

**The Female Body and Place:  
The Case of Young Iranian Women in Vancouver**

by

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M.A. Allameh Tabatabai University, 2005

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## ABSTRACT

Since all regulations in countries labeled as “Islamic” are adapted to the Islamic principles, the female body in these countries is viewed in light of an Islamic interpretation of sexuality. In Iran, after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Islamic codes have attempted to dominate in regulating social life.

In this research, I investigate how Iranian young immigrant women, who were born after the Islamic Revolution, experience and connect with their own bodies. My analysis is based on interviewing with 10 Iranian young women living in Vancouver in addition to pieces written by them as letters to their own bodies. I use Michel Foucault’s notions on *discipline*, *docile bodies*, *surveillance*, and *resistance* to conceptualize my arguments. One of the remarkable findings of this research was that female body was highly connected to *place*, specifically the public sphere and also *memory* in the voice of my participants.

**Keywords: Iran; women; sexuality; female body; the Islamic Revolution; place; memory**

# **DEDICATION**

**For  
Ahmad  
&  
Nava**

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## INTRODICTION

*I am writing to understand. I am writing so I won't be afraid. I am writing so I won't start crying again... I am writing to allow myself to feel the anger. I am writing to keep from running toward it or away from it or into anybody's arms. I am writing to find solutions and pass them on. I am writing to find a language and pass it to.*

*I am writing, writing, writing, for my life.*

**(Pearl Cleage, Mad at Miles)**

### **Why the Female Body?**

It was August 31, 2008, when I arrived in Vancouver without my headscarf which had been around my hair in all public spheres in Iran from the age of nine. After a while, when I had a chance to look at the new place, I discovered that I was not anxious about not being veiled. Comfortable and calm, I recalled many moments when the most concerning issue before leaving Iran was making my decision to be veiled or not to be veiled. When I found out that I had been unveiled from the first day of arrival without any bother and obsession, I became surprised. Not having a piece of clothing around my hair and neck had a liberating and simultaneously natural feeling. All the anxiety from recent months was gone.

What happened to me? Why did I feel so comfortable without my headscarf while from at least six months before coming to Canada my mind was full of contradictory thoughts and emotions about the way I would like to represent my own body? I had been veiled in public spheres as well as in family or friends' gatherings in Iran and had never felt bothered. But when I started to make decisions

about whether or not to keep my headscarf in Canada, I found out that I did not have any faith in veiling to persuade myself to stay veiled in a country where veiled women are in a minority. I understood that my past belief on keeping my hair covered was not strong and convincing enough to give me power to struggle to remain in a minority group in a completely new country. In fact, my main concern was how I could represent my personality and more importantly my capabilities and talents prior to representing my religious and social background by my headscarf.

I started focusing on my emotions and thoughts after immigrating to Canada. I experienced many different feelings as a “woman”. My own body became a site of concentration and a mysterious battlefield of many questions, concerns, and memories which obsessed me and at the same time bothered me so much. Why have not I “seen” my own body before? Why did I define myself just with my “mind” and related topics; intelligence, talents, rationale, etc.? Why as a woman, has I never noticed that I had a “female body” in addition to my mind; the body that can be the source of satisfaction, joy, and self-confidence.

I decided to study Women’s Studies in Canada and needed to encounter my own concerns, questions and anxieties as a “woman”. I needed to redefine my own identity again. I was not able to stay in the position of a frustrated woman who came from a “religious” context and had not had her own choices for perceiving and connecting to different parts of her sexuality. Therefore, I chose the topic for my Master’s thesis.

Honestly, the whole topic was not completely clear even to me. Sometimes I doubted what exactly I was searching for and whether my questions were clear and precise or not. I knew I wanted to explore my own concerns, but I was not sure if I was able to articulate the topic in a way I could research; in a way that I can make specific and clear questions and try to find appropriate and precise answers. The

whole combination of feelings, emotions, frustrations, angers, and confusions was a big deal to articulate in an “academic” format.

Therefore, I decided to explore my current questions on personal obsessions and find convincing answers for them. This idea shaped the topic of my thesis *The Female Body and Place: the Case of Young Iranian Immigrant Women in Vancouver*. I decided to question one of the most private parts of women’s lives; their own bodies and how they connect/communicate with. As Azar Nafisi notes in her memoir *Things I’ve been Silent about*, it is such a strong part of Iranian culture to never reveal private matters. “We don’t air our dirty laundry in public... private lives are trivial and not worth writing about” (2008, p. vi). But I decided to question young Iranian immigrant women in Vancouver about these “trivial” matters and asked them not only talk about “their dirty laundry” for me but also “to write” about their “private matters”.

My generation, who was born after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, has not had enough room to talk about how we were treated in public sphere as women and how our female bodies have been the battlefield of Iranian politicians, clergies, parliament members and all other officials. I do not believe that we have to keep silent about these “trivial” issues which have deeply affected many parts of our lives. I would like to break this silence, asking some other young Iranian women to talk and write about how they feel about their own bodies and break this “unconscious” silence about their own sexuality. Moreover, when women engage in the exploration of their own or other women’s experiences, either in the form of consciousness raising or as formal research, it is with the explicit aim of understanding better how and why women are oppressed (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p. 76).

I wrote in my diary: “I have to start writing about how all subjects led me to this uncontrollable frustration and anger. I have to write about my life, about all memories from childhood. Writing might help me to alleviate this huge volume of painful frustration” (Personal Diary, Monday, February 16, 2009). Gillian Whitlock

in *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* points out that “life narrative is a speaking cure for trauma that occurs according to the psychic needs and personal recovery of the traumatized individual and outside of political constraints and opportunities” (2007, p. 165).

Therefore, this research has been in the center of my self-exploration. During all stages of the research, from reading the related literature to interview the participants, I had been searching a “cure” for my traumatizing moments in my memories, renewing my perception and connection to my own body and trying to redefine how my female body connects to my sexuality and how the place of living, the lifestyle I have gained from my family and my social status have shaped my understanding of being a woman. Therefore, this research was more than a “thesis” as a required text for getting a Master’s degree in Women’s Studies for me.

## **Who Were Interviewed?**

I interviewed ten Iranian young women in Vancouver. Most of them were students at Simon Fraser University or University of British Columbia and have lived in Vancouver from fifteen years to three months before the date of our interviews. Interestingly, after the interviews, some of my participants expressed their astonishment about what happened during our conversations. They were surprised to dig out many memories, moments, and experiences which had remained hidden in the back of their minds. Three of them said that some information they shared with me, were the first time they shared it with somebody else. Four of them said that the process of interviewing was an opportunity to consider their own sexuality and the female body for the first time. One of them smiled and said “I have never learned that this subject can be as a thought-provoking topic which I can think about and question” (Sophia, Interview, April 2, 2010). After almost two hours talking, one

of my interviewees started crying over what she “discovered” about herself during our conversation (Roxana, Interview, March 28, 2010).

In addition to interviews, I gathered another source of information from the participants. I asked them to write a piece on their female bodies; a letter to their bodies and to try talking to it as an “object”. By asking them to write a letter to their bodies, I wanted to follow them after the interview session, and see how they would expand their ideas on the subject we discussed before.

As I see my interviews and the writings as kind of “autobiographical” acts, I try to employ the framework that Sidone Smith and Julia Watson suggest in their book; *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). Body and embodiment is one of the “autobiographical subjects” that they use to analyze the autobiography. In this regard, some of questions I attempt to respond to in analyzing the content of information I gathered by interview and writing, are: Which part, or function, or feeling of the body is visible in narratives? How does it become visible? How are the narrator’s body and its visibility tied to the community from which she came? What cultural meanings are attached to the narrator’s body? Does the body or part of it vanish from the narrative at some point?

Likewise, I started the introduction of this thesis by narrating my own story because “employing their own autobiography” is one of the strategies that feminist scholars use in order to “increase empathy and understanding” between researcher and researched (Sprague, 2005: 134). Moreover, it is a strategy for many feminists to choose topics about which they have “strong personal feelings or values.” (Reinharz and Chase, 2002). In fact, feminist scholars try to investigate questions related to their own experiences and lives. In this regard, I tried to employ feminist strategies both in choosing the topic and content of the thesis, and the methodology and techniques in this research.

## What I Searched for?

The views on the female body in the context of the Islamic religion have attracted much attention from religious leaders and scholars as well as political legislators and consequently public opinion. In countries labeled as “Islamic”, sexuality in general and the female body as the representation of sexuality is in the centre of many social, political, and cultural discussions regarding women. Since all regulations in the Islamic countries are adapted to the Islamic principles, the female body in these countries is viewed in light of an Islamic interpretation of sexuality and the role of the female body in the Islamic country. Mernissi argues that the symbolism of sexual patterns seems to reflect society’s hierarchy and power allocation in the Muslim world. She believes that strict space boundaries have divided Muslim society into two realms; the universe of men (the world of religion and power), and the universe of women (the domestic world of sexuality and the family) (Mernissi, 1975, p. 138).

I should emphasize here that discussions have tended to “blur distinctions between ‘Islam’ as a faith, ‘Islam’ as the ideology of a movement in opposition and ‘Islam’ as a ruling system...” (Moghissi, 1999, p. vii) Whenever I mention ‘Islam’ in this research, I mean Islam as a ruling system in so-called Islamic countries, not Islam as a faith or as an ideology.

According to a specific interpretation<sup>1</sup> of a verse of the *Koran* dealing with the subject of “*hijab*”, Muslim women have to cover all parts of their bodies in the public sphere. This interpretation is applied in the most Islamic countries at least in the case of female citizens considered to be of the Muslim faith<sup>2</sup>. In Iran, after the

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<sup>1</sup> There are other interpretations of this *verse* 30, *Sura Nour* that veiling is not compulsory for Muslim women.

<sup>2</sup> In some countries like Iran veiling is compulsory even for non-Muslim tourist women; in fact, women disregarding of their religion and faith have to be veiled when they enter this country but female Western tourists can be unveiled in Saudi Arabia or Egypt where veiling is not made compulsory by the government.

Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the establishment of an Islamic government, religious codes have attempted to dominate in regulating social life. For example there are certain social rituals in this country to prepare girls to become “good Muslims” starting at the age of nine (typically considered the age of maturity for women); these include praying, being veiled while in public, and observing modesty in front of males. Therefore, under the Islamic regime for more than past 30 years, Iranian female children have lived with well-organized and strictly enforced rituals to perceive their bodies, and to protect them from men’s gaze.

Hence, in this context, the body is a ‘socially constructed’ object and not merely a biological entity and can be culturally interpreted. Douglas (1973) suggests that there are two bodies: the physical body and the social body. She summarizes the relationship between them:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustain a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (1973: 93).

Obviously, the experience of “physical” female body by women in Muslim countries is highly affected by continuous strict regulations and rituals by governments; the practices which totally have filled women’s lives from their childhood; practices which have many cultural meanings, and can shape women’s bodily experience. I would like to research how this “continual exchange of meaning” has occurred in my participants’ lives. Besides, I try to find how Iranian young women talk about their bodies, how they perceive and connect, and how they relate it to their feminine sexuality.

One of my considerations in this research is that I pursue the female body in the positionality of specific places. In fact, when I requested my participants to explain how they connected/experienced their own bodies, mostly I focused on the body in place, because my approach is not a

philosophical one, and I do not see the female body as an abstract object out of any especial context. Here, when I discuss “place”, I define it two ways, which is useful to my research goals. First and foremost, I investigate how the female body is constructed in a specific place; here I mean the “public sphere”. Next, because one of my aims in this research is to analyze how young Iranian women have a different sort of connection or experience of their own bodies in Iran and Canada, the notions of place and difference in location become my main concept in this research.

Furthermore, I borrow Najmabadi’s word and call young Iranian women’s experience, perception, and memory on sexuality and the female body, a “national memory”. National memory has the possibility “that perhaps it would go some way in producing a counter-memory, counter to a cultural setting hostile to a central presence of women in its important cultural texts and in its political memory” (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 9). I believe the memories of Iranian young women who were born after 1979 in Iran are an invaluable treasure which can portray the broader image of Iranian women’s lives after the Islamic Revolution. I hope this research can be the beginning of collecting these personal experiences and memories from my own generation.

\*

In chapter one, I conduct a critical discourse analysis and describe a discursive space that constructs different perceptions about the “female body”. I specifically focus on the useful elements in analyzing different phenomena in contemporary Iran. These elements include Islamic Law, social codes, and westernization. I also will discuss how the Islamic regulation after 1979 in Iran has affected women’s lives and how they are treated in the public spheres in order to depict a comprehensible image of Iran’s sexuality politics after the Islamic Revolution.

In chapter two, I point out the limitations of recent studies about the female body in scholarly works. Moreover, I argue how the ideologies of the “Islamic Revolution” and events like the eight years war have influenced scholarship on women’s issues. In the second half of this chapter, I discuss Michel Foucault’s notions of *discipline*, *docile bodies*, *surveillance*, and *resistance* in order to provide a theoretical framework to examine the content of the findings.

In chapter three, I introduce my methodology and describe how the interviews were conducted and also why I asked the participants to write a piece on their own bodies. Additionally, some methodological concerns about talking about private issues such as bodily experience will be considered.

Chapter four explores my participants’ ideas, thoughts, and memories on their bodies and their experience of place and the public sphere in Iran and Canada. In this chapter some parts on interviews narrate as a dialogical mode of writing in order to illuminate how our conversations on a subject totally new for most of them, took place.

## CHAPTER ONE: IRAN, SEXUALITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY

مرغ باغ ملکوتم، نیام از عالم خاک / چند روزی قفسی ساخته‌اند از بدنم

*I am not a bird of the earth but the heaven,*

*A cage is made by my body for a few days...*

Rumi, Persian Poet<sup>3</sup>

### Contemporary Iran's Triple Set of Standards

There are some norms and values in all societies which regulate the exact boundaries of what is legitimate, and what is not legitimate to be expressed in the public sphere. According to Amir-Ebrahimi, Iranians have been affected by a “triple set of standards”. The first is the Islamic Law (*sharia*). The Islamic Revolution in 1979, as obvious from its name, caused this Law to permeate the private, public, and political spheres of Iranian life (Keddie 2006). The second set of standards is an unwritten code of conduct and a way of life (*urf*) of which the main elements are the

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<sup>3</sup>Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī also known as Rumi to the English-speaking world (September 1207 –December 1273), was a 13th-century Persian poet, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Rumi was an evolutionary thinker in the sense that he believed that the spirit after devolution from the divine Ego undergoes an evolutionary process by which it comes nearer and nearer to the same divine Ego. All matter in the universe obeys this law and this movement is due to an inbuilt urge (which Rumi calls "love") to evolve and seek enjoyment with the divinity from which it has emerged.

Islamic tradition and Iranian cultural tradition. This part is more flexible and can have a different definition in different locations or within different families based on the social status. The third set of standards is derived from modernization and Westernization, which the dominant religious government has struggled to quash for more than 30 years.

Consequently, the combination of those three elements formulates not only the status of women in society but also the politics of experiencing and expressing various concepts and issues regarding sexuality and the female body. For instance, when according to the first element, the Islamic Law (*sharia*), being veiled is compulsory for women in public sphere, some Iranian religious families extend this rule into the private spheres, including in the family gathering and parties; they avoid mixed-gender parties and have separate spaces for women and men in wedding parties if women would like to dress up and dance in a completely “feminine” territory far from men’s gaze. Wives and daughters in these kinds of families which are categorized as “religious” or “traditional” families are veiled in front of other male relatives such as male cousins, inlaws, etc. while women in other families who can be categorized as “non-religious” or “liberal” families, are not veiled among their male relatives in family gatherings or parties. The extent to which women are veiled at home is a good indicator for how we might categorize a family and the system of raising the children.

But everything is not as simple and obvious as veiling. There are more complicated issues which make it difficult to distinguish between a “religious” family and a “non-religious” or “liberal” family. When we enter the realm of “unwritten code of conduct and a way of life” (*urf*) in the interpretation of some Iranian families’ beliefs and norms, it is hard to determine in which category a family or a person is included. For example, if a girl loses her virginity before marriage, in most cases, she would surgically “repair” the hymen before marriage

even if she has grown up in a “liberal” family.<sup>4</sup> If you track these girls’ family and social background, it is not easy to categorize them in the “traditional” or “religious” families because losing virginity before formal marriage is a shame for Iranian families regardless to their religious or traditional beliefs.

Although according to the *Koran* women are instructed to be modest, there is not a verse in the *Koran* that directly orders women to be a virgin before marriage; so the statement that “losing virginity before marriage is shameful” can be considered as one of those “unwritten codes of conduct” (*urf*). Some of these codes have religious foundation and some of them are rooted in Iranian culture that even unreligious families take seriously.

With these multiple elements, it is complex to explicate how Iranian women perceive, connect and experience their own bodies. When I began to ask the research participants for this project to talk about their perception of their own sexuality and bodies, one of the first things I noticed was that these complications were seemingly distracting for my participants when they attempted to interpret why they feel or think or believe in a certain way. Sexuality and the female body are topics that can be read via religion, unwritten social codes and westernized values. Although my interviewees’ family backgrounds and social status were remarkably varied, there were many similarities in their responses to my questions. Notably, nobody had talked to my interviewees seriously about feminine sexuality and the female body even when they had come from “liberal, unreligious, comfortable” families.

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<sup>4</sup> Repairing the hymen is a common surgery in Iran, especially in recent years. Because of the globalization and development of different kinds of media, the society is gradually transferring to a more tolerant society encountering girls and boys relationships in the public sphere. But at the same time, there are rooted beliefs and traditions in this society which cannot be changed as quickly as other norms. One of rigid traditions in Iran is that virginity for a woman is an invaluable treasure, so she is not allowed to lose it for a relation out of the frame of formal marriage. It is common proverb in Iranian culture that “if a man wants to marry, even a man who has had many sexual relations before his formal marriage, he would never marry to a girl who lost her virginity before.” Hence, fighting to or changing this long-traditional belief is not an easy job and girls prefer to have their sexual relation before marriage and if they want to marry somebody else, they ask a surgeon to repair the hymen.

After finishing the interview, one of the participants expressed regret that she was not able to respond to the questions appropriately because she has never thought about it before and she “has never been educated” to believe that female sexuality could be a topic to think about, discuss and question (Sophia, Interview, April, 2, 2010). Another interviewee was not even comfortable to name menstruation. When she wanted to talk about her menstruation time and her body changes, she said “when I became mature” using a very conservative phrase to indicate how a young Iranian woman portrays the female body alterations (Saba, Interview, March 17, 2010).

I came across the same story when it came to talking about female genitals. In the Persian (Farsi) language, there are many words for the male genitals. Some of them are used by little boys and others by more mature men. Male genitals have specific names that boys “learn” to use in different ages while female genitals are called “thing” by little girls and even married women. It does not have any specific name. It is a “thing” among so many different other things. In fact, people prefer not to name it directly. I do not even know if somebody decided to call the female genital by its real name, what word she would use in the Persian language without entering the linguistic realm of the “extremely taboo”.

## **Iran and the Politics of the Female Body**

Since I use Foucault’s arguments on the body and disciplinary society, I present his ideas on Iranian Revolution in this part. Foucault traveled to Iran for two times in October and November 1978 as a special correspondent of the Italian newspaper, *Corriere della sera*. He went to Iran “to be there at the birth of ideas.” He wrote that the new “Muslim” style of politics could signal the beginning of a new form of “political spirituality,” not just for the Middle East, but also for the Europe,

which had adopted a secular politics ever since the French Revolution (Afary and Anderson, 2005, p.3).

In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson raise this question. Why Foucault's political and theoretical positions in Iranian Revolution have generated little discussion in English-speaking world. They argue that many scholars of Foucault view these writings as "aberrant or the product of a political mistake" (p.3). However, Janet Afary in *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* notes that "it would be a mistake to call Islamist social order counter modern" (2009, p. 267).

Afary and Anderson believe that Foucault's problematic relationship to feminism becomes more than an intellectual lacuna in the case of Iran. They criticize:

Foucault reproduced statements he had heard from religious figures on gender relations in a possible future Islamic republic, but he never questioned the "separate but equal" message of the Islamists... At a more general level, Foucault remained insensitive toward the diverse ways in which power affected women, as against men. He ignored that fact that those most traumatized by the premodern disciplinary practices were often women and children, who were oppressed in the name of tradition, obligation, or honor (2005, p.5).

Although Foucault's writings on the Islamic Revolution might be a "political mistake," his arguments in *discipline and Punish* are applicable to Iran regarding the female body. I will discuss his ideas more in Chapter Two and use them as theoretical framework for analysis of my findings.

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Soon after the revolution, citizens found themselves under the constant gaze of an Islamist state that observed and regulated public (and private) bodily functions. Practices such as fasting during *Ramadan*, participating in the Friday prayer, or ritual mourning during *Muharram*, were now strongly encouraged by the

state. Daily prayer, fasting, and after a while, veiling, were no longer merely a personal matter of faith, “but legal requirement that the state sometimes enforced” (Afary, 2009, p. 267).

The post-revolutionary Islamic state officially came into being in February, 1979, at which time many public spaces were segregated along gender lines. In June, beaches at the Caspian Sea resorts were segregated by sex. In the spring of 1980, unveiled women were knifed in the northwestern town of *Urumiyeh* (Tabari and Yeganed, 1982, p. 235). After the revolution, mosques, theological seminaries, and religious courts became the centers of power and religious bodies of knowledge came to dominate other forms of knowledge such as humanities, social sciences and even economics. The government tried to reverse a process of secularization that had begun with the Constitutional Revolution (1905- 1911). National non-Muslim rituals as the Nowrooz New Year festivities were played down and greater emphasis placed on religious rituals and holidays.

According to Afary (2009, p. 270) the new government tried to prohibit sports, particularly for women. Many sports for women were considered transgressive, because bodies were exposed. She argues that “in the course of the revolution the *chador* and the *hijab* had become the symbol of resistance of the Pahlavi regime. They represented the unity of women across social and class boundaries, as well as resistance to Western norms.”

The regime’s prescribed minimum attire consisted of a long and loose cloak or overcoat<sup>5</sup>, loose pants, and a large scarf covering the hair and neck, in black, brown, navy, or gray shades. At times, the struggles over the *hijab* or sports became a “life-and-death battle”, because according to Afary, “the Islamist state defined itself through bodily rituals that prevented ‘impurities’ and maintained gender hierarchies” (2009, p.270). A series of specific measures aimed particularly at

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<sup>5</sup> Known as *manto* (*manteau*)

modern urban women were spread during the first week of the revolution. On February 26, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a letter abrogating the Family Protection Law<sup>6</sup>, which had been a milestone for women's rights. On March 3, he prohibited women from serving as judges<sup>7</sup>. The next day, Khomeini announced that initiating divorce would be an exclusively male choice. On March 9, women were banned from participation in sports, including the Olympic team (Afary, 2009, p. 272). In addition to all those significant new orders on women, on March 7, 1979, Khomeini declared that he would require government employees to wear the *hijab* at work; he wrote that "In the Islamic ministries women should not arrive nude... It is permissible for them to go to work, but they must wear a *hijab*" (Khomeini 2005, p. 72).

Making the veil mandatory in the public sphere was the most important regulation regarding the female body in Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It was established in four steps; the first step was taken in March 1980, when Ayatollah Khomeini, commanded that women should be veiled. Widespread opposition from educated and employed women caused the government to

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<sup>6</sup> In 1967, Iran adopted a set of progressive family laws, the Family Protection Act, which granted women more rights in the family; those right were expanded in the Family Protection Law of 1975. Though the act was annulled in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution, the Family Protection Acts still stand out today for having been ahead of their time, particularly in a Muslim-majority country. Today, parts of the acts have been reintroduced in Iran, while others are under consideration. For instance the 1967 bill set up Special Courts for family matter. They were dissolved after the Revolution. Similarly, some legislative changes have moved family matters in a more progressive direction in the areas of minimum age of marriage, child custody and the grounds on which women can request divorce. For example according to the Family Protection Law, a husband required to go to court to divorce. It allowed a wife to initiate divorce and required the first wife's permission for a husband to take a second wife. Child custody was left to new family protection courts rather than automatically granted to the father. The minimum age at which a female could marry was raised from 13 to 15 in 1967 and to 18 in 1975; which changed all after the Islamic Revolution.

<sup>7</sup> Following the Revolution in 1979, conservative clerics insisted that Islam prohibits women from becoming judges and Shirin Ebadi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, was the first female judge prohibited to serve as a judge and she degraded to a secretarial position. Ebadi passed the qualification exams to become a judge in 1969 and after a six-month internship period, she officially started her judging career.

withdraw the command and some officials interviewed suggested that Khomeini's speech was understood "improperly".

The second step did not take place for another 16 months after Ayatollah Khomeini's lecture. The main supporters of the Islamic Revolution Leader tried their best to fulfill his wishes and ideas. In this step, although there was not any official regulation to be veiled in the public spheres, women who were not veiled, were assaulted and humiliated by others in the public sphere so that they preferred to be veiled gradually in order to escape being bothered and humiliated.

The third step was started by Ayatollah Khomeini's speech in June 1980. In this speech, he strongly criticized the Iranian bureaucracy for continuing to display signs of the past regime in state organizations and offices. He announced that the government should begin the process of "Islamisation" in all the organizations. Therefore, authorities immediately announced that the entrance of unveiled women in state offices was prohibited. This time, unlike the previous speech, Ayatollah Khomeini's words did not meet to any opposition from within the state or religious establishments. A few women, who wore black clothes to protest the charges of public support, were arrested. Afterwards, the *hijab* became mandatory for girls at schools.

Step Four was the newly-established Islamic government's initiative to make a law in parliament requiring the *hijab*. In 1984, the Parliament made the *hijab* compulsory and in that year the Islamic Penal Code included it as part of the Islamic dress code, which was passed in parliament, established a sentence of 74 lashes for those whose *hijab* was not considered adequate according to the government's regulation. Immediately, a special force was established to deal with women who eventually became known as *bad-hijab* in Persian (meaning "wearing improper *hijab*").

Therefore, all women who were born or passed their childhood or teenage years after the Islamic Revolution were not allowed to show any part of their bodies

in the public sphere. In fact, by covering all the bodies, women were educated in a long, ritualistic, well-designed process to forget about their bodies. The female body was identified as a source of temptation for “Muslim men” by religious texts and women forced to make this call to temptation as invisible and hidden as possible.

In response to Khomeini’s speech in June 1980, thousands of women and their male supporters poured onto the streets of Tehran. They demonstrated, chanted “No to the Chador”, “Down with Dictatorship”, and “We Made the Revolution for Freedom, but Got Unfreedom”. *Hezbollah*<sup>8</sup> chanted in response, “You will cover yourselves or be beaten”. Finally, in spite of large demonstrations, leftist groups negotiated with women, apparently convincing them not to press the issues of the veil, because such issues could pave the way for US intervention, which at the time was seen as a large threat. It is worth noting that in response to the women demonstrations, Islamists organized a huge demonstration with almost 100,000 women many of them in black chadors on March 16 to defend Khomeini.<sup>9</sup>

As indicated by the lines of Persian poetry I started this paper with, there is a pandemic belief in Iran that what is important, respectful and worthy of attention is the “soul” not the “body”. The body is just a “cage” that imprisons the soul and a good individual seeks to release her own soul out of this cage. According to this

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<sup>8</sup> The *Hezbollah* means Party of God. It is an Iranian movement formed at the time of the Islamic Revolution to assist Ayatollah Khomeini and his forces in consolidating power. *Hezbollah* is/was not a tightly structured independent organization, but more a movement of loosely bound groups, usually centered on a mosque in different localities in cities all around the country. *Hezbollahi* initially attacked demonstrations and offices of newspapers that were critical of the Ayatollah Khomeini. They have played an important role on the street at crucial moments in the early days of the revolution by confronting those the regime regarded as counter-revolutionaries. Their attacks included a wide variety of activities found to be undesirable for "moral" or "cultural" reasons, such as improper *hijab*, mixing of the sexes and consumption of alcohol.

<sup>9</sup> As the new revolutionary regime was placing greater limits on the rights on urban citizens, especially women, it simultaneously encouraged women of the old middle classes to become politically active in support of the Islamist cause. This is why Iranian women reacted to the policies of the Islamic Republic in such varied new regime, which deprived them of numerous rights, but many from the old middle classes welcome the new regime and actually gained greater rights. They see Khomeini and the revolution enable them to become active participants in society.

belief what is considered important in the whole education system, from elementary schools to even universities, is planning to educate and improve the spiritual self. This belief has been intensified after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 because Ayatollah Khomeini, the Revolution religious leader, continuously campaigned to improve “people’s spirituality” from the beginning of the new Islamic regime. Consequently, the entire post-revolutionary system arranged different social institutions to pay much more attention to the soul instead of the body, as a mortal, earthy object that should be ignored if there is a desire for achieving a higher level of spirituality.

Since the new Islamic government took upon itself the responsibility for increasing the “degree of spirituality” in society and since religion was the synonym for spirituality, Islamic rules or orders were written for schools, universities, offices and even public transit. After a short while, with forceful punishments for improperly veiled<sup>10</sup> women in the public, female bodies became completely covered and invisible in the public spheres. Little girls from the age of seven, the age of starting school, started to be veiled and all schools around the country made a huge celebration for girls in the third grade, at the age of nine, for becoming as a “mature woman”. According to Islam, the age of nine is the time of maturity for girls. Ironically, in these huge celebrations there is often nothing said about feminine maturity at all; what is explained are the female “responsibilities” in front of God by obeying the Islamic rules. Girls are not educated on their sexuality and femininity and they are not told why they are considered “mature” at the age of nine while boys become mature at the age of 15. They are never trained in the meaning of maturity with regards to sexuality. In this case female maturity is defined by responsibilities not by sexuality.

One subject that gets almost no attention in girls’ education is menstruation. There are just a few short descriptions of menstruation for elementary school girls,

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<sup>10</sup> *Bad-hijab* in Persian language

usually delivered by the religion teacher in grade three, four, or five, and what is explained specifies that a woman is “dirty” during the period of menstruation, with instructions of how she has to wash her body at the end of menstruation according to the Islamic rules. What a little girl understands from these teachings is that it is “shameful” for a woman to menstruate and she must pay special attention to keep this “secret” hidden from males’ family members such as her father or brother. While menstruating, women are not able to do the Islamic practices such as praying or fasting because these are “holy” practices and a “menstruated dirty woman” cannot do anything “holy” and she has to wait to become “clean” again to start religious practices. Although in recent years women have started rebelling against the official reading of female sexuality, releasing women -especially those who were schooled under the Islamic regime- from such beliefs is a long-term time-consuming process.

Another considerable social change that re-enforced the process of Islamisation and making new signs and consequently new concepts regarding the female body was the Iran-Iraq war (September 1980- August 1988) started seven months after the Islamic Revolution. This terrible non-stop eight years is known in Iran as “imposed war” or “holy defense” and helped the government to consolidate its new policies including those on sexuality. In September 1980 Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, hoping for a quick victory, but the war lasted far longer than expected. In 1992 he withdrew his troops from Iran’s territory and attempted to negotiate a truce, but Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran’s Supreme leader, chose to carry on with the war which dragged on until 1988, when Iran was finally pressed into accepting a UN-negotiated ceasefire (Hiro, 1990).

The Iran–Iraq War was extremely costly in lives and material infrastructure. It has been called one of the deadliest wars since World War II. Both countries were devastated by the effect of the war. It cost Iran an estimated 1 million casualties, killed or wounded, and Iranians continue to suffer and die as a consequence of Iraq's use of chemical weapons. Iraqi casualties are estimated at 250,000-500,000 killed or

wounded. Thousands of civilians died on both sides in air raids and ballistic missile attacks (Rajaei, 1993).

Iran lost such an enormous number of young males in the war that all streets, avenues and alleys in Iran are named after a martyr<sup>11</sup> from the war. A message from the unknown martyr, stating “Sister, your *hijab* is more devastating to the enemy than the shedding of my blood”, was scribbled on many walls in Tehran for many years. I remember that we chanted this rhythmic slogan in elementary school: “Woman! Fatimah (Prophet Mohammad’s daughter) had told you that the best adornment for a woman is keeping her veil”. There was a teacher behind the microphone. She screamed the slogan and we repeated. We repeated the slogan every morning for a whole five years of elementary school, while we ourselves were covered completely with *maqna’e*<sup>12</sup> and long coat and pants. After a short while, the veil gained a new shade of meaning. In the war era it became a symbol of *jihad*<sup>13</sup>. Soon many war posters showed veiled women carrying guns. Khomeini urged women and children to “defend their Islamic and national honor”, presumably through their dress code (Shirazi 2001, p. 100).

The financial loss of the war was also enormous, at the time exceeding US\$600 billion for each country (US\$1.2 trillion in total) (Rajaei, p. 136). But shortly after the war it turned out that the economic cost of war was more profound and long-lasting than the estimates right after the war suggested. Many middle-class

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<sup>11</sup> All dead soldiers in the war are called martyr according to the Islamic ideology.

<sup>12</sup> A nun-like, one-piece garment mostly in black or dark navy that covers the head and shoulders, leaving just the faces uncovered.

<sup>13</sup> *Jihad* is a religious duty of Muslims. This Arabic word means “struggle”. *Jihad* appears frequently in the *Koran* and common usage as the idiomatic expression “striving in the way of *Allah* (name of Muslims’ God). *Jihad* is an important religious duty for Muslims. A wide range of opinions exist about the exact meaning of *jihad*. Muslims use the word in a religious context to refer to three types of struggles: an internal struggle to maintain faith, the struggle to improve the Muslim society, or the struggle in a holy war. In western societies the term *Jihad* is often translated as “holy war” although some scholars of Islamic studies often stress that both words are not synonymous.

families were affected by the war financially and consequent pressures of war began to affect all aspects of Iranians' lives such as even children's nutrition. I was born in 1981, one year after the beginning of the war, and all my childhood memories are full of the fear of being bombarded in Tehran, marked by the sound of the "red alert" warning us to escape to the safe haven of our basement or the neighborhood shelter.

In such circumstances, I reached the age of seven in a country with more than one million killed, wounded and handicapped in the course of the war. Nobody made it a priority for my generation to talk about sexuality and related issues. The country was obsessed with more immediate problems and nobody noticed what was happening to the children and teenagers who needed knowledge, information, and entertainment that the country was not able to provide. How could we expect society, our teachers or our parents to talk about such luxurious topics such as sexuality, femininity, and womanhood?

The current justification for why women have to be covered in public sphere is that veiling (as well as hiding adornments or walking slowly and with modesty) protects women from men's aggression or assault. What goes un-noticed is that religious regulations and texts commenting on female sexuality and the body are almost entirely written from a man's point of view. It seems that the "standard body" from the religious perspective is a "male body" and the female body has not been mentioned per se. All direct *Koran* regulations regarding the female body are based on men's point of view. What is right and wrong for the female body is defined on what men think about the female body. On the surface, the logic of these rules is "protecting women from males' gaze". But in such a complicated situation, when men are the axis of all regulations, it is precisely men who become more sensitive to the current circumstances.

As a result of all limitations on female bodies in Iran, Iranian men become sensual and lascivious and start assaulting and bothering women in the public sphere, by verbal harassment or even touching sexual parts of females' body such as

the breasts or hips. Fatima Mernissi in "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries" emphasizes this fact and argues that sexual segregation "heighten the sexual dimension of any interaction" between men and women. Then she makes an example of her own country, Morocco, where the result of much attention to segregating women and men in public spheres, is that "seduction" becomes a fundamental component of male-female relations. "It is the art of abstaining from everything while playing on the promise of giving" (2003, pp. 491-2). It is exactly the same story in Iran as the result of segregation and covering of the female body.

After more than three decades of strict religious regulations in the public sphere, we are now beginning to see a double-pressure on women in Iran; the limitations and regulations have not only failed to protect women against men, but the very limitations have caused men to be more aggressive to women and assault them, especially in quiet, secluded, and dark places. Although this behavior by men is not acceptable and even labeled as "vicious", at the same time, it is now considered "normal" in society and can be expected to occur on a daily basis for a woman. I will discuss these harassments more fully in Chapter Four.

In spite of the centrality of the female body in the Islamic government rhetoric and action, women's own perception of the female body is ambiguous. It is not an easy job for them to articulate their perceptions and emotions regarding their own bodies. My interviewees talked about different parts of the body more than the body as a whole entity; some of them focused more on the face, some on the hair, etc. (Chapter Four).

I can identify some reasons for this ambiguity and also the lack of scholarly work around it; first, women who were born around or after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 are still young. They are at the beginning of their 30s or much younger. Most of their lives have been consumed by "struggle", trying their best to survive in the Iranian society. As a result, contemplating their sexuality and the female body has not been a priority. In fact, it often takes a post-struggle relaxation period of

time for women to assess what has been happened to them, and how they would like to see and define their own sexuality. This group of women is still too young to enter into academia and publish scholarly works in peer-reviewed journals or books. Additionally, based on my own experience and observation, my generation has been encouraged to enter into the sciences as preferred fields of study at the university level and consequently we do not have many talented and self-motivated women in social sciences that will be able to work on women issues in an academic way.

Another reason for the ambiguity around these issues is what I hinted at earlier regarding the tendency to ignore the concept of the body and put all the social and personal value on the soul. A third reason is what the *urf* implies about the female body, namely that it is a taboo subject, and even liberal elite families are ashamed of talking about female sexuality and the body to their daughters. This reaction of families, in addition to the lack of social institutions educating on the issue, have meant females have not learned how to talk or understand or connect with their own sexuality because there were not any available opportunity for them, either in the public or in the private, to focus on and contemplate the experience of the female body.

## **Women Overcome the Limitations**

There are some reasons to believe that Iranian women's relation to the censoring of their sexuality is changing over time. Gradually, after the war and the post-war reconstruction, in the light of an increase in women's university education, publishing of some feminist magazines, and the availability of satellite (Western) television for urban families, the women's situation has been altered and society has taken on a more liberal image. In urban communities, young women and men now form friendships in the streets, at the universities, and in the workplace.

In the mid-1990s the battle for a more tolerant society started from different sites; lawyers, clerics, fashion designers, artists, film directors, and university students became activist in the reform movement. In May 1997 the election of reformist Mohammad Khatami as president raised the status of women. In 2005, 65 percent of first-year university students were women (Afary, 2008, p. 310).

With the emergence of a "third generation" of youth, the Iranian social context is now encountering large, if largely hidden, modifications. The first generation started the revolution (my parents generation), the second generation endured the early days of Islamic government and the war period (my generation), and the third generation grew up in the reform era and is not only more confident, but more determined to confront the government. Those most active in the recent anti-government movement, which started after the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009, are from the third generation: youth between 16-25 years old.

Furthermore, despite continued resistance by more conservative sectors of the society, birth control and sex education classes became mandatory for prospective couples after 1993 in addition to a mandatory course in all universities across the country on sexual relations and birth control techniques.

Access to the Internet was an opportunity for young Iranian males and females to make new relationships; not only by chatting in chat rooms and forums but also by blogging. In a country where the establishment of private television channels and radio stations is prohibited according to the Constitution and the radio and television is state-run, the Internet became an exciting media for Iranians and blogging became so common that Persian soon became one of the most popular languages in the cyberspace. The only place for writing on the female body and sharing sexual desires and experiences by women is the blog space. I will discuss this subject in detail in the next chapter.

To summarize, the realm of gender and sexuality is a shifting ground in modern Iranian society. Arguably, the forces of modernization or liberalization have been much slower at work around these topics, compared to the other political, cultural and economic freedoms. For a complex set of reasons, some of them mentioned above, gender concerns continue to be most difficult to discuss. In the following chapters I draw on the experience of my research participants, to articulate some of the factors that are both sustaining and shifting the discourse (or lack thereof) around female sexuality among Iranian women.

## CHAPTER TWO: IN SEARCH OF THE FEMALE BODY

### Literature Review

Although Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist, believes that the main struggle of the Islamic Republic of Iran during more than 30 years after the Islamic Revolution has been the “problem of sexuality”<sup>14</sup>, sexuality generally and the female body specifically have not attracted many feminist scholars’ attention in Iranian Studies. Most of the scholarly works on Iranian Studies and women have a historical approach (e.g. Moghissi, 1994, 1999; Keddie, 2005, Paidar, 1995; Najmabadi, 1998, 2005; Afary, 2008). They mostly try to explain what happened chronologically to women after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, rather than represent scholarly commentaries or interpretations or use social science theories in order to clarify the meanings and consequences of those events in the voice of women’s experience.

Moreover, many researchers who have published “scholarly” books or articles on women’s issues and sexuality of contemporary Iran in the past 30 years can be categorized as “outsiders” in two different definitions; first, most of them have not experienced the real situation of the society “personally” and “immensely”. I argue that this lack of “personal experience” is the result of two things; first, most of them had passed their adolescence when the Islamic Revolution occurred in 1979 and were not able to experience “directly” that how consequences of the Revolution

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<sup>14</sup> Mir-Hosseini expressed this idea in a roundtable under the topic of “Women and Green Movement in Iran” broadcasted in BBC Persian on June 7, 2010. Dr. Mir-Hosseini is the author of “Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law in Iran and Morocco” (I. B. Tauris, 1993), “Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran” (Princeton University Press, 1999; I. B. Tauris, 2000), and most recently “Feminism and the Islamic Republic: Dialogues with the Ulema” (Princeton University Press, 1999). She has also produced with Kim Longinotto, two feature-length documentaries on contemporary issues in Iran: “Divorce Iranian Style” (1998) and “Runaway” (2001).

affected young women's childhood and teen years in Iran. Most Iranian female researchers who published scholarly works on sexuality and women's issues after the Islamic Revolution, have studied their own generation; a generation of women who were adolescents at the time of the Revolution. They rarely paid attention to the hidden effects of the Islamic Revolution and the consequent regulations on female children and teenagers in the Islamic country.<sup>15</sup> Although it can be pointed out that they might have daughters or close female relatives living after the Islamic Revolution, the problem of personal inexperience does not disappear, because of the following reason. The second reason is that most of the literature on female sexuality after the Revolution has been produced by Iranian female scholars in the Diaspora and their works banned at home in Iran ; most of them had been leftist political activists in those years, and after the radical Islamic regime stabilized, had to leave Iran a few years later.

Furthermore, investigating the events from a historical perspective necessitates research on different kinds of "texts" such as books, newspapers, memoirs, magazines, etc. rather than the "actual voice" of the people, which can be provided by "interview", "focus group" or other techniques in Social Sciences methodology. Therefore, the female generation who has been raised in the "Islamic disciplinary" social institutions and experienced the effects of eight years war on every single moment of their lives is completely absent in the scholarly works which have been done by Iranian or non-Iranian feminist scholars.

In addition to scholarly works on women and sexuality in Iran, there have been many memoirs and autobiographies published by Iranian women, mostly living outside Iran. Annette Kuhn in "A Journey Through Memory" points out that memories which are "raw material" in the production of new stories about the past, can "heal the wounds of the past" (2000, p. 186). Some of memoirs published by Iranian female authors, have considered mostly the pre-revolution period of time

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<sup>15</sup> In recent years, it is started researching on text books in the schools and how these books stabilize gender roles and norms from childhood in Iranian girls.

(Farmanfarmanian, and Houshmand, 2007; Nafisi, *Things I Have Been Silent about*, 2008) but others investigated and portrayed the tangible situations for women and girls after the Revolution. Although none of them is specifically on the construction of sexuality or the female body, there are some points and considerations on the subject throughout the books regarding the female body. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (2008), *Prisoner in Tehran: A Memoir* by Marina Nemat (2007), *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* by Shirin Ebadi (2006), *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* by Azadeh Moaveni (2005), *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi (2001), and *Journey from the Land of No* by Roya Hakakian (2004) are the most considerable autobiographies, recalling the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath. Some of them such as Nafisi's and Satrapi's books were the best-sellers in North America and Europe.

For some of the mentioned memoirs, *place* has a significant role. For example, the narrator of Roya Hakakian's book buys maps of the city compulsively as neighborhoods, schools and streets disappear (2004, p. 201). All places have been renamed according to the Islamic beliefs, which erased the time, place, and mentality of her childhood. Similarly, in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the representation of place (city of Tehran) has a central role. The author privileges a lost world of childhood in a city that is reduced to a series of symbolic signs. This is a lost homeland created by nostalgic memory.

Gillian Whitlock argues that "for women, in particular, a vastly different spatial geography emerged as Iran was reconstructed into a totalitarian state under Khomeini regime, which transformed relations between public and private space violently and in gendered terms" (2007, p. 164). Related to this remark, Nafisi points out: "my generation complained of a loss, the void in our lives that was created when our past was stolen from us, making us exiles in our country' (p. 76).

Among all memoirs written by Iranian women, Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis: the Story of a Childhood* is the autobiography most relevant to my generation. This book is a graphic memoir of black and white comics telling Satrapi's story of childhood before and after the Islamic Revolution from a female child's point of view. The cartoons are simple and more similar to childish drawings but at the same time sophisticated. The reader has to pause and speculate about the connotative force of black and white, simple drawings. The image of the hardcover is a female child in veil, and the book starts with the chapter of "the veil". Description of this image is "this is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980" (2003, p.3). In this page there is another cartoon of the school's playground with small students playing with their veils as toys and making fun of them. In this picture, Satrapi tries to put the veil into a different frame; it is a piece of cloth and the cultural connotations fabricated by adults. She writes in the top of the cartoon: "we didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to". She follows in this chapter how the bilingual schools shut down and how women demonstrated against compulsory veiling in Iran. Although Satrapi does not particularly focus on her sexuality in the autobiography, this book is important because the narrator of the story is a female child who was at the age of nine in 1979. In a chapter called "the Socks" in *Persepolis 2*, the narrator learns to draw in an anatomy class at the University of Tehran. The model is completely covered by the chador and she writes: "Not a single part of her body was visible. We nevertheless learned to draw drapes" (2004, p. 145).

## **Weblog: A New Window to Iranian Women's Lives**

The only materials in which we can find the real voice of Iranian women on their own bodies and sexual desires are Persian weblogs entries which are written by mostly anonymous women or women by pseudonym. According to the Iran's Constitution, television and radio are under the supervision of the State and there is no room for the private sector to establish private radio stations or television channels, the satellite is legally forbidden, and the newspapers and magazines can be closed if they transgress of the society's norms which are most often defined by the dominant religious government and related political party. Under the circumstances, the Internet has gained exceptional attention by Iranians, especially youth and women, who have not had sufficient possibility to write and read.

Although filtering the websites has been one of the most engaging issues among government leaders, the market of anti-filter soft-wares is as dynamic and fascinating as government concerns. Blogging, as one of the Internet capabilities, became popular among Iranian women who could write about that part of their lives which was categorized "private". They started to write about their lives in the public spheres i.e. in the university, work, street, shopping, cinema, theatre, etc. The second step was writing about their private lives, about their desires, needs and emotions. Some of them started to write about their relations to the boyfriends, night parties and sex and in April 2008, there emerged a controversial discussion about writing the female body and female desires in sexual relationships.

It was a significant movement in the contemporary Persian language literature because there has not existed any other written text or document on female bodies and women's desires from the female perspective in the contemporary writings. Writing about the female body in Persian blog sphere started from a blog by the name of "lovemaking of a woman; Female Narrative of

Eroticism”<sup>16</sup>. The author, who did not use her real name in the introduction of the blog, wrote: “writing about body undoubtedly is a great sin in Iranian contemporary culture. If a woman writes about the female body, it will be unforgiveable. I don’t write to share my most intimate moments with others. I do write to believe that there is no fear of unforgiveable sins.”

Although she had written about her body and her sexual relationship in an erotic language in all posts, her entry called “A Feminine Project: Preparation for Sex”<sup>17</sup> in April 3, 2008, became a commencement of the controversial and constant discussion in cyberspace among Iranian women bloggers. She wrote: “I am obsessing over my body hair. As a woman, I would have a very bad feeling if I didn’t shave all my body at least two hours before lovemaking. Even I say sorry seriously or kiddingly to my partner that my legs are not shaved as the fashion models and my skin is not as babies. Before sex, I spend at least 45 minutes in the bathroom and in addition to washing my whole body two times, shaving all my body and checking that I do the job meticulously perfect. I use gel for removing my vagina’s hair, wait for some minutes and then wash it. I am absolutely scrupulous in shaving my vagina. Next, it is the skin cream’s turn. Every part of my body has its specific lotion; the soles of my foot, ankles, legs, hands and even my stomach are covered by lotions carefully...”

Writing about the most private moments in such details was surprising not only for the other bloggers but also for the readers. Almost all comments of this entry included personal experiences of the preparation before doing sex. Although as a result of modernization after the war in Iran, people feel more freedom in relationship between men and women and even discussing these matters in friendly private meetings, talking about body and sex in detail in public sphere is a taboo for women. And if a woman talks about these issues, she would simply she be regarded as a prostitute, slut, and whore.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://hamkhabegi.blogspot.com/>

<sup>17</sup> [http://hamkhabegi.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post\\_1173.html](http://hamkhabegi.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post_1173.html)

For Iranian women bloggers, who have been obliged to be veiled in the public sphere for the past 30 years, cyberspace has offered an opportunity to be unveiled. Although the women commenced writing about their private lives, transgressing the socially accepted unwritten codes about what was to be talked about; it was not until the most recent postings on narratives of sex that the female body became truly visible. (Kiani, 2008, Unpublished Paper). The relation between the female body and sexual desires as explored in the postings, allowed the female body to emerge as a real tangible female property rather than something abstract, separated, and strange to women.

Interestingly, it seems from the writings of the women that making love is the moment when a woman discovers her own body; making love is an action in which the genitals are engaged more than other parts of the body. According to the women bloggers' narratives of sex, they discover the female body via the female genital, or they discover their genitals in the process of having sex and this leads them to pay attention to the female body. The pleasure in making love allows women to differentiate between themselves and their bodies and sparks the desire to generate female narratives of sex. This confirmation of female narratives is indeed the confirmation of woman's right to have her own pleasure and the right to be owner of her own body. It seems sex narratives from a female perspective are a pretext for a woman to request her own rights on possessing her own body in a society where the State narratives, religious narratives and wholly patriarchal narratives are dominant on wholly veiled women.

Furthermore, in this narration the female body is experienced as an eroticized and sensual object and the confirmation of the narration concerns those parts of the body which are engaged in sex. Narration of the female body is the locus of a combination of desires: desire for visibility, desire to have pleasure, desire to be unveiled, desire to be released from social unwritten codes and pressures, desire for freedom from government interference in all aspects of privacy and desire to discuss femininity as a power. And a woman who writes about her own body not

only articulates her buried desires but also helps to contribute in the process of knowledge production. In this case the female body is envisaged as a source of knowledge which can illuminate the dark sides; the sides which are banned from expression by the government, Islamic laws and social values and norms. Those who narrate the unseen parts of the female body perceive the power of femininity.<sup>18</sup>

In the following section of this chapter, I attempt to pursue the references to the female body in the religious texts and interpretations. I start from the *Koran*, the holy book of Muslims, and then present the Islamic Society's theorists who have had the fundamental roles in conceptualizing an Islamic Society in Iran after the Revolution in 1979.

## **The Female Body in Religious Texts and Interpretations**

Although there are limited scholarly works on the female body in the field of Iranian Studies, surprisingly, other prolific sources for pursuing the female body in the Iranian culture are available. These resources are religious texts, and interpretations by Islamist scholars. Hence, I attempt to articulate what the concept of the female body implies in the *Koran*, as the holy Muslim book, and in the religious interpreters of the Islamic texts.

Based on the *Koran*, the holy book of Muslims, "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent and to draw their veils over their bosoms... and let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornments" (Sura Nour, verse 30-31). This is a verse that religious leaders in the Islamic countries have

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<sup>18</sup> I wrote a paper on this topic, "Female Narratives of Sex: When Iranian Women Write about their Bodies in Cyberspace," for my graduate course, *Feminist Theories*. In the full-length paper I explained the detail contents of all weblogs entries on female body. This course was supervised by Dr. Helen Leung in Fall 2008 at Simon Fraser University.

interpreted as obliging veiling for Iranian women in public spheres and other strict social principles (*urf*) such as segregation in the universities class, the bus, etc. became the results of that interpretation. In addition, these unwritten social codes have other functions in the private lives' of Iranian women; for instance, virginity for girls is a fundamental issue for marriage. Even if a man has had many sexual relationships before his marriage, it is prescribed in the *urf* that he chooses a virgin girl for marriage. This social principle is so strong that many girls who have lost their virginity before the marriage refer to the doctors to repair it to increase their chance to marriage. The third set of standards implies an open environment for women. This significantly increases the number of female university students, produces a female workforce more educated than men, and modifies the style of veiling. Women started to make love with boyfriends, go to the co-ed night parties, drink alcohol and smoke in certain places.

Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim Moroccan scholar, suggests that women in Islam are primarily sexual beings; "they are defined by their genitals and not by their faith" (2003, p. 491). She argues that the development of veiling and segregation in Muslim societies is to prevent sexual interactions between men and women. She adds that Islam has a negative attitude towards body ornamentation, especially for women. All pious women have to be modest and hide their ornamentations and beauties behind the veil.

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their husbands or fathers or husband's fathers, or their sons or their husband's sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah, O believers, in order that ye may succeed. (*Koran*, sura 24).

Why is looking at the women's beauty considered a sinful act in the Islamic texts and are women ordered to watch their veiling and lower their gaze? Mernissi quotes from Ghazali, one of the best-known Islamic theologians and philosophers born in

1058, that the eye is an erogenous zone in the Muslim structure of reality, “just as able to give pleasure as penis”. A man can do as much damage to a woman’s honor with his eyes as if he were to seize hold of her with his hands (qtd. in Mernissi, 2003, p. 492). In this interpretation, women are considered to be such highly sexual objects that all part of their bodies even their faces and their eyes can be seductive for men and challenge the current order of the society.

On the contrary, some scholars believe that veiling has nowhere been mentioned in the *Koran* (Hoodfar, 2003; Keddie, 2007). Nikki Keddie in “Sexuality and Shi’i Social Protest in Iran” points out that veiling is nowhere enjoined in the *Koran*, which has just two passages that discuss women’s dress. She mentions the verse that tells believing women to cover their bosoms and hide their ornaments and argues that this widespread interpretation is doubtful; because if the *Koran* wants women’s bodies to be covered, all but their hands, feet, and face, “why would it have referred specifically to the bosom, which would automatically have been included in later formulas?” (2007, p. 301).

Getting a more comprehensive outline of how Iranian leaders after the Islamic Revolution looked at female sexuality, I present Ayatollah Khomeini’s, Ayatollah Motahari’s and Ali Shariati’s ideas on female sexuality. I choose these three personalities because all of them are well-known “theorists” of the Islamic Society. Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>19</sup>, the founder and charismatic leader of the Islamic Revolution is the major theorist of the Islamic Society, who reshaped Iran’s society by his speech and orders after the Revolution. Most changes in cultural and social values regarding women have been the result of his direct

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<sup>19</sup> Grand Ayatollah Syed Ruhollah Moosavi Khomeini (24 September 1900 – 3 June 1989) is an Iranian religious leader and politician, and leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Following the Revolution and a national referendum, Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader -a position created in the constitution as the highest ranking political and religious authority of the nation- until his death. In his writings, he expanded the Shi'a theory of *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the clerical authority" to include theocratic political rule by Islamic jurists.

unchangeable instructions. Ayatollah Motahari<sup>20</sup> was a faculty member of the University of Tehran who taught Western Philosophy as well as a clergyman. He was an attractive lecturer who made many public speeches against Materialism and Marxism which was a dominant discourse among Iranian young people in the beginning years of the Revolution. Ali Shariati<sup>21</sup>, a sociologist who studied at Sorbonne University was a political activist against the Shah Regime and in his many books and lectures tried to demonstrate how Shi'a Muslims can use the religious stories for political activities.

Ayatollah Khomeini in his book *Tauzih al-Masa'ils*<sup>22</sup> (book of religious instructions) discusses women. Nahid Yeganeh specifically introduces his ideas on female sexuality and body in this religious instruction book:

The definition of male and female sexuality and the institutions built around them is one that favors a maximum rate of reproduction. Incest is defined narrowly, marriage age is the lowest possible, and polygamy and

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<sup>20</sup> Ayatollah Morteza Motahari (February 3, 1920 - May 1, 1979) was an Iranian scholar, cleric, University lecturer, and politician. He is considered among the important influences on the ideologies of the Islamic Republic and was a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini during the Shah's reign and formed the Council of Revolution of Iran at Khomeini's request. He was chairman of the council at the time of his assassination. Ayatollah Motahari was a popular figure in the religious circles of Iran. He served in the Tehran University as the Head of the Department of Theology and Islamic Learning's. At the time of his assassination he was the president of the Constitutional Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

<sup>21</sup> Ali Shariati (1933 – 1977) was an Iranian revolutionary and sociologist, who focused on the sociology of religion. He is held as one of the most influential Iranian intellectuals of the 20th century and has been called the 'ideologue of the Iranian Revolution". Shariati's works were highly influenced by the Marxism, ideas that class war and revolution would bring about a just and classless society from one side, and the Islamic puritanism (or the Islamic Reformation) movements of his time from the other side. He translated these ideas into cultural symbols of *Shi'ism* that Iranians could relate to. He referred to his brand of Shi'ism as "red Shi'ism" which he contrasted with clerical-dominated, un-revolutionary "black Shi'ism".

<sup>22</sup> *Tauzih al-Masa'ils* are the volumes within which various Shi'i clerics provide instructions on bodily, religious, and social functions for their followers. Sexual functions usually constituted an important section of these books, and other sections also referred to sex-related taboos. In these texts, instructions on sexual intercourse have a degree of frankness and detail. These books enjoy the kind of status accord to medical books on these matters.

temporary marriages are allowed. Sex and reproduction are separated to a considerable extent in male but not female sexuality. Male sexuality is active; female sexuality is passive. Women as had been true since early Islamic times, have the religious duty to submit to their husband's sexual wishes. Sexual intercourse is equated with penetration, marriage can be dissolved and inheritance annulled if penetration does not take place (2007, p. 311).

Ayatollah Motahari was a reformist clergyman and professor of theology at Tehran University. He has written numerous books and his fame mostly is from his writings on how an Islamic ideology is able to conquer materialism and material ideologies. He believes that sexuality is biological and sex determines psychology. Consequently, he produces stereotypes of femininity and masculinity: man is rational, woman is emotional; man is strong, woman is weak; man is slave to passion, woman is a prisoner of love and affection (Motahari, 1979, p. 179-175). In his arguments, sexual intercourse is defined as a moment of total unity and possession. The only natural form of marriage is monogamy because men and women are monogamous by nature and if men have an inclination to seek for polygamy, it is because of "social reasons" and can be changed. Sexual instinct is active, strong, and deep in both women and men and the difference between them is that women have more control on their sex drive (Motahari, 1969, p. 96-100). Yehaneh suggests that in Motahari's writings, sexuality is defined as biological and as a result, it is in the realm of nature and takes place within the family. The sphere of the social is for thinking and working, and sexual difference does not belong there. This separation is to be achieved through the Islamic devices such as modest dress and behavior in public" (2003, p. 312).

Ali Shariati, an Islamist reformist who was opposed to the Shah and delivered many passionate lectures on Islam and *Shi'a* History, shares the idea of sexuality being natural and notes that Islam does not support equality for men and women but tries to find the natural place of men and women in the society. Therefore he believes in "natural rights" for men and women instead of

“similar rights” (Shariati, 1979, p. 100-105). According to Yeganeh, Shariati’s ideal woman is an “asexual” one and his argument evolves around a criticism of a woman as a sex object. “In his attempt to deobjectify women, Shariati desexualize her.” Woman is an object of desire, but desire should be for her love, not for her body (2003, p.313).

Motahari’s regulation of sexuality releases women’s labor power by making a non-sexual social sphere and Shariati’s ideas give women an important role in political struggles. Both of them are part of general trends within Iranian society.

## **Iranian Nationalism and the Female Body**

In addition to religion, I argue that Iranian nationalism is based on the concept of the female body. I believe that the relationship between Iranian nationalism and the female body can portray a broader image of why the concept of female body is so remarkable in Iran’s culture. This interconnection between nationalism and female body is important in the past two decades because Iranians passed eight years of war when the notion of “nationalism” and “defending the motherland” has been one of the core concepts in Iranian contemporary discourse in the society. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the name of the country “Iran” is a female name. Iran is a pretty common name for women in Iran. Second, the female body has always been the target of nationalist discourses of community. Women’s bodies have historically been used as a metaphor for nation. The female body not only represents freedom and liberty, but is the symbolic marker of the boundary between “us” and “them” (Wobbe, 1995). One need only need to recall the title of a book that sold like hotcakes during the Gulf War, *The Rape of Kuwait*, to appreciate how deeply has been the representation of the

homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizens to rush to her defense. (Parker, et al, 1992, p.6)

In “The Erotic Vatan {Homeland} as Beloved and Mother: To Love, To Possess, and To Protect”, Afsaneh Najabadi argues that the Persian word for homeland (*vatan*) conceptualizes it as a woman and the soil of the homeland has a connotation of the female body. She notes that representing the homeland as a female body has often been used to construct a national identity in a nationalist discourse (1997, p. 447). The configuration of *vatan* (homeland) from its pre-modern Perso-Islamic meaning to modern geo-body was in part performed through the imagination of it as a female beloved. “It was envisaged as the outlines of a female body: A body to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for.” (p. 448). Najabadi mentions:

The discursive production of *vatan* as a female body was achieved through the re-articulation of the classical literature of love into patriotic poetics. This made possible notions of adoration of *vatan*<sup>23</sup> and love of homeland<sup>24</sup>. It is also made the whole discourse of protection of woman – a body that needs protection against alien designs, intrusion, and penetration-and defense of honor available to nationalism (p. 445).

Iranian men were concerned over the penetrability of the porous borders of Iran’s geo-body, much as they displayed anxiety over who penetrated the orifices of the bodies of their female possessions. Najabadi intelligently mentions the word *tajavuz*. This Persian word literally means transgression but interestingly it is used both for rape and invasion of territory. Also the word *khake-pake-vatan* (the pure soil of the homeland) can be interpreted in this way as well. *Pak* means “pure” and when it refers to a woman, is saturated with sexual connotations (p. 459). In this regards, I point out one of the Iran’s newspapers articles after Constitutional Revolution more than one hundred years ago that addressed Iran as a woman:

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<sup>23</sup> vatanparasti

<sup>24</sup> vatandusti

O Iran! O our mother! You who have nourished us with the blood of your veins for many long years, and who have fed us with the tissues of your own body! Will we ever live to see your unworthy children entrust your skirt of chastity to the hands of foreigners? Will our eyes ever see foreigners tear away the veil of your chastity?<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, there is another important word in the Persian language which refers both to honor, law and woman. The word *Namus* is an ethical category, a virtue, in Middle Eastern Muslim patriarchal character. It is a strongly gender-specific category of relations within a family described in terms of honor, attention, respect/respectability, and modesty. The word derives from the Arabic language and means "the one in possession of absolute virtues". The word *namus* when returned to its origin, "namasa" means "the keeper of a secret, the one whom you confide in. For a man and his family, *namus*, among other things, means sexual integrity of women in the family, their chastity in particular. On the other hand, the man has to provide for his family and to defend the *namus* of his house, his women in particular, against the threats (physical and verbal) to members of his extended family from the outer world.

## **The Female Body and Place**

One of my considerations in this research is that I study the female body in specific places. In fact, when I requested my participants to explain how they connected/experienced their own bodies, mostly I focused on the body in place, because my approach is not a philosophical one and I do not see the female body as an abstract object out of any especial context. Here, when I discuss "place", I define it in two meanings useful to my research goals. First and foremost, I investigate how the female body is constructed in a specific place: the "public sphere". Next, because one of my aims in this research is to

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<sup>25</sup> *Suri Israfil*, 18 (November 223, 1907), p.3, from the complete reprint of *Suri Israfil*, edited with an introduction by Mansoureh Ettehadieh (Tehran: Nashr Tarikh Iran, 1982).

analyze how young Iranian women have different sorts of connection/experience to their own bodies in Iran and Canada, the notion of place and moving to a different location become one of my main concepts in this research.

Edward Soja calls spatial analysis an “interpretive geography,” a way of recognizing “spatiality as simultaneously... a social product (or outcome) and a sharp force (or medium) in social life. His work reminds us that that space is not “fixed, dead, and undialectical,” but has a critical relationship to the people who inhabit a space (qtd. in Oikawa, 2002, p. 76). As I talked to the participants, they explained how different places organize different forms of *surveillance* and how *disciplines* proceed through these spaces.

This interpretation is not far from some of feminist scholarships about the relationship between the materiality of the body and space. This approach pays attention both to sexual hierarchies in different locations as well as to embodied subjectivity.

The female body changes throughout our lives via menstruation, puberty, and pregnancy. In addition to these changes in our bodily shape and form, we experience different relations to the world around us. Gillian Rose raises a series of questions regarding the body in space and the gendered nature of different spaces. She demonstrates that both the human agency and the space through which it moves in time-geography are masculine and emphasizes that “this masculinism is not only an effect of a specific masculinity; it also constitutes that masculinity” (1993, p. 120). She argues that:

Thinking about bodies and emotions against their repression by time-geography, then, does not only invoke the pleasures and desires, lovers and children... It can also invoke violence and horror, brutality and fear. In its erasure of these experiences, time-geography speaks the feeling of spatial freedom which only white heterosexual men usually enjoy.

(Rose, 1993, p. 118)

In this regard, some feminists look at women's discomfort and fear in the public spaces (Hamner and Saunders, 1994; Jordan, 1990). June Jordan in "Black Feminism: the politics of articulation" mentions that women "are not to move about in the world freely" and adds:

If we do then we have to understand that we may have to pay for it with our bodies. That is the threat. They don't ask you what you are doing in the street; they rape you and mutilate you bodily to let you remember your place. You have no rightful place in public (1990, p. 113).

Frigga Haug in her article on women's anxiety notes that lacking free social spaces in the society develop anxiety and the fear of darkness is because of our fear of masculine violence but she emphasizes that "we were not so much concerned here with individual men, but with men as the agents of a social structure" (Haug, 2000, p. 163).

In the same way that different bodies stand in different relation to space, Liz Grosz explores the relations between bodies and cities. She believes that the city is one of the main factors in the "social production of (sexed) corporeality". In connecting the concepts of the body and city, she represents two dominant models, explains the problems of each model and finally suggests an alternative model to analyze bodies and cities connections. In the first model the body and the place have external relations. "The city is a reflection, projection, or products of bodies. Bodies are conceived in naturalistic terms, pre-dating the city, the cause, the cause and motivation for its design and construction" (1999, p. 382). The second model suggests that the city and the body are parallel in which "the features, organizations and characteristics of one are also reflected in the other" (ibid, p. 382). After numerating each model problems, she suggests a model that combines elements from each. What she suggests is:

A model of relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings. This model is practical, based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other (ibid, p. 385).

If I aim to follow how the female body and place connect in Iranian society, first, I need to explain two expressions in Iran's culture; public or exterior places (*biruni*) and private or interior places (*andaruni*). *Biruni* includes streets, squares, and markets which mostly are considered as masculine spaces and *andaruni* includes home, the neighborhood and any other spaces that could be closed and controlled which considered as feminine domain.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, women had been transformed into highly invisible subjects in the public sphere. In fact, imposed veiling was a precondition for women to be present in the public sphere. Following this restriction, public spaces became gendered as well. Buses separated into two sections; one for men and the other for women. Students had to sit separately at the universities; one part of the class male students and the other part, female students. Governmental organizations restaurants separated eating place for men and men. So very soon Iranian women learned how to overcome the obstacle of the veil to maintain their activity and then gradually to claim and re-invent new public spheres for themselves. Despite all the restrictions, they found out how to be socially active (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006, p. 456).

During the war, between 1980 and 1988, public space became political, because it was appropriated by the state (Khosrokhavar and Roy, 1999, p.13). Amir-Ebrahimi believes that this decade was the period of invisibility that imposed itself through homogenous and codified appearances and clothing codes. "Feminine invisibility manifested itself especially by the domination of the black colors and above all, black worn in public" (2006, p. 457).

In the 1990s, because of high inflation after the war, many women started to work and also accept more responsibilities for household exterior tasks as shopping, going to different administration and so on. This frequent presence in the public places gave women new consciousness on their individual and citizen rights. Amir-Ebrahimi argues about that period of time when the government decided to re-conduct people to a controllable public life:

Public spaces stood between two sets of life styles. On the one hand was Daily life/Modernity/ Citizenship/ International image, while on the other hand was Revolution/ Tradition/Ummah/ the image of Islam in the Muslim world. Consequently, public spaces entered into schizophrenic phase, where their functions moved from the word to the other, depending on time, space, and social actors (2006, p. 458).

## **Theoretical Framework: Foucault and the Body**

Although the subject of body is quite absent in Muslim or Middle Eastern scholars' works, it is a remarkable topic not only for Western feminists, but also for philosophers, such as Michel Foucault. Margaret McLaren, the author of *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* believes that Foucault's concept of the body has special features which significantly contribute to feminist perspectives on the female body. First, Foucault objects to mainstream philosophy for juxtaposing subjectivity with consciousness. He believes that the question of subjectivity is inseparable from the question of the body, so subjectivity needs to be associated with the body. Therefore, he rejects mind/body dualism. Second, Foucault views the body as a site of political struggle and his notions on *disciplinary practices* and *micro-power* are useful frameworks for feminist scholars to explore the construction of femininity and analyze the patriarchal power on cultural and social norms and the mechanism these norms affect the female body (McLaren, 2002, pp. 81-2).

Although the concept of body is fundamental in Foucault's works, he does not discuss gender-specific disciplines and in fact the body he investigates and analyzes is a sexually neutral body without specific gender. Feminists like Susan Bordo and Sandra Lee Bartky try to follow Foucault's view of the cultural inscription on body and develop his ideas on a gender-specific context and argue how the female body is affected by cultural and social norms. I will use their works in Chapter Four in interpreting my interviews.

Foucault discusses many wide-range topics related to body in his various works such as *Discipline and Punish* (1979), *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1980), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), and *Power/knowledge* (1980). I am interested more in some of his notions that I believe are more useful to my current arguments in this thesis. Mostly, I will discuss the notions of "discipline", "docile body", "resistance", and "surveillance" in his theory. He takes exercise as a useful example of the subject of control in the society and argues that "these methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called 'disciplines'" (1979, p. 137).

Foucault believes that the formation of the disciplinary society is connected with a number of broad historical processes and those "disciplines are techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities." What is discipline, who creates it, and how it works in a society? He explains:

Every system of power is presented with the same problem. But the peculiarity of the disciplines is that they try to define in relation to the multiplicities a tactics of power that fulfils three criteria: firstly, to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost (economically, by the low expenditure it involves; politically, by its discretion, its low exteriorization, its relative invisibility, the little resistance it arouses); secondly, to bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval; thirdly, to link this 'economic' growth of power with the output of the apparatuses (educational, military, industrial or medical) within which it is exercised; in short, to

increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system. (1979, p.218).

In relation to disciplines, he moves to the notion of docile body and notes:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it denied how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies (1979, p. 138).

Surveillance is another appealing topic in Foucault's ideas on body. He mentions that surveillance is found specifically in hospitals, asylums, prisons, schools, etc. He emphasizes architecture as a way to put people in the centre of surveillance. He argues that surveillance is part of a network of power; "it was also organized as a multiple, automatic and anonymous power: for although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perfectly supervised..." (1979, pp. 176-7). Surveillance is a significant form of disciplinary power; it impacts actions, behavior, and bodies. "Although it begins 'outside', through the disciplinary gaze of the guard or teacher, part of its effectiveness relies on its moving 'inside' through the self-monitoring of the individual being watched" (McLaren, 2002, p. 108).

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* argues that power operates on the body to produce the soul; and the soul is "the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body (1979, p. 29) and "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (Ibid, p. 30). What can be assumed as the result of imposing power on bodies is "resistance".

The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances (1980, p. 87).

McLaren notes that the concept of resistance in Foucault's argument "may simply consist in offering new configurations of power and knowledge, an alternative discourse that shifts power relations. Bodily resistance may result from the struggle or contestation of the various regimes that constitute it (2002, p. 86). In my discussion of scholarship in the Western tradition, I focus more on Foucault and Foucauldian feminists works because I use Foucault's notions on the body as a theoretical framework to analyze and conceptualize the female body in Iranian context. I explain briefly why I think his notions on discipline, surveillance, docile body, and resistance conceptualize current trends on sexuality and the female body in Iran.

To begin with, I view my subjects as *performative*, because they move between different discursive spaces, each providing different cultural positions from which they can speak. The subjects are *performative* also because they speak about their experiences by manipulating, combining and transforming existing sets of meanings constructed in multiple discursive spaces. I theorize their performance not in the way Judith Butler does as repetition, that is "a re-experiencing of a set meaning already socially established" (1990, p. 140). Basing her argument on a Foucauldian notion of discourse, she finds possibilities of gender transformation on the arbitrariness of gender attributes, where new meanings can emerge by "failing" to perform as well as breaking given social norms (ibid, p. 141). This view assumes that each performance taking place in a discursive space is dominated by a set of power relations that privilege white straight males.

I find my subjects' *performativity* rather in their ability to move, often instantly, between discursive spaces, each of which has a different tradition, authority, set of power relations, and set of discourse that organize it. The

subjects speak from different positions of articulation provided by these spaces. They speak about how the society (power) imposes strict regulations on them; they analyze how those practices make them suffer. They mention how the power “made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, 1979, p. 137); they explain how they avoid discussing moral police who remind them of the features of good veiling, and being a modest woman in the university or in the street because they would encounter punishment. They remember how their bodies transform to “docile bodies” in order to prevent paying extra in front of the power; they explain *disciplines* and *docile bodies*.

They talk about how the society (power) follows them in the public spheres to keep the proper veiling. They have some common stories about moral police in the street whose responsibility is to arrest women with tight light-color clothes or women whose hair is out of the headscarf. They confess how they feel there is somebody watching them even here in Canada where they are far from that society they were raised in, and how an internal voice talks to them when they want to treat their own bodies in a different way; they describe the *surveillance*.

Additionally, they excitingly describe how to initiate different techniques to struggle the current order and initiate their own style to disobey what the power attempts to oblige by wearing shorter or tighter clothes or bright color ones. They point out how they try to escape from what the power in social institutions (schools, state-run media, universities, streets, buses, etc.) want to conceptualize for them; they have many stories of how to escape from the “obliged praying” in the middle school, to how to fight with guardian women who were at universities to tell them about the proper veiling; they set out the concept of *resistance*.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In conducting my study of Iranian immigrant women, I apply feminist principles of qualitative inquiry. As Reinharz (1992) maintains, feminism or feminist approaches do not inherently determine the methodology, rather it lends a perspective on how to utilize existing methodology. Sprague argues that feminists have applied some strategies in order to avoid the weakness of qualitative methodology; weakness that objectifies the participants in the research and constructs a dichotomy between self and the other (Sprague, 2005, p. 134). Instead of enhancing the dichotomies, feminist researchers attempt to reinforce the connection between the researcher and the researched. In fact, feminist qualitative researchers have built the connections between researchers and researched. Their strategies are making the relationship more reciprocal, using emotional analytic guides and using the researcher's biography as a resource (pp. 134-140).

Using these strategies can be useful to make a feminist standpoint but it cannot be denied that building close relationships with those we study can make participants more vulnerable. Judith Stacey (1988) demonstrates in her own field experience that the greater the intimacy and feeling of connectedness in research relationships, the more vulnerable the researched is to exploitation.

Therefore, in the process of gathering information and interviewing, I prefer Reinharz and Chase's argument that what is needed is an adequate level of rapport, not a long-term relationship, and the best way to build rapport is to be a good listener, who is sensitive to the dynamics of power and privilege. (Reinharz and Chase, 2002) However, in the latter stages of this thesis, particularly as I analyze data and formulate the findings into a thesis document, I am committed to acting as

a “feminist qualitative scholar”. So, I will employ two strategies in analyzing collected data; I will attempt to use my emotions as analytic guides, and I will incorporate my own biography and experience regarding my research topic as a resource to show how gendered selves and biographies can be gateways to insight and enhanced understanding.

## **Interview as a Reciprocal Conversation**

Ann Oakley argues that if feminist researchers try to form a “sisterly bonds” between the researcher and the researched, such a relationship can increase participants’ trust and researchers’ empathy. (1981, p. 27) In collecting information from Iranian immigrant young women, my research relies on semi-structured interviews. According to Kirby, Greaves, and Reid (2006, p. 134), in this method the interviewer asks a set of questions with some variation in the order and format of questions. There is some “give and take” between the researcher and the participant as adjustments are made. This format is closer to a guided conversation (set of questions) where the researcher’s goal is “to elicit from the interviewee rich, detailed materials that can be used in quantitative analysis” (Lofland and Lofland 1984, p. 12).

The benefit of using the semi-structured format is that it provides the researcher with the opportunity to listen carefully to “attitudes and feelings, those non-quantifiable things that are not usually covered in social surveys; their interviews got at “subtleties” embedded in women’s speech itself, such as hesitations (Reinharz, 1992, p. 24). As a technique for gathering data, the semi-structured interview also allows the researcher to have a great deal of freedom in terms of the manner in which the interview takes place. Using this technique, I will be able to incorporate and if necessary, seek further clarification on any issues that arise within the interview- issues that may not have been outlined within the

original research questionnaire. Moreover, the semi-structured interview has the built-in flexibility of being able to accommodate those women who may have more difficulty formulating or articulating a response. By using this method, the researcher is able to get people's "witness accounts of the social world," to encourage participants to reflect on their experience or beliefs, or to provide segments of talk that the researcher can analyze to learn about their inner worlds. (Hammersley, 2003, p. 120)

Another strategy for feminist scholars is using emotions as analytic guides. In fact, researcher's emotions can be as a source of insight and direction to show how the researcher proceeds not only in the process of interview, but in the analyzing stage of the content and information she had gathered. Carolyn Ellis argues that emotions are not private experiences. "Emotions result from applying personal interpretations of collectively-created rules to the situations in which we find ourselves" (1991, p. 26. Cited in Sprague, 2005, p. 135). Keeping a detailed journal before each interview and writing my own emotions about each of interviewee's ideas is my strategy in this research. I specifically wrote down my observations on my participants' appearance, their style of clothing, what they said before starting the interview and what they asked or shared after the interview and how I felt about the elements of my observations.

I started the introduction with my own story. Putting a snapshot of my biography in the beginning of this research, I tried to gain more empathy and demonstrated how much the topic is my own interest and personal obsession. In fact, I aimed to enhance the understanding of what happened to my generation in Iran as women. I hope my own biography will uncover something of the social construction of female bodies and emotions and ideas related to the feminine sexuality, and make it possible to question how these experiences occurred in my participants' lives.

One of my goals as a researcher was to make the interviews as much like conversation as possible. Conversational interviews enhance rapport, making it easier for people to share the intimate details of their lives. In most studies, information flows merely from participant to researcher and there is a threat that the participant feels just as a source of information for the research goals not an alive human being with emotions and passions. Keeping the interview like a conversation has another benefit as well. Conversation is a process that both sides benefit from and enjoy. It was what happened to me in almost all of the interviews; not only did I gain something valuable from each interview, but also my participants expressed deep gratitude for exchanging feelings and experiences reciprocally.

I kept a detailed journal after each interview; from description of my interviewee's appearance and style of clothing and body language to my thoughts and ideas of what they expressed. I also wrote about new lessons for my own questions as well. Surprisingly, each interview opened an amazing window for me to contemplate on my own concerns and learn from each of them. Since they had come from very different family backgrounds and they had expressed many various approaches on female sexuality, each interview was a new horizon for me to figure out what I am searching for in my personal journey. After each interview I felt that I was not merely an "interviewer", I was somebody who was examining a mutually problematic issue and my interviews were more like "conversation" rather than formal interviews for an academic research. My relation to the interviewees was dialogic; it was beneficial process for us.

Interestingly, after the interviews, some of my participants expressed their astonishment of what happened during the interview; spoke of many memories which seemed hidden in the back of their minds and digging out their experiences regarding sexuality. Three of them said that some of information they were sharing with me, had never been shared with somebody else. Four of them said that the process of interviewing was the process of considering their own sexuality and the female body for the first time. One of them told me that she had never thought about

her female body. She smiled and said “I have never learned that this subject can be as a thought-provoking topic which I can think and question about” (Sophia, Interview, April, 2, 2010). One of my interviewees, after more than one and a half hour talking, started crying over what she “discovered” about herself during our conversation (Roxana, Interview, March 28, 2010)

In transcribing the interviews verbatim, I also tried to pay attention and record all kind of hesitations, their stumbling over words, their pauses on reaching appropriate words for their ideas and their seeking of my support to confirm them such as “you know...” or “you know what I mean”. In addition, I tried to be precise in reporting their tone in expressing their feelings such as “she laughs”, “she hesitates for a long time”, “she doubts whether to say this or not.”, etc. in order to get a more comprehensive image of what happened in each of the interviews and how the atmosphere of the conversation can help me to interpret the content of what the participants shared. Sprague calls it “narrative analysis” and suggests that this kind of analysis “has a great potential for identifying the perceptual frames circulating in a given culture and how they shape peoples sense of experience” (2005, p. 142).

## **Writing as a Source of Invaluable Information**

In addition to interviews, I have another source of information from the participants. I asked them to write a piece on their female bodies; a piece as a letter to their body and try to talk to it as an “object”. I believe that exploring the female body can be a key stage for a woman to question her own sexuality, femininity and even identity. Writing is an “awakening” process. When you start writing on a subject, you have to focus on it and dig your mind out to see what you would like to tell about the subject. Additionally, writing helps to organize the scattered ideas on a subject. The interview was the first time to think about their own bodies for most of my participants.

I did not like to leave the participants alone after the interview session, when they discovered some facts about their own sexuality or the female body for the first time. I would follow them after the interview session and see what they think and feel on the subject we talked about. Writing on their own female bodies has a mutual benefits; for me, as a researcher, gathering extra intimate information for my research and for them, as the participants, focusing and organizing their ideas and thoughts and of what they discussed in the interview session.

Furthermore, Helen Cixious, a French feminist in her article “The Laugh of the Medusa” asks women to write about their bodies (1997, p. 350). Cixious’s piece was a reaction to the whole history of “penis-worship” in the Western philosophy. She notes that writing on the female body is “an act which will only realize the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength” (p. 351).

Eight interviewees out of ten agreed to write a piece on their bodies. Their style of writing and content are varied; I have a piece from three lines to a piece of five paragraphs. Four of them wrote the piece in English and the rest wrote in Persian. I found the content of writings more revealing and more comfortable than the content of interviews and it was an invaluable source of information from the participants in addition to interviews. They might organize their minds after talking the subject or they were more comfortable with a plain paper rather than somebody else sitting in front of them and react to every single word.

## **Methodological Considerations**

For this research, I have a sample of 10 young Iranian immigrant women who experienced the “Islamic context” from their childhood to their teenage years as a minimum. Specifically, my sample includes young Iranian immigrant women who were born after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and have lived in Iran at least to the age of fifteen before immigrating. Fortunately, in a meeting for celebrating international women’s day with some Iranian young women in March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, at Simon Fraser University, after explaining about my thesis topic, five of them agreed to be interviewed regarding the female body. Each of them introduced one more participants until I could interview ten Iranian young women living in Vancouver, and mostly students at Simon Fraser University and University of British Columbia.

One of the problematic methodological considerations is that talking about the female body and sharing experiences in this field are in most cases categorized as dealing in the realm of “privacy” and “personal information”. There are many women who never think about their own bodies or never look at them in the mirror. So I am aware of this very fact that talking about body is not a regular topic for people. Thus searching for my sample with advertisement in public places was not the most appropriate option. To find some appropriate participants, before starting a formal interview, I scheduled a short meeting to introduce my topic and what I would like to investigate. I did it in order to make my participants feel comfortable, and if they are not prepared to share their personal experiences, not to start the interview and put them in an embarrassing situation.

If the participant agreed to share her emotions and experiences, we planned for a formal interview. As a result, I found people who are comfortable with the topic and put others aside.

Additionally, alienation from the female body was another concern for me. In fact, some women might never think about their own bodies. There are some strategies for dealing with this complicated situation. For example, in the process of interviews, I positioned them in some real everyday experiences, such as buying a dress, wearing makeup, and eating habits in order to ask them to talk about those situations; Furthermore, sharing my own story and emotions with some of the participants who were not comfortable or who never thought about some of my questions was another useful strategy. As a researcher, when I told them some parts of my own story, not only I was able to attract their attention and built up mutual trust, but I could lead them to be prepared to contemplate the issue by providing some clues from my own side.

Furthermore, I offered to conduct the interviews in Persian (Farsi), knowing that when a researcher shares the same language and ethnicity as participants, rapport may be increased, which may strengthen the motivation of participants to respond. (Kirby, et al. 2006: 38)

While I expected my interviews to produce a wide range of responses and stories, I analyzed the interview data in such a way as to draw out common themes and shared experiences that will help inform the conclusions of this research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE VOICE OF YOUNG IRANIAN WOMEN ON THE FEMALE BODY

اکنون کبوتران

در قله‌های پستان‌هایم

پرواز می‌کنند

اکنون میان پپله لب‌هایم

پروانه‌های بوسه در اندیشه گریز فرو رفته‌اند

اکنون

محراب جسم من

آماده عبادت عشق است

Now,

*on the peaks of my breasts,*

*doves are flying.*

Now,

*within the cocoon of my lips,*

*butterfly kisses are immersed in thoughts of flight.*

Now,

*the altar of my body*

*is ready for love's worship.*

**(Border Walls, Forugh Farrokhzad<sup>26</sup>, Persian Female Poet)**

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<sup>26</sup>Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967) was an Iranian poet and film director. Forugh is arguably one of Iran's most influential female poets of the twentieth century. She was dead at the age of 32 in a car

At a friendly meeting in the International Woman's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I was introduced to a number of young Iranian women who mostly studied at Simon Fraser University. The organizer of the gathering was one of my friends who became one of my interviewees later. We gathered for the International Women's Day in a "female" meeting to drink a cup of coffee and chat about women's issues in Iran. When I explained about my thesis and asked for participation, five of them, who were more comfortable to talk about the female body and their personal experiences, agreed to be interviewed. Each of the five participants introduced me to another interested participant and finally I interviewed ten Iranian young women who were living in Vancouver from 16 years to three months before the date of the interview. Some of them choose pseudonyms to be used in the thesis. Five of them did not answer this question whether they would like to have their real names or not in the consent form before the interview. They preferred to respond this question after the interview and evaluate what they had said in the interview and then decided to choose a pseudonym or not.

All my participants are studying at Simon Fraser University or University of British Columbia except one who will start a program on Journalism at Langara College in September 2010. All interviews were conducted in Persian (Farsi), which is both my interviewees' and my own mother tongue. I kept a detailed journal after each interview; from description of my interviewee's appearance and style of clothing and their body languages to my thoughts and ideas about what they expressed. I also wrote about new findings for my own questions as well. Surprisingly, each interview opened a window for me to contemplate my own concerns and learn from each of them. Since my participants varied in family background and religious beliefs, each interview was a new horizon to me to figure out what I was searching for in my personal journey. Consequently, I tried not to remain merely an "interviewer" or a "researcher" who was just writing a thesis on a

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accident when was pretty well-known for her "feminine" voice in the poems. For more information on Forugh's poems see: Michael Craig Hillmann, (1990) *An Autobiographical Voice: Forough Farrokhzad*, in *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, edited by Afsaneh Najmabadi (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).

problematic issue. So I decided to lead the interviews more like “conversation” rather than formal interviews for an academic research.

All interviews except one were conducted in March, 2010 in public spaces, mostly Starbucks, Weave Café, or Blenz Café where my participants were more comfortable. Duration of the interviews varied from 35 minutes to about two hours in one case, depended on the participant’s willingness as well as my interest in continuing the conversation. Since the nature of the interviews was like a friendly conversation, we started from different points or questions in each interview depending on where the participant was ready to start talking. Some of them started from their family background, some from their feelings as a woman in Canada and others from a memory of their childhood. My questions were mostly on their family background and social status, focusing on if the participant had a religious background or not; their feeling and experiences of their bodies in childhood, and specially their teen years in the public spheres where regardless of the personal values and beliefs, all women had to appear covered and veiled; their experience of moving from Iran to Canada; and the comparison of different feelings and experiences in two different social contexts. I was also interested in hearing some memories from their childhood and teen years related to their own bodies.

Although I planned to have veiled young Iranian women in my sample, I was not able to find any of them to interview. I would like to have young Iranian women’s voices that choose veiling voluntarily in Canada in my research. Two of my participants said that they knew some veiled Iranian women in Vancouver and would ask for the interview. None of them introduced me a veiled woman. I also knew another young Iranian veiled woman who never rejected the interview directly, but after several times of following, she preferred not to set a time for an interview, although she asked about the detail of the research, my questions, and my goals of the research for many times. Therefore, I am aware that what I will discuss in this chapter is based on samples that are not veiled and cannot be generated to all young Iranian women in Vancouver, especially who choose veiling voluntarily.

I deployed a dialogical mode of analyzing the content of interviews, rather than presenting the findings in a monologic, totalizing voice of the researcher (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialogism, a concept developed by Bakhtin (1981), is an epistemological understanding of the world dominated by “multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (p. 263). Dialogical writing allows such a multi-voiced world to enter into text, and aims to illuminate “one language by means of another” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 361). Thus, by dialogical writing, I do not simply mean to compose the major part of the text by quoting the conversations between the participants and myself, but elucidate how our conversations prolonged progressively on a specific topic.

## **Life Narratives**

In this chapter, I analyze the interviews precisely in order to indicate the common themes as well as the different points. In this regard, I see the interviews as a kind of life narratives. Because life narrative “includes many kinds of self-referential *writing*”, (Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 3) looking at the content of my interviews, I think I can call them kind of life narratives. I use this term because it is a general term in literature that includes many different genres of writing such as autobiography, biography, history writing, and even the novel. According to Smith and Watson, in life narrative, people write about their own lives and do so from “externalized and internal points of view”. (p. 5). My other reason to study them as life narratives is that to be able to have a certain framework for analyzing my interviews.

When people are talking about their lives, it seems that analyzing is simple but when one starts to focus on the content and try to extract the common themes, the complexity of these simple narratives become revealed. To explore this complexity, Smith and Watson suggests searching for specific subjects in the text;

memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency are subjects have to be considered in this regard. (2001, p. 15-16). I employ their notion and specifically tend to focus on the “embodiment” part of the content of my interviews. Obviously, all parts of our interviews were not focused on the body, so I try to highlight the very parts which fulfill my research goals.

What the participants expressed on their sexuality and female bodies were closely linked with memory and place, especially public spheres. As Paul John Eakin notes in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, “our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity” (1999, p. xi). In fact, the undividable female experience of her body with memory and place is what needs to be analyzed in the content of the interview. The most significant facts the participants revealed on their bodily experiences were within memories; memories that were tightly interwoven with public spheres. In addition, some of memories recalled in the interviews brought up ideas for the first time. They became excited when they had remembered something and could tell me a story. In fact those memories were recalled specifically in the context of the conversation. It is not surprising, as Susan Engel in *Context Is Everything: The Nature of Memory* suggests, that much memory is contextual and the act of remembering takes place in particular sites and particular circumstances (1999, p. 25).

Cultural discourses determine which aspects of bodies are meaningful. They determine where the body can be visible, whether all parts of body become visible in a discourse or part of the body or some specific functions of it. In addition to the anatomic body, there is sociopolitical body which feminists believes that is “socially constructed”; and there are cultural attitudes and meanings attached to this body. The cultural meanings assigned particular bodies affect the kind of stories people can tell. According to Smith and Watson, respectable Western middle-class women up through the nineteenth century could not tell sexual stories about their bodies because the cultural meanings associated those bodies corrupted the nature of female sexuality and to speak sex was as a shameful action. (2001, p. 39). In some

parts of the world such as the Middle East, writing about sexual experience by women is still a taboo.

Some of questions I attempt to answer in analyzing the content of interviews are: Which part of the body, which of its function, and which feelings and sensations, are visibly expressed in the narratives? How do they become visible? How are the narrator's body and its visibility are tied to the community from which she came? What cultural meanings are attached to the narrator's body? Does the body or part of it vanish from the narrative at some point? I put the content of interviews next to the writings my participants wrote on their female bodies and analyze them collectively.

## **The Female Body, Sexuality, Puberty, and Menstruation**

The sex/gender distinction seemed to resolve the problem of the body. Simone de Beauvoir's (1952) famous statement that 'women are made and not born' launched a whole generation of feminist scholars, intent on dispelling the doctrine of 'natural' difference and showing that differences between the sexes were socially rather than biologically constructed. Judith Butler has been highly influential in breaking down the distinction between biological bodies and socially constructed gender difference. She provides the refusal of gender difference, arguing that the distinction between male or female bodies is itself entirely arbitrary - an artifact of a social order organized by normative heterosexuality. For Butler (1990), women are neither born, nor made; they appropriate the cultural prescriptions on sex. The body is the domain where individuals enact sex but sometimes in ways which disrupt these norms, thereby causing, 'gender trouble'. Some French feminists like Luce Irigaray (1958), Helen Cixous (1976), and Julia Kristeva (1980) have looked for ways to give expression to women's bodies as the site of pleasure,

arousal, and sensuality.

Have you thought about your own body so far? This was one of my main questions in my conversations with the participants. Surprisingly, it did not receive specific clear answer from most of the interviewees. Although all of them knew that my research topic is on the female body, most of them have never thought about this subject before. A few of them had more precise responses to the question. Roxana, a 30-year-old Master's student, a slim girl with black curly hair says that:

Well... It's funny... I guess I didn't think about my own body for many years. Yeah... It's so hilarious... can you imagine that I had a friend in Iran who didn't know where a woman pees is different from where she have a intercourse?... can you believe? When she asked me about it, she was at the age of 28...

**Me:** So what did happen that you started paying attention to your own body?

**Roxana:** I guess... It was ... aha...when other people tell something about one part of your body, it captures your attention as well... well... for example, I have a heavy curly black hair... In the first months of my arrival in Canada, I really didn't know how I can do my hair, so I decided to do nothing... then I heard from different people around that 'your hair is so funny'. Then I realized that okay... I can play with my hair in many different styles... I always hide it behind a headscarf and mostly I have thought on the color of my headscarf rather than the style of my hair.

**Me:** What about before leaving Iran. Do you remember of anything that made you to pay attention to your own body?

**Roxana:** Well... Yes. When I had a boyfriend for the first time, I paid especial attention to my body... we had physical relation and since then I felt...oh... it's interesting that I have never thought about my body before. I was realizing

that how much the body was important to our relationship. After that, I started to think about my own body as a subject.

**Me:** Would you please explain more about it? What was the content of your thoughts on your body?

**Roxana:** Well... what was interesting to me... was that how much the body can change the mentality. For example, before it, I believed that when you love somebody, it means you love his personality. I didn't think that bodily relation –not necessarily having sex- can change your point of view in your relationship...it's for example is similar to kind of expression that you can imply just by a musical instrument, not by words in a piece of writing. It's exactly the same... you can express some emotions just by your body.

**Me:** Was it interesting to you?

**Roxana:** Yes. It was absolutely fantastic. As if it was as a discovery. You understand a new language that you were not aware of it before; a language that you can talk but you haven't practiced on so far... as if... as if... It was similar to my childhood... when I opened my mom's makeup box. I didn't know what the usages of cosmetic stuff were but I was sure that the box was very interesting,

**Me:** When you look at to your past, when you didn't discover these facts on your body, how do you feel? Why do you think it remained hidden all those years? Do you think it was a natural process in a woman's life or you got angry or frustrated or what?

**Roxana:** I know what you mean... you know... I mostly regret... I guess... yeah... yeah... (She pauses and stares somewhere for a while) I felt that I was deceived... you know... I think one of main parts of your personality is made by encouragements and punishments of the environment you have been grown up in... I think if I was a top student in the school years is back to my

parents' encouragement on studying hard, nothing more. I guess my parents specifically and the society generally didn't encourage anything related to the body.

**Me:** What was that feeling of regret? Did you blame somebody?

**Roxana:** I felt that... I guess I blamed my father... his unconscious valuing system –without being aware of it- caused me not to pay attention to many subjects for many years.

**Me:** I would like to know more about your feelings, especially for you, as a person who have been the top in “mental achievements”. You encounter your own body after many years. It seems it was kind of shocking moments. How did you encounter this fact?

**Roxana:** I deeply felt that I was deceived... I was always sure that all aspects of my life developed harmoniously and I suddenly found out that there was something going on wrong and all of my personality foundations would fail sooner or later... I gained many achievements in my life but I never thought that this mind –which helped to get all of those ‘mental’ and ‘intellectual’ achievements- supposed to be in a body.

This section of our conversation demonstrates that how an intellectual woman who has been number one in many exams and intelligent tests feels her personality did not develop in balanced with her intellectual achievements. When she *discovers* her own female body via a bodily relationship, it as if opens a new window for finding out more about her sexuality. She uses the word of *discovery* to show that how she became excited about what she realized about her own body. At the same time, she uses this word to imply that she could find something that existed before inside her but just remained hidden. Naturally, after the excitement of the discovery, what follows her is the feeling of being deceived. Who should accept the responsibility of misleading Roxana in developing an unbalanced personality? She blames her

parents' system of valuing of what should be encouraged and what should be punished for children and second, she blames the society and specifically the educational institutions that did not provide any education about sexuality and the female body.

\*

Each participant focused more on some parts of her body. Maryam, 30 years old wrote most of her piece to her hair.

I have a good relation to my hair. I might live it more than all other parts of my body. I always care about it and try not to bother it... Wherever I go, everybody compliments you and I am proud of you, my beautiful hair. I am cautious not to burn you with hairdryer... I am happy that you are so beautiful for the parties, university, and working place so that everybody asks me how I do my hair every day. All tell me to be appreciated of you... I love the natural curve of my dark hair...

I met Maryam two times; the first time in the Woman's Day gathering and the second time for the interview. Both times she wore a short skirt with leggings. First time she had a pink tight T-shirt with a jean mini skirt and a gray scarf around her neck. Her long boots made her style fashionable. The second time she had a mini black skirt and black shirt which with high heel boots made her distinguishable among her peers. She has been in Vancouver for almost two years, and was married just before leaving Iran to her boyfriend of eight years.

What did make her hair more visible than other parts of her body? The answer is other people's attraction. "My hair! You are so beautiful that everyone asks me how I do it every day... They ask me to be proud of you..." The hair is not the only part of her body that she admires; she also likes her eyelashes as well. She writes: "Long time ago, I thought I have a kind of weak eyelashes. When I was friend

with Majid {her current husband} he called them '6 meters' and now I am calling my eyelashes 'my dear 6 meters'."

The compliment from her boyfriend and other people has made some parts of her body more important for her. She also mentions that when one woman asked her where she had had a beauty surgery on her nose and cheeks, she began to notice to her nose and cheeks more than past; "I sat in front of the mirror and gazed at them and talked to them for a couple of months. I never paid attention to my nose and did not know that it was beautiful." Maryam was not the only one who noticed some parts of her body after other people's attention. Aida, a 29-year-old Master's student in Science confirmed that she always wanted to have "green eyes" like her grandmother till someday a male friend wrote a poem on her "black eyes".

In puberty years, my appearance was very very important to me and you know, those are very years that your face becomes so ugly... The body is not mature... the nose becomes big... the face is full of rashes... at that time I would like to have green eyes like my grandma and have a tiny nose... time passed and then somebody wrote a piece for me and admired my black eyes... and then I felt something changed about feeling to my eyes... oh... the black eyes can be as beautiful as green eyes... these kind of feedbacks made me to be more proud of some parts of my body (Interview, Aida, March 14, 2010).

In her piece of writing, which was submitted to me around one month after the interview, she explains more about those feelings when she encountered compliments on her eyes:

You are sitting next to me and all cars, passer bys and even the birds are crossing but you are still with me. I stare at you; restlessly for a long time. You are not able to move your eyes. Your voice is trembling when you are saying: Don't make a magic with those eyes! My inner woman smiles... (Aida, writing)

Aida, 29, is a slim girl who came to Canada ten years ago. She is a student at Simon Fraser University and has been living in Vancouver for four years. She has light skin and black short wavy hair. She does not use make-up on her face very much. She prefers to highlight her dark black attractive eyes by using mascara. She regularly wears a scarf around her neck if she has an open collar shirt. She believes that a woman sends a message with her style of dressing. She does not wear eccentric clothes; she says that she does not have a very open-collar cloths or very short skirt. She does not feel “comfortable” in exposed clothing. When I ask her to explain more about this “discomfort”, she says:

It means that... How can I explain?... It possibly depends on the places you go... for example if I go... yeah... let me tell you in this way... it’s interesting. When I went to the aquatics centre. If there is somebody I know –I specially mean young Iranian men- I don’t feel good. But if there is nobody I know, I really feel comfortable in my swim suit.

She thinks that Iranian people who are “first generation” of immigrants probably keep Iranian standards in clothing in the back of their minds. She seems worried about being judged by her own community members as not modest enough as an Iranian girl. So she is not comfortable in her swimsuit which exposes most part of the body in front of young Iranian men.

She seems more comfortable in writing rather than speaking. She writes in her piece:

The scene of that day in Karaj’s garden is completely vivid and clear in my mind even after many years. The first black evening dress, dark eye shadow behind my eyelids, the curves of the back, fashionable feminine perfume, pretty color lips, and the first admiring looks. I was a confused and vivacious girl among all those guests.

It was a sharp breath-taking uphill. My three companions and I got short of breath. According to our map, there remains two hours to arrive to the next place for resting. I feel the heaviness of my back pack and sweat so much. Suddenly, I sense an awful pain in my body. I want to sit down and put my hands around my belly. I feel extremely cold. I desire to have a warm blanket... oh, my God! Why is it not on time? I have been on time every month... (Aida, writing)

Although she does not mention menstruation directly in her short story of climbing, she is more revealing and detail-oriented in this piece in comparison to the information shared with me in the interview.

Puberty has been a big deal for most of the participants. Puberty is the process of physical changes by which a child's body becomes an adult body capable of reproduction. Before puberty, body differences between boys and girls are almost entirely restricted to the genitalia. During puberty, major differences of size, shape, composition, and function develop in many body structures and systems. The most obvious of these are referred to as secondary sex characteristics. The term *puberty* mostly refers to the bodily changes of sexual maturation rather than the psychosocial and cultural aspects of adolescent development. Breast development, pubic hair and menstruation are the most important “bodily” changes in girls in puberty period when the body becomes more visible. Setara, a 28-year-old married PhD student at Simon Fraser University, describes this as a “bothering experience”. She says:

The difference of my own body from a boy's body was distinguishable to me from the age of four or five... but it was so bothering when ... I was at grade five in elementary school... when my breast started to develop gradually... Everyone wanted to say something about it... my classmates, my classmates' mothers that told me 'you're so small but your breasts get bigger... (She laughs in discomfort) I didn't feel good at that time, so I tried to walk in a way

to push my shoulders closer to each other in a way to hide my breasts...  
(Setara, Interview, March, 26, 2010).

Pushing shoulders closer to each other in order to hide the development of the breasts was one of the common themes most participants mention when they talk about puberty years. It is a situation that most teenage girls in Iran are ashamed of because it is an unfamiliar change in their bodies. Teenage girls are not trained about their bodily changes systematically. They just learned to *hide* their bodily changes. When someone has to hide something in her own body, she is always ashamed of revealing it in front of others. I discussed in details in Chapter One on what kind of information teenage girls receive in the education system and how their bodily changes define for them.

Setara was dressed in stylish fashionable clothing. She has a light desirable makeup with short cut hair that obviously was done before coming at the University. According to the current standard, she is completely fit without any noticeable mark on her well designed face and body to be corrected. She says that she tries to be well-dressed because it helps her to “keep her spirits up”. “You see that there is not many women have makeup here but I do it every day and try to wear good clothes because I have a good feeling about myself.”

Similarly to Aida, she is more revealing in her writing than in her speaking when she writes in the letter to her body:

Dear Body,

I am glad that I am finally writing to you after these many years of being with you but neglecting to talk to you and think seriously about you.... My attempt not to be sexually seductive have led to many problems in sexual area for us even after marriage that we could finally overcome by talking to a therapist and reading numerous books to convince my unconscious mind that being sexually active is not a weird thing. I really do apologize for thinking that

way, but you know it was inevitable in the society I was raised up and with the extremely law-abiding personality that I have (Setara, writing).

It is an interesting piece of Setara's writing. During our conversation, she consciously avoided mentioning her experience in sexual relationships but in her piece, she seems more comfortable and talks about how the style of nurturing the girls leads to the sexual dysfunction even in marriage. But it is obvious that she is not still totally comfortable because talking about her own body in the sexual position is not an easy job for her. Setara is an example of all females born after the Islamic Revolution that have not learned to talk about their own bodies. Because that generation grew up in an atmosphere that the concepts of soul or intellectuality put in contradiction to the body in the dominant official of society's discourse. Clearly, when soul/mind encouraged to be reinforced, simultaneously the concept of the body is degraded in the social discourses.

Farnoosh, who says that all her friends in her childhood were boys and she played with them, experienced puberty sooner than her peers did, and she was ashamed of it. She had grown up with her cousin who was older than her by nine months but Farnoosh menstruated almost one year sooner than her cousin. She remembers that she did not like her cousin and other classmates to know that she menstruated. She did not feel good. I ask her why. She responds:

I don't know... maybe... I was ashamed... I would like to remain in childhood... I don't know... maybe it was supposed to be covered when you become a 'woman' and I liked to postpone this process... I remember that my cousin told me you always try to close your shoulders so nobody knows your breast is developing... even up to today I forget to sit straight and I guess this is a habit from the puberty period (Farnoosh, Interview, March 30, 2010).

She believes that she is not able to sit straight because "as a woman she always is ashamed of her body curves" and she thinks that the only solution to get rid of this shame is educating teenage girls about what is going on in their bodies exactly when

they approach puberty ages. She remembers that after her body became mature, her mother hinted her several times that she had to avoid some kind of behaviors that “are not good for a lady”, so she preferred not to encounter the puberty and tried to hide all bodily indications of puberty in order to make her childhood period longer and “not to enter the lady’s world”.

With *disciplinary practices* on ignoring the bodily changes and continuously emphasizing the soul instead of the body, and regulating detailed orders on female body, Iran’s government has been successful in making the female bodies as *docile bodies* specifically in teen years and puberty period. Iranian girls at those years prefer to hide their bodily developments as much as possible. The dominant *power* manipulates the female body in a way that teen girls decide to hide their own bodies because by mentioned disciplinary practices, they internalize the necessity of behaving and gesturing in some certain ways that the power determines.

## The Female Body and Family Background

Stories we tell about our lives define who we are as individuals, within particular families, cultures and historical period (Fivush, 2008, p. 50). When children begin to talk about the past, parents provide most of the content and structure of the narratives, with children participating mainly and by confirming or repeating what the parents say (Hudson, 1990).

My participants were obviously affected by their families in reacting to the social order. Specifically, if they grew up in the liberal families that did not force them to be veiled in the private spaces, they did not suffer the social norms regarding female as much as who had kind of religious or traditional families. All of them reacted to the imposition of *hijab* in the public sphere, but some of them like Niosha, did not bother so much because she saw the veiling as “a kind of uniform” for Iran’s society. She has a liberal family that never imposed any ideas regarding her body or sexuality, so the broader social structures did not bother her and she interpreted the veiling as a uniform for women in the public sphere. For example, Nazanin, 26 years old, explains how her family has had many co-ed parties in the house all weekends and her parents started dancing before the guests. Although she expresses that she did not care about her headscarf and most of the time it was not around her head when driving and most of the time she complained of “this piece of fabric”, she did not question the situation or challenge it directly.

On the other hand, families have undeniable influence on the women I interviewed. The norms and values their parents tried to internalize in their daughters remained into their near 30s. Farnoosh is 24 and living in Vancouver more than a year and a half. She mentions that although she could not categorize her own family as “religious”, she was not allowed to wear a skirt when she was a little girl, because according to her father, she “sat down inappropriately”. She notes that “I learned not to wear a skirt, because I couldn’t sit down as a ‘lady’. So I didn’t have any skirt when I was a little kid.” She mentions that being veiled and covering hair

was not important for her family but at the same time there were some strict rules for other parts of the body.

My dad was so sensitive about my legs. If I had a shirt with really close collar, he didn't care, but if I had a short skirt, he wanted my mom to ask me to change my skirt... He never hinted to me directly; he asked my mom to tell me. The only time I remember he said something to me on my clothing was when I wore a skirt and sat in a way that my skirt came up my legs. He called me and asked me to sit next to him and when I sat he tried to make my skirt tidy (Farnoosh, Interview, March, 30, 2010).

She explains that she no longer wears the short skirt often because she feels that she is not "comfortable in the short skirt". Additionally, when she talks about buying clothes in Canada, she says that "there is an internal voice reminding me not to buy revealing clothes. When asked which kind of voice, the answer is that: "a voice like my mother's voice when I wanted to buy clothes".

Saba has grown up in a religious family where the girls were covered in family gatherings and if women wanted to dance in a party, they had to arrange separate parties from men's parties in order to dance freely. Saba says that although when she entered the university at the age eighteen, she did not believe in religious codes on veiling anymore, she kept her *hijab* in the family gatherings. She preferred not to show her new beliefs on the *hijab* to her family because if she wanted to be unveiled, it was something weird in her family atmosphere. I ask her what the benefits were for her to remain veiled in the family gathering. She mentions the "cost of judgment of the family members". She says:

If I wanted to be different from my veiled female family members, I put myself in the center of their questions, so because of their reactions, I decided to behave not so much different from the dominant behavior to the family... I am kind of conservative person and other one's judgment and gaze

is important to me and I prefer not to be center of other people's talking and questioning all the time (Saba, Interview, March 17, 2010).

The religious families are often defined as "conservative" in addition to traditional. The way Saba's family think and behave affected her so that she categorizes herself as a "conservative" individual who prefers not to be questioned and judged by other immediate family members. Because in the family it is so *costly* that does not worth to behave freely according to her beliefs.

Sophia mentions another aspect of her family influence on her approach to sexuality and the female body. After finishing the interview, Sophia expresses her worries that she probably did not answer my questions properly because she "has never been educated to think about these issues." She expresses her surprise and raises this question that why in spite of having a "liberal family", they have never talked to her about these issues. In her writing, she describes more what she means:

If I was going to do (write a letter to her own body) as I was told and answer this question, maybe I'd tell you that I was never told how to do this. How to connect with my body, I never thought it was appropriate to delve within my sexuality and explore it. Maybe I would say that ever since I became a woman-the day I got my period-I was asked to hide it from everyone. No one was comfortable talking about it and so I became uncomfortable ... (Sophia, writing).

## **The Female Body and Memory**

When I asked my participants to explain about their feelings and events from their childhood or teen years, they recalled many fantastic and significant memories from those times. Memory in general, and autobiographical memory in particular,

“is constructed in social interactions in which particular events, and particular interpretations of events, are highlighted, share negotiated and contested, leading to fluid dynamic representations of the events of our lives that function to define self, other and the world” (Fivush, 2008, p.50). Robyn Fivush argues that autobiographical memories differ from what happened in the past. In fact, they are “evaluative and interpretative information” that transforms a memory from a simple recounting of what took place to “reminiscing” about what the event means. Therefore, I narrate those autobiographical memories more precisely in order to catch the meaning of the events. It is particularly worthwhile, because the participants became excited by their own memories and after narrating those memories, they started to “interpret” the content and explain why they recall those special memories at that specific time.

Scholars who engage in critical studies of memory debate the relationship between history and memory. They often point out the dismissal of memory in the traditional discipline of history and examine how private memories have been eradicated in nation-building projects to create a master narrative about a nation’s past (Nora, 1989, p.8). I argue that although the government has tried to create this kind of master narrative, my participants’ narratives of their private memories resist this very master narrative. Annette Kuhn proposes four primary elements that memory work normally contains; memory work 1) involves an active staging of memory; 2) takes a questioning attitude to the past and its (re)reconstruction through memory; 3) questions the transparency of what is remembered; and 4) takes what is remembered as material for interpretation (Kuhn, 2000, p. 186). Here, the memory constitutes “the very process of self construction,” or “ the production of subjectivities” (Steedman, 2000, p. 25). As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, autobiographical telling is a “performative act” in which the process of textualizing life stories cause the narrator’s subjectivities to emerge in the construction of the “narrated ‘I’” (Smith and Watson, 2001, pp. 60-61).

Sophia was one of the participants that started our interview while one of her memories when she was around eight years old. She recalls that she went shopping with her father in a grocery store. She stood near to the counter and watched the chocolates when the shopkeeper wanted to go out. When he passed her, he tried to push his body to Sophia's body while passing. Then her father saw the scene and came to the store, got angry and shouted to her to go to the car right now. She says that she did not share the story with anybody else and just thought that she did something wrong that caused her father to be annoyed but at the time she was sure that because she was a "girl" her father treated her in that way (Sophia, Interview, April 2, 2010).

Setara recalls a memory that happened many times in her teen years when she escaped from school's small mosque to avoid "collective prayer". When she was in the middle school, the principal forced all students to pray collectively every day. She says she hid somewhere and if the principal found her and asked her to go for praying; she went and chose the closest place to the exit. When everyone started praying, she escaped from there.

Roxana remembers that it was her first Christmas in Vancouver far from her own family. Her father came to Canada to be with her a few weeks. They set up a Christmas tree and her father started to capture a film of Roxana in order to show to the other family members in Iran. She says that:

I wore a short skirt on that day and my father was moving the camera around the room. When he captured me, he said that 'this is my beautiful girl with her short skirt. Although her dressing is fantastic right now, she wears "armor" when she goes to the university'. My father is proud of me but when I wear armor not a short skirt. He admires me when I behave like a man, not like a woman. (Roxana, Interview, March, 28, 2010)

Aida had an experience at the age of 12. The experience was so vivid to her mind that she says she exactly remembers the street, time and all details related to that

day. She was waiting for her father in one of the central streets of Tehran with her aunt. Drivers passed and honked their horns at them. She says that “I didn’t understand why they beep horn for us. Then when a car passed and the driver honked the horn, I was telling the driver that we don’t need any taxi, we are waiting for my dad.” Her aunt told her that they thought about them in the *other way*. In Iran, it is a very common reaction by male drivers to beep the horn and offer a free driving when they see a woman stands in the street waiting for a taxi or other public transit. When a man offers free driving to a woman, he implies he asks for something sexual from the woman. He expects to receive *something* for driving, which is definitely not money. This behavior annoys women so much because they believe that those drivers are seeking for prostitutes and see all women in the public sphere as the potential prostitutes that they can offer them sex at any time. Aida continues:

When my dad arrived, I sat in the car and started crying heavily and saying to my aunt that why those drivers thought in that way about us... I was so annoyed because of that day and the memory is so bothering to me even after 17 years.

This public sphere is annoying to Iranian woman because they are abused verbally and physically right there. I will discuss the matter more in the following section.

## **The Female Body and the Public Sphere**

According to Alexande Balasescu in his anthropological work, *Paris Chic, Tehran Thrill; Aesthetic Bodies, Political Subjects*, “In Tehran, the body, and the female body in particular, is represented in an immobile position. In public spaces one can easily observe the immobility of women, their restraint in movements and gestures.” (p. 264). He also observes women’s preference for “invisibility” in streets, shared taxis,

public transportation, and parks (p. 163). Amir-Ebrahimi confirms this observation and mentions that:

Invisibility in Iranian urban spaces finds dual and contradictory meanings. In Western societies, the visibility of people brings about public security in urban spaces. For Iranian women ... public visibility was equal to insecurity and to being subjected to constant control by others (2006, p. 459).

Aida says that when you are walking in the public spheres in Iran you are always reminded that “you are a woman”. Haug notes that “in every social situation women can feel themselves reduced to their bodies” (2000, p. 164). Therefore, women attempt to escape from the notice by appearing not fully feminine, “by becoming disembodied” (ibid, p. 163). She is not the only one who mentions this fact, most of the interviewees confirmed that they felt being a woman in Iran more than in Canada. What does it mean? How a special place can make your sexuality more visible than another place does? Aida explains it more:

You feel you are a woman all the time you’re walking in the street. You have to stare to the ground and avoid looking at males’ eyes... you can absolutely feel the males’ ‘gaze burden’... you have to watch where your eyes are going cause if your eyes contacts a male’ eyes in the street, he would definitely say something... everybody thinks that he has the permission to scrutinize your body from head to toe and estimates your availability; even if they don’t suggest anything, you can figure out when they mean from their style of gazing... (Aida, Interview, March, 14, 2010).

And in her letter, she writes on her emotions in this regard:

The street is dark. The man’s shadow gets closer to me. I say to myself he is just an old man but my imagination cannot reduce my increasing heart beat. I try to walk faster and the shadow gets closer faster and faster. He calls me: Ms... Does he call me? The second time he says louder: sweetie... I wished I was a bird, or a stone, or the soil, or whatever else but the woman he is calling right now. I run at the fastest speed of my whole life. I run and run.

When I arrive home, it takes me several hours to breathe normally... (Aida, writing)

Fearing the males' gaze in the public sphere is one of the common themes among the participants. They feel they are annoyingly observed in the public sphere. It is a concept that Foucault developed in the idea of the *Panopticon*. According to Foucault, modern societies use a different approach to instill obedience compared to pre-modern world. This approach is encapsulated in the *Panopticon*. The *Panopticon* was a proposed "modern" prison design in which a single prison guard could see anywhere in the prison, but the prisoners could never tell if the guard was watching them. Similarly, Foucault argues that workers in factories and students in schools come to believe that they are always under surveillance and therefore come to accept the rules and to discipline themselves (Foucault, 1979, pp. 195-6).

Sophia explains she is bothered so much in the street especially because she has been outgoing and liked to be out of home most of the time. I can categorize her as a "beautiful woman". When she entered the Starbucks Café at downtown Vancouver, I was pretty surprised. She had fantastic curly light brown long hair scattering around her face and came to her chest. This wild light brown hair with her attractive green eyes made an eye-catching image of her appearance. Therefore, she seems has been in the centre of the male's gaze in the public naturally more than other women have. She says:

When I went out, I worried so much. I didn't understand the meanings of the gazes at the beginning and became scared... that whenever I went to the street, somebody followed me in a car. It was terrible... I didn't feel safe at all... but little by little I didn't feel scared anymore, I felt kind of deeply worried... in recent years when somebody stares at me in the street or tells me something, I start annoying and raising my voice.

**Me:** Now you're telling me these things, how do you feel? How you can analyze that annoying feeling about males who stare at you?

**Sophia:** If I want to analyze why I do it, I have to say that I have a series of fears; I am frightened in some special situations. For example, I am frightened to be alone with a man in an elevator, because I don't trust men. I always ask myself why I feel in this way... then I browse my many memories from childhood that bothered me a lot... it's interesting... if I want to get a taxi in Iran, firstly I check doors and windows to see if I can open them easily... Nothing happened so far but the combination of many experiences in the public spheres makes me feel frightened. (Sophia, Interview, April, 2, 2010).

Farnoosh suffered from society obligations on women as well. She shares her feelings when she became physically mature and had to be covered and veiled in the public sphere:

I remember that I hated that the society imposed some rules on me. It was on my nerves actually... I thought it was my own body... in our religious text book we were trained that women have to be veiled in the public to be safe from males' gaze...and I always ask why I have to be covered? Hey man! Don't look at me! I was complaining all the time that why I have to tolerate many hardships in the public to make men to live easily and freely...

Being judged in the public is the main fact of Saba's discussion on feeling as a woman in public sphere in Iran. She is 23 and married for almost two years. She has been in Vancouver from August 2009. She says that she "disliked" her own body in Iran because she was constantly judged by her body and the style of her clothing. Balasescu in *Paris Chic, Tehran Thrill*, notes that "the look on others' faces in Iran is a source of constant control of one's own appearance and actions". According to Shahshahani (in press), concern about others' judgments is a factor that explains social behavior in Iran, and it constitutes a strong control mechanism with political consequences. Interestingly, Kostash also notes the influence of teenage girls' peers who reproduce the desirable style in wearing and being fashionable (p. 176).

If your stomach was bigger because of the fat, you had to wear a clothes to hide that part of your body...people looked at you in a badly bothering way... I mean that... your body is a part of your personality in Iran and when people looked at your body, they judged your personality. (Saba, Interview, March, 17, 2010).

Maryam says that she is always ready to be attacked in the street. She emphasizes that she will not react physically. She remembers:

I was in the middle school age and it was winter. When I got off the school bus it was dark. The school bus stopped at the end of our avenue and I had to walk home for a few minutes... I was walking and my back pack was on my shoulder while I felt that a young man jumped on me from behind. I collected all my powers in my teeth and bit his hand. I bit strongly and then he released me... if I didn't bite him, I don't what would have happened to me. I went home and said nothing to my mom because I thought I would make her worry. It took me 10 years to share that experience with my mom. (Maryam, Interview, March 26, 2010).

Setara recalls a memory how in a public place, in the university, that bothered her so much. She explains that she had a beautiful friend. Once, it was a holy month of Ramadan and her hair was revealed from her veiling. Then one of the "religious" classmates told her that "the male students in the class say that when they see your hair, they lost their fast"<sup>27</sup>. She laughs and adds: "Can you imagine?! What should happen that a male lost his fast?" She says "my mind was obsessed for almost a week. I thought about the event every day and then you think that what will happen

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<sup>27</sup> In Islam, fasting for a month is an obligatory practice during the holy month of Ramadan, from dawn until the dusk. Muslims are prohibited from eating, drinking (including water), and engaging in sexual activity. If somebody is aroused sexually, he will not be able to continue his fasting. When my participant says that the male classmates may lose their fasting, she means that they are aroused sexually by looking at that female classmate's hair.

to me in the future in this society? I was scared of my future at that time and I tolerated so much stress...”

Niloo, 23, who came to Vancouver just three months before our interview, explains that she went to the university with much stress every day because she liked to wear clothes categorized by university officials as “inappropriate”. So she felt the people’s gaze. She says that she “couldn’t wear short *mantau* in days she had to stay out till the darkness of the night” because she did not feel safe at nights in the street and felt anxiety. She smiles and says “whenever I walked in the street, I had a big frown”! (Niloo, Interview, March, 30, 2010).

What the participants complain about in public sphere in Iran is what Foucault explains by the term *surveillance*. This *surveillance* imposes on female bodies by *disciplinary actions*. By normalizing some type of clothing that covers the whole female body and making huge propaganda via state-run media, schools and all educational institutions and even writing on the cities walls, the government during more than thirty years, made society members gaze at each other and evaluate how much the others transgress the current norms. Gradually, women decided to avoid those gazes and try to be “appropriate”. Therefore, they employ some strategies and techniques to seem to be following the *disciplines* in order to avoid punishment by the society. Consequently, although the *surveillance* begins from the “outside”, through the disciplinary gaze of guards, part of its effectiveness relies on moving “inside” through the self-monitoring of the individual being watched (McLean, 2002, p. 108).

## **Iranian Women, the Female Body, and Canada**

It can be assumed that when Iranian women leave their homeland, they are not under the same pressure of the society’s gaze and judgment. Is it right to assume

that release from that pressure lead Iranian immigrant women to relate differently with their bodies and perceive them as a beautiful object?

When I was in Iran, I had a small mirror in my room that I could see just my face in it. I didn't need an over-sized mirror because I had to cover all my body and my face was the only place which could be exposed, so I didn't care how I looked. When I came to Canada... I don't know what happened that I felt I really need an over-sized mirror... you know... I felt that ... I need it to look at my body as a whole... (Roxana, Interview, March, 28, 2010).

Roxana, a 30-year-old Philosophy Master's student starts our conversation with the story of the mirror in Iran and Canada. Mentioning her need for a bigger mirror, she tried to explain how her perception on her own body changed after arriving in Canada. She says that her point of focus from her face transferred to her whole body and now she does care which kind of personality her whole body image implies. She talks more about her bodily experience in Canada. She explains that she did not have any skirt in the first months of being in Canada. After a while she finds out that she feel extremely comfortable in wearing a skirt. When in the second semester she decided to wear a skirt at the university she felt she was scared. I ask her what made her frightened of wearing a skirt. She explains:

Well... I guess I didn't want people to think that she is changing very soon... especially in our department there is no Iranian but me and I didn't want people to think that I was in the process of discovering my identity here... so I was so conservative... though I loved to wear a skirt...

**Me:** Are you wearing a skirt at the university?

**Roxana:** Yes and I am so comfortable right now.

**Me:** What happened to you? All your fears were gone?

**Roxana:** You know what happened? It was in summer and I tried to wear different kind of skirts out of the campus, then I became totally comfortable myself with the concept of skirt. Then I wore it at the Campus... then I saw nobody even looked at me... and if somebody looked at me, I wouldn't have cared about the gazes anymore. (Interview, March, 28, 2010)

One of Simon Fraser University's Master's students, Nicole Bailey, worked on Iranian immigrant women in Vancouver and focused more on women's reasons for leaving Iran. In her thesis, *Vancouver; Iranian Women Migrants in Vancouver*, she explains about the *changing standards and appearance* of Iranian women after immigration in Vancouver. She notes competing values and differing standards of what constitutes appropriate behavior in terms of clothing and appearances have created divisions between some Iranian women living in Vancouver. She argues that these values are informed by the religious beliefs and cultural background of these women, and in some cases they cut across these divides. The perception of change among some women and maintenance of tradition by others with regard to expressions of gender identity and sexuality, demonstrate some of the tensions that have arisen amongst Iranian women. She adds that "the existence of these divisions suggests that some Iranian women resisted the gender identities prescribed for them by their families and the larger Iranian population in Vancouver, but others continued to embrace them." (p. 96)

This fact that woman are not in the centre of the public gaze in Canada, is one of the common themes which most of the participants pointed out. As I mentioned earlier, one of the most bothering public sphere features for women in Iran was the male gaze which they feel that it is not present in the public sphere in Canada. As a result, they feel more comfortable in their new place. Saba says: "Canada is not the same as Iran. I can do my hair or decide not to do it. I can dress up or not. In fact, nobody cares what I'm doing and I don't care myself as well and I feel more comfortable... I couldn't accept the shape of my own body in Iran but here I've accepted it" (Interview, March, 17, 2010).

Kostash, a Canadian feminist scholar, in *No Kidding* investigates teenage girls sexuality. She points out that they are proud of their sex and they realize that “there is more than one way to be feminine” (p. 175). She expresses that teenage girls feel it is an advantage to be a female rather than a male because “they have the chance to do all those ‘fun’ things, like doing up their hair and buying shoes and looking for the perfume that express their personality”. (p. 176) Do Iranian immigrant women feel this advantage? Do they do all these “fun” things? Do they assume these activities are “fun”? Farnoosh does not think so. She does not feel the kind of freedom in Canada that other participants mentioned. She believes that there is a strong pressure on women in Canada and Western popular culture to be fit, slim, and dressed up every day. As Kostash states, “the body is the zone of female anxiety”. She mentions that “regardless of [female] active accomplishments and success in the world, their female worthiness rests in the approximation of their body to the current feminine ideal” (p. 178). Is it a similar feeling for young immigrant women? Do they perceive this anxiety in the new society? This is the central point of Farnoosh’s argument. Being in Canada was not as liberating as for other participants. She says:

I have some limitations on clothes I wear here in Canada. I mean that I can’t choose to wear whatever I like. A garment can be gorgeous but at the same time revealing... I feel there is voice in my mind instead of my mother’s voice...so I probably like a shirt or dress but I pay special attention which message I am transferring by my clothes.

**Me:** This continuous attention on what to buy and how to wear bothers you or you have an inner voice?

**Farnoosh:** ah... well... It sometimes bothers me. I even argue about it with one of my male friends. I ask him to comment on some of my clothes... you know... the prettier a dress is the more revealing the dress is, at least here in Canada...

**Me:** Do you like to be able to release your mind from this “mother-like voice” that order you what to buy and what not to buy?

**Farnoosh:** Well... Yeah... probably... I think if I get married, I will be released.

**Me:** Why? Do you think the message associated with revealing dress is searching for a good case for marriage?

**Farnoosh:** Yeah... If I get married, my revealing dress won't be associated with that concept.

**Me:** Do you think a revealing dress in Canada connotes that meaning as well? Or you mean Iranian community in Vancouver think in this way?

**Farnoosh:** In Iranian community it's definitely like that... I think even in this society there are some rules or codes as what we had in Iran... for example people who are more religious or more conservative in Canada think that women who wear revealing dresses try to get other's attention.

**Me:** So you mean that you don't wear a revealing dress here as well.

**Farnoosh:** No, I don't wear. I mean that ... I don't buy a short skirt or a shirt with very open collar.

**Me:** Do you feel that you would like to wear a revealing dress?

**Farnoosh:** I'd like to but I think there is a link between more covered clothes and “better” clothes...

**Me:** When you came to Canada was there any change in your perception of your own sexuality?

**Farnoosh:** I don't know exactly... I haven't thought about it much...but I guess here women's beauty is more important than it is in Iran... seems that... women have a strong tendency to be more beautiful than in Iran... and

I guess I am affected by this trend... I mean that now it's an obsession for me to do my hair, change all my clothing...

**Me:** you mean that you feel public gaze here more than Iran?

**Farnoosh:** I think that this society's expectation of woman {of being always perfect} is higher than what I experienced before.

**Me:** Does it bother you?

**Farnoosh:** yeah... I guess it is changed my life's priorities ... and I don't like it... I think being perfect in my appearance is not as important as my personality

**Me:** Do you see this expectation of perfection just on women or do you see it on men as well?

**Farnoosh:** Well... I think... maybe... I think.... There is pressure on men as well... If I want to find the root of this expectation, I guess this society tries to make people be consumerist more and more... what bothers me in this society 'as a woman' is that paying more than usual attention to my appearance is disgusting... in this situation, I think my personality can be forgotten easily and people don't look at me as a human firstly, they look at me as an individual with a sexuality -here, a woman- and expect me to be perfect and beautiful every single day (Interview, March 30, 2010).

Interestingly, she is the only participant who complains of a strong social pressure on women to be fit, slim, and dressed up in Canada. The other participants feel more freedom in Canada compared with Iran. Many western feminists develop Foucault's ideas about the female bodies and argue how women internalize men's social expectations regarding female appearance and behavior and then strive to meet those expectations, through such "disciplinary practices" as dieting and cosmetic surgeries. Sandra Lee Bartky is a feminist philosopher, who extends Foucault's discussion on disciplinary practices; points out that cosmetics and fashion are

disciplines that the society associates them to the female body. In *Foucault, Feminism and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, Bartky extends Foucault's argument on disciplinary society to women and illuminates how cultural norms transform women into properly feminine bodies. She categorizes those specific-gender disciplinary practices on women into three groups. First, practices that intends to transfer the female body into specific shape and size. Second, practices that obtain a certain selection of gestures and third, practices that encourage bodily adornment. Her analysis demonstrates how cultural norms via medical institutions and popular culture (media, advertising, etc.) reinforce disciplinary practices on the female body (Bartky, 2008, pp. 78-82).

Susan Bordo illustrates another perspective on feminist interpretation of Foucault's notion that the body is the site of cultural inscription. She identifies two levels that cultural practices exert power over bodies; first, the body as the text of culture which refers to the ways our bodies affected by social practices changes and second, the body as the practical locus of social control (Bordo, 1993).

Although these feminists argue about internalizing disciplinary actions on females bodies in the western societies, my participants who came from Iran, have still not realized this very social pressure on women in Canada as one of those western societies. They mostly feel more freedom in Canada than in Iran. The first reason might come in mind is that they are newcomers in Canada and are not aware of the deeper layers of the society and those disciplinary actions imposed on the female body. What are obligatory and disciplinary practices on female bodies in Canada and Iran are different. In Iran, those actions are obviously imposed on clothing and covering the whole body while in Canada, *disciplinary practices* are imposed more in the psychological level for women. Women feel anxious if they do not follow social and cultural norms on being slim and well-dressed.

Sophia, who has the longest experience living in Canada compared with other participants, describes how angry she had been about her position in Iran as a woman, especially because she came to Canada at the age of ten and came back to Iran at the age fifteen and stayed there till nineteen. She says that she adapted to the Canadian society in the beginning of teen years and being back to Iran evoked many awful memories. She says that when she came back to Canada again at the age of nineteen, she felt more comfortable with her own body and “that I was bothered if somebody gazed at me was solved. I don’t care anymore and now when I travel to Iran I am not bothered in the public sphere.”

**Me:** What happened? Do you think it was a natural process of your life or it was the result of the living in Canada?

**Sophia:** I guess it’s the result of being here {in Canada} because ... I don’t know how I can explain it... honestly, I haven’t thought about it much...but... but... every human being is free and I think what you like to wear is one of your fundamental rights, that Iran takes this right from you and makes you remain unbalanced... I think Canada gives me my own natural right back to me; which I was deprived of in my own country. ... Now, nobody can take from me this natural right... probably it’s because of it that I feel comfortable...

**Me:** Do you think this new society gave you your right?

**Sophia:** Yeah... I think Canada return my own right back to me.

**Me:** So seems you feel more powerful here in Canada.

**Sophia:** Exactly... Exactly... That’s right.

**Me:** because you have to be powerful enough to not to pay attention to other people judgment.

**Sophia:** Exactly... I know my current attitude is because of my immigration to Canada... I am sure if I remained in Iran, I couldn't be so comfortable to my own sexuality or my body... I am very grateful of my style of thinking right now (Sophia, Interview, April 2, 2010).

She articulates that discussion in her written piece more precisely and makes a comparison of being in Canada and Iran as a woman:

I became more comfortable with my body when I was in Canada at the age of 14. Maybe I'd tell you of the day that I bought my first bra and how excited I was to share this with my friends. Maybe I'd tell you that I had come into reconciliation with my body after living in Canada for some years. After some time, I liked to look pretty and learnt how to treat my body. I was satisfied and felt free to explore my curiosity. I loved the feeling of growing as a woman. I could share the rest of my life story with you and tell you that I moved back to Iran and was once again forced to ignore my body and its desires.

Maybe I should talk about how I came to dislike myself as a woman, because of the transparent discrimination in my country and blamed it all on my body and on myself. I ignored my body and did not pay attention to it. Maybe I'd say how I was finally able to deal with all the pressure of being a woman when I moved back to Canada at the age of 22. Maybe I'd tell you about a time where I was laying down on a bench in public with a skirt and fell asleep when I was unexpectedly awoken by a touch of a stranger on my ankle who was trying to look beneath my skirt. Maybe I'd tell you how appalling and nostalgic that felt and how it made me resent my body once again. (Sophia, writing)

Aida remembers an interesting experience about a contradictory situation in Canada compared with Iran. She says that she was a teaching assistant for a course and once she had a pretty long eye-contact with one the students. When eye contact

continued, the student apologized for that. She says: “He apologized to me because he looked at me for a long time. It was really interesting to me... Then I thought okay, here in Canada, people behave in this way. People don’t enter your privacy but when you are walking in the streets in Iran, everybody wants to estimate your availability (Aida, Interview, March 14, 2010).

Nazanin, a 26-year-old PhD student, who are living with her boyfriend, expresses that her father is not satisfied that she is living with a man out of the official marriage. She thinks that she never had a chance in Iran to have a boyfriend and to make love with him freely.

I need to emphasize the last point regarding the concept of freedom expressed by Iranian women in Vancouver. When participants talk about freedom in Canada, they do not mean freedom as an abstract concept per se. Because our conversations focused more on the juxtaposition of Iran and Canada and how they feel in these two different locations, their arguments were based on the *comparison*. When they believe in more freedom in wearing clothes and connecting to their female bodies in Canada, they compare the current situation with Iran when the government decides all the details regarding the female body. They feel that they have more *personal choices* on how to connect to their own bodies and how to enjoy life. This very personal choice is a key concept to realize why they feel more freedom in Canada than in Iran. If a woman in a western society *chooses* not to be slim, or not to follow the fashion, or not to wear high heels, nobody directly reprimands her. This woman might feel psychologically anxious about it but she does not encounter direct and harsh government reactions. However, there is no choice for an Iranian woman to be unveiled in the public sphere. She *has to* be veiled or else according to the Law, she has to tolerate 74 lashes in the prison. Therefore, the concept of freedom in my participants’ words is a *relative* notion which should be interpreted based on the social, cultural, and political circumstances of each country.

## CONCLUSION

Here I will share some of my findings on the female body among young Iranian women born after the Islamic Revolution and living in Vancouver right now. In a general view, the female body was not a “big deal” for *all* of the research participants in my generation, as I had initially expected it would be. This was thought-provoking to me. Why have I been struggling with this issue from the first moment of entering Canada as a new place of living, while my peers do not find the subject worthy of attention? To be honest, I have not found a convincing answer to my question yet. Although I have some answers, none of them absolutely satisfies me. One possible answer might be that choosing Women’s Studies as my field of study made me more sensitive to *women’s issues* than other young Iranian women are. But as I mentioned in the Introduction, the obsession started from the moment I entered the Vancouver International Airport before attending any course in Women’s Studies, though I accept that being a Women’s Studies student intensified the emotions, obsessions, and definitely questions related to my own sexuality and my female body.

Although most of the participants did not deeply engage with the discussion around the female body or challenge the common silence around this notion, the process of interviewing was thought-provoking and engaging for most of them. I am glad that my research topic could provide an opportunity for them to concentrate on their own sexuality and encourage them to think about the female body even if briefly in the course of our conversations. The interest on this topic was palpable among my interviewees: almost half of them wanted to know what the other participants had expressed in response to my interview questions. Four of them showed interest in developing our relationship as a friendship and asked me to hang

out more and talk about the research topic more and exchange ideas. I have met each of them at least twice since the initial interviews to share thoughts and emotions that pre-occupy me. One of them sent me two emails and asked me when I would publish a paper on my research because she was interested to know what would be the outcome of my thesis. Their interest in the topic was also considerable when I read other participants' pieces, which apparently helped them better organize their ideas on the subject and become more engaged in the topic. This was a process of "awakening" for them, which I am satisfied with. If the result of my research is engaging the women of my generation to pay more attention to their own sexuality and consider the structure of sexuality in the society where they have grown up, I have gained one of my goals as a *feminist* researcher.

I discussed some themes in the Chapter Four in analyzing the content of the interviews more precisely. I argued that the puberty years have been a big deal for most of the participants. They remembered puberty years as the period of time full of shame and fear. Most of them were not comfortable with their bodily developments, especially the breasts and tried to hide their breasts as much as possible in order to prevent other classmates or friends in their age from seeing those changes and finding out that they had become mature. Menstruation was another bodily change that women I interviewed, saw as contaminating and embarrassing, mostly because of the education on menstruation in the schools. I pointed out that with *disciplinary practices* on ignoring the bodily changes and continuously emphasizing on the soul instead of the body, and regulating detailed orders on female body, Iran's government has been successful in making female bodies as *docile bodies* specifically in teen years and puberty period. Iranian girls at those years prefer to hide their bodily developments as much as possible.

One of my significant findings was that the concept of the female body was tightly interwoven with the notions of memory and place. I analyzed the interviews based on the memories recalled by the participants and argued that many considerable facts can be concluded from the very memories. Interestingly, those

memories were interconnected to the concept of the place, especially the public sphere. In fact, when the participants recalled a memory about the female body, that memory had occurred in the public sphere. Therefore, I argued specifically about public sphere in Iran and how women are treated in the public sphere. In this regard, I mentioned fearing the male gaze and continued into Foucault's notions on *Panopticon* and *surveillance*.

I also discussed how young Iranian women feel about Iran and Canada regarding sexuality and the female body as two very different locations. Most of them expressed more freedom in Canada compared with Iran. This idea has been challenged by many feminist scholars who argue that western societies impose well-designed disciplinary practices on the female body via fashioning, dieting, cosmetic surgeries, and so on. They believe that these disciplines which are internalized by women in the western societies and are reinforced by popular culture, make women lose their power gradually. But I illuminated that despite those feminists' ideas, Iranian women feel more freedom in Canada compared with Iran.

One of the most fascinating parts of completing this research was the application of a "western" theoretical framework to the subject of my study. When I reviewed Foucault's notions on discipline, docile bodies, power relations, and resistance, I was amazed by the applicability of his conceptual framework to the very circumstances of Iran after the Islamic Revolution regarding sexuality and the female body; it was almost as if the Islamic regime in Iran had followed Foucault's framework word by word in order to create a disciplinary society characterized by docile female bodies.

As the results of my interviews, there are two related arguments that I would like to develop more fully in order to adapt Foucault's framework into the Iranian context. The first one is the concept of *resistance*, which feminists have argued Foucault did not develop extensively. If I were to create a model to conceptualize Iran's current circumstance with regards to sexuality and the female body, I would

emphasize the concept of resistance far more strongly than Foucault has. Additionally, and in the context of *disciplinary actions* placed within the power relations of contemporary Iran, I would pay specific attention to the family context in addition to the broader frames of power relations in society. One of the valuable lessons I learned from my interviews was that parents and specifically mothers had significantly greater effects on their children than the Islamic state and the larger society did. Although it is true that a family is influenced by the broader frames of the society and dominant cultural and social norms, when there were any conflicts between family values and societal values, my research participants consistently reported choosing the former over the latter.

Even though Foucault's thoughts on *surveillance* provides great insight into the inner workings of Iranian society after the Islamic Revolution, in interviewing my subjects I came to realize a significant loophole in Foucault's theory: the role of the family, particularly of mothers in educating and maintaining the social structure. To recall two instances which particularly reinforce the role of the family: the internalized voice of the mother, who reinforces modesty in clothing, in one of my participants' mind while dress shopping in Vancouver; the father's distress over his daughter's short skirt and imposition on his wife to have a talk with their daughter on the appropriateness of dress. These private and unseemingly moments draw insight into the role of the family structure in disciplinary societies. As a complex and intricate issue which requires further research and perhaps a different set of questions to be posed to interviewees, I look forward to developing and expanding these ideas in the future.

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I would like to present here some of the specific personal questions I had before starting this research. When I entered Canada some of the surprising questions that emerged for me were these: why are cultural norms so strongly attached to geographical borders and why did so many of the norms I had spent a

life time growing into become so meaningless to me when I changed my place of living? Why did crossing a geographical border affect my emotions, beliefs, and accepted norms more than my expectations? Why was it so challenging to find myself in my new context? And why have I not been able to overcome those struggles and become totally comfortable yet?

When a woman raised in a so-called Islamic country crosses a geographical border and encounters “the World”, she sees that cultural and moral values surrounding her own body are defined in a completely different way. Is there anybody who can investigate and interpret the shock that such an experience brings to the woman’s life? Nazanin, one of my research participants believes that “growing up in Iran means you are in a cage. You don’t know there is another place outside your cage. You don’t have any imagination from the outside. When you immigrate and see there are countless possibilities for lifestyles and enjoying your life, all of your past beliefs become ridiculous. You accepted them because you never were aware that there was something else to accept!” My observations confirm my interviewees’ idea that this approach to changing the collection of personal values is more obvious among Iranian women compared to Iranian men; surely the oppression of women is more obvious and tangible.

The realization that ideas around sexuality and the female body are socially and culturally constructed can be confusing and destabilizing. The problem is compounded for many immigrant women when they begin to appreciate that all other moral norms, including those basic ethics that underlie our sense of right and wrong with respect to sexuality, are also questionable. Sexuality-related norms always depend on Morality and Ethics in society for their justification, so when those norms are eradicated in one’s mind, all other associated meanings cannot remain safe. For example, when veiling is equated with feminine morality in one culture, and being honest is defined as the basis of feminine morality in another culture, imagine how confused one could get about the meanings of these words and the underlying cultural and social norms. In the process of moving between the

different contexts, the meaning of many words can be reduced to fake and counterfeit concepts.

What emotionally bothers me more than my current confusion does is that it never occurred to me to question all those norms about femininity in my society while I was there. Why did I totally forget that as a *woman* my rights were systematically ignored and intentionally dismissed? Why did I never ask why? Why was I unconscious about my own sexuality and the oppression on my body during my childhood, teenage years and adolescence? This has not been a simple intellectual process of questioning; this has been a *condition* I have been in for almost two years; a condition that is saturated by fear, frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction. This condition has been painful beyond my expectations. I wrote a piece titled "Why my traumas are not healed" in my diary almost one and a half year after entering Canada: "These days all the terrible memories from my childhood and teenage years are coming to the surface of my mind. They are reminding me of the oppressions I faced in my life as a woman and never took notice of. Time is passing and contrary to my expectations, I am not able to "forgive", instead I am full of being extorted more and more, deeper and deeper. I can't release my mind... I hate all these traumas that don't leave me alone even for a second..." (Personal Diary, Tuesday, February 16, 2010).

Maureen Canning in her book, *Lust, Anger, Love* argues that "trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence. Not only can trauma be healed but also, with appropriate guidance and support, it can be transformative. 'Trauma has the potential to be one of the most significant forces for psychological, social, and spiritual awakening and evolution' (p. 88). She is right. Trauma is painful but at the same time has a capability to bring about "spiritual awakening".

I am not sure if a trauma can ever go away or be forgotten. I am more realistic right now and try to extract the meanings of those traumas and live with them. I am also excited somehow when I recall many traumatic memories from my childhood because I never kept them in my mind and they are coming ahead from

somewhere hidden in the back of my mind. They are valuable resources for reviewing, evaluating, and redefining my own identity.

When I conducted, transcribed, reviewed, and evaluated my interviews, I was also in the first stages of my first pregnancy, and I experienced many new feelings regarding my own body. Actually, it was not just my own body; there was another body inside me reminding me of her existence all the time during the writing this thesis. When I write on my fears and frustrations, she kicks and kicks. I feel that it is her reaction to my emotions; she is telling me the world is not frightening as much as I perceive it to be. She asks me to be strong because there is another woman inside me, a woman who definitely will have the same questions and concerns on her own sexuality and identity; a woman who I need to be able to survive for and to raise despite the tremendous unanswered questions. I hope I will be able to provide circumstances in which my daughter can experience, perceive, and connect to her sexuality and more important to choose the way of life that she desires. I am writing letters for her frequently. In one of them, I wrote:

I wish I could tell you about my concerns as a woman someday... I would like you to know that these are hard days. I'm in an identity crisis and I worry about how I can be a stable, strong point for you when I sit among the ruins of my past life constructions... I would like you to know that I do want to stand up again. I would like you to know that I have experienced many different emanations since immigration... Just let you know that I am doing my best in struggling and challenging all my beliefs right now. I would like you to know that I try my best to be honest in the process of discovering my weaknesses and becoming aware of what has happened in my life.... I would like you to know that I am striving to be honest in redefining my identity as much as possible... just to know that for being an aware woman, I have suffered so much... nothing more... I just want you to know that (Personal Diary, Thursday, May 6, 2010).

I would like to conclude this last part of my thesis by Aida's last paragraph of her letter to her own body when she writes:

I have passed many ups and downs... many desires and dislikes... from struggling and ignoring to acceptance and satisfaction. I have found the world much more different from the books I have read. But I have a faith that being a woman is an art and has a stunning miracle; a miracle with the age and dignity of the existence....

## APPENDICES

### Participants' Letters to their Own Bodies

**Aida:**

*The issue might start from much sooner than my expectation; from snoopy reading in the summer in grandpa's house. From Désirée and the first eccentric sentence: "a woman can give whatever she wants from a man if she is beautiful and pleasant". As a kid, I was too novice to understand the exact meaning of those words. I guess I was 8 or 9 years old. But the words, regardless of the accuracy were windows to another world; a world that being a woman was an art and had a surprising magic.*

*Puberty years were times for sitting in front of the mirror; scrutinizing the rashes which made the beauty of my face vague, eyebrows that became gradually darker and darker, a small forehead, and the nose that was not harmonious with other parts of the face. And the body that developed every day was transformed in another shape sooner than you have time enough to examine and know it.*

*The scene of that day in Karaj's garden is completely vivid and clear in my mind even after many years. The first black evening dress, dark eye shadow behind my eyelids, the curves of the back, fashionable feminine perfume, pretty color lips, and the first admiring looks. I was a confused and vivacious girl among all those guests.*

*It was a sharp breath-taking uphill. My three companions and I got short of breath. According to our map, there remains two hours to arrive to the next place for resting. I feel the heaviness of my bag pack and sweat so much. Suddenly, I sense an awful pain in my body. I want to sit down and put my hands around my belly. I feel extremely cold. I desire to have a*

warm blanket... oh, my God! Why is it on time? I have been on time every month...

You are sitting next to me and all cars, passer bys and even the birds are crossing but you are still with me. I stare at you; restlessly for a long time. You are not able to move your eyes. Your voice is trembling when you are saying: Don't make a magic with those eyes! My inner woman smiles...

The street is dark. The man's shadow gets closer to me. I say to myself he is just an old man but my imagination cannot reduce my increasing heart beating. I try to walk faster and the shadow gets closer faster and faster. He calls me: Ms... Does he call me? The second time he says louder: sweaty... I wished I was a bird, or a stone, or the soil, or whatever else but the woman he is calling right now. I run faster than ever in my whole life. I run and run. When I arrive home, it takes me several hours to breathe normally...

I have passed many ups and downs... many desires and dislikes... from struggling and ignoring to acceptance and satisfaction. I have found the world much more different from the books I have read. But I have a faith that being a woman is an art and has a stunning miracle; a miracle with the age and dignity of the existence...

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**Sophia:**

Tell me about your relationship with your body and sexuality, you ask. About how I feel and what experiences I have had with it. Like it's no big deal, and can be done in two minutes. How am I supposed to condense myself and my body into a comfortable, enlightening and articulate page or two my entire thoughts and experiences?

If I was going to do as I was told and answer this question, maybe I'd tell you that I was never told how to do this. How to connect with my body, I never thought it was

*appropriate to delve within my sexuality and explore it. Maybe I would say that ever since I became a woman-the day I got my period-I was asked to hide it from everyone. No one was comfortable talking about it and so I became uncomfortable ...*

*If I was going to do as I was told and answer this question, maybe I'd tell you that I became more comfortable with my body when I was in Canada at the age of 14. Maybe I'd tell you of the day that I bought my first bra and how excited I was to share this with my friends. Maybe I'd tell you that I had come into reconciliation with my body after living in Canada for some years. After some time, I liked to look pretty and learnt how to treat my body. I was satisfied and felt free to explore my curiosity. I loved the feeling of growing as a woman. I could share the rest of my life story with you and tell you that I moved back to Iran and was once again forced to ignore my body and its desires.*

*Maybe I should talk about how I came to dislike myself as a woman, because of the transparent discrimination in my country and blamed it all on my body and on myself. I ignored my body and did not pay attention to it. Maybe I'd say how I was finally able to deal with all the pressure of being a woman when I moved back to Canada at the age of 22. Maybe I'd tell you about a time where I was laying down on a bench in public with a skirt and fell asleep when I was unexpectedly awoken by a touch of a stranger on my ankle who was trying to look beneath my skirt. Maybe I'd tell you how appalling and nostalgic that felt and how it made me resent my body once again.*

*I could go on to you for pages about myself and emotional experiences, but the truth is simply that I have no idea how to put myself, my essence, and my intentions into this short brief. I'd talk about how I need to eventually accept what I have experienced and transfer my thoughts onto those who care to hear. Then I could tell you about style, about humor, about grace under pressure, or maybe I'd tell you that the big things in life are more important than the little things.*

*I would paint a picture for you of a woman with depth and courage to stand alone, but still goofy, fun loving and unable to be artificial. These are the kinds of things I would say if I were to try to put myself into a tidy description. But I don't think I want to, so I guess we'll never know.*

\*

**Setara:**

*Dear Body,*

*I am glad that I am finally writing to you after these many years of being with you but neglecting to talk to you and think seriously about you. Now that I think about you, I see that we have done so many things together: we enjoyed life together, we tried to be thin and went through numerous exercises and diets together, and we tried together to be attractive but not sexually seductive.*

*My attempt not to be sexually seductive have led to many problems in sexual area for us even after marriage that we could finally overcome by talking to a therapist and reading numerous books to convince my unconscious mind that being sexually active is not a weird thing. I really do apologize for thinking that way, but you know it was inevitable in the society I was raised up and with the extremely law-abiding personality that I have.*

*I know that I am being tough to you in another way these days. The pressure on young ladies for being skinny is hurting both of us these days. I know that I am being harsh on you and endanger your health with on and off diets and exercises. I promise that I won't let you through tough diets and intermittent exercises that I know is not good for you and will*

*try to have a regular workout schedule so that I can make sure I can keep you in good shape and health.*

*After being through all this together, and let's not ignore that you were really thick skin to be able to overcome all this, I am really happy that you still are healthy and happy and in a good shape, at least in my opinion and since you are mine, that's what matters.*

*Thank you for supporting me, keep me self-confident and not letting me down even when I don't take good care of you. I prefer your health to your looks and I will try to keep you healthy.*

\*

**Saba:**

*I love my body!*

*It's not only a part of me, it's an important amount of me! I cannot think about myself without my body. That's what makes it really important for me. A large amount of my daily activities takes into account my body's advantages; I eat properly to keep it fresh and healthy, I work out to exercise my body and keep it in good shape, and I wear good clothes to emphasize its beauties and hide its imperfections.*

*As a female, my concerns about my body are mostly similar to that of males; we both like to exercise to keep our bodies healthy and to become what is considered to be pretty. We both like to wear good clothes to keep us warm/cool and also to give ourselves good looks.*

*As to say about my own body, I have always appreciated its looks and abilities. I like the fact that my body is a combination of my close relatives (mother, father, aunts, and uncles) and whenever I miss them, this is one thing that reminds me of them. I also try to use my unique abilities, the*

most important of which is my flexibility. I also like my looks, and whenever I try to change it, i.e make up my face or do my hair, I am not satisfied, and I prefer my original looks much better. (Not that I am selfish ☺ )

*This concludes my reasons for respecting and loving my body as a part of me.*

Bests,

Saba

\*

**Nazanin:**

*A letter to Nazanin's body written by her.*

*I wish you would be slimmer, but not really taller. I really don't mind the fact that you are this tall, but I hate when I touch your love handles and your pretty chubby thighs or see them in the mirror.*

*I wish you wouldn't crave chocolate this much, coz it just makes me feel so weak in terms of responding to your need of wanting chocolate. I can't resist the temptation and then weight gain is the next step you know.*

*You know it buddy that overall I am not satisfied with how you look :-)*

\*

**Roxana:**

*I talked in the interview how I considered to the social aspect of feminine sexuality in Canada more than Iran; particularly in my style in clothing, or how do my hair to be resemble to the personality that I know and like to be.*

*I talked how my father's dominant nurturing style caused me to be against the current stereotypes for women to pay attention to their face more than usual and I see that as a chain to my mind's feet. This made me to consider to my achievements and mentality so that materiality of my body ignored among all other mental involvements.*

*But I guess I didn't say that what made me to pay special attention to the materiality of my body and transferred it as an important independent topic was not leaving Iran but two other different reasons; first, my diseases (migraine and asthma) that made my body more visible because of the limitations of disease and second, bodily contact to my boyfriend that revealed the sexual dimension of my body more. So, the process of changing my perspective to my own body started before leaving Iran.*

*According to this question that how changing my place of living and being in Canada affected my approach to my own body, I need to say that regardless of cultural differences (more general freedom in wearing desirable clothes, not being in the centre of males' gaze, and variety in choosing clothing styles) what was more important to me to affect my perception to my own body was the opportunity to contemplate the topic. It was kind of detachment from rules, deeply personal deliberation, and intellectual semi-leisure that were the results of a huge change in people I communicate with, events I encountered, and the language I spoke in.*

*My suspension was pretty deeper than my other Iranian friends I found here in Canada. Because I didn't have any Iranian friend in the first year of entering Canada and consequently I had a feeling of complete detachment from my*

*past. It led me to look at myself far from any comparisons to other Iranian women here.*

*It was a productive amazing privacy for me; it brought me new motivations for working and writing, and also new dimensions for looking at the issues which have been in my mind for a long time. So, for me, arriving to a new place was a great opportunity to contemplate and focus on my personal issues and this chance of concentrating was more influential to me than the cultural differences between Iran and Canada.*

\*

**Maryam:**

*I have a good relation to my hair. I might love it more than all other parts of my body. I always care about it and try not to bother it... Wherever I go, everybody compliment on you and I am proud of you, my beautiful hair. I am cautious not to burn you with hairdryer... I am appreciated that you are so beautiful for the parties, university, and working place so that everybody asks me how I do my hair every day. All tell me to be appreciated of you... I love the natural curve of my dark hair...*

*My hair! You are so beautiful that everyone asks me how I do it every day... They ask me to be proud of you...*

*Long time ago, I thought I have a kind of weak eyelashes. When I was friend with Majid {her current husband} he called them '6 meters' and now I am calling my eyelashes 'my dear 6 meters'." I sat in front of the mirror and gazed at them and talk to them for a couple of months. I never paid attention to my nose and did not know that it was beautiful.*

# Consent Form

Women's Studies Department

Simon Fraser University

## INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECT

### TO PARTICIPATE IN A MASTER THESIS RESEARCH

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Simon Fraser University subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to protection of the interest, comfort and safety of participants at all times.

As part of SFU Women's Studies Master's program, Maryam Kiani is conducting a study which seeks to explore Muslim immigrant women's experience of embodiment and beautification. Part of this research involves asking persons to participate in interviews. Professional training in the social sciences includes recognizing the researcher's ethical responsibilities in the social sciences in relation to all people who provide data for research. These responsibilities involve an obligation to protect the interests, comfort, and safety of research participant at all times. It is paid attention to participant's rights to voluntary participation. Confidentiality can be assured only in respect to "the law".

The interview will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to complete and a digital audio recorder will be used in order to keep record all the details of the conversation. If you choose to participate in this study, you may withdraw, in part or in full at any time. You may at any time, for whatever reason, request that the researcher turn off the recorder. Additionally, you reserve the right to refuse to respond to any question you do not wish to answer, without explanation. The information provided from this interview will become part of a written thesis. Knowledge of your identity is not required for the purpose of this research. Although your signature is required for this consent form, the researcher may use a pseudonym when referring to the information you have provided. Any information obtained from this interview will be kept confidential.

Your signature on this form will signify that the student has explained the research procedures, which you have received adequate opportunity to consider any personal risks involved, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

- Having been asked by Maryam Kiani, of the Department of Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, to participate in research for master thesis, I have been informed of the research procedures.
- I am participating in an interview on ..... about my perception and experience of the female body and beautification before and after immigration to Canada, Vancouver.
- Date of the interview is on ..... at  
.....

- I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time or request to turn off the recorder or refuse to respond to one or more questions without further explanation.
- I understand that the student may use the content of the interview for completing her master thesis at Simon Fraser University and the confidentiality is guaranteed.
- I understand that I have the option to request my name is not used on the written thesis.
- I also understand that I may register any comments, questions or concerns I might have about the research with *Maryam Kiani* as a student by phone (604-726-5426) or by email ([mka60@sfu.ca](mailto:mka60@sfu.ca)) or with *Mary Lynn Stewart* as the professor and chair of Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University by phone (778-782-5479) or by email ([mstewart@sfu.ca](mailto:mstewart@sfu.ca)) .
- I also know that if I have any complaints I can refer to:  
H. Weinberg, Director. Office of Research Ethics, Simon Fraser University,  
MTF 251, 8900 Nelson Way  
Burnaby, B.C., V5A 1S6, or by phone (778 782 6593) voice, or by email ([hal\\_weinberg@sfu.ca](mailto:hal_weinberg@sfu.ca))

Please use a pseudonym when referring to the information that I have provided:

YES... NO....

Pseudonym:.....

Telephone Number:

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

WITNESS:

*You should receive one signed copy of this consent form.*

## Questionnaire

- Can you remember how you perceived your body as the female body in contrast of to the male body for the first time?
- Do you remember any memory from your childhood about your body?
- Have you lived in a family where the Islamic codes are considered and followed? Explain more about your family context.
- How did you feel when you follow the Islamic codes in the public spheres?
- Were you veiled in Iran or not? Was your way of living your family or environment's choice or it was your own choice?
- Do you feel any difference in your perception about your body after immigration?
- Did changing the social and political context affect your perception of your body?
- Do you think about and feel your body differently in public places in Canada compared with Iran?
- Now, how do you see your experiences and perceptions about your body when you were in Iran? Do you feel that way of living was better to you? Or do you prefer the current way of living?
- Are you veiled in Canada? Are you living in the religious family in Canada? Would you please explain more about your family context in Canada regarding the following Islamic codes?

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