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Writing a feminist ethnography: A comparative analysis of Iranian women's stories of resistance and agency in Iran and America

Tanja B. Messing

DePaul University, TBMESSING@gmail.com

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WRITING A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN WOMEN'S STORIES
OF RESISTANCE AND AGENCY
IN IRAN AND AMERICA

A Thesis

Presented in

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Requirements for the Degree of
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BY

Tanja B. Messing

Women's and Gender Studies Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
DePaul University
Chicago, IL

ABSTRACT

The aim of this project works against the stigmatization of Middle Eastern women in the West by examining women's experiences of resistance and agency within the diaspora and in Iran. Through a feminist ethnographic analysis of Iranian women's narratives, I work against Western stereotypes as a way to problematize the assumption that immersion in Western culture "saves" Middle Eastern women from their supposed cultural and religious "victimization." The focus of my inquiry is centered on four issues, or themes, of analysis, which are: everyday acts of resistance, subversion, and negotiation, issues of dress, household dynamics, and women's values and self-expression. Drawing on secondary academic research (including anthropology, critical and comparative gender studies, and transnational feminist theory), this project is designed to further understand how the dynamics of subversion, resistance, and agency that take place within the micro-practices of these women's daily lives impact their ability to exercise individual agency against societal limitations and against the State at large. Within this analysis, I look at issues of consumption, sexuality, and dress as a way to understand how the participants exercise resistance and agency in two markedly different cultural contexts. I argue that despite common assumptions made about Middle Eastern women in the West, Iranian women exercise as much, if not more, social agency in Iran as they do in America.

Keywords: Iranian Diaspora, Transnational Feminism, Ethnography, Gender, Youth, Agency, Resistance, Consumption

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Introduction: Overview of Research and Background of Study

Introduction and Statement of the Question

In 2007 author and illustrator Marjane Satrapi and director Vincent Paronnaud released *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, an animation film based on Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel published just four years prior.¹ Based on an autobiographical narrative, *Persepolis* depicts the story of a society in transition and the political upheaval experienced during the Iranian revolution of 1979. It is a story of social and class conflict, generational difference, and the renegotiation of public and private spaces.² It is a time of political revolution and populist uprisings, told from the perspective of Marjane, Satrapi's child-self, whose coming-of-age story highlights her journey through adolescence during a time of political upheaval and transition in post-revolutionary Iran.

The storyline follows the life of this child protagonist, which is marked by her pro-Western family's sympathies in support of the revolution and their subsequent hostility toward the religious authorities after they come to power. Chronicling her journey through childhood and adolescence, Satrapi's story depicts her experiences as a child of secular, leftist parents who increasingly fear for their daughter's safety in a highly volatile and politically charged environment.

In hopes of providing a more secure and stable environment outside of post-revolutionary Iran, Marjane's parents send their daughter abroad to Vienna, where she remains for several years. As a high school student abroad, Marjane experienced cultural displacement and often felt estranged from her non-Iranian peers. Although Marjane longed for her homeland, her return to

¹ "Interview with Marjane Satrapi—Director/Author of *Persepolis*," *Payvand News*, (December 2007), <http://www.payvand.com/news/07/dec/1254.html> (accessed May 8, 2011).

² Tom Prasch, review of *Persepolis*, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 80.

her country was marked with similar feelings of dislocation, as a young woman who had experienced many of her formative years outside of Iran.

Her experiences as an adolescent and young woman in Austria and back home, in Iran, demonstrates how social agency and resistance manifest themselves differently in each of these contexts, breaking down over-simplified categorizations of East and West. Satrapi's *Persepolis* has been hailed as a story which humanizes the adolescent experience in post-revolutionary Iran, and which makes explicit the social complexities of a society in a state of radical political transformation.³ As a young Iranian adolescent who embraces British Punk Rock, or as a teenage girl whose tenacious disposition leads her to frequent encounters with post-revolution state authorities, Marjane's character tells the story of a young woman who comes of age during one of the most tumultuous period's in Iran's recent history. As authors Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley suggest, *Persepolis* has "...force[d] the Western reader to work hard to understand the complexities of contemporary Iranian politics and social dynamics..."⁴

In fact, in a recent interview with MTV music Satrapi argues, "It has to stop being, you know, this very simplistic idea that, you know, the world is divided between East and West and Muslim and Christian. If there is one division in the world it's between the stupid guy and the intelligent guy-it stops there."⁵ In what has become a growing trend among those living in the diaspora, Iranian female writers like Satrapi have utilized literary and media pieces to "...write themselves back into the history of the [Iranian] nation" and to counter the stereotypes of the

³ Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley. "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (June/September 2005): 224.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵ MTV News, "Eastern Values Battle Western Decadence. 'Persepolis': A Young Girl's Fight for Freedom." MTV News Website, Windows Media Player media file, 00:54, <http://www.mtv.com/videos/news/197335/eastern-values-battle-western-decadence.jhtml> (accessed August 12, 2011).

“self-effacing, modest Iranian woman.”⁶ In this way Marjane Satrapi’s graphic-novel *Persepolis* (and later the cinematic production), has been extraordinarily successful at redefining oversimplified categorizations of Middle Eastern women.

The aim of this project employs a similar objective: to work against the stigmatization of Middle Eastern women in the West by examining experiences of resistance and agency in both Iran and America. Through an analysis of a select group of young Iranian women’s narratives, I work against prevailing stereotypes as a way to problematize the assumption that immersion in Western culture “saves” Middle Eastern women from their supposed cultural and religious “victimization.”⁷ The focus of my inquiry is centered on four issues, or themes of analysis, which are: everyday acts of resistance, issues of dress, household dynamics, and women’s values and self-expression. Drawing on secondary academic research, this project is designed to further problematize those aforementioned suppositions made about Middle Eastern women (that imply passivity and victimization) by positioning Iranian women’s personal narratives central to my research question and analysis. I argue that despite common assumptions made about Iranian society and about those women living in it, Iranian women exercise as much, if not more, political and social agency in Iran as they do in America.

General Research Hypotheses and Delimitations of the Study

Situating my analysis in a historical and theoretical understanding of contemporary Iranian history, I juxtapose contemporary Iranian gender discourses in terms of my primary (interviews) and secondary (literature) forms of research, specifically as they relate to four themes: acts of cultural resistance, issues of dress and fashion, house-hold dynamics, and values

⁶ Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley. “Estranging the Familiar: “East” and “West” in Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (June/September 2005): 224.

⁷ Lila Abu Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist*, 104 no. 3 (2002): 785.

and self-expression. Specifically, I focus on these areas of inquiry as a way to compare and contrast acts of subversion, agency, and subjectivity in Iran and America. By comparing their experiences in both contexts, I will be able to further understand the dynamics of inter-personal relationships (familial and romantic), resistance to restrictive and formally imposed dress codes and perceptions of American fashion, as well as their sense of autonomy and self-determination (both personally and professionally) in both cultural contexts.

Interview participants are comprised of a select group of transnational, middle-class female university students, who were born in and grew up in Iran and then later migrated to the United States. Their stories emphasize the detailed aspects of their social lives, as young students and professionals who are engaged in Iran's youth culture and society. The specificity of this study is based on a number of criteria, including gender, class, age, and generation. The demographic criteria of this study were delimited to Iranian women born during or after the Iranian Revolution (1979), which places them all in the under-35 age bracket.

Interest in this project emerged out of previous academic research on Iranian women and youth in post-revolutionary Iran. Specifically, those in recent decades who have received growing international attention because of their considerable population size, their distinctive 'youth' culture, and the formal and informal resistive strategies employed against an increasingly authoritarian regime, most notably during the country's 2009 presidential elections.⁸ Of some 70 million Iranians, approximately 60% are under the age of thirty.⁹ All of the interview participants were born during or after the revolution, and like their peers, they believe their generation is politically aware because they see this as the only viable option to bring about change in what

⁸ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 122.

⁹ Bruce Feiler, *Generation Freedom: The Middle East Uprisings and the Remaking of the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2011), 47.

they perceive as a restrictive society. An almost decade-long war with Iraq, which killed hundreds of thousands of young Iranian men, as well as the rise of a large educated urban middle-class population, are two important factors to also consider in this analysis. Furthermore, a permissive style of upbringing in conjunction with the opening up of cultural spaces during the 1990s, as well as the increasing impact of globalization and intercultural exchange, has impacted the individualization of today's Iranian youth population.¹⁰

Other social and economic factors, such as high rates of inflation, the increasing demand for dual-income households, and greater access to educational opportunities have created specific opportunities for negotiation and subversion of State-imposed laws and ideologies for young Iranian women.¹¹ The dynamics between the State and Iran's youth population have in the decades following the revolution become increasingly stifled and distant, largely due to changing attitudes among Iran's younger population as well as repressive tactics employed by some of those in charge. Instances of harassment and even arrest by the morality police¹², an increasingly restrictive social atmosphere, and laws and social pressures that prohibit women from realizing full equality, are according to some participants, what make Iran's younger population the driving force in the contentious struggle for the country's future.

¹⁰ Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order," *Iranian Studies* 38 (March 2005): 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹² The first morality police units were established by religious authorities in 1979, shortly after the revolution, as a way to discipline violators of "moral crimes," such as alcohol consumption, extra-marital relationships, and gambling. Arrests were frequent in the months following the populist uprising, and hundreds of innocent individuals were executed as a result of alleged 'morality' violations. During the 1980s the power of the morality police was almost infallible, but its authority in recent decades has waxed and waned. Activists and political reformists worked against the abusive powers of the morality police, and resistance by Iran's growing youth population has largely diminished this organizations' collective power. However, since conservatives garnered power in the early years of the 2000s, there has been a renewed crackdown on 'morality' violations, including arrests of young people dressed 'un-Islamically,' and confiscation of satellite dishes. Since 2007, there has been an increased presence of morality police and *basiji* (volunteer militia employed by the government to quash political opposition and social unrest), as well as an increased numbers of arrests and imprisonments. Azam Khatam, "The Islamic Republic's Failed Quest for the Spotless City," *Middle East Report* 250 (Spring 2009): 44.

Through the telling of their stories, many of the participants have intimated that the “personal is political”¹³ for young people in Iran, as they routinely employ intentional acts of resistance in their everyday lives, against the ebb and flow of a stifling political and social environment. In recent decades, many Iranian women have by and large defied social norms of gender conservatism and accessed a myriad of professional and educational opportunities within the country. In her discussion of Islamic feminist’s activism in Iran in the late 1990s, Afsaneh Najmabadi writes, “Almost two decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, against the deepest fears of many of the secular feminist activities of the revolution, not only have women not disappeared from public life, but they have an unmistakably active presence in practically every field of artistic creation, professional achievement, educational and industrial institutions, and even in sports activities.”¹⁴

Despite its laws that favor men in areas such as divorce, child custody, and inheritance laws, women are increasingly present and active in the country’s universities, much of which comes as a result of the state’s investment in its educational system and the massive public infrastructural improvements made during the late 1980s and 90s. The country’s youth population—both men and women—are an incredibly accomplished group of people. In fact, recent statistics show that as of 2003 women comprised approximately 62% of the university’s students and literacy rates for individuals under the age of 24 measures near 100%.¹⁵ Younger people are also heavily engaged in civic activism (both informal and formal), as was demonstrated in the historic protests against the presidential elections in 2009. In fact, in the last

¹³ This quotation was originally used as a title to a ground-breaking article written by radical feminist and civil rights activist Carol Hanish, in 1969. “Personal is Political” was published as part of a collection of works under the title, “Notes From the Second Year: Women’s Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists” in 1970.

¹⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Feminism in an Islamic Republic: “Years of Hardship, Years of Growth”” in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59.

¹⁵ Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, “From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order,” *Iranian Studies* 38 (March 2005): 48.

decade alone youth are responsible for the establishment of hundreds of NGO's through formal channels and informal networking.¹⁶

Young Iranian women and men have utilized technology, underground sub-culture movements, and 'ordinary,' everyday acts of resistance (e.g. through dress) to subvert and/or negotiate the religious politics of the State.¹⁷ In fact, several interview participants have utilized the internet to circumvent social restrictions and as a tool for resistance and self-expression. Interview participant Parastoo, a 27-year-old Iranian woman, engages in web-logging, or blogging, as a way to communicate with other Iranians and to engage in political and social discussions openly, without the confines of social restriction. Asal, a 27-year-old Armenian-Iranian Christian, met her Iranian Muslim fiancé through a mutual acquaintance in an online chat-room. Such encounters demonstrate how the internet and 'cyberspace' have allowed individuals to push the boundaries of social expectations and to engage in subversive behavior against State-imposed restrictions. Fereshteh Nourai-Simone echoes a similar sentiment: "Cyberspace provides a public social space that allows free expression of self outside the confines of the politically manipulated physical space. Here a young, independent woman can have mastery over her environment and assert her agency..."¹⁸

While this argument is certainly valid for many young women who participate in online activities as a form of social networking and as a way to articulate a sense of self, this has not prevented instances of criticism and judgment for this particular population. While the internet offers a space of potential anonymity, it also offers an opportunity for unfettered judgment from

¹⁶ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 126.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁸ Fereshteh Nourai-Simone, "Wings of Freedom: Iranian Women, Identity, and Cyberspace" in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nourai-Simone (New York City, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), 63.

public viewers to bloggers, especially if bloggers' identities as young women are revealed to viewers. In these instances, the internet transforms into a space of relative anonymity into a place of social limitations and self-censorship.¹⁹

This study examines the experiences of this particular population—young, middle-class, educated women, who have moved to the United States to study, live, or work—as a way to further understand how immersion in American and Western culture impacts their self-conceptualization as women from the Middle East. Working against the assumption that Western culture “saves” Middle Eastern women from “victimized” lives, I compare the participants' experiences of political and social agency in both Iran and in America as a way to further problematize this argument. In no way do I claim this project's findings and the limited participating sample population is representative of the country's urban, middle-class female population as a whole. Rather, its purpose is to highlight individual narratives and experiences as a way to create a more critical understanding of Iranian women's ability to exercise agency and autonomy within two markedly distinct cultural and social contexts. The conclusions drawn from these interviews, as well as from secondary research done on contemporary Iranian youth culture, point toward the idea that, despite the confines of social and legal limitations, Iranian women exercise more agency and demonstrate an extraordinary capacity for individual resistance against these social and political restrictions within their home country than as immigrant women living in the United States.

Methodology of the Study

Selected methodology includes a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, academic and scholarly literature (anthropology, critical and comparative gender studies, and

¹⁹ Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, “Performance in Everyday Life and the Rediscovery of the “Self” in Iranian Weblogs,” *Bad Jens: Iranian Feminist Newsletter*, 7 ed. (September 2004), <http://www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html> (accessed August 2, 2011).

transnational feminist publications). In this analysis, I consider several theoretical frameworks, including the diasporic migration of Iranian communities, gender discourse and ethnicity, and the effects of cultural displacement in diasporic communities. By situating myself within the theoretical parameters of transnational feminism and feminist ethnography, I have become critically aware of the potential limitations of writing an analysis of Iranian women's experiences in the diaspora.

Interview participants are comprised of a mixed group of Iranian students and professionals residing in and around the Chicago-land area. These individuals were introduced to me by acquaintances or referred by fellow classmates and/or professionals. Participation in the research process was entirely voluntary and after learning about my intentions with this project, individuals seemed eager to talk about their experiences as Iranian women living in the United States. The participant pool was delimited to female Iranians between the ages of 18 and 35. The interview is semi-structured, and follows the natural flow of conversation. This is the most appropriate method for this type of oral history collection since it allows for the most flexibility and opportunities to build rapport.²⁰ Guiding interview questions touch on specific themes, which include acts of resistance, issues of dress and veiling, household dynamics, and values and self-expression. More specific questions include inquiries about the representation of Middle Eastern women in Western media, the differences and/or similarities in social expectations between Iran and America, and the daily experiences of their lives as "foreigners" in a Western urban space. I am specifically interested in learning how their experiences as professionals, students, and women in Chicago compare and contrast with life in Iran. While the focus of my

²⁰ Harvey Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 4th Ed.* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006): 214.

inquiry rests on this area in question, the flow of conversation has been largely determined by the interview participant.

The interview participants express a wide range of interpretations, responses, and opinions on the politics of gender identity and self-conceptualization as Iranian women in America and in Iran. While the sampling of interview participants is small in size, the information gleaned from these interactions offers an in-depth look into women's experiences of social agency in two markedly different cultural contexts. In particular, our conversations have revolved around issues of dress, mixed-sex interactions, and sexual double standards. Interviews have only been recorded with permission and for discretionary purposes, pseudonyms have been used. Also, other identifiable information (such as the educational institution or place of work) may have been also been changed during the interview process.

While I am the sole author of this textual product, the analytic interpretations I have made consider dynamics of power and are grounded in principles of feminist ethnography. Utilizing transnational feminism and feminist ethnographic praxis as both the theoretical and methodological components throughout my research project has encouraged the ethical interpretation of the interviews and final textual product.

Significance of the Study and Ethics of Research

The significance of this project lies in the contributions it makes to transnational feminist scholarship and the continual integration of Western feminist rhetoric with non-Western centric positionalities. By situating my project from a critical transnational feminist lens, I present ethnographic accounts of Iranian women's personal experiences as "non-Western" women living in the United States. The primary aim of this project is centered on the inclusion of counter-narratives to mainstream hegemonic discourses and dialogue. While Western mainstream representations of Middle Eastern (especially Muslim women) are steeped in hegemonic

assumptions that imply lack of agency, passivity, and which further position non-Western individuals from an ethnocentric perspective²¹, the goal of this project centers its inquiry on countering such claims.

The representation of Middle Eastern women generally and Iranian women specifically in post-9/11 mainstream Western media is saturated with homogenized images of passivity, victimization, and oppression.²² In 2004 a study conducted on the representation of Iranian women in U.S. media concluded that "...Iranian women will be portrayed either as meekly house- or chador-bound, with only great piety to distinguish them, or as militantly Islamic."²³ While wearing the chador, Iranian women are described as "resigned" and "slipped into a vestibule." While in Western clothing, the representation of Iranian women includes such phrases as "subtle," "cheeky" and they "stride" and "show off" the latest European fashion.²⁴

Similarly, other studies conclude that Muslim and Middle Eastern women are represented in Western media only superficially, where their photographic images "...primarily reinforce preexisting understandings of Muslim societies as irrational, hostile, and antithetical to the liberal West."²⁵ Indeed, the "reductive interpretation" of the veil as a unilateral symbol of Muslim women's oppression by Muslim men has further perpetuated these assumptions about individuals from this region and the cultural relativism that ensues from such ill-conceived conjectures.²⁶

Further, it has been found that American news reporters and journalists will most often select

²¹Contemporary references include works written by Faegheh Shirazi (2010), Inez Mahony (2010), Laura Navarro (2010), Amir Saeed (2007), Smeeta Mishra (2007), Alia Salem Imtoul (2005), and Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain (2005).

²²Elli Lester Roushazamir, "Chimera Veil of "Iranian Women" and Processes of U.S. Textual Commodification: How U.S. Print Media Represent Iran," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2004): 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵ Ghazi-Walid Falah, "The visual representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States," *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion, and Space*, ed. Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Negel (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 317.

²⁶ Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist*, 104 no. 3 (2002): 786.

“images with an exotic or unusual appeal” when covering stories about Muslim individuals and/or the Middle East.²⁷ As Paula Holmes-Eber argues, “Women in the Middle East—and likewise the wearing of the veil—have become a symbol to Americans of everything we dislike about this inexplicable part of the world, a representation of everything we fear about Islam, and yet also a romantic and exotic image of our fantasies about the Middle East”.²⁸

Therefore, the short- and long-term impacts of this type of research study, notwithstanding the critical lessons I have personally gleaned as an aspiring scholar, include the creation of palpable counter-narratives, which work against the cultural ‘othering’ of Iranian women specifically and Middle Eastern women generally.²⁹ Variables including language and accents, names, culture, and national origin are, as Haideh Moghissi argues, what makes Iranian “...identifiable as immigrants of Third World origin.”³⁰ The epistemic violence incurred on Middle Eastern people, and particularly Muslims, through the use of “distorted and exaggerated images” perpetuates even further the orientalist rhetoric that subsumes Western media and Western popular culture.³¹

In this sense, Iranians, like other individuals from the Middle East, face what Ali Rattansi terms ‘cultural racism,’ where “generalizations, stereotypes, and other forms of cultural essentialism” inform and reinforce dominant ideas about Middle Eastern people in popular Western culture.³² Rattansi argues that *cultural essentialism*, the idea that social characteristics are naturalized into indistinguishable biological features, draws on other aspects of “race” other

²⁷ Paula Holmes-Eber, “Conceptions and Misconceptions of Women in the Middle East,” UW TV website, University of Washington, <http://www.uwtv.org/video/player.aspx?mediaid=1577094840Shirazi>, (accessed August 12, 2011).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Haideh Moghissi “Away from Home: Iranian Women, Displacement, Cultural Resistance, and Change,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 30 no. 2 (Spring 1999): 2.

³⁰ Ibid. 2.

³¹ Ibid., 2.

³² Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Hampshire: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55.

than biological features (such as skin color) to collectively demonize certain groups of people.³³ He uses other notable comparisons, including the “supposed avariciousness of Jews” and the “alleged aggressiveness of Africans and African-Americans” as two relevant, contemporary examples.³⁴

The continual rescue narrative that also subsumes Western mainstream media and political landscape further complicates this matter. When First Lady Laura Bush declared her support for the U.S. military action in Afghanistan in 2001, she declared that Afghan women were “...rejoicing at their “liberation” by the Americans.”³⁵ A statement such as this, perhaps more than anything, demonstrates the rescue narrative that has plagued Western, colonial movements and Western, white feminist activities since their very beginnings.³⁶ Feminist ethnographic research, therefore, encourages a participant-centric analysis and demands self-reflexive praxis by the researcher; disavowing what sociologist Norman Denzin terms a “crises of representation.”³⁷ By centering my research within the framework of feminist ethnography and transnational feminist scholarship, I seek to avoid privileging my own perspective as both researcher and observer (and a non-Muslim, non-Iranian individual), and attempt to engage in self-reflexive praxis throughout the research process.³⁸

Without fail, each one of the interview participants began our conversations with this question: “Why are you interested in Iranian women?” Parastoo admits that she doesn’t trust Westerners whose research has to do with Middle Eastern women, as a result of the arrogance and cultural superiority that often underlines their research. She says, “To be honest, I don’t trust

³³ Ibid., 56.

³⁴ Ibid., 55.

³⁵ Lila Abu Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist*, 104 no. 3 (2002): 785.

³⁶ Ibid., 789-780.

³⁷ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (London: Sage Publications, Inc., 1997), 3, 18.

³⁸ Ellen Lewin, ed., *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader* (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 149.

Westerners who study Middle Eastern women. I hate when they look down on us. I don't feel I'm less intelligent or less educated than them." As a white, middle-class, European-American, the problematic nature of this very inquiry and those whom I invite into these discussions has from its very beginnings produced an uneasy feeling from within. Not unlike the tensions that I have frequently encountered with women of color in our discussions of white privilege and micro-racism within American academia and our local communities, the study of Iranian women's experiences brings with it all of the baggage of Western feminist scholarship in researching the Middle Eastern "other."³⁹ The primary purpose of this project, in addition to refuting inaccurate claims, is to invite a discussion of the chasm that persists within these communities, and more broadly within contemporary Western and transnational feminist scholarship.⁴⁰

Recognizing my own privileged location, as well as the limitations of my own social purview, has made this experience an incredibly awarding and fulfilling research endeavor. With each interview, with each conversation, I hope to have provided open and honest discussions with women who entrusted me with the knowledge of their stories and experiences. After locating myself within the context of Western and transnational feminist understandings, as well as within the context of our local community in Chicago, all participants expressed an interest in contributing to the research project and telling me their stories.

The participants' backgrounds vary considerably in terms of religion, ethnicity, and social background. All are university students or recent graduates. Several are politically conscious and some participated in the protests following the contested 2009 presidential

³⁹ Marnia Lazreg, "Women's Experience and Feminist Epistemology: A Critical Neo-Rationalist Approach," in *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (Oxon: Routledge, 1994), 54.

⁴⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28 no. 2 (2002): 508-510.

elections in Iran, a period in recent Iranian history that marked the beginning of the country's Green Movement, a political and ideological movement comprised mostly of intellectuals, students, women's groups, and youth.⁴¹ Grounded in principles of "liberal democracy" and "Islamic Secularism," Iran's Green Movement has its beginnings in the country's 1990s reform movement, a political undertaking aimed at reforming the country's political and social structure, in which civil rights, intellectual freedom and civic engagement prospered.⁴²

Almost all participants have expressed a profound disappointment and shock at the representation of Middle Eastern women in American media and mainstream culture. Many have also experienced first-hand instances of narrow-mindedness and racism as a result of their status as 'Iranian' and 'Middle Eastern' women in America. The enthusiasm with which these women have approached our conversations demonstrates to me their conviction toward creating an alternative narrative about Middle Easterners, Iranians, and Muslim women, which counter mainstream hegemonic depictions. It is with this knowledge that I believe the significance of my project may contribute, however modest in scope, to the advancement of alternative discourses and a more critical, more thought provoking understanding of the potential for cohesion of Western feminist scholarship with transnational feminist praxis.

Summary

I have approached this project with the knowledge that the participants who have so generously shared their stories with me comprise just a small number of the Iranian diasporic population in Chicago. While their narratives provide only a few perspectives on women's experiences in Iran and in America, I believe these provide insightful perspectives on individual narratives of experience and agency. In Chapter 1 I introduce the interview participants, and

⁴¹ Nader Hasehmi and Danny Postel, ed. *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010), xix-xx.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

provide an outline of the theoretical framework utilized in transnational feminist praxis and feminist ethnography. In Chapter 2 I present a historical background of recent Iranian history as well as a review of existing scholarship and literature on comparative feminist and cultural studies. Chapter 3 incorporates a thematic analysis of the interviews and a discussion of the results. Finally, in Chapter 4 I provide a conclusion to the study, a synthesis of the results, as well as a look at opportunities for future research.

Chapter 1: Interview Participants and Theoretical Framework

An Introduction to the Interview Participants

Leela (a pseudonym) was born in Tehran, Iran's capital city and main urban center, in 1980, one year after the Iranian Revolution, during a period of incredible social and political transformation. Leela comes from a well-educated, upper middle-class family whose anti-revolutionary sentiments continue to resonate with her today. Born to a physician father and a social scientist mother, Leela recalls vivid memories of a childhood marked with the violence of war, a strict religious education in her school, and the negative reaction of her family to the newly founded Islamic State. Leela's family is staunchly secular, as are most of her family's relatives and circle of friends. Her parents were against the Revolution and the Islamic State, and in our conversation she recalls instances when her classmates were questioned about their parents' private lives in school. "The educational system was so tough [for] us," she says, "that is why I am telling you about this generation, the country was so damaged."

Coming of age in the 1990s, Leela admits that at times she engaged in rebellious behavior, but says that her generation in particular, those born during those crucial years during and directly following the revolution were, despite the governmental limitations they faced, too

“shocked, surprised, and tired to fight” because of a childhood surrounded by war and a strict, religious environment. She says,

We are the lost generation... We are all tired, we are not like our age, we are older... I myself think about my wishes, they are not great anymore... I don't think about anything special in the future anymore... because all of those cravings, expectations, they were all ruined, so there's no energy left to think about great ideals, great goals. The only thing that I do wish every minute is that my country becomes a stable one, you know? There [are] no more wishes for me and so many people in my generation.

Leela, like most of her friends, is politically conscious and aware, and closely follows the happenings in her home country. Having immigrated to the United States with her husband just over six months ago, she feels an incredible homesickness and pull to her country. Her acceptance to a master's program in Art History at a local university in Chicago has given her something to look forward to for the future, even though she is uncertain whether will return to her home country. Leela is an avid human rights supporter and participated in the protests following the 2009 presidential elections. She follows Iranian news daily because she says, “...we were born at the beginning of this revolution, we follow this system, as if we are following our destiny, because it's our life. We are like two partners, we love and hate each other, we [follow] to see what will happen...”

Like Leela, Parastoo, a 27-year-old educated middle class woman from northern Iran, is deeply devoted to her country's future, and is an avid supporter of the Green Movement. She follows Iranian news and is an engineering student at a local Chicago university. Although Parastoo comes from a highly religious family, she has in recent years turned away from religion. After coming to Chicago with her husband three years ago, Parastoo admits that she has changed since she first arrived in the United States. Her initial experiences with non-Iranian Americans and with other Iranians in the Diaspora were shockingly disappointing, and her

recollections of her first years in America are marked by intense sadness and loneliness. Upon her initial arrival in Chicago, Parastoo encountered intense competition with other Iranian women, a fact she now attributes to their internal loneliness and desire for social status in a foreign community. Parastoo was especially impacted by the negative perception of Iranian women by other Americans and Western media. In our conversation she recalls her initial impressions,

Here [Americans] have no idea [about you], you're just a foreigner, nothing, and the worst part [is] you're an *Iranian* foreigner, you're dangerous. It's really difficult. And I noticed that people are not even eager to know you, they don't even ask questions about your country...Every time I heard the name of Iran [in the media] it was related to the atomic bomb...it's because of your media! Every time I heard the name of Iran it was kind of related to the atomic bomb!

It was only until the 2009 Iranian presidential elections that Parastoo felt compassion and empathy from other Americans she encountered. Parastoo has developed her own sense of community by forging new friendships with diverse people, most of whom are not from Iran. Since her arrival in Chicago three years ago, Parastoo has found new perspective on the Iranian diasporic community, and prefers to maintain relationships with them, for the most part, at a distance. Although she is homesick for her family, she is still unsure whether she and her husband will go back to Iran one day.

Negar, a 27-year-old MBA student, came to Chicago four years ago from Tehran, Iran's capital and main urban center. Both of her parents work in the medical industry, her father as a doctor and her mother as a midwife. Having initially studied engineering as an undergraduate and master's student, Negar has recently decided to pursue an alternate career path in business and finance. Like Leela, Negar's family is middle class, but is neither religious nor secular. She emphasizes that her parents allowed her and her sister to dictate their own values about

religiosity and comportment, as a way to encourage self-determination, autonomy, and confidence.

Negar believes that women's employment and financial opportunities are far greater in America than in Iran, and that sexual double standards do not exist as blatantly here as they do in her home country. She attributes this to the State-imposed limitations placed on women, particularly in the workplace where, she argues, women are judged according to the type of *hejab* they wear. Although Negar admits that sexual double standards exist in both places, she feels that women encounter greater instances of sexual harassment in daily public life in her home country. There, if a woman speaks out against perpetrators, she says, it is perceived as "...your fault." She argues that people believe, "...you shouldn't act like that, you shouldn't wear [this], they relate everything to your appearance or your makeup, that you use to seduce [men]...If you say something back, the public thinks that you did something wrong, not him. You cannot call the police, because the police will not come for this kind of stuff." Negar further contends, however, that younger women are increasingly engaging in resistive behavior, and speak out against such grievances. Since she came to America, Negar says that, "...here, I am considered a human first, not a woman first, but in Iran...I'm considered a sex object."

Asal is a 27-year-old graduate student of micro-biology at a local Chicago university. Asal grew up in Tehran in a small Armenian community, a population group which comprises less than 1% of the country's 70 million inhabitants.⁴³ Although most Armenians immigrated to Iran in the 17th century, Asal's family has resided in Iran since the 1800s, and she admits that her identity is interwoven with both Iranian and Armenian culture and tradition. Her family is

⁴³ Congressional Research Service Report for Congress. *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, by Hussein D. Hassan. Order Code RL34021. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008.

passionately nationalistic and holds onto the Armenian identity through their language, culture, schooling, and church community.⁴⁴ Although her family is not religious, Asal says that her family does not approve of her relationship with her fiancé, an Iranian Muslim, because he is not Armenian. For Asal this is especially difficult, and she admits that this has caused significant tension with them in recent months. Asal refused to convert to Islam, and at one point her fiancé considered conversion to her Orthodox Christian faith. In Iran, it is illegal for a Muslim to renounce his/her religion.⁴⁵ While it is legal for a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim woman (so long as she adheres to any of the three Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism, or Islam), marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is forbidden.⁴⁶ As a result of these circumstances, Asal and her fiancé came to Chicago in order to live together and pursue their respective educations. While her fiancé was able to secure a student visa, Asal came to America as a social refugee because of her religious and ethnic minority status in Iran.⁴⁷

Asal does not believe the hejab prevents men from looking at women. In a moment of frustration, Asal relays the following sentiment:

[In Iran] you will find lots of those men who are looking at you in some way that's like, oh, he's having a fantasy in his head. So if that person wants to imagine something or look in a like, dirty way, he can do that even if you are under a blanket. But if someone

⁴⁴ Compared with other religious and ethnic minorities in Iran (such as the Baha'i), Armenian Christians have relatively greater civil freedoms in modern-day Iran. While comprising a small fraction of Iran's 70,000,000 people, Armenians have made significant advancements to the modernization and advancement of Iranian society in recent centuries. They also enjoy rights to their own educational system, churches, community centers, businesses, as well as governmental representation. Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148.

⁴⁵ S.A. Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam* (Jalan Othman: The Other Press Sdn Bhd, 2006), x.

⁴⁶ Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi' Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 36.

⁴⁷ While she herself has witnessed very few instances of prejudice, Asal qualified as a social refugee from an international organization based on specific instances of discrimination that she experienced throughout her lifetime. These have included instances of religious and ethnic intolerance by Persian Iranians.

really doesn't want to look at you that way, he won't do that even if you are naked. So, by just hiding some hair, are you kidding me? What is this? It's not important that you should put it under the scarf. And doing that made our new generation more greedy to [see] what is under [the veil].

Although Asal believes that women experience greater everyday freedoms in America (such as engaging in public sports), she also notes that the field of micro-biology is just as male-dominant in America as it is in Iran and that salary differences favor men above women.

Asal also feels that while instances of sexual harassment are far less frequent in America, the sexual objectification of women's bodies is by and large more pressing in Western culture and that the visual culture "is so much stronger here." On a recent trip to Las Vegas with her fiancé, she admits that, "It was kind of, like, really sad to see all those girls there, like, the waitress who is barely wearing anything..." Women who put their bodies on display, Asal claims, objectify their bodies and are in turn objectified by those who are watching them; something that Asal believes is much more prevalent in the West.

Iranban, a 32-year-old Iranian woman, came to the United States four years ago with her husband, both in pursuit of graduate education. Like the other participants, Iranban grew up in Tehran in an upper-middle class neighborhood with her parents and sister. Her father is a religious man, but her mother, she says, is less so. Unlike their cousin, who entered an arranged marriage at the age of fifteen, Iranban and her sister were raised to make their own choices and to be autonomous. She says, "Always my father and mother give this independence, this freedom to me. You should know what you are doing, so we cannot plan your life, they would say." Like Leela, Iranban's earliest childhood memories are marred by recollections of war. During their first years in school, Leela says that jokes and games were used as a way to resist and make light of the strict environment in school, where religious leaders frequently

questioned them about their parents' lives. Iranban exclaims, "It was resistance, of course it was," when she speaks about the practical jokes they played on their religious teachers. Leela states,

In Iran we made fun out of many things that the government wanted us to practice in a serious way, but we made fun out of it, and we continue to do that [today]. And now there are some comic series about religion on the internet, whenever I see them I wonder how these people and nation can make fun out of everything. Make fun out of religion, rules and regulation.

Today, Iranban agrees that Iranian women "are trying their best in Iran" to improve women's social position in society. As a secular individual, Iranban, like Leela and Parastoo, does not believe that veiling is an effective deterrent against sexual harassment and the sexual objectification of women's bodies in Iran. However, she also believes that women in America encounter greater obstacles. Social expectations, such as marriage, financial success, and motherhood continuously limit American women, Iranban argues.

I think women here just *think* they have their freedom. Sometimes I just look at the way that men look at them...they're just thinking she's beautiful, that is enough. Do you know what I mean? If she earns good money, it is enough. That is the thing that is so surprising for me, the freedom that I was thinking about the United States, for the women especially, is not as rich as I think.

Each participant's narrative, while unique in historical context and individual experience, provides a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and complexities of Iranian women's lives as Middle Eastern immigrants living in the American diaspora. While most admit that women in America enjoy a greater number of 'ordinary' citizen rights, based on their own observations many believe that Western women face greater challenges in a culture that promotes female hyper-sexuality and the sexual objectification of women's bodies. Furthermore, many of their experiences in America have unfortunately been overshadowed by their perceived status as 'Middle Easterners' and 'foreigners,' which have caused significant

feelings of depression and self-induced isolation. Despite the social obstacles they face in Iran, each woman has made it explicitly clear that Iranian women engage in intentional acts of daily resistance and that despite their social limitations, they possess an unyielding fortitude as conscious agents of social change.

Utilizing a Transnational Feminist Framework in my Methodology and Praxis

Transnational feminist theory demands a reframing of traditional, Western feminism into a more introspective and multilayered framework of feminist theory and praxis.⁴⁸ Considering *all* individuals' perspectives from a multitude of intersecting positionalities requires intentional collaboration with differing feminists, activists, and social justice groups across the globe. It is a way of thinking anew about the world, which encourages an alternative framework for addressing contemporary issues of social inequality, gender difference, and an acute awareness of the global politics of our time.⁴⁹ Grounded within a post-colonial, post-modern critique of Western feminist theory, this theory advocates alternative viewpoints outside of the parameters of dominant hegemonies.⁵⁰

Utilizing Inderpal Grewal's term, "scattered hegemonies" as a way to contextualize the subjectivities that exist outside of a Euro-centric/American-centric perspective is essential to adopting an effective transnational feminist framework.⁵¹ Its theoretical underpinnings encourage a more critical look at the universal category of gender and the politics of "global feminism" by considering the impact of global economies, "patriarchal nationalisms," and other various forms of local oppression on women's lives and personal experiences.⁵² Transnational feminist theory

⁴⁸ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997), 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

and praxis also challenges traditional ways of knowing—“the production, publication, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas”—in Western feminist scholarship, which as Chandra Mohanty argues, must be confronted in order to disrupt homogenous images of a Third World women as victimized, tradition-bound, and passive.⁵³ The significance of utilizing a transnational feminist framework in this research project cannot be overstated. In an effort to create an effective and intentional counter-narrative about Iranian women in the United States, it is imperative that I engage transnational feminist theory with praxis throughout the research phase.

Reclaiming the Narrative

Given the suppositions made about Muslim and Middle Eastern women in mainstream American media, it is especially important that my perspectives (as a Western researcher/observer) are not privileged throughout the interview process. As a qualitative method of research and information gathering, ethnography has been critically examined by early feminist anthropologists who considered the problematic components of this research method and ultimately, the implications of its findings.⁵⁴ Most often, feminist critics concerned themselves with issues of power and knowledge, ethics of research, the dilemmas of profit, and professionalism.⁵⁵ As one scholar notes, “Ethnography’s distinctive research method...privileges the body as a site of knowing...”⁵⁶ While ethnography offers detailed descriptions of the daily

⁵³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (Autumn 1988): 64,

⁵⁴ Initial critics included such scholars as Judith Stacey (1988), Ann Oakley (1981), Paul Rabinow (1988), Stephanie Riger (1992), Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), and Gesa E. Kirsch (1999); Lewin, Ellen, ed., *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader* (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 149.

⁵⁵ Lewin, Ellen, ed., *Feminist Anthropology*: 149.

⁵⁶ D. Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” *Communication Monographs* 58 (1991): 180.

life through a ‘writing of culture,’ feminist ethnography challenges traditional scientific paradigms of knowledge and “truth.”⁵⁷

Feminist Ethnographic Praxis

I turn now to developing a critical understanding of feminist ethnographic praxis as an integral component of the research process. This type of praxis insists upon the inclusion of interview participants in each phase of the interview process.⁵⁸ It encourages a more cohesive, collaborative effort between the researcher and those being researched. By working in tandem, questions of authority and power, and for “whom” one might be speaking are critically assessed. Katherine Borland suggests that, “By extending the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation, we might more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research.”⁵⁹ This practice, Borland further argues, would at the very least bring to the fore those points at which the researcher and interview participant fail to agree.⁶⁰

Judith Stacy argues too, that elements of “inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal are endemic to ethnography.”⁶¹ She insists that despite an ethnographer’s greatest efforts to incorporate the perspectives and “voice” of the interview participants, a published ethnography represents “an intervention into the lives” of research participants and represents ultimately the final product of the ethnographer alone.⁶² The consequences of which, according to Stacey, should include challenges of interpretation, evaluation, and judgment by those being

⁵⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁸ Katherine Borland, “That’s Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna B. Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York and London: Routledge, 1991): 73.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁶¹ Ibid., 114.

⁶² Ibid., 114.

researched.⁶³ The solutions proposed by Stacey include identifying the limitations of the ethnographic process as an imbalanced relationship between the observer and the participant as well as a “self-conscious awareness about the distortions and limitations of the textual productions of [researchers’] studies.”⁶⁴ Recognizing my own interpretation of the participants’ experiences as only a “partial truth” of their stories has aided me in the interpretive writing process.

While feminist ethnography encourages an awareness of the power dynamics in the creation of partial ‘truths’ in the research process, it is equally as important to critically engage the conversation between those being ‘researched’ and the ‘researcher.’ In other words, challenging underlying assumptions and engaging the participants through conversation is an essential component to writing an ethnography that both forges new ideas and questions the status quo. Here, follow-up questions and dialogue have encouraged this kind of reciprocity, one which considers both the perspectives of the researcher and the individual participants of the research process.

For example, in one conversation I had with an individual she accepted the idealization of women’s bodies in America, particularly in terms of their physical attributes, without looking at how women’s bodies were subjugated and objectified throughout this process. By not acknowledging, say, the effects of female hyper-sexuality in the media on young, adolescent women, this particular individual accepted societal expectations of Western female sexuality at face value, without questioning whose interest they ultimately serve. Here, issues of agency, self-determination, and resistance to misogyny were not central to her narrative. As a researcher, I felt it was important to address and engage what I perceived as an unintentional oversight,

⁶³ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 115.

particularly as it related to issues of agency and self-determination for young, Western women. I use opportunities like these as a way to engage questions of power and assumptions with the participants in order to invoke dialogue and create a more complex, nuanced analysis of their experiences and perspectives. Still, I have worked in cooperation with the participants to ensure that the flow of information, the construction of identities, self, and subjectivities, continues to be empowered from both directions throughout the interpretive phase and writing stage.⁶⁵ By situating more of the perspectives “of the researched” central to the writing process, as I hope to have accomplished throughout this process, potential violations of interpretation are significantly diminished.⁶⁶

Chapter 2: Historical Background of the Study and Review of the Literature

The following pages offer a brief synthesis publications related to feminist movement(s)ⁱ, revolutionary discoursesⁱⁱ, youth culture, social movements in Iranⁱⁱⁱ, as well as Diaspora communities that address issues of gender and sexuality. In addition to transnational feminist scholarship (which is examined more closely in Chapter 3), the theoretical underpinnings of my project include theories of power and knowledge, subjectivity, and dominant discourses. Among others, both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler’s theories of gender and subjectivity also inform my research inquiry.

A Brief Overview of Women’s History in Pre-Revolutionary Iran

The 2009 Green Movement has prompted a renewed global interest in the decades-long struggle for women’s right in Iran. Women’s political and social activism has a far reaching

⁶⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁶ Judith Stacey, “Can There be a Feminist Ethnography?”, in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York and London: Routledge Press, 1991): 115.

history in the country, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Their political, economic, and social contributions leading up to and during the 1979 Revolution were especially significant, as part of the Shah's expansive modernization program, with increasing numbers of women enrolled in higher education and universities, as well as in the employment sector.⁶⁸ In the early 1960s women also worked diligently to bring about status law changes in areas of divorce, marriage, child custody laws, and voting rights.⁶⁹

By the 1970s women comprised approximately 43% of teachers, 44% of clerical workers, and 11% of medical and paramedical personnel, although these were largely limited to a small number of elite Iranian women.⁷⁰ The majority of Iranians in rural areas remained illiterate due to the Shah's limited expansion of educational services, although this increased by nearly 45% from the 8% literacy rate measured just several decades prior, in the mid-1950s.⁷¹ Rural women remained largely uneducated and illiterate due to their own familial and labor obligations and as a result of the social stigma associated with female education. By the 1970s, however, more and more rural women gained access to the country's nationalized education system, and the percentage of women with higher education degrees jumped from 1% of the country's population in the 1960s to 5% just ten years later.⁷² Urban literacy rates grew in substantial numbers during this period, jumping by 33% in the mid-1950s to 65% in the mid-1970s. And by the end of the 1970s, nearly one-third of the country's 175,000 university students were women,

⁶⁷ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 22.

⁶⁸ Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16 no. 4 (2003): 557.

⁶⁹ Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 13 no. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980): 169.

⁷⁰ Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16 no. 4 (2003): 556.

⁷¹ Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122.

⁷² Ali Gheissari, *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111.

and comprised nearly 20% of the country's urban labor force.⁷³ While there were tremendous educational benefits for Iran's population, the Shah's modernization program, which was largely structured around the rapid industrialization of Iran and the White Revolution (a land reform aimed at restoring land ownership to Iran's rural farmers), resulted in detrimental consequences for Iran's working and low-income populations.⁷⁴ High rates of urban poverty, increased income disparity between the growing number of urban poor and the middle- and upper-classes, as well as an increasingly repressive secular monarchy spurred many women to join various opposition movements, including religious and Marxists organizations, whose disdain for the Westernized sexual objectification of Iranian women allied them even further against the monarchy.⁷⁵

Those who aligned themselves with Islamic modernism, a movement that called for the "reform and revitalization" of Shi'a Islam, were supporters of an Islamic religious platform "based on a general concept of social justice" embedded within this religious doctrine.⁷⁶ Others sought allegiance within Marxist and Leftist secular organizations, and equally scorned the hyper-sexualized presentation of Iranian women in Western-backed commercialism, cinema, and in the media.⁷⁷ Leading up to and during the revolutionary period, women actively engaged in political protests, student-led movements, and led political demonstrations, protests, and student movements against the increasingly corrupt monarchy.⁷⁸

⁷³ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (

⁷⁴ Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16 no. 4 (2003): 556.

⁷⁵ Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 13 no. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980): 171.

⁷⁶ Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16 no. 4 (2003): 558; Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 13 no. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980): 172.

⁷⁷ Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 13 no. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980): 171.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

Despite their involvement in the populist uprising, the decades since the Revolution have witnessed a substantial regression in their legal and social status in Iranian society, as well as a reversal of most laws enacted in favor of gender equity under the monarchy⁷⁹. Newly State-imposed legal restrictions putting women at distinct disadvantage in divorce and marriage rights, child custody laws, citizenship rights, obligatory veiling, and limitations on the freedom of mobility are the most frequent subjects of controversy surrounding the contemporary women's debate in Iran.⁸⁰ For the past three decades both secular and religious women's groups have lobbied against the abrogation of gender equity laws, which existed prior to 1979, as well as against new laws and policies that further repress women's autonomy, economic independence, and access to fair legal protection.⁸¹

Building a Nation: Women as Producers

Since the toppling of the Qajar Dynasty in the early twentieth century women's gender identity has been a central theme in the country's national-building project.⁸² Each phase has incorporated varying threads of gender discourse that hinge women's emancipation on the physical representation of their bodies, sexuality, and their role as wives, mothers, and as symbols of the nation.⁸³ Author Parvin Paidar, among others, has worked extensively on the subject of women's gender identity in twentieth century Iran. She concludes, "[Iranian] women are, on the one hand, constructed like men as citizens. But they are also treated as a special category in relation to various roles they play in society. These include reproductive and

⁷⁹ Despite the regression of women's rights in the legal arena, there have been significant improvements in other areas, including women's access to higher education, increasing acceptance of family planning and contraception since the abrogation of the 1967 Personal Status Law, greater levels of economic independence and participation in the workplace, and higher numbers of women in politics. Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order," *Iranian Studies* 38 (March 2005): 46.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 22.

⁸³ Ibid., 22.

symbolic ones. Women are assigned status as mothers and revered as symbols of national and communal identity.”⁸⁴ Throughout each phase of Iran’s nation-state building process, gender discourse has been embedded with socially inscribed expectations of femininity and womanhood that were linked to the country’s progress toward modernization and international sovereignty.⁸⁵

Scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis have examined the theoretical underpinnings of the relationship between gender and nation-building projects in modern history. She argues that nation-building projects rely on women as ‘natural’ producers of a “collective identity” and a “common origin,” which in turn, has had significant effects on women’s social positions in the formation of the modern nation-state.⁸⁶ According to German historian Peter Alter, nationalism is defined as “both an ideology and a political movement which holds the nation and sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values, and which manages to mobilize the political will of people or a large section of the population.”⁸⁷ Both Alter and Yuval-Davis argue that ideologies of gender within nation-building projects are based on the idea that identity is a socially constructed entity within a specific culture or population of a nation-state.⁸⁸ In her analysis Yuval-Davis further suggests that women’s biological ability to produce and bear children is inextricably tied to nationalist symbolism as ‘reproducers’ of the nation.⁸⁹ Women’s identities are inextricably linked to their role as mothers and wives, and the future and stability of the nation-state therefore, is conjoined with its subsequent strength and growth.⁹⁰ The notion of ‘culture’ or of a ‘culturalized discourse,’ based on Yuval-Davis’ assessment, places gender central to nationalist discourse and nation-building projects. Here she comments, “In this

⁸⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 26.

⁸⁷ Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, (London: Arnold Hodder Publications, 1994), 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.

culturalized discourse, gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectives.”⁹¹

Other scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Leila Ahmed, and Lila Abu-Lughod have also examined gender and cultural identity as they relate to twentieth century nation-building projects. Chatterjee has focused much of his work on the construction of Indian and Bengali identities, with a specific emphasis on the ‘inner/outer dichotomy’ of the post-colonial Indian nationalist project. Chatterjee argues that during the twentieth century the ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ domains of Indian life were based on what he coins ‘selective ideology,’ where the technological advances of the West were accepted into Indian life as modernizing advances, but the religious and spiritual ‘inner’ qualities of life were firmly preserved within the conceptualization of gender identity and knowledge.⁹²

Similarly, Leila Ahmed describes the discourse of Western colonial “feminism”⁹³ and cultural nationalism as a “vexed relationship,” in which the question of women’s social position “...animates the political and ideological contests couched in the language of cultural authenticity versus foreign influence.”⁹⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod’s exploration into the “woman question” also exposes the competing discourses of Egyptian nationalism with Western colonial influence. In particular, the reemergence of the veil as a symbol of resistance and rejection of the

⁹¹ Ibid., 39.

⁹² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 122.

⁹³ It was typical of nineteenth and twentieth century colonizers to attack the social customs of ‘native’ Egyptian society, implicating not only Islam as a culprit of women’s oppression, but also the local men who imposed and supported it. Veiling, in particular, was perceived as a backward custom and a symbol of women’s oppression by religion and Arab men. Advocating for the unveiling of women by British colonizers, as in the case of Egypt, therefore exemplified “progress” toward a colonial “feminist” discourse where “...the issues of culture and the status of women....could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture...” Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New York: Yale University Press, 1992), 244.

⁹⁴ Lila Abu Lughod, “The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Politics in Egypt,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 243.

West reaffirms what Ahmed and Chatterjee similarly argue: that the issues of women—their sexuality and physical presentation—tend to be linked within the anti-colonial nationalist discourse with struggles over cultural integrity and nationalist identity.⁹⁵ For example, during the period of British colonial rule in Egypt during the 19th and early 20th centuries, middle- and upper-class Egyptian women largely embraced Western ideals of femininity and womanhood through dress, lifestyle, intellectual development, and political and social participation. Aside from increased involvement (particularly for the middle-upper and upper-classes) in Western style education, and Western secular political and social organizations, unveiling was one of the most noticeable ways that Egyptian women renounced ‘backward’ ways of indigenous life and embraced Western style of dress and the mores of the British Victorian ideal.⁹⁶ Leila Ahmed writes, “Veiling—to *Western* eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, as it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.”⁹⁷

Just fifty short years later, during the 1970s, a period of intense resurgence in Islamist movements in Egypt and across the Middle East, brought with it a return to “authentic” and “traditional” Islamic way of life, where veiling and religious social mores were widely encouraged and accepted by many middle-class people in Cairo’s urban communities. A “return” to an “authentic” Arab culture, which addressed issues of dress, dynamics of family, and mixed-sex relationships and interactions in public spaces, reaffirmed the strength of the Islamist

⁹⁵ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New York: Yale University Press, 1992), 236.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

position and simultaneously denounced the West and the “discourse of colonialism.”⁹⁸ Here Ahmed argues,

The Islamist position regarding women is also problematic in that, essentially reductive in nature, it traps the issue of women with the struggle over culture—just as the initiating colonial discourse had done. Typically, women—and the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women and the restoration of the customs and laws of past Islamic societies with respect to women—are the centerpiece of the agenda of political Islamists.⁹⁹

The practical implications of this kind of cultural transformation from colonial rule to one of Islamic “authenticity” on women’s lives involved redefining ideals of femininity, and womanhood, as well as their social status and legal rights,¹⁰⁰ vis-à-vis nationalist/religious Egyptian discourse. After Egypt was decolonized by a nationalist revolt in 1922, Egypt was ruled by an autocratic secular government until the 1970s, where after it witnessed a resurgence in Islamic nationalist movements. During the fifty year span between the 1920s and the 1970s, Egypt’s leadership maintained a platform of Arab secular nationalism, for which President Gamal Abdel Nasser was most notably known.¹⁰¹ The resurgence in Islamic movements, which ensued after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, brought with it a religious awakening through which the future of Egypt’s modernization could be addressed and legitimized.¹⁰² Women’s unveiling and subsequent re-veiling, therefore, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, even if

⁹⁸ Ibid., 237.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰⁰ Although the acceptance of the Islamist movement in Egypt represented a return to a culturally “authentic” way of life, there has been significant contestation by Islamist feminists like Leila Ahmed who argue that the discourse of Islam embraces a static notion of gender based on centuries-old interpretations of “womanhood” as something that is both “unambiguous” and “ascertainable in some precise and absolute sense.” This idea, that Islam embraces the continual legal and social subjugation of women as supported by most modern-day political Islamist governments, is as Leila Ahmed argues, where these very political movements have in fact failed. She writes, “It is this technical, legalistic establishment version of Islam, a version that largely bypasses the ethical elements in the Islamic message, that continues to be politically powerful today. . . . Thus, the Islamist position with respect to the distant past is flawed in assuming that the meaning of gender informing the first Islamic society is reducible to a single, simple, unconflicted meaning that is ascertainable in some precise and absolute sense. . . .” Ibid., 239.

¹⁰¹ James Jankowski, *Nasser’s Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002), 25.

¹⁰² Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State 3rd Edition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1997), x.

voluntary, became interlaced with nationalist and religious ideologies that represented the cultural “authenticity” of Islam and Arabic life. Here again, we see how inseparable the relationship is between nationalist ideologies and women’s socially constructed identity.

Contemporary Iranian history has also undergone similar nationalist paradigms, throughout which national identity is subsumed with symbolic and material gender codes. Prior to the 1979 Revolution, this was perhaps most epitomized through the ‘Women’s Awakening Project (1936-1941), a government-mandated platform initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi, which promoted the education and integration of women into the workforce, and which also outlawed veiling.¹⁰³ The representation of women’s bodies through the forced adaptation of Western dress and beauty standards became central to the nationalist gender ideologies present during this time. Women’s bodies, as in Egypt and in India, were made subjects of the State and of Western influence, where struggles over national and cultural identity came to the fore.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, studies on the conceptualization of women’s identity in post-socialist Poland and the surrounding Eastern European region also indicate comparable patterns of gender suffused with nationalist ideals and symbolic, religious connotations.¹⁰⁵ The ideological structures in place prior to the collapse of communism and socialism in Poland specifically have, to a large degree, impacted the social expectations for women since the end of the Cold War.

¹⁰³ Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State, Policy and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*, (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2002): 106.

¹⁰⁴ This is not to say there was not significant resistance to forced unveiling; indeed, more religious and ‘traditional’ women, as well as older women who had experienced veiling their entire lives, opposed the Shah’s forced unveiling, and there were even those who refused to leave the privacy of their homes. Furthermore, men were also subject to State-policing, and were similarly forced to shave their beards and adopt Western dress during this time. Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State, Policy and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*, (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 106. Patricia L. Baker, “Politics of Dress: The Dress Reform Laws of the 1920/30s Iran,” in *Languages of Dress in the Middle East*, ed. Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham. (London: Curzon, 1997): 181.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Chruscicka, “Representations of Women in Polish Radio Advertisements,” in *The Medium with Promising Future: Radio in Central and Eastern European Countries*, ed. Stanislaw Jedrzejewski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007), 143.

Specific religious ideologies (such as sexual purity, motherhood, and guardians of the nation) have affected the role of women in both public and private spaces, and have acted as filters for the most prevalent Polish femininities found today.¹⁰⁶

For example, after the end of the Cold War, the Catholic Church emerged as one of the strongest and most influential religious and political organizations in Polish society. Since then, women's reproductive rights have been significantly curtailed and abortion outlawed. Within the Church itself, women are idealized as domestic caregivers and nurturers of the family.¹⁰⁷ Despite the increasing numbers of female university graduates and growing participation in the professional workforce, the Catholic Church has appropriated many of the 'traditional,' patriarchal structures already in place and valorized women as the cornerstones of family and nation. The portrayal of Maryja, the Virgin Mary, for example, as a symbol of religious purity and Polish nationalism reinforces the notion of 'gender adoration' through the collective national struggle and sacrifice of women—or 'Mother Poles—as the protectors and emblems of Polish national unity.¹⁰⁸ As one author suggests, "What emerged from the Quiet Revolution of 1989 in Poland was a highly traditional culture, rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalist ideology, and patriarchal practices."¹⁰⁹

Other examples include the construction of the 'ideal' middle-class English woman during the Victorian period in the mid-19th century as well as the American woman during the post-World War II period during the 1940s and 50s. During the Victorian period, English

¹⁰⁶ Monika Platek, "Hostages of Destiny: Gender Issues in Today's Poland," *Feminist Review* 76 (2004): 13.

¹⁰⁷ Malgorzata Fuszara, "Feminism, the New Millennium, and Ourselves: A Polish View." *Signs*. 25.4 (2000): 1073.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Matynia, "Provincializing Global Feminism: The Polish Case," *Social Research* 70 no. 2 (Summer 2003): 514.

¹⁰⁹ Halina Filipowicz, "Taboo Topics in Polish and Polish/Jewish Cultural Studies," *The Journal of the International Institute (University of Michigan)*. 9.1 (2001): 4.

nationalist identity was embedded with ideals and values that emulated women's domesticity, as well as their functionality as dutiful wives, mothers, and daughters within the home.¹¹⁰ Victorian ideologies were constructed based on the idea that a woman's "*habitus* took the form of a useful, productive [white] body..." within the realm of the private, domestic sphere.¹¹¹ Similarly, post-World War II American nationalist ideologies were centered on the ideals of women's subservience and sexual virtue. Like women during the Victorian period, American women's gendered identities during the late 1940s and 50s were positioned within the realm of domesticity and male dependence.¹¹² In each of these instances, gender is the site upon which nationalist ideologies materialize. Women as bearers of 'cultural authenticity,' whether as biological producers of a 'collective origin,' or as upholders of family, morality, and the private space, are the cornerstones of nation-building projects, and those that ultimately sustain its collective nationalist identity

Drawing comparisons with other societies in transition enables a more critical understanding of the linkages of gender identity with nationalist and religious discourse. Thus, the connection between the nation and women is established; as producers and educators of children and as bearers of tradition and culture.¹¹³ Indeed, the struggle over women's gender identity in Iran has not only been a battle between 'traditionalism' and modernity¹¹⁴, but also a

¹¹⁰ Angelia Poon, *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period: Colonialism and the Politics of Performance* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 22.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹¹² Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

¹¹³ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 72.

¹¹⁴ The concept of 'modernity' in its contemporary historical meaning is comprised of distinct characteristics including the emergence of the nation-state as a sovereign governing body under which infrastructural elements such as a centralized government, army, and education exist "through which people can "imagine" and develop a sense of nationhood." Contemporary modernity also involves the existence of an advanced-capitalist State in which divergent groups of class and identities, such as "the bourgeois, professional classes, youth, and public women" emerge. Asef

battle between Western influence, religion, and Iranian sovereignty, where a woman's social experiences and practices have embodied these very contradictions. Thus, much of the struggle of a contemporary Iranian youth identity is as much embedded in these historical battles as they are a result of the social contradictions of post-revolutionary and post-Islamic Iranian society.¹¹⁵

The Creation of the Islamic Republic and Women's Gender Identity

In 1980, shortly after the populist uprising of the Iranian Revolution had toppled the monarchy, religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini conveyed his pride for the women of Iran because of their massive participation in the Iranian Revolution. In the years leading up to and during the Revolution, women from all political leanings staged massive protests, became involved in political organizations, and engaged in political activist groups. Their participation was most prevalent during the two years directly following the revolution, a period labeled the "Spring of Freedom," because of the relative political freedom enjoyed by various groups including Leftists, Marxists, Islamists, labor groups and women's organizations.¹¹⁶ The millions of women who opposed the Shah were heavily involved in the revolution, and as author Nayereh Tohidi argues, this was for some with more traditional backgrounds the first opportunities of active political engagement outside of the home.¹¹⁷ This was not the case for many university-educated, middle-class women, who, although initially supportive of Khomeini's promises of

Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 222.

¹¹⁵ The ushering in of a post-Islamist era came in 1989, with the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the death of one of the leading founders of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini (in 1989), and the election of reformist president Hashemi Rafsanjani. The sudden opening up of public spaces, the construction of highways, parks, malls, and cultural centers, as well as increased numbers of women's and student organizations provided greater opportunities for women and youth to socially engage in resistance movements and have greater mobility in public spaces. Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and The Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 79.

¹¹⁶ Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2003), 7.

¹¹⁷ Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran," in *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology* ed. Haideh Moghissi (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 282.

reform, grew increasingly suspicious of the clerical leaders that promoted Islamic law as the future governing system of Iran. Nevertheless, according to Tohidi's analysis, women from all social and political leanings—some secular and others very religious—came together in rallies and demonstrations against during the revolutionary movement.¹¹⁸ In fact, secular, university-educated, and leftist women who prior to the revolution did not wear the *hejab* chose to don it out of solidarity with the religious movement. Tohidi writes, “Many university-educated, middle-class and leftist women, who may not have worn the veil before or usually would have seen it as nonprogressive, considered it a minor concession for the sake of unity against the common enemy.”¹¹⁹

The driving force behind the revolutionary movement, according to Asef Bayat, grew out of the increasing dissatisfaction with the Shah's autocratic rule by the majority of the country's population. While those benefiting from his modernization policies included much of the middle- and upper-classes, his repressive policies on equilateral political engagement frustrated the masses, including the working-class, modernized youth, and the Islamic clergy.¹²⁰ Bayat further argues that although each of these parties experienced dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement from the State for various reasons, they collectively united against the Shah as a symbol of anti-Western, anti-Imperialist beliefs.¹²¹ He writes,

During the tense years of the 1970s, therefore, at the height of the Shah's authoritarian rule and during a period of remarkable economic growth, many people (except perhaps the upper class and the landed peasantry) seemed dissatisfied, albeit for different reasons. But all were united in blaming the Shah and his Western allies, especially the U.S., for that state of affairs. It is therefore not surprising that the language of dissent and protest

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 283.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 283.

¹²⁰ Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 36.

¹²¹ Ibid., 36.

was largely antimonarchy, anti-imperialist, Third Worldist, and even nationalist, turning in the end into a religious discourse.¹²²

Thus it is clear, that while much of the scholarship on the Iranian revolution focuses on religious revivalism, the underlying reasons for the populist uprising were varied, and included opposition against the growing class-based inequalities, the monarchy's emphasis on consumerist policies, and the increasing marginalization of groups that attempted to reclaim political agency.

Many women, largely inspired by the works of Islamic intellectual Ali Shariati, opposed the Shah for promoting what Sadeghi argues was a highly sexualized femininity.¹²³ She writes,

Following the encouragement of Ayatollah Khomein, huge numbers of women actively participated in the street protests. They felt at the time their presence was needed for over-throwing the corrupt Pahlavi regime (1941-1979), which was trying to make women depoliticized "western dolls," (*arusak Farangi*), as the contemporary Islamist intellectual Ali Shari'ati described.¹²⁴

Thus, while it is clear that many women from all walks of life, including those from differing classes, religious backgrounds, and political leanings, maintained markedly different positions on the future of Iran's governing system, as Tohidi, Bayat, and Sadeghi suggest, there was relative collective allegiance against the Shah's rule. Universally, there was a trend toward dis-engaging women's sexuality and sexual appeal as the cornerstone of women's femininity. As in Iran, across the West, feminists protested the continual depiction of women in the media and in television in purely sexual terms. Encouraging an identity grounded in political and social agency, rather than a sexualized femininity, was a common theme during much of the West's Second-wave feminist movements during the 1960s and into the 70s. The politics of public appearance, where bodies become politicized, are the most prevalent issues that contemporary

¹²² Ibid., 36.

¹²³ Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran," in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 276.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 276.

Western feminists, like many Iranian female activists during that time, included in their political agendas.

Not unlike Chatterjee's analysis of gender identity in post-colonial India and Bengal, women's gender identity became interwoven with Iran's revolutionary discourse based on the idea that Iranian women were the bearers of cultural authenticity and Iranian purity.¹²⁵ Disavowing association with the Shah and Western values, the symbol of "woman" in the Iranian State came to represent the reclamation of Islamic heritage and the "purification" of a society.¹²⁶ "The 'purification' of society," as Sedghi writes, "through the control of women meant that women's movements and their labor for the nation, the revolution, and themselves would serve *not* women's *own* interest but the interest of patriarchy, as envisioned in this revolutionary period by male-dominated participants..."¹²⁷ The veiled woman came to represent the country's return to an 'authentic' Islam and its disassociation with Western cultural imperialism and "Westoxification."¹²⁸ In a speech issued by Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after the revolution, he declares the following, "Any nation that has women like the Iranian women will surely be victorious."¹²⁹ His promises for "real freedom, equality, and dignity" were framed within the guise of an 'authentic' Islamic discourse grounded on principals of social justice and women's subsequent emancipation.¹³⁰

Within weeks of claiming political power, religious leaders instituted an 'Islamic' standard of dress, which included the re-veiling of Iranian women, the abrogation of the 1967

¹²⁵ Hamideh Sadgehi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 206.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹²⁹ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

Family Protection Law (which afforded women the right to divorce and child custody, and increased the marriage age from nine to eighteen), and the prohibition of women's judicial participation.¹³¹ Despite their massive participation in the revolutionary uprising, including thousands who protested on International Women's Day in opposition to the legal enforcement of the veil as well as the legal restrictions set in place; women have experienced significant regression in the area of legal and social equality since the revolution.¹³²

The discourse of rapid Islamisation ensured not only religious leaders' political power, but it also redefined the concept of modernity for Iran. While the conventional discourse of modernity celebrated Western secular values as standards for national progress and sovereignty, the process of Islamisation relied on the creation of a "modern Muslim nation" as the route to national independence.¹³³ The establishment of the *guardianship of the jurist*, or *vilayat-ifaqih*, was the governing principal based on the absolute rule by the highest ranking religious leader of that time, Ayatollah Khomeini.¹³⁴ As one author argues Islamic polity "...promises to restore a pure and unbroken order to modern society based on a claim to an ontologically legitimized higher truth and a uniform set of values grounded in this truth."¹³⁵

With the national introduction of *Shari'a*, or Islamic Law, religious leaders attempted to ensure that the religious doctrine permeated every aspect of Iranian life and reforms in areas such

¹³¹ Ibid., 232.

¹³² Joseph Suad and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Law, and Politics* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 639.

¹³³ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 265.

¹³⁴ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 382.

¹³⁵ Ali Mirsepassi, "Politics of Reconciliation: Secularism and Tolerance," *The Feminist School* (November 2010), <http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?article407> (accessed July 21, 2011).

as the legislative structure, education, and physical appearance, were effectively put in place.¹³⁶

Asef Bayat argues that, “In short, Islamism was in general based on a reading of Islam that interpreted it as a complete social, political, and economic, and moral system that had answers to all human problems.”¹³⁷ As Bayat relays, the absolute authority of political-Islam as an infallible doctrine left no part of society untouched by the new religious rule. An official ‘Islamic State’ like Iran mandates a social and political infrastructure determined by Islamic doctrine alone, in which the “Qu’ran or Shari’a [Law] is the primary (or exclusive) source of all legislation in the country, and the nature and form of the governmental system is derived from Islam.”¹³⁸ Thus, with the introduction of an Islamic State in early 1980, political religious leaders sought to ensure that every aspect of political and social life in Iran stood in accordance with their interpretation of Islamic Law.

Creating a new Islamic discourse included altering women’s gender identity. New laws were passed that significantly curtailed freedoms on women’s dress, including compulsory veiling. While religious women were not nearly as impacted, secular women (and those who chose not to veil prior to the revolution) were significantly impacted by this new law. The symbolic meaning of the representation women’s bodies, thus, took on specific religious and nationalist meaning according to the new Islamic doctrine, and mandatory veiling was heavily enforced. With the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, women’s roles as wives and mothers were meant

¹³⁶ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 382.

¹³⁷ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and The Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 54.

¹³⁸ Peter G. Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*, (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 149.

to be emulated within a religious framework "...to produce manpower for the war, for the glory of Islam, and for the nation."¹³⁹

Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall talks about the interconnected relationship between language, representation, and meaning in what has been called a "circuit of culture," a cyclical relationship between regulation, representation, consumption, and identity.¹⁴⁰ As a 'representational system,' language is comprised of signs and symbols (whether in the form of words, images, objects, clothing, etc.) and is used to represent and convey specific ideas and ideologies in any given time period in history. Representation, therefore, through language (whether in symbolic or written form) is "central to the processes by which meaning is produced."¹⁴¹

In the same way that Nira Yuval-Davis hinges nation-building projects on women's 'collective identities' as mothers and producers of a nation, the meaning and representation of Iranian women's gendered identities in post-revolutionary Iran were similarly embedded within these reproductive codes (as wives and mothers). Gender and sexuality in Iran became intertwined with nationalist and religious paradigms, as Hamideh Sedghi argues, and control over women's sexuality is one way that revolutionary discourse was preserved.¹⁴² Mounira M. Charrad writes, "In the Middle East as elsewhere, women's bodies become the site of discourses on nation building and patriotic duty when issues of fertility and reproduction are openly

¹³⁹ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and The Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 73.

¹⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, Ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997), 1.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴² Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 209.

politicized.”¹⁴³ Nationalist and religious discourse had, as in other countries such as Egypt, India, and later Poland, become gendered in its conceptualization. The representation of women’s bodies in public spaces, through veiling for example, as well as their roles as mothers and wives (as nurturers of the family) became symbolic of the ‘ideal’ Iranian women.

Post-Revolutionary Iran: Civic Organizing and Women’s Resistance

The significance of the generation born during and in the years following the revolution is marked by their historical location in Iran’s modern history and the strategies of resistance they have enacted against the government in recent decades. As previously discussed, major historical events, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the rise of Iran’s urban middle-class and the country’s rapidly growing population, its improved infrastructural and education system, as well as the increasing impact of technology and globalization, are important events that must be considered in discussions of today’s Iranian youth.¹⁴⁴

The emergence of a vibrant women’s movement and an increasingly rebellious youth population characterized the 1990s, a decade that would soon thereafter be linked with the beginning of Iran’s post-Islamist Era.¹⁴⁵ Post-Islamism is heralded by a shift in ideological and material expectations of what a post-revolutionary Iran should encompass. For specific groups such as students and youth, women, and the growing professional class post-Islamism represented a move toward more open thought and political pluralism.¹⁴⁶ In essence, it embodied a “...blend of republican ideals and religious ethics, with “religious democracy” as its political

¹⁴³ Mounira M. Charrad, “Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency,” *Reviews in Advance, Annual Review of Sociology* 37 no. 20 (2011): 422.

¹⁴⁴ Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, “From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2005): 46.

¹⁴⁵ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and The Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 55.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

mission.”¹⁴⁷ Unlike the religious edicts under which the Islamic Republic was born, post-Islamism encompassed a desire for political reform through a separation of religion and the State, democratization, and the emergence of resistance movements from the most marginalized sectors in society, namely students, youth, and women.¹⁴⁸

During this decade countless women’s organizations were formed, including magazine editorials and e-zines, the creation of which propelled the growth of the post-Islamist feminist movement during the reformist period.¹⁴⁹ Divergent feminist voices, including secular and religious, discussed issues of political and religious significance, such as the legitimacy of certain positions within the government, like the Guardian Jurist, the Supreme Leader, and the lack of separation of religion and state.¹⁵⁰ The move toward a post-Islamist polity encouraged the emergence of a more intensely open and critical dialogue than anything preceding it since the early years of the revolution.

While secular and Islamist feminists differed in their ideological perspectives of feminist interpretation, the post-Islamist era afforded new opportunities for strategic resistance that sought to enhance the social and political rights of Iranian women in general. Islamist gender

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁴⁹ The term ‘feminism’ in contemporary Iran has a very specific contextual meaning, and although this term is used by Iranians to define women’s resistance specifically within a secular framework, I use this term broadly as a way to identify women’s liberation movement(s) and everyday practices of resistance against discriminatory legislation, repressive ‘traditions,’ and social mores. Situating these acts of defiance within contemporary discourses; including anti-Western rhetoric, orientalism and Islamophobia, modernization projects (including the emergence of new technologies and new classes), and increasing student- and youth-based movements, are important components to understanding and contextualizing the politics of the body and sexuality in modern-day Iranian society. Feminist projects are therefore placed “...not along a trajectory of liberation from patriarchy but squarely within the messy situations of state building, anticolonial nationalism, changing social orders, and the emergence of new classes.” Lila Abu-Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), viii.

¹⁵⁰ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 110.

activists,¹⁵¹ those who believe in a reinterpretation of Islamic law based on principals of “Islamic justice,” have done so with the aim to “...fundamentally challenge conventional gender visions often presented as “Islamic”” in order to work toward greater gender equality within Iranian society.¹⁵² Islamic feminists have worked within the parameters of religious ideologies to redefine women’s social and legal positions in accordance with Iran’s *Shari’a* law. While secular feminists’ efforts have largely been stifled because of their inability to work effectively within the context of the Islamic Republic’s legislative structure, Islamic feminists have utilized the structures of religion as a way to reinterpret and redefine laws that are perceived as misaligned with Islam’s true interpretation of women’s roles in an Islamic society.¹⁵³

In 1992, for example, a law passed in the Islamic parliament that mandated that any man filing for divorce from his wife must first pay her equivalent wages for her housework for the length of their marriage.¹⁵⁴ This law was originally petitioned and campaigned for by Islamist women activists, who argued for greater economic protection for women within an Islamic framework. This law effectively worked against male legal privilege in marital agreements by guaranteeing wages as compensation for women’s domestic labor.¹⁵⁵ Hoodfar writes, “The new wave of Islamist feminists, with their unconventional and women-centred interpretations of Islam, is challenging and reforming Islamic doctrine from within, rather than imposing or advocating a Western model of gender relations.”¹⁵⁶ It is as a direct result of “agitation by

¹⁵¹ As a way to distance themselves from any Western association with the term ‘feminism,’ Islamic feminists avoid associating themselves with this term, despite its general use to refer to its opposition to social inequalities based on gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, etc. Homa Hoodfar, “The Women’s Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroads of Secularization and Islamization,” *WLUML – The Women’s Movement Series, International Solidarity Network No. 1* (1999): 5.

¹⁵² Homa Hoodfar, “The Women’s Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroads of Secularization and Islamization,” *WLUML – The Women’s Movement Series, International Solidarity Network No. 1* (1999): 4

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

activist Islamic women,” that the legal restraints on women’s rights were significantly diminished. By arguing that gender-based restrictions undermine the ethics of Islamic principles, female activists petitioned for increased access to educational, financial, and employment opportunities that they were otherwise prohibited from engaging in.¹⁵⁷

Additionally, President Rafasnjani’s administration throughout the early- and mid-1990s encouraged women’s participation in the sciences and medicine, and “established quotas of 25 percent female in the fields of neurology, brain surgery, cardiology, and similar specializations.”¹⁵⁸ Islamic women activists aggressively petitioned for these legal changes as well as for greater access to professional opportunities, and by the middle of the decade female parliamentarians were issuing more aggressive, more assertive statements on the status of women in the Islamic Republic, in what Valentine M. Moghadam argues is more in line with “what may be called “global feminism.””¹⁵⁹ It is clear based on these events that Iranian women acted on their own behalf, as agents of social change within the constraints of the Republic’s religious laws. It is as a direct result of their resiliency and challenges to social norms and legal restrictions that they achieved increased access and opportunities in areas of employment and education.¹⁶⁰

While Islamic feminist activists worked against gender inequality within the confines of the Islamic Republic, secular feminists like Elaheh Rostami Povey reasoned in contrast, that as long as religion and the State were comingled in Iran’s legislative and political structures, the

¹⁵⁷ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27 no. 4 (2002): 1140.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1140.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1140.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1140.

potential for gender equality will never be realized.¹⁶¹ As Mehrangiz Kar, a female Iranian lawyer and activist, argued,

The Muslim reformers who believe that Islam is a dynamic religion and are in favour of modification of the Islamic law, don't really believe in equality between men and women. They believe that women and men have been born to play different roles in life and therefore they must be subject to different laws and regulations within family and society.¹⁶²

Secular feminism therefore emerged in Iran as a 'citizens' rights' movement, which is fundamentally grounded in the belief that equality should exist for all individuals (and that the same opportunities should exist for both men and women), both Muslim and non-Muslim, and should not be rooted in a singular religious text.¹⁶³

Although initial actions by both secular and Muslim feminists in the early stages of the reformist movement indicated a potential for collective organizing around women's issues, by the start of the new millennium, it became clear that the differences between the parties were both ideological and fundamental. In one passage of a Human Rights Quarterly issue, these distinctions are identified by Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh: "Religious-oriented feminists were ultimately committed to upholding Islam as the solution to the plight of Iranian women. The Islamic State, in its idealized form, was integral to this vision."¹⁶⁴ In contrast, secular feminism "does not apportion to Islam the grave responsibility of solving women's problems in Iran. In fact, secular-oriented feminists view the merging of Islam and politics as a central part of the problem that Iranian women face."¹⁶⁵ While religious-oriented feminists have

¹⁶¹ Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domain in Iran," *Feminist Review* 69 (Winter 2001): 55.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶⁴ Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Prospects for Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 32.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

in the last decade worked within the legislative parameters of the Islamic Republic, they have according to many secular feminists, been able to sustain relatively little lasting change to the status of women in Iran, despite women's unprecedented participation in the country's university system and as members of the professional labor force.¹⁶⁶ So long as Islamic discourse remains an integral component of Iran's legislative framework, secular feminists like Povey and Kar, see little potential for effective and long-lasting change for women's legal status in Iran. Still, it should be emphasized that Islamic feminists have achieved a great deal in terms of legislative reform in recent decades, far more in fact than secular feminists, whose opposition to the religious structure of the government prohibits them from achieving substantive reforms for women. For example, Islamic activists have increasingly petitioned for economic compensation for domestic duties and housework labor. This law was in fact passed in 1993, which guaranteed women wages for their domestic services.¹⁶⁷ Such an accomplishment demonstrates the perseverance of Islamic feminists who have worked within the scriptures of Islamic texts as a way to increase women's financial autonomy and self-determination.

Iranian Youth Culture

Youth were no less invigorated than feminists and women activists during this period and young people increasingly exhibited rebellious behavior, defiance of moral and political authority, and participated in underground subcultures.¹⁶⁸ Recent years have also witnessed greater disapproval of the government's rigid patriarchal rule, and youth culture is largely characterized by its praise for individualism, its rejection of violence, and an appreciation of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁷ Roksana Bahramitash. "Revolution, Islamization, and Women's Employment in Iran." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* IX, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2003): 237.

¹⁶⁸ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 122.

tolerance and non-violence.¹⁶⁹ Their clothing, values, and expression of self demonstrate both their rejection of State-imposed disciplining of the body as well as the influence of globalization, consumption, and fashion on their individual choices and youth culture. Despite these narratives, images of both “modern” and “traditional” Iranian women are subsumed with sexualized codes, and “...attitudes that privilege men’s desire and sexual agency at women’s expense are held by most members of society: women and men, young and old”.¹⁷⁰ Much like the West, sexual harassment, sexual objectification, double standards, and discrimination in the workplace are common experiences for younger Iranian women.¹⁷¹

In their work titled, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today,” Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi address emerging trends in sexuality and gender discourse among youth populations in Iran. Their analysis focuses specifically on the evolution of post-revolutionary Iranian society and the historical markers that have shaped contemporary trends among Iran’s modern youth population. By focusing on two key factors of social development-education and fertility-Moruzzi and Sadeghi weigh the current status of women in post-revolutionary Iran. According to the statistical evidence presented in this article, Iranian women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are by and large educated, mobile, and experiencing later marriages and fewer pregnancies than women in previous generations.¹⁷²

However, rather than having to engage with “formal traditionalism,” according to their analysis, contemporary Iranian women must now negotiate with “specifically modern forms” of

¹⁶⁹ Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,” *Middle East Report*, 241 (Winter 2006): 26.

¹⁷⁰ Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran,” in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 280.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁷² Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,” *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006): 23.

sexual inequalities. They write, “The decline of formal traditionalism has meant that gender inequality has evolved into specifically modern forms: sexual harassment on the street, gender discrimination in the workplace and the sexual double standard in the bedroom.”¹⁷³ Indeed this has been the case for most of the participants during our interviews. Complaints of sexual double standards (particularly relating to virginity and women’s domestic obligations) as well as men’s sense of entitlement to women’s bodies are frequent subjects of discussion during our conversations.

Despite this, younger generations openly engage in “heterosexual affection, including kissing, flirting and horseplay, and even religious girls and boys “hanging out” together, mark the new generation as pleasure seekers.”¹⁷⁴ This recent development has, among other factors, led to increased occurrences of pre-marital sexual relations among youth. However, still bound to the standards and traditions of patriarchy, young Iranian women find themselves increasingly in difficult positions, as they are pressured by their boyfriends to engage in sexual activity, but are then judged by patriarchal social standards, which still mandate virginity for unwed women.¹⁷⁵ As one young woman states in an interview with author Pardis Mahdavi, “Oh sure, you can have sex with him, if you want. But in the end he’s not gonna propose to you, and you’re not going to be the one he’s going to marry.... We just have to keep reassuring them that yes, you are my first, you are the first boyfriend I’ve had. It’s not ideal, but he won’t marry you if he doesn’t think you’re his first.”¹⁷⁶ Young women are either pressured into having sex or, if they refuse, are accused of “frigidity” by their male companions.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷⁵ Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009): 150.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷⁷ Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,” *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006): 26.

So, what does this mean for young women, who are still bound to modern-day sexual double standards of sexual purity and honor, but who are ultimately pressured by their male peers to engage in sexually promiscuous activity before marriage? The unfortunate conclusion for women, as measured by Moruzzi and Sadgehi, is that the reality of young women's lives in contemporary Iran, while improved in areas of education, fertility, and employment, are still confounded with sexual inequalities and sexual double standards.¹⁷⁸ As a country with one of the highest documented surgical hymen-repair rates in the world, how are women ultimately able to exercise agency in these situations?¹⁷⁹ While engaging in pre-marital sexual activity often is perceived as a 'liberating' act for younger women, particularly for those from more secular backgrounds, to what extent do the consequences of these choices, as sexually 'active' unmarried women, continue to present social obstacles within this globalized, trendy, middle- and upper-class youth culture? While younger people are openly and actively engaging in conversations about sex, as well as pre-marital sexual behavior, it is clear women are still confounded by age-old traditions of patriarchy and sexual double standards within a paradox of a culture that increasingly promotes pre-marital sexual activity.

This has certainly been the case for several of the participants of this study, who recognize that sexual 'purity' and marriage are still integral to the idealized Iranian femininity. Still, several have intimated that pre-marital sexual activity for young women, while largely frowned upon by society at large, has over time become more acceptable, particularly for middle- and upper-class secular families. In several cases, the participants who come from this specific population—middle- and upper-class secular families—openly engaged with their

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷⁹ Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 304.

boyfriends prior to marriage, although some still felt compelled to keep their relationships private from certain male family members.

In recent years, numerous scholars have studied the changing social landscape of sexuality among today's Iranian youth. One such author, again Fatemeh Sadeghi, has researched young women's sexual experiences in Iran as a way to engage discussions about the shifting dynamics of women's sexuality further.¹⁸⁰ The politicization of sexuality, and the control of public spaces that came shortly after the 1979 Revolution resulted in a sudden change in the role of public and private spaces in Iran, according to Sadeghi's assessment.¹⁸¹ Where public spaces (e.g. parks, cinemas, restaurants, and universities) were once seen as places free from the constraints of social convention within the family, the introduction of the 'morality police' by the Islamic Republic and its repression of mixed-sex interactions in public have, as she suggests, forced today's youth to find alternative venues for social interaction and entertainment.¹⁸²

Seeking refuge from what has become a repressive public atmosphere; youth now look to the home as a retreat from the intrusions of the State on social convention and behavior. Sadeghi writes, "Despite the Islamisation of public spaces the formal sphere, private and familial spaces have remained relatively open and may have become even more so as a response to the closure of public alternatives."¹⁸³ This shift has led to increasing frequencies of pre-marital sexual relations between young women and men. Although tolerance for sexual engagement is much more accepted than in previous generations, today's youth are bound to the underpinnings of patriarchy that favor male sexual privilege. The contradictory nature of this development

¹⁸⁰ Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran" in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 278-280.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 279.

presents increasingly difficult situations for young women. As suggested by other leading scholars, situations like these can be particularly detrimental for young women, who not only experience greater instances of sexual violence in the home, but also continue to face social conventions based on female sexual honor and male sexual privilege. Sadgehi writes,

On the one hand, the male-oriented society expects them to be sexually more open than traditional girls. On the other hand, this more open female sexuality is not treated by the same society as an appropriate form of feminine behavior. Being a modern girl in Iran means being trapped between traditionalism, which keeps them uncritical and acquiescent toward the norms and attitudes of discriminative society, and a patriarchal modernity, which makes them more bodily expressive.¹⁸⁴

By examining these conflicting cultural norms, which simultaneously applaud women for fulfilling male sexual desires by engaging in sexual activity and which then in turn, condemn them for participating in the very act for which they had originally been praised, Sadeghi demonstrates rather eloquently the problematic nature of these types of sexual encounters in terms of women's ability to exercise agency.

Young women certainly face similar social obstacles in Western youth culture as well. There are countless books written by Western feminist scholars and activists who advocate for a more critical interpretation of the dynamics of gender and sexual practices in mainstream Western youth culture, and the paralyzing effects that sexual double standards have on women's ability to practice agency in sexual relationships. For example, in her ethnographic research on young, adolescent women, Dr. Deborah L. Tolman, founder of the Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality at San Francisco State University, has found that the discourse of women's sexual desire is typically not present among young men and women. Moreover, there continues to be the prevailing idea that fulfilling male sexual pleasure as purely 'sexualized' objects without any subjectivity is the primary function for many young women today. She writes,

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 279-280.

“Even as we enter the twenty-first century, the possibility that girls might be interested in sexuality in their own right rather than as objects of boys’ desire is met with resistance and discomfort.”¹⁸⁵

Tolman also suggests that throughout adolescence and into adulthood, young people are consistently faced with a “set of rules, principles, and roles” that are otherwise “mapped” out for them as guiding points for engaging in ‘appropriate’ heterosexual, romantic relationships. Central to these points are discussions about male-female sexual interactions, which flood young women with oftentimes contradictory sets of sexual expectations for themselves and for the young men they sexually engage with. Sexual double standards, that include such contradictory ideas like “...don’t be a prude but don’t be a slut...” and “...have (or fake) orgasms to ensure that your boyfriend is not made to feel inadequate, if you want to keep him” present a barrage of competing ideas about women’s sexuality, none of which offer opportunities to young women to exercise agency or engage self-awareness.¹⁸⁶ Based on these comparisons, it becomes very clear that many young women, both in Iran and in America and throughout the West, face similar sets of sexual double standards that require a more critical, ‘feminist’ interpretation in order for meaningful and long-lasting change to take place.

Theories of Meaning and Representation

Michel Foucault coined the term “discursive formation” as a way to describe the way the correlative relationship between ideas and concepts, objects, language, and the body.¹⁸⁷ The body, according to Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge, is the site where all forms of

¹⁸⁵ Deborah L. Toman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2002), 7.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), 41.

history—economic, political, cultural—are manifested and realized.¹⁸⁸ Foucault’s analysis of the *subject*, as an ever-changing form, is “...constantly dissolved and recreated in different configurations, along with other forms of knowledge and social practices.”¹⁸⁹ This means that the body takes on very specific cultural and political meanings as it negotiates and/or subverts with various forms of social and political power. The emergence of what Asef Bayat coins a “youthful” identity in modern-day Iran can be argued, then, in terms of Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge. Young individuals who resist State-imposed ideologies subvert authority through the creation of subaltern movements and the construction of a youth identity.¹⁹⁰

Like Foucault, Judith Butler’s theory of gender also defines categories of identity as products of discourse and ‘regimes of power/knowledge.’¹⁹¹ Her analysis of gender as a socially constructed category is a highly controverted one; in fact, Butler situates categories of identity as “...effect[s] of signifying practices rooted in regimes of power/knowledge characterized as compulsory heterosexuality and phallogentrism.”¹⁹² A statement such as this one, which situates a symbol of male dominance at the core of gender construction, disrupts our understanding of gender identities as based on inherent biological or ‘natural’ characteristics. Seeking inspiration from twentieth-century French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who famously argued that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman,’ Judith Butler further argued that gender is a process of “acculturation,” and not based on these assumed ‘natural’ or biological traits.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Charles C. Lemert and Garth Gillan, *Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 70.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹⁰ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 122.

¹⁹¹ Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹³ Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader* edited by Elizabeth Fallaize (New York: Routledge, 1998), 29.

The assumption within contemporary Iranian society that men have less control over their sexuality than women is an exact case in point. This assumption, one which positions “female passivity” to “male activity” in terms of sexuality, is, as both Sadgehi and Moruzzi argue, upheld within three areas, including Islamic law, social conventions based on patriarchal traditions, and the prevailing viewpoints of Iran’s younger population. These three “competing and overlapping discourses of sexuality,” as they suggest, are what further sustain the idea that women have an easier time controlling their sexual desires than men. Still, it is evident based on my own conversations with the participants, that this discourse is constantly being challenged and in certain cases, ignored altogether. In several cases, for example, a number of participants have indicated that their families (mostly middle- and upper-class secular) supported their romantic relationships as young, unmarried women.

In Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, she argues that gender is a process of ‘becoming,’ of taking part in a process of the “cultural interpretation of sex,” which assigns specific characteristics of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ as a way to create distinct categories and sexual binaries within a social context.¹⁹⁴ Judith Butler in turn, argues that sex “itself is an effect of discursive practices, rather than an origin, ‘produced’ through regulatory processes, practices, and structures.”¹⁹⁵ She further contends that gender ‘norms’ or ‘behaviors’ are byproducts of the process of discursive knowledge formations constructed by those in power. Within a conservative religious environment such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Azam Torab, inspired by the works of Judith Butler, argues that gender difference and gender hierarchies are created

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁵ Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 11.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.

and maintained through a strict interpretation of the male-female binary socially constructed out of conservative religious and cultural beliefs.¹⁹⁶

According to the Iran's conservative religious thinkers, men and women are differentiated based on the idea that they possess inherently distinct emotional and biological traits; that they are not equal, but complementary in their physiological makeup. The perpetuation of women's legal and social inequality, therefore, is based on the idea that the "complementary concepts" of *aql* (which represents rationality and reason) and *nafs* (which signifies lust, passion, and the animalistic part of nature) are gendered in their composition. These two parts respectively signify "order, control, and morality" and "disorder, lack of control, passion, and desire..." with the first representing the masculine and the latter the feminine.¹⁹⁷ Women's gender identities, according to State religious discourse, are therefore grounded in the idea that their inherent, biological traits are based on sexual desire and irrationality, while men's gender identities are rooted in principles of order and reason.

"[The religious authorities] have gone to great lengths to avoid gender ambiguities, rigidly prescribing the boundaries between the sexes with legal codes and rituals pertaining to the minute details of everyday interaction. This is based on the construct that women and men have different mental and emotional capacities, which are in turn linked to ideas about agency, autonomy and morality."¹⁹⁸

The inequality of women (in legal and social terms) is therefore directly linked to their presumed biological inferiority, and through which gender hierarchies are maintained and substantiated in religious, nationalist discourse.¹⁹⁹ Still, while the State's attempts at creating a gender identity grounded in specific gender differences, ordinary people consistently challenge these dichotomies by pushing social boundaries.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 12.

Such statements are the trademark of patriarchal discourse and similar arguments can be found across the history of not just Iran, Muslim societies, or the Middle East, but of Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. For example, women during the nineteenth century Victorian era were idealized in terms of their “sexual passivity,” their “delicacy and dreaminess,” and unpredictable emotional nature.²⁰⁰ These ideas were largely grounded in ‘scientific’ theories predicated by male doctors of that time, the most prominent of which includes Sigmund Freud, who argued that women’s ‘normal’ inferior biological traits were grounded in their unpredictable nature, a hysterical personality, and a largely egocentric and narcissistic persona.²⁰¹

Because women represent the family as both nurturers and keepers of the domestic sphere, the ‘ideal’ woman is often essentialized into an unchanging, static idea. At the core, she represents the family, and embodies cultural ‘authenticity’ by maintaining and upholding her biological role within the family as a mother. Her sexuality, by default, is an extension of this idealized image. By lending it this ‘idealized’ imagery, women bodies and their sexuality become in turn politicized through the discourse of religion and the State. However, women who engage in subversive or resistive behavior are ‘reconstructing’ the boundaries of gender by challenging prevailing legal and social norms (e.g. more moderate veiling, increased sexual activity). They are utilizing sub-culture and methods of resistance (such as altering their behavior, dress, or public visibility) as way to create alternate discourses of women’s gender identity against the prevailing discursive production of knowledge about the concept of gender generally and about women specifically.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Susan R. Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* edited by Alison M. Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 17.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 12.

For example, women in post-revolutionary Iran have argued for a re-evaluation of their legal and social status by challenging gender normativity and the prescribed gender roles. Although contentions between secular and religious women have exposed the chasm between these two parties' interpretations of 'gender' and the appropriate role of women in society, they are nevertheless pushing the boundaries of traditional ideas, customs, and norms. For example, recent decades have increasingly witnessed how women have negotiated the social and religious expectations surrounding marriage, child-rearing, household dynamics, and political and social involvement and visibility.²⁰³ They are in essence, creating new opportunities for social and political advancement in spite of the restrictive circumstances that otherwise surround them.

Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer culture theory argues that in a market-driven society, consumers act as intentional and active subjects whose actions not only reinscribe cultural norms, but can also generate new forms of identity.²⁰⁴ In this model, consumption is framed within a post-modern framework, where it acts as a process of active engagement "...used to generate cultural meanings and identities."²⁰⁵ Using the marketplace as a resource, consumers utilize advertising, the media, and fashion, as a way to engage self-expression with symbols, dress, branding, and trends.²⁰⁶ Consumer culture theory then "...investigates the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption..." as it relates to the creation of cultural identities by populations.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Catherine Sameh, "Behind the Women in Green: Sex and Iran's Unstoppable Resistance." *Against the Current* (March/April 2010): 30.

²⁰⁴ Aliakbar Jafari, "Two Tales of A City: An Exploratory Study of Cultural Consumption among Iranian Youth," *Iranian Studies*, 40 no. 3 (June 2007): 372.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 372.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

For Iranian youth, again those born during or after the revolution, the resurgence of a distinctly “youth” culture during the reformist era led to an incredible surge in consumptive behaviors and patterns. Increased availability and access to foreign goods, including technology, music, clothing, beauty supplies, electronics, satellite dishes, and mobile phones have paved the way for a more fluid and dynamic cultural exchange as part of a globalized youth culture movement.²⁰⁸ Recent patterns of consumption, particularly of foreign goods (e.g. fashion trends, music, foreign movies and books) from the West, have “accelerated among Iranian youth,” who not unlike other youth cultures in the world are taking part in an inter-cultural exchange within a greater global cultural phenomenon.²⁰⁹

While the former certainly cannot be homogenized into a singular cultural entity, the use of consumption particularly among Iran’s more wealthy middle- and upper-class cosmopolitan population has worked in distinctively subversive ways in order to undermine the religious ideologies imposed by the State.²¹⁰ Almost all of the interview participants come from middle- and upper-class families within Tehran, and almost all would identify with an intellectual or cosmopolitan, urban social identity. With the exception of Asal (who comes from an established middle-class Armenian community) and Parastoo (whose family is more religious), each participant embodies these distinct subculture, cosmopolitan characteristics.

Working against both the confines of the Islamic State and the generational separation from their parents, young people (those born during or after the revolution) are, according to the theoretical principles of consumer culture theory, able to reimagine new social identities based on these consumptive patterns, behaviors, and beliefs. Based on research done by theorists like Aliakbar Jafari, there is evidence that demonstrates a shift in recent decades in mainstream youth

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 367.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 369, 371.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 371.

attitudes that embrace individuality, a trend which he argues is a result of the increasing interchange of global culture and immersion in a consumer-driven, market economy.²¹¹ Indeed, younger people are consuming greater amounts of foreign music, including British punk, rap, and heavy metal. Increasingly, students are traveling abroad to international universities, engaging in web technology (such as blogging), and embracing a more globalized youth culture.²¹² Iranian youth have, as Aliakbar Jafari argues, “depart[ed] from the grand narrative of the state,” in order to make “their own personal choices of their identities.”²¹³ As active participants within a consumer-driven society, Iranian youth are faced with paradoxical circumstances, which include an increasingly liberal economy as well as a more restrictive, institutional Islamic republic. Youth are, based on Jafari’s ethnographic analysis of Iranian youth, making conscientious choices as consumers of a globalized market. They are, based on this analysis, recreating and reimagining a social identity outside of the restrictions of a more socially, religiously, and politically traditional environment.²¹⁴

For young women of the Islamic Republic, the consumption and subsequent creation of a distinctly “youth” female identity is represented most prevalently through their physical dress, fashion modes, and beauty standards.²¹⁵ While more devout or politically radical female youth identify with a more ‘ideal’ Islamic identity through their conservative dress, more cosmopolitan urban youth (who typically hail from middle and upper-class families within Tehran) personify a youth identity representative of a globalized, ‘consumerist,’ youth culture.²¹⁶ As a number of

²¹¹ Ibid., 371.

²¹² Mahmood Shahabi, “Youth Subcultures in post-Revolution Iran: An Alternative Reading,” in *Global Youth?: Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds*, ed. Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 118.

²¹³ Aliakbar Jafari, “Two Tales of A City: An Exploratory Study of Cultural Consumption among Iranian Youth,” *Iranian Studies*, 40 no. 3 (June 2007): 378.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 378.

²¹⁵ Mahmood Shahabi, “Youth Subcultures in post-Revolution Iran: An Alternative Reading,” in *Global Youth?: Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds*, ed. Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 117.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 118.

interview participants have intimated, the use of bright colors, fashionable clothing, and subversive veiling (in the form of a loose, colorful headscarf) are commonplace clothing trends for many women, including those from the middle- and upper-class. Even wearing tight, snug-fitting jeans underneath brightly colored *manteaus* have become ordinary fashion statements for many of them, through which they attempt to undermine the State's policies on women's physical appearance in public spaces.²¹⁷

While these patterns of consumption are distinctly framed against the State's religious discourse and touted as forms of 'resistance' by younger Iranian women, to what end does this type of consumption ultimately increase women's ability to exercise agency and act as advocates for social change? While young women are challenging the discourse of forced Islamic rule by the State by embracing consumerist practices and dressing more provocatively by wearing tighter jeans and shorter *manteaus*, in what way do these practices simultaneously perpetuate women's sexual objectification by the patriarchal beliefs that are already in existence within mainstream youth culture specifically, and within Iranian society at large? Furthermore, how does Jafari's analysis fall short of engaging women's sexual agency into the conversation by failing to discuss the practical implications of utilizing these types of consumptive practices as a form of resistance against the State? After all, if young, middle- and upper-class women, engage in these types of consumerist behaviors, the ultimate beneficiary of these stylistic changes are not women, but men. The sexualized imagery offered up through these types of consumptive patterns (e.g. tighter clothing, heavier makeup application, and shorter, snugger *manteaus*), while resistive of conservative State ideologies, are still very much framed within the discourse of patriarchy and serving the male sexual gaze.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 118.

In her remarks on this subject, both Leela and Iranban have argued that American women in Chicago are “plain” in comparison to the cosmopolitan women in Tehran. In many cases, both women argue that American women wear much less makeup and that women’s clothing is much less evocative in ‘everyday,’ ordinary situations (like taking a trip to the grocery store, for example). In several instances, Leela has witnessed women in Tehran ‘dress up’ in stiletto heels, tight, capri-style pants, short *manteaus*, and silk scarves in what she called very ‘casual’ and ‘ordinary’ situations. In Chicago, this would very well be perceived by many as out of place or entirely inappropriate choice in clothing in more ‘casual’ or ‘ordinary’ circumstances, like picking one’s child up from school, for example.

What scholars like Moruzzi and Sadeghi argue, is that while consumption of ‘globalized’ trends like more sexualized clothing or looser veils may very well offer up alternative discourses that work against the confines of the State, this trend is still very much framed within the discourse of male sexual dominance that perceive women purely in ‘sexualized’ terms. This has in fact perpetuated the hyper-sexualization of young women as they struggle to ‘fit in’ with their peers and youth culture.²¹⁸ It would hardly seem then, that this type of consumptive behavior—the donning of tighter, colorful, and more sexualized clothing—despite the growing trend among this population, will have any meaningful or lasting impact on women’s ability to exercise agency outside of patriarchal norms that privilege the male gaze and male sexual pleasure. It is clear, as both Moruzzi and Sadeghi suggest, that a critical “feminist critique” is essential to more clearly understanding how consumption of global trends can indeed act as a vehicle for women to exercise agency and advocate for social change.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,” *Middle East Report*, 241 (Winter 2006): 27.

²¹⁹ Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,” *Middle East Report*, 241 (Winter 2006): 27.

Diasporic Experiences

Recent studies on diasporic communities in the West have revealed that the manifestation of youth identity is often complicated by the intersection of culture, race, nation, and class.²²⁰ In her recent work with South Asian adolescent girls, Meenakshi Gigi Durham argues that adolescence, when experiences in the diaspora, can lead to an even more complex set of issues, where elements of sexuality and gender become “...imbricated with the conundrums of the other transition”—that is, life outside of the homeland.²²¹

In an analysis of Iranian refugee women between 1978 and 1982, author Janet L. Bauer narrates the accounts of two women whose personal encounters echo similar sentiments as those of *Persepolis*' protagonist. Although Satrapi's main character leaves her homeland voluntarily, who with her family's urging spends most of her adolescence as a student abroad in Europe, how might feelings of cultural displacement resemble other immigrants and refugees similar to those interviewed by Bauer? While refugees depart their homeland *involuntarily*, as a result of inhospitable physical and social conditions, Marjane left Iran because her parents feared for their child's safety in an increasingly volatile political environment. Despite their differences in age, class, and education, both women Bauer interviews, much like Marjane, experience significant obstacles and dilemmas as they renegotiate their social positions within Iranian and non-Iranian communities located in the diaspora.²²² She writes,

In many ways the struggles of Iranian refugee and immigrant women over individual place — gender relations, sexuality, race, and identity — in the face of both opportunities and constraints within the household and various communities of reference, are similar to those reported for Vietnamese, Chilean, Algerian, Mexican, and other immigrant women.

²²⁰ Meenakshi Gigi Durham, “Constructing the “New Ethnicities”: Media, Sexuality, and Diaspora Identity in the Lives of South Asian Immigrant Girls,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 no. 2 (June 2004): 140.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

²²² Janet L. Bauer, “Desiring Place: Iranian “Refugee” Women and the Cultural Politics of Self and Community in the Diaspora,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 20 no. 1&2 (2000): 182.

In all these cases, women serve both as intercultural negotiators and as emblems of community status.²²³

As she indicates, the conceptualization of identity for young women living in the diaspora is a complex process, one fraught with contradictory messages of maintaining cultural ‘authenticity’ and assimilation.²²⁴ Although the experiences for those directly following the 1979 Revolution differ markedly from modern-day Iranians, the most significant point to take away from this example is the impact of cultural displacement experienced by young individuals who begin anew with a diasporic setting.

This has been clearly demonstrated to me by several of the interview participants, who based on their own experiences as immigrants, have experienced significant feelings of cultural disconnect and displacement within their own local Iranian diasporic communities as well as within mainstream, American culture. For example, Leela, Iranban, and Parastoo argue that in many ways, their experiences in America are marked with feelings of separation and detachment from other Americans and within mainstream American society. Depictions of Iranians in American media as well as personal encounters with hostile individuals have only intensified their longing for a homeland that in many ways they feel largely separated from.

Chapter 3 Thematic Analysis and Discussion of Results

Asef Bayat’s phrase “subversive accommodation” perhaps best describes the participants’ opposition and resistance to State-imposed policies in Iran.²²⁵ State policies aimed at policing gender and sexuality (such as through dress or mixed-sex interactions) have, despite (or in spite of) their oftentimes stringent enforcement, produced paradoxical results since the

²²³ Ibid., 182.

²²⁴ While the experiences of the Iranian diaspora directly following the revolution are markedly different than today’s youth, it is important that I contextualize my analysis in a historical understanding of the Iranian Diaspora.

²²⁵ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 126.

country's revolution. This has particularly been the case for Iran's some 42 million people under the age of thirty, who have been touted for their subversive acts of resistance and engagement in subculture movements against State-imposed policies and moral authorities.²²⁶ The subversion and negotiation of existing laws dominate the participants' narratives, as many of them recall instances of insubordination against the government's morality police or religious authorities in public settings, such as parks and universities. Similarly, others recount moments of defiance through direct resistance of those State-imposed regulations that impact and determine women's appearance and propriety.

Women's activism during the country's 1990s reformist era provided many of the participants with opportunities to push the boundaries of legislative restriction and individual expression during their formative, teenage years. A strong youth- and student-led movement during the late 1990s led to frequent confrontations with authorities, including *Basiji* militia,²²⁷ who often engaged in combative altercations with individuals of middle- and upper-class who are by and large in favor of a more unrestricted, open, and secular government. In fact, in 1999 when several hundred university students peacefully protested the crackdowns on press laws (including the closure of reformist newspaper *Salaam*), *basijis* militia stormed their dormitories during the night, killing at least five students and injuring countless others.²²⁸ Although President

²²⁶ Ibid., 126.

²²⁷ Created under the *Republic's* Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the *Basiji* Resistance Force, which means 'Mobilization of the Oppressed,' is comprised of a volunteer militia group whose estimated participation is numbered in the millions. Its primary objectives, in addition to assisting military defense, include suppressing internal civil unrest and ensuring that internal security in the country is maintained. Benefits of participation in this government-sponsored organization include expedited admission into universities, small government stipends, and loans for small businesses and licenses. Armed violence and aggression, as demonstrated during the 1999 attacks on students as well as during the protests following the 2009 presidential elections, is not an uncommon tactic for this volunteer militia group. Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), 132.; Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 264.

²²⁸ Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 141.

Khatami issued an apology on behalf of the *basiji*, later attacks and violent crackdowns against students made it clear that young people were the target of numerous crackdowns on alleged violations of Islamic law by the conservative political forces.²²⁹ Since then, young people have been largely resentful of the conservative political authority they believe has specifically targeted them with repressive and violent tactics. As a result, student and youth populations are among the most politicized social groups in contemporary Iran.²³⁰ Most recently, *basiji* militia openly attacked peaceful protesters in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections during, which also included night-time raids of university dorms, attacks of individual protesters, and large-scale arrests.²³¹

In their encounters with morality police, several participants have described how they have been able to cleverly trick authorities, or subvert the prevailing regulations through deceit, secrecy, and coordination with their peers, classmates, and boyfriends. Participant Leela surmises this point best: “[Iranian women] are not silent; they are not silent at all.” While Leela admits that American women by and large have more “ordinary” rights in terms of citizenship rights and with regard to public appearance, Iranian women are not silenced by the prevailing regulations imposed upon them by the State. Their daily lives, as Leela argues, are comprised with acts of resistance. She says, “Whatever we do we are fighting for it, we are not weak.” In these women’s narratives, they often speak of resistance and adolescent rebellion interchangeably. While youth rebellion is often characterized by acts of defiance against parental and/or community authority, these women have made it explicit that resistance to authority,

²²⁹ Ibid., 141.

²³⁰ Ibid., 141.

²³¹ Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 264.

whether parental, State, religious, or community, have in many ways become politicized in the decades following the revolution.

Since the Islamic Revolution, every day, ‘ordinary’ aspects of life are regulated, which therefore propel Iranian youth to engage what would otherwise be considered ‘normal’ adolescent behavior into political acts of resistance against a controlling and socially rigid public environment.²³² This means that those behaviors often associated with adolescence, including rebellion against parental and community authority, socializing and flirting with individuals of the opposite sex, attending mixed-sex parties, and pushing acceptable social boundaries, have as a result been transformed into acts of social resistance against the numerous institutions of authority present in their lives.²³³

In addition to the State’s regulations on dress and behavior, young people still must navigate other institutions that attempt to police their behavior, including parental authority, community regulations and traditional, patriarchal norms, as well as police and local authorities that patrol neighborhoods. Daily activities (such as frequenting coffee houses and engaging in subversive dress) have subsequently become politicized by those very institutions that attempt to regulate and control them.²³⁴ ‘Ordinary’ or ‘normal’ activities, such as one’s choice in dress, hairstyle, choice of music, or where one socializes, often signify political acts of resistance or become ‘politicized’ against intrusive State regulations. What this does not mean, however, is that all subversion has political meaning or that defiance of regulations necessarily equates conscious and intentional resistance against State-policing. I want to also emphasize that I do not use this term uncritically and without consideration for its greater meaning during times of

²³² Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 149.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 149.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

intense political conflict and violence. Moreover, given the multi-definitional and subjective nature of this term, I refer to Rebecca Raby's research on youth and adolescent resistance from a post-modernist perspective as a way to identify more clearly the ways that strategic forms of 'subversion' and 'negotiation' can be used to effectively work around social confines as well to create alternative discourses of knowledge and truth.²³⁵ Relying on Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge, as Raby does, I argue in this particular context that 'resistance' is about disrupting social normatives and social institutions of power, whereby subjects engage subversive tactics that undermine the legitimacy of these institutions from which social notions of 'normalcy' are created and preserved.²³⁶ In so doing, it can be argued that opportunities for individuals to exercise agency—the ability to act autonomously and with self-determination—is thereby increased.²³⁷ 'Agency' then, is a term used to identify ways that individuals employ or 'reclaim' subjectivity and positionality within specific institutions of power.

I use these terms as a way to demonstrate the micro-practices of opposition used by a select group of young, secular middle- and upper-class women who by and large oppose the State's regulations on women's bodies and comportment, and who simultaneously navigate the changing social landscape of Iranian society and culture. Still, one's choice in dress, while in defiance of State regulations, may at times have more to do with asserting class or status, or attempts at "fitting in" with certain youth fashion trends, rather than as a conscious form of political opposition. Just as Western youth might dress in certain fashion trends (like Punk or Baller) to ascribe to a particular youth culture and to "fit in" with a collective youth identity, so too do Iranian youth engage in similar behaviors and trends. Just because this particular segment

²³⁵ Rebecca Raby, "What is Resistance?" *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 no. 2 (June 2005): 162.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

of Iran's urban population embraces global fashion trends and a 'consumerist' identity, does not mean that there is a sweeping movement of conscious resistance among middle- and upper-class youth populations who engage in these subversive behaviors. If anything, it seems based on much of the ethnographic data gathered from this particular demographic makeup, that there is an uncritical acceptance of the 'consumerist' culture that encourages alternative trends in fashion and makeup without considering the implications of sexual double standards that persist within this new paradigm.²³⁸

Still, while not all adolescent rebellion can be categorized as 'intentional' or 'conscientious' in terms of its political significance, it is evident that a large percentage of youth culture (particularly in Iran's urban spaces) is highly politicized in terms of its 'ordinary' practices of resistance enacted against State-imposed regulations and policing. For example, in a recent survey of Iranian youth in Tehran, Shahram Khosravi argues the following:

The Islamic order has striven to penetrate the very bases of people's lives: what they eat and drink, how they dress, whom they sleep with, whom they look at. In such an atmosphere every aspect of daily life takes on a political meaning. An Iranian takes a political position in his/her everyday practices, from patterns of dressing to hairdos. As lifestyle is politicized, coffee shops play a significant role in the creation of political opinion by being arenas for "banal politics."²³⁹

In this way, creating subaltern or subculture movements that counter (and in turn resist) different forms of authority have transformed what many might consider ordinary, daily practices into political stances of rebellion and resistance. For many young people, an invasive State authority further propels them to embrace a globalized identity and individualistic values and goals.²⁴⁰ The theoretical underpinnings of consumer culture theory, from one angle, helps us understand how the consumption of global culture and its subsequent transformation into something essentially

²³⁸ This includes recent works by Ali Akbar Jafari, Pardis Mahdavi, Shahram Khosravi, and Kaveh Basmenji.

²³⁹ Ibid., 149.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 58, 130.

“Iranian,” offers an opportunity for young people to create an alternative social identity outside of the prevailing regulations of the State and its sanctioned practices, or outside of society’s norms at large. This does not mean, however, that an uncritical ‘consumption’ of global culture necessarily equates a ‘liberated’ social identity or greater opportunities to exercise agency for young women. The consumption of global fashion trends, and more ‘individualistic,’ tolerant attitudes merely suggest that young people are individually reasserting their identity outside of the State’s religious ideologies and distancing themselves from the discourse of the State.²⁴¹

Still, there is resistance of these norms that falls outside of the ‘consumerist’ argument. Both Leela and Iranban purchase illegally imported books in ‘underground’ bookstores as well as media and film. Although these are banned by the government, Leela and Iranban argue that anyone can purchase these items with relative ease, despite the State’s regulations on them. There is a desire to learn about different ideas and philosophical points of view, they both argue.

Michel Foucault coined the term “heterotopia” to describe a place which lies in between ‘social institutions’ and outside of the confines of social norms. It is, he argues, “...a kind of utopia where any real cultural space is contested and inverted in the process of representation; places that are, therefore, outside the spatial boundaries conceived of by society...”²⁴² Public spaces, the representation of bodies (through dress and hair), the consumption of goods (through brand names, music, art) have therefore become places of political contestation, “heterotopias” in their own right, against State-enforced regulations. While these have become spaces of critical contestation for many young people, one can also argue that these “heterotopia’s,” while resistive of the State’s policies and practices, have largely failed to dismantle patriarchal norms

²⁴¹ Ibid., 150.

²⁴² Barry Smart ed., *Michel Foucault (2): Critical Assessments*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 60.

that continue to subject women to unfair sexual double standards in favor of men's sexual fulfillment and domination. This means that many 'global' trends, like music and fashion, are embraced unabashedly by young women, without further consideration of the sexual standards that are still in many ways, stacked against them. While consumption of certain 'global' music, like the internationally acclaimed pop group Pussy Cat Dolls or rap may very well work against the confines of the State, this type of music by and large still subjects women to sexual double standards and a culture of hyper-sexualization.

Every day is Resistance: Acts of Defiance in Iran and America

For Leela and Iranban, ages 31 and 32, daily acts of subversion were common occurrences during their childhood. As young children born during the Revolution, Leela and Iranban experienced the initial severity of the Islamic Republic's religious edicts in grade school, where religious education became the primary focus and compulsory veiling was required for single-sex schools. Leela and Iranban recall specific instances of resistance against the teachers and mullahs because of the intensely strict atmosphere in school. Often questioned about their parents' private lives (such as whether they consumed alcohol at parties), both participants describe the difficulty of these experiences and the fear they lived with as children. Leela also recalls several times throughout her childhood when her mother instructed her on the wrongdoings of the religious government, particularly with regard to its extreme religiosity and limitations on women's rights.²⁴³

In the years following the revolution, the Islamic government placed a heavy emphasis on the segregation of the sexes and stringently enforced Islamic dress and veiling. Women who

²⁴³Valentine M. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," *Signs*, 27 no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1137-1138.

opposed these policies and the abrogation of laws in favor of gender equality were either pushed into exile abroad or into the private spaces of their homes. Strict enforcement of discriminatory practices and brutal treatment of leftists during the 1980s forced many Iranians to flee the country to evade arrest, torture, and even execution. Understanding the historical context under which these events took place is an important aspect of these participant's narratives.²⁴⁴

During an interview with Leela and Iranban, they jokingly laugh about their methods of resistance used during their adolescence. During the obligatory prayer times in school, both Leela and Iranban, like many of their other female classmates, regularly evaded this activity under the pretext of menstruation, a time during which women are exempt according to Islamic Law.²⁴⁵ For both of these women, this activity was a State-imposed edict that was forced upon them by their religious school teachers. While Iranban admits she was somewhat religious as a child, she argues that eventually this changed: "As a child I couldn't understand why during my break, I should go and pray. After a while, I grew up and saw that [what] they're trying to teach us, and all of the subjects that they were trying to teach us, were meaningless. In Iran, we made fun out of many things that the government wanted us to practice in a serious way..." "Making fun" out of these sorts of religious experiences became methods of subversion and evasion for women like Leela and Iranban.

Making fun of State authority and ideologies is just one way that Leela and Iranban expressed their disassociation from the prevailing governmental regulations that were largely forced upon them and their families after the revolution. One might ask (as I did) how it is possible that a young child or adolescent is capable of consciously engaging in political acts of

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 1137-1138.

²⁴⁵ Solomon Alexander Nigosian, *Islam: Its History, Teachings, and Practices* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 118.

resistance against a political regime. How are these behaviors different from typical ‘youthful’ rebellion against authority? How were these actions intentional and consciously formulated against a religious revolutionary movement? For both Leela and Iranban, subversion of prevailing regulations became an integral part of their identity as ‘Iranian girls’ as a result of the regulations that were imposed upon them at such an early age. Their identities, as young girls and later as young women, were highly politicized. Asef Bayat’s term “subversive accommodation,” was used by these women as a way to disengage one’s self from a religious system that suppressed them and their families.

Smoking in Public Spaces

In fact, throughout our conversations, both Iranban and Leela talk about how resisting State-imposed regulations have become a central part of their daily lives in Tehran. Iranban argues, “My very good resistance is smoking, I used to drive and smoke, sometimes in a park even. When it was snowing, I used to smoke weed in the park.” Both Leela and Iranban laugh at this statement, and Leela says, “You are so brave! If they arrested you.....,” to which Iranban laughingly responds, “I know, they would kill me!” Later Leela says to Iranban in a much more serious tone, “But I think you were so brave that you smoked in Iran in the park, because in Iran I smoked while I was driving, but I never had the courage to smoke in the street because I couldn’t tolerate the reaction of the people.” According to the Leela and Iranban, the social taboo for women who smoke publically is largely associated with sexual looseness and promiscuity in Iran.²⁴⁶ While this point remains one of contention (and therefore unconfirmed), smoking in

²⁴⁶ While this point has not been officially confirmed, several participants have discussed how smoking tobacco is associated with certain social stigmas. Although this may not in fact be true for all regions within Iran, it may be that certain micro-culture spaces in Tehran (where the participants are from) carry social stigmas for smoking cigarettes, such as sexual promiscuity or prostitution. Smoking marijuana or hashish, on the other hand, is illegal and prohibited.

public spaces in Tehran is an act that has recently come under attack by Iranian officials on the grounds of its negative health effects, and despite the alleged social taboos that are ascribed to women who smoke in public, it is legal for both men and women to smoke cigarettes.²⁴⁷ While recent public smoking bans have largely fallen under the discourse of public health concerns, awareness of State policies on smoking helps to contextualize how this behavior has in recent years become increasingly associated with ‘unhealthy’ and ‘marginalized’ behavior.

The bans on women smoking, while distinct from the bans on smoking in public spaces at large, are representative more broadly of an ideological shift that increasingly perceives female smokers as amoral and sexually loose. For Leela, being able to smoke openly was something that was extraordinarily liberating when she first came to Chicago, even though Chicago is increasingly prohibiting smoking tobacco in its public spaces. She says,

I smoked a cigarette and maybe more than anything else, here it was fun for me, because I was so free to do that and it was an ordinary thing to do and no one looked at me in a strange way [because] I’m a woman and smoking a cigarette....It’s strange for women to walk and smoke so freely and easily.....But [in America] I had the experience, because it was only me and my cigarette and it was nothing special. It was a sense of freedom in a way that I never really experienced with my cigarette that I never had in Iran.

But, as Leela later suggests, it is for this very reason that young Iranian women utilize smoking as a way to sexually entice other men and as a form of youthful resistance against a repressive society. This is not altogether different here in the United States and in Chicago in particular, where smoking bans are prevalent and the stigma against smoking in public is increasingly perceived as “disgusting” habit by other non-smokers. When asked why she engages in resistive activity, Iranban responds, “I’m against the revolution, I’m against the rules, I don’t like the

²⁴⁷ *Mehr News Agency*, “Smoking Banned in Public Spaces in Tehran,” *Mehrnews.com* (May 31, 2009), <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=888761> (accessed August 10, 2011).

rules. Even [in America],” she says, “...if I can find the weed,²⁴⁸ I will smoke it in the street. It is my health, it’s my freedom, isn’t it?! No one can tell me!” Still, this apparent equation of smoking in public in Chicago with ‘liberation’ perhaps is more broadly representative of her own feelings of anonymity as an immigrant who only recently came to America and who is still not integrated into daily life within this urban space.

In 2009, smoking in public places in Tehran became illegal. Citing its health dangers and negative effects on the population at large, Tehran Mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf announced that smoking in public areas, including all public organizations, hotels, restaurants, tea houses, and coffee shops would no longer be allowed.²⁴⁹ Only five years prior, smoking the water-pipe (a century’s-long tradition throughout the region) was illegalized in public spaces in Tehran. While this activity was prohibited on the grounds of its health-related concerns, the ban came amidst a crackdown by moral authorities on Iranian youth who violated Islamic dress codes and mingle with individuals of the opposite sex. Officials say smoking the water-pipe in tea houses has led to increased instances of social mingling and flirting by young men and women.²⁵⁰

Although the social taboo allegedly associated with smoking in public spaces in Iran remains a topic of debate, awareness of its overall negative health consequences has become its primary focus in recent years. This ban resembles countless others that in recent decades have been enacted in countries across the globe, which prohibit smoking on the grounds of its negative health effects. In fact, smoking was largely linked with social deviance and immorality throughout the twentieth century in the United States. It, along with the excess consumption of

²⁴⁸ In this reference, Iranban refers to the consumption of marijuana.

²⁴⁹ *Mehr News Agency*, “Smoking Banned in Public Spaces in Tehran,” *Mehrnews.com* (May 31, 2009), <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=888761> (accessed August 10, 2011).

²⁵⁰ Jim Muir, “Iran to Ban Water-Pipe,” *BBC News*, (June 20, 2004). http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3824515.stm (accessed August 4, 2011).

alcohol, drugs, gambling, swearing, and sexual practices, has throughout recent American history been associated with moral deviance, social irresponsibility, and unrespectable behavior.²⁵¹

While smoking bans have been enacted in recent decades because of their negative health effects, the negative cultural connotation associated with this behavior undoubtedly plays an important role in curbing smoking rates among many Americans.²⁵² The separation of smokers to segregated public spaces (often on the margins of a communal space) further "...relegate[s] smokers to the demeaning social territory of the deviant and faintly unrespectable."²⁵³

What is interesting about this recent development in American history has to do with the dominant social ideology that originally linked smoking (as well as drinking, drugs, etc.) with social deviance and immoral behavior in the early twentieth century. The evolution of this ideology has transformed these actions into illegal behaviors subject to the regulations of local and State authorities. Much like the act of smoking for young women in Tehran may be perceived by some as a symbol of sexual looseness and promiscuity, recent bans on smoking tobacco and the water-pipe demonstrate how the disdain for this behavior, as well as its negative health consequences, have potentially propelled this behavior into a place of social deviancy in contemporary Iranian society.

For Iranban, it is clear that smoking signifies a political act of resistance against laws as well as a subversion of social norms that prevent her from engaging in a pleasurable activity. She has made it explicitly clear that despite the restrictions (such as public segregation for smokers and non-smokers), she is unwilling to accept these laws that ultimately diminish her access to

²⁵¹ John C. Burnham, *Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), xvii.

²⁵² Robert A. Kagan and Jerome H. Skolnick, "Banning Smoking: Compliance Without Enforcement," in *Smoking Policy: Law, Politics, and Culture* edited by Robert L. Rabin and Stephen D. Sugarman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

smoking freely and openly in public. On the other hand, while Leela associates smoking in public spaces in Chicago with a sense of ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation,’ if smoking bans criminalize this act any further, she argues this could change for her as well. Conforming to and perhaps even internalizing these social norms (that smoking is an addictive and ‘disgusting’ habit) could potentially lead Leela disassociate herself from this behavior entirely.

Measuring Women’s Success and Sexual Double Standards

Interestingly, the participants’ experiences in America highlight what they believe is a ‘complacency’ by young American women to combat instances of sexual double standards and the sexual objectification of women’s bodies in Western media and advertisements. In a country where the State polices women’s bodies in a distinctly different way, various participants have argued that American society places undue pressure on women to achieve economic and familial success in lieu of achieving substantial meaning in their lives. In other words, they believe that American women are pressured to achieve ‘success’ in areas of employment and family life, by having accomplished both high-paying jobs, and also by fulfilling the role of wife and mother, most often to multiple children. This observation is certainly not new, in actuality it has been a strong point of contention for Western women since the 1960s and 70s.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ In recent decades many American women have argued that young girls are conditioned at an early age to fulfill certain ‘ideal’ standards of womanhood and femininity, which include marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, career and economic wealth have increasingly become symbols of individual success, and for young women, these pressures are often experienced separately and simultaneously. These ideas can be further explored in the following references: Arlie Hochschild with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon Books, 1990); Margie Herrin, Regina M. Watkins and Lonnie R. McDonald, “The Juxtaposition of Career and Family: A Dilemma for Professional Women,” *The Feminist eZine*, (1998). <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/Career-n-Family-Dilemma.html> (accessed August 4, 2011).; Stewart D. Friedman and Jeffrey H. Greenhaus, *Work and Family-Allies or Enemies? What Happens When Business Professionals Confront Life Choices*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).; Christine A. Leatz, *Career Success / Personal Stress: How to Stay Healthy in a High-Stress Environment*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

Other participants have also noted that self-induced seclusion has been used out of extreme frustration toward a society that they believe is racist toward Middle Eastern people, and particularly toward Iranians. Because subversion, resistance, and evasion plays such an integral role in the women's lives, both in Iran and in America, it functions as the central theme in discussions of issues of dress, household dynamics, and women's values and self-expression.

Other participants have talked about resistance against the prevailing social norms, which for many of them, are still steeped in traditional, patriarchal norms and outdated modes of thinking. Male chauvinism and sexism are by and large the most common complaints issued by the interviewees, who agree that Iranian men feel a sense of entitlement and access to women's bodies in public spaces. Asal recalls a particularly frightening encounter with an older man as a young, teenage girl while walking along a secluded bridge to school. Asal recalls that he grabbed her from behind and tried to pull her down, but after a few moments of struggle she was able to escape. At book fairs and festivals, Asal also complains that men intentionally brush up against her body and grab her. Negar has also had similar encounters with men, who she says, are taught from early on to perceive women only as sex objects. The tendency by men to perceive women as sexual objects, according to most of the participants, are grounded in patriarchal customs rooted in the customs and traditions of Iranian history.

When asked whether women are able to fight back and resist, Negar argues that while younger women are more vocal against male perpetrators nowadays, Iranian men continue to maintain the victimized status in these situations. Perceived as temptresses and seducers, women who publically speak out against sexual harassment and sexual violations are all too quickly blamed for their perpetrator's sexual violations. While Negar contends that American women do not experience these kinds of injustices, there are many women's rights advocates who would

argue otherwise. The vilification of scantily-clad women as “enticers” of male sexual aggression is a frequent point of contention for women’s rights advocates in the West.²⁵⁵ In fact, only recently young American women took part in “slut walk” protest marches, which have been spotted across the nation in cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston. These protests have grown out of what many women’s rights proponents hail as yet another instance of victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault. When a Toronto police officer advised against “dressing like sluts” in order to avoid rape and sexual assault, young women took to the streets in what has quickly snowballed into an international movement to combat sexual double standards that exist in cases of sexual violence. Shifting the blame from the female victims to male sexual aggressors is central to this movement’s objective.²⁵⁶

How do these recent events in North America compare to Negar’s perspective of American culture and ideals of female sexuality and agency in this country? While Negar agrees that women’s bodies are sexually objectified both in America and in Iran, it seems as though she is willing to accept the beautification of women’s bodies in America at face value without challenging the underlying principles of the standards on women’s sexuality and femininity in this country. But after talking about this for some time, Negar reasons that because women’s bodies “are restricted” in Iran, “it is not normal for men to see women” and so there is a constant desire to “discover them,” she says. In America, the visual appearance of women’s bodies is unrestricted and thus, she argues, normalized in public spaces. She says that both American and Iranian cultures sexually objectify women’s bodies in public spaces and concludes that, “I don’t

²⁵⁵ Avigail Moor, “From Victim to Empowered Survivor: Feminist Therapy with Survivors of Rape and Sexual Assault,” in *Feminism and Women’s Rights Worldwide: Heritage, Roles, and Issues*, Volume 1, edited by Michele Antoinette Paludi (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 139.

²⁵⁶ Russell Contreras, Associated Press, “Cop’s Rape Comment Sparks Wave of ‘Slut Walks,’” *MSNBC.MSN.COM*, May 6, 2011. (accessed August 8, 2011). http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42927752/ns/us_news-life/t/cops-rape-comment-sparks-wave-slutwalks/.

think it is good to make use of women for advertising, but putting restrictions [on women's bodies] will have negative effects. It should be balanced, I guess. Not this, not that.”

Subversion of Authority

Encounters with the morality police were frequent occurrences for many of the interview participants and their friends. Several have been publically chastised for violations of the Islamic dress code and for socializing with peers of the opposite sex. Others have been arrested on numerous occasions because of their flagrant violations of State-imposed policies. Iranban and her boyfriend were able to evade arrest by corroborating a story about their supposed engagement and upcoming wedding, a kind of ‘backup plan’ which they used when stopped by the authorities.

Like Leela and Iranban, Asal has also subverted authority during her adolescence. Although Asal has largely averted direct encounters with the country's morality police, her subversion of prevailing regulations on inter-religious and inter-ethnic dating has created significant tension within her family and community. As teenagers, Asal and her Muslim boyfriend would secretly ‘hang out’ together, violating both her Armenian community's social norms as well as the government's laws on unmarried men and women socializing with one another. Her boyfriend would drop her off in a neighboring area to walk the remaining distance home, so as to avoid a potentially violent encounter with Armenian men in her community. “I didn't want him to come there, because especially the young boys of the neighborhood they know this guy isn't Armenian, there will be a fight there, this has happened before.” Although Asal was aware of the risks of having a romantic relationship with a Muslim man, including community isolation and familial tension, this was a price Asal was willing to pay. In hindsight,

Asal says, “I knew that this would be the circumstance [with my family]. This is the consequence of what I did.”

In June 2009 Leela and her husband took part in the protests following Iran’s presidential elections. For both of them, participating in such a momentous historical event gave them hope that political change was possible in their country. “At that time,” Leela says, “we thought that if these protests continue for two more weeks things will change [in this country]. The people were so united in the protests, you could see people from different generations, we all were united, a person like me and a religious person with a long veil.” At the same time, Parastoo Sarashaar joined in a rally protesting the outcome of the elections from Chicago, where she says fellow Iranians came together in support of the peaceful demonstrations taking place in their home country. For Leela, participation in the protests signified a greater opposition of State-imposed policies.

Cultural Discrimination in Chicago

While in Chicago, several of the participants have recounted significant instances of cultural discrimination, and have as a result suffered intense loneliness and isolation. For Iranban, who has endured a significant amount of harassment because of her Iranian/immigrant identity, seclusion became a form of self-induced isolation against what in her mind, had become a hostile environment. On reflecting on her six month seclusion in her apartment, Iranban says, “Sometimes I think that there is so much weight that [Iranians] carry here. I feel like I don’t count as a human in the United States because I don’t have a proper ID.” In one instance, when a cashier refused to sell Iranban cigarettes because she wasn’t able to read her student visa clearly, she recalls how humiliating this experience was: “So I opened the visa page, and she

started checking the extension, but she said I cannot give you cigarettes. So, I was like, are you the immigration police? And I was so pissed, that is so embarrassing. There are a bunch of people in line and they are looking at you. First of all, the picture of you is in the scarf, and [they think] uh oh, there is one terrorist over there.” In recalling these experiences, Iranban says, “Everything here is tough.”

Unlike Iranban, Parastoo vocalized her opposition toward the racism she experienced by challenging individuals head-on. Citing specific instances of personal hardship since arriving in America three years ago Parastoo argues,

You have to do a lot [in America] to gain at least half of what you have in your own country. You speak the language, you know a lot of people, you know a lot of networks, you have the support of your family and friends. But here, you’re nothing! You don’t have any meaning! No one knows you! So, you have to start and build everything from the beginning.

When asked whether they experience greater forms of political and/or social agency in America, the participants have responded with mixed answers, citing that both places present distinctive opportunities and obstacles for women. What the participants have made explicitly clear in their narratives is that resistance, whether against the State, patriarchal traditions, parental or community authority, or against religious ideals, is a constant presence in their lives in Iran. The ‘discursive formation’ of State ideologies has left no area of their personhood untouched, therefore propelling them to recreate a ‘youthful’ identity outside of the prevailing regulations.

For several of the participants, life in Chicago has brought with it a unique set of unanticipated challenges, including bearing the social stigma associated with their Iranian immigrant identity. This has, I would argue, at times stifled their ability to engage in subversion or resistance of these reductionist categorizations, and prevented them from immersing themselves more fully as contributing members of society. This was definitely the case for

Iranban, who was unable to confront individuals who stigmatized her. Also, several of the participants like Leela and Iranban are prohibited from working in Chicago due to their own Visa stipulations. Others have been unable to afford the high cost of universities as international students living in the U.S.

Perspectives on Women's Dress Code, the Veil, and Fashion

Each interview participant has experienced instances of sexual harassment in Iran. Like Negar, most argue that it is a commonplace occurrence and that Iranian men are trained to perceive women as sex objects. Instances of verbal aggression, as well as pinching and grabbing were the most frequently noted forms of sexual aggression the participants have encountered. While they have emphasized on separate occasions that not all Iranian men engage in this behavior, the more important point the participants articulate has more to do with the overall ineffectiveness of women's modest clothing on men's sexually aggressive behavior, a fact which contradicts the notion that an Islamic dress code prevents women from seducing men. If anything, the participants argue, covering women's bodies has only enticed younger men to further act out their sexual aggression against them. Women's bodies, they argue, have become even more sexualized because they are not visible.

The purpose of shrouding garments like the *chador* and *hejab* not only maintains women's honor and 'ideal' Islamic identity, but is said to also protect men from succumbing to women's sexual enticement. After the revolution, some of Iran's Islamic clergy argued that even the presence of women was said to "undermine men's better judgement," and that the sexual arousal caused by women can disrupt the moral social order integral to Iranian Islamic society.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Haleh Afshar, "Behind the Veil: The Public and Private Faces of Khomeini's Policies on Iranian Women" in *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology* edited by Haideh Moghissi (New York: Routledge, 2005), 78.

Perhaps, as Negar suggests, women's bodies have become more sexualized as a result of their relative *invisiblity* from public view. The need to 'discover' them is largely a result of their subsequent shrouding, which has in turn further sexualized their bodies in public settings.

Still, most agree that Iranian men are trained to perceive women as sex objects, and that Iranian society places value on women only according to their sexual and reproductive capabilities. While they agree that women's bodies are also sexually objectified in America, the participants argue that by and large instances of sexual harassment are far fewer in the United States, and that overall feelings of security and safety on the streets are greater here than in their home country. While this may be true, it seemed as though there was relatively little critical analysis of the perception of women in American society by certain interview participants. For example, Negar, who experienced significant harassment in Iran because of her large chest size, argued that in America having large breasts is perceived as a positive female trait by men. When asked whether she had ever experienced harassment or male attention in the U.S. because of her chest size, Negar responded, "No, never." Surprised by this response, I in turn argued that women frequently experience sexual harassment and objectification because of this very physical attribute. Although Negar insisted that she had never witnessed or experienced these kinds of interactions, I believe this conversation demonstrates more broadly an uncritical acceptance of the sexual expectations of women in America. While Negar believes that women are both sexually objectified throughout American and Iranian media and in commercials, it seems as though certain aspects of Western sexual double standards have been largely accepted at face value, without critically engaging the objectification of young women's bodies that occurs within this process.

While activists have worked against women's sexual objectification and double standards throughout Western First- and Second-Wave feminist movements,²⁵⁸ recent critiques of sexual double standards have focused largely on the representation of women in media and advertisements as a problematic representation of the 'ideal' Western woman. The negative effects of these representations—those that glorify hyper-sexuality, thinness, enhancement of breast size, and superficial beauty—have come under the fire of feminist media critics who in turn deplore these tactics, particularly since many of them target young girls in their adolescence and youth.²⁵⁹ Furthermore, activists have pushed for legislation which mandates full disclosure of photograph's that have been 'photoshopped,' a computer program commonly used to manipulate commercial photographs by 'retouching' and 'enhancing' flawed aspects of people's bodies. According to Tim Lynch, an image-retouching expert, almost 100% of all photographs published in magazines "are retouched in some way or another."²⁶⁰ The negative effects of photoshopping on young women, according to numerous psychologists, media experts, and academics, has led to low self-esteem, poor body image, and unrealistic body standards. Even more disturbing are the high percentage of eating disorders, most notably anorexia and bulimia, among young women, which is further perpetuated by unrealistic representations of women's bodies used in media and advertising.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* (Sydney: Univeristy of New South Wales Press LTD, 2001); Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁵⁹ Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly* series, dating from the early 1980s to today, offers a compelling argument about the impact of hyper-sexualization of youth culture on young girls and adolescents in America. Her analysis specifically addresses the impact of media representation as a catalyst for emotional and physical violence against young women and girls. Jean Kilbourne. *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising Images of Women* (2010). Media Education Foundation. <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?key=241&preadd=action> (Accessed August 10, 2011).

²⁶⁰ Heidi Dalzell, "Photoshop Legislation: Combatting Unrealistic Images," *Philadelphia Examiner* (June 15, 2010): <http://www.examiner.com/eating-disorder-in-philadelphia/photoshop-legislation-combating-unrealistic-images> (accessed August 10, 2011).

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, young women are subject to a culture of hyper-sexualization, particularly in pop culture and in various musical genres, including pop, rap, and hard rock.²⁶² Young women in recent decades, including the likes of Britney Spears and more recently, the Pussy Cat Dolls, have created an entire pop icon out of hyper-sexuality where certain traits of their bodies, including their breasts, largely define their public identity. For example, in recent years one Chicago radio station ran a contest called, “Boobies like Britney,” that advertised the following: “Wanna be like Britney?...You’ve watched her grow into every guy’s fantasy slave. Now you want what she’s got?” The prize for this contest included a \$5,000 award, which as author Carol Platt Liebau argues, is “enough, presumably, to cover [the expense of] breast augmentation surgery.”²⁶³ Here young women are rewarded for emulating a pop icon who has largely defined herself with her sexuality.

Rap stars are no less at fault for perpetuating the sexual violence enacted on women through mainstream music culture. Award-winning rapper Nelly repeatedly demeans women in his music videos and has recorded a smash-hit song called, *Pimp Juice*, which was widely received by young fans of rap music.²⁶⁴ Using words like *pimps* and *ho’s* throughout his music, Nelly is only one out of numerous rap artists who demean women through the use of sexually violent language.²⁶⁵ How are young women who are mostly influenced by youth pop culture supposed to navigate and circumvent sexual double standards that perpetuate female sexual subjugation? It is clear based on these examples, that young women are taught early on that the key to “fitting in” and to social acceptance by their male peers includes having ‘large breasts’ or by succumbing to sexually aggressive language and behavior.

²⁶² Carol Platt Liebau, *Prude: How Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America too!)* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 85.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

While it may seem that women are indeed praised for having ‘large breasts,’ whose benefit will this ultimately serve? How are young women able to have agency in any of these situations without resisting these standards entirely, thereby disassociating themselves from mainstream youth pop culture? It is clear that the structural inequality clearly favors male sexuality and domination, while perpetuating misogynistic ideals within youth culture. This is, as feminists like Jean Kilbourne demonstrate, what contemporary Western and Middle Eastern feminists are trying fervently to fight against.

Encounters with the Morality Police and Religious Authorities

Each participant has recounted specific run-ins with the morality police on issues of clothing and modesty. The resistive strategies employed against the moral authorities have, according to some of them, grown stronger in recent years. For Parastoo, State-imposed policing of the body is unnecessary and an invasion of her personal rights. Recalling her own experiences with university authorities, she says the following:

They just stop you [and say] don’t you think that your headscarf, or your clothes, or your makeup is not appropriate for this *Islamic* country? I think what the hell? I don’t give a *damn* about this Islamic country. You know, people are angry, because we have a lot of financial problems, we have a lot of, you know, social problems and the only thing you care [about] are my clothes? Let me be free and I can take care of myself. I am not a prostitute. I want to be respected. People are just frustrated.

Others have echoed similar sentiments of frustration and anger toward the government’s regulations on women’s physical appearance. Upon exiting an aircraft from an international flight, Negar recalls how humiliating it was that morality police checked women’s attire as she and fellow female passengers exited the plane. Iranban feels that no one should have control over her appearance or her body. Parastoo even talks about how she has witnessed the female morality police act hypocritically and flirt with their male counterparts.

It's really humiliating. And then you see them talking with each other and kind of, flirting. They're wearing chador and you can see just their eyes and they do whatever they want with those eyes. I was like, what are you really looking for? They're sick and they look at us with those sick eyes and they interpret whatever they see with their sick minds. And that's why they don't let us talk with each other or wear whatever we want.

Resistance against regulations on clothing has become an integral part of Iranian women's lives. Nowadays, Leela says, "There is a constant war in Iran between women and the regulations. But the girls and women, they fight." While entering her university, Leela recalls a run-in with a woman who patrolled the entrance for dress code violations. Accusing her of wearing a *manteau* (an overcoat worn over the clothes) that was both too short and too tight, Leela says, "They just wanted to bother me a little. It's a childish game." Women are becoming increasingly vocal against the morality police, suggests Leela, and on several occasions she has even witnessed women stopped by the morality police begin to shout in order to draw a crowd and protest. In the summertime, Leela says that women wear brighter clothes, shorter pants, and nail polish, despite the government's regulations. "We tried colorful scarves, we had scarves for winter, different ones for summer, and then we made fashion out of it," she says. Those who can afford it purchase the latest high-end *manteaus* created by Iran's best female fashion designers. Parastoo even talks about how women use makeup as a way to "look sexy" and to rebel against the government's regulations. She says, "In Iran, women kill themselves to wear makeup." While clothing trends and makeup are often used to make fashion statements, in what way is Parastoo's sentiment representative of other women's indiscriminate acceptance of consumerist culture that glorifies women's beauty along these lines? How are women exercising effective 'resistance' against the State or better yet, exercising agency, by wearing a heavier makeup application? Furthermore, how do wearing shorter pants or more colorful clothes offer more opportunities for strategic subversion of the State's policies? As both Leela and Parastoo argue,

women's bodies have become a space for political opposition and subversion of prevailing regulations. Still, I would argue that the ultimate beneficiary of these fashion trends are not women, and that such beauty standards are centered around the male sexual gaze.

Likening it to a "game with the regulations," Leela believes that women in Iran care more about their appearances than American women as a way to compensate for the State-imposed dress codes.

In Iran, whenever women want to go out, sometimes I feel that they even pay even more attention to the things that they wear, because they need to substitute the need, you know? You cannot show your hair...I told you it's like a game, playing with regulations...I think women [here] are free to act as they like and they wear what they feel comfortable [wearing], but in Iran you work on your appearance, because you cannot work on something else, so you work on your makeup.

In this way, women take an active role in the consumption of market goods (like global fashion trends, designer clothing, and trendy makeup) as an attempt at creating an alternative cultural identity outside of the ideologies of the State, which polices the representation of women's bodies in public spaces. Still, I question the underlying principles of this argument, because it ultimately applauds women's efforts at sexualizing their own body's vis-à-vis trendy clothing and through heavy makeup application. While it is clear that all of the participants outwardly oppose the sexual objectification of women's bodies, there seems to be an unwillingness to critique the consumption of these global trends simply because they subvert the State's regulations on women's dress, despite the fact that these clothing trends among Iran's middle- and upper-class secular populations are becoming increasingly sexualized (tighter, shorter, and more form-fitting).

This kind of subversion has in many ways been accepted at face value without considering the impact it potentially has on women's sense of self or ability to exercise agency. With the formation of the Islamic Republic, the covering of women's bodies (through *chador*

and *hejab*) represented the country's national Islamic honor. In the early years following the revolution, the concealment of women's bodies from public view was said to "...bestow respect and dignity on [them]." Clergy argued that the *chador* and *hejab* provided women with "...deliverance from the yoke of imperialism" and was a "symbol of liberation, and resistance to capitalism, and revolutionary aspirations."²⁶⁶ The consumption of globalized fashion trends, particularly in the form of colorful, silk-woven *hejabs*, while it has allowed young women to subvert the State's regulations, I believe has only perpetuated the sexual objectification of women's bodies in public spaces.²⁶⁷

While women are required to wear the *hejab* in Iran, none of the participants in this research believe in its religious purpose and refuse to wear it in America. "I just used to wear a coat and a scarf on my head pushed back," Iranban exclaims and laughs. At home in her apartment in Tehran, Iranban wore only a tank top and shorts while she socialized with her female roommates in the open stairwell of her building, where she says, pedestrians were able to see her. She wore less modest clothes intentionally, she argues, so that, "whatever [people] want to think, they should get used to it. I wear this on purpose. You should see this and just get used to it." Sometimes Iranban's neighbors would even stare at her for long periods of time, which she thinks they enjoyed, but she said, "believe me, after two weeks, it became usual." While Iranban ultimately doesn't know what her neighbors thought of her, or whether her behavior was 'accepted' or disapproved of, her actions, she claims, were intentional forms of subversion against the State's regulations on women's bodies. She believes that after sometime the visual presence of her body became normalized.

²⁶⁶ Haleh Afshar, "Women, State, and Ideology in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 7 no. 2 (April 1985): 265.

²⁶⁷ Aliakbar Jafari, "Two Tales of A City: An Exploratory Study of Cultural Consumption among Iranian Youth," *Iranian Studies*, 40 no. 3 (June 2007): 372.

Michel Foucault argued that the conditions upon which “discursive formations” are created are based on “rules of formation,” created by the ideological and philosophical tenets upon which power and knowledge are interchangeably created and transformed.²⁶⁸ Iranban’s actions, therefore, challenge the discourse of gender representation in public spaces in Iran. Drawing on both Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler theories on gender and power, Iranban’s actions challenge dominant religious ideologies about women’s bodies by subverting the social norms and practices imposed upon her by the State. By engaging this otherwise ‘ordinary’ act of resistance in a relatively public space, Iranban ultimately renegotiated the discourse of gender representation by challenging the prevailing norms on the presence of women’s bodies. In public spaces, she in turn created an alternative representation of gender identity that subverted the dominant State discourses. Not unlike countless other women in contemporary Iran, these acts of defiance are representative of a greater movement by Iranian women that resist prevailing norms that propagate their legal and social inequality. Furthermore, by resisting the Islamic Republic’s prescribed norms of men and women, the mission of the Islamic Republic—to create and sustain an ‘ideal’ Islamic society—is challenged.²⁶⁹ Still, her actions are representative of individual acts of resistance, and differ markedly from a young woman who might engage in political activism as a journalist or a student activist.

When asked why she doesn’t wear a veil, Parastoo, who comes from a highly religious family, replied, “...because I don’t believe in it. For me, *hejab* doesn’t mean to wear something that covers your whole body. For me *hejab* means not allowing people to look at you as a sex object. I mean *hejab* is not in your clothes, it’s in your *manner*, it’s in your *attitude*. You know

²⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), 41.

²⁶⁹ Hammed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 213.

you're a woman, you can talk with your eyes and your attitude." For Parastoo *hejab* is a state of mind. All of the other participants have expressed similar sentiments.

How does this revelation in many ways demonstrate how Parastoo has rejected the dominant discourses of the State? The ideological and religious values endorsed not only by the State, but also by modern-day interpretations of patriarchy, valorize female sexuality purity, while simultaneously demonizing those women who do not adhere to these ideals. Islamic tradition creates a sexual hierarchy based on the idea that women have a moral obligation to fulfill the sexual desires of her husband. Although Islamic law also mandates a husband's sexual obligation to his wife, the hierarchy of the male-female sexual binary is clearly constructed in favor of men's sexual fulfillment and female sexual suppression.²⁷⁰ Within Islam there is an intense fear over women's seductive powers, which can potentially detract men's attention from God, and which in turn can disrupt the entire Muslim social order based on a strict hierarchy of the sexes.²⁷¹ While similarly sexual hierarchies exist in Christian tradition, there is the assumption that women's sexuality in Christianity is passive. Moreover, in Islamic sexual discourse women are presented as active, sexualized beings, whose sexuality must be harnessed and channeled.²⁷² For Parastoo, Iranian women are reduced to mere sexual objects because of the forced separation produced by the veil. Their bodies become sexualized because they are 'forbidden' and 'hidden' from public spaces.

While the participants agree that on a whole they experience less sexual harassment in America, several have suggested that American culture places greater emphasis on sexualizing

²⁷⁰ Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Post-Modern Analysis*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2002), 22.

²⁷¹ Fear of women's seductive capabilities is also historically prevalent in Orthodox Judaism as well as early Christianity, which held women responsible for men's sexual arousal and their subsequent lack of judgment and 'compromised' character. According to this belief, they were victims of women's sexual enticement. Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Post-Modern Analysis*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2002), 25.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 25.

women's bodies in public spaces. They further contend that American society places much greater value on women's physical appearance and that superficial qualities, like a woman's physicality, her career achievements and monetary value, are used to gauge a woman's worth. Iranban and Leela have both emphasized these points throughout our meetings, and both agree that the picture they once had of America in their minds is not everything it claims to be. Leela says,

When I came here I really thought that [America] is the land of opportunity, but when I arrived here I saw people in the streets, homeless people, I saw the discrimination between whites and blacks. Yes, you cannot say anything about it; you have to pretend that it's ok. Yes, it is a land of opportunity, for a person who is a genius, or who has a lot of money....I'm happy for this experience and the opportunities that I can have, but now I don't think that I would be happy with this life. It's the last chance, it's painful, it's not happiness, it's your last chance because there is nothing left in your country."

In many ways, Leela and Iranban's experiences highlight the superficiality of American culture. Feelings of intense loneliness, isolation, and separation from a community at large are the primary reasons that neither Iranban nor Leela see their long-term futures in this country.

Household Dynamics: Family, Relationships, and Women's Self-Determination

In discussions about household dynamics, participants reflect on their upbringing and childhood experiences, as well as their experiences with dating and marriage. As young women, most of the participants were raised in households that encouraged women's independence and self-determination, although this varies considerable for several of the participants. "I grew up in a family that respects girls, that doesn't make a difference between girls and boys. They give me enough confidence to fight for my rights," Negar says. They encouraged self-sufficiency, but as Negar suggests, there are still many women in Iran bound to age-old traditions of familial and marital dependence. Even if certain women, usually from smaller cities or rural areas, want to leave their husbands and return to their families, Negar says that they are unable to.

For Leela, home-life was a place of political radicalism, a place where her educated mother taught her about the importance of women's rights and the abuses of power by the country's religious leaders and authorities. "My mother talked with me a lot, about the things that happened to our country, and she was tough about it. She really did not want me to become religious...because she knew that it's a kind of limitation," she says. As a secular political scientist, Leela's mother is a source of inspiration because she says, "She sees the world through a good point of view, she really does not like any kind of limitation, or restricted ideas, or radicalism." Opposition to the prevailing norms and subversion of the prevailing regulations has been a constant theme throughout Leela's life, whose secular parents were staunch opponents of the revolution.

Unlike Leela, Parastoo's religious upbringing shaped her sense of self and identity as a young girl and woman. Raised in a small city outside of Tehran, Parastoo's parents who were strong proponents of the revolution and are supporters of the reformist and Green Movement, instilled in her a strong sense of religiosity and a desire to accomplish her expected role as a 'good' daughter and wife. For Parastoo, adhering to her family's religious ideals of Islam was absolutely essential as a child and young adolescent. As a child, Parastoo learned early on that as a female, her primary duty was to grow into a dutiful wife, who took on the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and managing the house. "I didn't want to be someone else's wife," Parastoo says, "I didn't want to live someone else's life." During our conversation, she explains that even in conversations with her friends, some of whom came from more secular families, the social and familial expectations imposed upon them were identical. "It didn't matter if you came from more religious, or more intellectual families, our memories are all the same," she argues.

Parastoo is a highly thoughtful and intelligent young woman, who describes herself as a 'rebel'; and for her, resistance has always been an essential part of her being. Still, her first conversations with adult men outside of her family came much later, at the age of eighteen, where in absolute secrecy she developed a relationship with a man ten years her senior. Suspecting that his daughter was romantically involved with a man, Parastoo's father threatened to kill her, but she argues that she thinks he was really only trying to scare her. Virginity prior to marriage was absolutely essential for Parastoo and despite her father's warnings; she fell in love with the man. Although Parastoo argues that his intellectual leanings were open-minded, she soon learned that even with a man who supported human rights and equality, sexual double standards were pervasive. "He wanted to have sex with me because I was a virgin," she explains, even though he had previously intimated that he had romantic feelings for another woman. His character was full of "contradictions," Parastoo recalls, since he privileged his sexuality over hers, something that was very difficult for her to understand at the time.

For most of the other participants dating was allowed prior to marriage, but with certain limitations. Many were able to go out to the movies or to dinner with their boyfriends, or to each other's houses, despite the government's restrictions on inter-sex mingling. In fact, Iranban dated her boyfriend for ten years before they got married, and Leela frequently visited her boyfriend's home and socialized with his family. But today, Leela argues, circumstances have drastically changed. As a young woman in her early twenties, Leela recalls that her parents would have never allowed her to go on vacation with her boyfriend or to stay out until two or three a.m. But now, even when she speaks with her girlfriends who have younger sisters, they recognize how significantly youth have changed:

I have a friend, she could not go on a trip with her boyfriend. But the younger sister? She does that, in the same family....All of my friends who have a sister, the limitations [today] are totally different....We went to parties, we went out a lot, but we had to be at home at twelve, not later than that. And not every night...Now, [my friend's] sister goes to parties every night, she stays out until two or three a.m., but her parents can't do anything. They tried, but they couldn't control her. And she drinks a lot.

When asked if this was typical of younger people in the early twenties, Leela argues, “Nowadays it's common, you cannot easily control this generation, around twenty to twenty-four. Like, the sisters of my friends. So, these things even happen in the same family. The older girl is totally different than the younger one.”

Iran's increasingly rebellious youth population has drawn considerable attention in recent years, and subversion of State regulations has become integral to their cultural 'youth' identity.

In an analysis of social discontent, Authors Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri echo similar sentiments,

The baby-boom generation of the early years of the Revolution and the war with Iraq does not remember—or care for—the experiences and beliefs that are at the core of the regime's claim to legitimacy. This is particularly true of the progeny of the urban middle class....These is nothing to indicate that this saturation of public space with the hegemonic discourse reaches its intended audience. Neither can one avoid the evidence of resistance to this kind of propaganda....²⁷³

While this passage refers directly to youth resistance of State-sponsored propaganda (posters and religious murals), it also speaks to a broad culture of resistance that permeates Iran's youth social landscape. While Leela admits that her actions as a teenager were consistently measured in terms of subversion or evasion of prevailing regulations supported by the State, she argues that today's younger generation engages in rebellious behavior that would far surpass that of her generation.

While subversion of State rules and regulations may very well empower today's youth and

²⁷³ Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, “Three Faces of Dissent: Cognitive, Expressive, and Traditionalist Discourses of Discontent in Contemporary Iran,” in *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics, and Conflict*, ed. Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 65.

propel them to engage in defiant behavior, how does the consumption of alcohol, drugs, or increased sexual activity for that matter, improve women's social status or change young people's lives in the long-term? While these young women engage in personal acts of subversion, perhaps against parental authority or because they want to 'defy' the State's regulations on young people's behavior, I would argue that these behaviors position women in vulnerable situations that open up opportunities for date rape or other forms of sexual violence, and do very little in terms of improving opportunities for women to exercise agency.

Permissive Styles of Parenting

Indeed, permissive styles of upbringing have been one of the most effective methods of resistance for mothers of the revolution. Children born during the years following the revolution have been witness to the State's most extreme forms of policing, including a strict Islamic education, and uniform dress codes.²⁷⁴ Permissive forms of parenting have been used as strategic forms of resistance against the State's regulations, which in the years following the revolution, were one of the most effective methods employed by young mothers of the revolution. Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut argues the following,

Child centeredness and the weakening of parental authority accelerate the process of individualization among the youths who develop individual strategies vis-à-vis other members of the family. Through the means that parents, especially mothers, have provided to their children, they have facilitated their opening to the modern world, and have encouraged them to internalize western values thereby opposing the regime's forced Islamization policies.²⁷⁵

By and large the most influential presence in the women's lives includes the parental guidance of the parents, and the value system instilled in them as children. Many of the participants attribute

²⁷⁴ Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order," *Iranian Studies* 38 (March 2005): 63

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

their resistive nature to the parenting styles, which in many ways mirrored the permissive nature Kian-Thiebaut examines in the previous passage. For many of them, this has included questioning their religious and cultural environment, including those social norms that perpetuate male chauvinism and misogyny in public spaces and society.

In a recent interview with an eighteen year-old Iranian woman, author Pardis Mahdavi documents one adolescent's motives behind her rebellious behavior: "We recognize the consequences of our partying, but we do it anyway. It's kind of like an F-you to the system, if you know what I mean; it's our way of protesting. That's half the reason we party so hard and engage in such sneaky and risky behavior."²⁷⁶ The desire to engage in rebellious behavior is, as this young woman indicates, a kind of resistance against the State-imposed restrictions on behavior and dress.

Dynamics of Marriage

When Iranian women marry, there is often a sense of freedom that still accompanies this act, Leela explains. Quite often, women use it as a way to escape the constant presence of their families.

For me, I got married nearly five years ago and I'm happy to choose my husband...but I had depression after my marriage because of the life that I experienced. I did not find myself as a woman before marriage. So, after marriage I began to understand myself, and to know myself better. But I was married! You know? And, it was like everything was finished and it was a sense of depression after that because I felt that I wanted to experience the world in other ways. After my marriage I felt that I didn't have enough freedom to know about my desires as a woman.

Having only dated three men, she says, was not enough for her to really *know* them, mentally and sexually. "I found out that my soul, my thoughts needed to be involved more in the world of

²⁷⁶ Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 122.

men. It was both sexual and at the same time intellectual,” Leela says. Although Leela says that she is happy she stayed with her husband because she loves him, she knows many women in Iran who married as a way to gain independence and freedom from parental authority, but who are now involved in extramarital affairs with other men. Even though Leela argues that young women do live alone on occasion, it is still not common in modern-day Iran. Marriage, quite often is an escape and a route to independence for young Iranian women.

I wanted to experience a life on my own before getting married, but I didn’t have that opportunity, you know?...I really do not like this part of my life. I even thought of getting divorced, but since I had a happy life, and I knew that this is not a problem of my husband, this is a problem with my identity, with my social identity, with my personal identity.

In our discussions of husband-wife relationships, Iranban and Leela emphasize how supportive their husbands are in terms of personal and career development. While Leela argues that life as an unmarried woman might be easier in America, she says she can’t be sure. In cases of adultery, Leela argues that the social repercussions for women are much greater in Iran than in the States. “For example, if a man has an [extramarital affair] it is not good, it is not good at all, but the family tries to accept it, society tries to accept it. But if the woman cheats on the man, it is a *disaster*.” While Leela argues that women have more ordinary rights in their individual lives in the States, it is clear based on her own accounts that there is a strong desire to subvert traditional ideals of women’s sexual purity before marriage. She says,

If someday I have a girl, I think, ok, I really need her to be mature enough to have sex. I really do not know what is the exact age for a girl to be mature enough to have sex. Not as an obligation, it’s her right. But I want her to have the experience before marriage. I know that this experience changes your point of view. When a girl does not experience a sexual relationship before marriage, she sees marriage as something that is *very* special.

Arguing that sexual intimacy encourages a heightened sense of self-awareness, Leela says that pre-marital sex is absolutely essential for young Iranian women and men to realize and discover

their “sexual needs and sexual desires” before marriage. Since coming to America, she has found that women in this country appear to have a much easier time engaging in sexual intimacy because it is relatively socially acceptable and normalized in Western society. It is as a result of years of suppression, Leela says, that many of today’s Iranian women are sexually active prior to marriage. The need for sexual intimacy and a desire to rebel against the State’s sexually repressive regulations “...make the teenagers of today the *wild* teenagers,” Leela says. “They have sex, sometimes they have sex with two or three people, there’s no thought after the sex, before the sex, wrong marriages, easy divorces after that. I think these [behaviors] are the result of these repressions.”

A Sexual Revolution

In recent years, Iran’s younger population has engaged in what has been called a sexual uprising against a confining political and social environment. Increasingly, young men and women are engaging in romantic relationships outside of the confines of traditional, religious customs as a way to express their defiance of a government that has significantly repressed their generation.²⁷⁷ In many ways, Iran’s sexual revolution has become a space for young people “to express their dissent” against a sexually repressive government, and as a way to recreate a social identity outside of the confines of State-imposed religiosity and sexual conservatism.²⁷⁸

Much like the sexual revolution of the 1960s in America, or the conservative, evangelical Republican era during the 2000s, the sexual revolution is situated within a period of intense

²⁷⁷ Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 304.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

political and social transformation within Iran specifically and within the region more broadly.²⁷⁹ During the 1960s and well into the 70s, America's 'sexual revolution' challenged conventional notions of sexual morality, abstinence, and pre-marital sex. The changing ideological landscape, as authors like David Allyn argue, came largely as a result of increased access to literature on human sexuality as well as greater access to contraceptives and a sex education curriculum that replaced "...scare tactics with explicit visual aids and practical information."²⁸⁰ This period, accompanied by intense political upheaval and protests, witnessed greater instances of pre-marital sexual activity among younger people, as well as an increasingly sexualized commercial and media industry. For many, the sexual revolution brought a sense of 'freedom' that came with this unabashed sexuality, however, for most feminists during this era the 'sexual' revolution represented the epitome of female sexual objectification.²⁸¹

Only four short decades later, America underwent a radical shift to the Right in its political and social leanings. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the election of conservative, Christian Republican George W. Bush to the presidential office, American society entered a decade of relative moral conservatism.²⁸² The convergence of Christian evangelicalism and Republican political agendas after September 11th gave way to American nationalism subsumed with conservative, religious rhetoric and an aggressive "national power" that promised to avenge any and all aggressors against the nation.²⁸³ During this time, issues such as abortion, same-sex relationships, marriage, female reproductive health (including access to contraception), and rape were discussed in such a manner that discriminated

²⁷⁹ David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, An Unfettered History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 5.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸² Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 2.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

minority groups and disadvantaged populations. Youth sexuality was largely discussed in terms of a pro-abstinence rhetoric, and abortion was condemned by ultra-conservative groups who argued against it even in instances of rape and incest.²⁸⁴

It comes as no surprise then that young individuals participate in sexually subversive behavior as a way to circumvent the conservative social mores of the State's Islamic ideology as a way to bring about social change.²⁸⁵ Indeed, attitudes toward sexuality have in recent years witnessed a significant change in Iran's public spaces. In her ethnographic research, author Pardis Mahdavi recounts the substantial social transformation she has witnessed among young people and in Iranian society in recent years:

...Young adults are now seen engaging in romantic acts with members of the opposite sex in public spaces. There have also been shifts in how sexuality is talked about in present-day Iran, and many of these changes have been politicized....It is clear that young people are striving to create the space in which to publicize dialogue about sexuality and accommodate a changing sexual culture.²⁸⁶

While Pardis Madhavi offers up an in-depth analysis of the sexual behavior and attitudes of Tehran's middle-upper-class youth population, at times it appears as though she ascribes the same celebratory discourse of "consumption" to Tehrani women who apply heavier makeup and who wear more revealing clothing. She writes,

Women in Tehran now wear relaxed Islamic dress along with layers of mascara, eye shadow, and lipstick. Their sense of self (which for some is gained when they enter college) is manifested on the street; in their own words, "makeup is our political resistance."....So their sense of style, comportment, and outward appearance is linked to their agency, resistance, and sense of self and citizenship....²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 2 and 138.

²⁸⁵ Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 304.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 303.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 107.

Except for the fact that she inserted this passage just after she interviewed a female informant who described how she uses her body and sexualized appearance to interact with men as a way to navigate otherwise trivial ‘everyday’ activities (like going to the store) and as a way to receive positive male attention.²⁸⁸

By practicing sexually “defiant” behavior, youth are engaging in sub-altern movements that challenge the dominant discourse of conservative traditions and religious ideology supported by the State. This does not mean, however, that young men and women are judged by their peers equally, or that the expectations for women’s sexual propriety are not still framed within the discourse of female sexual purity and virginity. While it may appear that young people are indeed more tolerant of open sexual relationships with multiple partners before marriage, this is perhaps the worst kind of uncritical acceptance of sexual double standards that are still stacked in favor of men.

The expectations of virginity prior to marriage, for example, continue to persist despite the changing sexual landscape among Iran’s younger population. For example, in a recent review of Shahram Khosravi’s *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, Norma Claire Moruzzi argues against his indiscriminate acceptance of the “Americanized, consumerist Iranian identity” that is so prevalent among Iran’s middle- and upper-class urban youth.²⁸⁹ What Khosravi fails to consider, as Moruzzi suggests, is that while these youngsters engage in what many have celebrated as quintessentially ‘modern’ behavior (such as frequenting upscale malls in northern Tehran and engaging openly with individuals of the opposite sex), the rules of engagement are still written according to modern-day interpretations of patriarchy and male privilege. This is perhaps one of

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 107.

²⁸⁹ Norma Claire Moruzzi, “Paradise Lost, Gone Shopping,” *Middle East Report* 245 (Winter 2007): 42-43.

the biggest downfalls of the celebratory discourse of consumerist culture in Iran as elsewhere (including the United States), as it continues to subject women bodies to sexual objectification and uneven expectations of sexual propriety.

So, if women make themselves more visually ‘available’ to the public vis-à-vis tighter, more revealing clothing, how are they gaining or even exercising agency in these situations? How is this improving women’s social status or increasing their sense of ‘citizenship’? If anything, these trends demonstrate rather crudely how a younger generation of wealthier Iranians are engaging superficial standards of ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’ vis-à-vis consumption and in turn, are linking them to really significant ideas like ‘agency’ and ‘resistance.’ While it is clear young people are utilizing fashion trends to subvert State-imposed policies that attempt to regulate public appearance, I would argue that if anything, these kinds of practices are detrimental to women’s social status in Tehran (as elsewhere), and that they only serve to sustain patriarchal norms.

Strategic Subversion

Parastoo’s story is unlike any of the other participants. Coming from a religious family required a great deal of familial involvement in her engagement and marital process, and she was prohibited from accompanying her soon-to-be husband unattended outside of her home until after they were married. Subversion for Parastoo meant working within the confines of the ‘system,’ she argues, because she realized early on that she could only live a meaningful life with a partner who valued her completely and not simply based on her capacity to function only as a ‘wife.’ Working against the social and religious boundaries of her family and community were integral to her daily life as an adolescent and young adult. Using this knowledge, Parastoo says

she strategically became involved in a non-profit organization as a way to interact with other boys her age. She says that while boys would never have been able to call her family's home prior to her volunteer work, interacting with other boys under the pretext of 'doing good work' made this suddenly possible. After one year at the organization, "...my father would answer the phone and a boy would ask for me, and it was ok," she says laughingly.

Marriage life for Parastoo has not always been easy, but she says that her husband has changed since they first were married and that their relationship has improved. She financed their marriage counseling in Iran, something which gave her strength given the enormous weight of familial stress in the situation. Dealing with his sister and mother-in-law has perhaps been the most painful experience for Parastoo, who she says, expected her to be nothing more than a traditional wife who cooks, cleans, and takes care of her husband. Well before they came to America, Parastoo pushed the social boundaries of 'traditional' marital relationships by "practicing equality" with her husband, something which she says his mother and sister did not instill in him at an early age.

Like many other Iranian women, Parastoo challenges the acceptable social and religious norms of husband-wife relationships by insisting on more egalitarian practices within her home. Moreover, Parastoo is unwilling to accept her mother- and sister-in-law's dominant presence in her marital relationship, whose interference in her life early on in her marriage was almost unbearable. Charging her with asserting too much independence and authority in her new marriage relationship, both sister- and mother-in-law accused her of trying to gain 'status' in the new family. Although they did not live together, she cites instances of 'interference' and 'meddling' by these two female relatives, who she argues, failed to instill in her husband a sense of domestic obligation and marital partnership. In traditional Muslim communities, patriarchal

customs ensure women's dependence on her husband's family early on, including the matriarch of the household, the husband's mother, who often uses her status as an older woman and mother to exert her authority over the young bride. The life cycle of a newlywed woman within her husband's family is, as Deniz Kandiyoti argues,

...such that that deprivation and hardship she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law. The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves.²⁹⁰

By not "internalizing" the norms of patriarchy meant that Parastoo constantly worked against the confines of cultural and religious ideals that subordinate her role in her marital relationship. When they came to America, Parastoo says that she cut off all communication from her husband's family, and that he doesn't ask her to speak with them on the phone either because she says, he knows how she feels about them. Well before they came to America as a married couple, Parastoo pushed her husband to participate more in the domestic responsibilities and at one point, challenged him to cook every night for one week so that he could understand the challenges of working a double-duty shift, as an employee and student during the day and as a housewife at night. "He failed the challenge," Parastoo says, and has since taken on more responsibilities within the home.

For Parastoo, "practicing to be equal" implies an inversion of the status quo, within the dynamics of her marital relationship and with her husband's family. By challenging the cultural and religious norms of familial and marital relationships, Parastoo is reinventing a gender identity outside of these norms that perpetuate women's subjugation within her and her husband's home.

²⁹⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2 no. 3 (September 1988): 279.

Parastoo's present-day resistance is an example of what Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan argued decades prior in the mid-twentieth century; that 'femininity' is not based on 'inherent' or 'natural' biological traits, but that women's domesticity is based on socially constructed cultural norms, which relegate women to the home as caregivers of children and subservient wives.²⁹¹ The fulfillment of 'femininity' in the guise of these 'natural' traits is what both de Beauvoir and Friedan argued was situated at the center of women's social suppression.²⁹² By working against these socially constructed norms, women have over time been able to transform social attitudes about issues such as women's employment, motherhood, and husband-wife relationships. For a woman like Parastoo, these acts of resistance and defiance against the social expectations of young, newlywed brides have worked as effective tactics to combat women's suppression.

Women's Perspectives on Personal Beliefs, Values and Self-Expression

Like Leela and Negar, Iranban was raised to be a self-determining and autonomous woman. Although her father is a religious man, Iranban argues that he never tried to force his religion on his children, and instead, encouraged them to determine their own values and belief system on their own. Unlike Leela, Negar, and Iranban, Parastoo was raised in a very religious household in a small city north of Tehran. As a teenager Parastoo explains that she began to question her faith in Islam. In a recent conversation, Parastoo explains how difficult her decision not to veil must be for her parents:

I never talked with them about it, and they never asked me. But I guess they know, because they know me. I was always a rebel, and I didn't want to wear *hejab* or *chador*, and they know that. But they don't want to talk about it because it's not easy for them to

²⁹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), xxv-xxiv.; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 16-17.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, xxv-xxiv. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

accept, so they prefer to say nothing about it... You know, you have to have meaning for what you are doing.

Blindly accepting the State's Islamic ideals and regulations is something that Parstoo is not willing to engage in. She has asserted these opinions in opposition to not only the State's regulations on women's physical appearance, but also against her family's more religious traditions on female propriety and comportment. Navigating these two separate landscapes—an otherwise repressive State and society's changing expectations of young women is something that Parastoo has to engage in on a daily basis. She attributes this to her own intellect and introspection, despite being raised in a household that demanded religious adherence and discouraged alternative ideals and values.

Deniz Kandyoti's 'Patriarchal Bargain'

In her analysis of women's resistance in Muslim societies, Deniz Kandiyoti employs the phrase "patriarchal bargain" as a more accurate description of men's domination over women and female sexuality throughout time. The term "patriarchy" in and of itself implies a constant, static, and unchanging social script that controls and regulates the attitudes and perceptions of acceptable female behavior in any given society. However, its transformation is evident throughout history, as Kandiyoti argues, and has influenced women's submission to and resistance to its shaping of their lives.²⁹³ A "patriarchal bargain," therefore, involves women's strategic balancing of acceptable social norms and their simultaneous advocacy toward greater gender equality.²⁹⁴ "Patriarchal bargains....influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression."²⁹⁵ The resistive strategies employed by the interview participants, whether in the form of dress, sexual intimacy, or through

²⁹³ Deniz Kandyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2 no. 3 (1988): 275.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

self-expression, constitute a 'bargaining' process through which State regulations and social norms are continuously subverted, refuted, and refined.

Perceptions of Women's Social Status in America

When asked whether women enjoy a higher quality of life in America, Leela responds that she is unsure. While she believes that women enjoy greater ordinary rights in America, she is unsure whether all women are awarded equal social opportunities. "Yes, it is better here, because you have more freedom here, but that does not mean that you are happy." As an Iranian woman, Leela argues, she is certain that she would not be given the same professional opportunities as say, an American woman might be awarded. She argues this might also be the case for Hispanic and African-American women as well. A strong emphasis on financial success and individualism comprises an aspect of American culture that Leela does not identify with or find appealing. "Money is so important in America, you know, you have to be in power in America when you earn money," argues Leela. However, Leela argues that as an Iranian woman in America she has greater opportunities to "find herself" in this country, where she does not experience the same State-policing and regulations as in Iran. "A woman here is more involved with herself," she says.

Like Parastoo, Leela and Iranban have articulated their dissatisfaction with the American 'image' and culture they have experienced thus far. Prior to her departure for the States, Leela recalls the reaction of her peers, "When we wanted to move here and I was kind of depressed, someone told me you are stupid, you are going to America....In Iran, [people say] you are going to America, do you know, do you understand this opportunity?.....I think that if I want to continue living in America, I should be another kind of woman, not the kind of woman that I

am.” Issues like discrimination, homelessness, income disparity, and extreme financial competitiveness comprise those characteristics of American culture that have largely shattered the image of America presented to young individuals like Leela and Iranban in Iran. Iranians who had previously lived abroad present an image of America that depicts a land of perfection and flawlessness.

For Iranban and Leela, America was presented to them as the land of equal opportunity; however, this image has been contradicted by their experiences. Extreme capitalism encourages values like individualism, financial competitiveness, and social inequality neither Iranban nor Leela identify with or find fulfilling. For Iranban, her time in America has been an incredibly lonely experience. “I felt that I’m so lonely, I felt that people they didn’t treat me well. I thought that I was the loneliest person in the world.”

For Iranban, American women’s political and social complacency has also destroyed her image of a country that in her mind was a global leader in the history of women’s rights movements and civic activism. Based on her own observations, Iranban believes American women are often judged by their financial worth, status of employment, their bodies and sexual appeal, as well as their accomplishments as mothers and wives. “It’s about mastering your life, American women master their lives,” she argues. Her perception illustrates more clearly the double standards by which she believes American women are judged, something that I believe is not taken seriously enough in this country. Pressures of marriage, motherhood, while simultaneously excelling in education and employment (in addition to financial gain) are real, daily pressures that exist for young women in this country. Iranban and Leela have also observed a lack of cultural depth and community membership in America, and feel that people in America are incredibly disconnected from one another. “The focus is always on the individual,” Leela

argues. Both women believe that a sense of community belonging and cultural identity are important elements to living a high quality of life. Leela admits, “I’m happy for this experience, but now I don’t think I would be happy with this life [here].”

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Summary of Study: Statement of the Problem and Specific Research Hypotheses

As a backdrop to my analysis, I have underscored the significance of Iran’s nation-building and modernization projects in the country’s recent history. Utilizing Michel Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge, as well as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir’s theories of gender, I have incorporated gender and national identity into my analysis of Iranian women’s social and political status. By comparing the evolution of gender and national identity in Iran with relevant examples throughout history, such as Poland after the end of the Cold War, there is a clear linkage between Iran’s social and political progression with the evolution and construction of women’s gender identity in terms of religion, sexuality, and as members of an Islamic community.

While one of the objectives of this research includes an analysis of women’s stories of resistance and subversion in Iran, the primary purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the extent to which immersion in American culture changes Iranian women’s self-conceptualization. Throughout my historical and theoretical analysis, as well as within the auto-ethnographic writing of these women’s stories, I have worked against the assumption that Western culture “liberates” or “saves” Middle Eastern women from cultural and religious victimization in their homelands. Rather, I have used this opportunity to demonstrate how certain aspects of mainstream Western culture, such as the media, consistently engage in epistemic violence against Middle Eastern women both in their description and visual depictions as either

‘exoticized’ or ‘veiled,’ passive and silent, and victimized. Throughout these women’s stories, it has become even more evident to me the impact the impact that cultural discrimination has had on these women’s ability to exercise agency. They have recounted how on numerous occasions they have had to negate assumptions made about their social and political backgrounds, as well as reductionist interpretations of their ‘Iranian’ and/or ‘Muslim’ status.

Moreover, the assumption that Western culture would naturally “save” Middle Eastern women from their otherwise “victimized” status has otherwise been debunked by these participants’ personal narratives. While these stories include only a small sampling of personal accounts, their experiences as students, professionals, and everyday citizens are not unlike the experiences of other Iranian immigrants who have recently come over to the United States.²⁹⁶ The obstacles these women have encountered are in many ways more broadly representative of the hardships many Middle Eastern women encounter when they immigrate to the United States as foreigners from a non-Western country.

Summary of Methodology

Selected methodology has centered primarily on ethnographic data, and has also included a secondary analysis of academic and scholarly literature in the areas of critical and comparative gender studies, anthropology, and transnational feminist scholarship. The population selected for this research study was delimited to young, educated, middle- to middle-upper class Iranian women born during or after the revolution of 1979. The significance of this particular population, as I have demonstrated throughout these pages, lies in their ability to navigate and negotiate State regulations that continue to limit women in areas of citizenship and social engagement, as well as

²⁹⁶ Patricia E. Darlington and Becky Michele Mulvaney, *Women, Power, and Ethnicity: Working Toward Reciprocal Empowerment* (Binghamton: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 146.

in a society that has in many ways encouraged women's social participation, but that is still framed within the context of patriarchy and male privilege.

The theoretical framework of this project is grounded in transnational feminist theory and praxis. The parameters of this research have been centered on inverting Western hegemonic discourses by replacing them with alternative narratives about women from the Middle East. Feminist ethnography has aided me throughout the interpretive process by positioning these women's voices central to the writing process, while simultaneously engaging their responses, contradictions, and assumptions with critical dialogue and feminist theory. I have made every attempt to ensure that the words I have chosen as well as the quotations I have used have not been taken out of context or misappropriated in any way. Continual conversations about interpreting their words have been necessary to ensure that the probability of epistemic violence was diminished. Interviews were analyzed according to four themes, which included resistance, issues of dress, the shifting dynamics of household relationships, as well as women's values and self-expression. Questions of agency and autonomy have been central throughout the research process.

Conclusions and Implications of Study

While several of the women have been awarded excellent educational opportunities throughout the Chicago-land area, the social obstacles they face as 'foreigners' within local communities have been extraordinarily painful, causing significant feelings of loneliness and depression. Several have also observed the presence of structural inequalities and discrimination in local Chicago communities and the sexual subjugation of women in mainstream American society. This has only exacerbated the separation many of them already feel from their home

country and homesickness for their families and community networks.²⁹⁷ While a few of the participants have connections within the local Iranian diasporic communities, most have distanced themselves from other Iranians, made friends with non-Iranian individuals, or kept to themselves entirely. This is, according to Parastoo, Iranban, and Leela, not only because of competition that exists between young Iranian women as a way to gain social status within the Iranian diasporic community, but also because of the ongoing social unrest in Iran. For some of the women, there are feelings of sadness and depression because of the current political climate in Iran, which has in many ways prevented them from fully acclimating to American society and to other Iranians living in Chicago. All women have articulated this sentiment on separate accounts, and according to them, many of the same pressures they faced in Iran (sexual pressure, peer pressure, and competition among women) have intensified in among younger Iranian women living in Chicago.

Both Leela and Iranban have intimated that the separation from their country has been extremely painful, particularly during periods of social unrest, increased protest activity, and during heightened periods of government crackdowns. Despite these feelings of homesickness and sadness, many have welcomed this new environment as a much-needed change from daily life in Iran. As Leela intimated during one of our discussions, “The only thing that I do wish every minute is that my country becomes a stable one, you know? There [are] no more wishes for me and so many people in my generation.” Throughout our conversations, several of the participants have also talked about how unencumbered they feel as young women living in

²⁹⁷ As of May 2011, students coming from Iran to the United States are able to apply for a multiple-entry Visa, which allows them to travel back and forth between the two countries. However, all of the participants (excluding Asaal, who is in the United States as a social refugee) were granted only single-entry Visas, which prohibits them from traveling back home to see their families. Arshad Mohammed, “U.S. Revises Visa Policy in Gesture to Iranians,” *Reuters* (May 20, 2011). <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/20/us-iran-usa-visas-idUSTRE74J7B320110520>. (accessed August 11, 2011).

America. Savoring ‘everyday’ or ‘ordinary’ activities, like cycling in public, smoking in the streets, or dressing without thinking about violating dress-code regulations have overall been extremely exhilarating for most of them.

Still, it is evident based on their experiences as young women in both Iran and America that they have experienced and employed as much, if not more, agency and resistance in their home countries than as young women immersed in Western culture. In many ways, the epistemic violence imposed upon them—as Iranian/immigrant women—in the media and in interactions with other Americans, has as Parastoo indicated, only ‘re-victimized’ the very status which they have so vehemently tried to disavow.

Moreover, in telling me their stories they have been explicit in categorizing their experiences in Iran as ‘resistance’ or ‘negotiation’ against various institutions of authority throughout their adolescence and young adulthood. The significance of individual ‘subversion’ (as with dress) or ‘evasion’ (as youngsters evading rules in school), I think, demonstrates the importance of personal resistance in these women’s lives as methods used to exercise agency against the State and against the limitations of society at large. The problem with some of these practices, as others have argued, is that the consumption of many global trends, particularly in terms of women’s clothing, makeup, and sexuality, has not increased women’s ability to exercise agency or bring about lasting social change. Instead, these practices have pigeonholed many young, middle- and upper-class women into highly sexualized roles within a youth culture that simultaneously glamorizes female sexuality, yet still condemns women who engage in sexual relations outside of the dynamics of marriage. The double standards implicit within these attitudes about female appearance and sexual behavior has not been critically questioned within

the greater discourse about consumption as a means toward ‘liberation’ or as a means to ultimately increase women’s ability to exercise agency.

This is in no way meant to diminish the severity of women’s legislative restrictions that are deemed just in the eyes of the Islamic Republic or the methods used by the women who act against them. Women are still restricted in areas of marriage, divorce, and citizenship rights and their individual rights are largely bound and determined by their living male relatives.

Compulsory veiling, temporary marriage, and exclusion from many areas of political participation were some of the major blows enacted against women after the revolution.²⁹⁸

Iranian women have, however, engaged in what author Sanam Vakil has coined the “quiet revolution” in the past three decades, by subverting limitations and pushing social boundaries against an oppressive and oftentimes violent religious government.²⁹⁹ She writes, “They have played a decisive role in elections, assumed political posts, and now outnumber men in all arenas of education.”³⁰⁰ It is precisely because of these restrictions, that these women’s stories demonstrate their unyielding strength and fortitude in the face of innumerable social obstacles and legalized discrimination.

For many of the participants, the opportunity to study in America signified more broadly an opportunity to actively engage a global youth culture, and to further advance their university education and professional goals. While many of their experiences in Iran highlight the regime’s fierce and often ruthless tactics to subvert opposition against State authority (most recently demonstrated in 2009 in the violent crackdown against peaceful protesters) these stories have

²⁹⁸ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal Status, Social Positions, and Collective Action,” *Iran After 25 Years of Revolution: A Retrospective and a Look Ahead*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Conference (Conference, Washington D.C., November 16-17, 2004).

²⁹⁹ Sanam Vakil, *Women and the Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 3.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

underscored how effective resistance and subversion are in engendering long-term social change. Still, I believe based on these stories, and the scholarship that has recently been written about this specific population in Iran, fails to critically address the repercussions of using ‘dress’ or ‘sexuality’ as a means to subvert State regulations or to improve the societal expectations of women at large. This is where feminist scholarship that considers issues of gender and class can expose some of the bigger problems that exist within these kinds of assumptions.

Future Research and Looking Ahead

There has been an enormous generosity of spirit demonstrated to me by each of the women throughout our conversations and interviews. These women have been generous both in their time and in their willingness to share private thoughts and their personal stories in order to make this project possible. Our conversations flowed naturally, and by and large the women engaged in story-telling about their personal experiences as students and professionals living in Iran and in Chicago. Conversational reciprocity and active listening are according to Aihwa Ong, necessary components of ethical anthropological research and “highlight alternative circuits of discursive power.”³⁰¹ Taking into account these power dynamics throughout the ethnographic process has helped me critically engage my own voice throughout the writing process, while still challenging assumptions or commonly held beliefs expressed by the participants.

While I have admittedly struggled with the politics of studying ‘outside’ of my own social location, as a non-Iranian and Western woman, I believe I have engaged the contentions of Western and transnational feminist scholarship in a constructive and critical way. Drawing attention to the problematic nature of these kinds of inquiries, I think, has only helped me

³⁰¹ Aihwa Ong, “Women out of China: Traveling tales and Traveling Theories in Postcolonial Feminism,” in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995): 354.

transform the theoretical components of transnational feminism into applied praxis and a more concrete understanding of the implications of this kind of research. Utilizing these critical lessons in theory and praxis has also further prepared me for future research on gender and sexuality within diasporic communities.

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