BEYOND THE BURKA: TRACING THE SEMIOTIC VALUE OF
CLOTHING FROM PRE-MONARCHY TO POST-REVOLUTIONARY
PERIOD IN 20TH CENTURY IRAN

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Beyond the Burka: Tracing the Semiotic Value of Clothing from Pre-Monarchy to
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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

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In the discussions of Iran’s sociopolitical situation, a focal point of conversation is the imposed dress code. The sudden imposition of a strict, outwardly Islamic dress code simultaneously shocked and distressed the western world greatly, as it provided a stark, visible indication of the regime’s perception of the concept of citizen’s rights to self-determination, or on an even more basic level, who even holds basic rights as a citizen as the term is defined on the global level. The most notable and important omission from this conversation is the greater social and historical cause and effect that led into this drastic imposition. It did not occur in a vacuum and is not solely, as the bulk of the discussion would indicate, strictly the result of patently Islamic thought or a trend towards religious fundamentalism. It is rather the result of a series of important social and political changes resulting from the precedent set by longstanding conventions in Iranian society and the changes brought to these conventions by modernity. Most important of the modern conventions at work is the advent of the camera, and the mass media that came shortly after. In order to enrich the understanding of modern Iranian visual norms, I use Roland Barthes’ work on clothing and fashion, as his work provides a detailed and relevant theoretical framework and makes a good argument for the direct correlation between stylistic fluctuations in clothing and the state of social politics. I trace and analyze images in which clothing functions as the most important semiotic code to show their succession leading into revolutionary and post revolutionary forms, expanding the conversation to include anti-bourgeoisie sentiment as an influence in the generation of images created by Iranians about Iran or its citizens.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the discussions of Iran’s sociopolitical situation, a focal point of conversation is the imposed dress code. The sudden imposition of a strict, outwardly Islamic dress code simultaneously shocked and distressed the western world greatly, as it provided a stark, visible indication of the regime’s perception of the concept of citizen’s rights to self-determination, or on an even more basic level, who even holds basic rights as a citizen as the term is defined on the global level. The most notable and important omission from this conversation is the greater social and historical cause and effect that led into this drastic imposition. It did not occur in a vacuum and is not solely, as the bulk of the discussion would indicate, strictly the result of patently Islamic thought or a trend towards religious fundamentalism. It is rather the result of a series of important social and political changes resulting from the precedent set by longstanding conventions in Iranian society and the changes brought to these conventions by modernity. Most important of the modern conventions at work is the advent of the camera, and the mass media that came shortly after. In order to enrich the understanding of modern Iranian visual norms, I use Roland Barthes’ work on clothing and fashion, as his work provides a detailed and relevant theoretical framework and makes a good argument for the direct correlation between stylistic fluctuations in clothing and the state of social politics. I trace images in which clothing functions as the most important semiotic code to show their succession leading into the revolutionary and post revolutionary forms, expanding the conversation to include anti-bourgeoisie sentiment as an influence in the generation of images created by Iranians about Iran or its citizens.

Barthes carries the metaphor between language systems and “The Fashion System” through his writings on fashion. He writes “everything happens as if the fashion lexicon were fake, composed finally of a single system of synonyms…Yet this lexicon seems to exist, and this is the paradox of fashion at the level of each utterance there is an appearance of full meaning…what is read, received is apparently a full sign”(The Fashion System 9).
Barthes speaks to the unique semiotic position clothing holds in its ability to convey meaning based on the meanings the system generates rather than the intrinsic meaning of the symbol, or even the meaning brought to the symbol by the reader. In his thinking, the most important level in which clothing creates meaning requires a literacy of its system, or a foothold in the dialectic of fashion. Within this generative system in his view, there are also a “multiplicity of levels of commutation, which attest to the plurality of simultaneous systems,” leaving clothing slightly more ambiguous as a system than language as well (The Fashion System 34). Like language, fashion works to convey different meanings to different discourse communities, and like all language in Barthe’s perspective, it is entirely self-referential in its creations of meaning.

A major reference point in understanding the tangled system of meaning generated by each garment or series of garments is to understand the aesthetic capacity of fashion versus the utilitarian, a distinction that becomes particularly important in denoting class distinctions in pre-revolutionary Iran and their effects in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. Iranian clothing, historically demonstrates a system deeply entrenched in the necessities of class. Before modernity, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Iran existed in a tribal oligarchy. These affluent tribal families were famous for careless spending and poor local governance. In their time, more than historically, the trends set by the wealthy became the most visible of a growing series of distinctions between the lives of the affluent upper class and comparatively disenfranchised lower class. Ultimately, it was the disconnect between the worldview of the rich and poor that led the enfranchised segments of society to grow comfortable disconnecting themselves with the poor of their own society and connecting themselves with the cultures of other societies. These displays of affluence tended to create direct contrast to the egalitarian austerity en vogue in the rest of Asia to increasing socialist influences throughout the region at the time. I will argue that these displays of wealth aggravated the situation that lead to the ideological falling out between the overwhelmingly secular humanist wealthy, and the clergy- influenced poor, particular in the second shah’s reign from 1941-1980 (Cottan 195).

Fashion played the role of the outward signifier of the problematically wide ideological gaps between the segments of society. The most visible of these gaps was and is the religious, causing many oversimplified characterizations of the revolution as “Islamic,“
when it was, in fact, as much the result of a wider series of social and ideological changes as religious ones. One such important influence was the socialist. Socialist ideological influences played large part in deciding the turn Iran took in toppling the monarchy. The Tudeh, or Iranian socialist leftist party is described by Iranian scholar Milani, as “A Persianized Marxist Leninist party whose philosophical constitution was founded on atheistic material” (307). They were for many years one of the most powerful political forces in Iran, constituting a large enough threat for outside forces to attack them in various ways including exile and mass incarceration. One source notes, “repressive rule…removed Iranian communist activities to Europe and to within Tehran’s Qasr Prison” (Ghods 506). Their influence is most visible in the poster propaganda that emerged after the regime change from the Pahlavi monarchy to the Regime of the Islamic Republic. The art generated in this time shows intense emphasis on the ideal of a society unified by faith.

These stylistic and ideological changes also show a fundamental break from general social acceptance of comfort with the concept of hierarchy in traditional Shi’ite Islam. According to Erica Ferg, a scholar of Islam, Shi’ism has its roots in monarchical backing since the Safavid dynasty, where the canonization of living beings was popular with the monarchy (112). A contemporary British observer said of the system:

“On Friday, the exalted king went to the congregational mosque of Tabriz and ordered its preacher, who was one of the Shi’ite dignitaries, to mount the pulpit. The King himself proceeded to the front of the pulpit, unsheathed the sword of the Lord of Time, may peace be upon him, and stood there like the shining sun”.

(Ferg 112)

This instance of glorifying the institution of kingship can be seen as representative of the traditional Iranian insistence on the veneration of the figure of the king. The break from Sunni Islam occurred because Shiites insisted that Mohammad’s successor be a blood relative, a tradition based on such standards of kingship (112). This veneration of the institution of kingship is upheld well into the middle of the twentieth century. Its remnants can still be seen in the number of household items carrying the image of powerful Iranian kings.

Traditional Shiite comfort with the ideal of power and piety co-existing can be seen in the following piece. The King depicted in Figure 1 is Nader Shah, whose reign predated this piece by at least two hundred and fifty years. The king wears a crown and his vest is decorated with regalia, all outward vestiges of the authority implied by his position.
In this piece, function is particularly important in creating meaning. The fact that the image of this king is brought into the household as both a pragmatic and decorative item speaks to his importance and omni-presence in society. The piece is meant to be ingrained into the daily routine of a family and shown to guests as a part of important rituals reinforcing his transcendent status. These items are also novelty pieces, their widespread distribution indicating that people are and were willing to expend revenue to have an image of the kings in their home. This social support for the image of kings as nationalist symbols is the best representation of comfort with the tropes of class and the general comfort among Iranians with the idea of the wealthy as pious. In these types of images, the king is generally very well decorated, and the symbols of his wealth are prominently integrated into the frame. In the piece above, all of the king’s significant regalia, including the crown, can be seen.

The rapidly changing national social politics began to play out on the female body beginning with the reign of the first shah. On June 8, 1936, he announced a national ban on hijab, making a clear outward statement that his power was to take precedence over the power of the clergy. There are recorded instances beginning on this date, in which women who were often lifetime wearers of hijab were forced to remove their traditional garments (Amirsadeghi 102). It was an effort that incited much anger, the results of which could be attributed to causing the backlash of religious fanaticism in the following years. Not only did this move force many urban women to accept a new standard visibility, but it also strongly forced new standards of dress, often ushering in western clothing habits into the lives of many for the first time.

One explanation of the turbulence that characterized the rapid changes in standard women’s dress could lie in the popular international mid-century habit of using the female
body to personify the nation. It is possible that with the increased visibility of women, an important change also occurred in the popular descriptions of the nation. It could be that in the case of Iran, female visibility itself became a trope of the monarchy, aligning the entire habit of granting even limited visual agency to women with the idea of wealth and western influence. The king, previously the sole visual allegory of the nation, was increasingly accompanied by the figure of the queen. While there is no gender pronoun in Farsi to denote this change, the feminizing of the nation has countless other examples in geographically close countries such as Russia. Russians use the affectionate “Mother Russia” when describing and visualizing their nation. There is also the example of India, where the nation became nicknamed “Bharat” or “Bharat Mata,” during the struggle for independence so as to personify it as a mother goddess to add a spiritual note to Indian nationalism (Ramaswamy 175).

Iranians did not take as well to this increase in female centrality, likely due to prevalent Islamic attitudes regarding the display of feminine beauty. A concept relevant to fashion, one of these key, loosely Islamic cultural concepts is fitna. The word fitna is an Arabic term that literally refers to “discord, or disagreement among people.” In context it often refers to the commonly held belief throughout much of the Middle East that feminine beauty causes said discord and should be concealed in public as a result (Zaman 259). It is not fair or accurate to label this concept as patently Islamic. It is rather more an omnipresent social and cultural attitude in certain parts of the world, and it is possible that there are many individual Muslims who would agree that displaying beauty is far more important than avoiding conflict. In large part, however, there is a great deal of hesitance towards open public displays of the female body.

With consideration to this series of events and attitudes regarding display, and the degree to which it should be a factor in society, Barthes’ description of fashion as a “normative reserve from which the individual draws their clothing (The Language of Fashion 8),” can hint at a cause and effect relationship the agency to generate meaning is as much a part of realizing this a “privileged semiological code” (The Language of Fashion 11), and can be understood as a living manifestation of important social norms in Iranian society and even problematic aspects of the individual Iranian psyche. Fashion also shapes daily life on a pragmatic level. For example, in public spaces where chador is required, for example,
movement is literally restricted, as the garment is not fixed, and requires physical holding to keep in place. This makes it difficult, if not impossible to engage in sports activities for example, or even hold multiple shopping bags at once. The garment physically restrains the movement of the wearer.

These changes begin with the monarchy’s adherence to the conventions of modern depictions of leadership and in doing so failing to create a conversation with their own pre-modern polis. Almost the first major political move the Islamic regime made was to be sure to first impose a strict dress code in order to assert that a full ideological transformation had taken place, importantly overriding the efforts of the previous regime and turning Iran from a nation in which the secular were in power to one that at the very least nominally adhered to the tenets of a distinctly Iranian Islam. Barthes reaffirms the importance of changing public dress to reinforce hegemony by suggesting that there is a more direct correlation between institutions of power and fashion, than with the more pragmatic concerns of function and geography for example. He writes, “the geographical presentation in histories of dress is always based on a leadership in fashion which is always aristocratic” (The Language of Fashion 5). The case of Iran is unique because of the degree of change that occurred in this semiotic code in a relatively short span of time, namely from the start of Shah Riza’s reign in 1923-1941(Afkami) when hijab was outlawed in the name of promoting progress for women, to 1979, when it was enforced by groups citing “respect for our sisters and the nation.” (Arjomand 37).
CHAPTER 2

HEGEMONIC FASHION

If as Barthes suggests, fashion is in reality “a system,” like language, then the significance of specific stylistic aspects can be viewed as presenting a “visual grammar” by which to read the significance of the changes in cycles (The Fashion System 191). Important fundamental changes in fashion as a semiotic code begin with the Iranian royal family, whose use of visual rhetoric to the end of governance was largely if not totally unsuccessful. Drawing on the comparison between semiotic and linguistic meaning, clothing can be seen as conveying larger, more encompassing concepts. Deviations in patterns of speech, as well as those in clothing, can be fundamental deviations in the creation of meaning, making clothing rhetorically as powerful a semiotic code in this understanding, as spoken or written language.

The monarchy’s emergence as a central political power came after the rule of a disparate oligarchic government of warrior princes called the Qajars. The struggle to create a unified government capable of regulating the ethnic and political factions in the nation, was particularly salient in light of modernity. Clothing mirrored the change in governance. Previously almost entirely a function of ethnic identity and class, the new fashions after unification in 1925 were increasingly representative of the unified nation as exemplified by the western-backed Shah. This factionalized governance and the proceeding power struggle allowed the US-backed Pahlavi line the unique position of using foreign support to help in creating the image of Iran as a unified nation in the post-modern world, a move marked by the increase in cocktail dresses and miniskirts in popular cinema (Maziar 366-367).

The first Shah, Shah Gholam Reza Pahlavi, shown in Figure 2, opted to follow the visual customs long-standing tradition of kingship and placing himself visually at the center of the nation, or in other words, as the very central allegory of the nation as is seen through his portraits. The widely published pictorial depictions of this shah are restricted to very simple photographic portraits, which are stylistically almost identical to earlier, painted portraiture of kings. Here, while he is photographed, he is almost stylistically identical to the
teapot miniature of Nader Shah. He is wearing the traditional regalia of the king, and holding a properly solemn countenance.

Between the first Shah and his son the camera became the primary tool for generating state images. This crucial shift ushered modernity in to an otherwise largely un-modernized nation. Whereas, as shown above, Shah Gholam Reza Pahlavi was rarely seen with anything but the most contrived facial expression and in the most calculated context due to the highly stylized pieces that carried the sole responsibility of depicting him to his people, the new Shah was seen almost entirely through press photos throughout the state. He was then not only without the courtesy of painterly stylization, but also with much, much more frequency, allowing for increased scrutiny of him as a person, rather than a figurehead. Suddenly, his every move was catalogued for the eyes of the public. Access through print media took the Shah from a transcendent figure to a household topic. It is possible that the public’s negative reception of him reflects discomfort with the accessibility of his faults provided to him by the photographic medium.

Snapshot aesthetic allowed for unflattering images of an Iranian leader to appear on a mass scale for the first time in history. The Shah’s salt and pepper gray hair was accompanied with wrinkles accentuated by the upward tilting of a camera. An awkward smile in bad lighting could be seen as much more of a leer. In this manner, the camera showed Iranians the fallibility of their leader in excruciating detail, lessening the respect for his office despite the edge it seems he might have held in his access to all of the symbols and implements of modernity.
Also, importantly, through the camera, women became visually present, and visually important for the first time. It was a move many of the more conservative sectors of the nation did not appreciate, as evidenced by the post-revolutionary prohibitions against women in any part of the public sphere. In summary, the Shah’s bad press contributed to national revolutionary sentiment by de-stabilizing visual norms and habits of class in a move similar to that referred to by Beverly James as “the ‘double semiotics of iconoclasm,’ symbols that embody the ideals of a vanquished ancient regime are destroyed” (285). In this case, this symbol is shown in Figure 3, is the lone-standing figure of the king, as the queen became visible as well during this time, changing the icon from a lone figure to a pair.

![Figure 3. Portrait, Shah Reza Pahlavi.](image)

The Shah’s notoriously lavish habits were publicized; his clothing became representational of ostentation. In Figure 4, the Shah is depicted wearing an Armani suit, accompanied with a slightly receding hairline and worried wrinkles. The effect serves to convey a wealthy businessman rather than a divinely appointed political leader, as the first one does. Barthes describes the Shah’s adherence to the existing language of fashion as necessary to make the system create meaning, when he writes “a term which generally serves as a relay between the vestimentary signifier and the signified, providing it is not too heteroclite, and respects a unity of substance…” (The Language of Fashion 149). Even though the older image is more lavish, ornate and likely expensive, it was the photos of the Shah’s lavish lifestyle which proved “too heteroclite,” and modern clothing and the ideas it signified were introduced to a public that did have access to it. This disconnect worked to prime the disenfranchised public for hostility towards the upper and middle class.
Once the transcendent image of the institution of kingship was visually broken, it fundamentally altered society such that it created a vacuum for the placement of new visual modes of representing authority. For those with access to cinema, film was one of the most important new sources. For the middle class, fashion began to change according to what was seen on screen. Film scholar Hamid Naficy describes the degree to which the bourgeoisie emulated western fashion as a result of exposure to foreign cinema. Naficy describes the degree to which western film stars were emulated, noting that the haircuts they popularized were called by their names and many were proudly and overtly involved in “branding” themselves by emulating a popular performer. He posits a cause for the emergence of the distinctly Iranian subculture that emerged from the Bourgeoisie access to cinema: “The dandy style resulted from the distortion and exaggeration of government westernization and from the dandy’s own intense alienation from both Iran and the west” (274). Cinema, particularly western cinema becomes overtly and admittedly the new source of generated social norms for those with access to it. This selective sub-culture of cinema watchers served to isolate those without the means to attend the cinema, then a luxury and a novelty in Iran. As a result, cinema and all it represented on a wider social scale came to be seen as another point of interface with the west that the poor did not have access to, slowly creating a backlash against the camera as an artistic medium.

Print media fashion editorials emerged during this time, often perhaps unintentionally equivocating images of the king and queen with images of movie stars due to similar display customs. These photographs, therefore, also served the important didactic purpose of ushering new visual norms into society. Popular film stars, such as the notoriously sexual
Forouzan, were frequently placed in editorials in which they were shown engaging in the hypothetical activities of the new, modernized woman. In the following piece, for example, Forouzan is depicted standing out on a street corner wearing a mini skirt. The piece is ambiguous, as she is looking out slightly to the left and the male figure behind her seems not to have seen the scandalous display of skin that happened upon her coat blowing open. She is in possession of the space to the left, and the coat provides a barrier between her and the male in the space. In all, while the viewer cannot discern who is watching her in the space of the photograph, we can tell that she is outdoors, and she in inappropriately clothed for being in an outdoor space. The image is entirely a mix of control and disenfranchisement, the ambiguity of the piece likely as problematic as the social implications.

Cinema in conjunction with print media created the sole avenues through which women’s fashions outside of those in the monarchy could be displayed at the national level. While allowed in so much as films were not censored completely, there was not very much respect for female actresses, as the demands of popular cinema required that they engage in a number of social taboos for women. Nice women, as was widely perceived, did not perform. Cinema was one of the places where the east most visibly met the west. Both the men and women in most Iranian cinema did not dress like native Iranians. In a reaction against western clothing in the national setting, many clerics directly denounced the suit and tie as representative of the “dandyism” Naficy notes was a cultural stereotype, as much as they denounced the miniskirt or excessively bare skin as they perceive it. As a result of the increased hostility towards this symbol, even post revolutionary “secular” leaders did and do not wear cravats, insistently denying the convention as an act of defiance towards what was seen by non-privileged youths as reactionary to the burgeoning western- influenced “dandyism” of the privileged (Arjomand 164).

Dandyism as Naficy describes it, had many other social and political repercussions. There were many social shifts manifested that were misperceived as attributes of the social movement that fostered dandyism. Therefore, wealth, cinema and male grooming could be inappropriately equivocated by those outside the sphere of those that had the privilege to have those attributes. The images and values could have been confused, simply due to their visual proximity to one another. For example, there was a great reform movement encouraged by Riza Shah, to educate women about their standing rights, and to make even
some of the more heinous marriage practices, such as child marriage illegal (Naficy 157). A notable journal called *Alam-e-Nesvan* was a grassroots, shah backed organization that circulated nationally providing easily readable articles that would be as accessible as possible to accommodate for minimal literacy. They cited “the most acute problems of family life to be child marriage, temporary marriage, polygamy, venereal disease and other threats to women’s health” as the consequences for the lax marriage regulations under the Qajars (Naficy 159). Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed as a result of this program being juxtaposed with the image of the increasingly modern images of kingship, opposing hegemonic masculinity could have been read as equivocal to wealth, the monarchy and excessive grooming.

In this sensitive time of change, the second Shah’s choice of wife, and the values she represented were of utmost importance. Due to his father’s emphasis on women acting outside of the home and to the unprecedented social visibility of women around the rest of the world due to modernity, the Shah’s choice of wife presented a very important cultural figure, both inside and outside of the nation, as well as his personal ambassador and publicist to the people.

Beginning with his first failed marriage, the photographs taken of the Shah alongside his brides were pivotal in representing him with the ethos of a man who grants women visual and thereby political ethos. In the first in these series of significant photos, The Shah is presenting princess Fowzia of Egypt to the press. Fowzia, never had a chance to become as visually dominant as the Shah’s other two wives, but she is visible, present and central, despite the degree to which she minimizes her agency with her downcast gaze. In Figure 5 especially, she is visually, wholly a representative of the institution of the royal female.

As with other state photos, it is important to note that female royalty was being depicted photographically and therefore publicly for the first time in the history of the Middle East. With European influence came the advent of large public portraiture. Even then, the portraiture was most often displayed in wealthy homes, representing the display issues previously discussed. Certain segments of society would never be permitted to view the physical body of the princess. This norm changed with the advent and increased distribution of press photography. Fowzia’s bare- headed appearance in front of press cameras was, in itself, a beginning of presenting the image of a modern leadership to a pre-modern nation.
Her clothing, also, is not extremely contemporary for the given time, in fact, it hearkens back a generation denoting her desired conservative portrayal.

While not strictly traditional, considering that it is photographic and showcases modern femininity, the piece is, at least more conservative in tenor, leading to more comfort with the presentation of what is being signified by the outfit. Perhaps due in part to her choice in personal appearance, and perhaps due to the politics surrounding her identity and marriage, Fowzia is a largely ignored figure in the discussion of Iranian royalty and in the discussion of the life and times of the Shah. She and the Shah divorced six months after their marriage citing personal differences, leading into the Shah’s second marriage (Afkhami 41).

In the princess Soraya’s most prominent wedding image as seen in Figure 6, the centrality of her dress leads the viewer towards an understanding of the figures as the most important signifier, and their clothing as the second most visually important element. The placement of the camera is unusual for a state photo, facing neither upward, nor straight on, but downward. This angle can be accounted for partially as a failed homage to the traditional Iranian wedding, in which the bride and groom remain seated. It is more important to note that in this piece the camera is not focused on either the face or figures of the Shah and his wife, but rather strives to capture the entire dress. It is notable that this, among the hundreds of other images taken and then subsequently released to the press, remains the one most commonly viewed.

In terms of placement, the central item in this photograph is neither the Shah, nor his wife, but instead the Dior wedding gown she wore. It dominates most of the frame. Due to the size of the train and poor event planning the dress is only partially evident in other
Figure 6. Shah Reza and Soraya.

photos. It was designed specially for her by Dior, who was then in the height of his career as an haute couturier and gained renown for how he “made the “new look” and “revolutionized Parisian post war fashion” (Murphy 3). It was an entirely unique dress, not just in terms of Iranian weddings, but on the world stage as well. In fact, more than contemporary the piece was largely atypical for wedding dresses. The dress shows little regard for the standards and traditions in wedding garments at the time. There is no lace and tulle, and rather than being the traditional white of the popular wedding dress, the dress is made of silver brocade. This couture piece was a jeux d’esprit for the designer, or a showpiece or feature in other words. This gown is a perfect representation of Barthe’s concept of the authority communicated through the stylistic aspects of a gown. While likely the ethos of Dior and the issue of couture would have been inconsequential to the segment of society that had not yet met with the norms of modernity, what would have spoken volumes are the lavish and distinguishing aspects of it. She says of the piece “My wedding dress was a splendid creation of tulle and silver brocade and it weighed nearly forty pounds.” Princess Soraya opted out of a veil, the most traditional wedding symbol of feminine piety in most traditional ceremonies worldwide. Furthermore, the dress incorporates feathers and mink, both non-traditional wedding dress materials, though she says the mink was necessary “since during the religious ceremony my shoulders and arms had to be covered” (Esfandiary 52). The total effect is less a tasteful and modest photo of a woman on her wedding day, but rather an ostentatious show of wealth, more appropriate for a gala than a state wedding. The dress communicates wealth
rather than, as is tradition for female monarchs, the value of virginal feminine loveliness, forfeiting a sense of appropriateness for the occasion.

Importantly, the signifier of the expensive dress versus the signified modern female in this case, also presents Soraya as an enfranchised individual, an intrinsically revolutionary concept in terms of Iranian femininity. Unlike the conservatism conveyed by Princess Fowzia’s simple frock and high gloves, this dress denotes three different, problematic concepts. The first, and most focal is that a couture piece by nature denotes a certain degree of individualism. The second is ostentatious nature of the piece. While close to the problematic nature of individualism, the dress’ ostentatious nature also gives it a classist tenor. The train represents a degree of wealth and identification with an aristocratic lifestyle, as a train has the spatial implication of their being a clean stretch of ground upon which to let it drag. Flagrant displays of wealth, perhaps, more than the individualism conveyed contributed to the trouble caused by such pieces. The final, problematic value represented is that of answering to a western, rather than Iranian discourse. The piece is more about the dialectic of Parisian fashion than that of Iranian traditional power structures. It is likely that the message being relayed was that money removed these figures from the experience of being a part of the nation, as it was experienced by its people. It is possible that it was the cocktail of decadence, western secular individualism and female agency that snowballed to make this piece an important catalyst for the events that followed.

In the years after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, national tumult created a struggle for the agency to control cinema and print media. In the revolutionary environment, press was notoriously difficult to regulate, edit favorably and control, allowing a wider series of influences to leak into the mainstream. To silence these voices, the regime demonstrated good strategic foresight and reverted to painting as their primary medium in the creation of propaganda. Notably, the regime relied on billboards as a medium, as billboards also communicate with the non-literate segment of society, then a considerable constituency, even in urban centers of Iran (Naficy 150). Considering the diversity of influences in Iran at the time, it is important to note that the images created by the current regime spoke to the concerns of socialist and modern influences. However, in order to understand the fundamental shift between the dominance of photographic western style fashion photography and why the move to other norms is so often read as gendered and Islamic, it is important to
consider how rapidly modernity polarized the nation, and how visibly that divide could be seen in popular films and press.

Barthes describes the fashion-related phenomenon that occurred after the revolution when he observed that in every society in which fashion is stifled, “The absence of fashion contributes to the totally stagnant nature of society” (*The Fashion System* 91). Arguably, the total stagnancy of society worked the other way around in Iran as well, the outward vestments ultimately presenting the image of a society that wished to silence the values which Soraya and movie stars such as Forouzan set a precedent for. The total rejection of an individualist and classist female identity can be seen by the regime’s insistence on uniformity. Not only is there a war on the part of the regime on exposed skin as a symbol of female individualism, but there is also a pointed cultural disapproval of other stylistic elements, such as color. Many young women report having been beaten for wearing bright colors, despite otherwise adhering to the insisted dress code of the regime. Again, we see an Iranian cultural deviation from the standard of the rest of the Muslim world, such as in countries like former Bosnia, where women often wear very bright colors (Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotela 50). In fact, early post revolutionary Iran is one of the only countries in which there is a dress code imposition, other than a few Arab nations, and in most of those nations the restriction has cultural precedent or is culturally implied rather than politically enforced. Here again, however, it is important to dissect the pragmatic function of clothing among the poor and how it could work to explain the ideological pairing of color with ostentation. Simply put, dark cloth is more difficult to stain. This concept works on a metaphorical level as well, as conformist austerity is easier to trace than In a survival situation, or in a career that involves physical labor, a woman would need to make her garments out of a sensible, dark cloth to ensure its durability. Before modernity bright, or lightly colored clothes, no matter how covered, would have been the privilege of the well to do.
CHAPTER 3

FASHION AS EGALITARIAN

Importantly, under Barthes’ pragmatic stance regarding the nature of fashion, fashion is rather a simple oscillation in habits of dress among women. He states “It seems that we could conclude that fashion is not linked to such and such a particular form of clothing, but rather is exclusively a question of rhythm, a question of rate in time” (The Fashion System 91). Examining the events of the revolution from this angle in Barthes’ theory presents another affirmation that the dress code is representative of a desire to breech differences in class rather than, as popularly framed, solely differences in religion and culture. Visualizing fashion trends as a cycle leads to the conclusion that the abrupt disruption of the traditional cycle of wealthy women’s clothing is representative of a grander disruption in society: one rooted in the political order. The manifestation of social tensions in the woman’s dress is not unprecedented; the extent of the focus and war on women’s clothing and all that it represents is. In this case, as we will see in the later images, this fashion dialectic was set into motion by a disruption in Barthe’s prescribed cycles of fashion continues to present affirmation that clothing becomes an increasingly important semiotic device, utilized to help people of both genders present themselves in terms of what they wish to signify.

At this point in time we see another crucial shift in the individual as the allegorical representative of the nation. The primary semiotic code at play in order to create this allegory is the clothing of the figure as much as the figure herself in most cases. While the build and facial features of the ideal woman vary according to painterly perspective, the clothing of the figure remains the consistent, billowing chador in almost every piece. In order to successfully play off the allegory, the regime must necessarily concede some of its own preferences, such as the exclusion of women from all visual and verbal portions of the public sphere. Therefore, the regime deviated from their relentless depictions of Khomeini and Khamenei. In the wake of the revolution, society’s reversion to painting to create propaganda signals an intelligent shift of medium on the part of the regime, as billboards, by nature, reach a wider and less literate audience (Cronin 276).
The replacement of the queen as the central female visual allegory of the nation with a more universal egalitarian figure keeps with trends in Asia at the time. While seeming to adhere to Abrahamic religious modes of representation, the images created by the regime also represent a close adherence to socialist ideology and modes of representation. As with trends in socialist images, while at first there was total visual omission, but as time went on “images of women more frequent, even persuasive, as emblems of the movement” (Haskins and Zappen 345). The pointed hostility towards the ideal of the woman as sexual is concurrent with pointed hostility towards the concept of the woman as enfranchised in both cases.

Bearing in mind this trend, and the active socialist base in Iran previous to the revolution, it is possible to read increasing frequency of integration of women in painting as resulting from anti-classist trends in Asia in the mid twentieth century. The central visual feminine allegory of the nation in this time changes from the photographed queen to the more egalitarian image of the pious Muslim woman depicted through painting. It is another move that provides a clear push for increasingly egalitarian images of the nation.

Keeping with the concept of clothing as the most important semiotic code, it is important that the most visible aspect of the figures generated by the Regime generally lack any non-functional adornment. As is the case with any idealization, there is great cognitive dissonance visible in the disparate values at play in the post revolutionary images of women.

In the regime’s attempt to oust the subversive values that accompany modern femininity, they are replaced with motherhood as the penultimate example of feminine virtue at use as social service. The postage stamp shown in Figure 7 is a commemorative depiction of Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima. She is the only one of Mohammad’s children to have given him an heir, making her a venerated image of motherhood throughout the Muslim world. In the piece Fatima is at the center is in a full blue chador holding a child tenderly at her breast, glancing downwards at it. She is pointedly round-faced and plain, and decidedly Iranian in her few visible facial features. Except for a very clear smile with which she relishes her role as a mother, her physical features are indiscernible under the long length of cloth she wears. She wears no make-up and the blue-white cloth she is wearing is simple, unembroidered cotton. She represents the ideal mother: giving, unconcerned with her own well-being and eternally supportive. The image recalls the Islamic/Christian depictions of
Mary as one of the holiest women in the cannon (Galvan). It is possible to argue that there is a conscious decision on the part of the regime’s artist to tint the piece blue, the conventional color of Mary, rather than green, the traditional color of Islam. The woman in the piece is being communicated to her audience as everywoman, but also as a woman whose piety emulates that of the Virgin Mary. This switch, interestingly, mirrors the opposite of the effect of the Haskins and Zappen describe in the Soviet milieu, “Thus, the selfless devotion of the saint is replaced by the woman’s devotion to industrialization in the interest of promoting the socialist agenda” (Haskins and Zappen 35). In this case the devotion to the saint is replaced by the devotion to the family, and the figure in the piece looks down at her child, rather than up as if in prayer. Essentially, the stamp conveys the women as a nation of Marys, reminding the nation and the world of the superior modesty and spiritual beauty despite the complete lack of outward adornment (Rauh).

After the revolution, the most surprising nuance of the imposed dress code is that it makes fashion—the western system-- an intrinsically a rebellious gesture. Even after the strictest dress codes were no longer enforced, we see a historical insistence upon many of the visible vestiges of western society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the green movement photography from 2009. Each of these photographs presents not only the journalistic aspect of the shots taken, but also the artistic intentions of each photographer. Most of them show great attention to framing, lighting and lines. One example of such a still shows a woman wearing a green headband under her black headscarf making a peace sign hand motion with her palm painted green, the color of the movement. She has long

Figure 7. Stamp, Fatima.
fingernails painted silver. She looks right into the camera. Her eyes are narrow and her facial expression is hard but she is smiling. She does not look down in deference or modesty like any of the queens. Her face is blurred but still visible, while her hand is in perfect focus. In this photo, the focal point is the international hand gesture for peace, but the source of that symbol is the modern woman, denoted by her hair, cell phone, makeup and defiant expression. It is important that while she is not contrived, there is no question that she is posing. The impression given overall, is that of the aware, defiant and entirely modern woman. In all, far more socially and politically enfranchised than her monarchical or regime-generated predecessors.

She would not speak to the same discourse community as the allegorical mother figure in blue, or the demure, off-center placement of Soraya in the Pahlavi royal family portraits. The woman in Figure 8 pays attention to her physical attractiveness, and what the implications of the polished projection of herself means in context of the modern world outside of Iran, and, by implication, outside of the control of the regime. In terms of the discourse communities this photograph is addressing, she presents a rejection of the regime’s ideal of womanhood, while the symbolism of her hand gesture and use of green in context represents her consciousness of the global community. Furthermore, her use of her appearance as the medium in conveying the ideals of the protestors is one example of the arrival of modernity to the Iranian polis.

![Figure 8. Green Movement Woman.](image)

When comparing portraits of wealthy women from pre-revolutionary Iran, the portraiture represents an adherence to the Iranian oscillations in fashion. After the revolution for a brief period, we see a halt in the oscillations in question, and the implementation of the national dress code of chador. Soraya’s wedding dress provided the first major abrupt
disruption of the prevailing visual culture, ushering in an era of female individualism. She was one of the first and most significant figures to choose a western semiotic code over the Iranian one. Her visual agency, along with the medium of the camera could have contributed to the loss of the Shah’s visual agency. In response, the regime effectively sought to re-frame the nationalist feminine allegory to represent a binary between the figures of young, sexualized unmarried women silenced by omission, and the Madonna figure represented by married mothers. The implied distinction was made largely through clothing as a semiotic code and not as popularly framed, between modest and immodest women or Muslims and non-Muslims, but rather against visibly wealthy women with access to the implements of modernity and the greater group viewed by the then enfranchised as the other. The regime used fashion as an avenue to silence a large constituency of its people, and the whole nation, in recent years, in a poetic act of rebellion, are now using it to communicate.
REFERENCES


