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THE VEIL TO UNVEIL AND REVEIL OF IRANIAN WOMEN: AN IMPORTANT ISSUE OF IRANIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT



Simanta Roy

ABSTRACT

Iranian historiography shows a remarkable change that taken place time to time since the very beginning of nineteenth century up to the present time, motivations towards the alteration of Iran's history from conventional to pragmatic have been generalized. Whole the nineteenth and twentieth century, Iran has been going through the socio-political and religious obstacles. Issues, movements and the reforms are the main objects that are the description of modern Iranian history. Among the all issues which have been raised there the most imperative is the women issue and thereby it is constituted as one of the most important changes in modern Iranian history. Women issues like women education, participation to vote and politic, polygamy, divorce, service, veil, inequality and etc could have the equivalent importance, thus all around the issues of veil therefore the women's suffering in Iran have been criticizing throughout the world.

This present paper is a portrayal of the issues of women veiling and its respective reforms in Iran with comprising the others women issues, revolts and reforms. Also giving a account of its impact in Persian literature too.

KEYWORDS :Modern Iran, Qajar Period, Pehlavi Period, Iranian Revolution, Women issues, Reforms, veiling, Unveiling, 20th century Iran.

INTRODUCTION

"O Lord! How long will the nation remain insensible,
how long will women remain in the clutches of the veil?"

Are women not human amongst us, or is there in
women no power of distinction between good and evil?"¹

- Iraj Mirza, a renowned modern Iranian poet.

The veil or *hejab* is the principle of dressing modestly. The primary aim of the Muslim veil is to cover the *Awrah* that is the parts of the body should be considered private. which is particularly worn by Muslim women beyond the age of puberty in the presence of adult males outside of their immediate family and non-muslims. For satisfying the demands of *hejab*, generally, Muslims have recognized many different articles of clothing. *Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali* the four major Sunni schools of thought comply that the whole body of a woman must be covered, except her face and hands, while a few clerics state that the face, hands should be covered during prayer and in public settings as it is refer in *Awrah*. There are also some who allow the feet to be uncovered as well as the hands and face.² Veil or *hejab* is never used in the Qur'an as the clothing article of women. It is said in Quran that women's clothing should promote modesty, advise women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms in the presence of men.³ Wearing the *hejab* is mandatorily required in Iran. women, especially younger ones, have taken to wearing transparent and very loosely worn *hejab*.

"A nation is nothing without considering its inhabitants comprising of both men and women equally."⁴ But in such perspective, "Iran passes throughout the times where women have not been given to subsist with their minimum needs."⁵ Unfortunately, a long time Iranian women were hidden from their history and made themselves habituates as live as in dictation because of the gender inequality, in term of male centric ideologies and male dominance. They have been traditionally dissociated from all of their basic rights "that treat women as irrational, child-like and immature, and from widespread discriminatory policies that affect their lives from birth to death."⁶

Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1852–1920), a notable Iranian writer, satirist and one of the prominent figures of women's movement in Qajar Iran, straightforwardly depicts that:

*"Behind the closed doors at home, prohibited from everything in life, education, training and social life, women are regarded as mindless, like infants; they are confined to the burdens of household work and childbearing and are considered the slaves and servants of their husbands"*⁷

Veil, the code of conduct for dressing of Iranian women. It is factual the veil let Iranian women to suffer in their daily life. There are the castigations if a woman goes against the veil or even her unconscious appearances towards the veil. Every year thousands of Iranian women are put into jail or are punished and executed for not wearing full cover.

A story has shown a shocking frequency in modern Iran that :

*"A fifty-five year old woman is walking home, her arms full of groceries. It is hot, and the woman is clearly struggling to hold the groceries and maintain her veil, or chador, at the same time. Before she can put it back into place, the chador slips back and a single lock of hair appears on the woman's forehead. Immediately, she is arrested and imprisoned. For her "crime" she receives eighty lashes with a whip."*⁸

Veil, one of the serious issues in Iran which has the different effectual records, set up in different times. Veil in Iran may describe with its three different faces: first, from the Islam ascertained in the mid of 7th century A.D till the end of *Qajar* dynasty in Iran; second, during the *Pahlavi* Period in Iran; and third, from Iranian revolution up to present the time. During the time from Islam advent to Iran up to the established of *Qajar* in Iran, veiling was harshly compulsory. There we could not see any protest or movement which taken place against veil. But in during the Qajar (1785–1925 A.D.) this

scenario started to change because of some socio-cultural adjustments within the process of modernization in Iranian society by the western influences. Here a remarkable event was the direct contact to the European countries. Thereby along with the political development, a huge social and cultural transformation was introduced. Surprisingly, the education, Iranian students got the opportunity to go Europe for pursuing higher education and many European Missionaries came forward to educate the Iranian women in Iran. These are the main reasons by that the consciousness were increased against the traditionally systemized socio-political and cultural crisis. Directly or indirectly many women during this period raised their voice against veil. But in the Pahlavi period (1925–1979 A.D.) women became more active and they were free from veil, so far it was no longer stayed. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 A.D. Iranian women again covered, *hijab* became officially compulsion.

WOMEN ISSUES AND REFORMS IN MODERN IRAN:

From the second half of nineteenth century Iranian women started to come out from their customary life style. Time to time they raised their voice for their minimum needs of life, this persistent attempt got its definite platform in during the twentieth century when maximum of the reforms were introduced in favour of women (i.e. social, religious, political and educational), “the time must be considered as the time of women’s awakening and development.”⁹ Here the most significant was the veil, firstly women movement against veil became widespread and secondly at the same time the reform against veil was placed. Yet it has not been sustaining since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 A.D. A strong law was made for forbidding the previous reform against veil.

Women have a significant participation in Iranian socio-political rights movement between since the mid 19th century onwards, specially the women right movements like against the women discrimination, abuse, oppression, exploitation and etc. Iranian Nobel Laureate *Shirin Ebadi* says that “it is not easy to be a woman in Iran, because some laws make it tough for women to be active.”¹⁰ Consequently, women came forward and protested with the issues like “education, marriage, divorce, clothing and *Hijab* (veil), the right to vote, health related issues (like abortion), and etc.”¹¹

VEIL AND ITS IMPACT IN PERSIAN LITERATURE:

Literature and print media played a vital role for spreading the awareness and suggesting the possible revolutionary ideas and worked for the maximizing revolutionary strength. Litterateurs of modern Persian literature mainly focused on the present country situation that before till the end of 18th century they used to employ the traditional themes of literature. But in modern time they have been only showing the human centric themes, criticizing the socio-political obstacles.

Literatures contenting the issue like veil had the deep impact in Iranian women right revolutions. The first poetess *Fatima Baraghani* (1814/17 to 1852), titled as *Tahiri* ("The Pure One") and *Qurratu l-'Ayn* ("Solace/Consolation of the Eyes") was the first Iranian women and poetess who wrote poem against veil, she says: “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women!”¹² A few couplets one of her poem cited as under:

“At last, why don’t you raise the window curtain?

Just peak out for once to show your face.

They dropped their veil, forgot their desires,

Gave up this search, and stripped to nudity.

Burn off the clouds now and show us the sun,
Pull off the veil. Let us see your beauty:

So then the wise would be struck dumb,
And the fools will find their wisdom.”¹³

Md. Riza Ishqi Hamadani (1894 to 1924), a prominent poet of modern Persian literature also wrote a poem dealing with the emancipation of women, in his poem he call to the fight against the veiling of women in Iran. He says:

“If some two or three patriots raise their voices in unison with me,
Gradually this movement will be set afoot in the country,
By their demand the faces of women will be unveiled,
Women will take off the disgraceful dress and will become exalted,
Pleasure will be derived from the social life,
Else, so long as women hide their heads in this shroud
One half of the Iranian nation remains dead.”¹⁴

Husayn Khan Bakhtiyari Pizhman, another renowned poet and revolutionary figure from 20th century Iran. By his poetry he raised voice against veil, saying veil was sanctioned neither by religion nor by law and wisdom. He also motivated women by saying any woman has the courage in her body, she may tear away the veil. He illustrates:

“Law, religion, wisdom and civilization with one accord
justify the removal of *picha* and mantle;
Would that a group of chaste ones took courage and
tore asunder the veil of superstition.”¹⁵

Parvin Etesami (1907 to 1941), a notable poetess of Persian literature always expressed her sentiments against the women inequality and injustice. In a poem ‘*Zan dar Iran*’ (Woman in Iran) she deals the unfortunate condition of women in Iran that they had to endure with their veil.

Also *Bahar*, *Husam-Zada*, *Zainu’l Abidin Hikmat*, *Shahriyar*, *Tahereh Saffarzadeh*, *Forough Farokhzad*, *Arif Lahuti* and others have exhorted that women should cast away the veil from their face.

WOMEN VEILING, UNVEILING AND REVEILING IN IRAN:

1936 the year may consider as the year of immense success for Iranian women that it was the first time when Iranian women came out from their gloom, by introducing policies that altered the lives of Iranian women. Unveiling was enforced by the Reza Shah’s government. At last it was reform after a long struggle that before Iranian women had not right to unveil. Generally, hundreds of years they had been abiding the veiling false notionally or in forcefully. Well-known Persian novelist Seyyed Jamalzadeh says:

“No women can be seen in this country of men, but strangely, half of the walking population in the streets is wrapped in black bags from head to the toe without even an opening to breathe.”¹⁶

During the Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign (1925-1941) most of the reforms were introduced in favour to women empowerment. A significant attempt has been taken towards unveiling Iranian women

strongly. Therefore it was officially taken place in January 7, 1936. The day is celebrated as the '*Roaz-e Azadi-ye Zan*'¹⁷ (women's emancipation Day) in Iran. An advance order had been issued to all the wives of ministers, high military officers, and government officials to appear in European clothes and hats, rather than *chadors*. Also he admitted to his family that the unveiling decision was the *hardest* thing he has ever had to do. Then he suggested his daughters and wife to be unveiled and "serve as an example for other Persian women."¹⁸ He then announced his proclamation of women's emancipation.

But unveiling was abandoned and enforced reveiling in 1979 by religious leader *Ayatolleh Khomeinien* when he came to power. Immediately he cancelled the **Family Protection Act** which was established before. Within a few months women lost every substantive right that they had gained under the Shah. *Ayatolleh Khomeini* ordered women to wear the full *hejab* any time they were in the presence of men.

CONCLUSION:

The present status of Iranian women are relatively different that they had in their past. The women conditions and their position are improvising that before they were judged as the second class citizen, furthermore they were being used only the purpose to produce children and please their husbands. At present women can vote and they can get education liberally. Here a significant progress is the women education that they are more active in Iran's higher education than men. They are now servicing in public sectors and government offices.

But still, the problems regarding the veil in Iran are the questions to the entire world that today in 21st century Iranian women are not liberated, they are compelled to go through the veil. Yet in effect of globalisation of media, Iranian society is now much depended on western culture that the society is altering into the liberal.

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1.Qajar was a dynasty established by Aga Mohammed. The dynasty was continued to rule Iran from 1785 to 1925. Qajars were the Persianized royal family of Turkic origin.

2.Picha, a substitute for the veil, is worn by Iranian women over their forehead for hiding their faces, made of black horsehair about nine inches square in size.

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