

Ethnography of Body Experience in Iran Today: My Mother is always Chasing Me.



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ABSTRACT: How do we experience our bodies? This intentionally broad question was taken into the daily life of society to let the lived experiences guide us. This ethnographic study was conducted among a friendship group of four girls born in the 1980s, who exhibit diversity in their dress and lifestyle. Through extended conversations and accompanying this group in various settings, we gradually gained insight into their understanding and encounter with their bodies. Among the extensive field notes, a relatively consistent pattern emerged. In this pattern, individuals initially identify their bodies based on familial values and standards. At a certain point, influenced by external factors, they begin to question these patterns and start rethinking and creating their own unique patterns. However, the individualized body does not easily manifest within the family context. As a result, people often lead dual lives, which is highly exhausting. Eventually, they decide to inform their families about some of their personal patterns, which also comes with challenges and never fully materializes. While recent developments in Iranian society, particularly the "Women, Life, Liberty" movement, highlight the role of social and political institutions in the embodiment of women, the findings of this study indicate that the family institution, particularly the mother (and even the mother-in-law), still holds significant authority.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the past few decades, "the body and embodiment have been positioned as subjects of direct critical reconsideration" (Cregan, 1396¹ [2017], p. 15). Interdisciplinary body studies have brought the body to the forefront of the humanities. Until the mid-20th century, the humanities, influenced by Cartesian dualism, considered the body and mind as entirely separate entities, with the former being the subject of empirical sciences and the latter belonging to the humanities. In the latter half of the 20th century, under the influence of phenomenologist philosopher Merleau-Ponty, the mind-body dualism was challenged (Merleau-Ponty, 1392 [2013]). A few decades later, neuroscientific experiments on the brain confirmed Merleau-Ponty's philosophical views (Fuchs, 2018).

However, it is feminism that places the body at the center of critical studies (Mousavi, 1389 [2019]). Thanks to the feminist theoretical debates regarding the relationship between body, nature, and culture, a broad theoretical literature on the body has developed. The concepts used in women's studies regarding the body can be categorized into three groups: "the body as nature, the body as a social construct, and embodiment" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 1399 [2020], p. 42). This categorization is also observed in sociology (Shilling, 1400 [2021]). However, while women's studies primarily focus on the role of the body in reproducing gender inequalities, social sciences address a broader range of topics. Particularly in the 1970s, the issue of "power and especially political action on embodiment" emerged (Le Breton, 1392 [2013], p. 19).

Simultaneously with the academic attention to the body, we observe its increasing significance in society. In the contemporary world, "the body is the site of self-formation and realization" (Giddens, 1991). The body "is at the centre of an individual's sense of self"; to the extent that Shilling considers the degree of reflection on the body and identity unprecedented in history (Shilling, 1400 [2021]). Gender theorists, including Judith Butler, also demonstrate the complex and close relationship between identity and body through gender (Butler, 1993). According to Butler, the perception of the body is a self-construct. We present and perform ourselves through our bodies. Psychology increasingly emphasizes the relationship between body and mind in understanding and expressing the self (Mate, 1402

[2023]; McDougall, 1400 [2021]) and relates it to identity and individual emotions. For example, adolescent shame is explained in relation to "self-identity, femininity and masculinity, sexual adequacy, and bodily integrity" (Mann, 1400 [2021]).

¹ The dates of sources used in Persian are written in the Solar Hijri calendar (the official calendar of Iran), with the corresponding Gregorian date in brackets

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Recent changes in Iranian society also highlight the significance of the body for individuals. Over the past few decades, rapid changes in values and beliefs related to the body, identity, and lifestyle have been observed (National Family Survey, 1397 [2018]; Monitoring Iranian Behaviors and Attitudes Towards Fertility, 1401 [2022]; Azimi, 1400 [2021]; Taleban, Mobashery & Mehrayin, 1389 [2010]; Javaheri & Helali Sotoudeh, 1395 [2016]; Kousari, 1395 [2016]). A prominent example is the tensions surrounding the issue of "mandatory hijab." The morality police², from presidential debates to overarching regime policies, have consistently been a focal point in the country's news. Conversely, movements such as "White Wednesdays" and "Girls of Revolution Street"³ have actively opposed mandatory hijab. The climax of these tensions was observed in the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement⁴ in 2022, which had profound impacts on Iranian society.

However, societal issues concerning the body should not be reduced solely to the hijab. From 2013 to 2018, I worked as a women's empowerment facilitator and had the opportunity to hear individuals' unspoken concerns. Although the sessions did not focus specifically on the body, not a single session went by without one of the participants addressing bodily issues. From concerns about obesity and dieting to selecting appropriate party attire, from feelings of guilt regarding sexual relations with their spouse to guilt about rejecting sexual harassment, from vaginismus to avoiding visits to a gynaecologist, from family intervention in lifestyle choices to the anguish of self-suppression at work and in public spaces, a wide range of body-related issues permeate the daily lives of Iranian women. Hearing these stories shaped the main concern of this research. For this study, the ethnographic method was chosen to avoid imposing any preselected topic or approach on the field. With a very general and vague question, we approached the field to gradually clarify and highlight the issues related to bodily experience that are significant for the studied group. Our general question was: How do we experience our bodies?

Study Group and Ethnography

Typically, ethnographic research is conducted in a specific field site. However, this research was conducted on a friendship group of four individuals: Samira⁵ (born in Qom⁶, 1990), Neda (born in Ardabil⁷, 1989), Sogol (born in Karaj⁸, 1985), and Athena (born in Tehran⁹, 1989). They all enrolled in Textile Design at the University of Art Tehran in 2009. They participated together in the Student Scientific Association and have maintained and deepened their friendship ever since (up to 2023). Since 2023, this group has been engaged in establishing a clothing brand. All activities of the brand, from textile design, fabric printing, clothing design, sales, etc., are managed by these four individuals. Additionally, Samira works as a fashion model.

Rationale for Group Selection:

Although the number of individuals in the group is small, their diversity and unique composition add significant variety to the events and experiences, preventing monotony. This diversity pertains to variables that can influence bodily experiences. One such variable is marital status, with two members being single and two married. Additionally, the group members hail from different cities: one from Qom, one from Karaj, one from Ardabil, and one from Tehran. Presently, three live in Tehran and one in Ardabil. Another important factor is their style of dress: one wears a hijab, two wear scarves around their necks¹⁰, and one does not wear a headscarf¹¹. Prior to selecting the group, I was aware of their high levels of self-awareness and self-expression. Three members have long-term experience with psychoanalysis, giving them a deep understanding of their inner worlds and ease in discussing it. I had a close friendship with Samira and was acquainted with two other members through her. Samira introduced me to the group, facilitating my acceptance. These factors made this group a suitable subject for the study. Besides these criteria, access to the group and their acceptance were crucial, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic.

² The moral police in Iran, established in 2005. Its primary function is to enforce Islamic dress codes and "Islamic moral behaviour" in public spaces, focusing on women.

³ Social campaigns formed in protest against the compulsory hijab from 2017 onwards

⁴ The "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement started in 2022 after the death of a girl named Mahsa Amini in the moral police detention centre and led to a series of protests against the compulsory hijab law.

⁵ Fake names have been used to protect people's privacy.

⁶ Qom is one of the important shrines and religious cities of Iran.

⁷ Ardabil is located in the northwest of Iran and Iranian Turks who have a different cultural background live in this area. It is said that Turks are more patriarchal than the residents of central Iran.

⁸ Karaj is close to Tehran and has a relatively open social atmosphere.

⁹ Tehran, as the capital city, is the leader of social changes and is more open, diverse and tolerant than other cities in the values related to the body.

¹⁰ According to the law, it is mandatory to cover the head with a scarf. People who do not follow this law put a scarf around their neck to cover their head with it if they are seen by the moral police.

¹¹ After the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, people who intend to directly and explicitly oppose the hijab law refuse to wear a scarf around their necks. This type of clothing is considered radical in the public space of Iran.

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The trust and open, uncensored discussions needed for this research were made possible through Samira and the manner of my introduction to the group.

Entry into the Group:

In the spring of 2023, before starting the research, Samira and I participated in two body-related programs. One was a "Peace with the body workshop" facilitated by me, and the other was the "Body Narrative: Displayed Body" event I organized at a cultural institute in Tehran, where Samira shared her life story and her experiences with her body. Two other group members attended this event. This strengthened my connection with the group, allowing me to begin this research three months later and be readily accepted by the group.

Group Introduction:

The individuals in the group, whom we will refer to as "the girls" following their own usage, are highly capable. After graduating from university, they did not conform to the expected paths but instead created their unique journeys. Their professional lives are filled with trials, errors, and achievements, and they all engage in constant self-reflection. They have repeatedly reconsidered their thoughts, beliefs, lifestyles, and other aspects of their lives.

Our research method is ethnography. The data collection techniques included participant observation, situational conversation and listening, and observation. To study this group, I engaged with them in both individual meetings and in various work and non-work settings, such as the swimming pool, parties, and friendly gatherings. I also followed them on social media, recording and documenting their content. This fieldwork was conducted throughout 2023. For data analysis, we used coding, identifying key themes or concepts related to our research issue through open coding of field notes. We then categorized the codes based on focused coding. One of our focused codes centred on the family. The six themes related to the family were as follows:

1. I wanted to be invisible

"I am curious to know what kind of relationship we have with our bodies? How do we experience them?" If I needed to explain my research on this group of girls, I would use this broad phrase. Conversations arising from this question would quickly bring up childhood, adolescence, and family upbringing. Although explicit statements were not made, brief references sufficed for mutual understanding among the "children of the '80s"¹²: ugliness, shame, hijab, hunching, constriction, mother, religious family, lack of permission, closed, shame, etc. It seemed we all shared or at least understood each other's childhood and adolescent experiences, taking them as given and continuing the discussion. I first met Neda at the pool. I introduced myself and explained my research topic. Just she heard the word "body," she began narrating:

"Remember when Samira said she hunched? I did too. I didn't want to be seen –we were sitting around the Jacuzzi in swimsuits and she pointed to her breasts but avoided saying the word- My mom got me padded -She meant padded bras. Everyone said if you wear padded bras, they'll stay small! I wore them on purpose to keep them small."

I asked her why? And the same answer I had heard from Samira and Athena:

"I don't know, I just wanted to be invisible."

The girls frequently mentioned hunching at different times, but for them, it symbolized the "closing and crumpling of the Body". Samira, who had spoken about her bodily experiences at the Exhibited Body event, described the body she brought from adolescence to adulthood more precisely:

"I grew up in a family where I had to wear hijab and, on the other hand, had large breasts, so I always had to censor myself because of my body shape. Everyone around me asked why I was hunched! Why I wasn't straight! It wasn't clear to me at the time how much contradiction there was! This contradiction wasn't tangible for a child, so I chose to stay in that cover and that huddled state. It wasn't until I started therapy that I gradually realized the body is closed. The body is not open. The body is not free. The body is not comfortable in front of others. The body is ashamed, feels guilty, and escapes from being an object."

Of course, the girls did not intend to continue their lives with this "familial body." Each reconsidered their bodies and management patterns in their own way.

Reflexivity is a key trait of self-identity and self-understanding in the modern era (Giddens, 1991).

2. From Closed to Open:

Each girl had a different story with her body, but change was a constant in all narratives. As Neda put it, they were all "Little Black Fish," the well-known character from Samad Behrangi¹³ symbolizing courage in movement and change. These girls, too, at some point (usually the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood), started doubting family patterns and values and finding their own. Neda's story illustrates this well:

¹² The 80s is the first decade after the Islamic Revolution that Iran is involved in the war with Iraq. In this decade, religious ideology and spirit of idealism rule the society.

¹³ Iranian teacher, social activist and critic, folklorist, translator, and short story writer (1939 – 1968) ¹⁴ Referring to the Green Movement that took place in protest against the results of the 10th presidential election.

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"I was in the dorm in 2009¹⁴. It was a really tough year. I started doubting some things... I spent the whole summer reading books. I felt these beliefs weren't mine, and I had to rethink them. I stopped wearing the chador and gradually reached this point -raising her right hand and pointing to her hair- I used to wear a chador and was religious. Then, suddenly... In 2009, someone was killed at our university, and the atmosphere became very tense. Back then, people looked down on those of us who wore chadors. I brought the topic back to the books: I don't remember exactly but I read religious books in general, those they were critics, I tried to listen to them too. I have an uncle who's very opposed against formal religious teachings; he brought me those books."

Then, I talked a bit about the cultural atmosphere of Tabriz¹⁴ and Ardabil with Neda. She shifted the conversation to the bodies:

"You know, in Turkish communities, women are against women. One issue is virginity. If you've been humiliated once, why do the same to your daughter-in-law?¹⁶ Another is that in our areas, men are elevated, and girls are humiliated - she raised her right hand and lowered her left- From the beginning, they don't let boys do anything. They're always ahead everywhere. And housework is entirely with women. Before clearing the table, you have to serve their tea. That's how it is in our gatherings. This made me hate motherhood and femininity... I was at odds with my body. I hated being a woman so much that I rejected myself. I realized these things about myself through my therapist."

Until 2009, Neda managed her body according to family values. The political unrest of that year calls for the first push to go back to her beliefs and were the first jolt, prompting her to re-evaluate her beliefs. Therapy sessions provided the next jolt. She hated her female body due to two factors: the patriarchal values and norms of her environment and her controlling mother, who represented this system and imposed strict criteria to control her daughter's body. For Neda, change meant reconciling with her female body without falling into patriarchal frameworks.

Samira's transformative journey began with her university education and subsequent relocation from Qom to Tehran, but it unfolded gradually. Initially, she restricted wearing her chador to Qom. Over time, she expanded her social circles, participating in mixed-gender gatherings. She gradually learned to dance, attended Zumba classes, started dating, and developed her own standards for managing her body. Samira's self-awareness regarding these processes was also enhanced by her therapy sessions. She reflects:

"It was in these past two years of therapy that I realized how much my lack of self-confidence and self-esteem is related to my body."

After navigating a challenging path, Samira now works as a model.

Sogol has followed a similar trajectory, being under the values and norms of her family until entering university. University provides the opportunity to acquaint oneself with other lifestyles and to reconsider the familial lifestyle. Simultaneously, another event occurs which gives Sogol more courage to distance herself from her family: an unsuccessful marriage that resulted from family pressure and ended in divorce during the engagement period. The loneliness and difficulty of the divorce process greatly impacted her. Sogol says:

"My family kept saying I had to get married! I had to get married! Well, I wouldn't have gotten married! Why did I think I had to marry anyone who came along? Then all this, it's like I'm moving up a step... It's like I realize the family has really hurt me. I thought I had to be the good child of the family. No! There's no reason for that." After that, Sogol no longer seeks to play the role of the "good child of the family" and moves towards finding or creating her own unique pattern. The shift from "familial body" to "individualized body" corresponds with what Samira refers to as "the shift from closed body to open body." This change can also be seen as part of the individualization process of Iranian society (Goudarzi, 1397 [2017]; Nabavi, 1402 [2023]).

3. My mother is always chasing me!

Challenging familial frameworks is not easy. It has significant psychological and social costs. The first time I spoke with Athena, fear came up after a sentence or two. After a long shopping trip in Tehran's market, she took the metro to my house. I open the door. She has a black sheer scarf wrapped around her head, so her hair is not visible. She is wearing a tunic and jeans, a typical trendy hijab style. Her movements are calm and silent, like invisible girls or those who blend into the background. Athena sits with her legs together, hands on her stomach, tucked into the corner of the couch. I talk about my research and gradually the conversation starts. The discussion turns to the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement and Athena shares her experience:

"Over the past year, I have thought a lot about why I wear the hijab? I think it's more out of fear than guilt - She emphasizes the word fear - I have a very controlling mother, she makes me feel very guilty."

Her distinction between guilt and fear interests me and asked her "Fear of what?" Athena continues:

"I don't know. It matters a lot to my mother. For example, my sister is freer, her scarf is here - She points to the middle of her head - My mother complained to me about it. My mother said 'I kept telling her to pull it forward! It kept going back! I kept telling her, it kept going back! One night I dreamt I died, and I told your sister, 'come! I've died, just take off your scarf! Are you relieved now!? Now that Athena is pregnant, her baby is coming, and her mother isn't there, not for her, not for her baby.' Yes, my mother is like that, she makes you feel so guilty. I think my mother is always chasing me... I don't want to upset her. When I took off my chador at university, my mother had chest pains for a while. Whether it hurt or not, anyway, saying it made me feel guilty."

¹⁴ I am from Tabriz. The cultural atmosphere of Tabriz and Ardabil (Nada's hometown) is similar. ¹⁶ Referring to the virginity test that is still going on in some traditional families.

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Based on my knowledge of her, I guess my question won't be offensive: "So hijab isn't a belief for you?" She says:

"Yes, but not much, I mean, I think praying to God in this religion is much more important than hijab, humanity, ethics... I don't think hijab is that important. Look, not everyone can change their dress, Samira was very brave - She returns to the topic of her mother again - Ever since I was a child, my mother kept telling me not to move, to sit next to her... I've always sat there, during puberty and adolescence one gradually becomes isolated, introverted, or alone... Others kept encouraging that I was such a polite girl! So dignified, one loses their self-confidence."

Athena, like other girls, has undergone changes. She has set aside her chador and revised some of her beliefs. But usually in her conversations, two issues are involved: the controlling mother and fear; fear of breaking the boundaries set by the mother and upsetting her. Athena is not the only one who is afraid. All the girls mention it at some point in their conversations.

In the early days, Samira used to dance with her hijab at parties, out of fear of the "inner parent" (Berne, 1386 [2007]):

"I realized how much I fear my mom and dad! Even when they're not there, I'm afraid. At a party in Tehran! Even though they're not there, I'm still afraid of them, that I don't take off my hijab."

Here, we are dealing with the individual's split self. Part of the self wants to change the lifestyle, and the other part, which is the internalized parent, prevents this change by creating a sense of fear or guilt (Greenberg and others, 1996).

Each of the individuals studied expends a significant amount of psychological energy to resolve this split. Many have sought help from their therapist. However, Sogol's guide has been her yoga instructor. Azi, who later became Sogol's friend, not only encouraged her to rethink her ideas but also gave her the courage to try forbidden things. Sogol refers to this process as "unlocking the locks." Sogol says:

"Azi really unlocked a lot of things for me. I realized I could be friend with my body, a lot of things could happen and there's no shame in it! For example, Azi said, why do you think you shouldn't have sex? Then in my mind, I always thought, no! Maybe it's bad... Azi clarified that no! It's not. I also tried my first drink with Azi. In Turkey, we went by the sea. We said we're going to drink and let whatever happens, happen. And nothing happened! Then we said let's smoke too, see what happens? And we saw that nothing happened! Gradually, I started unlocking things for myself - She repeats her internal dialogues aloud - See, nothing happened! See, you tried this too, nothing happened! It was like a help to put aside fears. To try! You won't die. Then I thought why I always thought I shouldn't smoke - She answers her question - Because my family doesn't like it! Let them not like it! I want to smoke!"

An important aspect of these narratives is the role of the family, especially the mother. Events, changes, thoughts, and actions are reinterpreted with the central role of the mother and by referencing her. Fear of the mother is the most important psychological barrier against change. They either fear upsetting her, are in constant internal dialogue with her, trying to convince her, or ultimately, whatever is happening must be kept hidden from her.

4. Double Life

Fear is an internal barrier to build individual patterns. Everyone more or less overcomes this fear and builds their individualized patterns to some extent. But is it easy to announce or display these "individualized" patterns to the family? Hiding the individualized body is the most common method to reduce the costs of change.

The following ethnographic narration of Athena's dealings with her husband's family provides a better understanding of this duality. Athena wears the hijab, but the type of hijab differs from that of her friends, her family, and her husband's family. He says:

"I cover more than usual my body in front of my wife's family. Because my wife's family is a bit more strict about hijab. For example, once my manteau was too short and I saw my father-in-law suddenly I was very shocked. I said to myself, it is very bad that my father-in-law saw me like this. My wife said that if you believe that it is good to be present in society with this kind of dress code, you should also appear in front of my father in the same clothes. You have to be yourself!"

I ask Athena: "Why don't you do this in front of your wife's family, while your wife also supports you?" Athena says:

"I don't know. it has been put in our minds since childhood something under the name of Respect -She says the word Respect loudly and mockingly- I say to myself that nothing special will happen to me now if my dress is longer. Instead, I have respected the opinion of my wife's family. This is while I know that if I dress up in something that I like, they will not respect to my choice. Anyway, somehow I have not so much problem with this. I am passing myself; I am passing the style of comfortable clothes that I like to wear. And I wear a more complicated and difficult dress. But in general I am somehow satisfied with myself."

For Athena, the dual life is mostly in the area of clothing choice, especially in the length of the coat. For other girls, it is more complicated and includes more parts of the lifestyle related to the body. For instance, besides the type of clothing, the type of parties and gatherings, smoking and drinking, and even having a boyfriend must be hidden. There is a constant mental struggle to manage what can be expressed here and now and what should not be expressed. This situation leads to psychological exhaustion due to cognitive dissonance (conflict between behaviour and attitude) (Aronson, 1398 [2019]). When a person does not have control over their body, it is as if they are separated from their body and their existential security becomes disrupted (Giddens, 1991).

The individualized body is constructed, but the inherited body is not discarded. The new pattern of body management, instead of naturally settling into the body and organizing the individual's life with its automatic order, becomes an external object that itself needs to be organized. The elements of these two forms are kept outside the body, like clothes hanging in a closet. Depending on the conditions, the individual chooses pieces of this or that clothing. The individualized body does not add to the real self to create

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a unified whole and new identity. Instead, both the inherited body and the individualized body become something external to the self, between which the individual moves. Here, we witness Goffman's performances. Clearly, "a kind of solidarity forms between the team members, and secrets that could undermine the performance are shared and maintained" (Goffman, 1392 [2013]: 267). For example, Samira's mother knew that she usually goes without a scarf, but until her own revelation on Instagram, no one would bring up this subject. After the revelation, Samira wears a shawl and scarf in Qom. In Tehran, if her mother is with her, she puts the shawl on her shoulders, but if one of the "troublesome relatives" appears in her mother's presence, she might pull the shawl over her head. In these performance scenes, the clothes of the performers are chosen not based on their preferences but based on other actors and the audience. In determining what can be shown and what cannot be shown, the mother plays a reference role.

Neda explicitly says:

"My mom wouldn't let us put on nail polish until high school... For a long time, I had a dual life to satisfy my mom... I reached a point where I saw I was sacrificing my life for my mom."

5. Coming out

The continuation of a dual life is exhausting. Everyone gradually gets tired and decides to inform their family about parts of their changes. Each person, depending on the type of relationship and family culture, decides how and which parts of the differences to reveal. Samira's way of coming out was very bold. In 2022, following the political developments, she, referring to the family obligations and the necessity of defending freedom, published her first unveiled photo. I know Samira's kinship network. They are all established traditionalists from Isfahan (One of the most traditional and closed cities). Several famous clerics are also among their close relatives. In this family context, such a statement is considered radical. It was important for me to know how she reached this point. In the winter of 2023, I asked her this question. Samira said:

"I don't know. For me, it was very gradual. During that year of therapy, my therapist kept telling me, 'Samira, stop wearing the hijab in front of your family, tell them how you are. Be the Samira you are. This role-playing is draining your energy, pushing you away, weakening your connection.' He kept explaining these things to me. A few months before I removed my hijab, I went to Isfahan after my grandfather passed away and talked to my parents. It was the hardest thing I did. My therapist pushed me to have to talk and address this with them. He asked me to tell my parents about my childhood traumas and who I am now. My therapist told me that they are my parents anyway and will accept me in any form. It's not otherwise."

I am surprised: "What a risk! Many parents don't accept it."

She continues:

"I said to myself: God forbid, my parents might even have a stroke! They might get very upset! But know! These are all defences! These are all bodily reactions to not accept. I stand firm until they accept.... Look! My therapist worked on me for a year, saying you have to talk. I have never spoken to my parents... No dialogue forms at all. After my grandfather's ceremony, I said to my parents let's sit in the room and talk. I was crying the whole time. With great difficulty... I said give me some time to calm down so I can talk. I haven't been able to talk to you for thirty years."

My family structure is very similar to Samira's. The situation and pressure she was under are familiar to me.

Samira continues:

"Now imagine I was crying. My dad was crying. My dad was sitting in front of me on his knees. I was in the most emotional moment of my life. I said it's not clear which of us is going to die next, and I want you to know who I really am in this time I have with you. Know what hurts I have from you, what my childhood was like, and know how much you are still hurting me, how much you are bothering me, and all that... I started telling everything... I didn't think my parents would be so supportive. They were very supportive... I said I shouldn't come to you... You should have come to me over these years to talk. I said if I wear the hijab, it's because of you. I don't see it this way at all. I said I'm not coming to tell you why you are this way or what you accept or don't accept! You should also accept me as I am... After that, my parents were ready. Then everyone said, 'you removed your hijab on Instagram!' I said I talked to my parents."

Samira's strategy was direct dialogue, a difficult task she accomplished with the help of her therapist. Of course, this dialogue has not ended Samira's dual life. She has only revealed parts of her new self to her parents, and this does not mean she can live them out in front of her parents. Rather, it has simply informed them to reduce the burden of a hidden life. For example, her attire is still different between Qom and Tehran. It is these numerous subtleties that make coming out difficult. She has to decide which part of herself she can declare and which part not!

Here, the importance of recognition by "the significant other" comes into play. The significant other was first introduced by Herbert Mead. According to Mead, the formation of the self requires the presence of a social group. Among the components of this social group, the significant other plays a fundamental role in the formation of each individual's self. According to Mead, the self is an unfinished social process that is always being formed with the presence of the other (Mead, 1934). Lack of acceptance by the significant other leads to disruption in the process of self-formation.

Axel Honneth has profoundly deepened this discussion. According to Honneth, individual subjectivity has an intersubjective structure, meaning that human subjectivity and individuality flourish and grow coherently when recognized by others. Honneth

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considers the family as the first level of recognition. If an individual's differences are not recognized by the family, their self-esteem is seriously damaged (Honneth, 2020).

6. Caring for Emotional Relationships

Revealing individual parts of the body to the family is not the end of the matter. Girls value their emotional relationship with their parents and care that this revelation does not create tension in the relationship. After coming out, they take steps to ensure that the family, especially the mother, is not upset and does not develop a negative perception of them.

Sogol says in this regard:

“Maybe I was a bit more comfortable than the others because I didn't have a religious family. They were more traditional. But well, some things are locked in the family. For instance, a girl drinking alcohol, smoking, having pre-marital sex, and so on. These are also locked in my family. That's why I have a life that's different from my family's and maybe they won't accept it. Maybe they would accept it! You know, a while ago, I tested something. I drank alcohol in front of my mom and broke its lock. At a wedding, My cousin offered, and I accepted. Then I pretended it was my first time. After that my mother said she was upset for three days, thinking about it. It really bothered her that I did this! My mother said,

‘You really broke me down!’ Then I talked to her. I asked if I did something bad

[while drunk] that would embarrass her. She said no, but she didn't expect it from me... My mom thinks only bad girls drink alcohol. I talked to her and calmed her down. I told her just because you don't know doesn't mean other girls don't drink. Everyone does everything. Why do you think this is bad? Why... for example, my brother drinks at home, and you're okay with it. If I drink, it's bad? This isn't strange at all. You have to accept these things. Later, I told my big aunt to talk to her. After we said these things, she calmed down.”

After years of hiding, Sogol decided to express herself, but with multiple subtleties and care so that her mother could cope with the issue. It is also important for others that their lifestyle does not create a gap between them and their mother.

Neda, who lives on the upper floor of her family's home and has a lot of contact with them, presents the issue in this way:

“My mother always said, 'Let me die and then do whatever you want.' One time I told her, 'My mother! I am 35 years old. God gives you a long life. Let's say you live for another 40 years. I'll be 65... 70... So when should I have my youth?' Of course, I said all this jokingly and with laughter. I try hard not to break my mother's heart. But after that, she doesn't bother me anymore.”

There are many such narratives. We are dealing with four women born in the 1980s who are trying to manage their bodies based on their own criteria and values, but due to the hegemonic presence of the family, they can never fully live as themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted after the "Women, Life, Liberty" movement when the female body became the center of political discourse conflicts. The official discourse considers veiled women's bodies as a symbol of the presence of the official and ideological culture of the government in the public sphere and refers to it as a "flag against the enemy". (Sardar Radan, 1403) On the other hand, "oppressed groups have risen to resistance by symbolizing the body and expressing it in the public sphere." (Schilling, 1400: 140) Before starting the study, I assumed that my interviews and observations would lead me to "bodies symbolized for resistance," especially since three of the four participants had changed their dress or made it public during this movement. However, the results were completely different. Contrary to my previous assumption, beneath the seemingly uniform social current lies a diverse range of individuals with different bodily experiences. Each person assigns a different meaning to their body and body management frameworks. For this small group, what is evident is that the narration of the body and its surrounding issues is not in reference to systems of power or political order, but in reference to individuality, lifestyle, identity, and ultimately the family institution.

We encounter individuals who see body management as part of the process of self-discovery. Clothing, sexual relationships, participation/non-participation in mixed-gender parties, and similar decisions serve as a means to define and redefine their identity and express their individuality. It seems that the body is an entity in the process of becoming, "a project to be worked on and complete as part of individual self-discovery" (Shilling, 2021: 140). Although bodies are pressured to be symbolized by the power system, these four individuals (whether the three who do not wear Hijab or the one who does) are not interested in being in this field. They do not attribute any political meaning to their body or clothing; they experience their bodies more in the private sphere, in gatherings, family circles, in-laws, workplaces, and similar settings, and are more engaged with family traditions than with the power system.

Analysts focusing on the control, disciplining, and suppression of the body usually introduce a large social institution. Turner views modern society as a somatic society in which the body is "the primary field of cultural and political activity by governments" (Turner, 1984). More famously, Foucault introduces modern society by disciplining bodies through social institutions in schools, hospitals, prisons, and similar settings (Foucault, 1973 and 1995). In a society like Iran, where the state formally and directly implements diverse laws to regulate the female body and even uses force for it, Foucault's analyses of body suppression and control by political institutions can easily be discussed. However, in the conducted research, the study group identifies the family as the main reference of power, not the large political and social institutions. Even if they live in another city, the family remains the primary reference for definition. The individual either moves within the family framework or starts to change from it. One cannot step outside this

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framework and begin body management; they always feel themselves within this framework and live concerning the family. Outside the family, the individual has no power to give meaning to themselves and their body. Disagreement with the family is either hidden and creates significant psychological costs for the individual or is negotiated with numerous considerations and plans, especially with the mother. The declared change must be approved and accepted by the family or at least define its relationship with that framework and balance it to reduce its psychological cost.

Among the studied group, two were married, and both referred to the role of the mother-in-law/father-in-law as much as the role of their mother. Interestingly, their husbands did not interfere much in their wives' embodied lives; their husband's families acted as a reference for shaping the bodies of their daughters-in-law. Their husband's families became a new reference point for determining women's bodily existence. Fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law have enough legitimacy to impose family frameworks on their daughter-in-law's body, something men encounter less with their wives' families.

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