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# Women's Portable Habitats

Z. PAMELA KARIMI

Since the development of new institutions in the late Enlightenment, the private/public spatial dichotomy in the West has broken down; as a result, public and private spaces in Western and Westernized cities have acquired similar spatial characteristics and have even become enmeshed. The prevalent dialectic of private and public allows people to define themselves simultaneously as individuals and as public citizens. In contrast, in some contemporary Muslim societies the division of public/private space is still arguably one of the most important features of spatiality and often centers on the female body.

## The veil as 'habitat'

Architects usually think of 'habitat' as a manmade space or natural environment occupied by a person or a group. A habitat can, however, also refer to a non-architectural entity, such as clothing and veiling. Such entities are directly related to our bodily acts, habits and even ethics. Rosalyn Diprose maintains that the term 'ethics' derives from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning dwelling or habitat. Dwelling is both a noun (a place in which one resides) and a verb (the practice of dwelling). Dwelling is both a habitat and a habitual way of life. This way of life, *ethos*, or set of habits determines our character (Diprose 1994: 19). In both figurative and literal realms, Diprose's etymological analysis suggests that an understanding of a habitual way of life centers on a constitutive relation between one's habitat and one's embodied nature. This notion identifies the body as the locus of one's *ethos* where the body is constituted by a relation to its habitat.

In Iranian cultural contexts some connections exist between conceptions of spatiality and the *chador*. Applying Diprose's analysis to the relationship between Iranian women's habitats, especially in public, reveals how women remain in a secluded space behind the veil. Moreover, women's wrapped bodies—like architectural entities—influence the image of the environment. Indeed, women's bodies have always been central in Iranian political discourse and in the construction of public space. Soon after Reza Shah came to power in the beginning of the twentieth century, he embarked on a quest to modernize the image of Iranian cities by ordering that the streets be rid of the veil which was presumably a sign of backwardness.

In 1983 women were again obligatorily re-veiled, creating a strong Islamic image for Iran. In post-revolutionary Iranian political thought, the distinction between the public and the private spheres has served both to confine women to typically female spheres of activity like housework and to plunge them into the public realm. Despite being allowed in public, women are secluded from the outside world as their bodies are wrapped in the *chador*. The *chador* works like a space for seclusion of the bodily appearance in the eyes of others. The *chador*, thus, functions first as a portable habitat (reflecting the true meaning of *chador*, 'tent'), reduced in size to the bulk of a woman's body. It also works as a stage set

**Academic studies increasingly examine the relationship between the social organization of space, gender and sexuality in contemporary Muslim societies. Such studies tend to consider historical, socio-political and religious notions associated with the veil, or *chador*, as it is traditionally known in Iran. Whether bound up with the concept of male/female spatial binaries or closely involved with aspects of space that create visual and physical control, studies rarely deal with the veil as an entity that can be understood as a secondary space, or a 'habitat' which clinches women's bodies in public.**

for the audience (indicating a secondary meaning of *chador*, 'screen'). Janet Abu-Lughod points out that the rules governing gendered spaces in Islam have traditionally established not only *physically* distinctive regions, but also *visually* distinctive regions. This idea has a long history in the discourse of Islamic architecture. Islamic law has even regulated the placement of windows, the heights of adjacent buildings and the mutual responsibilities of neighbors toward one another to guard visual privacy (Abu-Lughod 1987: 167). The visual features of spatial

settings in Islamic architecture are, thus, as important as functional aspects. The notions of visual privacy, as imposed on women's bodies in countries like Iran and Algeria, however, departed from their traditional meanings and carried a decisive political stamp; they shifted from the historical stage to the level of political and institutional frameworks.

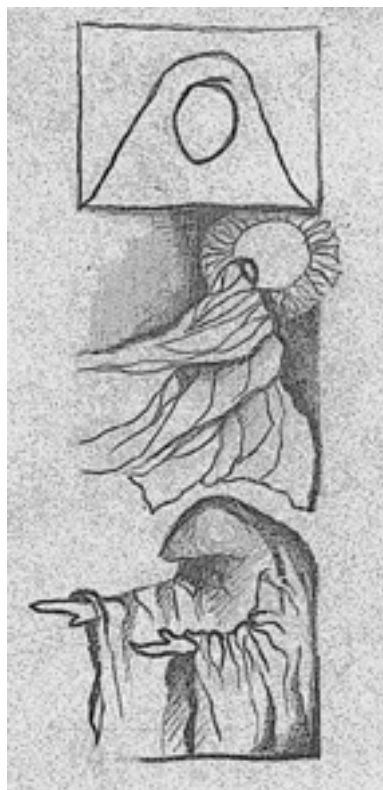
## Images of women's veiled bodies

In Iran the image of veiled women protesting in mass demonstrations reinforces how images of wrapped bodies of women are mobilized to create a new identity for Iran. Women's veiled bodies appear also in cultural products such as illustrated journals. Contrary to traditional beliefs about Muslim women, women are indeed present in the public sphere. Post-revolutionary Iranian women are not associated solely with the private because they seem to be everywhere in the outside world and because, 'To be outside is to be in the image, to be seen, whether in the press photograph, a magazine, a movie, on television or at your window' (Colomina 1994: 7). Various right-wing women's journals have reproduced images of the faceless *chadori* women, making this image somewhat ubiquitous even now.

In the images from women's journals, women are not only faceless but paradoxically bodiless too (fig. 1). Female readers should assess their bodies according to the 'other,' bodiless, selfless, and ultimately mindless represented women. These images foreclose women from their own desires and prevent them from taking full possession of their own bodies. In contemporary Iranian artistic endeavors, a woman's body becomes, once again, an ideological emblem. In contrast to real life experiences, this emblem contradicts the post-revolutionary definition of women's corporeality and protests against the media's definitions of female corporality that puts women in a bodiless category.

We can find specific evidence in the post-revolutionary period of the interrelations of women's bodies and space in Tehran by looking at the first feminist-conscious enunciations that cautiously appeared in literature, cinema and conceptual art.

Besides political regulations regarding art exhibiting and filmmaking, there can be a great social pressure on women to omit details in order to disguise truths about themselves. They have been drilled in the rules of moral and Islamic discourse, thus internalizing censorship from the outside into a kind of self-policing from within. Talking openly about certain matters—'telling the truth about one's own experiences as a body,' as Virginia Woolf puts it—'is not nice' (Mairs 1995: xiii). The proscriptions placed on Iranian women's speech foster feelings of shame that lead women to trivialize their own experiences and prevent them from discovering the depths of their lives. Given the religious and social constraints on women's self-expression in public, exceptionally few women have been able to break the silence.



**Types of images of the female body that appear in typical Iranian women's journals by Z. Pamela Karimi, 2003.**



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**Chador, the Portable Habitat by Z. Pamela Karimi with M.Gonzales.**

In the realm of literature, Shahrnoush Parsipour's novels are among the few feminist-conscious writings that appeared inside Iran in response to limitations imposed on women by state ideology (Talattof 1998: XV).<sup>1</sup> Parsipour looks at the interrelation of body and space from inside a chador! Perhaps she follows her own feelings to express psychological conditions that can apply to most Iranian women. Parsipour is, in fact, in search of a better correlation between space and women's corporeal existence. In her stories she describes the physical aspects of women's bodies, such as their virginity, their hair, their hands and their heads in detail. More importantly, she relates these physical aspects of the body to conceptions of spatiality. In her novel, *Women without Men*, 'The outside' appears merely as a desire in the minds of the female characters.

Conceptions of gendered spatial differentiation that traditionally employed boundaries and walls have, in fact, turned into implicit gendered spatial zones both in residential space and in various public venues of modern-day Iran. For example, women rarely sit in the center of the living room when men are present. Similarly, in public places women occupy the marginal zones. They choose the corner of the sidewalks closer to the walls or sheltered spots in public parks, restaurants and coffee shops. In mosques the women's section typically occupies a corner; when a space is unevenly divided, usually by a curtain, the larger section belongs to men regardless of the number of men and women who are present. In addition, women are forbidden access to some public places such as sports stadiums.

The film director Samira Makhmalbaf finds many ways to illustrate such problematic aspects of space in her movie *The Apple* (2001) as exemplified in a scene when a social worker says in reference to two girls, 'The problem is that they are girls. If they were boys they could have played outside. They could even climb people's walls...' (Dabashi 2001: 271). *The Apple* symbolically shows Iranian women's psychological exile from the public space.

In a somewhat similar manner, several young female Iranian artists such as Shadi Ghadirian<sup>2</sup> illustrate isolation of women from the public. The walls that surround them are many—the walls of their homes (even the walls of domestic objects found in the kitchen as depicted in Ghadirian's works), the walls of their veils, and the walls of their intrinsic fears (fig. 2). In the face of harsh sociopolitical conditions, Iranian artists have challenged many commonly held conceptions about veiling and the *chador*. The *chador* creates a secondary space whose boundaries can be folded and take shape in accordance with the body's movements. A *chador* usually has no resistance to transformation. As the body moves the *chador* transforms and transfigures. The *chador* in contemporary Iranian art becomes an emblem that is, in Marx's words, 'pregnant with its contradictions.' It creates a spatial boundary and folds down a buckled space for women's bodies; it can also metaphorically unfold to function as a stage set filled with contrapuntal messages for the audience. The female body transfigures as its habitat moves, and consequently the ethics of women's 'proper place' shift from a genuine level to the stage of doubt and interrogation.

It is perhaps no accident that the veiled female body is highlighted in various cinematic techniques and in artistic skills used by Iranian filmmakers and artists. Indeed, subtle ideological discourses in recent Iranian artistic endeavors are indissolubly tied to the female body. As such, these works replicate a political consciousness that is, in Trinh T minh-ha's words: 'as much the product of the eye, the finger, or the foot, as it is of the brain.' (Trinh T minh-ha 1989: 39)

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## Notes

1. Parsipour is a prominent novelist who was imprisoned in Iran. She now lives in exile.
2. Shadi Ghadirian's photographs are available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.kargah.com/ghadirian/index.php>

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