

Layered Meanings of Resistance through Dress and Bodily Practices

A Case Study of Iranian Women

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ABSTRACT

Western scholarship is particularly concerned with the intentionality behind women's dress and grooming in Islamic societies. In everyday life, however, women manipulate their available repertoires to meet a variety of needs and purposes. Impulses toward resistance are typically intertwined with other motives and messages. Interviews with urban women in contemporary Iran reveal that trendy styles of dress such as wearing mantels without buttons and tucking scarves behind ears perform autonomy, comfort, and a rejection of the dominant model of hijab imposed by authorities. KEYWORD: Iranian women, material culture, dress, resistance, interpretation.

On the evening of August 13, 2019, I sat in a Bean & Bean coffee place in New York City to interview Maryam, an Iranian Ph.D.

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student, about her experiences of living in Iran as a woman. She shared this narrative with me:¹

One day [around 2017], I wanted to go to the gym. I parked my car on the street near the gym. I wore a sport manteau; it was an open manteau [mantle]. My scarf fell from my head. Two women approached me and told me, “Come with us for one minute.” I understood [what was going on]. I said, “Let me call a friend.” They did not permit me. Later, I thought I had the opportunity to escape. It was close to Vanak Square,² and they wanted to reach the quota they were ordered. It was their trick to say, “One minute,” and when you were close enough to the van’s door, they took you inside. We went to the [guidance] center. I took my cell phone out [of my bag or pocket] to take a selfie, and I did. Someone jumped and grabbed my phone and asked, “Don’t you know it is forbidden to take a picture when you are in the police station?” I wanted to post that picture on my Facebook. We signed the forms.³ It overall took two hours. They said, “If you repeat it, we will call your family next time.” It was fun, you know. It was the sign of being dandy and pretty among my friends if they arrested you (interview, August 13, 2019).

Later, I heard that the “real” reason these women were stopped by the *gasht-e ershaad* (guidance patrols) was described as “being pretty” by a few other Iranian women I interviewed. How might one read Maryam’s pride in her experience? Different interpretations are possible by different readers. A general Western point of view, accustomed to seeing Muslim women as either submissive victims or would-be liberal feminists, is likely to see rebellion against an Islamic fundamentalist government such as the Iranian government. A Western feminist folklorist is equally likely to see a refusal of patriarchy, though she might worry about “being pretty” as a mode of rebellion and wonder whether Iranian women will succumb to a new mode of tyranny

as they rebel against the old one. A sociologist, however, might point out that breaking rules and risk-taking carry prestige in adolescent cultures generally⁴ and suspect that most women, as they grow older, come to accommodate the constraints put on them. The shared theme among these different readings is resistance. This paper examines how a subset of Iranian women conceptualizes resistance to patriarchy in material culture.

As an Iranian, I was an observer of similar scenes in the streets of Tehran from 2008 to 2018; however, I was not stopped by *gasht-e ershaad* when living there. As an insider, a person who belongs to the general category of Persian women, I rely on my interviewees' narratives and descriptions (2018-2020) to report this research, and a form of "reciprocal ethnography" (Lawless 1991) to compensate for the consequences of being an outsider who has not faced this specific issue. Yet I do not intend to play the role of a spokesperson for any Iranian woman.⁵ In her "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty draws our attention to the reductive interpretations of the "Third World Woman" in Western feminist texts that "result in the colonization of the conflicts and contradictions which characterize women of different social classes and cultures" (1984:344). Indeed, she argues that "Third World Women" can represent themselves without the help of Western feminists. Dress and styles of clothing are one way of presenting and representing oneself. Considering interactive, linguistic, and pictorial elements in the broader context of culture, I propose that Iranian women's new ways of dress can be interpreted in nuanced, and interrelated ways. Such interpretations are partial and selective rather than authoritative and definite.

Resistance is a popular subject in many disciplines and and is expressed in various material ways, especially in dress. For example, the study of dress by Dorothy Noyes (1998) in late 18th-century Madrid theorizes that elite adoption of plebeian dress was a symbol of resistance against French reforms. By wearing plebeian styles, wearers represented "their own

autonomy” and “national identity” distinct from those of other parts of Europe. Another example of this ubiquitous topic is the research of Norma Mendoza-Denton (1996), which explores the relationships among power, femininity, and ethnicity among gang girls. By wearing dress such as baggy pants, Latina gang girls inscribe on their bodies their femininity, one that undermines Anglo-style femininity and models of beauty. Muslim women’s dress is a popular subject. In her “Sex Role Reversals, Sex Changes, and Transvestite Disguise in the Oral Tradition of a Conservative Muslim Community in Afghanistan,” Margaret Mills shows how anonymity, veiling, and seclusion enable women to circumvent some patriarchal social constructions, challenging the conservative patriarchy in Afghanistan in the 1970s by following a male model (1985:190-194).

Both Mills and Noyes draw our attention to how anonymity and covering through dress bring safety for the wearers—such as men in Spain and Afghan women—when what they are doing is sociably unacceptable; however, wearing plebeian styles is a badge of Spain’s identity, while Afghan women’s wearing of *chadori* does not denote any national identity. The Latina gang girls’ heavy makeup and tough clothes use the feminine gender performance as tools “to achieve a radical de-stabilization of hegemonic masculine gender norms” (Mendoza 1996:49).

Resistance can mean many things depending on the context in which it is used and who is using the term. Even writings of Iranian diasporic authors who narrate stories of women challenging the state’s bodily politics have been considered resistance (Yaghoobi 2021 and Fazaeli 2017). In general, dress as resistance might be defined as a refusal to obey the regulations and norms of dress to express various meanings. I argue that in the case of Iranian women’s dress, resistance takes on the layered meanings of comfort, aesthetics, and autonomy. Whether bending dress codes or creating style innovations, dress is a way to integrate and entangle these meanings of resistance.

To understand the intertwined meanings of comfort, aesthetic beauty, and autonomy, relations between body, dress,

and policies need to be addressed in parallel. Dress has the potential to compose meanings and add them to the body, reveal messages, or even transmit implications through the body's performances and gestures. In her "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler asserts that "the body is a materiality that brings meaning" (1988:521). The meanings can be intensified or diminished through dress and its various styles. Also, Elizabeth Grosz (1997) argues that "the body is ... a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic re-inscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways" (Cited in Trauger 2004:301). Thus, the body is a focus for meanings, and it can express interpretations such as resistance. Bodily performances, with the help of dress, can assist in goals such as subverting rules.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF IRANIAN WOMEN'S DRESS CULTURE

Women's dress codes have historically undergone a variety of dramatic changes in Iran. Reza Shah (1925–1941), the first king of the Pahlavi era, enacted the "Unveiling Law" on January 8, 1936, which prohibited Iranian women from covering themselves with veils in public. It was an attempt to Europeanize styles of dress, nationalize the country, and separate it from the Islamic world (Chehabi 1993). The middle-class women who were accustomed to and believed in the Islamic tradition of hijab imprisoned themselves in their homes so as not to follow this mandatory code. Then, under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), dress regulation changed and compulsory unveiling subsided (Amanat 2017, Zahedi 2007, Abrahamian 1982). Women became free to wear whatever they liked. They were given social and civil rights, such as the ability to vote and pursue a divorce. Under such circumstances, a lot of middle-class urban women absorbed cosmopolitan fashions.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, religious conservatives who gained power and authority promoted the ideology of women covering their bodies with an Islamic hijab;⁶ however, before veiling became enforced, there were movements against the mandatory hijab. For instance, Nikki Keddie writes that “a mass demonstration on International Women’s Day, March 8, 1979” led to a retreat in the enforcement of hijab by the government (2000:410). The criminalization of unveiling happened under an article in the *Ta’zirat-e Hokomati* (Discretionary Punishments) on December 2, 1983, by the Islamic Parliament of Iran, which set punishment for women who did not wear the Islamic hijab in public. According to the note of Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran (2014),⁷ “Women who appear in public places and roads without wearing a *shar’ei* [Islamic] hijab shall be punished by imprisonment from ten days to two months or for a fine from 50 to 500,000 Rials.” Later, in 1996 and 2014, amendments were made to the penal code of Iran, but this article remained as law.

Some types of innovations in clothing appeared during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), one of the influential leaders of the reform movement. Under his promotion of dialogue, tolerance, and promotion of “true democracy” within the Islamic Republic of Iran, women as one of “the ignored factions” were able to taste some liberation and mingle in social activities (Jahanbegloo 2001). Also, Iran’s re-entering of the international community in this period resulted in its people familiarizing themselves with global fashions of dress. Still, they had to manipulate fashions to make them conform to Islamic codes, mixing traditional elements of ethnic groups’ customs with fashionable clothes. Shoura, who lives in Tehran, says,

We used to wear black, gray, and very dark blue in the years after the 1979 revolution for more than two decades. The women have become tired of wearing black and being covered with a lot of clothes. It was a burden to them. The changes in clothing styles and colors are easily observable

over the last two decades. We are looking for comfort and freedom. For example, we transformed the harrier [silk] headband of ethnic groups like Turkemens into a scarf called a *shawl* since women wanted comfortable scarves that are not knotted under their chin (interview, October 31, 2019).

Women were able to bend the law because only women who wore no hijab at all in public were punished.⁸ Also, mild opportunities, such as organizing the annual fashion festivals that were provided by the reformists, emboldened ordinary women to think of innovations in their clothing (Shirazi 2019). One of these innovations was changing the style of dress while still wearing the hijab, for example, by not covering their hair or body entirely. Wearing *shawls*, for example, instead of *rusari* (head scarves) gave women the opportunity to unveil their hair partially and deliberately.

The conservative rulers could not tolerate liberal thinkers (Jahanbegloo 2001:128). Thus, they started to criticize reformists' outcomes, including acknowledging women's civil rights. The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), a conservative leader, was a time of limiting women's rights. Based on the clerics' critiques of the manipulation of complete veiling, *The Plan of Social Security Promotion*⁹ was established by order of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution in 2006. The *gasht-e ershaad* police were given the authority to implement the plan. Their intention was to prohibit "bad-hijab" women from having a social presence and "guide" them to follow Islamic rules in a way that officials deemed "right."¹⁰ Veiling per se was not enough unless it was worn "properly," because hijab in the Islamic Republic of Iran does not mean only "modesty and morality." It has an extra, symbolic meaning that signals the religiopolitical power of the government (Najamabadi 1994 and Keddie 2000).

The term "bad hijab" was first used by "extremist" religious authorities to identify women who did not follow the Islamic hijab completely. In other words, the officials believed that these

women performed the hijab imperfectly. Later, police also began to use this term to categorize and control women who did not appear in a complete hijab in public. There are no transparent criteria or standards for recognizing who will be stopped by the police as a bad-hijab woman. This leads to unlimited discretion for officers to stop and investigate women. However, despite increasing limitations and arrests, women have not stopped their innovations in clothing styles.¹¹ Open-front manteaux instead of closed manteaux¹² with buttons, and tucking shawls behind an ear or two ears, are some of the women's dress styles that have become common and trendy in the past 20 years.

THE NEW FASHION OF OPEN-FRONT MANTEAUX AND RESISTANCE

During the series of interviews that I conducted, focusing on clothing as art, I realized that Iranian women use art as a tool to create change. Their art represents their sense of resistance and aesthetics simultaneously through the material culture of dress. The women I interviewed dislike being forced to wear the hijab; instead, they like to be able to wear the hijab in a way they like, or not at all. One of these alternatives to the hijab is the open-front manteau (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. When Negin is out socially, she wears an open manteau

How did open manteaux become trendy? There is a connection between loose manteaux, which had disappeared from women's dress culture for a while, and open manteaux. In the years after the 1979 revolution, very loose manteaux were common among women. Women had been ordered to cover their bodies with *chadors* first. At the same time, some social activists asked the religious leader and the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini, if women would be allowed to wear manteaux instead of the *chador*, especially so that those who were employed could have more freedom of movement at work. The leader allowed women to wear manteaux but with the condition that they must cover the body and not attract men.¹³ Rana, who is twenty-two years old, told me when she saw the old pictures of women with loose manteaux, she asked herself, "Ah! Who could wear these manteaux?" Even some of the young generation make jokes on social platforms by publishing photographs of women with these types of manteaux (see Figure 2). To explain the return of the open-front manteaux without buttons in Iranian women's culture, which started a decade ago in Iran, Rana said:

The dress designers think about what can be nostalgic for people. They are reminded of the loose manteaux of the 1980s, so they make some evolution in the loose manteaux by removing buttons. It gives a sense of nostalgia to people who see that again. Also, open-front manteaux allow women to make their bodies' beauty visible. People welcomed open-front manteaux because they feel nostalgic about that (October 10, 2019).¹⁴

Like Rana, Shoura, who lives in Tehran, talked about the reasons behind fashioning loose manteaux without buttons. While Rana's interpretation of the loose manteaux was more connected with the concept of nostalgia, Shoura thinks that because Iranian women wanted to wear comfortable and convenient dresses, they turned to the loose manteaux. She said, "They are

more comfortable than manteaux with buttons, especially for the summertime. They make you cool when the wind moves under your shirt.”



Figure 2. A Group of Iranian women in a coffee shop in Tehran. When they are out socially, they wear open-front manteaux

However, there can be another connection besides nostalgia and comfort. The style and shape of these manteaux are similar to the *abba* of *akhonds* (cloak of Islamic clerics). The formal clothing of *akhonds* in Iran is composed of an *abba* (cloak) and an *amamah* (turban). *Abba* is a long, loose garment without any buttons that *akhonds* wear over their other clothing in public settings (see Figure 3), and the *amameh* (turban) is a head-hugging wrapped cloth that the Islamic clerics wear in a specific style.

The style and shape of these manteaux are similar to the *abba* of *akhonds*. These manteaux have even been described as “*abbaei*” (*abba*-like) by women, clothing designers, sellers, etc.¹⁵ For Iranian women, wearing *abbaei* manteaux can be considered an appropriation of the official dress of *akhonds*. According to Cheryl Keyes, “Appropriation involves women’s adaptation of items, customs, and behaviors traditionally



Figure 3. An example of akhond's abba
 (<http://ghadirstore.ir/category/عبا> accessed February 20, 2020)

associated with male culture” (1993:208). There is a strong possible reading of resistance in this case. I argue that Iranian women have appropriated this type of men’s clothing, which belongs to the authoritative class, through alterations. They transformed their closed manteaux into open-front manteaux by removing buttons and by borrowing the loose manteaux as the emblematic sign of the time right after the 1979 revolution. The new dress gives women the feeling of freedom and comfort while it is an ironic mimicry of the male clerics’ robe; however, there is no way to prove that these women intentionally and consciously subvert dress codes through the appropriation of *akhonds’* dress.¹⁶

The form of new manteaux garners attention among women and men—men, in general, in any of the patriarchal positions.¹⁷ However, it does not mean that all communication is direct and explicit, even to the one communicating (Noyes 2016:141). Dorothy Noyes argues that forms mediate between attention and inattention. She says, “When boredom

sets in or a new situation calls for it, the conscious creativity of revision and new invention asserts itself" (133). Monotonous colors and styles, as Shoura mentioned, influenced women to alter their clothes, in the process communicating indirect messages by drawing attention to their rejection of patriarchal expectations.

These styles of dress as resistance are similar to those stylized bodily performances that categorize the identity and thoughts of the performer. As Robin Bernstein says, these "performances in everyday life are utterances of thoughts that cannot be expressed in words. These thoughts are neither conscious nor unconscious, neither wholly voluntaristic expressions of intention nor compulsory, mechanical movement" (2009:70). These women mark their bodies by wearing open manteaux to make themselves *visible* in an implicit way. They do this by simultaneously borrowing the unproblematic dress of authorities, and past fashion, and revising this new style to match their aesthetics and resistance. As the folklorists who first theorized "feminist coding" argued, ambiguity is the main feature of implicit meanings (Radner and Lanser 1993). Thus, the ambiguous meaning of open manteaux, combined with clues consonant with the sociocultural context in Iran, help the viewer to read these styles as resistance. It is not necessary to prove intentionality to read an action's implicit meanings.

Patriarchal constraints on women's dress also created a sense of boredom that women sought to overcome. Because of Khatami's influential speeches about reformation, liberty, and tolerance for diverse styles and ideas in his presidential period, Iranian women found the courage to reveal parts of their bodies and resist the mandatory hijab.¹⁸ Soon after the end of his presidency, facing the imposition of former constraints, those women who opposed the mandatory rules of hijab in the country felt oppressed. They, who had tasted the favor of liberty, even minimal and rhetorically, encountered fatigue in the new situation.¹⁹ They gradually made alterations to increase their autonomy, liberation, and right to choose. Shoura asserted

that “since we do not have that much freedom, we always have to add something to our dresses; this addition is itself a kind of creativity, and you can do it in a way that makes you beautiful” (interview, October 31, 2019). For Shoura, even this gave her a sense of power. In explaining how power is negotiated in unbalanced relations, James Scott speaks of “public transcripts” that are produced by dominant groups and “hidden transcripts” that are produced by subordinates. In the performance stage, the subordinate uses her hidden transcript to balance the power in her favor indirectly. Referring to Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place*, Scott calls imitating men’s language and appearance by women “damage-control maneuvers in the face of power” (1990:30-31). Perhaps an open-front manteau is a kind of hidden transcript used by this subset of Iranian women to resist the systematic patriarchy in which being beautiful or becoming pretty via liberal styles is prohibited.

Although none of my interviewees pointed out the similarities of open-front manteaux with the *abbas* of *akhonds*, I interpreted this as an “appropriation,” as with the Iranian women’s vocabulary and linguistic elements (*abbaei*), which shows that the women are undermining the patriarchal system indirectly. When I returned to available interviewees to attempt a form of “reciprocal ethnography” and see if they negated or verified my interpretation, they provided me with noteworthy opinions.

For instance, in the second interview, I suggested to Shoura the implicit message of challenging patriarchy through appropriating the *akhond’s abba* as an open manteau. She said, “I had never thought about that in this way. This has to be true because the first type of open manteaux was called *abbaei*” (interview, February 15, 2020).²⁰

These experiences and memories of arrest raise doubts for observers that the *gasht-e ershaad* would recognize a message of resistance in these styles, beyond their general violation of the rules of hijab. For example, Shoura’s experience of being stopped by *gasht-e ershaad* shows the importance of manteaux buttons in the mind of the judge, who is the

representative of the dominant power. She believed that she was not a bad-hijab woman when she was investigated. She described her experience: “It was in 2016; we were stopped and arrested by the police. I firmly believe they stopped us because of my friend’s beauty who was with me. Since I was wearing a dark blue jean manteau, a complete hijab on my hair, not a *shawl*, and simple pants. My friend, Sahar, is very beautiful and had a *shawl*. When the judge wanted to evaluate the case, he asked me, ‘Why did they arrest you?’ I said, ‘I have no idea.’ ‘Have a step back,’ the [*gasht-e ershaad*] judge said. ‘Ok, your manteau does not have the last button.’ He said that seriously, but we laughed [in the center] since it was a ridiculous reason” (interview, October 31, 2019).

Shoura emphasized that the judge was serious, but she and Sahar viewed the judge’s argument as absurd. The criteria for bad hijab are not clear; however, having enough buttons to close the manteaux seems a necessary or sufficient reason to apply the rules of the hijab in the minds of the authorities. PA is another Iranian woman who spoke of her experience being stopped by *gasht-e ershaad* officers:²¹

It was the last year [2018] I was in Iran [that *gasht-e ershaad* stopped me] in Vanak Square. It was an afternoon. I had put a long loose manteau on. It was black, covered all my body, and followed all the code. I had worn pants and a *shawl*. I was going to my workplace. They stopped me, and a female officer said, “Your manteau is open.” I told her, “You see that I wore a long tunic underneath my manteau.” She said, “They ordered us to stop and take every woman who wears an open manteau.” They took me in their van to the center (interview, August 2, 2019).

Again, wearing an open-front manteau is a vague sign for officials policing hijab; they cannot precisely explain why and how wearing these types of manteaux violates the rules of hijab. The performances of women through their dress styles

draw attention to but not necessarily a full understanding of the message. These styles are women's responses to the written rules of officials added to the (implicit) appropriation of the *akhond's* official dress. Importantly, this subpopulation wants their autonomy in wearing their styles, but in so doing they are not being disrespectful to women who like to wear the Islamic hijab.²² In this regard, Mona, my Tehrani 35-year-old interviewee, explained the distinction between two kinds of hijabs. She said: "There are two types of hijab. One is the 'Islamic hijab' that someone believes in and follows because her religion orders that. This is respectable. The second is the 'compulsory hijab.' This is the hijab that you do not believe in as a religious order, but since it is required by law, you have to wear [it]. The latter is mainly common in Iran" (interview, October 31, 2019).

REVEALED EARS: "THEY WANT TO SAY THAT THEY HAVE EARS. THEY CAN HEAR."

Those Iranian women who are not happy with being forced to wear a hijab have learned how to make some alterations in their clothing styles to feel free and express their aesthetic sense. Hair and its beauty must be covered completely, in the opinion of conservative clerics.²³ There are two common ways to cover hair among Iranian women. First, a large square headscarf called *rusari* is knotted under the chin and wrapped around the neck. The second type of headscarf is a large *shawl*, a rectangular piece of fabric with one side placed on a shoulder and the other side hanging loosely. While the reason for using a *shawl* instead of a *rusari* is evident to many people—since it is more comfortable—tucking a *shawl* behind the ear does not have an obvious advantage (see Figure 4).

When this fashion started to become trendy, I remember, my brother asked me many times if I knew why women tucked their shawls behind their ears.²⁴ "Do the women think it is beautiful?" In response, I always laughed and told him that I did not know. There are also examples of the confusion behind this way of

dress on social media. Male users ask, “Anyone who knows the philosophy [reason] for tucking a *shawl* behind an ear, tell us.”²⁵



Figure 4. Shoura's picture; An example of putting a shawl behind an ear

There are also jokes about this new way of wearing a shawl on social media. In one *Telegram* post, a man asks his friend, “Do you know why the girls tuck the *shawl* behind their ears?” His friend said that the answer is simple, “They want to say that they have ears. They can hear.” The joke is interpretable in many ways, but I found Rana’s (my sister’s) response intriguing. (She sometimes designs her own clothes as a hobby.) She said, “Those women can make part of their body visible. It does not matter which part exactly. But they do not like to be forced by the rules” (interview, October 10, 2019). As Emily Dickinson put it, “one can ‘tell all the Truth but tell it slant’” (quoted in Radner and Lanser 1993:16).

Showing a particular organ of the body—the ear—can be read as a form of resistance that conveys an implicit message. Rana mentioned a fundamental point in her interpretation; women want to bend the patriarchal rules. They are not comfortable with an imposed rule written by male authorities, and they are

not always trying to make their appearance beautiful. I argue that this style is a type of resistance that attempts to appear as overt while aesthetically pleasing.²⁶

Listening to the orders of men, specifically male officials, following them, and being subordinate is one of the fundamental expectations from women in a patriarchal society. This subset of Iranian women suffers from two types of patriarchy: vernacular and institutional. Both types refer to unbalanced relations between men and women. Institutional patriarchy is primarily related to political-legal impositions that reinforce inequalities to the disadvantage of women. Vernacular patriarchy is the traditional form of patriarchy that excludes women from individual and social spheres without necessarily needing governmental intervention.²⁷

Showing ears certainly breaks the rules of hijab, but it reinforces the patriarchal conventions if we consider that ears are the central organs for listening to orders. There is a Persian expression of "*goush be farman*," which literally means that ears are ready for commands. People use that when they want to show that they are totally obedient. This connotation is compatible with the interpretation of "indirection" in the language of Joan Radner and Susan Lanser. Indirection, as a type of coded feminist message, suggests those expressions, behaviors, and modes that women use to subvert real meanings and make interpretation inaccessible to outsiders. That is to say, women create a gap between the text/action and the message behind the text/action. That is why it also is called "distancing" (Radner and Lanser 1993).²⁸ These women are challenging and undermining conventional misogynist expectations. They are creating a space for themselves to feel power and liberation. Metaphorically, the ear is a liminal space between the outside world, which belongs to men, and the inside, feminine world, behind their clothes.

This is only one possible reading. Rana gave me the example of wearing a *shawl*, which is a sign of hijab, but also can be manipulated to fit women's aesthetic sense. She said "Even

though this is a limitation on your hair, a *shawl* can be worn in a way that shows your hair. If its color matches your other clothes, even the style of its tying can show yourself to be beautiful. You can show your ears and your earrings if you tuck the shawl behind your ear.” Earrings are not regularly shown. Women wear a compulsory *shawl* to cover their hair, but they uncover another part of the body—ears—and demand their autonomy.

Violating the rule of covering ears does not make sense to men. This subpopulation of women has to “slip under the radar” in a different way with a brand-new “poetic function” to attract attention while the dominant attention is focused elsewhere (Scott 1990 and Noyes, 2016: 135)—as with the loose styles of *manteaux* and *shawls*. The goal is to compel the attention of the ultimate audience, the patriarchy. However, they do not intend for the audience to comprehend all intertwined meanings. The women need to, as the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard says, “[put] forward the unrepresentable in the presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consequence of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (1979:81). Ears are organs that are not commonly presented or understood to be aesthetically pleasing. Iranians, both women and men, do not make compliments about ears as sexy organs. They say, for instance, “your hair is beautiful,” “your body is sexy,” “your eyes are pretty,” “your lips are seductive,” but I, as an Iranian folklorist, have never heard someone say your ears are sexy, beautiful, or pretty. Some people, as my interviewees mentioned, think this way of wearing a *shawl* gives these women the excuse to display the beauty of their earrings; however, this is not the exclusive reason, since showing earrings is not forbidden.

To strengthen the meaning of resistance as autonomy, I reference the portrayal of Iranian actresses on the national TV of Iran. The hijab, as a general regulation, is mandatory for actresses and newscasters, too, although authorities control newscasters more

due to the importance of “visibility” on TV and the propagation of governing ideologies related to rules of dress. Also, actresses wearing the desired hijab of the system are represented as role models, as obedient employed women. Some flexibility applies in the domain of cinema, but not on national TV. It seems that because national TV has more viewers and is more accessible than cinema, the managers of national TV are more authoritative than the administrators of cinemas about women’s dress regulations. It is enough to know that the head of national TV is appointed directly by the Supreme Leader of Iran to promote Islamic ideologies at the national level.



Figure 5. An Iranian actress in the series “Banouye Emarat” (The Lady of the Mansion). The caption reads, “The masterpiece of channel 3, the bride putting earrings on, on her scarf” to make fun of this display and criticize the rules of the hijab (accessed February 25, 2020, in https://what.sapp.ir/joke_fori/)

It is common to see a slight portion of an actress’ hair as well as her earrings—note, *only earrings, not ears*—in a theatrical

production, but you never see Iranian actresses showing hair²⁹ on Iranian national TV; however, displaying earrings is not forbidden when headscarves cover the ears (see Figure 5). Therefore, showing earrings cannot be the sole reason for uncovering ears among Iranian women, as it is not prohibited.³⁰

Another bit of evidence for this idea was news in February 2021 concerning a “legal violation” in a movie. The movie, titled *Ghatel va Vahshi (The Killer and The Savage)*, was prohibited from being shown in the 39th Fajr Film Festival because of the uncovered ears of its actress Leila Hatami in the movie.³¹ Indeed, for understanding the layered meanings of resistance—demanding autonomy, promoting comfort, and being creative—common expressions, cinematic representations, and complexities expressed by women need to be considered concurrently.

A CASE FOR COMPARISON: ARE THICK EYEBROWS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE OR JUST FASHION ?

Beauty and art, as many scholars have said, are subjective and relative. The perception of folk art depends on the shared values and aesthetics of a group of people, and it can be presented through their identities, cultures, and traditions. For example, Pravina Shukla explains that women’s religion, region, caste, marital status, and ethnic identity are recognizable via different types of jewelry, clothes, and makeup in India. She asserts that individual creativity is a choice, but that it occurs within shared aesthetic frames (2008:12). Beauty also varies from generation to generation. The shared understanding of beauty in a community can guide us to shared meanings. Hence, beauty is performed by a cultural group and renewed in each group’s particular time and place.

One of the facial alterations of the recent two decades among female youth in Iran is applying wide, thick eyebrows that are called *mode-ruz* (new fashion). For almost half a century, women liked to shape their eyebrows to be thin. Nowadays, the universal taste has changed to having “sport” or, as it has sometimes been called in Iran, “masculine” eyebrows.³²

Even women who have less hairy eyebrows transplant hair to their eyebrows or get dyed tattoos to fit this dominant aesthetic. Of course, there is a history of bushy eyebrows as part of Iranian woman's beauty, as shown in Qajar photographs of the 19th century (Soudavar Farmanfarmanian 2000). The question is whether this recent taste carries a feminist message or not. Considering the name "masculine eyebrows," are women appropriating a form related to a male culture (and thus possibly asking for equal rights) or only adopting a western fashion? As showing the face is not forbidden, it can be used to send a message. I asked my interviewees for their views on this style, comparing it with the two styles of revealed ears and open manteaux.

Negin is twenty-two years old and lives in Yazd, Iran. In almost all of her photos on her Instagram page, she has wide eyebrows. She explained to me: "I do not shape my eyebrows thin, not because it is a fashion or it is a stabilized trend now. Because I think wide eyebrows have a spectacular beauty in a way that thin eyebrows cannot compete with them. Thin eyebrows make a face completely feminine" (interview, September 29, 2020).

On the other hand, Mj, who is thirty-five years old and lives in Isfahan, likes to shape her eyebrows to be thin. She believes that "thick eyebrows are just a new fashion." Relying on her knowledge of fashion and art, she sees the emergence of thick eyebrows as an expected occurrence in the field of fashion. She says, "For a long time, it was fashionable to have thin eyebrows. It is a stable and forever fact in the industry of fashion that suddenly, the opposite [meaning thick eyebrows] appears" (interview, September 29, 2020).³³ We know that an individual fashion does not live for very long, and people have different tastes.

During the two first decades after the 1979 revolution, it was common to announce one's move to adulthood, to enter the feminine universe officially, by making fashion choices such as shaping one's eyebrows to be thin. After that, young women started to experiment with thick eyebrows. I remember my sister and friends refraining from shaping thin eyebrows

because they believed that they made them look “feminine.” When I noticed Negin had the same rationale, I asked her for more explanation. Negin responded: “Thin eyebrows show your age as older. The wide eyebrows show your age younger...Once I shaped my eyebrows thin. I looked very old; my face was not like a twenty-year-old girl anymore” (interview, September 29, 2020).

When Negin talked about the connection between age and the shape of eyebrows, she also used the word “girly eyebrows.” Part of the rite of passage for girls in Iran to enter the world of adult women is shaping their eyebrows. Christian Bromberger describes the tradition of *bandandazi* (threading to remove body hair, particularly on the face) that transforms a girl into a woman in Iran (2008:384). He discusses eyebrows’ identifying codes in the earlier period, which show a female’s status. “A teenager’s bulky eyebrows, often called “goat legs” (*pâche-bozi*), are thus replaced by graceful geometric designs” like styles called *hashti* or (in the borrowed translation used by Bromberger) “shaped like eights” or “fine bows” (384). However, not all Iranian girls, as he emphasizes, wait for their wedding to have their eyebrows shaped to be thin. Those who are “impatient for emancipation will frequently blur identification codes.” This French anthropologist speaks of an explicit code.³⁴ Yet, keeping eyebrows girly, bulky, or “*pâche-bozi*,” or making them thick in general, can be potentially read as a sign of rejecting a model of womanhood that was involved in the revolution. If women shape their eyebrows thick (like a girl who has not yet entered the world of adulthood), they would possibly be treated with more tolerance, and would attract fewer complaints about their other styles that do not follow the rules. However, for this type of autonomy involving the borrowing of western fashion, we cannot be sure of its meaning.

Negin and her generation shape their eyebrows only slightly, keeping the girly/ “masculine” eyebrows. This shape can be read as a matter of aesthetics, including the connotations of immaturity. Negin and her generation shape their eyebrows

only slightly, keeping the girly/ “masculine” eyebrows. This shape can be read as a matter of aesthetics, including, ironically, connotations of immaturity and childishness. Thick eyebrows are the meaningful styles that are, in the words of Mendoza-Denton, “irreducible to impersonations of abstract idealizations” (1996:62).

In Iran, thick eyebrows can be created since the face is the only permitted part of a woman’s body to be unveiled. In the documentary “Our Man in Tehran,” this point is mentioned by a female makeup artist. She states that “a woman’s face has to be as beautiful as possible” because it is the only organ that women are allowed to show off with visible adorning. However, many clerics believe that made-up faces should not be allowed to be visible in public, according to their interpretation of sharia.

It is complicated to determine a readable feminist message in the case of thin versus thick eyebrows among this subpopulation of women for several reasons. First, sharia rules sometimes question whether thick eyebrows constitute resistance. After an inquiry to a *Mujtahid*—who interprets sharia regulations for its followers—he responds that “as long as women do not cut their hair like boys and men, it would not be any problem.” The question was: “It is customary that ladies, after getting married, adorn themselves, plucking their eyebrows and remove any extra hair from their face. In this way, is covering them on the face required?” The response is: “If it is only trimming eyebrows or facial hair, [it’s] no problem.”³⁵

Probably, cutting hair in a style typically worn by men would be perceived as a sign of “gender-egalitarian[ism],” as Nikki Keddie uses this term (2000:407).³⁶ However, there is no prohibition against thickening eyebrows like men.

The second reason for rejecting a feminist message in eyebrow styles comes from images of women known as “religious” women (fond of the Islamic government of Iran and its rules of hijab), showing them wearing thick eyebrows.³⁷ They do not follow western fashions, nor do they wear makeup in public; both of these are forbidden based on the principles

of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I read their thick eyebrows as a fashion in their allowed aesthetic framework that matches other subpopulations' tastes in fashion. And none of the women who had the experience of arrest by *gasht-e ershaad* mentioned that they thought they were arrested due to their eyebrow styles or because of wearing heavy makeup.

Thick eyebrows per se may not convey the meaning of resistance, but my ethnographic data shows that if other clues such as open-front manteaux or revealed ears (or both) are chosen as ways of dress, resistance against imposed veiling is apparent (see figures 6 and 7). I argue that the women who wear open manteaux and/or tuck their scarves behind their ears are part of a community of shared belief; they can perform their own version of liberty distinct from, but still within, the governing rules. This community reveals its opinions about mandatory hijab through dress styles. Since being stopped by *gasht-e ershaad* Maryam and her friends consider themselves beautiful precisely *because* of such encounters. Their shared narratives of encounters with the police establish their folk identities as beautiful women who endorse resistant ways of dress.



پست معنادار دختر سردار سلیمانی برای شهید فخری زاده + عکس (*shomanews.com*)

Figure 6. *The woman is affiliated with authorities who believe in mandatory veiling for all women.*



Figure 7. Negin's picture shows her dress styles: An open-front manteau, a revealed ear, and thick eyebrows

CONCLUSION

For a subpopulation of urban Iranian women who feel oppressed, dress is a tool to challenge authorities. New dress styles include meaningful messages that are readable as resistance as seen through social context and women's narratives/explanations.

Open manteaux convey openness and comfort, in addition to the irony of imitating clerics' *abbas*. Calling open manteaux *abbaei* and verifying the possible interpretation as resistance by interviewees shows intentionality. Similarly, the common expression of "*goush be farman*" can indicate an implicit demand for autonomy behind the revealed ear while wearing *shawls*. However, I have not found signs from the surrounding context to read thick eyebrows as a resistance to patriarchy.

The imposed hijab code leads Iranian women, who do not like to be forced, to reject bodily discomfort. Also, they show aesthetic resistance by countering the boredom of dark colors and monotonous styles and creating new and colorful styles. These styles can be considered political resistance by ordinary women, as they defy restrictions.

Dress is a distinctive mode of resistance in Iranian women's culture because the wearers manipulate the clothing intended by the authorities to dominate women as a way to express their beauty and resistance to the patriarchal status quo. In a system where explicit objections do not help actors reach their goals, implicit ways are substituted. Resistance through dress simultaneously demands comfort, beauty, and liberty.

NOTES

- 1 I conducted all my interviews in Persian and translated them into English.
- 2 Vanak Square in Tehran is a well-known place where *gasht-e ershaad* stops women to question their dress style. Also, the main guidance center is geographically close to the square.
- 3 The form of obligation is a signed promise according to which you pledge not to repeat the violation.
- 4 For instance, in his *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, Shahram Khosravi introduces the youth generation as "the most rebellious generation in the modern history of Iran" who are proud of behavior that has been criminalized by the government (2008:126). As they want to listen to their pleasure-based instincts, they have been seen as lawbreakers by authorities. This pride that rises from the courage for breaking the rules is admirable to other youths (125).
- 5 The topic of dress and culture of resistance is more complex than a researcher can address comprehensively and objectively in a single article.
- 6 The Islamic hijab has not been defined in Islamic law, but some Hadith (traditions) of Muslims determine some criteria for wearing the hijab.
- 7 This article of the penal code is still enforceable.
- 8 The law does not define a hijab. It supposed that every Muslim knows it as one of the orders in his/her religion, Islam.
- 9 طرح تأمین امنیت اجتماعی
- 10 Meaning, they ask the women to cover their bodies and hair entirely.
- 11 It might also have another reason. Many legal scholars questioned the plan and legitimacy of *gasht-e ershaad's* interventions in women's social lives. *Gasht-e ershaad*, thus, decreased their activities sporadically and seasonally. Also, I should mention that they appear only in

big cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, and Isfahan because manipulated veiling is more common among urban women.

- 12 The word is originally French and is used by Iranians to refer to long coats.
- 13 Hijab and Covering. 2013. <http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/> (accessed February 10, 2020).
- 14 After 1979, the manteaux were only loose. Now they are loose without buttons.
- 15 <http://delbaraneh.com/fashion-model/manto-abba/> (accessed March 20, 2020); <https://www.tasvirezendegi.com/مدل-مانتو-عبایی-جدید-شیک-مینیاتور-مینیاتور/> (accessed March 20, 2020); <https://www.digikala.com/product/dkp-468285/مدل-مانتو-عبایی-زنانه-ولیعصر-مدل-موژان-کد-21010> (accessed March 20, 2020)
- 16 After the death of Mahsa Amini and during the movements for changing patriarchal rules in Iran, the phenomenon of “turban tossing” (knocking *amameh* off the heads of *akhonds*) became common. It was a protest on the part of Iranian adults in response to orders from Islamic clerics to observe hijab. The protesters wanted to make public areas unsafe for *akhondas* as delegates of the government, just as *gasht-e ershaad* made women feel unsafe in public. This paper was based on research that was completed in 2020. “Turban tossing” can be a topic for further research in the future.
- 17 I hesitate to use the term patriarchy in my paper not because it is known as a “western construct” in scholarship of feminism but because, as in her “From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We’ve Really Come,” Vrushali Patil mentions that restrictions of intersectionality like patriarchy fail to identify translational dynamics of power (2013: 850-854). Of course, this does not mean that I assume women of my research to be “sexual-political subjects prior to and external to social relationships” (850). Indeed, I show that the subset of Iranian women I researched about are social actors who subvert imposed laws affecting various parts of their social and personal lives in artistic ways. Yet there are other Iranian women whose clothing styles match the laws. Referring to the legal context and historical events such as the 1979 revolution is part of the local conditions that constituted patriarchal arrangements that I mention in this research. Terms should not matter too much in practice when at least part of the intersecting and complex relations of gender inequality are considered.
- 18 An example is <https://www.aparat.com/v/HFLQK/>
- 19 The new situation arose starting with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Oppression of subalterns and the weakest classes

- (such as women and minorities) became intensified during and after the protests of 2009.
- 20 Another example from a linguistic realm is a joke that criticizes the dominant thinking of extremist conservatives who believe “rape is the result of not wearing an appropriate hijab” by saying, “Then why there is not any raping of the *akhonds* who wear open-front *abbas*?” Telegram Jokes, September 2, 2021. “این تفکر از کجا آمده که کسی که بی حجاب بهش تجاوز می‌شود چرا کسی بهشون تجاوز نمی‌کنه؟ این همه آخوندای عبا می‌پوشند چرا کسی بهشون تجاوز نمی‌کنه؟”
 - 21 She has been living in New York City for three years. She was twenty-eight years old when I interviewed her in August 2019.
 - 22 Also some Iranians believe that Islam does not require all Muslim women to wear a complete hijab, as Iranian officials say. Seyed Hoseyn Sarkeshikian (2010), in his Master’s thesis *Iran[ian] Criminal Intervention in Inappropriate Clothing*, explains the different perspectives of Islamists and scholars of Islam about women’s hijab. Consulting historical documents of early Islam, along with the lack of a clear verse in the Quran that demands a hijab for all Muslim women, Sarkeshikian proves that wearing a hijab is not mandatory for Muslim women.
 - 23 The entire body must be hidden and covered, according to orders. The orders are given by the men who have the authority to write laws (and thereby establish institutional patriarchy) and the men who colloquially believe that they are above women (and thereby promote the vernacular form of patriarchy). However, institutional patriarchy affects how moderate middle-class men present themselves aesthetically in Iran. For example, some imposed limitations on the men’s dress styles led to alterations in their bodily aesthetics. In the dynamism of power, institutional patriarchy is in a higher position than vernacular patriarchy. Still, both of these forms of hierarchical patriarchy put pressure on this subset of women..
 - 24 Sometimes women tuck a shawl behind only one ear, and sometimes behind two ears.
 - 25 www.mobna.com (June 24, 2015) or www.clob.com (June 28, 2015)
“اگر کسی فلسفه شال پشت گوش انداختن خانم‌ها را فهمید به ما هم بگوید”
 - 26 Their coding through their art, in a sense of folklore, is implicit. Beauty for those Iranian women who do not like the hijab imposed *on them* is connected with the sense of freedom. They think, even with a hijab, they can make/show themselves beautiful. They use art as a weapon to implicitly resist the dominant regime’s rules and the “religious authorities.”

- 27 One example of this type happened recently in Orumiye, Iran (on 8 August 2021). Following a verbal altercation between a male driver and two female pedestrians due to their unveiling, the driver attempted to hit the two women with his car. The driver fled the scene after the women were hit by his vehicle, but was arrested later by law enforcement. The supreme cleric of the city condemned this action. (hamshahrionline.ir) (زیر گرفتن ۲ زن در ارومیه به بهانه بدحجابی! - همشهری آنلاین (accessed August 11, 2021)
- 28 Radner and Lanser do not provide any definition of “indirection,” Instead, they talk about different modes of indirection and give examples of this type of coding.
- 29 Real hair is forbidden to be visible, but not wigs. Also, the hair of non-Iranian women can be shown on Iranian national TV.
- 30 It is technically possible to show earrings without showing the full ear while wearing the scarf. This style is common among Arab women. Example: <https://youtu.be/r6uSDfyorZs>
- 31 For example, 24 حذف «قاتل و وحشی» از جشنواره فجر به خاطر نمایش گوش لیلا حاتمی | اقتصاد (eghtesaad24.ir) (accessed February 11, 2021) [Deletion of Qatel and Vahshi from Fajr Festival due to Display of Leila Hatami's ears]. [eghtesaad24.ir/000Odd](https://www.asriran.com/003DeV) or <https://www.asriran.com/003DeV>, January 26, 2021. “توقیف فیلم قاتل و وحشی / مشکل از گوش لیلا حاتمی است یا چشم، زبان و مغز دیگران؟” “Qatel and Vahshi's Film's Impound is the problem Leila Hatami's Ears or Others' Eyes, Tongue, and Brain?” (accessed February 11, 2021)
- 32 Example: “New fashion of eyebrows for women in 2020 in Iran” in: <http://www.irannaz.com/%D8%B9%DA%A9%D8%B3-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF.html> (accessed October 3, 2020)
- 33 Maryam, one of my other informants, had the same idea. She believed, “If Iranian women wear thick eyebrows, it is because they are under the influences of Hollywood's actresses in styles and fashion” (Interview, September 29, 2020).
- 34 See Radner and Lanser's Introduction, pages 5-6.
- 35 Women's Makeup, Fatwas by Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi (مدظله) آرایش زنان-فتاواي آيت الله العظمی مکارم شیرازی (anhar.ir) (accessed July 8, 2021)
- 36 Instead of the term “Islamic feminist”
- 37 Zeinab Soleimani, Qasem Soleimani's daughter is an example.

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