



THE VEIL

Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics

EDITED BY JENNIFER HEATH

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17 Concealing and Revealing Female Hair

Veiling Dynamics in Contemporary Iran

ASHRAF ZAHEDI

My hair and my face are my means of displaying my disagreement with the Regime.

Mina Nikzad, a Tehran University student, 2005

The Islamic government may overcome the U.S., but it will never succeed in telling Iranian women what to wear.

Tehran shopkeeper, 2004

Female hair, revealed or concealed, has always been an intriguing aspect of woman's image and identity, worldwide.¹ In contemporary Iran, female image and identity are highly politicized. Iranian political regimes, past and present, have constructed ideal images of Iranian women congruent with their ideology and presented women as symbolic of the country—modern or Islamic. In constructing new icons, each regime has used encouragement, legal measures, and physical force to impose its political will on Iranian women. The compulsory nature of unveiling and revealing has deprived women of the right to choose individual identities and violated their human rights. These violations have politicized Iranian women and inspired them to challenge authority (figure 17.1).

Control over female hair has not been confined to Iran. It has a long history and draws on the social meanings of female hair and its sexualization. Human societies are fascinated with head hair. It is the only part of the human body that continuously grows and can be shaved, cut, and



Figure 17.1. A fearless young woman in Tehran, Iran, is pulled over by the morality police but continues talking on her cell phone, 2005. Her arms and hair are exposed, although she wears minimal *hijab*. The female police wear *chador*. Photo by Satyar Emami. Courtesy of the Iran Times International.

shaped without harming the body. Though there is nothing inherently sexual about female hair, most societies throughout history have assigned sexual symbolism to it, letting it determine a woman's attractiveness and power over men.

In some cultures, wild, uncontrolled hair is associated with unconventional, uninhibited women and is frowned upon. Witches are often portrayed with untamed hair. Traditionally in Japan, a proper woman wore an elaborate, highly controlled hairstyle. In India, widows' heads were shaved to desexualize them and curb their appeal.

Cutting the hair has been used to punish women who did not comply with social norms and behavioral codes. In World War II Vichy France, for example, the heads of women who took German soldiers as lovers were shaved. Stripping women of their hair cast them as "recognizable" undesirable elements of society.

Men in power have sexualized, theologized, and politicized female hair. They have written and drawn from theological and legal texts to justify

its concealment. Central to this justification was the need to control female sexual power and in turn, the male gaze. Hence responsibility has shifted from men's uncontrollable sexual appetites to women, who must diminish their own sexual appeal to protect men. Women acquiesce by internalizing popular beliefs.

The need to curb the sexual power of female hair can be traced to places of worship where genders mix. Women are expected to wear hats or scarves in Christian churches. In contrast, men are expected to remove their hats in church. Men's headgear is not intended to curb their sexual appeal but is usually a marker of social status. Female headgear serves a dual function: on the one hand it is meant to hide her sexuality, on the other, it is meant to beautify and enhance her attraction. The social meanings of head coverings worldwide are as diverse as the cultures they come from. In Iran, the social meaning of the veil is a contested one and continues to be the subject of religious and political disagreements.

Iranians commonly believe that veiling began with the Islamic conquest of Iran in 637 C.E. The veil, however, goes back to the Persian Empire, from the Achaemenid (ca. 500–330 B.C.E.) through the Sassanid (226–651 C.E.) dynasties. But the pre-Islamic veil had a different social meaning. As in the ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean cultures, veiling in the Persian Empire was a status symbol enjoyed by upper-class and royal women, who led secluded lives and wore the veil in public to protect themselves from the impure gaze of commoners. Common women were forbidden to wear the veil.

The first known reference to veiling is believed to be in an Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century B.C.E.² The veil signified class distinction. Assyrian law prohibited peasant women, slaves, and prostitutes from wearing the veil and violators were punished.³ Women who wanted to choose an identity different from the one the authorities assigned to them were disciplined.

Contrary to common beliefs, Islam did not invent the veil, nor was it compatible with Arab lifestyles. Early Muslims adopted veiling as a result of their exposure to the cultures they conquered.⁴ The Islamic veil was neither used as a marker of social status nor limited to any certain class of women. The Islamic veil signified modesty.

Islamic veiling, as a social and religious requirement for all women, was a new concept. Veiling took a long time to institutionalize in Iran and for the most part it remained an urban practice. Moreover, Turkic tribes who migrated to Iran between the tenth and sixteenth centuries led nomadic and pastoral lives, incompatible with veiling.⁵ Indigenous paintings show that tribal women did not wear the veil.⁶

"Italian travelers to Iran [in the sixteenth century] wrote that women were shockingly exposed."⁷ But during Persia's Safavid dynasty (1501–1736 C.E.), religious authorities gradually gained more power and actively advocated the veiling of women. Nevertheless, the practice did not spread to Iran's rural and tribal women. They have always had an active role in social production; veiling curtails their activities and movements. And although tribal and rural women have their own, local, forms of head coverings, even in today's Islamic Republic of Iran, they wear the veil only when they travel to cities. Head coverings are part of traditional clothing for women and men in Iran, serving to mark their ethnicity and signifying their social status. Women wear caps, shawls, and scarves or combinations thereupon. Head coverings partially conceal female hair, but their shapes, colors, and decorations are intended to enhance female beauty. Tribal women have always had some degree of freedom to adorn their head covers and in turn beautify and express themselves, even today.

The exposure of the Iranian elite to European societies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their socioeconomic advancements inspired many to seek reforms. Unveiled European women and their status within society highly impressed these reformers—men and women—who sought many changes in Iran, including improvement in the condition of women. They began demanding access to education, changes in marriage laws, and unveiling. In the 1920s and early 1930s, activist Iranian women published magazines and formed organizations to raise awareness and sensitize the public to the injustices they faced.

Prevailing reformists of the time tied seclusion, veiling, and women's education together, in part influenced by Western perceptions about Muslim societies. For the West, the veil was—as it continues to be—the symbol of women's oppression, signifying backwardness. Modernist Iranians called the black veil (or *chador*) *kafan-e seeyah*, meaning "black shroud," a

play on the word *kafan*, the white burial cloth. The reformists were strongly opposed by secular and religious conservatives.

The reformists hoped for a strong ally who could stand up to conservatives, and they found him in a new king, Reza Shah Pahlavi, a soldier who rose through the ranks to depose the last shah of the Qajar dynasty (1781–1925). Reza Shah was influenced by the modernist visions of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, president of Muslim Turkey. Among his secular reforms, Atatürk encouraged unveiling of Turkish women. Reza Shah, however, took a different path in unveiling Iranian women.

In 1935, Reza Shah established Kanoun-e Banovan or Ladies Center and, with the support of women's advocates, waged a campaign to prepare public opinion in favor of unveiling. Nevertheless, conservatives' opposition remained strong. In 1936, the shah legally abolished the veil or chador. The abolishment of the veil was called *kashf-e hijab*. The word *hijab* at this point and in this context was used only in reference to the veil. Many educated upper- and middle-class men and women welcomed unveiling. Soon, Iranian women appeared in public unveiled and in Western clothing. Some revealed their hair; others wore European hats, often as a substitute for a head scarf, but many simply as fashion statement. Ironically, Iran was the "first Muslim country to impose Western dress on women."⁸

The shah also initiated a number of other reforms benefiting women, but it was the unveiling that polarized society. Unveiling was a progressive measure and provided many women with the choice of public attire. This choice, however, was for unveiling proponents only. Advocates of the veil were left with no choices. Unveiling was an important part of Reza Shah's modernization efforts and he was not to be deterred by conservatives' strong opposition. He employed the use of physical force, ordering soldiers to remove women's veils, sometimes tearing them off in public.

The imposition of unveiling—not only the violence—was highly offensive to those who believed in the veil. For women who were unready or unwilling to appear in public unveiled, it was a major religious and emotional challenge. Forcefully unveiled women felt naked and shamed. Many refused to leave their houses and avoided public places. Even using

the public bath was a trial. Unveiling was particularly painful for older Iranian women.

Reza Shah ordered theater, restaurant, and hotel owners not to allow entry of veiled women. Even wearing a head scarf was not permitted.⁹ For women with limited resources, unveiling was a financial burden. They could conceal their modest clothing under the veil, allowing them to blend in with others. Unveiling required proper—Western-style—clothing, which they could not afford.

Compulsory unveiling outraged the clerics and secular conservatives. They had tied women's moral character to the veil. It symbolized the identity and chastity of Muslim women. These men saw themselves as the guardians of morality and social decency and used mosques and public spaces to oppose unveiling. Bazaar merchants, who stood to lose lucrative sales of the black chador, supported them. Many violent confrontations took place between proponents of the veil and the shah's army. The army suppressed all opposition.

Complications now arose about who should be unveiled. At issue were the prostitutes. Sex workers were not to represent the image of modern Iranian women. According to the authorities and prevailing beliefs, prostitutes lacked the moral character of decent women. But how could the new laws be enforced without allowing the prostitutes to unveil like other women? Thus it was recommended that "if the prostitutes would take husbands, they could then remove their veils like other respectable women."¹⁰

Unveiling presented a new image of Iran. For the shah and modern Iranians, the image of veiled women was synonymous with backwardness. This image had to be removed from the Iranian stage. Women who wanted to veil, and for whom the veil was part of their identity, were marginalized while modern, educated women emerged as a symbol of the new Iran. With their educations and modern looks, they were well suited for various governmental jobs. Veiled women, even if educated, were not allowed to work wearing the veil, not even the head scarf.¹¹

Teachers were not allowed to teach if they wore the veil and some of them left their jobs. Likewise, conservative advocates of girls' education who did not support unveiling no longer allowed their daughters to at-

tend school. Unveiling, in some cases, effectively undermined education. In short, compulsory unveiling provided modern women with the choice of identity and access to education and employment, yet it simultaneously deprived veiled women of the same choices and opportunities.

The whole period of forced unveiling lasted only four to five years. In 1941, Allied forces removed Reza Shah from power, accusing him of favoring Nazi Germany, though Iran remained neutral during World War II. His young son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became the new king. With his more flexible approach toward the veil, compulsory unveiling came to an end. Some religious leaders sought to reimpose the veil universally. Others merely encouraged women to reveil. Some women, either because of religious convictions or pressure from their families, took up the veil. Thus women appeared in public as *ba hijab*, veiled, or *bee hijab*, unveiled, and were referred to as such. Veiled women were also called *chadori*.

Many women—among them those who experienced the freedom of movement without the veil yet did not want to appear in public with revealed hair—chose to wear head scarves. The head scarf gave them a medium to negotiate between *ba hijab* and *bee hijab*, veiled and unveiled. In so doing they constructed a new symbol of cultural identity. Now all women had the freedom to make a choice of public attire and self-presentation.

From 1941 to 1978, veiled and unveiled women were present in public. But the image and the social meaning each group put forward was totally different. Though veiled women were seen in public, unveiled women had social and political “presence.” The issue, however, was not just the veil. The physical indicator of modernity was “revealed” hair. Women in scarves and with “concealed” hair, wearing modest fashionable Western clothes, were still viewed as “traditional.”

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi implemented a number of reforms in the 1960s and 1970s. Some, like his father’s, benefited women. But his policies were often ill-conceived and improperly implemented, leading to uneven economic development, social disparity, and growing gaps between rich and poor. He carried out his reforms without taking into consideration people’s sentiments and building national consensus. Some questioned his modernization program, which was accompanied by Westernization.

For them, Westernization was merely a new disguise for political dominance and cultural imperialism, a threat to Iranian and Islamic culture. The Western way of life was viewed as vulgar and decadent. Opposition to the shah, his policies, and his alliance to and dependency on the West increased and as it did, so grew his determination to suppress it. The shah's expanding military might was, to some extent, aimed at his internal opposition. Over the years, his regime became increasingly undemocratic and dictatorial.

In the 1970s, many Iranians raised questions about the negative impacts of rapid social change. Some Iranians, like some Turks and Egyptians, directed their criticism at political leaders. The failure of regimes espousing capitalist, socialist, and nationalist ideology led many to doubt the merits of these imported ideologies. Instead, the religious critics found an ideal paradigm in Islamic ideology and authentic Islamic culture. They glorified Islam as a social remedy to all social problems. Turning to Islam and so-called authentic culture had a great appeal and came to be known as the authenticity movement.

Proponents of cultural authenticity believed cultural imperialism had corrupted Iranian women. These women, instead of following their own Islamic culture, had adopted Western values and allowed themselves to be seen and used as sexual objects. With revealed hair and makeup on their faces, they had made themselves inauthentic to Iran, becoming "Western dolls" and slaves of Western fashions, obsessed with consumerism and lacking social and political consciousness.

Women were pivotal to the political construction of the authenticity movement of the 1970s, whose image was shaped by Dr. Ali Shariati, a French-educated Iranian sociologist. By setting Fatemeh (also Fatema or Fatima), the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, as a role model, Shariati inspired women to emulate her modesty. He encouraged women to distance themselves from the ideology and fashion that objectified them, to challenge traditional customs, and to take active roles in the pursuit of education. What's more, he urged them to respect their bodies and minimize their sexual appeal by wearing a long and loose manteau, or jacket, and cover their hair with a *rusary*, or scarf. This outfit symbolized the modern Muslim woman. Before the authenticity movement, the veil was synony-

mous with the chador, the black, head-to-toe veil. The manteau and rusary provided a modern meaning for hijab and a more practical way of observing the Islamic dress code of modesty, while simultaneously remaining active in public life. A new image and identity were constructed.

Inspired by Shariati's teachings, some women took up the veil, while others used the manteau and rusary to indicate their identities as authentic Muslim women. The outfit had not only religious but political meaning. In the mid-1970s, these women had active presence in universities and the society at large. They were self-confident and charged with the ideology of cultural authenticity. Needless to say, the shah did not welcome this politicization of women. Shariati and his followers were harassed by SAVAK, the shah's brutal secret police. Nonetheless, he left them to choose what they wished to wear.

Decades of discontent with the shah led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Massive numbers of Iranian women participated. The image of thousands of veiled women demonstrating against the shah captured the world's attention. The veil had found a new political meaning. No longer a symbol of backwardness and oppression, it now signified resistance. Even many secular and modern women, who did not believe in wearing the veil, put it on in solidarity with religious women and in opposition to the shah.

Iranian women, veiled and unveiled, played an important role in the revolution and its victory. Though they did not participate in the revolution as women advancing their own cause, they hoped to benefit by supporting it. But their symbolic use of the veil came to haunt them as the postrevolutionary regime of the clerics set into motion the Islamization of Iran.

Women were the first targets. Shortly after the revolution, the clerics' regime entertained the idea of officially reveiling Iranian women. And veiling was good for business. Among the clerics' supporters were the aforementioned conservative bazaar merchants, who could recapture the huge market they had lost during the Reza Shah era and only partially regained during his son's reign.

On March 8, 1979, thousands of Iranian women—many of whom had veiled to express their dissent and support the revolution—marched in

the streets in the first of many protests against the veil. They were often violently attacked by Islamic zealots. Ironically, they were not supported by secular and leftist organizations that had, in principle, favored women's rights and social advancement. In the name of revolutionary unity, these organizations viewed women's protests as diversionary and chose not to support them. This was a sobering experience for secular and modern women. Without the support of men and secular political organizations, they could not succeed.

In July 1980, the Islamic regime began implementing "compulsory" veiling as part of the regime's agenda to institutionalize and exploit the female identity espoused by the authenticity movement. It promoted wearing the veil as "moral cleansing." Concealing female hair became the clerics' immediate political project. The regime capitalized on all mass media to justify veiling. It propagated the links between veiling, morality, and Islamic virtue. Women who did not comply with veiling or the new hijab were subjected to harassment, violence, and imprisonment.

The meaning and symbolism of hair again took the center stage. Female hair was publicized as seductive and alluring. According to a prevailing Islamic view, "it has been proven that the hair of a woman radiates a kind of ray that affects a man, exciting him out of the normal state." Even Abolhassan Banisadr, Iran's first elected postrevolution president, allegedly shared this view.¹² Concealing female hair says more about men's sexual anxiety than about the seductive power of women. In other words, "fear of the power of female sexual attraction over men" justifies any device that can protect men against female power.¹³

The regime orchestrated a major campaign to institutionalize veiling, using the same tactics that Reza Shah exploited to unveil women. The clerics used force as well as their legal authority over business to enforce reveiling. Shop, restaurant, and hotel owners were ordered not to serve unveiled women. Just as veiled women had once been barred from employment, unveiled women were now not allowed to work. With the Islamization of Iran, proponents of veiling and hijab would now be the ones to benefit. For them, the veil would be liberating, providing opportunities they did not enjoy under the shah. In veils or the manteau/rusary, the daughters of traditional religious families, who would otherwise not have been per-

mitted to study and work, filled the seats in universities and found employment in the public sector, even taking night shifts, once taboo for traditional Iranian families. The veil has increased the social presence of these women, paradoxically bringing them *out of* seclusion.

Meanwhile, women who found the veil oppressive were fired from their jobs and lost their livelihoods, becoming socially and politically marginalized. They faced a contradiction between their own identity and the emerging female identity constructed by the regime. Some resented the imposed veil/hijab to the degree that they moved to rural areas where veiling was more relaxed or simply left the country altogether. Most Iranian women living in the West cite imposed veiling as the main reason for their migration.

As much as the regime hoped to actually reveal Iranian women and impose head-to-toe chador, in practice most women have chosen to wear manteau and rusary. They believe in modesty and view manteau/rusary as compatible with Islam. But the regime's obsession is not so much with modesty as it is with female hair. The slightest showing of female hair, even for modestly dressed women, can lead to their punishment. Self-appointed Islamic vigilantes along with the "morality police," commonly referred to as Kommiteh, report violations of the modesty code to the authorities and the violators are fined or punished with penalties ranging from seventy-four lashes to two years' imprisonment. In the same way that Reza Shah sanctioned unveiling and revealing of women's hair by the use of force, the clerics' regime has used force to reveal and conceal women's hair.

Despite the regime's efforts, resistance to the veil and Islamic dress codes continues. Women raise constant questions about the merits of concealing female hair in any form, whether beneath the veil or a head scarf. Compulsory concealing of hair has led many women to create different styles of head coverings. Inspired by tribal and ethnic head coverings, women have fashioned new scarves and different ways of wearing them. Women's creativity in styling trendy-yet-acceptable Islamic attire is a manifestation of their desire for self-expression and their quest for a new identity and image.

During the 1997–2005 government of President Mohammad Khatami—

who came to power with the support of youth and women—pressure on women became less intense. They therefore felt freer to express themselves, to construct a new image and identity through fashion. The dark color, shape-concealing manteau was transformed into a shorter, colorful, shape-revealing garment. Gone were the long dark pants, replaced by three-quarter-length trousers that hint at shapely ankles. The big dark rusary was discarded in favor of small, brightly patterned, and transparent head scarves. Stray strands of highlighted hair peek from the fabric, illuminating the women's faces.

Iranian designers capture women's quest for self-expression with smartly constructed "Islamic" clothing, displayed at fashion shows (figure 17.2). Women express themselves and slyly defy the authorities with makeup. Indeed, sales of cosmetics, once associated with the "Western doll," are on the rise. Despite the regime's efforts to enforce modesty, Iran is the third largest consumer of cosmetic products in the Middle East.¹⁴

With female hair and body already covered, a higher emphasis is placed on the face. The use of makeup is complemented with plastic surgery. It is believed that Iran now has the highest rate of nose surgery in the world.¹⁵ Nose surgery costs at least one million tomans (\$1,200). Though highly expensive for middle-income Iranians, nose surgery has been highly popular. Even those who could not afford the surgery wear nose plasters as status symbols.

Nose surgery is an urban phenomenon of the upper and middle classes. They often say, "it is the fact that they have to wear head scarves: a big nose stands out and even more when you are not allowed to show your hair."¹⁶ In a country that does not allow social and political changes, Charlotte Wiedemann remarks, "people are willing to manipulate in an area where change is possible. It is easier to correct a nose than an entire system."¹⁷

With the 2005 recapture of political power by more conservative clerics and the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, pressure on women has again increased. The clerics and Ahmadinejad recently started a fresh campaign against "social corruption and social indecency" within the Islamic Republic of Iran; women have been its main focus, labeled as sym-



Figure 17.2. Iranian designers, “Islamic” clothing, displayed at fashion shows, 2005. Photo by Satyar Emami. Courtesy of the Iran Times International.

bols of public corruption and Western influence. Those women not fitting the regime’s ideal image are once again warned, fined, and punished. According to Tehran police chief Brigadier General Morteza Talaie, “30 percent of complaints to police involve cases of women not covering up properly.”¹⁸ These women are called *bad hijab*, or improperly veiled, and shopkeepers are ordered not to serve them. Shops selling Western fashion and serving improperly veiled women are occasionally closed.

During the past twenty-eight years, the regime has been trying hard to confine the image of Iranian women to the one congruent with its ideology. Recently, the Iranian parliament has been discussing the idea of fashioning a new style of Islamic attire. Should the uniform be approved, it will be enforced at schools, universities, and government offices.

The regime has a vested interest in enforcing the black veil (figure 17.3). It supports the conservative merchants of the bazaar, who have enjoyed annual sales of \$30 million in chador fabric imported from Korea and Japan.



Figure 17.3. Women and a little girl in various states of covering peruse materials that encourage veiling, outside a mosque in Shiraz, Iran, 2004. Photo by Sheryl Shapiro.

In the past few years the sale of black veils has reached \$40 million.¹⁹ With such financial gains, these merchants will continue to support the regime and push for keeping the veil mandatory.

Iranian women's concerns are not about whether to veil, but about their right to choose veiling. From 1936 to 1941, this right was violated for women who wished to be veiled and inversely, the rights of women who wish to be unveiled have been violated since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. This violation, indeed, dates back to imposition of the veil following the Islamic conquest of Iran. Women's resistance to unveiling and reveiling has been resistance to assigned identity, assigned image, assigned symbolism, and assigned gender roles. Compulsory unveiling and reveiling and revealing and concealing of female hair have deprived Iranian women of choice about their identity, self-presentation, and place in society. Violations have only intensified women's determination to challenge these regimes. Women's quests for self-determination and human rights will continue to play out in the Iranian political scene.

NOTES

1. The first epigraph comes from Mina Nikzad's interview with the author in Tehran, Iran, 2005; the second, from "Islamic Government Tight Control on Women's Dress," *Iran Focus*, August 25, 2004, www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/articles.php?storyid=92.
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