

Iranian Woman: Veil and Identity

زن ایرانی: حجاب و هویت

07 September 2010 [Farah Shilandari](#)



When talking about Iranian female identity, veiling is one of the most controversial issues. Some scholars believe that Islamic culture, particularly the imposed veil, deconstructs women's self-identity, and reconstructs an identity of obedience for them. Therefore, it is relevant to look briefly into a short history of the process of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling of Iranian women, and to investigate how a religious culture can be employed by the rulers to impose their policies on people.

A Brief History of the Veil in Iran

Islam, as other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, has a long history in Iran. Iran is a multi-religious and multi-cultural country. However, the majority of Iranian people are Muslims, and the majority of the Muslim people are Shiite in Iran. There are two main sects in Islam, which are Shia and Sunni. These two sects have some differences but both believe in the veil in principle. However, the significance of the veil had not been imposed throughout history in Iran by the clerical class before the 1979 revolution. Simon Hay, in *Why Read Reading Lolita* (2007), argues that "in the early sixteenth century, dominant interpretations of the Koran did not legislate veiling, which was practiced mostly only by the wealthy" in Iran. However, it is in the late seventeenth century that there was a change in "the form of Islam embraced by the dominant classes change" (Hay 2007) and correspondingly the veiling of women became prevalent. As Minoo Moallem asserts, "during the second decade and a half of the twentieth century, called the post-constitutional period (1911–25), the modernizing and Westernizing nation-state was established by Reza Shah Pahlavi, replacing the Qajar dynasty. In 1925, Reza Shah became shah, ruling until 1941, when his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, replaced him" (Moallem 2005). It is in the early twentieth century that Reza Shah initiated his westernizing reforms. According to Vanessa Martin, Reza Shah's "dream of a secular state, and like his contemporary Ataturk, he perceived religion as retrogressive and the 'ulama [clergymen] as backward-looking obstacles to progress" (Martin 2000). Reza Shah imposed European dress on the population, opened the schools to women and permitted them to enter the work places. Indeed, some of his measures were consciously planned to end the power of the sacred and religious hierarchy of the clergymen in Iran.

In 1936, Reza Shah abolished the wearing of the veil; and consequently, as Hay asserts, "under Reza Shah, class attitudes to the veil reversed, with the upper class embracing Western reforms including Western dress, while the working poor saw the veil as a sign of propriety" (Hay 2007). A large part of women choose to stay at home rather than confront police who pulled the veils from their heads.

Reza Shah, who at first enjoyed a broad support of people for unifying the country, re-establishing order, and strengthening national independence, and other economic and educational reforms, was criticized by the clerical class for abolishing the wearing of the veil. According to Hay:

Reza Shah's unpopularity is strongest among the working class and the religious right, and with his abdication, most urban women begin wearing chadors again, though without face veils. Eventually, the leaders of the religious right insist on a more patriarchal repressive version of Islamic law, and after the 1979 revolution, whatever its initial progressive ideals, the combination of the dominance of such patriarchal versions of Islam with strong anti-Western sentiment [mean] that veiling [becomes] once again mandatory. (Hay 2007)

Indeed, the meaning and significance of the veil have been interpreted according to the social and political conditions in Iran across the history by the ruling systems in Iran. Veiling and unveiling have been used instrumentally by the governing elite to consolidate the foundations of its power. In the Pahlavi era, political and cultural tendencies to the West can be seen, which led to unveiling. After the 1979 revolution, on the contrary, the Islamic government's political and cultural tendencies were against the West, particularly the U.S., and veiling became compulsory.

Between 1979 and 1980, some women's spontaneous demonstrations against the mandatory veil occurred. Unfortunately, the non-Islamist and leftist organizations agreed with the Islamic State's policies regarding the veil, and they argued that focusing on women's rights was a kind of individualistic and bourgeois and played into the Islamists' hands. Therefore, women were left alone in their battles against women's rights' violation; and veiling became mandatory in the Islamic state.

If the act of unveiling in pre-revolution era has a liberating potential, the act of veiling lacked this potential after the revolution. In post-revolutionary Iran, there was no choice for women regarding the veil. The significance of the veil is manipulated. It turned into a means of power for the Islamic State to show its victory, and a sign of subordination for Iranian women. Hay argues that the veil contains within itself no truth, but rather is a means by which other struggles are rewarded and takes its meaning in any given context from those struggles (Hay 2007).

Azar Nafisi puts it as the 'politics of the veil', referring to the women who wear it as 'political signs and symbols'. She argues further "in many important ways the veil had gained a symbolic significance for the regime. Its re-imposition would signify the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the revolution" (Nafisi 2003) as the unveiling of Iranian women by Reza Shah was "a powerful sign of the reduction of the clergy's power" (Nafisi 2003). Consequently, the veiling and unveiling of Iranian women are both political symbols of power for those Iranian governments which imposed them mandatorily on women before and after the Islamic revolution. The Ayatollah Khomeini and Reza Shah both used veiling/unveiling 'instrumentally'. The veil, in Iran, is an instrument to show that the government has gained power to impose its own dream on women. Since there remains no choice for women in such a political context, the veiling limits their freedom of choice and affects their identity. Therefore, it is noteworthy to investigate the relation between the veil and women's identity.

Veil and Identity

There seems to be a relation between the imposed veil and women's identity deconstruction in Iran. The Islamic state attempts to reconstruct a new identity for women according to Islamic definition of righteous women. Imposing the veil on women is a means to create uniformity. The aim of this uniformity is to destroy the individuality of women, making them eviscerated, thereby having no sense of individual identity, and consequently having no subjectivity. Iranian women have been an object in the plans of Islamists who intended to deconstruct women's subjectivity and construct them according to their own fantasies and ideals for women in post-revolutionary Iran. The Islamic definition for righteous Muslim women defines them as obedient wives and mothers and expects them to act accordingly. There are numerous Islamic and Quranic quotations which define righteous women, and the one that is usually cited by Muslim men to prove their entitlement to be superior to women is the following: "good women are obedient. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them" (IV: 34). Islam considers 'obedience' as the most favourable quality for Muslim women. Consequently, it is legislated for men to exercise physical violence against women; even the prelude of the post-revolutionary Constitution resorts to the same Quranic verse to draw women to their homes.

The preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran asserts that "women are the most important beneficiaries of the revolution, which has enabled them to return to their 'true non-exploitative, non-imperialist identity and human rights' and regain their rights and entitlements, which are a return to the family". The Constitution implies that motherhood is the most important function of Muslim women, and therefore places them inside the home. Religious leaders declare that motherhood is not just a function for women but it is their 'sacred and holy duty'. According to the government-sponsored women's organization, Jamiyateh Zananeh Jomhorieh Eslami, "as the Imam has repeatedly said, good men are raised in the laps of good women. If we follow this example then we will find our true station in life and recognize that motherhood is a sacred and holy duty for women" (Afshar 1999). This is not an opinion which is shared by the Iranian women who have fought for their equal rights for more than a century. As Linda Alcoff argues, such essentialism "is in danger of solidifying an important bulwark for sexist oppression: the belief in innate 'womanhood' to which we must all adhere lest we be deemed either inferior or not 'true' women" (Barker 2008). Such organizations like Jamiyateh Zananeh Jomhorieh Eslami mix two significant concepts in their discussions, which are 'equality' and 'difference'. Although there are significant physical differences between a man and a woman, both are equal in human rights. It is possible for both concepts to co-exist. As Joan Scott puts it, "equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not prelude equality" (Barker 2008).

Imposed veil covers women's true self, forming a kind of uniformity through which the individual differences disappear. Then, there is a direct relation between veiling and women's identity in a patriarchal society in which opportunities for autonomy are increasingly limited. Mandatory veiling causes Muslim women occupy a subordinate status. Disobedient women, according to Islamic logic, are subject to various forms of oppression. In accordance with the underlying theory of the veil, women should be invisible in order to mitigate their danger to Muslim society as they are assumed to be the sources of temptation. Afsaneh Najmabadi in *Women with Moustaches and Men Without Beards* (2005) quotes Fatima Mernissi that Islamic doctrine has been based on the supposition of an active female sexuality. She asserts that if active female sexuality "is not contained and controlled, this powerful force would cause

social chaos (fitna) and threaten men's civic and religious lives. The veil and the closely related institutions of gender segregation are the mechanisms through which Muslim societies contain and control female sexuality." The veil seems to signify the Muslim societies' timeless obsession with controlling heterosexuality. The veil has been transformed into an instrument to control society. The compulsive characteristic of the veil bears a negative significance and causes women's disobedience. Through the veil, Iranian women's femininity is ignored, denied, and condemned by the dominant Islamic culture in order to decrease the women's independence and autonomy during the three decades after the revolution. There are limited social opportunities for women in such political and cultural context to construct an identity, which reflects their own choice.

Iranian women have used these limited opportunities to the best; and according to Haleh Afshar, in *Islam and Feminisms: an Iranian Case-Study* "over the decades the campaigning Islamist and secular women have gradually made it unacceptable for any government in Iran to exclude them from the public arena" (Afshar 1999). Many women human rights defenders have been arrested by the government, imprisoned, and sacked from their careers throughout the post-revolutionary period. Many Iranian women and young girls have been subjected to sexual violence, torture, and insult; and some of them have been executed and stoned to death. There are evidences and documents which prove that some young girls have been arrested for social crimes, such as inappropriate dress, and have been raped in the Islamic Republic prisons.

These violations against women's rights are legislated by the Islamic government. According to the note to Article 139 of the Islamic Criminal Code, "women who appear in the public thoroughfare without the Islamic covering will be subject to 10 days to two months' imprisonment." Therefore, in the first years of the revolution, a 'morality squad' was established which patrolled on the streets to prevent women from even putting some strands of their hair out of their scarves, or wearing tight clothing which displayed their bodies' curves and shape. It is about three decades that the streets have been turned into a war zone, where young women who disobey the rules are hurled into patrol cars, taken to jail, flogged, and fined; and all this violence is done under the name of supporting the Muslim society.

Clearly, since 1979 in Iran, there has been a "drastic reduction in women's personal, political, cultural, legal, and social rights" (Hay 2007). Islamic law has re-established polygamy, lowered the legal age of puberty for women to seven, reduced women's ability to inherit or possess their own property or to divorce or gain custody of their children, and enforced the wearing of the Islamic hejab. Through veiling, the Islamists deconstruct Iranian women's identity, ignore their will, disrespect their individual freedom and shape women according to their own plan. The ruling Islamic ideology and its ideals deconstruct the existing culture in Iran, and construct a new order through religious laws. Islamists try to affect women's identity, particularly, through mandatory veil, which means uniformity of women, and eviscerate them from their individual differences.

It is obvious that the veil has become one of the non-negotiable essentials governing women's lives in the post-revolutionary Iran. However, a lot of Iranian women try to show their disobedience through putting some strands of their hair out of their scarves; and the "morality guard" is evidence to this claim. Such gestures of disobedience allow Iranian women to develop their identities specifically for the reason that they are forbidden; and enables them to construct their identities against the torturous rituals governing what they are forced to wear, how they are expected to act, the gestures they have to control, the daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions.