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interfaces 1

VEILED INTERROGATIONS IN A WALLED SPACE

a working paper

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THE WALL: A POEM

In her 1957 poem, “The Wall,” Forough Farrokhzad speaks in the voice of a woman who feels the urgency to escape from inside the walls constructed around her by *the eyes* (gaze) of an unspecified other only addressed as *you*:¹

*In the rushed passage of the cold seconds
your wild eyes in their silence
build a wall around me.
I escape from you in the lost passages of the road.*

Why is time rushed and cold? Who is this other? What makes the other’s eyes wild? Why in silence? Why do they build a wall around her? What is the function of the wall? What is the material of the wall? Why does she want to escape from this wall-building other? What does she want to escape to? Why does her escape has to happen in those passages of the road that are lost? How does she find them?

*To see the fields in the moon dust
To bathe my body in the waters of the springs of light
In the rainbow fog of the warm summer morning
to fill my skirt with wild flowers
To hear the roosters’ calls from the roof of a peasant’s hut
I escape from you to press my feet
hard on the grass in the fields
or drink the cold dew from the blades of grass*

The body. Sight. Out. In the fields. At night. Moon. Bathing. Submerging. Light surrounding the body. Rainbow fog. Warmth. Summer morning. Out. In the fields. Skirt,

¹ Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), in spite of her short life, is considered to be one of the foremost contemporary Iranian poets. In addition to her unique use of the language of the everyday, the vivid and complex imagery in her poems, and her spirit of experimentation, she is also known for having revolutionized the contemporary Iranian poetry through her highly personal (some wrongly call it autobiographical) subjects including desire and sexuality. The translation of “The Wall” is mine. Note Farrokhzad, pp. 130-2.

touching the body, a hand holding up the sides, a hand picking wild flowers. [No more hands available to hold a chador in place.] Sound. Out. On the roof. In the country. The feet. Pressing hard. On the grass. Out. Why this yearning for the outdoor? Why the insistence on the bodily experiences? Why does she have to escape from this *other* in order to access these experiences? If *out* is where she escapes to and this is *out*, where is *in*? Presuming that the enclosure marked by the wall is the *in*, can we deduce that the wall functions as a barrier to sight, to sound, to the body's ability to be *out*, in the *open*, when the body chooses? Is the *in* a disciplinary space then? Is the wall that the other's gaze has constructed around the body a prison? And why is the body's presence only possible through representations? What meanings are these representations pointing to? In fact, where is the location from which these representations are made? Or, where is the site of her subjectivity if her perception of her body is constituted through the desire to escape her other's wall-building gaze? Does the gaze produce the desiring body and the desire both?

*I escape from you on a deserted shore
to watch the dizzying dance of the sea storms
from atop the cliffs lost in a dark cloud*

Out. A deserted shore. A lost space. Sight, the site of experience. Gazing out. Dizzying dance. Seas, storms, cliffs, clouds. Height.

*In a distant sunset
like wild pigeons to spread my wings over
the fields, the mountains, the skies
to hear from amidst the dry bushes
the happy songs of the field birds*

Out. Far. Horizon. Transforming the body and its experience through imagination. Pigeons. Wings. Fields. Mountains. Skies. Dry bushes. Happy field birds. Representations without any details. Only pointing *out*. Does the wall also function as a barrier to the imagination? If the lived experience of the *in* inspires her desire to escape to the *out*, is her

perception of the out independent from that experience?

*I escape from you to open away from you
the way to the city of desires
and inside the city...
the heavy lock of the golden palace of fantasies.
But your eyes with their silent scream
blur the roads in my eyes.
In their dark secret
they continue building a wall around me.*

If the way to the city of desires can be opened only when away from her other, does the other build the wall in order to keep her from her desires? What might she find in this sought city of desires? What is locked in the golden palace of fantasies? And why? Can eyes scream? Can a scream be silent? To what end do the eyes scream if the effect of their silence is the loss of the ability to see the road to the city of desires? What dark secret necessitates the building of the wall around this desiring body? Does the wall produce the desire?

VEIL = WALL

Veil is wall. Their functions may indeed explain their purposes.

function: to divide

The wall divides the spaces: inside | outside; private | public. The veil divides the spaces: inside | outside; private | public. Inside is the female body. She remains private.

function: to hide

The wall acts as a barrier to sight. The inquisitive gaze of the outsider meets its end at the wall. What is inside and private remains hidden from the gaze. The veil hides the female body from the inquisitive gaze.

function: to protect

The wall keeps what is inside from the potential threats from the outside. It protects the properties of the private. The veil protects the female body as private property. Simultaneously, it protects “morality,” “authentic identity,” and the hierarchical sexual order.

function: to confine

When the door is locked, the wall confines the inhabitants of the inside to the enclosure marked by the wall. The veil confines the female body, its expressions and movements to its enclosure.

LOCATIONAL POLITICS: WRITING AGAINST THE VEIL

Writing against the veil is a dangerous undertaking even if one is writing in the “West” to a primarily “Western” audience. It may be clear what dangers such writing could face in countries where brutally oppressive regimes are in power under the banner of Islam. But what are the dangers in the “West?” Let us forget the Roshdi affair and the launching of the arrows against the person of the writer. Temporarily. There are other locations from which attacks may be launched. On a background of intense racism in the “West” against the “Muslim” others, writing against the veil may be understood by many well-intentioned anti-racists as spreading hatred. The history of the presence of large “Muslim” communities in many “Western” societies is marred with many racist incidents. In fact, the entire history of “West-East” is a highly productive field for investigators of racism in action; the long domination of many Islamic societies by European powers withstanding, adding economic and geopolitical colonial and neo-colonial dimensions to the complexity of racism as a psycho-historical phenomenon. Much of the racist anti-Islamic discourse has

focused on the veil, this most immediately visible emblem of Islam, as the sign of the otherness of Islamic believers and their societies. Writing against the veil may be interpreted as further othering Islam and its believers. On a background of feminist projects of restoring and claiming female agency, writing against the veil may be understood as an attempt to question or undermine the agency of “Muslim women,” which, in itself, may constitute a form of veiling. The presence of many veiled women in the political arenas of countries governed by Islamic ideology, some feminists believe, proves the futility of the attempt to focus on the veil if the writer is to take a position against the veil on the grounds of its oppressive operation on women wearing it. The writer and her writing against the veil are not in a position of exteriority to this discursive field. Is there a *safe* location from which to write on this matter? This question immediately evokes others: Is there a safe location from which to write on *any* matter? If writing is inevitably representational, and if representation is inevitably discursive, and if discourse is inevitably political, and if politics is inevitably historical, can any location exist outside the history as a discursive field of representational politics? Can the writer writing against the veil even in theory escape from the enclosure of the walls of history?

SEVEN LAYERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY VEIL IN IRAN: SNAPSHOTS OF A POLITICAL HISTORY

1.

The first serious challenge to the Islamic state in Iran was launched by women on the heels of Rooh-o-lah Khomeini’s first offensive on women’s rights. This was less than a month after the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan, authorized by the Council for the Islamic Revolution, replaced the Shah’s last appointed prime-minister, Shapour

Bakhtyar, and his government of National Reconciliation. On March 7th, 1979, Khomeini - by now acclaimed as the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution - demanded that the Provisional Government fulfill its Islamic revolutionary duty by banning unveiled women from working in or entering the government buildings. In the same week, he had also called for the abolition of the Family Protection Act and the dismissal of women judges by the Ministry of Justice.²

The next morning, March 8th, 1979, Islamic Committees prevented unveiled female employees from entering their workplaces and demanded that they wear a *hijab* in order to be allowed entrance. Many women turned around and refused to go to work. Many joined forces and staged demonstrations in front of the government buildings. On the same day, a feminist-organized celebration of International Women's Day turned into a spontaneous protest movement as it came under attack by Islamic zealots.³ For days thousands of women, primarily educated upper- and middle-class, took to the streets again, this time against the mandatory reinstatement of the veil, the abolition of the Family Protection Act and many other assaults on women's corporeal and social bodies. Women demonstrators chanted slogans such as "*Dar bahar-e azadi, Jay-e haq-e zan khali!*"⁴

The Islamist forces' response to this uprising was violent: Mobs of organized religious vigilantes - known as *hezbollahis* - attacked women on the streets and in their gathering places.⁵ Women demonstrators were subjected to physical and verbal assaults. Many were

² Paidar, p. 234.

³ This celebration of IWD was the first of its kind since the 1953 coup and ensuing repression. Prior to 1953, the Tudeh Party, Iran's largest Marxist-Leninist party, was the primary organizer of IWD celebrations. The 1978 celebration was organized by a coalition of Marxist-Leninist women's groups most of whom were also affiliated with leftist political organizations. Note Moghissi, pp. 139-143 for a breakdown of women's groups involved in this event.

⁴ "In the dawn of freedom, women's rights are missing!" This was a reformulation of the slogan popularized upon the Revolution's "victory": "In the dawn of freedom, the martyrs are missed!"

⁵ *Hezbollahi* means "belonging to *hezbollah*," the *Party of God*.

beaten and stabbed.⁶ They were called “whores”, “American agents”, “anti-revolutionaries”, and assaulted by mobs of men shouting “*Ya roosary, Ya toosary!*”⁷ In their intensity of emotions and confrontations that they gave rise to, these events paralleled the anti-Shah demonstrations of only a few weeks ago. The Iranian National Television did not report the demonstrations at all, although they received wide coverage in the Western press.⁸

Prime Minister Bazargan, a leader of the “moderate” National Front, responded by issuing a statement in which he said that, although he did not agree with compulsory veiling, the women in his own family and those of his cabinet ministers’ had always been veiled in accordance with their Islamic faith and duty.⁹ Earlier that week, in response to Khomeini’s demand, Bazargan had issued a policy letter which indicated that women judges should be relieved from their judiciary duties and transferred to other administrative positions in the Ministry of Justice.

While organized mobs of men attacked the protesting women on the streets of Tehran, Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, Tabriz and other major cities, the male-dominated political opposition in Iran, mostly on the left, abandoned women in their fight for their rights. Arguing that gender equality could only be defined as a by-product of socialist and/or democratic systems, and that focusing on women’s rights at that moment was secondary and even harmful to the class struggle and to the ‘larger’ struggle for independence and democracy, the male leadership of many leftist organizations issued orders to their women cadres to not

⁶ Kate Millett’s *Going to Iran* gives an account of the street confrontations and events surrounding March 8, 1979. Millett was invited by the organizers to speak in the IWD celebration in Tehran. She and her Canadian colleague, Sophie Keir, were deported from Iran on March 16th.

⁷ “Either a head wrap or a head rap!” or “Either a head scarf or a head scar!”

⁸ Sanasarian, p. 125.

⁹ Paidar, p. 238.

support and participate in the demonstrations. Many women cadres ignored these orders.¹⁰

2.

In 1848, Fatemeh Zarin Taj Baraghani - more commonly known as Tahere Qurrat al'Ayn¹¹ - appeared in the first publicly recorded instance of a woman unveiling as a liberatory political gesture in Iran:

Tahirih, with her face unveiled, stepped from her garden, advancing to the pavilion of Baha'ullah; and as she came, she shouted aloud these words: 'The trumpet is sounding! The great Trump is blown! The universal advent is now proclaimed!' The believers gathered in that tent were panic struck, and each one asked himself, 'How can the Law be abrogated? How is it that this woman stands here without her veil?'¹²

Fatemeh Baraghani was a scholar of Islamic theology and a powerful orator when she left Islam and her husband's home and became a main leader, theorist and military strategist of the Babi religio-political movement, the parent of the contemporary Bahai'i religion. The political significance of her unveiling immediately gave rise to a highly erotic mythology created around her person. Sipih, a contemporary Qajar court chronicler, wrote:

She would decorate her assembly room like a bridal chamber and her body like a peacock of Paradise. Then she summoned the followers of the Bab and appeared unveiled in front of them. First she ascended a throne and like a pious preacher reminded them of Heaven and Hell and quoted amply from the Qur'an and the Traditions. She would then tell them: "Whoever touches me, the intensity of Hell's fire would not affect him." The audience would then rise and come to her throne and kiss those lips of hers which put to shame the ruby of Ramman, and rub their faces against her breasts, which chagrined the pomegranates of the garden.¹³

¹⁰ Note Paidar, pp. 234-6; Moghissi, pp. 139-158; Sanasarian, pp. 124-7. All of these accounts also include analysis of the ideological justification put forth by the two main popular opposition organizations, Fadaiyan Khalq and Mojahedin Khalq, for their lack of support for women's spontaneous uprising. Moghissi also discusses the Tudeh Party's stance on the issue.

¹¹ Tahere means *the pure*, and Qurrat al'Ayn *the solace of the eye*. These titles were used to refer to her by two of the male leaders of the movement, respectively The Bab (meaning The Gate) himself, and Rashti, an Islamic theologian and a main theorist and promoter of Babism. Not surprisingly, Fatemeh Baraghani has survived history only under the veil of these titles given to her by these two men. For more on Baraghani's life and times note Milani, pp. 77-100.

¹² Abbas Abdol Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful*, quoted in Milani, p. 86.

¹³ Quoted in Amanat, p. 321.

3.

During the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905-1911), many women, who actively participated in and supported the struggle against the Qajar monarchy, found an opportunity to publicly voice their desire to shed the veil:

For years, unveiling had been a central issue for women's groups. Women used various means to show their discontent with the black veil (Chador). In Shiraz, for example, women had changed the colour of the Chador from black to dark brown, an innovation which ended when they were attacked by a mob in the streets.¹⁴

The veil then became a politically divisive issue that undermined the effectiveness of the indigenous and independent women's movements in Iran:

Some women chose this moment [1910] to wage a war against women's veiling. A group of women appeared in the streets of Tehran shouting pro-constitutional slogans and demanding their freedom from the veil. The sight of these women removing their *chador* created a public outcry not least from [some of] their constitutionalist sisters who dissociated themselves from the actions of 'a bunch of prostitutes'.¹⁵

The struggle against the veil during the Constitutional Revolution was closely tied to the struggle for women's enfranchisement in the context of other demands for democracy. In the first majlis, when the issue of women's right to vote was raised by a male reformer and supporter of women's movement, the Shi'i clerics shouted him down, accusing him of blasphemy.¹⁶

4.

Although by 1920s many women activists had already started to appear unveiled in public, particularly in Tehran, the majority of Iranian women did not come out from under the veil until unveiling became compulsory in 1936.

On January 8th, 1936, Reza Shah, a devout Muslim himself and every bit a traditional

¹⁴Moghissi, p. 39.

¹⁵ Paidar, p. 59.

¹⁶ Afary, p. 121.

man,¹⁷ attended the formal ceremonies for the opening of Danesh'saray-e Moghadamati (the Primary College) and the convocation of the graduates in medicine and mid-wifery. Highly specific about this event was that his wife and his daughters, unveiled and dressed in Western style clothing, also attended the ceremonies. Gaining a symbolic political significance, this became the official start of *Kashf-e hejab* (Compulsory Unveiling), one among many of Reza Shah's strategies for 'modernizing' Iran. In secret briefs issued to government agencies, they were required to organize social gatherings in which all government employees had to participate along with their wives unveiled and in Western style dresses. The briefs emphasized that efforts should be made to prevent "ill-reputed" women from attending these gatherings. All female students were banned from attending their schools veiled. A telegraphic frenzy set in as many government agencies in the provinces and small towns demanded from Tehran the dispatch of tailors skilled in Western style dresses and hats. Some government departments paid advances of a few months' salaries to their low-ranked employees who were unable to afford the hiked-up prices of fabric and tailors. Orders were issued for the arrest of merchants overpricing fabric. The police and military forces were put on alert in anticipation of public outbreak against the anti-veil measures. Sporadic protests confronted violent responses. Soon the police were authorized to forcefully remove women's veils on the streets. There are many accounts of women being beaten and harassed in this period either for keeping or for removing the veil.

5.

The Shi'i clergy who had been pushed into 'quietism' by Reza Shah's anti-clerical 'iron claws' holding their necks, immediately came back to the political scene after his abdication in 1941 when his 19-year-old son, Mohammad Reza, was put on the throne by

¹⁷ This is according to Ashraf Pahlavi, his daughter, in her autobiography, *Faces in the Mirror*.

the Allied Forces occupying the country during WWII. Ayatollah Borujerdi, the first recognized *marja-e taqlid*¹⁸ in many decades, took advantage of the new king's political instability and his fear of the increasing influence of the leftist and national democratic organizations and

reached an unwritten agreement with the young Mohammad Reza Shah. The former [Ayatollah Borujerdi] agreed to support the monarchy and to silence his politically motivated colleagues; the latter promised to relax his father's secular policies and lift the prohibition against the veil.¹⁹

Khomeini, a student of Ayatollah Borujerdi and his personal assistant for years, entered into the national political discourse in 1943 with a pamphlet which denounced Reza Shah on the charge of "secularism" for many reasons including the unveiling of women:

[F]or closing down seminaries, expropriating religious endowments, propagating anticlerical sentiments, replacing religious courts with state ones, permitting the consumption of alcoholic beverages and the playing of "sensuous music," forcing men to wear Western-style hats, establishing coeducational schools, and banning the long veil (*chador*), thereby "forcing women to go naked into the streets."²⁰

As a result of this climate some women returned to the veil although the form of veiling was different: *Roobandeh* (a mask covering the entire face except the eyes) which was common prior to the mandatory unveiling was now outdated; and many re-veiled women either simply covered their hair with a scarf or wore *chadors* of light and multi-coloured fabrics. But many women did not return to the veil.

6.

On January 8th, 1978, on the anniversary of Reza Shah's anti-veil legislation, a small group of Islamist women, supported by theology students, demonstrated in Qom, the religious capital of Iran, demanding the reinstatement of the veil.²¹ The police confronted

¹⁸ This is the highest rank among Shi'i clerics, and the term literally means *the source for imitation*. Every Shi'i believer must follow a *marja-e taqlid* whose interpretation of Islam and decrees in all aspects of life are binding for his followers.

¹⁹ Abrahamian, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²¹ *Day-by-day History of the Islamic Revolution*, p. 45.

them, disbanding the small crowd with violent force. The next day, January 9th, a larger crowd, this time mostly theology students, took to the streets of Qom, and the ensuing killings by the police prompted the successive demonstrations which soon took on massive dimensions and led to the Shah's downfall. The event of January 8th, 1978 is among one of the least considered in the analysis of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, although January 9th is commonly considered to be the landmark date in its history.

7.

Starting in September 1979, the war with Iraq created a condition of emergency which gave the fundamentalist Islamic government the free reign to violently suppress all oppositions. Among a variety of armed forces patrolling the streets, including the Revolutionary Guards (Sepah Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami) and the Revolutionary Committees (Komite-ye Enghelab-e Eslami), were the so-called "Zeynab Patrols." These were Islamist women, armed and driving around in military vehicles in groups of four, whose sole responsibility was the enforcement of the compulsory veil. All of these forces had the authority to stop, charge and arrest women who were not properly veiled. Often the punishment was flogging. One of the 'official' slogans covering the walls was "khawharam, hejab-e toa az khoon-e man koobande-tar ast."²² In early 1981, in a speech to a group of Islamist women in the holy city of Qom, Khomeini stated:

[O]ne of the biggest achievements of the Islamic Revolution was the return of the veil.... If the Islamic Revolution had no other outcome but the veiling of women, this in and of itself is enough for the Revolution.²³

²² "Sister, your veil is more effective than my blood." Blood referred to the 'martyrs' of the war. Note the subject positions envisioned for women: While men defended the 'Islamic Revolution' and the country by participating in the war and losing their lives, women's most effective participation was claimed to be through their veiling.

²³ *Perdiss*, no. 14, Farvardin 1, 1360/March 21, 1981, p. 1. Quoted in Sanasarian, p. 95.

UNDER THE VEIL OF POLITICAL HISTORY: WOMEN AND MODERN SUBJECTHOOD

The matter of the veil in Iran raises a set of rather basic questions about the categorical woman as the subject of a modern state.

Within a modernist framework of power, one has to ask: What are women's rights, as subjects, before the law? Add a feminist angle to it: Are women equal to men before the law? A quick survey of the personal status and labour laws in Iran returns this answer: No. The inequality has sanctioned a variety of forms of violence against women *as* women, practiced by the state as well as individuals. The considerations that there are many women in Iran who choose to wear the veil and that there are many other conditions that make life particularly difficult for women in Iran and relegate them to the status of second-class citizens may lead one to the conclusion that the veil is not the matter right now. After all, it is not the veil, in and of itself only a piece of cloth, that is the impediment in the way of women having equal status. Besides, things have eased quite a bit particularly since the "moderates" have come to power. These notions are of course contradictory and simplistic, and can be challenged even from within the same framework. Do women, as subjects, have the right to choose what they wear? It is the compulsory order of the veil, and not necessarily its forms and practices, which signifies women's inequality to men as subjects of the state and judicial discourses of power. The compulsory order of the veil puts women in a specifically subordinated position with regards to these powers. Women who prefer not to be veiled in public must either leave Iran or remain confined to their homes, differences in religion, ethnicity, class and even nationality notwithstanding. Moreover, the considerable changes in the practices of veiling over the past two decades is the result of women's individual resistances, centimeter by centimeter and colour by colour, through innovative anti-veil strategies devised against the state-backed systematic enforcement of veiling. That the "Zeynab Patrols" do not roam the streets of Iran, and fewer women are arrested and

physically punished or fined for “bad-veiling,” has not driven the veil off the agenda of any of the parties. The fundamentalists, or the so-called “hard-liners,” frequently lament the decline of Islamic morality, observable in the strands of women’s hair and their use of make-up, as a sign of “anti-revolutionary” infiltration by Zionist and American agents.²⁴ The separate entrances designated for women in government buildings are staffed by Islamist women who ensure that the women entering the sanctity of the enclosure are properly veiled. These stations are also equipped with nail polish and make-up removers, cotton balls and tissues. Women who refuse to follow the orders are denied entrance. The existence of enforcement mechanisms is a proof of anti-veil resistance. It rejects the notion that veiling in Iran is a matter of choice or an issue of secondary importance for women’s struggle. Given the highly violent thread tying it closely to ideological discourses of modernity, nationalism, religious fundamentalism and revivalism, neo-colonialism and Marxism, and the political discourses at the birth of two major revolutions, the formation of constitutional monarchy, parliamentary state and Islamic republic within the space of less than a hundred years, the discourse of the veil has more than an emblematic role in the context of the formation of Iranian woman as the subject of a modern state and the articulation of her rights.

LOCATING THE IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE OF A PRACTICE: “MUSLIM,” “WOMAN” AND THE NECESSITY OF THE VEIL

Among the contemporary Iranian Shi’i ideologues credited with the “revival” of Shi’ism as a political project two figures stand out because of their prolific discursive production and their ideologically influential roles in the Islamic movements that dominated

²⁴ *Avay-e Zan*, an Iranian feminist magazine published in exile, has documented several newspaper articles attacking women’s “bad-veiling” published in Iran in 1997, only a few months after the “moderate” cleric Mohammad Khatami became the president. *Avay-e Zan*, Vol. 7, no. 29, Spring 1997 (pp. 20-1).

the 1979 Revolution. There are many parallels between these two men, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Dr. Ali Shari'ati: They were particularly active during the years immediately preceding the Revolution; they were quite familiar with and paid attention to the popular culture; they taught, conducted public lectures and wrote extensively on Islamic theology *as* political ideology; they drew from and simultaneously critiqued “Western” ideologies; and they talked frequently about the family, the role of women in Islamic society and the necessity of the veil.

In general, their views represent two of the main tendencies in what has been called “Islamic Revivalism:” Shari'ati, a ‘layman’ educated in France in sociology of religions, brought into his interpretation of Islam notions borrowed from Marxist theories of class and imperialism and the post-colonial discourse of Franz Fanon and at the same time critiqued the first for its ‘materialism’ and the second for his ignorance of Islam and spirituality. Motahhari - who, in addition to his Ph.D. in theology from the University of Tehran, was traditionally-trained in Islamic theology and had the rank of ayatollah - promoted a return to Islamic sources through a critique of “Western rationalism” and the concept of “individualism.”²⁵

different natures, different rights

Although the two men were at times in opposite poles, for Shari'ati was highly critical of the Shi'i clerical establishment, and Motahhari found Shari'ati's ideas objectionable because of their Marxist inclinations, on the matter of “women” and their “rights” they are in agreement. Women by nature are different from men. Their natural differences necessitate differences in their social rights. Differences in their rights do not mean they are

²⁵ Note Paidar, pp. 175-189.

unequal to men but only that they do not have the same rights, for obvious reasons.²⁶

consumer family, colonialism, and the veil of idealism

Both Shari'ati and Motahhari identified family as the fundamental unit of the Islamic society. While Shari'ati acknowledged the exploitation of women in the sphere of the family he explained it in terms of the general depoliticization of the Islamic society and its domination by the colonial relations of consumerism. In his lectures collected and published under the title *Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast* [Fatemeh Is Fatemeh], Shari'ati identified the source of women's oppression in Iran as "cultural imperialism" which aimed to deprive the Third World nations of their cultural identity and traditional values in order to better exploit them without the possibility of resistance. As Paidar points out in her analysis of Shari'ati's discourse on gender, women as the center of the family were targeted for exploitation, according to Shari'ati, through a double strategy that turned them into sex-objects and uncritical and insatiable consumers. The only way women could free themselves from this enslavement was through their ability and commitment to follow Fatemeh (the Prophet's daughter, Ali's wife, Hossain, Hassan and Zeynab's mother) their Islamic role-model, by wearing the hejab to combat the image of sex-object, and by changing their values and becoming "active participants in the Muslim community."²⁷ The influence of this

²⁶ "[A]lthough Islam is strongly against 'prejudice' against women, it does not support 'equality' for them . . . Nature has created man and woman as complementary beings in life and society. This is why unlike Western civilizations Islam offers men and women their 'natural rights' and not 'similar rights'. This is the most profound word to be said on the matter and its depth and value should be clear to those conscious readers who would dare to think and see without seeking Europe's permission." Shariati, *Zan Dar Cheshm Va Del-e Mohammad* [Woman in the Eye and Heart of Mohammad], quoted in Paidar, p. 181. Also note pp. 175-6 for Paidar's analysis of Motahhari's view on the matter of "equality" of rights.

²⁷ Paidar, p. 17 and pp. 179-182. It is important to mention that although Shari'ati's 'martyr' status made him acceptable particularly during the revolutionary period, he generally occupies somewhat of a "marginal" position in the mainstream discourse of the ruling fundamentalists because of his open opposition to the clerical establishment. However, or therefore, his ideological teachings form a primary source for the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), which has been, since 1979, one of the most active forces opposing the current Islamic government. It is in accordance with his teachings that women of the MKO are veiled, and the organization considers the veil as an ideological banner. Also important to note is that Morteza Motahhari was assassinated by MKO in 1981.

discourse on Shari'ati's followers appeared in the denial of sexual desire in the female-male relationship. Rather than sexual pleasure, what brings the man and the woman together in Shari'ati's ideal Islamic society is their common struggle toward the making of *jame'ey-e tohidi*, the classless Islamic society which apparently only existed during the imamat (religious leadership) of the first Shi'i imam, Ali. Widely practiced among his followers, primarily the opposition MKO, was and is what has been called "ideological" or "organizational" marriage.

the question of the veil: private spaces, public spaces

Ostad-e shahid [the martyred teacher] Morteza Motahhari's interpretation of the Islamic veil is documented in his book, entitled *The Issue of the Veil*, which is based on a series of lectures delivered to the Islamic Association of Physicians, published in several editions and widely distributed by this Association. Here, the teacher explains the "authentically Islamic" philosophy of the veil:

Hejab in Islam originates in a more general and fundamental principle and that is that Islam wants the range of sexual pleasures, through sight and touch and other kinds, to be specifically designated to the family environment and within the framework of legal marriage, and the society to be solely for work and [social] activities. Unlike the Western system which mixes work and [social] activities with sexual pleasure-seeking, Islam wants to completely separate these two spheres.²⁸

the issue of the veil: veils, walls, sight and genitalia

Referring to the Qur'anic verses related to hejab in *surat* [chapters of Qur'an] of Nour, Motahhari offers this reading:²⁹

²⁸ Motahhari, p. 76. All translations of his text are mine. In my view, the richness of the original text itself justifies the intertextuality at play hereon forth.

²⁹ Fatema Mernissi, a feminist scholar, offers a different reading of the Qur'anic verses on hejab in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Mentioning that the original Islamic order of *hijab* [meaning *curtain*] - which in Sunni interpretation is primarily based on the *surat* of *Ahzab* - descended on the Prophet on the night of his wedding to one of his numerous wives, she concludes that the *curtain* was to signify the sanctity of the Prophet's house and to set his wives apart from other women. The reason for this distinction, Mernissi believes, was that the period was a politically dangerous time for Mohammad after the Muslims had sustained big losses in some wars. Other politically influential men conveyed their ambitions for the leadership position through propositioning Mohammad's wives. (Pp. 85-101) Mernissi writes:

The content of the first and the second verses is that the believers [*mo'menin*] should not enter someone else's house without permission. In the third verse, public places and non-residential places are excepted. Then, two other verses are related to the duties of the man and the woman in each other's company. These include the following parts:

1- Every Muslim, man or woman, must avoid *nazar-bazi* [literally *playing with eyes*, sexual connotation in common usage] and *cheshm-charani* [literally *feeding the eye*, sexual connotation in common usage].

2- Every Muslim, man or woman, must be *pak-daman* [literally *clean skirt*, meaning chaste] and cover [his or her] genitalia from others.

3- Women must have *poushesh* [literally *coverage*, a Farsi term which he uses interchangeably with *hejab*], and must not disclose their *arayesh* [literally *decoration*, the word is also used to mean make-up but its application goes beyond the face] and jewelry to others and must not attempt to excite and provoke men's attention.

4- Two exceptions have been mentioned with regards to the woman's coverage... one relates to all men and the other... prescribes the woman's uncovering in relations to specific groups.³⁰

...

Islam... ordered against entering without permission into other people's residential places. It is clear that the philosophy of this order is in two things: One is the issue of *namoos* [refer to footnote] meaning the coverage of the woman, and it is because of this that the order has been mentioned along with the verses of *hejab*. The other issue is that people in their living spaces have secrets that they prefer others would not discover.³¹

“[The Qur’anic verse about the veil] introduced a breach in space that can be understood to be a separation of the public from the private, or indeed the profane from the sacred, but which was to turn into a segregation of the sexes. The veil that descended from Heaven was going to cover up women, separate them from men, from the Prophet, and so from God.” (p. 101) On the matter of re-veiling, she writes: “The return to the past, the return to tradition that men are demanding, is a means of putting things “back in order.” An order that no longer satisfies everybody, especially not the women who have never accepted it. The “return” to the veil invites women who have left “their” place (the “their” refers to the place that was designated for them) to leave their newly conquered territories. And it is implied that this place in which society wants to confine them again is to be marginal, and above all subordinate, in accordance with the ideal Islam.” (p. 24) The issue for me is not about differing interpretations of the ancient logos. Rather, I am concerned with current practices and their common significations. Interestingly, Mernissi published her milestone study of Islamic sexual imaginary, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, first in a French translation, in France and under a pseudonym, unlike her other books. Arguably, her veiling in this instance is a safety precaution.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 131-2. The omissions in the translation are the Arabic words of the verses.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 134. According to Mo’in’s dictionary of the Farsi language, the word *namoos* is Arabicized of the original Greek word *nomos* meaning *law*. In Farsi usage, the word also can mean *divine inspiration*, *angel*, *secret*, *guile*, *politics*, *strategy*, *comotion*, *self-satisfaction*, *pride*, *respect*, *war*, *chastity* and *women in a man’s family*. (Mo’in, vol. 4, p. 4629) The last two meanings are the most common in current popular usage.

WALL = SMOKESCREEN

Gazing through many intersecting walls fragmenting the history and our remembrance, the spaces of “the colonizer” and “the colonized,” the “First World” and the “Third World,” “Islam” and “the West,” “upper classes” and “lower classes,” “men” and “women,” this writer has arrived at a rather simplified outlook on the matter of walls and veils. A wall functions as a double signifier, the original referents being the spaces on the two sides of the wall and what they must contain. As a structural element, the purpose of the wall is to maintain the containment or, where there is a window or a door installed, to regulate the flow of traffic going from one side to another. Precisely because windows and doors and two-way traffic crossing from one side to another have always existed, walls are smokescreens when they create the illusion of spatial and temporal discontinuity. In other words, the notion that spatial/temporal fragments can be, or have ever been, independent and fundamentally self-contained is an effect of the wall itself. It seems rather common-sensical to this writer that the organized violence with which female bodies have been veiled, unveiled and re-veiled and the close connection of the discourse of the veil to the political discourses begs asking a set of rather basic questions about the female body: If body is a discursive construction, what does this body/construct represent? What is the dominant force in its construction? And what agendas do this force and its product serve? Finally, whose body is it anyway?

INSCRIPTIONS ON THE WALLS OF FIRE: VEILS OF SEXUALITY**woman’s nature, man’s nature, female sexuality and male gaze**

Contrary to Shari’ati, Motahhari not only does not deny sexual desire, but locates the necessity of the veil precisely in the “burning fire of sexual desire.” In his book, *The Issue*

of *Hejab*, he bases his discourse of the veil on the natures of the feminine and the masculine, the feminine body and the male gaze.

In our opinion there is a fundamental reason [for the covering of the female body] which has been neglected. In our opinion we should not search for the social reasons for the appearance of the separation [*harim*] between woman and man in ascetic tendencies, or the man's exploitation of the woman, or male jealousy, or lack of public safety, or woman's menstruation; at least, these are not the main reasons. We must find the roots of this phenomenon in an instinctual wisdom of the woman herself.

In general, there are discourses about the roots of the woman's sexual behaviour [*akhlagh-e jensi*] such as shyness and chastity. The woman's tendency to cover herself from the man is part of this, and there are certain opinions on the matter. The most accurate of them is that shyness, chastity and the covering of the body is a strategy that the woman herself, with a kind of divine inspiration, has devised for pricing herself up and for maintaining her status in relation to the man. The woman, with her own especial intuition and intelligence has realized that she cannot equal the man in terms of the physical ability, and if she wants to arm wrestle with the man in the arenas of life she cannot match the man's muscle power. On the other hand, she has found the man's weak point in that need which the Creation has installed in the man's existence which has made him the symbol of desiring and loving and her the symbol of being loved and desired. In the nature, the male has been created as the taker and the pursuer.³²

reading through the veils of power

In this orders of love and desire, the man is the subject and the woman, the object of his desire. In the sexual order of power, desiring the woman is the man's sole weakness. On the other hand, the woman is physically - and as Motahhari points out elsewhere, "at least disputably" in intellect - weaker than the man. In the order of "nature," the woman's physical (and intellectual) weakness is the productive site of both her intuition (feminine intelligence and knowledge) and her desire: It is her knowledge of her "natural" weakness in "social" arenas that produces in her the desire to decorate and display her body by way of sexually *entrapping* the man:

The reason that the order to cover the body is specific to women is that the desire to decorate and show the body is particular to women. In terms of owning the hearts, the man is the pray and the woman the predator; just as in terms of owning the body, the woman is the pray and the man the predator. The woman's desire to decorate her

³² *Ibid.* pp. 61-2.

body originates in her particular predatory instincts. Nowhere in the world is there a precedence for men using provocative clothes and make-up. It is the woman who, driven by her particular nature, desires to attract the man's sexual attention and to imprison him in the trap of loving her. Therefore, the deviation of nudity is specifically a female deviation, and the religious order of veiling is specific to women.³³

In the order of hearts, the woman takes and the man gives. In the order of bodies, the woman gives and the man takes. Of particular importance is the relations of ownership: In the order of property, the woman's body is the man's property. At most, the woman can only own a man's heart. In the order of sexuality, female sexuality originates in her body and male sexuality in his gazing that body. The separation of the body from the gaze is a strategy for regulating sexuality. Regulation is precisely what necessitates the veil. It covers female body (her sexuality) and acts as a barrier against male gaze (his sexuality). On the woman, the disciplinary operation of the veil takes place at the level of the body in order to curb its doubly deviating sexuality: nudity and display of nudity. The woman has the especial responsibility of carrying the veil precisely because she is deviant. The cloth of the veil is a tool for disciplining the female body. In the order of signification, the veil signifies female body, female deviation and the order of sexual discipline, thus inseparably connecting the three. How does the veil operate on the man?

The truth is that in the question of coverage, or hejab in recent times, the words are not about whether the woman should appear in public veiled or naked. The spirit of the words are in this: Should the woman and the man's sexual pleasure-taking in the woman be free [*rayegan*, meaning without monetary cost]? Should a man have the right to derive the most pleasure, with the exception of adultery [*zēna'*], from any woman in any settings? ... Islam, looking at the spirit of things, answers: No, men only in the family environment and within the framework of the marriage laws and with a series of heavy obligations can take pleasure from women as their legal wives.³⁴

In the order of the *spirit*, the female body and its deviations are of no significance. Here, in the order of *rights*, the question is about the man's right (as subject) to the woman's

³³ *Ibid.* p. 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 78.

pleasures (as object). In the order of the market, the object has a price. In the order of marriage, the man, according to Shari'a (the Islamic legal system) pays a purchase price (*mahri'ye*), to be agreed upon by the woman's male guardian at the time of wedding. Upon marriage, the man also becomes responsible to pay for the food, shelter, and clothing of the woman, and that of her off-springs from him. In the spirit of exchange, this gives him the right to 'copulate' with the woman at will, and the woman, so long as he pays, does not have the right to refuse the man's sexual demands. In other words, the woman does not have the right to her own body. This relation of ownership explains why the woman is not required to veil before her husband. In the order of kinship, the woman does not have to be veiled before her father, her brother, her male offspring and her husband's father. The primacy of incest prohibition makes the veil useless between her and her immediate blood kin. As for the husband's father, Shari'a laws strictly prohibit a man from copulating with any woman who is in a marriage contract (permanent or temporary) with his son. But what other sexual pleasures can the man take in the woman if adultery (*zina*, meaning fornication outside a marriage contract) is not part of the deal?

Islam has paid full attention to the strange power of this fiery instinct [the sexual instinct]. There are many stories about the danger of "the gaze" [*negah*], the danger of being alone with a woman, and the danger of the instinct which ties men and women together.

Islam has devised strategies for taming and balancing this instinct and has set specific responsibilities for both women and men. One common responsibility for women and men is related to looking... Man and woman must not stare at each other, must not flirt with their eyes, must not send lustful gazes to each other, must not look at each other for pleasure. There is a specific responsibility designated for women and that is to keep their bodies from male strangers.³⁵

In the order of fiery instincts, sexual desire is the fuel and the gaze the trigger. The "danger of being alone with a woman" indicates the primary location and direction of the dangerous gaze. In the order of dangers, it is the unveiled presence of the woman, in fact the

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 84-5. Quotation marks around *the gaze* are in the original.

very corporeal presence of the woman, which is the zone of danger. Here, the female body signifies sexuality. In the order of non-physical pleasurable communication, both sexes can be the sender and the receiver. In the order of lust, eyes speak. In the order of speech, eyes are tongues. [If they can speak in pleasure, can they speak in fear? Or, in pain? Or, in anger? If they can speak, can they scream?] That the man is not equally responsible for veiling his body is not only an indication of the unique excess of the female body, but it also indicates the direction from which violence occurs:

[T]he woman's veiling, within the limits set by Islam [only the face and the two hand showing] results in higher respect and value for her as it [the veil] protects her from the violence [*ta'arroz*, also meaning *violation*] of immoral and base [*djelf*, also meaning *idiot, fearless, unjust*] individuals.

And who is primarily responsible *and* accountable for violence?

The woman's honour requires that when she goes out of her house she should be respectable and decent; she should not, in her dress or actions, indicate any intention to provoke or excite; she should not invite the man toward herself; she should not dress loudly [*zabandar*, literally meaning *having tongue*, also implying *talkative, fearless*], walk loudly, or give her voice a meaningful lilt. There are times when the gestures and the gait speak one thing and the words something else.³⁶

[If this sounds only too familiar to the Western readers, the question is: Had the veil created the illusion that male-domination is fundamentally different in Islamic societies?] What is the Islamic way for protecting women from violence they themselves provoke in the first place by their mere presence in the public spaces?

If you ask theologians [*foqaha*] if the woman's going out of the house is prohibited in itself, they answer no... There are only two conditions, first that she should be veiled and her appearance should not be for the purposes of provocation [*tahrik-amiz*, implying sexuality in common usage] and self-display [*khod-namai'i*, the meaning is literal].³⁷

The veil and the wall function as protection. And:

The other [condition] is that family well-being requires that the woman's exit from the house be accompanied with acquiring her husband's consent according to his judgment [*maslahat-andishi*, literally meaning *considering own welfare*].³⁸

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 100.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 102.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

In the orders of safety and well-being of the family, the man knows best.

SPATIAL CONTINUITY: THE “PUBLIC” SPHERE OF INFLUENCE AND THE ILLUSION OF “PRIVACY”

The veil is a tool for regulation of sexuality. It is a disciplinary tool for it creates a set of binary divisions between spaces and individuals (man/woman, public/private), a hierarchical order of power, and a system of individuation of relations of power. As any other disciplinary measure, it effects the processes of subjectification, subjectivization, and subjugation. Precisely because the veil is an *extra* layer and the subject of heavily ideological discourses, at the level of subjectification, it functions as a sign of the difference in the rights of the subjects according to a binary classification of gender. The woman is the carrier of the sign of difference. At the level of subjectivization, the veil inscribes sexual desire by regulating it. Desire is permissible only within specific relations between the individual man and the individual woman. The individualization of the disciplinary mechanism is the locus of its operative power.³⁹ Furthermore, the veil, as material, only operates on the woman at the level of the corporeal body. As for subjugation, clearly, one set of people (women) are in relations of subordination to the other set of people (men), as objects are to subjects.

In the space of incessant influence of the “public” in the “private” affairs of the individuals, “privacy” is only an illusion, an effect of the wall.

³⁹ “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up... There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference.” Foucault, p. 202.

THE ORDER OF HETEROSEXUALITY: MALE DEVIATION, FEMALE ABSENCE⁴⁰

Veiling is a productive process which fixes gender identification on the basis of the biological body in very early childhood. Young girls from the age of 9 [legal marriage age for girls before the Family Protection Act, still widely practiced] have to be veiled. Veiling ensures their proper upbringing for ‘giving’ sexual pleasure. The unnegotiable binary division of genders and the strict constructs of gender and sexual desire precludes the possibility of crossing, at least for females as women.

Male homosexuality is explained as a deviation primarily caused as a result of “inavailability of females.” Thus, the veil is not only a regulator of sexuality, it also effects sexual deviation and perversity among males. To prevent and/or treat male homosexuality, marriage is prescribed. At the level of practices, the fixation with the feminine body as the object of sexual desire gives rise to highly “feminized” male bodies, the veiled beloved (*shahed*) in much of the mystic love poetry. The beloved, a biological man, hides under the veil of femininity and thus survives detection and persecution, at least in poetry. The Shari’a laws prescribe strict punishment for the sin of *lavat* (male homosexuality) which shows that in the case of men, homosexuality is a recognized subject position.

Female homosexuality, on the other hand, is unrecognized by the law. There are no specific words in Arabic or Farsi for female homosexuals. Because desire is only sexual within a heterosexual framework, because sexual relations involve a “taker” and a “giver,” and because women as “females” are always only “givers,” female homosexuality is impossible. At the level of practices, it is quite possible that in the strict homosocial spaces of women (women are not required to veil in the presence of other women) sexual relations between women have existed. But women’s stories have not entered the space of the formal history even though women, once unveiled, entered the public sphere. Najmabadi points out

⁴⁰ This section only appears as a working outline, to be developed in the next drafts.

that once women entered public spaces unveiled (gradually from the late 1800s) their language became sanitized to make it suitable and acceptable within the moral codes of the heterosexual space. In other words, women's language was veiled once their bodies were unveiled. This may be the reason why we are not aware of female-female sexuality in our history. The lack of this subject position may also be explained in terms of utilitarian notions of female sexuality: for reproduction and for male pleasure.

OVER THE WALL: WHERE IS THE SPACE OF DESIRE?

Finally, some day...

I escape from the guile of the doubtful gaze

I spread in the air like the fragrance of the colourful flower of fantasies

I slip in the waves of the night's hair

I go to the sun's shore

in a world asleep in eternal peace.

Does perseverance, some day, save resistance from being futile? Why is the gaze doubtful? Is doubt the guile? Or, does doubt produce the guile? Finally, dissolution of the body in the air, its dissipation like molecules, slipping in the night. Body no longer there. Burning at the sun's shore. Eternal peace? Is death the only escape route?

I gently slip in a gold-coloured cloud's bed

fingers of light tapping on the happy sky

the rhythm of many songs.

From there free and light

I stare at a world that your beguiling eyes

blur its roads in my eyes.

I stare at a world that your beguiling eyes

in their dark secret

continue building a wall around it.

A fantastical escape, realized only through double processes of transformation and

transportation of the body. But the dramatic shift in her position - from being inside to being above the wall - doesn't seem to bring with it the freedom from *perceiving the wall*. Why look back if free? Does the very desire to escape forever bounds our desires to what we escape from? Is this why the roads to the city of desire are blurred even from an aerial view? Is this the *guile* of the *disciplinary gaze*? Moreover, when the world is a walled space, is the wall-building other *inside* or *outside* the wall? What sets the spaces apart anyway if the wall is a smokescreen? Guile?

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