

*Reshaping the Resistance of Women's Bodies After the Pandemic in
a Totalitarian Country Like Iran*

Faegheh Hajhosseini, University at Buffalo, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Each society and country has been affected differently by the pandemic. Nevertheless, I believe its impact on societies with dictatorial politics that control almost every aspect of people's lives could be more profound. During the last three years, citizens of these countries have been able to live their lives however they wished since they didn't have to worry about the 'public'; as a result, the sphere of their 'private' lives has been expanded to include their 'public' lives. Now we are back to 'normal life.' In these countries, 'normal life' is closely tied to the laws and forces of the state. However, living for three years more freely opens the possibility for the citizens of these countries the "I can" belief: "I can" live however I wish. Iran is among these dictatorship-ruled countries where we observe women's uprisings these days. These uprisings or protests are reactions to the "morality police" who control women's clothing and hijab. In my paper, I argue that the effect of living in isolation for almost three years in Iran has reshaped and reframed the resilience of women in a closed society like Iran. They have experienced living more freely during the pandemic, while the public sphere was not an issue for them. And as a result, now they are resilient to the state's dictatorship. I will use Sandra Harding's view of women's bodies as an objection to show how this new shape of resilience is the resilience of women's 'figurative body.'

Keywords: Iran, Covid-19, Totalitarianism, Women's Revolution, Figurative Bodies

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

Over the last four years, the whole world has faced a unique situation caused by the Coronavirus, which created uninvited isolation with new concerns and strategies. Different societies and countries have been affected to varying degrees by this pandemic. Its impact, however, could be more profound in societies where dictatorial politics aims to control almost every aspect of people's lives. Due to quarantine and isolation (which varied across countries), citizens of these countries were able to live their lives as they liked since they did not have to worry about the 'public' rules constantly; as a result, the sphere of their 'private' lives has been expanded to include their 'public' lives, which was contrary to their "normal life" before the pandemic. It's back to 'normal life' now. In these countries, 'normal life' is closely tied to the state's laws and forces. Living for three years more freely provides citizens of these countries with the opportunity to adopt the "I can" belief: "I can" live as I choose.

Iran is one of these dictatorship-ruled countries where women are uprising these days. The protests are a direct response to the existence of "morality police" who control women's clothing and hijab on the streets. My paper argues that living in isolation for almost three years in Iran has reshaped and reframed the resistance of Iranian women. I also will use Sandra Harding's concept of Strong Objectivity to show how this new shape of resistance is the resistance of women's 'figurative body.'

Totalitarianism

For the sake of argument, I will briefly explain the characteristics of totalitarian countries in the first part of this paper. The purpose of this section is to describe how power is confined to one territory in these societies. This territory has sovereignty over all aspects of people's lives, including their most private affairs. This issue is becoming increasingly serious as technology advances since it equips authorities with more surveillance tools.

Totalitarian countries with the case study of Iran

In this section, Mostly, I am referring to Hana Arendt's *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. A deep investigation of totalitarianism, however, will be impossible in this paper, and it needs further research. My purpose is to provide a background about what kind of society we are discussing by briefly listing the characteristics of totalitarian countries.

One of the primary characteristics of these countries is the establishment of a fictitious world by the government and the attempt to make it a tentative working reality in everyday life. A totalitarian ruler must also prevent this new world from developing new stability. Stabilization will weaken the need for movement in this fictitious world, and with it, the hope for eventual world conquest will disappear. By means of propaganda and the party's organizations, the rulers constantly warn about enemies both inside and outside the country. Still, the greatest threat to totalitarian dominance is the flood of reality coming from the other, nontotalitarian side.

Power is a means of confronting reality directly, and totalitarianism in power is constantly trying to overcome this challenge. Additionally, nations in this fictitious world are portrayed differently than other nations in many ways. For instance, the authorities stress different elements, such as race (Nazi), religion, tradition, culture, history, and so on, to empower this fictitious world.

Totalitarian regimes in this fictional world play Power in a particularly ruthless way, so violence is their determining tool. Furthermore, “they use their power to neglect national interests rather than nationalism; and promotes “contempt for utilitarian motives, which is different from their unwavering belief in a fictitious ideological world. Hence, by replacing the fictitious world, which can be anything as long as it serves the "Supreme's ideal world," we face a kind of structureless country, which is unpredictable and in neglect of material interests (418-419).

The other element of totalitarianism is the category of the suspect. “The category of the suspect embraces, under totalitarian conditions, the total population; every thought that deviates from the officially prescribed and permanently changing line is already suspect, no matter in which field of human activity it occurs. Simply because of their capacity to think, human beings are suspects by definition.” As a result, the individuals and their unique identities are not important under the domination of a totalitarian ruler. Their personal realm gets lost among the public realm, and “freedom” and “equality” fade in the name of “law.”

Now let’s see how Covid challenged these features of totalitarianism in Iran. A large-scale disease outbreak such as Covid destroyed the fictitious totalitarian world. The state first needed assistance with vaccination and other health services from other countries. Despite initially claiming that Iran would not accept help from foreigners, particularly the USA and England, the supreme leader changed his mind after a few months when the death toll rose. Consequently, when such a virus became more threatening than human power, the power of that built-up fictitious world decreased, and reality forced itself on the state.

Secondly, the state's attempts to distance the Iranian nation from other nations failed. There is a sense of closeness between Iranian nations and other nations. Everyone was suffering throughout the whole world from Covid-19. “Suffering” became a linking element for all humans worldwide. This closeness covered all the distances that were situated in the fictitious world of the totalitarian ruler. Society was still unstable. But the world was unstable. The destabilization of the totalitarian ruler became a link, contrary to his desire.

Now let's consider how the pandemic changed rulers' contempt for utilitarian motives, which led to their structurelessness and unpredictable behavior. Corona was stronger than the nonfactual elements of their "fictitious world." It was a time when regimes had to consider their nations' utility or face the consequences. The brutality of death outweighed the ruthlessness of the regime's power. So, the power of reality was more severe and cruel. As a result, the walls of their fictitious world cracked, and the real world emerged from those cracks.

Another category of totalitarianism was the category of the suspect—the suspect of individuals and their freedom in the name of the law. As a result of isolation, people began to see themselves as an agent with free will who could even act against not logical law without being afraid of counting as suspects.

After explaining the basic characteristics of totalitarian societies, I would like to add how technological development and algorithmic societies can complicate totalitarianism and give authorities more violent power to control the most private aspects of people’s lives. This is true that algorithms control every aspect of our lives, no matter where we are in the world. However, this issue is more severe for totalitarian countries since these algorithms are planned and controlled only by authorities. Other independent parties who design these

technologies will be arrested and punished. Therefore, in general, only the regime benefits from algorithms. As a result, technology facilitates the state's intrusion into private lives.

The fact that everything we do online is recorded is known, but who records it and for how long is not. Algorithms detect your performances (by different kinds of surveillance cameras), track your activities via variable technologies (like GPS-enabled trackers), or block online content by filtering them, which happens very harshly in totalitarian countries, specifically in our case study Iran. Computer codes are conducting these systems of automatic law enforcement, and we don't have any knowledge about them. Our ignorance causes the increasing knowledge of the other side (in our case, the state). Consequently, knowledge is power, which exclusively belongs to a limited territory. They use it to "make important decisions about us and to influence the decisions we make for ourselves" (Pasquale, p:3). Consequently, this structure can increase violence in new modes.

Nonetheless, the situation changed with the onset of the pandemic in 2019, which led to a clearer distinction between the private and public sectors. In more concrete terms, during the pandemic, the algorithms behind these computers leaked¹, resulting in increasing public knowledge about these systems and reducing the power of the government, which made them more responsible for the violence they perpetrated. Obviously, they didn't respond, but people's dissatisfaction and feeling of insecurity increased.

Public education also undergoes a change. For almost two years, students stayed at home. As a result, they became more authoritative and had more control over their lives. Ideally, Iranian students are raised as puppets, serving their superiors. Authorities want to reproduce dictatorship in schools by different methods. However, the situation was completely different for two years. A principal could not force students to wear uniforms and headscarves in school or sing chants about praising governments every morning in long lines. As a result, students became more self-authoritative, unable to return to their previous disrespectful situation. This can be one important cause explaining why generation z is one of the protagonists of these current protests. It is hard to make them silent again.

Further, family and friend gatherings moved from public places (such as restaurants, public salons, coffee shops, etc.) to private places, which were mostly private properties. By doing so, people are free to be themselves without worrying about their hijab or clothing. After the pandemic ended, they returned to public places, but they no longer took the public's dominance over their basic rights, such as cloth, for granted. They saw the possibility of saying NO to violent surveillance.

Last but not least, the pandemic has led to a decrease in moral police presence. There was something more crucial threatening in the country than women's hair, so more budget and forces were allocated to fight Corona, and as a result, people in the public domain were freed from being controlled continuously.

¹ I can talk about how it leaks, but in this speech, there is no time to do that in this speech. But: since many experts were at home at that time, they started to do private businesses; among them, we can name producing many podcasts about technology which explain the functions of algorithmic policies and filtering in simple languages for ordinary people (many of these podcasters now are in prisons). The "live" videos on social media like Instagram enhance which, without the interference of the authorities and their permission, experts, artists, technicians, philosophers, and scholars find chances to talk freely about forbidden concepts. All of these caused an increase in public knowledge and restriction on state forces.

All of these ended in more freedom and more distance between private (personal) and public lives. People see the “possibility” (and I want to emphasize the term “possibility” here) of living their own lives without the constant intervention of states regarding their cloth, their food and drinks, their thoughts, their companionship, and so on. This possibility opened new doors in nations' lives in this totalitarian society, doors to a more private life where they could resist the constant invasion of public life. Isolation is more or less over, but the state cannot cope with the new community shape and its confined power. On the other hand, it is also impossible for the nation to go under total control of the state again. The conflict becomes more serious at this point.

What is happening now in Iran

On September 13th, Iran's "morality police" killed Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old girl who had traveled with her brother from Saqqez, a city west of Iran, to Tehran, the capital. At first, she was arrested for "violating the hijab law." Her brother pleaded with the police that "we are foreigners here. We do not know what we should do. Please!" Regardless, the police arrested Mahsa and suggested her brother go to the morality police station to find out what to do next. Her brother arrived there just in time to see the ambulance carrying Mahsa's body to the hospital. The Police said she suddenly went into heart failure at the station, but the eyewitnesses claimed she was beaten and her head hit the side of a police car. Despite all these narratives and the medical evidence, the police, like always, denied their cruelty and announced other reasons for her death. Sadly, Mahsa died after two days in a coma due to a cerebral hemorrhage and stroke.

After that tragic death, the protests are going on and on. People are more persistent, and governmental forces are becoming more and more violent. It's been almost 120 days that people have been protesting with whatever they have. They call this no more a “protest” but a revolution.

The protagonists of these protests are women and new generations (generation z), and the trigger was their demand to wear whatever they wanted. Despite the fact that this sounds like a very basic demand that stems from a very basic right, even the morality police have not been abolished completely, proving that the authorities do not want to compromise or step back in any way in their relationship with the nations. So, they cut the internet, continued blocking more services, social networks, and websites, and imprisoned more normal people and activists. Additionally, foreign sanctions are increasing, which results in decreasing people's well-being.

People are uprising without anything but their lives and bodies in this situation. I propose this fight as a figurative account of the "I can" and a figure with bodies as figures. I will benefit from Sandra Harding's “Strong Objectivity” to explain this fight as a women's fight.

Strong Objectivity

Strong objectivity is a term coined by feminist philosopher Sandra Harding, known for her work on feminist standpoint theory. Harding suggests that starting research on the lives of women "actually strengthens standards of objectivity." Strong objectivity is posited in contrast to scientific objectivity since strong objectivity amplifies researcher bias, something that Harding argues can never really be removed; a researcher's life experiences will always be a lens through which they view the world and, subsequently, their research.

Strong objectivity argues that there is androcentric bias in research because male researchers attempt to be neutral researchers, whereas Harding argues that is not possible. Harding suggests researcher reflexivity, or consideration of the researcher's positionality and how that affects their research, as "stronger" objectivity than researchers claiming to be completely neutral. For instance, Oppression is one of the central grounds of strong objectivity. Women have an interest in representing social phenomena in ways that reveal their oppression. They also have personal experiences of sexist oppression, unlike men, whose power enables them to ignore how their actions affect women.

This paper focuses on women as strong objects with different experimental epistemologies and how this cognition has been challenged during pandemics. Before, they got used to these oppressions, but now they know they can stand against them. As a result, they are rising against all oppressions imposed on their bodies with their bodies. I do believe that it is women's bodies' revolution, in Harding's words, based on their strong objectivity.

“Women's figurative revolution, Bodies' interaction with their Images.”

In order to clarify this, I will turn to an anonymously written article by a woman who took part in these protests and wrote in the early days of the protests an article entitled “Women's figurative revolution, Bodies' interaction with their Images.” This essay begins with a concentration on an intuition born of experiencing a gap: A gap between viewing photos and videos of protests online and presence in the street.” I will call this gap a gap between representative episteme and practical episteme. In other words, the gap between images you see and those images. The writer says that for several days she was exposed to video recordings of the people's street protests, their exciting songs, and the photos and figures of women protestors. The videos and, more importantly, images are instruments to remind her of the oppression the women's body has tolerated, along with the possibility of resistance against these oppressions. The images cannot have the same function and meaning for men since they do not posit "strong subjectivity." Eventually, the writer found herself in the middle of a protest on the street. “The first moments of being “there,” in the street, surrounded by protestors, were extremely strange.” This is the moment of revolution when all those epistemology and images push the woman to act, perform, and revolution. “What I saw firsthand was very similar to what I had previously viewed on screen, but there was a gap between the spectator-I and the I-in-the-street that took a few short moments to recognize...I myself was those images.” Therefore, it can be said this revolution is the space that fills the gap between the representative me and the real me. The woman becomes the same image of resistance that she has seen before.

She recognizes “these protests are not as crowd-centered but situation-centered, not slogan-centered but figure-centered.” Any woman can “desire” to become that image of resistance that they had seen in previous days. Therefore, anybody “can” create an unbelievable, radical situation of resistance by themselves, such that it astonishes the viewer. “Belief in this “I can,” this ability, has spread very far. Everybody knows that they are creating an unforgettable situation with their figures of resistance: I want to be that woman with the figure of resistance, the one I saw in the photo, and I create a figure.” These figures were already present in the unconscious of the protestors without ever having been practiced, as if they had been practicing them for years while they were oppressed and subjugated. She proposes, “what has extended this uprising in a feminine and feminist form is the plural, figurative stimulation points in protesting bodies: Figures that protestors visibly desire to

become, such that it's no longer possible to go to the street without striking the figure of one of those disobedient, rebellious, resisting bodies.”

The images of other resisting women have granted us a new understanding of our bodies. So, she considers images more stimulating and important than other media because the time imprisoned in the photograph makes it dense, a carrier of the entire history in which that body has been subjugated. Photographs stimulated this uprising and drove it forward: The photo of Zhina [Mahsa] Amini on the hospital bed. The photo of Zhina's relatives holding each other in grief in the hospital. The image of Kurdish women in the Aychi cemetery waving their headscarves in the air. The photograph of Zhina's gravestone. The figure of the torch-bearing woman of Keshavarz Boulevard. And so many other photos.

In truth, what distinguishes this uprising as a feminist is the possibility of creating images that do not necessarily capture the intensity of conflict, the cruelty of repression, or the unfolding of events but instead carry the history of bodies. Accordingly, the bodies are becoming figures that can reproduce the resistant images. People thereafter go to the street not with the bodies that they are but with the bodies that they can and want to be. The feminist uprising is characterized by this figurative desire that springs from strong objectivity. The outbreak of repressed history. “Giving birth to a body we, women, have been pregnant with for years.”

Conclusion

To wrap up, I want to emphasize that these new bodies have been already born and are inspirations for future bodies yet-to-be-born. The outcome of these protests is and is not important anymore. If regime change happens or not does not matter. What matters is that women's new modes of resistance do not allow the government to oppress women's bodies any longer. Their bodies are not men's property anymore. Rather, they are figures that can reproduce resistance and new epistemological ground for equality and freedom.

References

Feminist Standpoint Theory. (n.d.). Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved February 10, 2023, from <https://iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>

Hana, A. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Harding, S. G. (Ed.). (2004). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. Routledge.

Mourad, S. (2022, October 4). *Figuring a Women's Revolution: Bodies Interacting with their Images*. Jadaliyya. Retrieved February 10, 2023, from <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44479>