

## The Personal, the Political, and the Public: Performing *Hijab* in Iran

Oli Mohammadi

**Abstract:** *This dialogic ethnography shares the personal narratives of three women, each of a distinct generation, living in Iran. It looks at their performances of Iran's legal mandate to cover their bodies and hair. In particular, this paper reveals how they narrate their decision to conservatively cover as an act of resistance. Presented in three distinct but interdependent parts, the first section brings us into field, introduces the women and operationalizes the term hijab. The second part talks about the challenges and dangers of conducting research in Iran, in particular of gathering narratives that explore the institutional mechanisms used to ensure a disciplined following and censorship. This section also operationalizes storytelling as a performative act, and positions the women as agents of action. The final part forwards the women's personal narratives on hijab. The overall goal of this paper is to show that the intertextuality and intersubjectivity of hijab render it as functionally indeterminate. Hijab has as many uses as there are ideological and institutional powers that can take hold of it.*

### Crossing into the Field and Over the Border

Oxidizing bronze and copper deposits scar the rocky mountains of Tehran; the thick lines of purple and green hold a breathtaking, soothing majesty. When I look up at the jutting colors, the crowded and congested streets of the metropolis fade away, and a sweeping sense of being connected to the earth takes place.

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I sense life will continue long after politics, governments and the concrete walls of institutions crumble from existence.

As inspiring and awe-inducing Tehran's geography can be—it still carries consequences. The very height of the mountains ruthlessly trap in pollution and hold it over the valley that comprises much of the city. Thick blankets of smog stick to the human body and taint the otherwise transparent sweat on one's forehead a murky shade of gray. Breathing in downtown Tehran does not feel healthy to me. It is hard to believe it is barely five o'clock in the morning. The day is already smoldering, hot and gooey.

Only ninety minutes had passed since I sat on a stuffy airplane, preparing to step out onto the fiery soil of Tehran. I was looking forward to meeting up with Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima—three women both related to one another and good friends. They are the reason for this particular trip. They were going to allow me into their homes, and share their narratives on the legal mandate and religious practice of *hijab* and the act of veiling and covering associated with it.

As my plane crossed into Iran's airspace, the flight attendant's voice crackled over the speakers. With encouragement and prescription, she thanked the women onboard for showing "courtesy to Islam." This statement was her way of asking us to begin complying with the Iranian governments' mandate that all women practice *hijab*.

Generically referred to as veiling or covering, *hijab* is a much more exhaustive and complicated Arabic word. *Hijab* appears in five verses of the Qur'an (Qur'an 7:46; Qur'an 19:16-17; Qur'an 33:53; Qur'an 41:5; Qur'an 42:51). There are several translations. The most popular include barrier, seclusion, curtain or divider. Although different Islamic sects take individualized reads on the Qur'an, the spirit of *hijab* embraces *being decent and modest*. The verses where *hijab* appear are not those that address the clothing of women in Islam.

The concept of women's clothing distinctly appears in two other sections of the Qur'an. The Arabic word *khimar* (Qur'an 24:31) refers to women's headscarves and the word *jilbab* (Qur'an 33:59) to women's outer garments and clothing. It is when the scriptures mentioning *hijab* and the ones discussing women's clothing are taken in combination that the idea of *veiling* comes into action as a practice of the faith. The Islamic practice of covering derives its power from the fusion of the Qur'an's call to *being decent and modest* read alongside the verses mentioning *khimar and jilbab*.

Iran's current theocratic government requires women practice *hijab*. The legal obligation is women cover most parts of their bodies, the only exceptions being that of the face and hands. This compulsory practice was placed into action in 1979 after the Ayatollah Khomeini took rulership. During the revolution that positioned Khomeini into power, Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima were much younger than when they spoke to me. The change was particularly difficult for

Maryam and Fatima. Maryam was into her thirties, and Fatima was a grandmother for the first time. Mitra did not share the same experience of having to adjust. She was only six years old at the time. While Maryam and Fatima had lived almost half their lives without forced veiling, Mitra was too young for it to matter.

The political climate surrounding *hijab* was nearly the opposite in the time before the Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran's previous ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, denounced the act. The Shah promoted the idea of taking on a more modernized social system. He believed the practice of wearing the *veil* held Iran back from economic and social global advancement (Hay 2007).

When I asked Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima why they thought *hijab* became mandatory, they answered without hesitation—Khomeini placed his understanding of Islam as the center of all its ruling ideology. In such circumstances, the *hijab* became a visual emblem of Iran's religious and political identity under his power. Iranian women covered in accordance with the tenants of *hijab* symbolized the new Islamic government. The imagery at once forwarded the new government's rhetoric and visually represented what constituted an ideal type of Iranian culture under the new system.

*Hijab* is at once a religious and social practice as it is a political practice within Iranian culture and beacons an intertextual and intersubjective approach towards understanding. To call *hijab* *intertextual* and *intersubjective* is to say that it is an aesthetic, embodied representation of multiple ideologies. In other words, it carries more than one meaning. On a fundamental level, talking about *hijab* involves using words to describe the embodiment and image of women *veiled*. Additionally, *hijab* adapts both to the concrete legal mandate and the spiritual practice of the Qur'an's text. This makes it impossible to approach from a singular perspective or reading.

Given this dynamic nature, volumes of work have been dedicated to scholarship on *hijab* and the subsequent historical, cultural and social events surrounding the mandate of *veiling*. In the book *What is Veiling*, Sahar Amer covers the history of *veiling*. She argues the act and action cannot be understood as purely religious or spiritual in reason. Rather, history and politics play a significant role in shaping the meaning of *veiling* (59). Her framework can be extended out to highlight that the role politics and history play in understandings of the *hijab* are easily revealed through the 'Shah Pahlavi ban/Ayatollah Khomeini mandate' dichotomy.

Hamid Dabashi also explores the multilayer of ideological texts played out in Iran's mandatory veiling. He places Iran in comparison to France. In 2004, French law placed limitations on public displays of religious expression in public schools. This law prevents female students from *veiling* in public schools. In 2010, France furthered this law by banning full-face veiling in all public spaces (Heider 94-95). Dabashi expands on the idea of *veiling* as *political* by showing

that both Iran and France's regulations mark bodies as sites of state operation and legitimacy. When applied to women, France's vacated space, one that strips the body of wearing the veil, leaves no room for the embodiment of defiant reasons that challenge the public reasons. In other words, the law is a form of censorship Muslim women are prohibited from publically embodying their religious ideology. In similar vein, Iran's mandates occupy the space of the female body, much as one military would enter and occupy another country's land. In other words, being forced to wear the veil enacts a tyrannical mutation of the feminine body and renders it a site of political contestation (38). Iranian women are not expected to express anything but a perceived dedication to *hijab*.

Hammed Shahidian also does a good job of analyzing the idea of *hijab* as politics in his book *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*. His work views the female body and compulsory veiling as making public the act of patriarchy. Shahidian argues that Shah Pahlavi's rules abolishing the veil was as much an act of male domination as the Khomeini's mandate women must cover; the central claim being that even under the Shah women were *being moved* toward freedom (34). The Shah believed that *veiling* was a backwards act impeding Iran's move toward modernity, and ultimately participation in an expanding global market. As such, 'He' was helping women along by making sure they did not *veil*.

These three authors are just a few examples of the intense work that deserves unpacking.

Greater details on *hijab* will appear later in this paper as the narratives of Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima weave in their voices. For now it is important to note that it was *after* 1979 that *hijab* became a policed mandate. As such, my flight attendant's suggestion female passengers cover is an ordinary part of flying to Iran. Passengers can board inbound planes wearing anything they desire, and as in any typical airport, most passengers board wearing clothes that match their everyday culture and social system. However, once the plane crosses over the invisible geopolitical demarcation of Iran's airspace, it is suggested all women over the age of nine begin the compulsory practice of *hijab*. I intentionally use the word *suggested*. *Hijab* is not policed or enforced while international planes are in flight. It is only once the plane land and deplaning begins, the flight attendant's gentle request becomes a formalized legal mandate.

Out of respect, I followed the flight attendant's request. Reaching below my seat, I pulled out my favorite hair covering. It is a scarf, also known as a *rusari*. Made of fine, stretchy cotton it has softened over the years; faded, its turquoise blue has amended into a crystal-like hue. Adjusting the *rusari*, and tightly tucking it behind both ears I swung one side over my left shoulder and drifted back to sleep. I slept until we landed, and awoke to other passengers shuffling off the airplane. We had entered Tehran. It was long before sunrise when I finally

passed through customs, and saw Maryam, Mitra and Fatima smiling and waving at me at the Tehran Mehrdad International Airport.

Maryam was standing in the middle. She has three grown sons in their early fifties. She is controlling and full of sergeant-like characteristics that are always in swing. This impetus is left over from her pre-revolutionary days. She was the principal of a prominent French-English school. Besides students, the high school boasted a myriad of employees: teachers, counselors, and groundskeepers, each living under Maryam's direction.

"Tehran is a mad jungle now," she says in a firm but sad voice when she discusses *hijab*.

Maryam's choice of words always intrigue me and her description of Tehran was no exception—"mad jungle." I still turn the comment over in my mind. Mad as in angry, mad as in crazy, mad as in wild, or mad as in impassioned? Which one? Moreover, a *mad* jungle-city; an emotive land, a responsive land, an angry or perhaps even crazy place housing uncountable life forms. I have to remember to ask her some day.

Mitra stood to Maryam's left. Her wave was small and unassuming, but her smile bold and full of welcome. Of the women, Mitra was the most eager and the most interested in speaking on the subject of politics. A warm-hearted woman in her early forties and married for nearly a decade, she is famous for having two of the brightest and rowdiest sons in Tehran. Ages fourteen and eleven, these two boys will as soon correctly recite Venezuela's current foreign initiatives as they set fire to the kitchen.

Mitra's voice is uniquely situated within this paper. Though her generation of Iranians have spent the majority of their lives under the current regime, they can recall bits as pieces of "the time of the Shah" and its spiraling downfall into "the time after the Revolution". These markings of the time refer to before 1979 and after 1979. Being able to recall these early childhood memories and compare the before/after prompts a calm-empathy from Mitra. A fact that remains true even when she disciplines her extremely energetic sons. She attributes her overall approach to parenting as directly related to a sense of truth and the current political climate.

I am calm because I can see what is happening, Mitra says. "I understand that the people of Iran, even the children, live under the pressure of politics every day. I can see the tensions the rules and regulations bring," she explains.

Fatima was the third woman who had agreed to share her narratives. She has cancer and I was touched she made the trek to the airport. As newlyweds, Fatima and her husband settled into a small parcel of lush land. That area is now one of the most congested parts of Tehran's landscape. When she speaks of Tehran her words allude to a non-existent city. Tehran was nothing more than trees and fields. It was not until the arrival of living human bodies, of hers, her husband's, and others like them looking to make a start, which the "city of Teh-

ran” materialized. Their last names gave identity to the town. Streets were named after the first family who took possession of the land. Their decisions on where to erect buildings, where to place parks, how to lay the roadways, what stores and businesses to build helped mapped today’s Tehran and its current cityscape .

This era of her life is the first in which *hijab* is law. Her narratives on *hijab* speak on time as a distant past, and something created. She does not believe that the current political affairs will sustain. She has survived the passages of kings, assassination of prime ministers, and now a theocratic republic. Political agendas using *hijab* as a platform for government mandates are not *the now*; they are converging dialogs spinning as part of the overall threshold that is living. *The now* is life and life is a transitional stage in a larger spiritual ritual.

“Each man who gained leadership shifted Iran’s laws,” she says, “but they did not shift life. God releases us onto earth. Life is part of a larger thing we have to do to reach heaven. That is where we matter.”



Fig 1. *Family on Beach*, 1983 from the personal archive of Oli Mohammadi.

### Field of Challenge

This collection of stories has not been the easiest to compile. Even as an Iranian citizen, I endure bureaucratic steps to reenter the country. Currently, the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C. has an Interests Section that serves the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although this embassy handles all the necessary paperwork for U.S. raised and English as a primary language Iranians, most of the documents remain in Farsi. I do not read or write Farsi fluently. Thus, I need help filling out the forms. I have to take extra time to find someone who is fluent and ask him or her the favor of completing the forms on my behalf.

I asked the women why the Embassy added this hurdle. Mitra guessed the embassy wanted to pressure me, and others like me, to *be less American and more Persian*. I am living on the wrong side of the on-going Iran-U.S.A geopolitical dispute. My inability to complete the documents gives me the sense of falling short on my cultural identity. I wonder what will happen if I run out of family or acquaintances to support me. Will I need to join an Iranian Cultural Center and cultivate a friendship with a better-rounded Iranian?

Adding another layer to the challenge of conducting research in Iran is my framework, one I shared with the Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima. I viewed their storytelling as a performative act. I used this characteristic in the spirit of J.L. Austin's work on speech-act theory. Speech acts *do* something rather than merely *represent* something. Within this space, the women's storytelling is *evocative* and not just a mere fact-stating event or descriptive function. The sharing of their embodied experience with *hijab* has a *force* and enacts a *social action* (McCade 44).

In other words, Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima constituted that which they represented. The three women transposed narratives from a purely *constative* plane to a plane whereby the *meaning* of their narrative utterances was the very act by which they uttered. I approached their stories along the dimension of their appraisals of *hijab*, and not the dimension of their words as truth and falsehood or a simple report of facts (Austin 83–164).

This framework centers on the process of meaning making rather than foraging for finite denotations or *Truths*. This idea is very important when viewing the *hijab*, and in particular when approaching *hijab* as indeterminate. Mitra, Maryam, and Fatima are situated as agents of action, shifting history from a recounting of what happened to an interpretation of what the happening meant. Their understandings of their embodied life experiences and their interpretations of how these stories relate to collective membership in Iran are located within their stories. As I previously mentioned, *hijab* is at once a religious and social practice as it is political in nature.

This issue rounds me into the next challenge. Trying to get to the different layers of social, cultural, and political ideologies at work in Iran makes for a

tough gig. Under even the most ‘normal’ of field conditions and in much less politically contested landscapes gathering oral histories is sensitive and vulnerable research. As Della Pollock has explained, the manner by which the self is represented is especially heightened by the presence of the interviewer as a symbol and mediator of a much larger audience (2008). Storytelling is a significant and generative act that intensifies face-work. What this means is that people are often hyperaware of how they present themselves when they know they are being studied. As such, a narrator’s recall cannot be reduced to passive elements of social structures, psychological templates, or cultural scripts (Field 157). The women of this study are carefully constructing what they show me of themselves. Part of this is because they have safety concerns. These characteristics render oral histories a balancing act between what becomes necessary to work through for our sense of self and what we select to present to others (Behar 19). This is particularly salient in Iran.

Iran’s post-revolutionary government insists on privacy and security, and demands dedication and loyalty from its citizenry. The government’s propensity to jail individuals suspected of spying or spreading anti-state sentiments placed pressure on the women and me. Mitra, Maryam, and Fatima expressed that the decades of a militant rule and corporeal punishments have entailed a sense of fear. The possibility of being prosecuted for leaking too much information or accidentally saying the wrong thing gave them anxiety. As the women explained, not knowing when or for what they could be persecuted further intensified their feelings of concern.

The line between what constitutes right/wrong or acceptable/unacceptable is much clearer when dealing with larger matters of public communication than when looking at smaller or more individual acts of resistance, opinion, or outcry. As Mitra puts it, things have become somewhat tricky. She uses the word tricky as a way of describing the blurriness of current policing strategies, and the oral or visual transmission on the everyday lived experience. She explains that standing in front of Tehran’s capital building and screaming support for Israel is a sure way to get the police to come over to you. However, would telling a researcher your *rusari* feels itchy and hot on summer days turn into a problem?

*Maybe.*

*Maybe that is half the game.*

*Maybe that is half the problem.*

Maryam told me that the first years after the revolution were the hardest. She heard story upon story of women having their faces sprayed with acid or stuck in bags of cockroaches because one strand of hair was showing. While she can’t confirm if these acts actually happened, she explained she believed the narratives were true. In current times, the policing of *hijab* has relaxed but not fully disappeared. As Maryam narrated, sometimes the government wants to



remind the general population the laws are still very much in place. Military and police forces will be ordered by the governmental leaders to sweep the streets and grab women. When I asked her if she or other women sensed this was coming or knew what things, in particular, would set police off, she simply replied, “God only knows.”

The current *baphazar* policing of *hijab* certainly places a twist on the idea of a panoptic. I use the term *baphazar* to represent a seeming lack of notable organization and *panoptic* as Foucault meant it—disciplinary actions as a function of state-control and the exertion of power (Foucault 201-304). In particular, fear-driven space leads to complacency. The Iranian government’s institutional mechanism to ensure a disciplined following of *hijab* and the sharing of information with researchers is ambiguously enforced. Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima explained the government often uses militant force and rumored to use major acts of torture. The narratives of what could happen or has happened when women fail to properly veil are publically shared. The population at large is so scared they may be next that they are more likely to fall in line with the mandates and perform the perfect governmental subject.

Fear as a direct result of perceived ambiguity is certainly in place for Mitra, Maryam, and Fatima. The three women regularly mentioned they were nervous and cited uncertainty as the root for their concerns. The women tempered their answers and took caution when offering information when we began speaking on *hijab*. Once trust developed between us, I was asked to turn off the recorder and to keep information shared out of my presentations and papers. Some of the unrecorded narratives felt neutral and simple to me. I was surprised the women marked them as politically charged.

Knowing the dangers, I tried to be sensitive when asking the women questions. I avoided the temptation to probe deeply into political matters and respected their freedom to share what information they felt comfortable sharing.

Since the current definition of censorship seems to have a more fluid than rigid quality policing can feel random. Assumptions on censorship and contraband materials are rule-of-thumb understandings passed down through stories. Each time I exited Iran I purged myself of a great deal of information because I had a visceral fear. I convinced myself that I was smuggling data out of the country, and I would rot in a cockroach infest Tehran jail and be forced to eat moldy bread. I got this haunting idea stuck in my head because one of the women told me a cautionary tale. She said that forty men were once arrested and crammed shoulder-to-shoulder in 10x20-foot space. Guards threw live rats and stale bread on their heads. I had no idea if this happened, but I got to thinking.

Clearly, regulations and censorship limited my ability to reach detailed answers. As such, I cannot verify all the information the women have shared. All their narrations are not based on first-hand knowledge or even eyewitness ac-

counts. Alongside face-work, some of the stories are a medley of folklore, cultural stories, rumors, and even stereotypes. Maryam, Mitra and Fatima's style of creative verbal art matches Iran's collective cultural structure. Mitra explained she didn't answer my straightforward questions with direct responses because it was impossible for her not to love Iran as it was, as it currently is and as what it could be. She needed and wanted to show me the various threads weaving the culture. As I learned, the rhetoric of this attitude balances with the country's propensity to preserve its rich history, even as the general population pushes for freedom from the political constraints.

I understand that my role as an academic writer and performance scholar requires breath and depth of the subject. I also acknowledge it is my duty to both to raise and answer questions. However, part of academic freedom is the ability to interpret ideas and to personalize research. There are ways in which to *do* research. But, there is a certain magic to oral history and ethnography as practice. I intentionally made the decision to go only as far as I felt the women who participated in this project wanted or were willing to allow me to go. They would be alarmed if I linked their narratives to revolutionary or social movements in Tehran. They would feel nervous the government would punish them if I discussed their lived experience against a larger political reading of the veil, oppression and women's rights. I know this because they told me.

One of my biggest personal challenges has been compiling this research and making choices on how to present the women's narratives; an issue that has not gone unnoticed. Those who have helped in editing drafts of this work have highlighted my approach built itself up against ideologies I do not fully unpack. I have been offered the advice to read the women's narratives *against* that of other activist women within Iran and their subversive practices of *veiling*. The suggestion has also been made I open up and prioritize an understanding of these Iranian women *for* Iranian women, rather than for "other" women.

H. L. Goodall once asked, "Who has the right to speak for a culture?" (12). This question is seminal for the field of ethnography. By asking it, Goodall calls to attention the power of an ethnographer to construct what he or she learns. The key idea is that our subjectivity takes hold of the work we disseminate. The pitfall in this is it that the voice of the researcher takes precedence over the voice of the participants. Numerous postcolonial, feminist, and anthropological scholars have argued that ethnographic projects are deeply lodged within the cultural and political agendas, resulting in discoveries lacking neutrality (Lewis 581). Researchers end up either "speaking for" subjects, in the sense of political representation, or "speaking about" them, in the sense of turning them into objects of study, rather than treating them as subjects in their own right.

I take Goodall's question as a challenge to avoid the objectifying formulation of *culture* when presenting data. By focusing upon how cultures are alive and adaptive, researchers should write dialogically, dynamically and ethically.

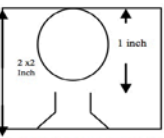
The spirit of these terms is one that gives voice to members of the culture, allowing them the space to exert their active agency.

I have struggled to create this kind of space, not out of a desire but rather as a shortcoming of my writing abilities. It has been almost impossible for me to avoid pairings of ideas against one another or as a 'one versus the other'. I have grappled with this vulnerability and this may show in parts of this paper. In an attempt to figure out how to curtail pairings or comparisons, I have spent hours reviewing the works of ethnographers I admire. I did this because I believe dualistic approaches are especially problematic when considering the Iranian female body and its relationship to covering.

The goal in my writing maintains the women's position as agents of action, ones negotiating and creating through their storytelling. Rather than provide a voice for the women, the women have voice. I serve as a collaborator in understanding. This framework retains the dialogical characteristics of storytelling and celebrates the emergent, shifting, often discontinuous, intertextual nature of the women's narrating voice. Aesthetically, I hope this re/presentation offers the sensation of *doing* ethnographic work — of the pleasures, suspense, and surprises embedded in performative and narrative research. I also hope there is the revelation of intertextuality and intersubjectivity in regards to *hijab* as the woman's corporeality magnifies and distorts the complex relationships between codifications and choice. From this here, the embodiment of the *hijab* actively materializes as an indeterminate site in which the subjects of gender, politics, religion, and history are culturally shared and individually situated.

بسمه تعالی

پرسشنامه جهت تجدید و تفکیک گذرنامه و انجام سایر درخواستهای کنسولی

<p>۴- دلیل شناسنامه جمهوری اسلامی همراه یا همراهانی که تقاضای دریافت گذرنامه جداگانه دارند.</p> <p>۵- تقاضای کتبی (بدر یا قیم برای فرزند زیر ۱۸ سال) مبنی بر تفکیک یا سردر گذرنامه.</p> <p>۶- تعداد ۴ قطعه عکس جدید جهت هر یک از متقاضیان گذرنامه جداگانه (به بند شماره ۴ قسمت تجدید گذرنامه رجوع شود).</p> <p>۷- وضعیت اقامت (به بند ۵ قسمت تجدید گذرنامه رجوع شود).</p> <p>۸- هزینه تفکیک (به فهرست هزینه خدمات کنسولی فرم شماره ۶۰۰ ردیف شماره ۳ رجوع شود).</p> <p>۹- کپی کارت شناسایی ملی (دوررنگی که تاکنون اقدام نموده اید بایستی همزمان اقدام به درخواست آن نمایید (رجوع به فرم شماره ۴۶۲)</p> <p>۱۰- دلیل مدرک شناسایی عکسدار مانند گذرنامه امریکایی، کارت شناسایی و غیره.</p> <p><b>نکات مهم:</b></p> <p>۱- افرادی که دارای شناسنامه قدیمی (قبل از انقلاب و یا اوایل انقلاب) میباشند برای تعویض گذرنامه قبل از هر چیزی بایستی نسبت به تعویض شناسنامه اقدام نمایند به فرم ۴۶۲ و ۴۶۳ رجوع شود و بعد از دریافت شناسنامه جدید از ایران اقدام به تعویض گذرنامه شود.</p> <p>۲- افراد بالای ۱۵ سال که شناسنامه آنها فاقد جای عکس میباشد همزمان برای تعویض شناسنامه نیز اقدام نمایند. جهت اطلاعات بیشتر به فرم ۴۶۳ رجوع گردد.</p>	<p><b>مدرک لازم جهت تجدید (تعویض) گذرنامه (Renewal)</b></p> <p>۱- دلیل گذرنامه تکمیل فرم شماره ۱</p> <p>۳- دلیل شناسنامه جمهوری اسلامی ایرانی و یک نسخه کپی خوانا از کلیه صفحات شناسنامه متقاضی.</p> <p>۴- تعداد ۲ قطعه عکس جدید رنگی از رویور ۲x۲ اینچ Passport Picture واضح و با زمینه روشن، عکسها باید بدون عینک و کلاه، عکس های بانوان و دانشجویان ۹ سال به بالا با حجاب کامل بوده بطوریکه فقط گردی مسورت نمایان باشد و پشت کلیه عکس ها نام و نام خانوادگی درج گردد. (عکس های کامپیوتری قابل قبول نمیباشند). لطفاً جهت جلوگیری از انعکاس جوهر روی عکس ها، بین عکس ها ورقه‌هایی قرار دهید. (عکس ها باید ظرف ۶ ماه گذشته گرفته شده باشند).</p> <p>۵- کپی ورقه 94-1 یا کپی از دو طرف کارت اقامت یا مدرکی دال بر وضعیت اقامت در آمریکا و برای مشمولین ماده ۹۸۹ قانون مدنی (درا بودن تابعیت خارجی) فرم شماره ۹۸۹ و دسرور ثبت‌نامه‌ده بودن فرم شماره ۷۲۳ تکمیل و ارسال شود.</p> <p>۶- طبق قوانین جدید سردر گذرنامه مجزا برای هر فرد در هر رده سنی الزامی است.</p> 
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## Maryam

The first day of research began early. I was jet-lagged. The time difference is 12 hours, and I tend to wake up in the middle of the night for the first few days I am in Tehran. But, given that she was hosting a dinner party, and it was only three days away, Maryam needed to go to the grocery, butcher, florist, and place orders at the confectionary.

I awoke to Maryam earnestly shaking my arm, “Get up girl! Hurry! Get up girl! Hurry! We have a list of errands to run. Any hope of getting done means an early start! Who sleeps past 7 AM? Who!?”

This rude awakening was Maryam’s typical style. A stout woman with short brown hair that is always pulled back in a small ponytail, she spends most days speedily dashing around town, taking care of all the family errands. Her sharp brown eyes notice the people of her surroundings. She reveals this awareness through witty comments on who is wearing what. The wife of a doctor, she is very well known and respected around her neighborhood in Tehran,

“Hurry, hurry, hurry!” Maryam sternly directed me. She was a woman used to giving orders, and unabashedly frowned as I lazily rolled out of bed. I was in trouble.

Part of our rush, she began to explain, was that business hours in Iran run on a unique system. Everything does not work in a New York minute. Congested roads slow traffic. It is not unusual to hit long lines, or even find a store closed to perform *Dhubr*, also known as noon prayer.

“Hurry! Hurry!” I continued hearing as I dressed myself, fashioning the same rusari I wore on the airplane, “The cab is waiting! HURRY!”

As I emerged, Maryam ambushed me; reaching over she yanked the blue material roughly over my forehead.

“Pull it tighter around your face!” she ministered, “No hair. No hair!”

I groaned; the impenetrable heat was already crawling across my skin, and the encounter tossed me into a somewhat angry, irritable state. It was hot, and the heat was exasperated by having to wear a *rusari* and a *manteau*.

She is ridiculously conservative, I stammered to myself. Outside, the city streets were littered with women whose rusari were not tightly fitted around their faces. Many women were doing little in the way of hiding locks of dark hair streaked with contrasting gold highlights. In fact, once I saw a group of young women with tall beehives and bouffant hair-dos sprayed stiff, raising ten inches to the sky.

The fact is that the actual textiles used to meet government mandates range in Tehran. While interchanging the terms *burqa*, *chador*, *rusari*/*rupeesh* or *manteaux*, and *hijab* happens, these are not the same word or synonyms for one another. Each term carries denotative and connotative meanings. Practices vary from one Muslim country to another Muslim country. It is uncommon for the

women of Iran to wear burqas. Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima favor the *rusari/ rupoosh* or *manteau* for everyday wear and reverse the *chador* for ritual occasions such as funerals.

The *chador* is argumentatively the most conservative of the choices found in Tehran. Generally speaking, only the women who actively practice Islam and therefore *hijab* can be found wearing a *chador* as part of their daily public and private routines. The *chador* flows from the head all the way down to the feet and is normally one large piece of material. Imagine this like a long sheet worn somewhat as a 'cloak'. The colors range from muted tones to black. In private settings, such as in the home, *chadors* can have small designs such as flowers or come in light shades of yellow, green, and blue. The most formal color is black. *Chadors* are also the standard choice for ritual events such as funerals. Materials change according to weather, with cotton being favored in the summer months and wool blends in the winter.

On the other hand, bright colors are very typical for the *rusari/ rupoosh* or *manteau* combination. Women who are not practicing *hijab*, but covering simply because the law makes them tend to favor this aesthetic for their daily routines. The *rupoosh* or *manteau* is a raincoat or an article similar in style to a raincoat. It falls mid-thigh to right below the knees, buttoned or zippered down, often belted at the waist, and worn with pants, capris that reveal the ankles, long skirts, or simple denim jeans. The *rusari* is a scarf covering the hair, shoulders and neck. Like the *chador*, it comes in a variety of materials. The most popular are cotton blends, silks, or synthetic materials such as polyester. The *rusari* comes triangular, square and rectangular in shapes. The most traditional form of securing it is to tie a knot under the chin for the smaller, square or triangular shape, or to throw a piece over the shoulder with the longer, rectangular designs. Much of the securing styles depend on the shape, length of the material constituting the *rusari*, and the fashion of the times; while some of the securing styles deal with Iran's legal mandates on *hijab*.

Knowing that variability existed on how I could cover, I wrapped the *rusari* tightly around my neck and looped it around and around as if I was about to step out into the cold Alaskan tundra. Then I tucked the back down the nape of the navy blue *manteau* I purchased at Wal-Mart. I tightened my belt around my waist and looked at Maryam.

Maryam swiftly picked up on my little act. Impatiently tapping her foot at me she said, "Child! You already look like you don't belong here in Iran! Do you want to make it worse?"

"Well, no hair shows. I am covered," I responded, after a long pause sheepishly adding, "And it is fashion forward."

"It does not look fashionable," she threw back.

"How do you know? Maybe I will start a trend. I'll come back in a year, and everyone in Iran will be wearing their *rusari* this way," I sassed back.

At the time, the nickname for the trendy cover was *manteau tang*. The term *manteau*, as previously mentioned, *translates* to overcoat while *tang* is the adjective meaning tight. The *manteau tang* appears in an array of bright spring shades—lime green, crimson red, fiery sunset orange, form-fittingly girdling around the curvy hips of Tehran’s trendiest women. From some of the outfits I had seen walking around, the addition of a rather unabashed “chunky” belt was stylish at one point. Almost four inches in width, and cinched directly around the waist much like a costume corset piece, the countenance of this accessory revealed the human disposition toward design and self-expression.

Deliberately squinting her eyes, Maryam inched towards me; I backed up. Though she wears thick bifocal glasses and is average height, standing just less than 5’6”, Maryam holds a statuesque position. No matter where she is or what she is doing her body bears intention. Pushing her full bosom forward and pressing her square shoulders back, she took on a posture I found as intimidating as any military drill sergeant.

“In America,” she sung rhetorically, pulling the “er” and hitting the “c” like it was a “k.” In AmerrriKa, “if someone wore a bathing suit to a dinner party would it start a trend or would people think they are stupid, disrespectful, crazy?”

Maryam both respects and obeys rules. She explained to me that following rules gives her a sense of empowerment. As, she awaited my answer she shuffled us along. Since I knew the question was not so much begging an answer as it was making a point, I remained silent and satisfaction fell over her face; my demure stance indicated to her the point she was trying to make was successfully communicated.

Unlike many women in Tehran, Maryam opts for wearing a long dark *manteau* and *ruwari* that reveals no hair. Visually speaking, her style is associated with women actively practicing Islam or with women who work in governmental offices requiring very conventional and conservative approaches to *hijab*.

When asked why, she responded, “Because those are the rules, and rules are meant to be followed.”of

Her response means more than meets the eye. It partly reveals her over-all personality. At the same time, it is a direct result of not following the rules of *hijab* earlier in her life and being sanctioned as a result.

Soon after the revolution, military police caught and detained Maryam because her bangs poked out from under her *ruwari*. Having finished a long day of running errands, Maryam was walking to the taxi stop. A large black van with the face of the Ayatollah Khomeini airbrushed on the side screeched to a halt on the adjacent corner. The passenger door swung violently open. Rushing out of the vehicle, charging toward Maryam were four feverish men. Pulled into the interrogation van the soldiers repeatedly questioned her about her disgraceful appearance.

“Why is your hair showing? Do you not believe in God?” she growled as she reenacted the first guard.

“You are anti-establishment. Against the new regime,” she snapped like the other guard.

After about an hour, the soldiers took her footwear as punishment. She was forced to run the many miles home barefoot, a taboo and embarrassing bodily presence, one indicating “dirty” and “unkempt” in Iranian culture; being barefoot in public links back to poverty or a lack of social manners or etiquette.

“Are you scared we are going to get caught by the military and punished again?” I asked Maryam about her strict *ruwari* and *manteau* choices.

“Scared to be caught?” she sarcastically threw back, “No! I just refuse to give anyone the space to step up to me and say whatever they want, tell me I am wrong, or try to embarrass me. I respect myself too much for that.” Coupling her next sentence with a vivid imitation, she went on to say with a laugh, “If a foamy mouth street dog rears the mangy fur on his back, pointlessly barking at me on the street, I do not stand there and bark back.”

From this she proceeded to an improvisational performance of an insane dog that seemed to have no true purpose but to bark unintelligently. Jumping between characters, she pushed out her chest like a hero and stared down the imaginary canine.

Maryam’s choice of words and that performance are unforgettable. I am frequently drawn back to this story. Notions of sheer, raw pre-discursive bodies, presence, and corporeality permeate the anecdote. She compares the police to homeless dogs. In this way, she complicates the institutions of the military, government, and religion and strips them of their power. In Iran, calling someone a ‘dog’ has insulting and profane connotations. It is one of the ultimate put-downs. When I asked why such a simple word carried so much strength, I was told it is because dogs lick their butts. As such, canines are foul and self-indulgent animals.

As Maryam experienced the policing, she sensed the men were enjoying their confrontation. The police were deriving pleasure from scaring her. She made the decision to not give them the pleasure again; thus she tucks all her hair into her *ruwari*. By not giving them a reason to punish her Maryam is stripping the government of power. For Maryam, power is not the ability to inflict punishment; power is the actual inflicting of punishment. By abiding by the rules and regulations, she thwarts the policemen’s capacity for fulfillment.

Struck by her self-proclaimed trickery, it took me a minute to fully embrace the idea of compliance as an act of resistance. Once I was able to allow Maryam’s perspective to settle in—I let out a bit of laughter and felt a sense of inspiration. The old saying, they cannot hurt you if you do not let them, crossed my mind.

Despite the cumulative pressures of the actual scenario, Maryam narrated an impression of the police officers that is quite animalistic. Her words remind me of what Frances Barasch would describe the genre of “ludicrous-horror” or the grotesque in storytelling. While his application of the terms were directed at an understanding of literary text, the spirit of his definition interplays well with Maryam’s narrative.

In this form of storytelling, Barasch writes, the narrator creates a dual effect. The story places the audience in a position of uneasy tension between laughter and disgust. This is accomplished by manifesting both fear and comic relief in the story (4). The narrator gives time for the audience to identify with a character and then places the character in a situation in which the sinister is addressed. From this juncture, the author then interchanges fear with hope and ultimately laughter. One of the rhetorical purposes for this genre is to challenge credibility and credentials of the sinister and give power to laughter and absurdities (3).

Maryam’s story coupled with my arguably accomplishes this task. In her storytelling, she is in the middle of minding her own business when military police suddenly confront her. Listening to her explain being grabbed instills a sense of fear in me. Rather than dwell on the fear, Maryam uses her words to narrate the powerful men with guns and authority into foaming street mutts behaving in an almost hysterical and rabid manner. She twists them out of their human form turns them into animals. Humans standing on two feet and two legs, drop down to the ground onto all fours, their flesh giving way to bristly fur. Spit gathers, lathering into foam that surrounds snarling, contorted muzzles. There is a climax of fear in the visual she creates. From this point, she switches her story and performs the military police in such a way that I start laughing, and a new appreciation as to who holds the power takes hold of me. Bringing down to earth the ineffable and authoritative theological/military forces, she renders them grotesque—to use Bakhtin’s words—figures of unruly biological and social exchange (1965).

Maryam sees herself as more than a mere participant in Iran’s current conditions surrounding *hijab*. She sees herself as a powerful agent, one who can refuse to give the government the power to punish her. Maryam refashions the traditional view of the citizenry’s role as Object/Subject into one of Self/Subjectivity. I find this supports the argument *hijab* is indeterminate. As Maryam shows, it is only an assumption the veiled female body is docile and in “constant danger of violation” (Conboy, Medina, & Stanbury 3).

Maryam is in action. Rather than an act of submission or an act of retaliation, in wearing her conservative *hijab* Maryam gains emancipatory power, transmuting her materiality from one controlled by governmental law to that of a free agent. She does not want military police stepping up to her, saying whatever they feel like to her, or trying to embarrass her. Her fleshy, exposed feet



no longer signify the harsh reality of disciplining discourses and embarrassment, but manifest an explosion of energy racing through Tehran's overcrowded streets, pushing past pressing bodies, rhythmically beating down on man-made concrete and human-generated wastes.

### **Mitra**

Now in her forties, Mitra has spent the majority of her life under the current Iranian regime. With that said, she can still recall, "the time of the Shah" and its spiraling downfall into "the time after the Shah." Like others members of her generation, Mitra's memories of the Revolution are the memories of a child. The Revolution drastically altered her childhood. At a time in her life when she should have been playing in the yard with friends or enjoying ice cream at the park, she was hiding in basements because guns were firing outside her front door. She remembers the violent sounds and sights of this deep happening through the eyes of a toddler, but could not come to understand what she witnessed as a matter of politics and global issue until she reached adulthood. When Mitra shares her stories on *hijab*, her voice exists in a gap, betwixt an adult re/embodiment of a childhood memory.

Speaking with her I was struck by the simple and elemental nature of her facial features, eyes, nose, mouth, ears just the right size, resting in just the right place. Fresh, untouched, Mitra wears nothing more than a slight stroke of mascara; her face glows with radiant beauty and passion as she speaks. Large brown eyes bubble, and when she smiles two deep dimples form on each cheek. Her beautiful face lured me, seduced me into a transfixed stare.

"The changes to our everyday lives came slowly," she explained, "When the new government took over I was in grade school. I did not really know what was going on. I can remember that it began with people in the street. They held signs I couldn't read but I knew what they said. 'Down with the Shah! Death to imperialism. Death to America.' These things were chanted loudly, rhythmically. In unison, with a beat."

As Mitra finished her last sentence, she lingered. I got the impression she had more to say, but she did not speak. She sat silently with her thoughts. I was not sure where she traveled, but I felt her mind ticking, ticking, ticking, or perhaps flipping, flipping, flipping through the pages of some mental scrapbook. Shifting in my seat, I stare uncomfortably. Although her voice was missing, our space was not silent. Between us hovered the lull.

"You know," Mitra said, finally breaking in, "I understand that the people of Iran, even the children, live under the pressure of politics everyday. I can see the tensions the rules and regulations bring. It is not like I cannot see what is happening."

“Don’t you think the rules are very relaxed now? Compared to the beginning. When all women had to wear long, dark *chadors*.” I eased in, thinking about my blue *ruwari* and Wal-Mart *manteau*, “Things are better, easier?”

“Very. Things are very liberal,” Mitra responded, as she quickly compared the current state of affairs against her memories.

“Overly liberal? I mean, liberal, but not overly liberal,” I sputtered; half shocked, half double-checking.

While she hangs out with trendy women her age, going about the streets of Tehran fluttering in and out of popular shops, Mitra stands apart. They all wear bright *ruwari*, make-up and do their hair in ways where much of the locks show. Presenting herself conservatively, almost hyper-conservatively in public spaces, Mitra wears heavy black shoes, a floor length loose fitting black overcoat, and a black scarf fastened firmly around her head. This outfit is maintained through every smoldering summer day of Iran. As she put it, she sweats through it.

“So are you in favor of an Islamic society?”

“Faith is good,” she continued, “My husband and I teach the children to pray, meditate. We read the Quran, studying it by also reading the works of old, great master philosophers.”

Although I sensed the caution in her voice and the suppression of more elaborated thoughts, I nevertheless heard her sincerity. I knew she meant what she said, and so I asked, “Is this why you think today’s’ prevalent colorful, tight *manteau tang* is too liberal? They are against the religion?”

In a surprising twist she gave an unsuspected answer, “I believe in faith. I love religion. I love Islam. It is a beautiful religion. How pretty it is. How prettier life is with religion. One sees brighter. It is not religion. I think liberal women are opposing themselves. I think they are giving the government exactly what the government wants.”

Uncertain how to take her response, but reminded of Maryam’s narrative of the military police as dogs, I asked, “Why do you think women pushing politically forced boundaries, moving beyond mandates is too liberal? Don’t the colorful *manteau tang* challenge the government? Introduce freedom of expression? Maybe even the color an individual feels or sees Islam in? An artful expression.”

No, Mitra stated with firm strength to the string of questions. The government of Iran wants its citizenry to be distracted, to be so worried about what they can and can’t wear they forget the social injustices that occur every day. The citizens are so caught up in the veil/not veil they have fallen prey to the government. The government is oppressing and controlling women through distraction not *hijab*. The *hijab* is a means to an end for the government. She went into a lengthy explanation.

“Since the population has outgrown the workforce, many people do not have jobs. And of course, men will get most jobs before women, so women are

really un(der?)employed. Having little outlet for their energies many exercise and diet, spend time and money on their clothes and makeup," she says, "the women of Tehran have spectacular bodies. They are in shape. Large breasts. Small waists. Tight buttocks. They are polished, clean, well groomed, and bored. They look good, they look sexy, and the young boys stare. Maybe for some people the colorful *hijab* is a political statement but if you ask insiders mostly everyone is bored. There is nothing to do so boys and girls busy themselves playing flirty, sexy body language games. Veiling is the smallest of our issues. Veiling is not the issue. The issue is the way this government treats people, the relationships this government has with the globe. *Hijab* is the symptom of larger problems. Instead of occupying my time concerning myself with distractions I do exactly what they say, to show the powers to be I am aware of the ridiculousness, the ludicrousness of our government."

When I began spending time with Mitra, I was certain she was pro-government or at least very Islamic. In her black *chador*, she looked like the regime and the religion's perfect poster woman. However, as I listened to her stories it became apparent that *hijab* was not about forced religious gender divisions or disciplinary struggles for her *per se*.

Through her words, she surfaced on her body the multiplicity of the *hijab*, as governmental order, as a religious order, and as a personal belief. At the same time, she strategically *unveiled* the contingencies of meaning and the dynamic authority embedded in this material enactment. From her perspective Mitra stands out, her body is not an object the government can use as a tool for distraction. She reveals a *body of choices*. By not fighting the government's mandate on *hijab* she makes the choice to remain alert to what she considers the larger issues Iran faces. While other women play with their *rusari* as acts of resistance, Mitra considers mental clarity and awareness the strongest form of resistance she can enact.

As she told me, she believes that in parading around in colorful *rusari* and *manteau tang* is the antithesis of liberation. These "liberal" women are in actuality falling prey to the compliance being demanded by the government. Mitra explains that from her perspective, they are so worried about how they look that they miss the real politics. By wearing the conservative *hijab*, she engages question. Even Iranian women are surprised she looks so conservative. For her, wearing a *chador* is a conversation starter towards social change. Once she initiates the dialogue she can begin the discussion. She refuses to be distracted from the truer, more meaningful issues at hand. In this, she believes she twists the government's rhetoric back onto itself. She stops them from ruling over her mind, by not fighting them over her body. She uses a seemingly compliant body as a way of raising critical awareness.

This idea contains great rhetorical power. When I looked at Mitra, she was seemingly either under the umbrella of a singular Islamic oppressed she or an archetypal Islamic ideal.

This approach is problematic.

Once we enter into this framework, the Iranian female body becomes an essentialized being of discourse (Paider 1). I write this using discourse as a verb meaning to write authoritatively, and essentializing is a reductive act. As Mitra puts it, we fall prey to exactly what the government wants, a mindset that is not expandable but still framed and read through Islam.

Approaching Iranian women as oppressed or fundamentalist or even revolutionary—by being focused on *how hijab* is practiced—simply propagates the Iranian government’s political agenda to place religious scripture in control of women’s bodies. Within this space, the lived, ephemeral, sensing body of the woman falls stagnant and becomes secondary to the *veil*. Rather than the embodied and sensual body, the female’s corporeality is “entered into writing” (Brooks 3) as the technical functions of religious text and governmental discourse materializing in the textile draped over her body.

Like Maryam before her, Mitra challenged my initial interpretations. I wondered how her narratives supported the indeterminate nature of *hijab*. As a woman, my knee-jerk tendency is to approach the *hijab* critically. I attach negative connotations to the Iranian government’s mandate on the Islamic *hijab* and its subsequent requirement women wear a covering. My basic argument is any attempt to coercively force disciplinary religious symbols onto the female agent is an oppressive act. I initially doubted Mitra. I felt that her action of wearing the *chador* did not actually perform a form of resistance. Much like Maryam, from a distance I read her choice as more compliant. It was only in storytelling that her method of resistance was revealed. She resists by not resisting. In this, Mitra is a woman of *intention*. This is her rhetoric of resistance.

### **Fatima**

My conversations with Fatima were emotional. Hers is a universe of unspoken thoughts and emotions too abhorrent to share. Her chest is filled with cancer revealing the unfortunate results of family genetics. Her strong Islamic faith prompts her to make curt, laconic statements about her impending death. Surprisingly, a peaceful disposition and gentle air undercut the sorrows hounding her everyday mood. Best described as an endearing caretaker, perhaps even a homebody; she watches no television, listens to no radio, reads no books. Rather she passes her time silently maintaining her home. The bulk of her day is spent preparing meals for her family, helping care for grandchildren, or laundering soiled cloths. Fatima has a hauntingly honest quietness about her, exemplified in her devotion to prayer.

Fatima and I were sitting in the middle of her living room. Under us laid an old, itchy wool Persian carpet; above us hung an old chandelier casting dancing shadows onto the walls; between us there was a small bowl of fruit. Fatima lifted a small ripe peach from the bowl and adjusted her *chador*. She wears *chador* styled for indoor use throughout the day. Unlike the dark colored *chador* worn in public, indoor *chador* take a lighter form. On that day, Fatima's was a light colored cotton material, and adorned with a small pattern of delicate flowers or thin paisleys.



Fig 2. M., Oli. "Women and Girl Walking." 2010.

Gently peeling the fuzzy peach, she took a deep breath and prepared to tell her next narrative. Having occupied her apartment for over 40 years, she told the story of how it came about that she chose the smallest of three bedrooms, the one facing the street with no air-conditioning, for her bedroom.

"The ghost of my deceased husband lives in *that* room. That room is haunted," she said in a surprising matter-of-fact tone, extending out her index finger out to point at the shut door next to the kitchen.

Haunted? A sense of shock and sensationalism passed through me. I blinked hard. Focusing my eyes, I took a closer look at the apartment. It is a small and smack in the center of Tehran. Shared with two of her daughters and her son the space is full of life, almost cluttered with energy. The two sisters attend large universities in Tehran, one working on her doctoral degree in advertising, the other earning a masters degree in film. Together they have strewn books all over, coming and going in between lectures and activities to grab food or naps. When they are home, they can be found in opposite corners listening to music or working on school assignments. Their brother holds a high position in one of Tehran's city offices. He leaves early in the morning, not returning until early evening. Adoring videos, when he is at home he plants in front of the television to watch broadcasts beamed in from all over the world. Fatima's third and oldest daughter does not live at home but comes over daily.

The haunted room is generally avoided. In it are a few shelves of knick-knacks, a mirror, a mattress, and the family sewing machine. The sisters share a room, and their brother; Toyed pulls out the haunted room's mattress, sleeping in the middle of the living room every night.

"How do you know the room is haunted?" I timidly inquired.

"After my husband died strange things happened. The sewing machine, its lid would open and close. I shut the sewing machine tight when I am not using it. One day, I went to get some thread. I saw the door just open and slam shut. I got scared. He has returned I thought. At first I did not understand. Later I noticed the atmosphere became heavier at night. When we were sleeping the air in the room felt like it would change. For a while, after I noticed, all of us slept in one place, holding hands. We slept holding hands."

She stopped speaking for a moment.

"Really?" I said, breaking the peculiar eeriness hanging over us, "Anything else?" I leaned forward, my eyes wide with curiosity.

"Oh yes," Fatima continued, "The blinds in that room. They go up and down by themselves. One time, I was cleaning the room and I saw him behind me standing in the mirror. I was cleaning the mirror and his reflection was in it, laughing. I thought he is actually alive. Standing. Laughing. I turned around but saw nothing. Thank God."

I felt my lips snarl back, "Yes, thank God there was no ghost!"

"Oh I am not worried about a ghost. I worried it was him. Worried *he* was back."

Fatima's late husband had been a very abusive man, hitting her often, holding her hostage in the home, and forbidding her from speaking to family members or neighbors. Sometime in the late eighties, he fell ill. So ill, he required intensive hospitalization and a series of surgeries. As Fatima tells the story, when he first entered the hospital he was in bad shape. Doctors gave him only a few weeks to live.

“But, he did not die. In fact, he lived for seven more years,” Fatima said, her voice mixed with awe and frustration, “And he kept living and one day he had to go back to the hospital. He had a relapse. The doctors did more surgeries and I began to pray he would die. I said—God, take him and I will be your follower for the rest of my life. The next day he died. I kept my promise to God. I asked God to take my husband and the next day he took him. He got up to go to the bathroom, removed his watch, looked at me and said ‘I am about to die’ and died.

“Wow,” I responded, “That sounds difficult. How did you feel about the situation?”

“Surprised. Relieved. Guilty. I was guilty until one day I went to one of the mountains surrounding Tehran. All three girls were with me. We were together. There is a mosque at the top of this mountain and we wanted to see it, maybe say a prayer for my husband. When we got up to the mosque, it was rather empty. It was really just the four of us. Not crowded at all. I went up front and began to pray and I saw something from behind, something behind my head and then the sound of footsteps came. I said “God” silently to myself. *Suddenly* I saw a person’s hand! It was put on my shoulder. I turned around and looked. I saw, something like a *mirror*, like some bright light was on. There stood one man wearing a ring. I heard his breath. I sensed the warmth of his breath. It was beautiful. Then I understood nothing. I just kept praying. And I called the girls over. On the spot where he had placed his hand, it smelled of perfume. From then on I always smell roses when I wear this *chador*.”

Tugging on one corner of her floral chador she pulled it toward me and repeated, “This *chador* smells like rose water to me. That man was God was telling me everything was okay.”

“Is this why you always wear it? Or did you always wear it?”

“Oh no. I did not always wear a *chador* in the house. I promised God I would follow him, do His work, and listen to His commands. I do not like taking this off. God granted me my prayer. He touched this, and forgave me for my selfishness. It also reminds me of my husband, and the misery he brought and how I should not feel guilty feeling God freed me,” she concludes.

Within this framework, wearing a conservative *chador* renders the very conventional symbol contingent and situated. Fatima is at once giving herself to a God, a deity she describes as he (male) and celebrating being freed from the patriarchal rule of her husband (him). Perhaps under generalized definitions of or ideas on what defines resistance, Fatima has failed. She is replacing one man’s rule over another. With her *chador*, she is throwing on her love of (he) God, a patriarchal deity, even though she is throwing off the rule of her earthly male husband. However, because *hijab* embodies multiplicities, these seemingly incongruent acts—one of submission and the other of resistance—can and do occur simultaneously. This sense of at once-ness highlights and reiterates the

functional indeterminacy of the *hijab*, and just as importantly the functionally indeterminate nature of resistance itself. Resistance has as many uses as there are powers that can take hold of it.

The two males representing the difference between *good* man and *bad* man; one merciful, freeing, forgiving, the other abusive, frightening, and exhausting. She reflects on death and life, rebirth and parting. A spiritual calling, not a governmental mandate is suddenly visible in Fatima's *hijab*. Rather than be transfixed by the dominating theocracy and religion, I am touched by her display of life with and within those discourses. Freedom is not always freedom from something: freedom can exist as a degree of latitude within certain constrictions. Resistance will always operate within the cracks and small-embodied spaces.

What Fatima shows us is the term *hijab* can be a noun, verb or even adjective. For example, in the sentence—we *can assume she is Islamic because she is wearing a hijab*—the term functions as a noun, and the noun serves to reify our own particular and essentializing typologies. The *hijab* is the marker that helps us build larger heuristic devices that build a “world” for us, at least cognitively.

At other times, *hijab* is used as a verb. An example of this would be—*hijab is something she practices*. As such, the term *hijab* is more than an article of clothing or an *on/off*. It is at once a worn textile, gender role within the faith, symbol of Islamic belief systems. In other words, *hijab* is a performative. There is a consolidation of impressions that achieves a reorganization of the dominant reading of *hijab* as an oppressive state of being to a place of pleasure and enjoyment. In her narrative, the *hijab* is no longer fully fixed as a mark of being under any human or even earthly authority. She binds individualized, subjective and spiritual connotations onto the tangible, denotative, legal mandate of the *chador*.

Fatima proves the government does not own *hijab*. The idea is *of* God. By experiencing God, there is an induction into the system of spiritual bliss that supersedes government mandates and oppressions. In other words, in feeling that she has reached a level of spiritual enlightenment that lends back to an expressed gratefulness towards the *hijab* she resists the powers of government. Fatima *enjoys* wearing her *chador*. From Fatima's perspective, if she wears her *chador* out of love for God, then the government is not making her wear it. Within this framework, the government lacks all authority. As with Maryam and Mitra, Fatima's narrative shows a resistance against the government's power. She reveals the dynamic corporeal, sensual experience of *hijab*. Her embodied experience breaks the government's power.

## Summary

In *Acts of Resistance*, Pierre Bourdieu begins his note to the reader by writing: “The texts that follow were written or spoken as contributions to movements



and moments of resistance, and it is because I believe that the dangers that provoked them are neither isolated nor occasional that I decided to bring them together for publication (pg. vii)." I bring up this quote, here at the conclusion of this paper because it matters. It contains words worthy of repeating. Danger. Movement. Provoked. Moments. Resistance.

These words beacon questions such as: what qualifies as an act of resistance, as a dangerous act of resistance? Is it only the overt acts? The acts that are readily noted, so in your face action cannot be missed? Is dangerous resistance only clear defiance? Or is there more?

Resistance is sometimes equated with defiance: the refusal to perform and action or a set of action that are ordered and demanded by a transcendent or hierarchal agent. However, as is made clear in a society in which the government operates as a quintessential totalizing institution, resistance operates sometimes between the cracks of power, as opposed to flying in the face of power. In this way, the *hijab* might be visually conservative, and on that front, seem to collude with dominant power structures to further the oppression of women. However, the agent beneath the *hijab* has her reason for performing *hijab*. In this instance, *hijab* operates as camouflage that allows an agent to traverse unseen in between and around hierarchal power mechanism. Becoming imperceptible to the operations of power is how most revolutions begin. Mass protests, highly visible and conspicuous media and social media-driven events are often equated with the nascent stages of a revolution. Interestingly, in an era of so much visibility, camouflaged resistance can just as equally lead to sudden outpourings of revolutionary spirit.

Through their narratives, Maryam, Mitra and Fatima evidenced the indeterminate nature of *hijab*. It is within this very framework—the framework of indetermination and intertextuality—as space by which to enact a resistance. Their words and stories showed that *hijab* has as many uses as there are ideological and institutional powers that can take hold of it. Their narratives revealed that as a religious and political act, *hijab* is a personal and public practice. But there is more than just that dichotomy. Interpretations on *how to cover* or *what to use when covering-up* are subjective. They are choices. The list of choices goes on into infinite subjective combinations. Through their words and on their bodies drapes multiplicity of the *hijab*.

There is value in these findings. The narratives of Maryam, Mitra, and Fatima display the ways in which religious and governmental ideologies can be bended *for persons* and *by persons*. In other words, the women's narratives break binary readings of covering the body and introduce new acts of resistance. As such, the women render *hijab* as functionally indeterminate.

Equally as important, the stories show that simply homogenizing women in Iran under the binaries of veil/unveil, compliant/radical is problematic. Not all the women of Iran express their positionality as radical or oppressed: some

women in Iran find freedom between the radical and the oppressed, as none of these terms necessarily define each other. *Hijab* or covering comes in variegated forms, and there are more tempered viewpoints. There women who would practice *hijab* regardless of the law and women who are mandated by the Iranian government to cover. They are women in between, hiding in the camouflage, and perhaps patiently bidding their time, waiting for a moment when resistance can throw off the camouflage, and begin to fight for something new in plain sight.

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