian society during the last two centuries. These dynamic changes can be traced back to three historical periods:

The period 1925-41 was marked with a comprehensive process of modernisation under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, in which norms regarding women's ways of being underwent the same process. As a part of his modernisation project, Reza Shah promoted unveiling policies. For him, the veil was the symbol of backwardness, and unveiling symbolised modernity and progress. Along with compulsory unveiling, a number of reforms that benefitted women were implemented, including raising the age of marriage, removing family laws from clerical jurisdiction (though the patriarchal family norms remained unchanged), broadening the range of women's social participation, the enfranchisement of women and more freedom of press (Paidar 1995). Although these progressive measures were beneficial to women's status, the way in which they were imposed was undemocratic and stripped women of the right to choose

and generated more inequalities and class differentiation. For instance, while unveiling

mobilised upper- and middle-class women and encouraged them to participate in the

public sphere, the majority of women from traditional working-class backgrounds were

unable to adapt to the dramatic changes which were in conflict with the cultural context

in which they lived. They were prohibited from participating in society by the male

members of their families and thus the compulsory unveiling and new freedoms resulted

in their further marginalisation (Zahedi 2007).

From 1941 to 1978, under the new king, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, widespread

political opposition (1941-1953) forced Muhammad Shah to introduce new reforms in

women's status which included the right to vote and run for parliament. In 1963, the

Family Protection Law was established under which women won the right to petition

for divorce and to gain child custody. The marriage age for girls was raised from 9 to

15. The court required men to request permission if they wanted to have a second wife

(Moghadam, 1985). Moreover, women gained the right to choose their public modes of

clothing. Many women opted to wear the veil. In this context, the veil took different

forms and social meanings indicating women's social status. *Ba-hejab* (veiled) or

Chadori referred to veiled women who were religious and had limited education and

mostly came from the traditional middle class. *Bi-hejab* (unveiled) referred to unveiled

women who were educated and had occupations and mostly came from upper- and

modern middle classes. Later Iranian intellectuals—chief among them Ali Shariati

(1933-1977)—promoted a new interpretation of Islam in which women were

encouraged to discard both the western way of being as well as the seclusion and

traditional practices and customs for the sake of pursuing a new authentic Muslim

woman. This oppositional discourse of being modern—seeking education and having an

active presence in society—while at the same time being an authentic Muslim, required

women to desexualise their bodies to be able to work alongside men in society. For this

purpose, wearing headscarves and loose outer garments became an alternative to the

traditional old-fashioned *Chador* (black head-to-toe attire) and represented a new image

of women (Zahedi 2007). By the mid-1970s, the veil had found a new political

meaning, symbolising resistance to the Pahlavi regimes and their modernisation

projects. As Moallem (2005) argues, oppositional discourses of Islamisation and

modernisation during the Pahlavi regime opened up a space for women to protest

against both modernist forms of femininity and rigid patriarchal gender identities

through social movements and revolution.

Decades of contention and conflict over various oppositional political forces and

discourses finally paved the way for the 1979 Islamic revolution. The Islamic regime

supported the traditional view of women which predated the Pahlavi regimes. Soon after

the revolution, the regime welcomed the idea of the re-veiling of women. For Ayatollah

Khomeini, the religious supreme leader, the unveiled women were 'painted Western

dolls' and the veil symbolised progression and liberation of women from Western

values (Shirazi 2001, p. 92). Soon after the consolidation of power, Khomeini abrogated

'The Family Protection Law.' As a result, the marriage age was again reduced to nine.

The contraception and family planning laws were banned and the restriction on

polygamy was removed. On 3 March, 1979, he deprived women of the right to judge

and excluded them from many fields of study, professions and occupations. After

overtaking the religious forces, on 6 March, he enforced the compulsory veil on women

who worked in state organisations. Despite women's opposition and protests against the

re-veiling campaign, in 1983, the Islamic regime enforced compulsory veiling and a

punishment law of 74 lashes was passed by the Iranian parliament (*Majles*) against

those who failed to observe the veil properly (Zahedi 2007).

The first decade after the Islamic revolution was characterised by a dramatic

decline in women's legal, social, and political status. However, over the next few

decades, significant domestic and international changes, including the ceasefire in the

Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988); the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1989); the dramatic

growth of the educational and professional capacities of Iranian women; and economic

and cultural globalisation provided a basis for political and cultural reforms. As a

result, the public sphere became more open to women; they were allowed to hold

particular forms of power, representation and knowledge, as long as they observed

Islamic practices of modesty. Today, women have gained more freedom in choosing the

form, colour, and fabric of their clothes (Moghadam 1985).

Clothing as an embodied and social practice

Any analysis of the veil requires an approach that acknowledges the embodied and

structural nature of the veil. This entails an approach concentrated on the veil, as a form

of dress, that is structured by socio-cultural and historical relations of power, as well as

enacted and enabled actively through women's lived experiences (Entwistle 2000). For

this purpose, in what follows, I flesh out the interrelations of the veiled body, social

space and identity that constitute women's subjectivity.

Clothing is a medium for self-expression. Through choice of fabric, colour and

style of dress, individuals perform a sense of self. However, this act of self-expression

does not originate from inside the individual, rather it is performed within social spaces

which are produced through relations of power. The question of what constitutes the

choice of clothes, then, must be centrally concerned with clothes as both a bodily

experience and a sociospatial practice. In the theory of logic of practice, Bourdieu

(1990) has aptly demonstrated the ways in which our choices are shaped through our

past, present, and future circumstances, as well as our position in the social relations of

power. To illustrate how individuals' experiences are rooted in the social structures in

which they are immersed, he employs two concepts of habitus and field. Habitus refers

to an individual's perception, action and appreciation that incline her to act in certain

ways in specific social fields (Jagger 2012). The individual acquires a particular taste

for a style of clothes through her upbringing within a particular culture and differential

social relations of gender, class, sex, race, age and religion. Social fields as spaces of

relations of force constitute and shape individuals' bodily expressions, gestures,

movements, posture and behaviour. Bourdieu notes acquisition of habitus occurs below

the level of consciousness and is pre-reflexive. The body is, thus, inclined to act

unthinkingly and habitually according to the norms of a specific social space, as he

points out 'the hands and legs are full of numb imperatives' the apparent insignificant

imperatives such as 'sit up straight', 'don't hold your knife in your left hand' condition

the body to certain forms of being (Bourdieu 1990, p. 69). Likewise, clothing norms are

built into the body through the course of life in ways that are not explicitly accessible to

attention. As such, over time, individuals gain a propensity, or as Bourdieu puts it, a

'second nature' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56) to choose the style of clothes that are expected

of people like them, of their gender, class, age and religion. Clothing norms, thus, are

preserved, (re)produced and performed at the level of the body, with different degrees

of self-consciousness in everyday life interactions.

Joanne Entwistle (2000), in her intensive works on fashion and dress, highlights

the ways in which different cultures inscribe different sets of norms and regulations on

dress, which are produced through relations of power. The looser the social conventions

of clothes, the freer the body to express itself through clothes. More importantly, she

notes the norms associated with clothes are not homogeneous within a culture, rather

they change depending on the spatial situations and occasions in which the body is found. In most modern cultures, regulation of clothing has been used as a means for organising and controlling the body and space. These regulations not only regulate and organise society, but also inscribe the regulations on the body. The distinction between what one wears in the public versus private spaces is an example of the ways in which social institutions have employed regulation of clothing to organise society through regulating people's bodies productively in defined spaces.

The dichotomy of public and private spheres has long been central to the feminist political struggle over sexualised and gendered inequalities. While, today, in Western societies, public and private divisions appear to break down on some vital issues regarding gender distinctions and divisions, they still persist, if not distinctively within public and private boundaries, then in profuse and fragmented spaces and for specific people. When it comes to clothing practices, for instance, although today women are freer in choosing their modes of clothing, implicit moral norms, to a great extent, guide women's everyday clothing practice. These moral imperatives are context specific; any situation or occasion demands its own implicit norms about how to cover and comport the body. Transgressing dress codes is often met with shunning and ridicule in micro-social orders and relations. Entwistle (2009), in her works, has brought many examples of the ways in which the norms guarding clothing practices are situated in specific social spaces. For instance, she notes a few strands of cloth that make a dress appropriate at the beach would be deemed inappropriate in a boardroom. Moreover, she points out that breaking situated implicit norms of dress are mostly possible by those with high social status, such as professionals and artists. For instance, in most western countries, homosexual men have to hide a potentially discreditable identity through

bodily (e.g. changing the tone of voice) and clothing practices to receive respect in occupations that involve managerial positions and practices (Roberts 2011).

In Islamic states, however, the dichotomy of public and private space plays a significant role in gender divisions and inequalities. In these countries, the line between public and private spaces is reinforced through veiling practices, urban design and cultural products (Karimi 2003). Space functions as a medium for Islamic states to inscribe their power on public buildings, squares, parks, and monuments through symbols and markers, which become an effective tool for suppressing opposing discourses (Çınar 2005). The moral concern of Islamic states has made the veil a key marker in upholding spatial segregation of sexes. Alev Çınar (2005) in her book, *Modernity, Islam, and secularism in Turkey*, elaborates on the ways in which the dichotomy of public and private spheres is inscribed on the body and social spaces. 'By concealing certain body parts and revealing others (mainly, the head and the hands) the veil inscribes the boundaries of public and private upon the body, and thereby creates public and private spaces' (p. 57). The veil, thus, has both a visual and functional application. It creates a strong Islamic image in the public space, as well as regulating women's bodies in the private space of the home.

The regulations governing clothing practices are highly gendered in both Western and Islamic states. Fashion—i.e. popular styles of clothing—, for instance, is an important area for capitalists to inscribe the binary forms of gender identity on the female (and male) body and to (re)produce the patriarchal norms. The relationship between feminism and fashion is ambiguous and coalesces around three main debates including 'consumerism and politics,' 'feminism and femininity' and 'women of different class statuses' (Groeneveld 2009, p. 183). However, contemporary feminism that emerged in the early 1990s (Wilson 1985, Gibson 2012) has been less fraught

towards fashion. Wilson (1985), for instance, draws on Butler's discussion of drag, and

approaches the notion of fashion as 'play', which 'incorporates dress into the parodic

performance of gender identity' (Groeneveld 2009, p. 182). For Wilson, fashion is a site

of pleasure and creativity. The link between the veil and fashion is another intriguing

area, which has been overlooked for decades by both the public and academics. The veil

has always been misunderstood merely as an act of religious duty and therefore

disregarded as a marker of women's oppression. Reina Lewis (2015) in her insightful

book, '*Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures*', traces the link between the veil

and fashion and destabilises the meanings attached to binary terms such as

secular/oppressed, modern/Muslim, and economy/religion (as opposed to state

organised religion). Admitting the overlapping and changeable nature of Muslim

women's religious identities, she notes that fashion has given Muslim women the

opportunity to eradicate accusations of backwardness attached to the veil (in both

Middle Eastern and Western countries). By reformulating the veil as a fashion, they

have created their own forms of religion that differ from that of their parents. However,

while this reformulation shifts Muslim women's representation from being victims of

patriarchy to being politically active Muslims, simultaneously, Lewis acknowledges that

these veiling practices bring representational challenges for the non-devout women who

do not wear the veil. Regardless of their level of faith, these women find themselves

subjected to the norms that differentiate them as less 'good' Muslim women (Lewis

2013, p. 4).

Similarly, the veil plays a significant role in the construction and contestation of

subjectivities in Iranian public spaces. The compulsory unveiling and modernisation

project, during the reign of the Pahlavi kings, served to establish a modern and

westernised public sphere where the premodern woman, who was previously absent

from the public sphere, could freely step out into the public space unveiled. In contrast,

with the onset of the 1979 revolution and the advent of Islamisation in Iran, compulsory

re-veiling served to purify women from Westernisation and modernisation established

by the previous government. The Islamic Revolution had a significant role in the

reconstruction of private and public space. Compulsory veiling served to reset the

boundaries of public and private spheres. The public sphere became surrounded by a

pro-revolutionary undercurrent, while the private sphere remained in line with the

modern Islamic ethos. The veil as a disciplinary practice inscribes women's bodies and

creates a visual display in the public realm that not only upholds the segregation of

women from men but also promotes Islamic ideologies. These regulations are reinforced

through the creation of separate and unequal social spaces in residential and various

public venues (Karimi 2003). In many places (e.g. buses, university lecture halls,

mosques, and so on) where proximity of men and women is inevitable, space is

organised unequally to contain men's bodies in the front and larger areas, and to

allocate women to the back stages (Farahani, 2007). Moreover, the rigid control of

social action by the morality police (*basiji*) preserves women's chastity and controls

their presentation and interaction with the opposite sex. Iranian women have to

consciously negotiate the oppressive policies and practices that regularly monitor and

controls not only their activities, but also their physical appearance (Najmabadi 1993).

According to Sadeghi (2008), in recent years, as a response to the closure of public

spaces, the Iranian family has become more tolerant and open in accommodating the

needs and desires of their youth. Today, many activities that were once forbidden in

public spaces are encouraged and, in some cases, overemphasised in the private spaces

of homes, apartments and cars. However, Sadeghi notes while many activities such as

non-related heterosexual mixing, the playing of music, dancing and the consumption of

alcohol have become prevalent in private spaces, public spaces are governed by Islamic

norms and regulations. As a result, socialisation in Iranian society involves careful and

conscious negotiation of social and spatial boundaries.

Cyberspace as a space for resistance

Today, the traditional and political delineations of public and private spaces have been

transcended through the emergence of cyberspace. Cyberspace has appeared as an

unbounded and uncertain space in which women resist the dominant discourses and

symbolic orders of 'real' life. Expressing themselves in a virtual space in which bodily

markers of identity (e.g. gender, age, sex, race and class) are removed, women have

been able to perform multiple identities; to speak their own minds; and to disrupt the

dominant discourses of appropriate forms of femininity (Seymour 2001). However,

grounded in geographical spaces, cyberspace has its origins in the realities of everyday

life. The desire to bring a change, thus, is bounded into embodied, situated experiences

of women within parameters of social life (Cohen 2007). In this sense, an act of

resistance is never free from order, it is an alternate order entrenched in relation to

public and private spaces in which it is inscribed (Hetherington 1997). In Iranian

society, where public spaces are policed by oppressive Islamic regulations, cyberspace

has emerged as a space in which women can disrupt dominant discourses that inscribe

Islamic forms of femininity on their bodies. Practices considered taboo in 'real' life,

such as writing about intimate and personal experiences of everyday life, picturing

moments of throwing off the veil, expressing unique femininities contrary to the ones

suggested by the Islamic government, have become prevailing on visual spaces. While

the images of women wearing black *Chador* at mass gatherings (e.g. performing

collective prayers) have become prevalent in the Iranian mainstream media (Karimi

2003), the images of women in colourful scarves gathered in demonstrations against the

government (e.g. the green movement) have become ubiquitous on the Internet. As

such, cyberspace has formed as a site of pleasure, a liminal zone, blurred and

unbounded within otherwise defined public and private spaces. The act of resistance in

cyberspace, thus, in the words of Donna Haraway (2016), has become an act of

'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries' (p. 7).

Ba-hejab vs. Bad-hejab: legitimising social categories on the female body

In her book "*Diasporic Narrative of Sexuality: Identity formation among Iranian-*

Swedish Women", Fataneh Farahani (2007) highlights the normalisation mechanism

through which the social categories of *ba-hejab* (veiled), *bi-hejab* (unveiled), and *bad-*

hejab (miss/less-veiled) has been legitimised and inscribed on and upon Iranian

women's bodies over the last two centuries. The creation and appreciation of these

social categories as a form of social identification for women, in different historical

periods, illustrates the ways in which different Iranian regimes by referring to various

discourses (modernisation and Islamisation) have inscribed categories of normal and

abnormal on women's bodies. As I have noted, in the pre-revolutionary period, the

compulsory unveiling of women in the Reza Shah's reign, which was followed by

freedom in choosing one's mode of clothing in Muhammad Shah's reign, inscribed

categories of *ba-hejab* (veiled, uneducated, and traditional) and *bi-hejab* (unveiled,

educated, and modern) on women's bodies. In the post-revolutionary context, with the

regulation of compulsory re-veiling, the category *bi-hejab* lost its application and gave

way to the 'abnormal' category of *bad-hejab* as a benchmark for measuring the

'normal' category of *ba-hejab*. A *bad-hejab* refers to a woman who does not observe

the veil properly and attracts the male gaze. She might wear tight, fashionable, colourful

dress showing the contours of her body and strands of her hair. In so doing, she

accommodates the Islamic laws, while at the same time intentionally disparaging the

spirit of the veil (Sadeghi 2008). In contrast, a *ba-hejab* might wear *Chador* (a head-to-

toe attire covering the whole body except the face), or she might wear a long headscarf

and loose tunic obscuring the body contours (Shirazi 2001). According to Sadeghi

(2008) the act of wearing *Chador* is mostly for protection against sexual molestations in

public spaces, rather than supporting the regime's Islamic ideologies.

Using a Foucauldian lens, Farahani (2007) argues that the politics that 'classify

life and behaviour of 'the abnormal' are, in practice, deployed as the underlying

principles for controlling people's behaviour' (p.153). The category *bad-hejab* woman

continues to exist despite being discarded by the regime, because a *ba-hejab* woman

cannot be produced without producing a negative counterpart, the *bad-hejab* woman.

However, as Bourdieu (1980) suggests, 'the socialised body does not stand in

opposition to society; it is one of its forms of existence' (p. 29) (cited Swartz 1997). A

person is a combination of both objective and subjective dispositions. However, these

dispositions do not determine action; rather, they constrain practice (Swartz 1997).

Putting it differently, as Butler (2004) argues, a person's desire does not derive from

his/her personhood, but is constructed through social norms that constitute an

individual's existence. Therefore, he/she is fundamentally dependent on these social

norms for her recognition as a socially viable being. In fact, as Farahani (2007) asserts,

all women including *ba-hejab* or *bad-hejab* identify to the veil and normative practices

of veiling. Women who fail to observe the veil properly must prove their modesty

through other means. In this sense, veiling practices are extended to women's behaviour

and conduct and constrain their choices, movements, voices and relationships.

Practicing freedom: Iranian women's subjectivities

A substantial body of empirical and historical literature on Iranian women's bodies and

gender relations (Afary 2008, Farahani 2007, Moallem 2005, Najmabadi, 1993) has

revealed the significance of discourses of veiling in the constitution of the women's

embodied subjectivity. As I have noted, the complex and interwoven discourses of

Islamisation and modernisation have made substantial contributions in shaping Iranian

women's femininity. On the one hand, the women are forced to adhere to the prevalent

norms of modesty which are enforced by the government as well as cultural

conventions. On the other hand, modernisation discourses and globalised media,

including satellite transmissions and the Internet, push them to strive for a global,

Western ideal of living. Today, Iranian women's lives, as highlighted in Sadeghi's

research (2008), compared to the first two decades following the Islamic revolution,

have changed significantly. Despite the Islamic restrictions and control over the

women's appearance and physical activities, widespread emergence of practices such as

wearing fashionable colourful veils, over-emphasising makeup, promoting cosmetic

surgery and breaking gender segregation policies, highlights the government's failure to

fully accomplish the task of controlling the women's bodies. Proving the fact that while

regulation of veiling serves as a means of control for the Iranian government to

implement their Islamic ideologies, it also provides the possibilities for Iranian women

to subvert, resist and challenge these regulations for their own interests. Yet, if we think

of these practices in the context of gender inequality, as Fatemeh Sadeghi (2008) in her

study '*Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran*,' asserts, the

younger women's engagement in these practices

> does not necessarily lead to a more liberated female role in heterosocial
> relationships. While many of the misveiled girls [/bad-hejab] seem to offer a more

eroticised public self-presentation, most of them are also hesitant to challenge

discriminative gender attitudes within their own experience of public and private

affairs (p. 256).

Indeed, if these practices are to be understood through the norms of liberal secular

feminism as suggested by Sadeghi (2008) and numerous literature on feminist theory

(Bordo 1993, Barkty 1999), not only can they not be interpreted as disrupting the

hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality, but also they could be discarded on the

basis of objectifying the female body and subjecting them to the masculinist and

patriarchal representations. While I do not deny Sadeghi's concern over the inefficacy

of these practices in bringing gender equality, I assert the importance of employing a

framework that examines the specificities of these practices. In other words, the

conditions through which they are structured. Only then can one grasp the forms of

agency they entail. To do so, in what follows, I will outline a short overview of

poststructuralist theories on agency and endeavour to develop an account of agency that

incorporates a recognition of different modalities of agency.

The question of what constitutes an autonomous act/choice/human subject has

been central to feminist debates on women's agency and freedom. In liberal feminist

tradition, the concept of self-realisation is linked to the individual's autonomous will

which is identified with a universal rational reason. From this perspective, the subject's

interiority (e.g. bodily desires, interests, and attachments) and exteriority (e.g. nature,

others, traditions, prejudice) are conceived as an impediment to the subject's autonomy

(Colebrook 1997). As such, liberal feminists often problematised a woman's experience

against an unproblematic feminine experience or a female imaginary that was perceived

to be universal/modern, without considering the particularity of her position, history,

and attachments (Mahmood 2005). The poststructuralist account of human agency,

following Foucault's lead, represents a marked departure from traditional liberal

humanist scope, in that the subject is perceived as discursively constituted while still

acknowledging the imposition of external forces that operate and work on it. To

conceptualise human's agency, Foucault suggested a theory of ethical formation, in

which the relation between freedom and ethics are central. For Foucault, both freedom

and ethics are active, in the sense that ethics are ongoing bodily practices, desires, and

activities individuals undertake to practice 'care of the self', and freedom is achieved

through acting ethically in relation to others and the world. Freedom is not an end state

achieved through eradicating all restrictions, rather it is expressed through an

individual's ongoing practices of self-creation and self-formation within specific

historical conditions. Thereby, ethical self-formation is necessary for freedom. To the

extent that the imposition of external forces is less harmful to the individual than losing

the capacity to assert one's own identity. In other words, individuals have the capacity

to act creatively and assert their desires and interests within the limits of the contingent

circumstances regardless of how extreme the social restrictions might be. In this sense,

resistance to normalising forces cannot be perceived as liberation of the 'free' subject

from those forces, rather it is an ongoing struggle to maintain one's freedom against

power relations which are not merely imposed on the subject, but are manifested in

individuals' everyday practices of self-disciplining and self-subjugation (Foucault

1988b).

In order to include the corporeal specificity of the subject, Butler (1993) draws

on Foucault's insight on discursive power and illustrates the inseparability of the subject

from its acts through her theory of performativity. Being mainly concerned with identity

categories of sex and gender, Butler argues that rather than being a core or essence,

gender identity is an act, a repetitive stylised corporeal act that is regulated through

compulsory heterosexual norms over time. Her theory of performativity illustrates the

ways in which ongoing repetitive bodily and linguistic performances within obligatory,

politically regulated systems, or as she puts it, 'regulatory fictions' create the illusion of

a reality/truth that sustains systems of hierarchies. There are two crucial aspects to her

theory. The 'regulatory fictions' are obligatory in the sense that any act that is

incompatible with 'fictional ideals' entails punishment and violence. More importantly,

perpetual repetition and reiteration of acts makes them unstable and vulnerable and

thereby provide the possibility for change and subversion (Jagger 2008).

However, as Butler has shown in her later works (1993, 2004), the concept of

resistance should not be read as always subverting norms and various forms of social

subordination. In fact, not all women are in a privileged position to consciously subvert

the subordinated position in which they are locked, nor are all social subordinations

destructive to women's desires and aspirations (Magnus 2006). In her book '*The

Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*' Saba Mahmood (2005)

proposes a notion of agency that goes beyond resistance to include other modalities of

agency. Drawing on her interviews with the Islamist women who participate in piety

movements in an Egyptian mosque, she argues that by participating in the movement,

the women actively engage in ethical self-formation practices that are in line with

patriarchal values imposed on them. By doing so, they do not wish to consciously alter

structures of male domination, rather the central aim of the movement is to challenge

'western liberal models of the self'. Nonetheless, Mahmood notes that their active

engagements enhance their role in their religious and political life.[1] I find Mahmood's

notion of multiple forms of agency in keeping with the aim of my study. She proposes

that her notion of agency is not a synonym for resistance to relations of power, but is 'a

capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create'

(pp. 33-34). Thereby, for her the question of agency is not centred on how the norms are subverted, rather on how they are 'lived, inhabited, ascribed to, reached for and consummated' (p. 48).

In this perspective, the agency of younger Iranian women who participate in the practices of wearing fashionable veils or promoting cosmetic surgery, cannot be translated into liberal feminist terms, in which the preeminent subjects autonomously act against normative constraints, rather the women's capacity to act is constituted through external normative forces that have assigned subordinated position to them, their act, thus, cannot be fully free from these relations of subordination. By participating in these practices, as Sadeghi's research also confirms, younger Iranian women do not have a 'conscious' intention to challenge the patriarchal and hierarchical systems imposed on them. However, by engaging in these practices they participate in acts of ethical self-formation, they strive for their own values, and invent new subjectivities that are in opposition to the ones offered to them by the regimes of power.

To make this point clear, it is worthwhile having a closer reading of a dialogue Sadeghi has had with two participants in her study who could roughly stand as representative of younger Iranian women in Iranian society: a *Misveiled* girl and a *Chadori* girl. According to Sadeghi, for the *Misveiled* girl, the act of wearing fashionable veil is "to feel more relaxed in relationships with boys" and for the *Chadori* girl wearing the veil is an act of "refusing to be sexually molested", for both *Chadori* and *Misveiled* girl, thus, the veil has lost its symbolic and ideological meaning which is observing modesty or strengthening the Islamic ideologies of the Iranian regime. If we read these practices through a liberal feminist lens, both acts would be discarded on the grounds of objectifying the female body and subjecting them to the masculinist and patriarchal representations, the former through fashion and the latter (apparently)

through religion. However, if we interpret these practices as an expression of ethical

self-formation, both *Misveiled* and *Chadori* girls employ the veil as a means for

pursuing their own desires and needs within the limits of the culture they are immersed

in. Although the bodily form it takes is different for each of them, they both use the veil

to achieve their own truths through acts of self-creation and self-invention in relation to

others which here are the boys. The aim is to obtain a personal ethos (attracting men's

gaze or distracting men's gaze). These practices highlight the nuanced and complex

nature of women's embodied experiences in relation to sexuality and Islamic or cultural

norms. In the following table, I have outlined the women's ontology of ethics based on

Foucault's template of ethics:

practices	Ethical substance	Mode of subjection	Self-forming activity	Telos
Misveiled (*Bad-hejab*)	Body/mind take care of the self	Getting close to boys	Reformulating the veil with fashion	attracting men's gaze
Chadori (*Ba-hejab*)	Body/mind take care of the self	Getting distance from boys	Wearing the veil	distracting men's gaze

Moreover, Sadeghi asserts it is a misperception to equal these practices to 'free

expression of female sexual desire and agency' (p. 260). While Sadeghi draws on

Foucault's and Bourdieu's insight on power relations and acknowledges the

significance of historical specificity in shaping Iranian women's lives, her concluding

point overlooks their analytical potential. As Mahmood asserts 'we cannot treat as

natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics'

(Mahmood 2005, p. 15). According to Butler, desire is constructed discursively, and it

is tied to the relation of power (Butler 2004). Therefore, interrogating women's

motivations for cultivating different forms of desire requires a discursive contextual

analysis of women's behaviour and conduct (Mahmood 2005). In other words, the

desire to behave in a particular way is constructed through normative social discourses

in certain social contexts. Having a 'cross-cultural' approach (Vintges 2012), I argue

that although over-emphasising makeup and promotion of cosmetic surgery in Western

feminist discourses appears as one symptom of the patriarchy's discipline of a woman's

body, in the Iranian socio-historical context it might be interpreted in light of Iranian

women's intentions (although it may in fact be non-intentional) to undermine the

hegemony of an Islamic public in which their bodies are rigidly Islamised. The veil

conceals the whole body and reveals the face as the most prominent part of the women's

bodies. Thereby, they are compelled to beautify their faces as the mere site of

expression. Furthermore, the globalised media, including satellite transmissions and the

Internet, push women to strive for a global, Western ideal of beauty. These

contradictory forces reinforce the value of beauty over women's bodies, and promote

sexism in society. However, they also challenge and transform Islamic politics and

discourses. By engaging in these alternative movements, women place themselves in

conflict with many Islamic structures of authority. They experience vulnerability while

creatively living up to certain values. Therefore, their experience cannot be reduced to

merely promoting structures of patriarchy, sexism and capitalism.

Another example Sadeghi refers to in her study is the appropriation of *Ashura*

ceremonies by younger Iranian generations. The Ashura ceremony or *Moharram*, as it is

called in the Islamic Republic, is an Islamic Shiite ceremony commemorating Imam

Hussein's martyrdom, who was a grandson of Muhammad the prophet. This ceremony

is usually conducted by religious men and women. Today, according to Yaghmaian

(2002), the Hussein party, as it is called by the younger generation, attracts many young

Iranian girls and boys as an opportunity to dress up, make up and show off in the streets

in hope of exchanging eye contact and opening up hearts (Sadeghi 2008). By engaging

in these practices, they creatively use the sources of oppression; build alternative forms

of relationships and emotional experiences within a repressive system in which

proximity to the opposite gender is strictly prohibited. These forms of cultural resistance

can be understood as significant as political forms of resistance in bringing change in

society. As Foucault asserts, "right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes

and patterns of behaviour than to legal formations" (Foucault & Rabinow, 1994, p.157).

        Similarly, cyberspace, as I have noted in the previous section, as an alternative

space, provides the opportunity for Iranian women to transcend and push the boundaries

of space, time and the body. Globalised social media—such as YouTube, Facebook,

blogs, and so on—have become a 'third space' (Turner 1992) in which Iranian women

can voice their opposition not only to the Iranian government but also to show the world

a different image of themselves than the one represented by the Iranian government.

'*My Stealthy Freedom*,' for instance, is a well-known political Facebook page against

compulsory veiling in Iran, coordinated by Masih Alinejad (2014). The page encourages

Iranian women to submit a post regarding a moment in their life when they have

protested the regulation of the veil away from the gaze of the Islamic police, and to

submit it to the page. However, these alternative spaces are not all free from the

regime's prosecution. Many young girls and boys have been arrested by the government

for merely expressing their feelings or unhappiness on these social media sites.

Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to question and problematise the veil in the Iranian context by

linking historical and sociocultural discourses and practices of veiling to contemporary

power social relations. The veil as an embodied and structural practice plays a crucial

role in the lives of Iranian women. In a context filled with shifting and oppositional

discourses, Iranian women's bodies have emerged as a site for exercising power. The

veil has served as an instrument of control for the Iranian regimes to impose their

policies on women's bodies. The imposition of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling during

the last two centuries has (re)constructed and contested Iranian women's bodies in

shifting and oppositional ways. Women's bodies have become a site for implementing

ideologies and inscribing dichotomy discourses of modernisation/Islamisation,

public/private, veiled/unveiled, and so on. However, while the veil serves as a tool of

control for the Iranian regimes to regulate women's bodies, it also serves as a means for

Iranian women to challenge, subvert, and resist the veil against itself for political ends.

Iranian women, while complying with the disciplinary practices of veiling,

simultaneously challenge, resist and subvert them by exercising power through various

daily subversive practices, such as donning fashionable colourful veils, over-

emphasising makeup, promoting cosmetic surgery, appreciation of the Ashura

ceremony, etc. By performing these subversive practices, women act in their own

interest, even if this interest might not be tied to feminist emancipatory policies. In so

doing, they redefine and reshape the effects of oppressive Islamic laws and practices.

Notes

1. Mahmood's aim is not to read women's practices through the lens of 'subordination' or
   'subversion', rather her goal is to challenge this duality. Vintges (2012) criticises
   Mahmood's ambivalent approach towards her subject. She argues although Mahmood
   wants to keep away from duality of resistance and subordination, her account illustrates
   that the movement challenges both 'western liberal models of the self', which is one of the
   central aims of the movement, and 'male authority in Islam', which is not asserted by the
   movement (p. 294). Mahmood acknowledges that it is possible to read her empirical data
   through duality of 'consolidation' and 'change', however, such a reading without
   considering the complexity of the movement 'flattens out an entire dimension of the force
   this movement commands and the transformations it has spawned within the social and
   political fields' (Mahmood 2005, p. 175).

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Subject: Submission of revised manuscript titled *The Veil: An Embodied and Structural Practice* with ID number: CJGS-2019-0074

Dear Editor and Reviewer,

Referring to your email dated 01-Sept-2019 enclosing the reviewer's comments. I would like to thank you once more for very constructive comments on my article. Your comments have definitely affected the remaining of my work as well. I have applied the suggested changes; the revised sections appear in green colour within the manuscript.

Below you find the replies and actions to your comments:

- **Comment 1:** *I think the claim 'I suggest a re-definition of embodied subjectivity in which the capacity to act would not be locked into the feminist teleology of emancipation (Bordo 1993, Barkty 1999)' (currently page 9 lines 3-8) needs to be brought to the beginning of the introduction so that it is clear from the outset that this is the originality of the piece. At the moment this claim is a bit 'hidden' but it is an important one that differentiates this analysis from a lot of the literature on the veil coming out of Europe and disrupts the binary of emanicipation/subjugation through exploring the Iranian experience. I think this claim would sit usefully, perhaps with a bit more explanation/elaboration, after the sentence 'My purpose in this article is not to support or discard the practice of donning the veil as an embodiment of either female agency or subjugation' (currently page 7 lines 51-56).*
  Response: The suggested changes applied on pages 1, 2 and 4.

- **Comment 2:** *I found the table on ontology of ethics very interesting. Does the author think that this is something that could be usefully referred to in the text and included in the analysis? I think it is very useful in terms of explicating the conceptual thinking and would be a useful guide for the reader.*
  Response: the table is added to the text with some explanation about the women's ethical ontology (on page 25-26).

- **Comment 3:** *the author has added a significant amount of analysis here and included Fatema Mernissi's work. Thank you for this. Can the author bring their own argument/voice through a bit more in this section, please. For example, on page 10 line 33 the author cites Mernissi's conceptualization of the 'visual, spatial and ethical', could the author more clearly apply/use these concepts in relation to the Iranian context and analysis. This may mean removing some of the more descriptive parts in the new text and thinking about how Mernissi's analysis can help to build your own analysis.*

In this section it is important for the author to add a few sentences on the subject position of Mernissi and the different material context in which she was writing to highlight that you are taking these insights and using them to inform your analysis of the Iranian context. It is also worth noting that Mernissi's book that the author refers to was banned in Iran.

Response: The descriptive texts in this section are removed. I have added some discussion on feminists' position on the veiling practices in the Islamic countries; their change of position from demanding a universal Western model of freedom for Muslim women to re-appropriating Islam and considering the specificity of Muslim women's experiences, and then I proceed with presenting Mernissi as a pioneer in this shift whose contextual approach to the interpretation of the veil in major Islamic text has placed the question of the veil in the wider social, political, cultural context; and finally I ended with some explanation on how her works are relevant to my approach to the Iranian women veiling practices. I am afraid I couldn't fully apply what you suggested in the comment. If you think my discussion on Islamic feminists' position on the veil is long and could be instead used on Mernissi's works, I would be open to working on this section again.

The rest of the comments regarding minor changes in the manuscript are also applied and highlighted in green colour throughout the text. I hope the revised version is now suitable for publication. Thank you again and looking forward to hearing from you in due time.

Sincerely,