

# Body or Face: Truth or Truce- Iranian Actresses Costumes in Domestic and Abroad Film Festivals

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*Received: 24-08-2021; Accepted: 19-07-2022*

## ABSTRACT

*During the last two decades, many thinkers on Iranian cinema have had many things to say about censorship, especially the issue of the veil imposed on women's gender by the authorities in Iran. In this paper, I will describe Hamid Dabashi's narrative as related to the concept of "truth" to show further that the veil issue has reached a new phase in Iran. Although much of what Dabashi defines as the absented body of women in his article "Body less faces: Mutilating modernity and abstracting women in an 'Islamic cinema'" may still hold, I believe his over-arching narrative doesn't contribute enough to our understanding of the new relations among the authorities and actresses' Fashion styles on red carpets. This paper's method is connected with cultural and visual studies through Roland Barthes' semiotics. I first focus on Hamid Dabashi's conception of "truth" and how he believes "truth" is related to Islamic ideology and embodied in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema to further (through analysing photos of Iranian actresses' clothing who attend festivals) conclude that Iranian women try to adopt new resistances in choosing their costumes compared to the early two decades of post-revolutionary Iran. The presence of Iranian women in festivals especially regarding what they wear has established a new interwoven relationship with authorities which has somewhat not been surveyed properly. By surveying the photos of their fashion and style I conclude that they are in constant negotiation with authorities through what they rebelliously wear.*

**Keywords:** Hamid Dabashi, Truth, Women, Fashion, Iranian Cinema, Semiotics, Roland Barthes

Choice of dress. Veil. Imposed morality police. Actress's attire in private and public spheres in a film. Censorship of body and gender. These seem to be ubiquitous issues when reading an article on Iranian cinema regarding gender. However, is it all that there is? Most of the writers on this issue typically repeat some redundant facts about gender in Iranian cinema: even close relatives are not allowed to touch each other; women always wear hijab in a film, even in their intimate time and space with their husbands; their clothes are baggy and are designed not to

indicate any curves; women and men have to be segregated both socially and visually, etc. Hamid Naficy observes that “Iranian hermeneutics is driven by a dynamic and artful relationship between veiling and unveiling, between self and other, which constitutes “modesty,” or hijab. This hermeneutics is based on distrusting manifest meanings and concealing core values” (Naficy, 2012, p.102).<sup>1</sup> This dynamic relationship of “veiling” and “unveiling” in many articles on the issue of hijab and gender is mostly centred on “veiling” part of that hermeneutics. Instead of trying to understand the unveiling part of potential dialectics, scholars, both Western and Eastern, most of the time take the Iranian cinema to be a production of a regime with strict hijab control and tight cultural, ideological agendas and emphasize its censorship, veil, gender without really take the more challenging route of close examination of what lies there for the eyes.<sup>2</sup> Usually, writers with an inclination to yoke the issue of gender with veil and hijab underestimate the agency of women and instead of valorizing the efforts of Iranian women in the film industry to undermine ideological formulas prefer to stick to cliché or one single narrative extracted from the history of Islam or from the current situation in Iran to explain all the subtle nuances of living that are traceable in the act and practice of Iranian women.

As one of the non-Arab countries with an Islamic government, Iran is separated from the majority of the Islam population by its Shi’a religion. Hijab is mandatory in Iran as mentioned in its law and many women during 4 past decades have faced many mild or harsh issues regarding what they wear and how they appear in society which in turn has made the problem of mandatory hijab an urgent issue for many middle-class women. These are clear facts and you won’t face much trouble finding an article that provides examples for these. Yet a younger generation of scholars is trying to show that this issue is not a heretic one and the monolithic conception of hijab and veil only blurs our perspective on realistic situations (see, for instance, Shirazi, 2019).<sup>3</sup> What ails the monolithic narrative is its tendency toward generalization by ignoring many interwoven issues that are lived by Iranian women and neglecting what these issues have to say about the actual context of everyday living in Iran, whether as a woman artist, actress or as a housewife. One of these generalizing narratives is that of Hamid Dabashi in his article written more than two decades ago: “Body-less Faces: Mutilating Modernity and Abstracting Women in an “Islamic Cinema”. In that paper, Dabashi attempts to provide evidence, by a close reading of some movies, for his argument that Iranian post-revolutionary cinema is a showcase for a dialectic between power and resistance which

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<sup>1</sup>Naficy, Hamid (2012). *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vol. 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2012*, Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup>See for instance, Tapper, Richard (ed.) (2002). *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, London: I.B.Tauris.

<sup>3</sup>Shirazi, Faegheh (2019). The Veiling Issue in 20th Century Iran in Fashion and Society, Religion, and Government. *Religions*, 10(8), 461.

in turn results in an “aesthetics of revelation” of “profane moment” of the power pole of that dialectic. Yet, as Dabashi sees it, the resistance is ultimately absorbed in the discourse of government’s censorship and their opposition to this polemics, Iranian filmmakers go no further than strengthening the very premise of what they are opposing to. In this paper, I’m going to read more carefully what Dabashi elucidates in his article to see if his narrative of the situation of censorship in Iran regarding the concepts of “truth”, “body” and “face” informs us anything about the concrete problematic of these concepts and to challenge his regard by questioning the metaphysics of his argument. Furthermore, in the second part of my paper I would argue that contrary to what many have had to say about Iranian women and their difficulties, these women have managed to acquire a new freer atmosphere for themselves which is somewhat tolerated by the government. I would undertake to do this by drawing on Roland Barthes semiotics in his book *The Fashion System* and to charge Iranian women’s garments on red carpets with meanings of resistance and defiance.

### **Dabashi and his Over-arching Theory**

After mentioning what he sees as the first theoretic linking between “truth” and “veiling” in Frithjof Schuon, Dabashi attempts to theorize the relationship between concealment and Truth in Islamic metaphysics to correspondingly argue that in Islam, “the best “Truth” is the one which is never revealed, the best wine is the one which does not intoxicate, and the best woman is the chastest [*sic*]” (Dabashi, 1998, p. 363).<sup>4</sup> Deemed as otherworldly, the truth (*haqiqat*) as Dabashi comprehends it, becomes a metaphoric concept and holds no correspondence to the real world. Although Dabashi has a theoretical stance, his reading of Schuon is at best unilateral. What Dabashi unravels as the first theoretical linking and describes as something Islamic is for Schuon himself a Semitic trait. Schuon puts his notion in the following words:

The Semite tends to distinguish between an “essence” and a “form” and does not hesitate to sacrifice the homogeneity of the latter for the veracity of the former, so that in Semitic texts of a religious or poetic nature one must always perceive the intention behind the expression and not misconstrue it because of some formal incoherence; and it is not only the spiritual intention that must be discovered, but also the emotion that determines its outpouring and verbal concretization. (Schuon, 2006, p. 1).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Dabashi, Hamid (1998). Body less faces: Mutilating modernity and abstracting women in an ‘Islamic cinema. *Visual Anthropology*, 10(2-4), 361-380.

<sup>5</sup>Schuon, Frithjof (2016). *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence, A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. by Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and Hames S. Cutsinger, ed. by James S. Cutsinger, Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom Books.

It is of no surprise that later when Schuon wants to manifest what ties naked truth to “danger,” he starts his argument by quoting from Gospel and not Koran. The Gospel commands us “not to cast pearls before swine nor to give what is holy unto dogs” (ibid, p. 2). It is obvious here that he regards this trait to be universally significant, hence not restricted to Islam and, more importantly as part of Semitic tradition, to has to do with rhetorical reservations regarding indirect figures of speech. Nonetheless, Dabashi is keen to see that Schuon argument moves ultimately toward an Absolute “over-riding Islamic Metaphysics...” (Dabashi, ibid, p. 363). Whereas Schuon sees an absolute truth or “essence” behind every contingent form, Dabashi too reduces so many formal contingencies in Iranian cinema to Islamic metaphysical quests for discovering One Supreme Truth. Indeed, Dabashi’s narrative of the Iranian post-revolutionary project for segregation and sexual separation of unveiled Iranian women from the rest of the society as unworthy members of the society who needs to be punished, censored, restricted or forcefully rectified, has nothing short of what Dabashi ascribes to Schuon’s ideas.

Schuon’s exceptional perspective on seeing one constant essence in every message in Islam, which is applied by ignoring the varieties these messages may have due to multiple social characteristics of diverse geographies where Islam has spread during its history, could not be justified in everyday life of Muslims around the world. In other words, what Schuon discloses barely relates to the quotidian life of Muslims because he doesn’t feel any necessity to provide any account for the discrepancy among the “forms” and his only obsession is with the absolute essence. Dabashi could only be right when he sees this as an overriding metaphysics, but this very metaphysics is what entrapped Dabashi’s argument as well.

In an attempt to regard some Iranian movies as subversive creativity at the time of writing his article, which is more than two decades ago, Dabashi sees “the image of Iranian women” to be “emerging as the haunting head of a body-less figure tilting and panning from side to side, the vivid lantern of emotions in search of a body to sustain and nourish it” (Dabashi, ibid, p. 364). After this slightly poetic comment, Dabashi embarks on his reading of the first movie, namely *The Spouse* (Fakhimzadeh, 1994), among other eight movies he is going to survey in different lengths. Although by this date, hijab is mandatory in Iran and wearing a hijab has become commonplace in movies, Dabashi states that women’s beauty in this movie and others as well emits even paradoxically through their thick veil, and that’s why he further considers the vibrant presence of these women to ironically defy “Islamically imposed dress code” (ibid). Even though Dabashi brilliantly describes what happens in the movies of that early decade as some sort of defiance of the Islamic dress code and the government’s patriarchal conduct with women, it is not clear why he ultimately sees this defiance as a “glorification of the veil beyond an individual choice into a compelling aesthetic” (ibid, p. 376). Dabashi

believes that the problem with this defiance is rooted in directors' successes in using dress code as a means to aesthetically challenge the system because it turns out in their movie that veiling, even when aesthetically used to oppose Islamic imposed codes of dressing, is not a choice after all and is an "esthetic imperative". The ambivalent stance of Dabashi could be seen when he subsequently regards Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Actor* (Makhmalbaf, 1993) as destructive of what other movies like Kamal Tabrizi's *End of Childhood* (Tabrizi, 1994) and Pour-Ahmad's *For the Sake of Hanieh* (Pour-Ahmad, 1995) perpetuate, namely "Shi'i memory of Persian patriarchy."

The Islamic and Koranic foundations which Dabashi draws upon to establish his ideas regarding women's face and body and what he calls "body-less face" should fall under his umbrella conception of "Absolute Singular Truth," which he believes is at work everywhere in post-revolutionary Iran. Since Dabashi needs his theory to remain trustworthy, he has to look the other way where the contingent facts of Iranian society say otherwise and defy his idea of One Absolute Truth. For one thing, many scholars believe that wearing some sort of scarf or shawl is evident in pre-Islamic iconography, and as a means of veiling it is not restricted to Islam (see, for instance, Zahedi, 2007).<sup>6</sup> Even the concepts regarding shame, modesty, or social respect are in no way confined to post-revolutionary Iran. Nevertheless, since Dabashi needs this overarching narrative of "One Hidden Truth" for his representation of the current situation in Iran as a site of negotiation, he now and then reminds us of that Single Truth. His notion of negotiation, which he somewhat indirectly borrows from Lynn Hunt's article in the book edited by her, *Eroticism and Body Politic*,<sup>7</sup> embrace what I want to work out about women's dress on red carpets without the necessity of providing One over-arching narrative regarding what matters in post-revolutionary Shi'i Iran. Assuredly, by putting everything under this omnipresent notion of "One Absolute Truth," what finally defines Dabashi's endeavour to elaborate on women's body and face in movies would be entrapped in the same metaphysics of searching for the only truth and hence in direct opposition with contingencies and vicissitudes of real-life situations.

Dabashi's tendency to provide what I would like to call an "overarching narrative" for his deconstruction of the post-revolutionary era in Iran could be seen at work elsewhere in his

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<sup>6</sup>Zahedi, Ashraf (2007). Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 3(3) (Fall 2007), 75-98.

<sup>7</sup>Hunt, Lynn (ed.) (1991). *The Eroticism and the Body Politic*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>8</sup>Dabashi, Hamid (2000). In the Absence of Face. *Social Research*, 67(1), Faces (Spring 2000), pp. 127-185.

extended essay named “In the Absence of Face”.<sup>8</sup> Here again, drawing on Derridean deconstruction, Dabashi’s pursuit of finding an over-arching narrative that could explain everything in the multifaceted history of Islam is intriguing. The over-arching narrative here is the very title of the essay: *The Absence of the Face*. The gist of what Dabashi wants us to perceive after almost 60 pages of writing amassed with multiple references to Koranic interpretations and the story of Yusuf as narrated in the Koran is that before Islam, Arabia’s gods or idols were signs, that is the visual site of sight, of the presence of the gods or the divine. Yet, after overcoming of Islam and the Prophet’s insistence of clearing Kaaba from previously worshipped idols, Islam tried to turn the sign (understood here as something visual or at least as having a face) into a signifier who is absent forever and has no face whatsoever. This transmutation, Dabashi, holds, results in a denial of or resistance to any face for God. The concept of God’s countenance as a Jewish concept is here reciprocated by Dabashi where he further complicates the Islamic notion of sign and sight to show why Islamic Holy Scripture starts by summoning God’s name and not His face. Dabashi:

The Islamic hermeneutics is categorically predicated on a constitutional mistrust of the Face-value, of the sur-Face meaning, and the reversal trust in the promises of the Hidden, in the Unseen, in that which is to be dis-covered, unveiled. (Dabashi, 2000, p.134)

Here Dabashi is in no opposition with what Schuon earlier had to say about Islam and its absolute essential truth. Similar to his venture here to deconstruct Islamic metaphysic of God’s absence of face and the presence of His absence everywhere, Dabashi would simply argue in his article on Iranian post-revolutionary cinema that since Iranian current Shi’i government, like his God, fears face or body as the sites of sight it denies women their freedom to wear what they want. Every face, Dabashi argues, reminds us of God’s face and hence should be absent. Dabashi’s endeavour, however, to overcome this metaphysics reminds one of Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche’s attempt to overturn Platonic metaphysics. If the outcome of Nietzsche’s attempt to overturn Plato’s metaphysics is just replacing one metaphysic with another, or as Heidegger perceives it, one hierarchy with another, it strikes me that what Dabashi’s account implies concerning the hierarchical system which he ascribes to Islam, and in which Signified sits on top, Signifier on a lower level and sign/sight on the lowest part is to replace Signified with Sign and simply replacing one hierarchy with another. Moreover, Dabashi’s narrative is just another grand narrative that falls short in attending multiplicity of Muslims’ contingent life in their respective lands and situations.

Once more, when Dabashi expresses that “The exposed head of a woman constitutes a threat to a patriarchal order” (Dabashi, 1998, p. 377) he sees this threat in the context of his notion

of the presence of a grand narrative that delineates everywhere in Islam. This is not the fact,<sup>9</sup> and for instance, in many regions of Iran, the concept of hijab or veil is somehow a loose or relaxed one.<sup>10</sup> However, Dabashi needs not to consider earthly examples. As a matter of fact, for example, when he reads Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's movie *Roosari Abi* (or *Blue-Veiled* as mentioned in Dabashi's article), he tells us nothing about how to understand veil (*roosari*, some sort of scarf) here and how *roosari* is different from other means of the veil. What Dabashi himself correctly calls the real or "the facticity of being", and is what he believes Islamic Cinema in post-revolutionary Iran is brutally "seeking to transcend", is applicable to Dabashi's conception of one over-arching narrative dominating Islamic metaphysics: he transcends the facticity of real.

What I'm trying to say in these lines should not be interpreted as denial of what happens in Iran. I want to say that providing an over-arching singular narrative doesn't fit in the real life of Iranian women, in the cinema or otherwise. As mentioned above, for instance, *roosari* (scarf) is a natural head shawl in the northern provinces of Iran; many northern women don't wear chador in their daily life. They usually are seen, especially in rural areas, wearing a long garment and a pair of loose or baggy pants while having a shawl or *roosari* around their head. So, translating the title of the movie as Blue Veiled, whether it is done by Bani-Etemad herself or by Dabashi, doesn't provide enough clues as to what the factual contingent situation is in different regions of Iran and why it is depicted as such in a movie. The Iranian government has not tried to interfere in rural lives, at least not as harshly as it has practised mandatory hijab in cities and capitals. Nevertheless, since considering these facts intervenes with what scholars have to say about Islam and its relation to the hijab, they ignore it. It is a fact as well that Islam does not provide a coherent and strict perspective on the hijab. Mernissi's point of view on this issue says enough that there couldn't be one final and strict notion of hijab

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<sup>9</sup>I remember when I was attending a French course in Iran and we had an African lady as our teacher who had an Iranian husband. She told us that when they were grown up enough to attend the high school back in her homeland in Africa, they had no idea what their religion was and when they were asked by school officials in the premier day of school regarding their religion (for filling an enrollment form) they had to go home and ask their parents about it only to find out that they are Muslims. Furthermore, she remembered that many of the girls who were attending the high school next day had no clear cut conception of what to wear as a Muslim; ironically enough, she told us, the next day and after discovering their religion and what it, supposedly, asked and mandated them to wear, many girls attended high school wearing hijab while putting a miniskirt on as well.

<sup>10</sup>I'm originally from Khuzestan, Behbahan, where at least among many families that I know, attending a wedding party while wearing tight and even modestly revealing dresses is normal and to some extent tolerated by government.

in the Islamic world even nowadays. So, adhering to just one grand narrative doesn't hold water.<sup>11</sup>

Again, it's not that I want to deny what the Iranian government has done to women over four past decades but to emphasize that contrary to what the state wants, many Iranian women have tried to enter into a negotiation with the government which should be accounted for in any narrative regarding what is happening in Iran and need a closer inspection by scholars. It is also not to say that Dabashi is ignorant of the multiplicity of Muslim life around the world. He has written many books and articles and has been prolific in reading and writing about its diverse facets. Yet in his two articles, where he tries to provide theoretical grounds for explaining what's the reason behind all these issues of hijab, truth, face and body, he finds himself coming to terms with only one big "Reason" and implies that by accepting this reason one can correctly explain the cultural and religious texture in the backdrop of which all the women issues of hijab and veil are happening. As I want to argue in the second part, Iranian women have pushed the boundaries, whether these boundaries come from Islam or be they reminiscent of patriarchal society. By emphasizing what they wear and by defyingly selecting new codes of dressing, they invite each other to understand the restriction better and make the issue of hijab a matter of negotiation. Moreover, the Iranian Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry don't give or provide a strict set of rules regarding what women have to wear in movies, TV series, or to attend red carpets. Providing strict rules means accepting the challenge when you know you are already doomed to accept the terms of your obverse, meaning here accepting that women's dressing code shall never be regarded as uniformity.

Compared to what Dabashi provides for his analysis of Islamic tradition, and to avoid falling back into binary opposition, I believe that Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to cultural issues like fashion is far better and more revealing. For one thing, it focuses on fashion as a concrete everyday system of signification without the necessity of giving a single narrative for clarifying all the discrepancies that are visible there, and for another, it helps us better understand why dress code is, as I see it, a matter of negotiation in Iran. Thus, in the next part of my paper, I will draw on Barthes to read the issue of women's attire on red carpets.

### **Women's Fashion and Film Red Carpet**

In this part, I should remain modest lest I myself be carried away by the same tendency of giving an over-arching narrative. I don't claim to give a full analysis, or a comprehensive one

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<sup>11</sup>For further discussion see Fatima Mernissi (1992). *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland, Perseus Books Publishing, USA; Christopher Wise (2009), *Derrida, Africa, and the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, especially his article: "Deconstruction of the Veil"



for that matter, of causes or courses of what the hijab in Iran has to tell us about Sharia or Shi'a religion or the multiple branches of course of events during four past decades. Such a work would need the study and analysis of a dense mass of sources which is practically beyond my abilities. So, I try to see the hijab from a different angle and later see what a few photos of Iranian actresses' attires may tell us about the lively issue and question of dressing in Iran.

Hijab in Iran could be seen as practised in at least four spheres: In TV series, in Movies, in local regions or areas (familial and societal) as compared to what is the fashion of the season in the capital Tehran, and in everyday activities in society. What Iranian women wear in every one of these realms can be closely analyzed. Hereafter, I intend to regard yet another new sphere added to the other four spheres, namely a red carpet. During the last decades or so, the fashion industry worldwide has afforded the Islamic hijab with a significant change of meaning from a matter of identity to a matter of identification. The discourse of hijab and its semiotic of degrees of concealment or revealing has made the fashion industry become part of the living agenda in Islamic countries. Iran's no exception, and during the two past decades, women's garments and how much these garments are supposed to reveal or conceal has been the issue of ongoing negotiation in Iran. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the country's political upheavals, Iran has been the centre of many misunderstandings, domestic or foreign. One of these misunderstandings is how censorship in Iran is normally depicted in Western societies.<sup>12</sup> The issue of hijab is one of these misunderstandings I believe.

This year, the 10<sup>th</sup> International Fadjr Fashion Festival was held. Adding yet another branch to Fadjr's International Festivals regarding fashion shows how urgent it has become for the government to deal with the dress code. However, two years ago, the Iranian actress Matin Sotoudeh who is seen here attending a private premiere night of a movie in which she had a role, later was summoned to the Guidance Court for her attire. It is simultaneously hard and easy to see what's wrong with her outfit in the eyes of government agents. There are some notions regarding the hijab that go unmentioned and lack strict rules, yet women know them and try not to ignore them. For instance, neck-covering is essential and almost always, actresses on the red carpet don't show their neck or the immediate lower part of their neck adjacent to their chest. Here Sotoudeh covers her neck. Her hair is showing around her face, and she is wearing a white tunic, a long, light, front-open mantle (*manto-e jolo-baaz*, as it is called in Iran, which is like an abaya with the difference of being colourful and more

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<sup>12</sup>for more discussion see for instance *Iranian Cinema Uncensored* where Mohammad Beheshti discusses the issue especially in pages 11-12 and elsewhere in the book which is a collection of interviews. Rahbaran, Shiva (2016), *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers Since the Islamic Revolution*, London, I.B. Tauris.

revealing) and black trousers that show her belt. You may encounter this fashion in many places in Tehran. If there's no morality police around, women let the front part of their *manto* remain loose and open to better show what they're wearing under it. Since *manto* provides them with numbered choices regarding what to wear, there's a new tendency in Iran among middle-class women to wear such *mantos* and practice and reveal their taste of fashion with what they wear under their *mantos*.

Sotudeh was summoned to court, and later the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry announced that it will soon provide a new guideline on the proper presence of women on the red carpet, which would soon be published. Meanwhile, what Sotudeh herself had to say about her attire was intriguing: "Honestly, the reaction shocked me. Some people started to curse me on social media and I really don't understand why" (Sotudeh, 2019).<sup>13</sup> The publishing of a draft on proper costumes for women is one thing and making them strictly practice it is another and the government and Ministry know and understand this. The concepts of chastity and modesty are ambiguous ones, and actually, no one knows where the lines are. That's why Sotudeh feels shocked by the reactions.

Here, one sees another actress wearing almost similar attire to what Sotudeh wore on her movie's premiere. Though wearing almost similar attire, Alidoosti faced no court summons, not at least for what she is seen here to put on at the Cannes festival.

Generally, colourful dresses, especially the colour white, contrast with what government and national media promote as official or Islamic hijab. Covering the entire body is another matter which is regarded as sensitive. As seen in these photos, Iranian women, while practising the mandatory covering, are continually negotiating with the government over the "what" and "how" of their outfits. On the one hand, now that Indonesia has banned mandatory Islamic hijab for schoolgirls,<sup>14</sup> it has become more urgent for Iran's government to consider this issue on a broader scale and not just a matter of local or domestic importance. It is evident that Iranian actresses are not going to wear chador when attending famous international festivals around the world. On the other hand, what they wear at a domestic festival is in no way similar to what government wants them to put on.

The problem of assigning meaning to what women wear is at the centre of the negotiation. The authorities want to control this meaning in every possible realm. The difficulties of signification and its boundaries are what every group wants to define for itself. As Roland Barthes wants us to imagine:

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<sup>13</sup>(<https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/10/iranian-actress-matin-sotudeh-summoned-to-court-for-red-carpet-attire-the-reaction-shocked-me/>, last retrieved on March 7, 2021).

<sup>14</sup><https://www.arabnews.com/node/1804306/world>

Imagine (if possible) a woman dressed in an endless garment, one that is woven of everything the magazine of Fashion says, for this garment without end is proffered through a text which is itself unending. This total garment must be organized, i.e. cut up and divided into significant units, so that they can be compared with one another and in this way reconstitute the general signification of Fashion. This endless garment has a double dimension: on the one hand, it grows deeper through the different systems which make up its utterance; on the other hand, it extends itself, like all discourse, along the chain of words.... (Barthes, 1990, p. 42)<sup>15</sup>

Gwen Bouvier aptly discusses the same Islamic fashion issue in Egypt and tries to show how binary concepts like tight-loose, open-closed or heavy-light fabric should be understood in the country's context. For that matter, she even asks Egyptian girls to see how they understand themselves as what to wear. This article is a guiding method on how one may see fashion in an Islamic world. Although it is revealing many things about attires, it doesn't concentrate on how these dressing may be the locus of rebellious acts, defiance or negotiation and just mentions some possible ideas in this regard.<sup>16</sup> Bouvier draws on Roland Barthes to argue that dress provides expected values. Her analysis of the fashion regarding the aforementioned criteria of loose/tight and the like is astonishing because of the clothes similarity one may see in everyday life in Iran and Egypt, especially among middle-class people. The authorities try to make up Islamic fashion's utterance according to what they regard as Islamically correct conception of chastity. For them, the beige colour or darker colours are far better for a Muslim girl. The authorities recognize that the new generation needs to use new fabrics and styles, and that's why they are trying to hold Fashion festivals and give new guidelines in this regard. This phenomenon is not restricted to Iran, as seen in Bouvier's explanation that Muslim girls in London prefer "more subtle and muted colours such as beige" (Bouvier, 2016, p. 366).

As seen in the three photos (Figures 1 to 3), the primary colours of the hijab officially promoted have been and still are darker muted colours. However, it is not the case anymore, especially among the middle-class women of the younger generation. Regarding the fabrics and colour, the new generation is bolder and feels self-sufficient enough to wear clothes with a lighter texture and attends festivals while wearing clothes that are perceived by authorities as being provocative or sexually appealing. Darker colours (the darker the better) are not see-

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<sup>15</sup>Barthes, Roland (1990), *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward & Richard Howard, California, University of California Press

<sup>16</sup>Bouvier, Gwen (2016). Discourse in clothing: The social semiotics of modesty and chic in hijab fashion. *Gender and Language*, 10(3), 364-385.



**Figure 1: Matin Sotudeh at the premiere of Maskharehbaz (English title: “A Hairy Affair”)**

Source: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/414740>



**Figure 2: Matin Sotudeh at premiere of Maskharehbaz**

Source: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/414740>



**Figure 3: Matin Sotudeh at premiere of Maskharehbaz**

Source: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/414740>



**Figure 4: Taraneh Alidoosti in the Cannes festival**

Source: Pinterest

through and protect Muslim women’s bodies from the men’s polluted glance. In this regard, as Hamid Naficy explains, men are regarded as the victims of gaze and not women. Naficy observes that:

It is interesting to note, however, that the unequal power relations in the relay of the gazes in the Islamic world seem to be the obverse of those posited in Western feminist discourse, in that the aggressive male gaze affects not so much the female target that receives it but the male owner of the gaze. (Naficy, 1991, p. 34)<sup>17</sup>

Thus, drawing on what Barthes illustrates, on the one hand, Islamic authorities in Iran want to be the only source for defining what clothing must mean and how it should be interpreted. Yet, on the other hand, new generations of women defy this by wearing attires that are not easy to be defined as *unveiling*. The concept of *Bad-hijabi* (understood as loose hijab or a hijab which is not according to the authorities' criteria), which is impossibly hard to define, shows that women have succeeded in negotiating their outfits. For instance, in what Sotudeh was wearing, the tucked tunic may be regarded as provocative or even her belt as appealing. Yet, if all that she was wearing were in black, probably it didn't make such a fuss. Although women's power and authorities' power are unequal in this regard, in the authoritative Islamic reading of what women wear, there's some sort of tolerance noticeable. The chain of words that Barthes mentions is where this tolerance happens. If regarded in the context of what women wear in National Medium (or *resaney-e melli*, as National TV broadcasting is called in Iran) almost all that actresses wear on red carpets is an obvious violation of what authorities accept as the true Islamic veil.

Nonetheless, the government from time to time ignore these situations and accepts a general atmosphere of freedom as long as it is located and confined to red carpets. Since as Barthes later explains, isolating the connotation of fashion is almost impossible and since the signifiers are to be seen everywhere on the clothing and "since the signifier... is spread throughout the entire utterance and because its signified (Fashion) is latent" (Barthes, *ibid*, p. 43), I believe the core problem in Iran is reading that latent meaning. Clothing is not restricted to one element and the concepts such as glamour and elegance are hard to define strictly and in correspondence to Islamic rules. Attending red carpets means accepting the challenge to be simultaneously glamorous, elegant and covered. Yet Chador or *hijab-e Islami* by no means provides the potential of these two adjectives, neither in style nor in colour. Iranian women as part of the Islamic world are negotiating the style and colour and even the textiles. Compared to what women had to wear more than two decades ago, the modern costumes of women in Iran can be considered on its own terms as revolutionary.

The main ayah in Koran regarding the veil is 33:59. It reads: " O Prophet! Ask your wives, daughters, and believing women to draw their cloaks over their bodies. In this way, it is more

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<sup>17</sup>Naficy, Hamid (1991). The Averted Gaze in Iranian Postrevolutionary Cinema. *Public Culture*, 3(2), 29-40.

likely that they will be recognized ‘as virtuous’ and not be harassed. And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (Koran, 33:59).<sup>18</sup> This ayah has aroused many controversies about the hijab in Islamic countries. As a text, it references to something visual and every group (modern interpreters of Islam and Koran vs traditionalist ones) attempts to understand it according to their own terms. As it is clearly seen here there is no indication as to what colour this cloak should be. Nevertheless, believers in black chador insist that the colour black is better and even try to justify their idea by providing documentation from the books written on the topics like the psychology of colours. It is interesting to read some part of the text written on that internet website in defence of the “black colour” as the best colour for a Muslim girl: “Psychologically, when a person sees a black cloth, he no longer has much desire to look at it and automatically returns the view. Looking at light colours opens the eyes and doubles the desire to see and focus. In other words, from the point of view of the psychology of colours, looking at dark colours, especially black, which is absolutely colourless, destroys almost all desires” (Hawzah, 2010).<sup>19</sup>

If we were to read this passage semiotically, we would see that, as Barthes would have explained, what we are dealing with here is not the problem of description but the problem of signification. If it was a problem of description, we could as Barthes sees it, easily translate the Koranic ayah; yet the author of that text which is written in a site affiliated with *Hawzah* (the most influential religious institution in Iran which supports and provide religious evidence for enforcing hijab) tries to determine the signification of the colour of that cloak mentioned in Koran. If Koran wanted to look at the hijab like a recipe, it would have been way easier to describe it in more sophisticated details. So, the support for black colour should be solicited either from science or pseudo-sciences or from other Islamic theology sources. In this regard, what Barthes observes about what is uttered in a Fashion magazine and its relation to real dresses and clothes would help us to locate the problem more accurately:

...if we had to “realize” the magazine’s utterance, how many uncertainties there would be (the form, the number, the arrangement of white accents)! In fact, it must be recognized that the meaning of clothing (which is the very point of utterance) is directly tributary to the verbal level: white accentuation signifies *by its very imprecision*: language is a limit beyond which meaning cannot be realized, and yet the relations of language cannot be identified with those of the real vestimentary code. (Barthes, *ibid*, p. 46)

I believe that the concept of colour is at least one of the issues that will remain open to signification and imprecision, and that’s precisely one of the points where Iranian actresses

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<sup>18</sup>The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation (2015), trans. Mustafa Khattab

<sup>19</sup><https://hawzah.net/fa/Question/View/62577> (last retrieved March 7, 2021).

defy what the authorities want to make as a strict realization of the meaning and signification of the holy scripture; unable to control this signification they have to enter in negotiation with Iranian women.

Since any documents about clothing written in the history of Islam almost always are accompanied by no image of the clothing (in fact, the clothing of different eras is seen elsewhere, in miniatures, for instance), there's no way to imagine a unified and Unicode clothing clearly. "Written clothing," as Barthes terms it, in modern Fashion magazines provides a text concerning the images seen in that magazine as drawn, staged and photographed or simply photographed from everyday life. What is at stake here for Islamic authorities on the one side and women on the other is precisely to hermeneutically deal with clothing as it is descriptively imaged in words. The text I cited from the *Hawzah* website further contains essential points which make it worthwhile for reading at length:

Nowadays, psychologists say: "Black means 'no' and the its opposite color, means 'yes'. Correspondingly, one can observe that the woman who wears black in front of namahram<sup>20</sup> in fact wants to tell that man that her answer is "no", and the woman who wears attractive color, in fact, willingly or unwillingly exposes himself to filthy and polluted looks and becomes a means of pollution and deviation both to herself and to the society. In the psychology of colors, we read that "white is like a blank page on which we should write a story, but black is the end point beyond which there is nothing". As a result, the woman who wears white and colorful clothes in public, would suffer from lesser security but the woman who wears a black chador has created the maximum safety for herself.... (Hawzah, 2010)<sup>21</sup>

We may one more time go back and scan Sotudeh photos on the premiere of *Maskarehbaz*, especially the middle one (Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7). As is evident here, the other two women are wearing black, and their *manto* reveals nothing special about what they are wearing underneath. This contrasts radically with what Sotudeh is wearing and provides an excellent visual example of how white and black is seen by religious authorities and organizations. Yet, the black clothing of those standing on both sides of Sotudeh is in radical contrast to the long baggy *mantos* of the early 90s as seen in Figure 8. This colourful attempt at dressing which defies what clerics insistently encourage as Islamic hijab is likewise evident in what Alidoosti is wearing in the photos of her presence at the Cannes Film Festival. This is where clothing, as carried out in words, resists the hegemony of language and shakes itself from the shackles

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<sup>20</sup>men which are not among a woman's close circle of familial relatives

<sup>21</sup>translation of this text is mine.



**Figure 5: Taraneh Alidoosti in the Cannes festival**

Source: Pinterest



**Figure 6: another TV announcer in 2019.**

Source: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/04/21/1774239>



**Figure 7: a TV announcer for children programs in early 90s; the source is unknown. It's a viral photo probably taken from original program and can be easily found on the net.**



**Figure 8: Students' clothing in early 90.**

Source: <https://www.bartarinha.ir/fa/news/836065>

of verbal signs to move towards a hermeneutics of visual semiotic which is no more in total control of authorities and open to negotiation and dialogue.

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**How to cite this article:** Parvanehpour, M. (2020). Body or Face: Truth or Truce: Iranian Actresses Costumes in Domestic and Abroad Film Festivals. *SOCRATES*, 8(2), 26-42. Retrieved from <https://www.socratesjournal.com/index.php/SOCRATES/article/view/463>