

London Fashion Colloquium

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London, September 2011

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Fashion & Female Desire in Iran after 1979

The Hijab, the garment worn by Muslim women to cover the head and body, plays a significant role in the cultural history of Iran, both throughout the twentieth century and now in the first decades of the new millennium. The rules governing the veiling of women in Iran have altered during those years. In 1936 under Reza Shah's government women were forced by law to remove their veils. In stark contrast, in 1979, women were again made to cover up under new laws passed by the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini.

I will be focusing specifically on the enforcement of this dress code following the 1979 revolution and the influence that this has had on the appearance of females in Iran. I would like to suggest that the compulsory wearing of the Hijab and Iran's enforced dress code has gradually led today's Iranian women to the point where they express their desire and their sense of rebellion in a series of coded fashion statements. These statements themselves are still made by women under very difficult conditions which I will also examine. I will use a series of documentary images and photographs to illustrate the life of women in Iran and to demonstrate the new subverted dress code I believe now exists in the post-revolutionary society in my country.

Following the 1979 Revolution, designed to achieve equality and freedom of speech for the population, women continued to wear what they wanted. However, just a few months later on 7th March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini's decree on the compulsory wearing of the headscarf was announced as part of the government's new ambition to protect Islamic society. Women were suddenly restricted and repressed; they were essentially deprived of their basic liberties (Naficy, 1998). The following day, the 8th March, became a significant moment in Iranian history when about 5,000 women gathered at Tehran University to protest against the compulsory Hijab. The women climbed over the gates that were locked behind them by the Islamists and marched defiantly through the city. This feminist movement gained much international attention. The American author, Kate Millett, for instance, travelled to Tehran at that time to lend her support to this movement for women's rights. The French Politics and Psychoanalysis Group also convened to document the protests with a 16mm camera and conduct interviews with the demonstrators. This led to the joint production of a 13-minute short film entitled *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Iraniennes - Année Zéro*, which today serves as the only video evidence of that historic moment¹.

The enforcement of the Islamic dress code in Iran is based on the teachings of the Koran which includes such instructions as 'women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; they should not display their beauty and ornaments; and that they should draw veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty in public' (Surat Al-Nur Verse 31) ². Islam sets out special guidelines regarding women's appearance and these are strictly enforced by the ruling Islamic Republic Government of Iran that has been in power since the Iranian Revolution of 1979; In 2007 Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, the Iranian Interior Minister stated: 'When the "Muslim dress code" comes under attack, it's our duty to protect this most valuable cultural treasure' (Iran

News, 2007). So it is apparent that the Iranian way of life after the revolution is mainly based on adherence to religious codes and strictures.

Iran's actions in this area have typically provoked fervid debate amongst a myriad of different people including activists, lawyers, journalists and academics. The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Shirin Ebadi, discussed a range of human rights issues in Iran in a sold out presentation at the University of San Diego in 2006³. In particular she highlighted the discrimination and injustice suffered by women in Iran on a daily basis, describing the state of women's rights as 'the discriminatory law against women' (Ebadi, 2006). Such powerful language gives a strong sense of the condition of Women's lives in post-revolutionary Iran.



(fig 1)

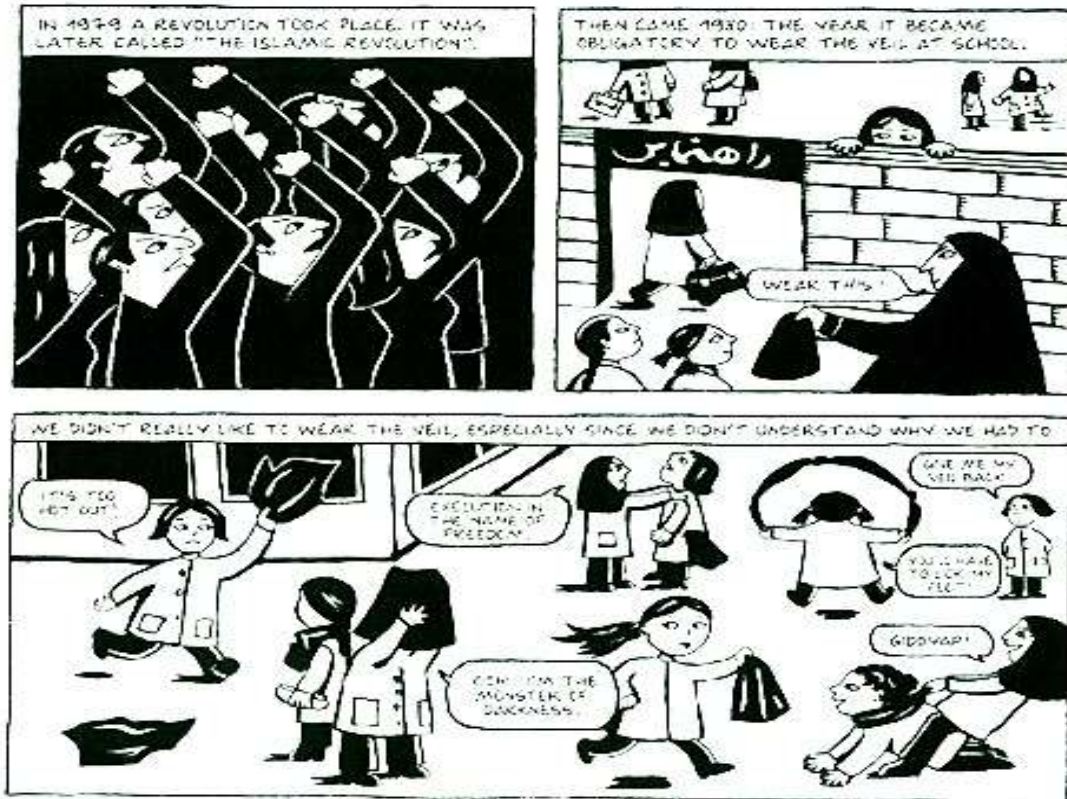
As these photographs clearly show, the appearance of women in Iran has changed dramatically from 1979 to today. The image of the female and her dress code can be said to represent the shifting wider conditions of women, revealing the underlying limitations, restrictions and discrimination suffered by women on a daily basis during this period in Iran.

The first image was taken on 7th March 1979, during the women's protest against the new compulsory dress code. The rebellious stance is clear in the physical actions and visual appearance of the women in this image. The dress code and fashions of that time, including the hairstyles, are all varied and are obviously influenced by the trends of the late seventies and, in particular, by western style and culture.

The second image, from 1981, demonstrates the new conformity of women following the 1979 Revolution. The figures are more rigid and their faces far less expressive. Notably they all are dressed in a similar fashion, which is simple and adheres to the reinforced Islamic dress code. In fact, this is what the Islamic Republic has expected women to wear in any public space since 1979. The style and design is very poor and uniform in comparison with the previous image and this reflects the state of fashion and women's lives during the period of the beginning of the new government just after 1979.

A sense of 'subversion' can be seen strongly in the final two images, which combine varying degrees of rebellion and conformity. These photos feature women of the new generation, those who have only known post-revolutionary culture. Although they are in a public space and therefore must follow the Islamic dress code, there are many elements in their clothing that demonstrate different levels of subversion of this code. For instance they are wearing scarves but a good deal of their hair is revealed outside of the covering. Other women are wearing the manteau but it is tighter and much shorter than we would traditionally expect it to be.

This new fashion amongst the younger generation is a complex mixture of the Islamic dress code and western fashion. The last two images seem to combine a sense of rebellion with ideas of contemporary fashion. The rebellion against the enforcement of the dress code, which began on 7th March 1979, now seems to have reappeared in fashion and clothing.



(fig 2)

Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis*, published in the year 2000, is a personal story of the author's experience growing up after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and it reveals many aspects of women's experience in Iranian society at this time. There is a remarkable connection between image and text throughout the illustrated story of *Persepolis*. One significant scene depicts the rebellion of school girls immediately after the revolution. Satrapi contrasts the teacher forcing her students to wear the veil with the playful, rebellious way that those students react to this demand fig3. The first image is accompanied by the text 'wear this' and the second, of the girls messing around with the veil in the playground, reads 'we didn't really like to wear the veil'. So these two images clearly demonstrate the changing desires of women, and here little girls, after the introduction of the compulsory Hijab and their feelings of 'resistance' against it.



(fig 3)

Now the new fashion amongst the younger generation in post-revolutionary Iran, conveys that same sense of rebellion. Both those parts of the body that must be covered in order to follow the Islamic dress code and those that are allowed to be unveiled are used to express this subversive spirit as we can see in these images. This kind of unusual and expressive fashion statement reinforces Satrapi's argument in *Persepolis*; that women don't really like this dress code. According to Islamic dress code most parts of the female body should be covered when women come to any public space, except for their face, their hands from the wrist and their feet from ankle.



(fig 4)

These five parts of their body may be seen outside the veil. For this reason, women in these images can be seen using heavy makeup on their faces or wearing luxury brand accessories on their hands or face such as bags or sunglasses. This is because these are the only parts of their appearance that they have control over and so use them to express their individuality. Some women also wear short sleeved manteaus or shorter trousers which are fundamentally contravene the dress code restrictions. By using fashion in this way, women try to express their feelings. Whether these are feelings of rejection towards the dress code or whether they are feelings of modernity, the appearance of these women is itself illegal in the Islamic country of Iran.



(fig 5)

In fact, in post-revolutionary Iran, it appears that the use of ‘correct’ Islamic dress code is not common amongst women. This situation seems to confirm that a ‘new fashion code’ exists which expresses women’s desire for modernity and western style and which directly contradicts Islamic dress code. Shirin Aliabadi’s photography *Miss Hybrid* provides an important example of fashion today in Iran. I believe Aliabadi’s photography presents the concept of ‘subversion’ in Iranian history as I noted earlier. In an introduction to her work, Victoire de Pourtales observes that *Miss Hybrid* Aliabadi focuses on women’s lives today in Iran, and this series of photography, which starts from 2006, overwhelmingly features young girls who are wearing blond wigs and blue, green or gray contact lenses. In some cases the girls are shown with piercings or a plaster on their noses, which suggests the use of plastic surgery and reflects its popularity amongst the young generation in post-revolutionary Iran (Pourtalès, 2011).

Miss Hybrid shows the diversity of modern and western consumerism adopted by the young generation in Iran after 1979, the makeup and awareness of fashion displaying women’s desire to avoid tradition and move towards modernity. Aliabadi depicts the fundamental state of women in post-revolutionary Iran where the transformation from tradition to modernity is taking place (Pourtalès, 2011). This transformation, as the photos show, is mainly influenced by western ideas of modesty and it seems these ideas are the most influential amongst the young.



(fig 6)

As western ideas have had such an impact on women's fashion in Iran, the Islamic government has attempted to reduce their influence. For this reason the internet and satellite television, which are the main sources of up to date fashion information for Iranian women, are limited by the government. The Islamic government also filters many websites and removes the satellites from people's properties in order to protect the Islamic society. However it seems even with all this protection and restriction, women still demand western styles of clothing. The expression of modernity and fashion appears to be something that Islamic countries inevitably will have to submit to. Susan Buck-Morss (2006) has noted that this need for expression can be seen as part of the process of moving between "tradition and modernity" in which modernization, in any society, itself seems to be a "task of submission" (Buck-Morss, 2006 p. 44). Despite this, up to date fashions and contemporary brands are still the most consumed in the shopping centers of Tehran and other large cities such as Shiraz, Tabriz and Isfahan.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, it was decreed that women's bodies should always be covered in public based on tradition and religious teaching. In this sense, the act of veiling is seen as a sign of purity. It is mentioned in the Holy Koran that Islam wants women covered from the 'eyes of men' to make women more pure and respectable (Surat Al-Nur Verse 31) 4. All women in Iran, including foreigners, are expected to adhere to the Islamic dress code and not reveal the contours of their body or their hair. However, Hamid Naficy suggests that covering women by force was not born out of a desire to protect them and that it did not, in fact, shield them from the gaze of men (Naficy, 2003). Instead, he argues, it rendered women subject to a kind of 'surveillance system', in which their appearance and, in turn they themselves, were monitored and controlled. He compares such a system to the ideas of exhibitionism and voyeurism and adds that the compulsory Hijab is not 'panoptic' and one-sided but rather that 'men and women both organize the field of vision of the other' (Naficy, 2003 p. 140). Furthermore, the introduction of the compulsory veil clearly prevented women from using their own rationale and judgement during any interaction.

Naficy states that, rather than protecting women from the male gaze, the veil actually has the opposite effect in drawing even greater attention to them which is, in fact, against religious principles: 'The distance and veiling are constitutive components of pleasure drives from looking' (Naficy, 2003 p. 143). In support of this notion he alludes to Freud's idea of 'Scopophilia' the pleasure derived from looking at an object of sexual stimulation. 'Scopophilia' demands distance between subject and object because 'it is in the play of absence and distance that desire is activated' (Naficy, 2003 p. 132). Therefore it can be argued that the veil may render the woman wearing it highly charged with sexuality, an effect which is exactly the opposite of what was supposedly intended by the introduction of the Islamic law in the first place (Naficy, 2003).

In Laura Mulvey's famous essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she examines the way in which the representation of women unconsciously leads to the pleasure of 'looking'. Mulvey categorizes this unconscious pleasure into two different types; firstly, voyeuristic pleasure, where the viewer is placed within the male gaze, looking at fetishized scenes of women and, secondly, where the viewer takes pleasure in 'identifying with the male character who seems to control the narrative' (Mulvey, 1989 p. 54). She also notes that: 'the pleasure for women is that of "complementary exhibitionism" because we (women) are formed by it we are not immune to a narcissistic fascination with images apparently addressed to men- with finding our own satisfactions in the spotlight of that controlling gaze' (Mulvey, 1989 p. 69). So while the veil and the act of veiling, as Naficy notes, clearly has an impact on the desire felt by and towards women, it is not something created by the veil or by Islamic society. Mulvey suggests instead that behaviour and desire driven by the pleasure of looking is a universal phenomenon.

The Enforcement of the Dress Code law forces women to follow the given social norms of Iran when they go out in public. If a woman does not comply she will be taken to the police station, fined and not released until she is brought the 'correct' clothing (Iran News, 2007). This is a common experience for women living in Post-revolutionary Iran. One such experience, an exchange between a woman and the police, was filmed and reported on Iranian media in the summer of 2008. The woman a student in her late twenties, was on her way to university wearing a pink manteau

and blue trousers. The summer in Tehran is hot and this one was no exception, so it was absolutely necessary for comfort to wear light airy clothing. The police stopped this woman in the street and asked her: “Do you think your clothes are suitable for an Islamic country?” “Yes” she replied, “I think so, what’s wrong? I’m wearing a long manteau and loose fitting trousers. What is the problem with these clothes in an Islamic country? The police said: “Your manteau is very transparent. Consequently, the top you’re wearing underneath and your bare shoulders are visible. Please come to the police car. We will go to the police station to call your parents. As soon as they bring you suitably opaque clothes, you will be free to go.” The woman was then taken to the police station to wait for her family.

The restrictions on clothing and appearance in Iran were first introduced after the Revolution in early 1979 but they have progressively become stricter and stricter, especially since 2005 when there was a change in president. As Christian Joppke claims, ‘Islamic restrictions are the most fundamental challenge to liberalism’ (Joppke, 2009 p. 38) and the state of the life of women in Post-revolutionary Iran presents a particular challenge to achieving liberation.



(fig7)

In 2002 the Islamic government decided to embark on a *Morality Campaign* to supposedly protect the Islamic roles given to men and women. Therefore, the government relied on ‘special units’ (yegan ha-ye vizhe) to complement the existing morality police that were tasked with ‘Enjoining the Good and Prohibiting the Forbidden’ (Amr be Ma'ruf va Hani az Monkar) in an effort to combat ‘un-Islamic behaviour’ and social corruption among the young (ISNA, 2008). It seems that public space at this point became a sort of ‘prison’ where women and, in particular, their appearance and behaviour were constantly scrutinised. Indeed, women are still arrested if they do not follow these rules.

The Morality Campaign supposedly 'protects' the roles of men and women and society as a whole. In September 2007 Tehran's police chief even said that the intention was to increase security (AFP, Sep 2007). Thus it seems that women's appearance is capable of provoking anxiety and even violence in Islamic society. It is also apparent that the law is here to stay; Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has, indeed, encouraged police to ensure implementation by treating the campaign as continual rather than as a 'seasonal' or 'temporary' measure (AFP, Nov 2007). However, rather than creating a safer society, this kind of surveillance is essentially aimed at trying to establish control over women's appearance. As Naficy observes 'social space, rather than being a zone of protection and security, becomes a threatening prison'(Naficy, 2006 p.65).

As I have shown, in today's Iranian society, the stricter enforcement of the dress code is, in parallel, causing an increase in the desire for self-expression amongst women. In fact, in some cases, this expression reaches an exaggerated state with women wearing levels of make up that appear to be almost theatrical by comparison with the western style that has inspired it.

Ultimately this subversion of the government's rules cannot be prevented and will continue to increase. This is because this Islamic law in Iran, in enforcing a dress code, is not trying to control a style of dress but, in fact, repress a natural human instinct. The more strictly that human instinct is repressed, as we have seen, the more this desire and sense of rebellion increases.

I believe it is a basic human right for women to choose what they can wear. I hope that, in the future, women in my country will have that right to choose how, through fashion and clothing, they want to express their desires and themselves.

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