

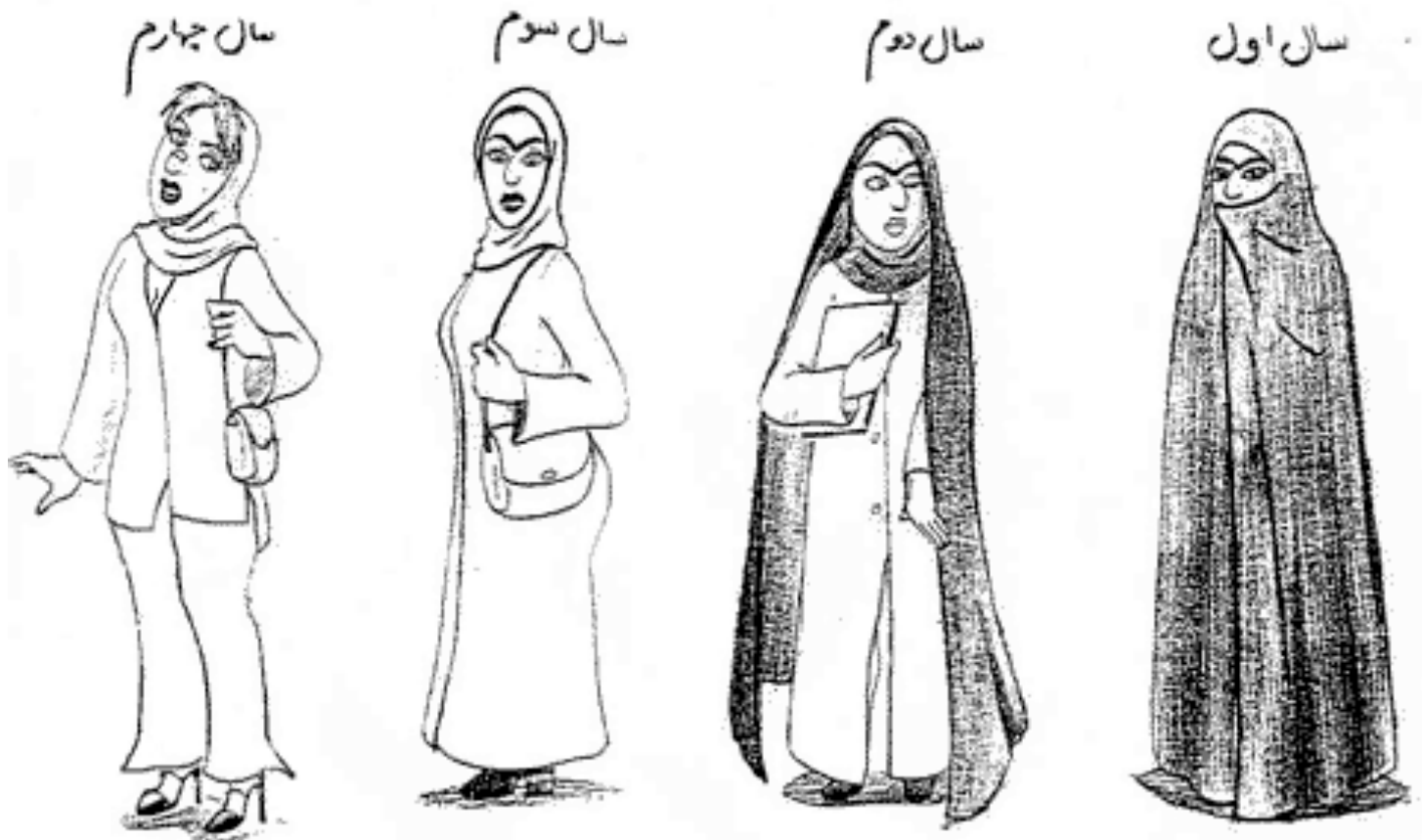
# Covering the Aesthetics of Resistance:

the fashioning of *bad-hejab* stereotypes in online media

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*On a wintery day in the beginning of 2009, I walk with my grandmother from her apartment in northern Tehran to Tajrish Bazaar to pick up fruit for the guests coming over that afternoon. There is still snow on the ground as we approach the busy intersection to the market. Without hesitation, my grandmother walks into oncoming traffic, somehow managing to reach the other side while I, lacking the fearlessness of a native Tehrani, miss my opportunity. Waiting for an unlikely pause in traffic, I suddenly feel an arm on mine and look to see a woman in a black chador pointing down at my knee-high boots. It takes me a second to recognize the khaki green maghnae<sup>1</sup> poking out from under her chador. Mumbling something about my short overcoat and tight pants, she asks me to come with her. Why me, I think, looking to my left where two girls had just been - dressed much 'worse' than me with tighter manteaus, Barbie-doll makeup and visible hair. But by now they were already halfway across the street...if only I had tried to cross faster. I'm stuck: it's best not to give away I speak Persian, hoping she'll let me go once she realizes I'm American, but how else can I get my grandmother's attention from across the street? 'Come with me,' gently tugging on my arm, 'let's go talk over there.' Suddenly my grandmother appears, grabbing me back with a yank. She gives the policewoman a look that is at once offended and condescending, speaking to her as if this whole incident is a waste of her time. 'Why are you bothering my girl in this weather? Don't you have better things to do? What do you want from us anyways - money!?' She pulls me with her across the street and the policewoman falls silent, looking like she didn't know what had hit her.*



Fig 1: Photograph for Fars News Agency by Ebrahim Noroozi

As that morning's story was recounted by my mother and grandmother, with added drama and hyperbole each time, friends and relatives reacted with sympathy, frustration, dismay and often humor – but never surprise. Sometimes, with mixed fear and relief, I was reminded how lucky I was to have my grandmother come to my rescue and told recent horror stories that had heard been firsthand or on the news. Others gave me tactical strategies and tips for how to avoid getting in trouble with the 'komite,' often described in English as Iran's Islamic morality police. I learned after the incident that *komite* members had been briefed this winter to look out for pants that were tucked into boots, since this requires pants that the Islamic Republic considers indecently tight. One of my cousins rolled her eyes at the irony of this suggestion: 'the whole

point of boots is to keep your pants from getting wet or dirty!’ Sharing the experience gave way to moments of laughter at the absurdity of these rules, not to mention my grandmother’s willful ability to deflect such situations, and provided me a way to relate firsthand to friends and relatives living in Iran.

Though there is nothing particularly noteworthy in this incident for Iranians, many of whom witness such occurrences on a daily basis, it has even become a familiar story for non-Iranian audiences. And yet, authors continue to use ‘humiliating or traumatic incidents in which they or their loved ones suffered at the hands of the state’ to serve as openings or attention grabbers in fiction and non-fiction pieces that focus on urban youth culture in Iran (Olszewska 2013). Both scholarly publications and popular media are littered with stories of the *komite* reprimanding young Iranians for their appearance, flirting with members of the opposite sex, or attending parties. The stories may end tragically in arrest, harsh punishment and even death (e.g. Khosravi 2008) or they can recount close encounters narrowly avoided, like my own (e.g. Mahdavi 2009). Often, these accounts set out to show the reader an unexpected side of what has come to be seen as a misunderstood or inaccessible country – as in my own story where my grandmother emerges as a willful woman who successfully deflects the policewoman’s attempted arrest and indeed appears stronger than this symbol of the state.

Dominant discourses on Iran have long privileged the voices of people like myself – Iranians, often living in the diaspora, who are critical of the Islamic Republic and come from largely well-to-do, secular and urban backgrounds – which helps to explain how certain predictable conventions have formed in writing or sharing narratives about Iran. There were a number of personal experiences I could have chosen, in similarly sardonic spirit, to introduce this paper that would fit with what have become the expected ways of representing Iranian women’s lives over the past fifteen years: as an Iranian-American, I could have begun by dramatizing one of the many ignorant or offensive reactions I encountered growing up or I also could have hooked readers with the story of being asked to ‘de-Islamify’ myself by removing my *hijab* before attending an underground brunch in Tehran where stylish men and women meet every weekend for pancakes and lattes. In any case, such narratives about and by Iranians cannot help sounding like tired clichés even when they are real, lived experiences. While the intention is proving to readers that *Iran is not what you think it is*, they have helped produce new stereotypes

in the process. It no longer feels acceptable to share the experiences of a select few as representations of an entire nation or diaspora. And it no longer seems enough to write just for the sake of claiming to show the real country ‘behind the veil,’ to use yet another cliché in writing about Iran or Iranians.



Fig 2: Illustration by Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour

In this paper, I tease out and problematize some of these conventions, particularly those of recent English-language media coverage on Iranian fashion trends. Memoir-style narratives that grew popular during the 2000s presented the lifestyle choices and everyday actions of urban Iranian youth as forms of anti-government resistance through their disregard for state-prescribed rules of appropriate conduct.<sup>2</sup> These works set the precedent for representations of youth resistance that continue to resurface in international mainstream media periodically, often coinciding with significant current events in the Islamic Republic that are seen as having some bearing on the international community. By circulating images of Iranians that do not meet the government standards of appropriate Islamic attire, popular online sources suggest that Iranian women have found a way of achieving personal expression through fashion in spite of Iran’s severe restrictions on freedom of speech; their sartorial choices are interpreted as politically subversive and symbolic of anti-government sentiment.

Given how regularly I have encountered common misconceptions about Iran – in questions that range from ‘*You’re forced to wear a burqa there, right?*’ to ‘*do trees exist in*

*Iran?* – the new trend using written and visual media to show ‘another side of Iran’ should in theory be one I welcome. For all intents and purposes, I myself was a walking version of these articles long before they became so widespread, miming the small headscarves or tight clothing one might see in Tehran to my surprised American friends. Instead, I find myself feeling conflicted about these blog posts, photo essays and articles. Does sensationalizing the everyday resist ethnocentric or reductive understandings of Iran any more than classic ‘stereotypical’ images do? Why should it come as such a shock that many young Iranians – like many young non-Iranians – take selfies or break the law? Is its shock value underpinned by our own fear that ‘they’ may be more similar to ‘us’ than we would like? Discussing the photography used in articles about Iran intended for Western audiences, another Los Angeles-raised Iranian describes his personal reaction in similar terms: ‘given the horrific, sensational, and patently untrue myths the Western media systematically perpetuates about Iran and Iranians, a small part of me wells with joy at the opportunity to show Americans that in fact Iranians might be human as well...This joy, however, is always tempered by the utter annoyance and disgust I feel at the ridiculousness of needing to prove our humanity to anyone’ (Shams 2013). For me, the need to explain that Iranian women achieve personal expression through various means – least of all through fashion – despite restrictions imposed by the government feels equally ridiculous.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first introduces examples of the media coverage on contemporary Iranian fashion that constitute the subject of my investigation; it contextualizes the publication of these articles within historically specific circumstances and suggests potential socio-political reasons for why analyzing these fashion trends through the lens of ‘resistance’ has become so popular. The remaining sections consider the difficulty of defining resistance through context alone or the near-impossible task of knowing actors’ intentions. Part II looks at how mass media, despite claims otherwise, continues to use the visual appearance of women and their bodies to define resistance and diagnose the social progress of an entire people. Exposing the major limitations of defining resistance in this way, the final section demonstrates why representations of Iran should include people from more diverse backgrounds and keep in mind factors like class and status when considering Iranian consumerism and personal expression. I conclude by briefly imagining ways of moving forward, in which media coverage of Iran refrains from seeing either feminine bodies or clothing in purely symbolic ways.







## PART I. *The Inescapable Politics of Representing Iran*

Following the revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini and other members of the Islamic Republic instated laws meant to counteract what was seen as the loss of Iranian and Islamic identity during the Shah's regime. Board games and card-playing were banned, western-style toilets were dismantled and just days before International Women's Day in 1979, 'hejab'<sup>3</sup> was made mandatory. In the following years, especially given the strained diplomatic relations and the closing of Iranian borders to foreign tourists, one of the most common images of Iran to reach the West was seas of women, barely recognizable as such under their shapeless black *chadors*. As these images became widely circulated abroad, so did tales of the crude and harsh punishments (before President Khatami's reforms in the 1990s) for violating the dress code, such as dipping hands or feet into buckets of cockroaches for wearing nail polish (Mirhosseini 1995). The *chador* – a full-body-length piece of fabric that is held closed in the front, leaving the face exposed – became a visual representation of the country as a whole: 'to Western visitors, it dropped a pin on their travel maps, where the bodies of Iranian women became a stand-in for the character of Iranian society...we had become Iran's Eiffel Tower or Big Ben' (Anvari 2014).

But by the dawn of 2014, a flurry of photographs showing stylish Tehrani women wearing colorful clothes and designer labels in public took the internet by storm. The circulation of images taken from *The Tehran Times*, self-proclaimed as the 'first street style blog of Iran,' snowballed through user-generated content sites, social media and online news sources.<sup>4</sup> *The Tehran Times*

has approximately 44K followers on Instagram and close to 25,000 likes on Facebook<sup>5</sup> two years after it was started. Its founder is a young Iranian designer who lives in Paris but runs the blog with a team based in Iran and through content contributed directly by fans. Stylistically

similar to popular fashion blogs like *The Sartorialist*, the site



Fig 4. New York Times illustration by Tom Jay

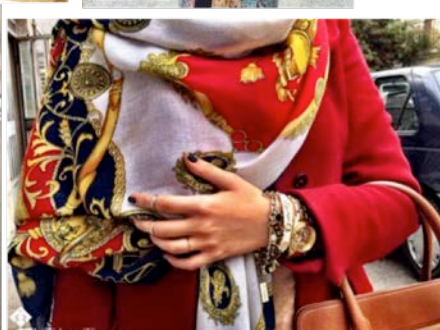


Fig 5. Examples of images from 'The Tehran Times' Tumblr blog.

regularly updates posts of attractive young women, and occasionally men, showing off their outfits to the camera. A typical *Tehran Times* girl clutches her bag with long manicured nails, purses her bright lips and struts the affluent neighborhoods of the nation's capital in strappy stilettos or hip creepers; she wears a *rusari* (headscarf) and some version of a *manteau* (overcoat), although the *rusari* will often be pushed back to reveal the hair and a *manteau* worn open to reveal the outfit underneath.

Publications claiming there is a 'revolution' via fashion underway in Iran are well aware of how pervasive the image of the Iranian *chador* has become internationally. Anticipating shock on behalf of their presumably Western audience, these articles often contrast images of angry or militant-looking *chadori* women with images of young fashionable women to validate their own journalistic integrity and authenticity. An online post from the popular entertainment and social news website BuzzFeed (2013) starts by showing a photojournalistic image in black-and-white from a historic protest, captioned as 'the stereotypical image of women in Iran,' and ends with a colorful image from a seasonal catalogue of what it claims is one of Iran's most popular clothing brands. The irony of this post – and the many articles that use promotional imagery and advertisements to bolster their arguments – is that what is presumably shared as a more 'real' image of Iranian women is actually one of hired models in a staged photo shoot.

This is the stereotypical image of women in Iran



commons.wikimedia.org / Via Wikimedia Commons

One of Iran's most popular brands is Poosh Fashion, designed by Farnaz Abdoli



Facebook: POOSHdesign / Via POOSH Design

Fig 6. Images used in 2013 BuzzFeed post 'How Iran's Young Women Are Using Fashion To Influence Politics'



Though acknowledging how representations of Iranian women have changed over time, these articles are themselves not free from the influence of the historic and political context in which they are written. This sudden ‘discovery’ of Iranian street style by international mainstream media began less than one month after President Hassan Rouhani, known as the moderate or reformist candidate, assumed office in August 2013. A widely cited article published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) attributes President Hassan Rouhani’s success in the 2013 election to his more lenient attitude towards the national dress code, which he adapted in response to ‘Iran’s expressive young women, for whom dress has become a symbolic way to speak their mind’ (Noori 2013). The suggestion here is that Iranian women not only use fashion as a language to express their personal political views but also as a tool with which to effect change, communicating their anti-government sentiments to their peers or directly to the Islamic Republic itself.

Given the optimism with which American and European governments greeted Rouhani’s victory and the positive consequences they expect it will have on diplomatic relations – especially in wake of the nuclear deal talks that started since his presidency – it is difficult not to see the sudden availability of positive images of Iranian youth as part of a concerted effort to make a people so long dehumanized finally relatable to the Western public. In fact, fashion is not the only aspect of Iranian youth culture recently touted as common ground over which youth in Los Angeles or London may identify with those in Tehran. Just as Rouhani began his presidential term, a number of high-profile blogs ran series that documented Iranians engaged in activities and exhibiting interests that would resonate with youth abroad. In posts named ‘Youth in Iran: Inside and Out’ or ‘Another View on Iran,’<sup>6</sup>

These new styles are even becoming issues in Iran's elections – and these young women have found an ally in Iran's new president



Fig 7. Many articles discussing current Iranian fashion applaud Rouhani's use of twitter to communicate his more lenient attitude towards the dress code. In a tweet congratulating a female mathematician and recipient of the Fields Medal, he posted a photo of her in hijab alongside one without.

abridged versions of a longer photo project originally titled ‘An Iranian Journey’ by Hossein Fatemi<sup>7</sup> went viral in February 2014. Though Fatemi also photographed prostitutes, mullahs, and a criminal being hanged from a crane for this series, online media like the New York Times Lens blog have focused on more mundane scenes of women in beauty salons or indoor gyms. A widely circulated CNN World Photo blog series entitled ‘The double lives of Iranian youth’ shows Iranians practicing with their garage bands and practicing yoga.



*Figs 8 and 9. Photographs by Hossein Fatemi [left] and Kaveh Rostamkhani [right] of an all-female gym and underground band Garage48.*

These examples reveal ways in which international political agendas may motivate trends in how visual media from Iran is utilized by non-Iranian publications. One of the most misleading implications of the media is that fashions which disregard the dress code constitute a recent phenomenon or that the government has relaxed its enforcement of the dress code since the recent election. These claims are in stark contrast with my own experience during my last visit to Iran just six months after Rouhani’s term began, when many of the Iranians I spoke to said there was no difference in either people’s activities nor police responses to them. If there was any more leniency than usual, they claimed, it was because I had visited in winter when there is always less public harassment by the *komite*, in part because cold weather is more conducive to dress-code-appropriate attire. Although Iranians have engaged in behavior that the state would deem immoral or un-Islamic since the Islamic Republic was first established,<sup>8</sup> this reality is remarketed and phenomenalized by popular Western media as new ‘trends’<sup>9</sup> taking hold of Iran as part of a wider social movement.



Figure 10. Painting by F. Scott Hess entitled 'Checkpoint' (1993).

Nor are these popular Western media accounts the first to show 'another view on Iran' or the 'double lives' of Iranian youth. Following the 1979 revolution, everyday life in the newly established Islamic Republic remained relatively inaccessible to outsiders throughout the 1980s, due to the prolonged Iran-Iraq war, strained diplomatic relations and highly restricted tourism. Several anthropologists and academic researchers, many of whom gained special access on state and cultural levels due to their status as Iranians who themselves or whose families had moved during the revolution, began producing ethnographies with a focus on Iranian youth culture in the late 1990s and 2000s.<sup>10</sup> In analyzing their data, many of these researchers understood Iranian street style as subversive political messages masked in fashionable clothing and make-up, as do the popular media accounts that form the focus of this paper. In *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, anthropologist Shahram Khosravi argues that because the Islamic Republic seeks to control every aspect of its citizens' lives, down to each minute detail – 'what they eat and drink, how they dress, whom they sleep with, whom they look at' – decisions made in everyday life, no matter how trivial, take on political significance; 'An Iranian,' he claims, 'takes a political position in his/her everyday practices, from patterns of dressing to hairdos' (2011: 149).



I will continue to refer to these ethnographic works whose research and arguments helped set a precedent and provide intellectual support for the grand claims of articles and online posts suggesting that fashion in Iran is laden with more symbolic meaning than it is otherwise: ‘for Iranian women, the simple act of wearing vibrant colors confidently is subversive’ (BuzzFeed 2013). Memoirs and ethnographies from the 2000s, though decidedly more nuanced and multi-faceted than popular online articles, were met with considerable contention by some Iranian scholars who suggested their publication catered to or was made possible by certain socio-political sensibilities specific to the post-9/11 era. Despite their popularity in university syllabi and even for mainstream consumption, these ethnographic accounts have been criticized for oversimplifying their representations of Iran as a unified people opposing a tyrannical state, as if ‘there is a single fault line of struggle in society’ (Olzewska 2013: 844). Given the tense political context, and rampant Islamophobia, in which the ethnographies of Varzi (2006), Khosravi (2008) and Mahdavi (2009) were published, some scholars (e.g. Mottahedeh 2004, Keshavarz 2007, Dabashi 2006) were concerned that the overemphasis on urban, secular youth dissatisfied with their government would help bolster arguments for American military intervention in Iran.<sup>11</sup>

As demonstrated, no representation of Iranian women is free from the politicized history of their representation (see Hoodfar 1993) or the political climate of the moment. A basic awareness of the debates that have unfolded around the issue of Iran’s problematic representation can help non-Iranian audiences read between the lines of the oversimplified writing style belonging to online media that is meant to be both exciting and easily digestible. We must continue to refute characterizations of Iranian women as having no means of personal expression, but also remain suspicious of *any* overly neat representations. As we witness a shift from showing women in *chador* to *bad-hejab*, ‘we should be careful that, in an effort to repossess our image from the grasp of a strict ideology, we don’t slip into a mindless production of new stereotypes’ (Anvari 2014). In the next section I will outline how mass media overemphasizes and romanticizes ‘resistance’ by commodifying it for Western audiences and thereby reinforces the habit of viewing Iran – and Iranian women – solely in terms of stereotypes, visual appearances, and external context.

## PART II. Reinforcing narrow ways of viewing Iran and imagining resistance

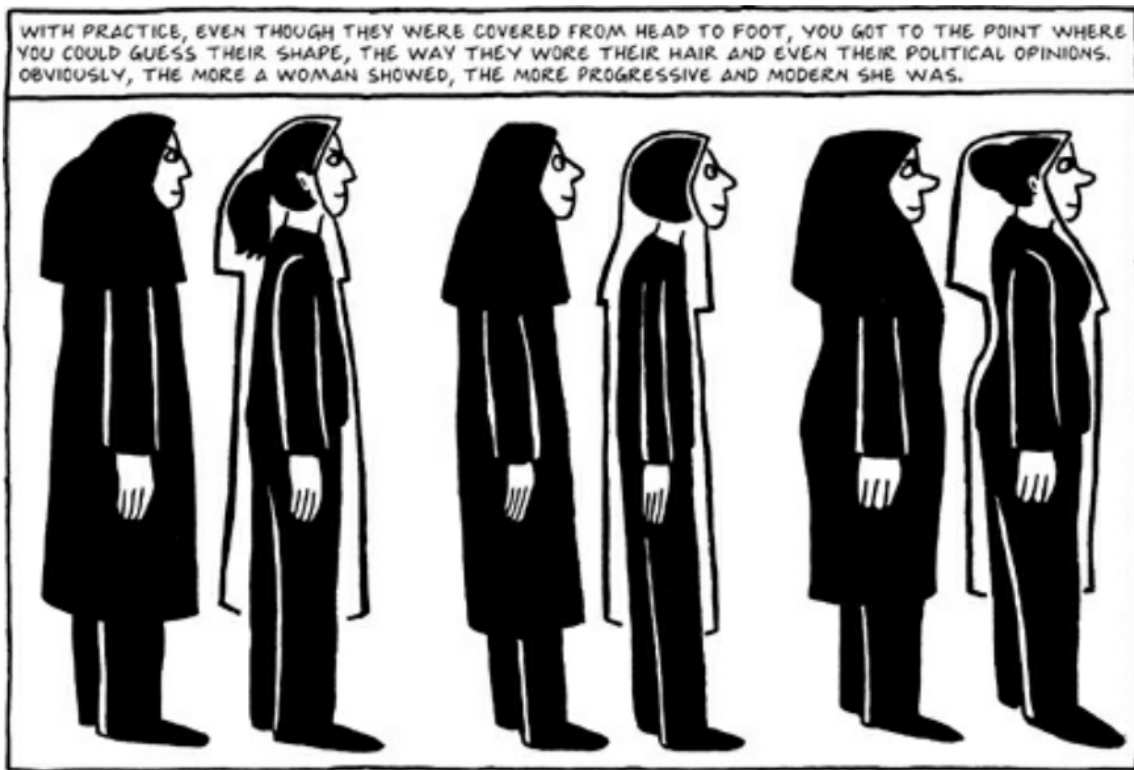


Fig 10. From Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000).

Couched in liberal discourse that argues appearances are deceiving, recent media reports on Iranian youth gain viewership by claiming to rise above the simplistic media representations that have persisted so long; in reality, they continue to rely on external appearances to understand the entire country or culture of Iran and measure its social progress. The previous section warned us to proceed with caution towards representations that show Iranian women in a seemingly more positive light, and to question what agendas or interests they might serve. I now look at *how* images are manipulated and constructed by Western media to suggest that free personal expression only counts as such when it comes in a form that is palatable for its audience: resistance against the Islamic Republic.

Quotations from actual Iranians are conspicuously absent for articles claiming to be about a newfound freedom of expression in the country. Media coverage of Iranian street style rarely describes the actual trends or designs in detail, mentioning only the 'vibrancy' of the colors used.

The few verbal contributions by the founder of *The Tehran Times* or fashion designers are responses to questions about the context in which their work is produced, rather than discussions of the content or artistic vision behind the work itself.<sup>12</sup> With life under the Islamic Republic so sensationalized in Western imagination, it is often enough for the news to report that ‘Iranian youth are saying something,’ rather than listening to what that something is. Disregard for the content allows attention to be focused on appearance instead, such that, ‘the individuality, creativity, and personal agency of women in Iran – and Muslim women in general – have all been subordinated, if not completely dismissed or disregarded, to the Western obsession with the Islamic veil’ (Shirazi 2014). Feeding the fixation on resistance to the veil allows media a visual way of showing their audience that Iranian women are capable of expressing themselves, without the added challenge of addressing the complexity in what they may be expressing.<sup>13</sup>

The prominence of resistance as a theme in publications on the Iranian public, and youth in particular, can be demonstrated most simply through titles of books, like Mahdavi’s ‘*Passionate Uprisings*’ or Khosravi’s ‘*Young and Defiant in Tehran*,’ and popular articles like ‘*Iran Moves Forward: The Silent Revolution for Iranian Women*’ (Mende 2013) or ‘*Women of Iran defy mullahs by embracing western fashions*’ (Daftari 2014). By pairing this language of resistance with a particular set of images, mass media has helped form an overall image of resistance as a young woman, hair visible from under a loose headscarf, who meets traditional standards of beauty in North America and Europe. By envisaging resistance in this way, such media imply that the political, and sometimes religious, views of Iranian women are immediately

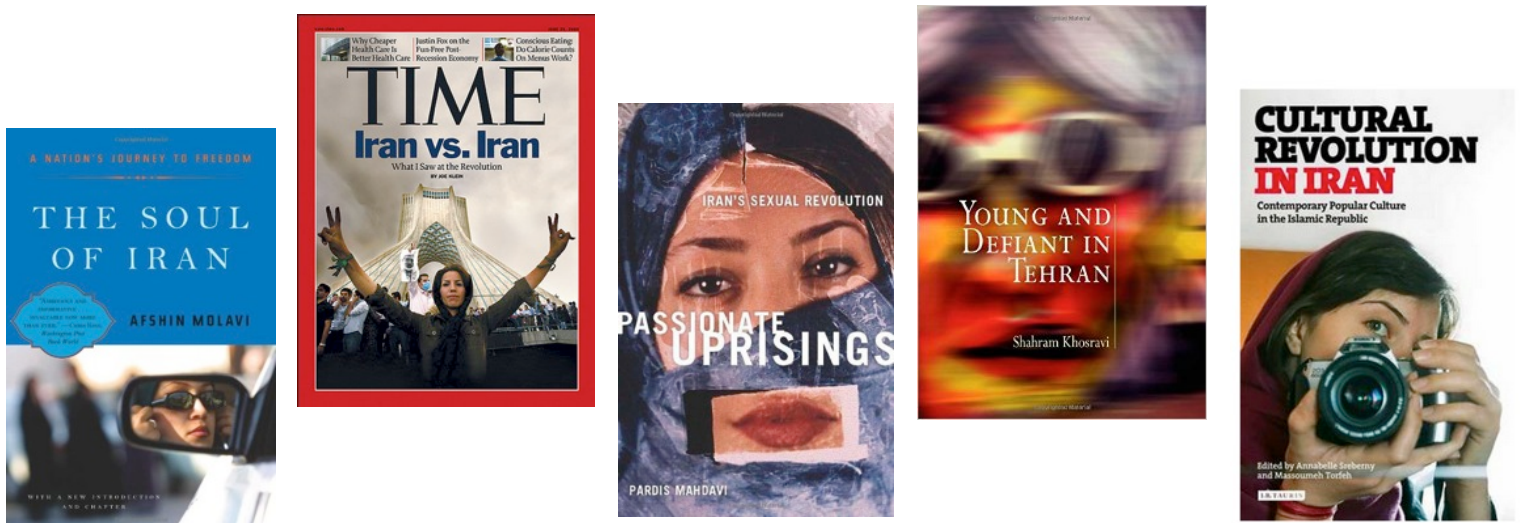


Fig 11. Examples of publications that pair language of resistance with images of young, attractive Iranian women, none of whom strictly observe the dress code.



discernible from outward appearance alone.

In the imagination of popular media, trendy women of Iran's 'fashionable revolution' (Curci 2013) physically embody ideals like secularism, modernity, and progress that are seen as antithetical to the Islamic Republic. The greatest irony is that these accounts, in their treatment of female Iranian bodies as such, share an underlying logic with the very regimes of Iran's past and present that the Western world sees as antithetical to its own liberal principles. Returning to the history of Iran, actions taken by both pre-<sup>14</sup> and post-revolution governments used women's external appearances as registers with which to measure the state of morality or modernity in the country as a whole. Both the forced unveiling of the Shah's modernist project and forced veiling of Khomeini's theocratic project manipulated the physical bodies of women to engender and reflect their own ideal version of the nation (Hoodfar 1993). Western media, while decrying Iran's human rights abuses against women, similarly manipulates images of women's bodies to stand for the social, moral or political character of the current generation or even country as a whole. Problematizing narratives that 'locat[e] either freedom or oppression on [women's] bodies alone,' two journalists from the Ajam Media Collective have already made this connection: 'Whether it is the Guidance Patrol imposing state standards of morality on women's clothing or roving photojournalists searching for resistance in those very modes of covering, women's bodily surfaces are utilized as a site for measuring morality, and thus in need of either state intervention or commentary in mass media' (Houshyar and Sarmadi 2014).

The Islamic Republic's strict morality code provides a context that makes the media's readiness to impute political intent based on appearance, i.e. *bad-hejab*, appear more logical than it would otherwise. And because defying the dress code is visually conspicuous, resistance becomes imagined to be the only way of exercising one's freedom of expression that is authentic or worthy of consideration. The same BuzzFeed (2013) post for example refers to the mandatory *hejab* in its claim that, '[Iranian women] are taking something that is often considered repressive, and using it as a way to express themselves – which may be truly revolutionary.' In this way, the

Fig 12. A promotional poster made by the government for public display reads, 'Psychologists claim people who wear improper clothing or heavy and repulsive makeup have disturbed personalities'



assumption that being *bad-hejab* is necessarily intended as defiance ‘perpetuates the view that deliberate action is only worth regarding as truly deliberate when it breaks with convention or challenges state prescriptions’ (Houshyar and Sarmadi 2014). In her seminal work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood convincingly shows how resistance only comprises one of many forms of agency. Myopic definitions of agency assume it to be the realization of one’s own interests against the weight of custom or tradition and see the desire for autonomy and self-expression as universal. On the other hand, ‘if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific...what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment’ (Mahmood 2004:14-15). A major achievement of Mahmood’s expanded understanding of freedom and agency is that it tolerates

illiberal actions if they are undertaken by freely consenting individuals, without resorting to false consciousness as an explanation.



Fig 13. Cartoon by Sajjad Jafari for Fars News.

According to Mahmood’s critique, liberal traditions have difficulty seeing outside their own understanding of agency and freedom, which are historically and culturally specific rather than universal. Steeped in liberal tradition as it is, the genre of popular media dealt with here purport a dangerous combination of suggestions about Iran: the limited

notion of ‘agency-as-resistance’ accompanies the suggestion that the internal views of an individual can be ascribed through her external comportment. To deny the agency of women who choose to wear *hijab* as prescribed by the state – out of religious observance, tradition, physical comfort, respect for the law, or otherwise – reinforces negative and simplistic stereotypes of devout Muslim women as ‘a backward, anti-Western tool of the patriarchal state, or at best, as a helpless victim of it’ (Houshyar and Sarmadi 2014). By overlooking the complex realities and lived experiences of actual Iranian women, these popular articles undo previous efforts of researchers – like Mahmood in Egypt (2004) or Adelpkhah in Iran (1999) – to dismantle binaries of modern/traditional, public/private or resistance/subordination, to which life in the

Middle East is so often reduced. In an informal survey shared with female acquaintances living in Iran, I asked whether they felt confident in their personal ability to guess a woman's political and religious views based on how she wears her *hejab*: while to some extent religious conviction could be surmised (one respondent suggested up to 90%), and socio-economic status even more so, a woman's political views cannot be determined. Scholars have helped to support this suggestion by pointing to women who choose to wear the *chador* themselves but speak out in opposition to forced veiling, particularly during protests in the late 1970s and 80s (e.g. Hoodfar 1993: 12). But a consensus among my own respondents, especially those more mature in age, was that now with the current generation of youth in Iran it is more difficult than ever to accurately gauge the political endorsements of strangers.

In conclusion, there is a danger in relying on visible forms of personal expression to prove that it exists; this will inevitably result in the overemphasis on forms of personal expression that are immediately recognizable to Western audiences, i.e. explicit resistance against structures of power or tradition. And, recent coverage on female peshmerga combating

ISIS suggests that media fascination premised on the idea of defiant Middle Eastern women extends beyond Iran. Activists within the Kurdish movement have reacted to such coverage with suspicion, accusing journalists of choosing the most 'attractive' female fighters for interviews and criticizing fashion magazines for appropriating the urgent political struggle of Kurdish women for their own purposes. Like coverage on Iran's fight through fashion, this romanticization of Kurdish fighters came at a time when the U.S. is politically aligned with them in fighting a common enemy even though Kurdish independent movements are by no means a recent phenomenon. In a matter of months, female peshmerga became so iconified and objectified that the corporate clothing company H&M came under fire for allegedly capitalizing on the commodification of the peshmerga



Fig 14. Twitter posts from October 2014 suspicious that H&M's design was taken from the peshmerga uniform.



image by selling jumpsuits that bear a striking resemblance to the peshmerga uniform. Not unlike this, numerous media outlets have capitalized on the commodification of resistance – through the objectification of Kurdish and Iranian women – that would cater well to the sensibilities of their Western audiences; in turn they have reinforced a certain way of looking at Iran and imagining resistance. Having considered the shortcomings of measuring the surface of women's bodies as a measure of a society's capacity for expression and progress, I now turn to how the media's overemphasis on resistance causes crucial oversights in both *what* and *who* are represented.

### **PART III.** *Looking beyond resistance: consumer culture and the uptown/downtown divide*

Despite the many parallels, a major difference emerges between Western coverage of Kurdish and Iranian women through critics' suggestions that the media failed to take the political aspects of Kurdish female fighters' struggle seriously while overstating the political nature of feminine consumer culture in Iran. A quick look at contemporary Iranian visual art, which is also featured regularly on *The Tehran Times*, conveys a different interpretation of the young fashionistas celebrated by international press. Evidently preoccupied with their appearances, the women in the paintings of Homa Arkani and Saghar Daeeri or the posed photographs of Shirin Aliabadi are shown shopping in malls, primping themselves in mirrors and (over)indulging in makeup, fashion and plastic surgery.<sup>15</sup> With the critical social commentary of these emerging artists in mind, new and less celebratory possibilities surface that put into question the reliance of 'resistance' as an analytical tool for understanding Iranian street style.

In a critique of the existing body of anthropological research on Iran, Zuzanna Olszewska writes, 'I take issue not so much with the idea of studying cultures of resistance or defiance in themselves, but with the failure to seriously consider their boundaries' (2013: 843). She identifies 'blind spots in the contemporary ethnography of Iran' that are overlooked or downplayed in anthropological analyses that privilege resistance to an oppressive state as a framework with which to understand the actions, and outfits, of Iranian youth. I will now turn to

two ‘blind spots,’ the first being the silent majority of Iran’s population who are not urban, secular or financially privileged youth but who have been largely ignored in representations of the country since colonial times. This common pitfall of conflating the upper-middle class with Iranians as a people leads to a second ‘blind spot’ in the failure to consider how aspirations for upward mobility and displaying one’s status can serve to motivate patterns of personal expression that resemble defiant behaviour.



Fig 15 (top left). Two photographs from Shirin Aliabadi's 'Miss Hybrid' series (2006, 2008).

Fig 16 (top right). Homa Arkani's painting 'Just for you' from her series 'Share Me' (2011).

Fig 17. A painting from Saghar Daeeri's 'Tehran Shopping Malls' series (2008).

The women represented in *The Tehran Times* and other images shared in Western media have been sweepingly commended for making sartorial choices in the name of gender equality and freedom of expression; but rarely are the highly privileged backgrounds that form the conditions of possibility for such choices acknowledged or mentioned. The fixation on this one

particular kind of Iranian can be traced back to colonial accounts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about which Homa Hoodfar's description continues to ring true today: 'Of little interest to western readers was the fact that the vast majority of the population of Middle Eastern societies lived in rural areas, where they worked on the land and in homes, with lives very different from the very small minority who were members of the well-to-do urban élite' (1993: 8). Persisting in both mass media and scholarly works today, the overrepresentation of women from upper-class backgrounds draws away from the struggles of many Iranian activists fighting for a wide range of political, economic, religious, ethnic, environmental, urban and gender justice.<sup>16</sup> In my own experience, the projects of Iranian photographers I know personally have been more marketable and successful abroad when depicting the lifestyles of northern Tehran's elite<sup>17</sup> rather than some of the harsh social realities – and the individuals or organizations fighting them – that are found across social strata.



*Fig 18. Two photographs from a series entitled 'Start of an End' by young Iranian photographer Mohammad Reza Soltani. The series (2011-2012) focuses on drug addiction among women in Iran by visiting a number of rehab centers and 'camps' located in the suburbs of larger cities like Tehran. With lack of government support, many camps have opened independently; over 1,000 addiction treatment centers exist throughout Iran but only 220 of these have legally recognized facilities.*



Recent scholarship has helped debunk the myth, promulgated by popular media, that it is primarily the upper-middle class that drives political action in Iran, particularly defiance to the Islamic Republic. Rather, the financially privileged often prove most politically apathetic, since they can fall back onto support networks of family money and connections during times of economic instability. The glamorous youth of Tehran debuted in the news may indeed be ‘emboldened in how they walk the streets, showing an affinity for Western clothing, jewelry, makeup and hairstyles’ (Daftari 2014) but their confidence may result in part from knowing that, if caught, they can afford to bribe *komite* or pay bail for their release. Sociological analyses of the 2009 Green Movement suggest that social divisions and the inability to maintain a cross-class structure over time ‘exacerbated social cleavages and limited the movement’s expansion,’ ultimately causing its demobilization (Harris 2012; see also Reisinezhad 2014). Acknowledging these deep social divisions, Olszewska calls on researchers to ‘challenge some of the class prejudice and stereotypes of the wider society by venturing into the *pā’in-e shahr* [downtown, implying lower-income neighborhoods] at least as often as they do into uptown coffeeshops and ski slopes and giving greater representation to the country’s socioeconomic and cultural diversity’ (2013: 862; bracket explanation added). This attention to the non-elite becomes particularly imperative to avoid devaluing other less conspicuous but no less important forms of resistance by a diverse range of actors. The founder of *The Tehran Times* himself said in an interview that has only been quoted in one of these English-language articles, ‘Politics is politics and art is art. Today the main issue in Iran is not the dress code. Fashion is creative enough to make its way through any restrictions. We could manage to cover ourselves for another century, but we could not afford to avoid higher education for another day’ (Petré 2013).

Olszewska is joined by a few colleagues in arguing that consumer practices and aesthetic tastes express class *habitus* and displays of status equally if not more than ‘resistance,’ demonstrating this through the analysis of consumption in relation to fashion, nose jobs (Lenehan 2011; Tremayne 2006), weblogs (Shakhsari 2011) and even purchasable witchcraft and spells (Doostdar 2013). Some of the most robust arguments for considering the multiple possible meanings for the actions of Iranian youth are nuanced analyses of political activism. Olszewska provides the

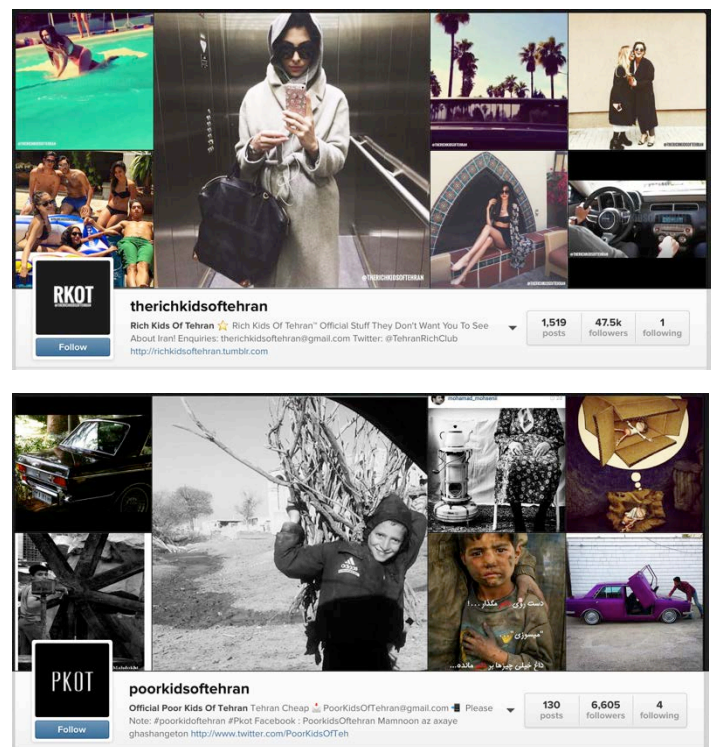


Fig 19. A popular internet meme, shared by @Sam1Kia on Twitter (2012).

example of a young girl from a poor economic background who participated in the Green Movement protests, but not because she was sympathetic to the politics of the opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi; instead, it provided her the rare opportunity to rub shoulders with and be accepted by affluent northern Tehranis (Olszewska 2013: 845; see also Harris 2012: 450).

Turning to fashionable trends, Olszewska suggests that ‘when working-class girls mimic the more ‘daring’ fashions of upper-class girls, for example, they may in fact be signalling their aspiration to upward mobility’ rather than defiance to the policies of the Islamic Republic (2013: 844). Examples which remind us that the same practice can have completely different meanings for members of different socio-economic classes challenge our readiness to use ‘resistance’ as an all-encompassing explanation for people’s behavior. Scholars who are skeptical of the popularity of ‘resistance studies’ (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1990; Mitchell 1990) also remind us that these practices can have simultaneously multiple and conflicting meanings for the same person; to avoid simply reducing the ethnographic ‘other’ to fit our own expectations or stereotypes, we must accept the ‘ambiguity of resistance and the subjective ambivalence of the acts for those who engage in them’ (Ortner 1995: 175). For example, we may take for granted that political blogging is engaged in out of personal conviction and for purposes of activism but as Sima Shakhsari convincingly demonstrates, ‘some diasporic Iranians become entrepreneurs who participate in the production and marketing of a particular form of knowledge about Iran;’ they used their blogs to express their opposition to the Islamic Republic but also as a means for personal gain in either financial or social capital (2011: 19).

In her ethnography chronicling what she claims is a ‘sexual revolution’ gaining momentum in Iran, Mahdavi admits she was quick to judge the ‘painted dolls’ or ‘Iranian



*Fig 20. The ‘rich kids of Tehran’ instagram account was made as a spinoff of the popular US-based ‘rich kids of Instagram’. This inspired reactions on social media like the counter ‘Poor kids of Tehran’ account. (See Thomas 2014; Khorram 2014). )*

Stepford Wives' she met in Tehran, only to eventually understand what she first took for superficiality as something more 'meaningful.' She 'accused them of all looking alike, of having



used the same plastic surgeon to sculpt their identical noses and of using the same makeup,' but later learns that for many of her informants, 'wearing red lipstick symbolized defiance while for others it was a form of artwork' (2009: 33). That Mahdavi introduces the concept of art into her analysis of self-fashioning in Iran returns us to the age-old debate of how to define art and how much to consider artists'



Figure 21. Two images from the 'Iran Politics Club' blog, titled 'Persian girls before makeover' and 'Persian girls after makeover!' (2013).

intentionality in doing so. Are all of the 'painted dolls' roaming the streets of Tehran, who according to Mahdavi look almost identical, artists or can we make distinctions between those whose makeup counts as art and those whose do not? Perhaps the question of the relationship between fashion and politics in Iran can be framed in the same way: when women's style is outwardly similar to one another – and to women abroad – how do we distinguish whose outfit is politically motivated or meant to represent anti-government sentiments and whose is

not? Should we consider actions or decisions – like wearing red lipstick or a form-fitting *manteau* – as political statements purely based on the context in which they were made? If it is the intention behind the action that matters, must Mahdavi's informants consciously consider their morning routine of applying layers upon layers of makeup as an act of protest or rebellion? Answers to such questions may leave the anthropological appetite for neat explanations of social phenomena unsatisfied since contextually-based understandings of resistance seem superficial and, as Ortner (1995) describes, knowing the personal motivations and inner psychological workings of actors seems near impossible. We may do best to allow for multiple, even conflicting explanations to coexist, by acknowledging the intersectionality of class, religion, gender and space that form the everyday experience of women in Iran on the one hand, and the complex ambiguity of resistance as an analytical category on the other.



## **Conclusion:** *Beyond symbolic understandings of street style*

The restrictions on everyday life and public behavior – and the grave risks one takes in dressing as s/he<sup>18</sup> does – in the Islamic Republic cannot be ignored. And yet, contemporary Western narratives that politicize casual street style in Iran with one sweeping gesture feel equally unbalanced and force the question of whether merely wearing a particular item of clothing can really count as exercising political resistance or one's own free will. Returning to the personal incident that began this paper, let us imagine for a moment that a picture of me had been taken that day by a photojournalist or fashion blogger. Would the use of my photograph as visual proof of the 'silent' or 'fashionable' revolution of Iranian youth operate on the presumption of knowing my inner thoughts and motivations? Or could the backdrop of Tehran behind me, and the socio-political context it implies, be enough to make wearing skinny jeans and knee-high boots a reflection and tool of political expression?

My purpose here has not been to take a stance on whether similar acts can or cannot be regarded as 'resistance' but rather to suggest we cannot take such analyses at face-value. Nor do I intend to suggest my own standards or registers by which to judge if certain actions count as political defiance, but rather I have pointed towards the difficulty in doing so. Reading all flashy consumerism party habits and blatant disregard of mandatory hijab as direct political action against the Islamic Republic overlooks the complex realities of womens' lives, their tastes and other ways they may express freedom of speech beyond the lipstick they wear or the amount of hair they show.

But is there any way to engage a productive discussion on the subject of feminine bodies in the Middle East, and the cloth that surrounds them, without contributing further the normalized fetish of staring at them? I share with other feminist anthropologists who come from Middle Eastern backgrounds a concern or hesitation in speaking on the subject at all (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2002), sometimes wondering if the best way to overcome the objectification of Muslim and Middle Eastern women is to quietly draw attention away from them. One suggestion has been to diversify where and on whom attention is placed; promoting a media shift away from elite women, Iranian journalist Haleh Anvari explains, 'to see us in focus, you must enter our inner sanctum. But the inner sanctum includes women who believe in the hijab, fat women, old

women and, most important, women in professions from doctor to shopkeeper. It also includes men, not all of whom are below 30 years of age' (2014). For example, Farha Ghannam, an anthropologist whose work focuses on urban Cairo, discusses her own inability to see the male body as a worthy subject of analysis for many years as a result of the ““over-embodiment,” especially in Western media, of the women and “disembodiment,” both in the media and scholarly work, of the men of the Middle East’ (2013: 4). She encourages the discussion of masculinity in terms of its physicality, emotional complexities, and bodily matters to help balance the discrepancy in the representation of Middle Eastern men and women.

Meanwhile others have blamed the reductionist tendencies in representations of Iran on the ‘danger that resistance may be seen and romanticized in cases where other analytical categories’ – namely class, status and social mobility – ‘would more accurately represent actors’ intentions and self-perceptions’ (Olszewska 2013: 847). But, as academia as well as popular culture begin to see aesthetic trends and consumer practices in Iran as indicative of wider societal concern with class and appearance, we must be careful not to begin the construction of other deterministic or reductionist frameworks with which to understand and represent Iranians. Increasingly, explanations for the rampant plastic surgery and use of makeup have looked to the dictates of the Islamic Republic’s dress code to argue that the restriction of the body’s visibility has resulted in an excessive obsession with the face (Tremayne 2006). In looking beyond ‘resistance’ as an explanation, we should also avoid representations of working-class consumption and taste as an imitation of the upper-classes or as the direct cause of institutional agents.

It might be too much to ask the journalists and bloggers behind popular news and social media sites to use ethnographic research for more nuanced and robust representations of social phenomena. After all, this genre of media is intended as quick and light reading and not for the intellectual investment required by academic publications; perhaps then, the purposes of these differing media and the questions that each set out to answer should be determined independently. In covering contemporary fashion in Iran, the driving question has been *why*: why urban Iranian youth dress the way they do, why young women wear so much makeup, why hair is or is not covered, why Iran has some of the highest global rates of plastic surgery. I suggest instead that asking *how* – how do urban Iranian youth dress, how do they communicate

their aesthetic preferences, how do cultural dispositions become sedimented within or across certain groups – can lead to more expressive findings that avoid jumping to grand conclusions. And, asking how material expressions ‘*matter*’ to people rather than their ‘*meaning*’ addresses ‘a more diffused, almost sentimental, association that is more likely to lead us to the concerns of those being studied than those doing the studying’ (Miller 1997: 11). Whether we see fashion as either an expression of political defiance or an expression of one’s aspiration for social mobility, both views understand it as a symbolic form of communication. One of the dangers of thinking in symbolic terms – i.e. thinking of clothing as symbols or women’s bodies as symbols – is that both what the symbols stand for and what they mean can be easily manipulated to serve specific interests – which, in the case of popular media formats like ‘listicles’<sup>19</sup> or blog posts, has been to gain viewership.

‘Look, for us, this is life here; we don’t think its strange; only you who come from outside think its strange,’ was the response of one Mahdavi’s informants after the anthropologist shared her own assumptions of how frustrating it must be to live by governmental regulations (2009: 57). Her informant goes on to remind Mahdavi of her own behavior, ‘just like, you know, when you go to your parents’ house you speak Persian and wear proper clothes, and when you go out with your friends, there you speak English and wear sexy clothes, right?’ Her brother chimes in, ‘shift that research lens of yours’ (Ibid). Roxanne Varzi, in her ethnography focused on youth and media in Tehran, describes a similar response from informants: ‘almost all the youths that I questioned claim that no media material – Western or Iranian, especially propaganda – has adequately described them. At the same time, when asked how they would describe themselves almost everyone answered: plain, normal, like everyone else’ (2006: 138). I would argue that this is because to be ‘plain, normal, like everyone else’ is to be deeply complex, with conflicting and ever-shifting subjectivities that cannot be summed up through symbolic discourse. Popular media in the West has yet to achieve ways of presenting this for mainstream audiences, relying instead on conforming ‘the other’ to its own narrow, culturally specific definitions of freedom and resistance. Until it does, this headline from a drily sarcastic review of the media fervour around Fatemi’s photo essay may prove one of the more insightful descriptions of Iran’s youth (Ward 2014): ‘Young Iranians Continue to Shock the Internet by Being Normal.’



## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> A kind of head covering common to students or government employees.

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer to best-sellers including Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Nahid Rachlin's *Persian Girls: A Memoir* (2006), Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: Growing up Iranian in America* (2003) and Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel series *Persepolis* (2000-2003), but also ethnographic works like Pardis Mahdavi's *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (2009), Shahram Khosravi's *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (2008) and Roxanne Varzi's *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, And Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Transliteration of the Persian pronunciation of *hijab*, a generic term for any Islamic modesty covering but which here refers to covering of hair as well as the body.

<sup>4</sup> *The Tehran Times* posts and similar photographs have been reposted on sites based in North America and Europe that range from the conservative Fox News to the Huffington Post or the Guardian, personal blogs to fashion magazines like Elle, and from hip, NYC-based fashion site Refinery29 to Middle East-related news sites. They have also been widely popular on photo sharing sites, social media sites or user-generated news sites including, but not limited to, Pinterest, Imgur and Reddit.

<sup>5</sup> As of March 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively, McCann 2014 and Imgur post: <http://imgur.com/gallery/VMAvt> (Accessed: March 15, 2015). Titles of other online posts featuring Fatemi's photographs from this series include: 'Expressive photos reveal a rare, alternative view of Iran' (*My Modern Met*), 'The women in Iran we never see' (*Crack Two*), and 'An Iranian Journey: Hossein Fatemi Takes Us Inside an Unseen World' (*Cube Breaker*).

<sup>7</sup> See the full, original photo story published on Panos Pictures (online): <http://www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1629-2123/Hossein-Fatemi/An-Iranian-Journey/> (Accessed: March 15, 2015)

<sup>8</sup> The painting pictured on p. 11 was made by my American father in 1992, during his first trip to Iran that lasted over a year. It was a much stricter era in Iran's history, before the reforms made by President Khatami in the late 90s; still, his artwork and personal journals attest to the boldness of many Iranians in engaging in illegal activities even when the stakes were much higher. Full of ambiguity and uncertainty, *Checkpoint* reflects some the fluidity between public and private life in Iran and complexities of navigating the Islamic Republic's surveillance. For the subjects in the scene, and for us as viewers, there is no way of knowing what will happen at this street checkpoint and what they can/cannot be in trouble for. Looking closer, we see that nothing is black and white: could there be alcohol in that rose water bottle in the backseat? Is the passenger in the front seat wiping off lipstick? Are there illegal western films on the VHS tape? Has the

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magazine been censored or prohibited since its publication? Are the men and women married or relatives, i.e. are they allowed to be in this car together?

<sup>9</sup> Different trends in reporting about Iranian youth, and women in particular, have included stories about skiing, hip hop and heavy metal bands, coffee culture, dogs as pets and plastic surgery. For a robust critical response to a recent media fixation on Iranian women who practice Japanese martial arts, see Shams (2012).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Mahdavi (2009), Khosravi (2008), Varzi (2006), Adlekhah (1999) and Afary (2009).

<sup>11</sup> And, on the other hand, there is a demonstrated concern among some scholars about being realistic in acknowledging or representing the positive achievements of the Islamic Republic without being accused of sympathizing with its abuses or less favorable policies: 'How would you react if someone told you that many Iranian women have never been as free, as independent, and as active as they have been since the 1979 Revolution; that they are actually able to make money, travel and be 'breadwinners'? Most likely by suspecting your interlocutor of being an Islamist or defender of the regime (Adlekhah 2009: 207). Iran is essentially a welfare state and a republic, however authoritarian, that since the revolution has achieved a significant increase in literacy and education rates of women. Paired with the shift in other social dynamics, such as rapid urbanization and a flourishing informal economy, these achievements have actually helped lead to higher expectations for social mobility and economic opportunity among the youth (Abrahamian 2009). In other words, reforms introduced by the Islamic Republic itself that strengthened and expanded the middle classes, inadvertently giving rise to recent political activism and opposition, like the 2009 Green Movement (Harris 2012).

<sup>12</sup> As a counterexample, see Alexandru Bălăşescu's *Paris Chic, Tehran Thrills* (2007) in which he undertakes ethnographic research on the processes of design and production of haute couture fashion in Iran.

<sup>13</sup> Even when articles do not discuss these fashion trends in explicitly political terms, they frequently mention the Islamic Republic's public decency laws or share anecdotes of the *komite* reprimanding those in *bad-hejab*; in so doing, they still contribute to the general media fixation on Iranian consumer trends and implicitly make a correlations between the 'fashionable' and the 'anti-establishment.'

<sup>14</sup> See Amin (2002) on the treatment of female bodies by state policies spanning 1865-1946.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, female subjects are featured exclusively in all three bodies of work; these series become at once about the recent rise in Iranian consumer culture – which many associate negatively with a rise in superficial or frivolous concerns and political apathy – and also about the representation of Iran through its women. Ghannam (2013) has pointed to 'a discourse that emphasized the physicality of the woman and ignored the materiality of the male body' in representations of the Middle East; in their undivided attention on female bodies and physical alterations, we may ask whether these artworks are themselves absorbed in this discourse or critical of it.

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<sup>16</sup> For a few contemporary examples, see Houshyar, Shima and Sarmadi, Behzad (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Class divisions in Tehran are largely understood in geographic terms. The north of Tehran is called *bālā-ye-shahr* (lit. ‘top of the city’) and houses the highest elevated and most affluent neighborhoods. As the city slopes down and south towards *pā’in-e-shahr* (lit. ‘bottom of the city’) income brackets decrease and air quality worsens.

<sup>18</sup> Men in the Islamic Republic are also required to follow certain dress codes. See Worth (2010) for an article about popular but illegal hairstyles among young men in Tehran.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Listicle’ refers to a list-based article, e.g. BuzzFeed’s article ‘Rap, Drugs, and Hijabs: 13 Things You Should Know About Young Iran.’



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