



Portraits of Two Islamist Women: Escape from Freedom or from Tradition?

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In the last two decades as the political landscape of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia increasingly has become identified with conservative Islamist discourses, a number of feminist historians have tried to probe the contradictions in an attempt to understand the underlying reasons for the growth of Islamism. Most of these studies, including writings by this author, have adopted a broad historical, political, or sociological lens through which gender relations and the concerns of women of the region have been analyzed.¹ In this article on Islamist women

1. This article is a revised version of papers presented in August 2001 at the Bellagio Conference on “Women and Gender in the Middle East: A Multidisciplinary Assessment of the State of Theory & Research,” the April 1999 Annual Research Conference of the Joint Center for International Studies (Milwaukee-Madison), and the August 2000 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (Washington, D. C.). Special thanks to Mark Tessler, Michael Chamberlain, Lauren Langman, Azar Nafisi, Akbar Mahdi, Barmak Sameian, Sherifa Zuhur, Amanda Neridge, Suad Joseph, and Kevin Anderson for their helpful comments, to Hirmand Hassas, who provided me with valuable information from Iran on Zahra Rahnavard, and to Saeed Damadi for copies of *Payam-e Zan* and other Persian periodicals. The literature on gender relations is simply too broad to list here and includes writings in English and Persian by numerous Iranian feminists, including among others Shahla Haeri, Val Moghadam, Haideh Moghissi, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Nayereh Tohidi. For a more recent discussion of gender and the religious right in the Middle East and the point of view of several historians, see the special issue of *Journal of Women's History: Women*

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of Iran, however, I wish to adopt a somewhat different perspective. I am not looking at rank-and-file women who, willingly or not, acquiesced to the Islamist movement *after* the 1979 Revolution. Rather, I am interested in a more intimate, almost personal, exploration of the lives of two women who assumed leadership roles in the Islamist movement *before* the Revolution. My point is that religious fundamentalist movements often have women in prominent positions, and their role is to help develop and popularize the movement's gender ideology. These women are hardly subordinate in the obvious sense. Many join the movement as a result of a complicated series of motivations, including a desire to end their own sense of loneliness and lack of power, a wish to appropriate certain aspects of modernity without alienating their traditional milieu, or to gain authority over others.

This type of study has been explored for other historical periods, and other countries, as will be seen below. However, it has not been easy for Iranian academic feminists to carry out because of political considerations inside Iran. Outside Iran, it has been emotionally wrenching due to the wide ideological, political (and geographical) gulf that has separated us for over twenty years. And yet the changes that have been going on in Iran since 1997, the emergence of a strong Reformist movement that includes many advocates of women's rights who have ties to the Islamist movement, and the new discourse on Islamic feminism, all make it imperative to conduct precisely this type of study.

I also wish to draw on the particular insight I have gained from years of studying and teaching Erich Fromm and other theorists of the Frankfurt School. I believe that Fromm's analysis of authoritarianism in the 1930s and 1940s, together with more recent studies on the religious right in the United States, can help shed new light on the complex phenomenon of Islamism in Iran and some reasons for its growth in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, an exploration of Islamism in Iran, particularly with an emphasis on gender, can enrich theories of authoritarianism by pointing to sites of changes and resistance and by showing that the decision to join these movements stems from a desire to both "escape from tradition" and "escape from freedom." Women who join right-wing Islamist movements gain a

and 20th Century Religious Politics: Beyond Fundamentalism, vol. 10, no. 4 (Winter 1999). In particular see the articles by Nikki R. Keddie, "The New Religious Politics and Women Worldwide: A Comparative Study," pp. 11-34; and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion, and Gender Politics: Iran and Afghanistan Compared," pp. 172-95.



number of rights that the traditional patriarchal society does not offer them. These privileges, however, come at a heavy cost to others, especially secular advocates of women's rights who have suffered immensely under the Islamic theocracy of Iran.

Modern Individualism and Rise of the Right

In his studies on fascist and totalitarian societies in the twentieth century, Fromm argued that the growth of individualism in modern Europe resulted in psychological trauma with significant political ramifications. Fromm held a doctorate in sociology, was a practicing psychoanalyst, and became a founding member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, which forged a new synthesis of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche in its studies of the family and authoritarianism. Fromm wrote about the disruption of the traditional family in urban Western societies and the sense of insignificance and loneliness that the individual felt as a result. Modernity had freed human beings from the highly hierarchical mold of medieval life, with its rigid guild structure and well-known patterns of family obligations, and introduced the possibility of "freedom from" traditional society. But this more hierarchical medieval social order also had given human beings a relative sense of security since everyone's place in society was predetermined. Thus, the modern notion of freedom became an unbearable burden for some, to whom freedom of choice meant insecurity and loss of identity.² The loss of status of the father in the modern family was a contributing factor to the growth of fascism in several ways. First, it contributed to an anxiety over rapid downward mobility as well as anger toward those deemed responsible for this social and economic loss. Second, the loss of status of the traditional patriarch, due to a myriad of socio-economic factors, helped fascist movements because they could claim to be the defenders of traditional patriarchy. They symbolically took the place of the father by calling for a restoration of national "pride and dignity."³

The basic human desire for identity and rootedness now manifested itself in extreme forms of nationalism and fascism. One type of response for individuals was "to become one with the world by submission to a person,

2. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt Press, 1994 ed.), p. 35; idem, *The Sane Society* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1955), p. 61

3. Lauren Langman, "I Hate, Therefore I Am," *Social Thought and Research*, vol. 21, nos. 1-2 (1998): 169.



to a group, to an institution, to God.”⁴ It was to transcend one’s loneliness and individual existence “by becoming part of some body or something bigger than” oneself.⁵ A second way was to express one’s desire for connectedness by moving in the opposite direction, toward domination over others. An individual could “try to unite himself with the world by having power over it, by making others a part of this constructed world and thus transcending a sense of individual existence through domination.”⁶ Through this symbiotic relation of submission/domination, a form of sadomasochism, the individual gained a sense of attachment, direction, and power, though not necessarily a sense of integrity.⁷

Andrea Dworkin and Elinor Burkett, who have studied right-wing women in the United States, suggest a similar pattern of uprootedness, loss of integrity, and ultimately symbiotic attachment to a conservative movement. The individual completely submits to a higher principal, while also dominating others. Dworkin argues that women who have been kept “ignorant of technology, economics, most of the practical skills to function autonomously” find themselves mystified in married life, especially in an abusive and lonely one. Women such as Marable Morgan and Anita Bryant, who later became stars in the religious right, regularly lectured on how they transformed their sense of helplessness by total submission to Jesus (the church). At the same time, their new responsibilities and their need to travel, preach, and “carry out the work of God” relieved them from many domestic chores, additional pregnancies, and even a confining marriage, but without experiencing divorce and its stigma.⁸

My focus in this article is the complex underlying patterns of submission/domination that compelled two Iranian women, Zahra Rahnavard and Marziyeh Dabbagh, to become followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah

4. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 154.

5. Ibid.

6. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 36

7. Ibid. For a discussion of this for contemporary society, see Lynn S. Chancer, “Fromm, Sadomasochism, and Contemporary American Crime,” pp. 31-42, and John Wozniak, “Alienation and Crime: Lessons from Erich Fromm,” pp. 43-58, in Kevin Anderson and Richard Quinney, eds., *Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology: Beyond the Punitive Society* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000).

8. Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York: Wide View Press, 1983), p. 29; and Elinor Burkett, *The Right Women: A Journey Through the Heart of Conservative America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).



Khomeini and join the leadership of the religious right before the 1979 Revolution.⁹ I am not suggesting that every woman who became an Islamist leader fits the same pattern as these women; the phenomenon of the religious right is far too complex to fit any single model. I do think, however, that despite geographical, historical, and cultural differences between the phenomena studied by Fromm/Dworkin (European, American, and Christian) and the women in this article (Iranian and Muslim), a somewhat similar pattern can be detected. For example, some of the followers of the Islamist movement in the 1960s and 1970s were highly ambitious women who were caught in the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. They seemed to gain a new sense of purpose and identity as a result of submitting to the Islamist movement and its ethico-political structure. As they gradually became leading members of the Islamist movement, their relatives recognized their superior position, including their husbands and fathers. In this way they gained another benefit, respect and authority within the family and the community. Eventually they were also relieved of many of the burdens of a traditional life. Paradoxically, then, their allegiance to a conservative patriarchal movement that advocated women's subordination actually allowed them to be more ambitious, to gain more power and exercise extensive leadership over others, and to live much more gratifying personal lives. After the 1979 Revolution, their highly conservative political activity resulted in severe restrictions on numerous other women who lost their positions either because they rejected the strict orthodoxy of the Islamist state or because they did not fit the patriarchal mold the new government was constructing. Others left the country and chose a lonely life in exile rather than live under the Islamic Republic.¹⁰

9. Elsewhere I have looked at the historical, as well as social and political reasons for the rise of Islamism in Iran and the Middle East in the last two decades. More recently I have written on the new feminist movement that gradually is blossoming in Iran, especially since 1997. See Afary, "Steering Between Scylla and Charybdis: Shifting Gender Roles in Twentieth Century Iran," *NWSA Journal* 8: 1 (Spring 1996): 28-49; idem, "The War Against Feminism in the Name of the Almighty: Making Sense of Gender and Muslim Fundamentalism," *New Left Review* no. 224 (July-August 1997): 89-110; and idem, "Bar amadan az zulmat" *Bonyad-i Pazuheshay-i ZannanJ* (July 2001): 194-219.

10. For a discussion of these restrictions, see Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. by Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and idem, "Gender, Modernization,



Payam-e Zan

Before examining the lives of Rahnavard and Dabbagh, it is useful to review the role of the magazine *Payam-e Zan* (Women's message), the primary organ of Islamist women in Iran. *Payam-e Zan* began publication in Farvardin 1371 [March/April 1992] in Qom under the auspices of the Bureau of Islamic Publicity (BIP), a branch of the Qom Theological Seminary, to which many leaders of the Islamic Republic are affiliated. Both publisher Mohammad Ja'far Gilani and editor Sayyid Ziya' Mortazavi are men. An anonymous group of women, identified as "The Sisters Unit of the BIP," work as staff members of the journal. Between 1992 and 2000, close to one hundred issues appeared. About half of the articles were written by women. Typical articles dealt with culture and religion, society and politics, family and childcare, literature and the arts, and finally, health, hygiene and homemaking. Most articles had a strong ideological bent, including those on child rearing and the arts.

Payam-e Zan is not the only women's journal of Iran, nor is it an enormously popular one. However, the journal does not have to rely on subscriptions or advertising to sustain itself, since the government amply funds it. But *Payam-e Zan* has to compete for readers with the more popular women's journals such as *Zan-e Ruz* (Today's woman), which has a greater variety of articles, and especially with the more independent *Zanan* (Women), which publishes writings by Western and Iranian feminists. In contrast to these latter journals, *Payam-e Zan* has adhered to two principles throughout its existence. First, it sees feminism as an expression of Western immorality because it recognizes a woman's right to sexual pleasure and challenges a husband's uncontested right to enjoy his wife's body at will. Second, it claims Western imperialism has used feminism to invade and destroy Muslim societies. For example, a 1993 article, "A Look at the Origins of Cultural Invasion," argues that:

What colonialism and its lackeys have accomplished [in the Muslim world] is the unveiling of women, along with debauchery, inappropriate [gender relations], together with foolish freedoms of the modern woman. All of these are gifts of Europe. To accomplish these deeds and to fight ethics and virtue, colonialism has used the most dangerous weapon, women. The great Prophet of Islam is said to have predicted that "after

and Islamization in Iran," *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. by Valentine Moghadam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).



[my death] women will be the cause of great sedition [*fetnah*] among men.”¹¹

A 1995 article, “Feminism: A Repeat of Failed Experiences,” states that:

Feminists argue that a distinction should be made between sex for pleasure and sex for procreation, which means that they now [claim] the right to sexual pleasure. [They also believe that] birth control and a woman’s right to abortion are necessary in order for women to gain sexual pleasure: The other issue ... they raise is women’s readiness and willingness [for sex]. They say a husband does not have the right to enjoy his wife whenever he pleases. His wife also should be willing. Based on this argument, feminists have demanded the abolition of marriage because marriage is an obstacle to [women’s] seeking pleasure.¹²

After the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, *Payam-e Zan* edged away from the above hard-line positions. The journal began to publish articles by leading Muslim jurists in defense of women’s greater participation in society, including the right to become judges.¹³ The journal also has published articles on gender discrimination around the world. And it has condemned (together with many others in the Islamic Republic) the policies of the Taliban regime, which have forced women out of public life in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, *Payam-e Zan* remains quite conservative by contemporary standards, even within Iran.

In the late 1990s, a new generation of theologians, secular intellectuals, and feminists has called for a reform of the orthodox conservative interpretation of Shia Islam and its reconciliation with democratic principles. Human rights lawyers Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi and feminist poet Simin Behbahani joined filmmakers Tahmineh Milani and Rakhshan Bani E’temad to challenge the numerous gender inequities in the Islamic Republic. *Zanan*, edited by Shahla Sherket, is part of this growing effort by women writers and journalists. This new generation of feminists is fighting for an end to polygny, for a woman’s right to sue for divorce, her rights to retain custody of minor children and share common marriage

11. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 6 (Shahrivar 1372 [August/September 1993]): 10.

12. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Farvardin 1374 [March/April 1995]): 17.

13. *Payam-e Zan* vol. 5, no. 12 (Esfand 1375 [February/March 1997]): 4-15.



property upon divorce, and civil liberties for both women and men. *Zanan* is a literary and cultural magazine with an explicitly feminist agenda and has regular features on divorce, sexual violence, and child custody. *Zanan* also translates articles from journals such as *Ms. Magazine* in the United States.¹⁴

In contrast, while some of the writers of *Payam-e Zan* joined the camp of Muslim feminists after the election of Khatami in 1997, the editorial board has continued to defend the chief religious authority, or *faqih*, 'Ali Khamenehi, who is believed to oppose such reforms. The journal has remained equally unrelenting in its denunciations of the United States, Israel, and Western cultural values as a whole.¹⁵ Nonetheless *Payam-e Zan* is a unique source for learning about women who are in the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Between 1992 and 2000, *Payam-e Zan* conducted a series of interviews with nearly one hundred women, including parliamentary deputies, heads of various government agencies, journalists, and other professionals who work closely with the government of the Islamic Republic. Among others, these included: Majlis (Iranian Parliament) deputy Marziyeh Dabbagh; Director of the Women's Mobilization [Basij] Organization Mohtaram Jamali; leaders of the Women's Society of the Islamic Republic such as Zahra Rahnavard and Fereshteh Irani; BIP member 'Ozra Ansari; Director of the Women's Bureau Shahla Habibi; Director of the Family Program for the Voice [Radio] of the Islamic Republic Simin Ahmadi; Director of the House of Zahra [an educational institute in Kashan] Fatemah Nahid; Director of the Foundation for the Martyrs of the Islamic Republic Fatemah Karubi; and various women theologians, women war veterans, mothers and sisters of veterans, village activists, teachers, and workers. Their ideological credentials are approved by the most conservative wing of the government, and annually many of them are awarded such titles as teacher or worker of the year.

The lengthy interviews sometimes appear in two to three installments. They focus on the respondents' personal lives (parents, level of education, marriage and family) and political accomplishments. In evaluating these interviews, one should consider the fact that those who are interviewed (as well as the journalists who conducted them and the editors who published them) are constructing narratives that fit the journal's model of a proper

14. Afary, "The War Against Feminism," p. 110.

15. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 7, no. 10 (Dey 1377 [December 1998/January 1999]): 4.



Islamist woman. The stories often seem to embellish the women's previous religiosity and political commitment and exaggerate their economic deprivation before the Revolution. However, at the same time the interviews seem accurately to portray many personal details of the women's lives. Somewhat paradoxically, they present the respondents as active members of society, although most of whom hardly fit the image of docile and full-time mothers and housewives, the very image that the Islamic Republic has propagated during the last two decades.¹⁶

At least two distinct types of stories emerge from these interviews. They include younger respondents who, at the time of the Revolution, were in their twenties and tended to belong to urban lower middle class families. Many were the first in their families to attend colleges and universities. Members of this group joined the Islamist movement as a reaction against the modern and secular values they encountered at school and at work and hoped to maintain the traditional ethical values they had learned at home. The way in which they embraced conservative mores could be considered a form of "escape from freedom." At the same time, they remained committed to an advanced education and to professional employment for women, even after the Revolution. When these students realized that the new government was unwilling or incapable of realizing their ideal notion of a just Muslim society for both men and women, some shifted their attention specifically to women's issues. The second group is comprised of women who, at the time of the revolution, were in their thirties and forties, and most were from more traditional or rural backgrounds. Several had entered an arranged marriage at a young age and moved to larger cities with their husband, where they were exposed to new gender relations and expectations. Joining the Islamist movement offered them social mobility, and for the truly committed, some freedom from the traditional roles of mother and housewife. These highly conservative women became political activists, lived outside their homes, and even traveled abroad without experiencing the conventional stigma of separation and divorce. Because they owed their newly found freedoms to Khomeini's advocacy of an activist and militant Islam, many became his most ardent supporters. However, their commitment to women's rights always remained nominal at best. They were first and foremost committed to creating an Islamist state and were interested in recruiting women in order to attain their ideological goals.

16. Muhammad Muhammadi, "Majera-ye taghir-e zan dar farsi-ye avval," *Zanan* vol. 8, no. 56 (1992): 2-3.



Ironically, members of both groups gained their initial standing in the Islamic Republic by telling other women that their loyalty first and foremost should be to their husbands, children, and Islamic family values, something they themselves have not practiced either before or after the Revolution.

Nearly all the women interviewed by *Payam-e Zan* come across as astonishingly busy. They hold full-time jobs, are responsible for a variety of volunteer committees and organizations, and often attend graduate school. Immediately the question is raised: Who is taking care of their husbands and children while these women dedicate themselves to propagating the foundational ideology of the Islamic Republic that *a woman's first responsibility is to her husband and family*? The fact is that none of them, whether single, married, or divorced is a traditional mother or housewife.¹⁷

Fereshteh Erabi, editor of the conservative women's journal *Neda* says that she is an active member of the Central Council of the Women's Association of the Islamic Republic. Previously, she held the position of public relations officer in the organization, and is now editor of several other publications as well. Erabi is married with three school-aged children.¹⁸ Simin Ahmadi graduated with a degree in sociology, works at Radio Voice of the Islamic Republic, and runs its family programs. She plans to continue her education and receive an advanced degree in sociology. She is also the mother of three children.¹⁹ Tayebeh Sultani heads the House of Zahra Publicity Association. This organization offers a variety of classes in arts and Islamic education for women. Tayebeh is partly disabled. She has two children and is preparing herself to take the very difficult university entrance examinations.²⁰ Despite their hectic lives, all repeat the slogan of the hard-liners that women *must not spend much of their time away from home and abandon their children to the care of others*.

If the respondents are married, the magazine asked them fairly detailed questions about their daily lives and how they juggle their responsibilities to husband and family with their political commitments and organizational

17. Margot Badran writes of a somewhat similar phenomenon in the earlier Arab women's journals, when "portraits of women famous for their public achievements, undermined the press's own cult of domesticity." See her *Feminists, Islam, and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 65.

18. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Mordad 1372 [July-August [1993]]): 14-18.

19. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 5 (Mordad 1372 [July-August 1993]): 16-55.

20. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 5 (Mordad 1372 [July-August 1993]): 20-33.



obligations. If the respondents are widows, and especially if the husbands are considered martyrs (either because they were killed in the Iran-Iraq War or were targets of a terrorist bombing), there is detailed discussion of their married lives before the tragedy and a close examination of the difficulties that they face raising their children alone. However, in a fair number of cases, the reporters never asked the standard questions about husband, children, and household duties. This omission suggests that the respondents very likely may be single or divorced. Yet readers never learn how these highly prominent women, who are often over thirty, negotiate their daily lives or with whom they live. Did they get a divorce, and if so, why? And why have they chosen to remain single after a divorce or even after the death of their husband? In such cases no personal questions are asked. In fact some of the women who are in leadership positions are single, divorced, or widowed. Their commitment is almost entirely to the ideological goals of the Islamic Republic, rather than to husbands and family members, but *Payam-e Zan* does not openly acknowledge this fact.

Among those who did share their personal stories, the narratives of Zahra Rahnavard and Marziyeh Dabbagh, two women prominent during the most conservative period of the Islamic Republic and members of two different generations, are particularly informative. The remainder of this paper will focus on their stories, which suggest that between rebellion against traditional patriarchal values and adherence to modern feminist ones lay many alternatives.

Rahnavard and the Retreat from Modernism and Secularism

Dr. Zahra Rahnavard is married to Mir Hosain Musavi, a protégé of Khomeini in the early years of the Islamic Republic, and a former Prime Minister. She has an MA in the arts and a Ph.D. in politics. She is the author of a number of publications on art, literature, poetry, religion, and politics. Her writings have been translated into Turkish, Arabic, Urdu, and English. These include essays with titles such as “The Uprising of Moses,” “The Colonial Motives for the Unveiling of Women,” “The Beauty of the Veil, and the Veil of Beauty,” “The Philosophy of Islamic Art,” “Islam, Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Arts,” and “Women, Islam, and Feminism in Imam Khomeini’s Thought.”²¹ Rahnavard also has held several exhibits of her artistic works. Her large sculpture, “Mother,” is

21. For a list of Rahnavard’s publications, I am grateful to Hirmand Hassass.



situated prominently in the middle of a busy Tehran square.²² In January 1999 she became president of the influential al-Zahra Women's College in Tehran (previously called Madreseh-ye Ali-ye Dokhtaran), at present the only women's university in Iran.²³

Rahnavard was born in a religious family with Sufi inclinations and defines her life as a constant struggle between “modern and traditional” values.²⁴ She grew up in the early 1950s in a large extended family where forty to fifty relatives—uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, parents and grandparents—all lived in one large house. Both her powerful grandmother, who headed the clan after her grandfather's death, and her mother were intensely religious.²⁵ Orthodox Shi'ism is a religion of rituals and one's piety is measured by one's observance of such rituals. Rahnavard describes her grandmother as a scrupulous observer of the religious rituals of pollution and purification. She was a constant presence in their lives and insisted that the grandchildren follow her example. She also took them to visit the shrines of Shia saints: “Through religious narratives she repeated the lessons of ritual purity and cleanliness over and over.”²⁶ Rahnavard's mother came from an artisan family. She believed that all actions on earth were preordained by God and were a daily response to the worldly sins we committed: “If my foot hit the door accidentally and hurt she would immediately ask, ‘What sin have you committed’? She constantly reminded us of God's punishments.”²⁷

Rahnavard's father was a military instructor at the War Academy who was torn between his religious devotions, his tribal affiliations, and his commitment to the military and the nation. His resentment toward American military officers in Iran eventually led to his forced retirement at age forty.²⁸ He then began to give clandestine military instructions to religious dissidents who had joined the camp of Khomeini. On the maternal side, Rahnavard's family claimed to be related to Navvab Safavi (1923-56)

22. The statue has been controversial among modern architects and artists. For a criticism, see Sima Kuban, “Tehran ers-e pedar-e kasi nist,” *Ketab-e Tahrān*, vol. 4 (1994): 136-37.

23. See *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 7, no. 9 Azar 1377 ([November/December 1998]): 29.

24. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 3, no. 5 (Mordad 1373 [July/August 1994]): 5.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 5.



the influential religious leader of the militant Feda'iyān-e Islam, the group responsible for the assassination of the prominent historian, Ahmad Kasravi, in 1946. The Feda'iyān-e Islam also opposed many of the cultural innovations associated with modernity in the 1940s and the 1950s.²⁹

A very bright student who ranked first in her classes, Rahnavard was like many others introduced to an underground stream of Existentialist and Marxist literature in high school in the 1960s. She claims that, “except for Marx’s *Capital* I have read nearly all other works by Marx and Engels.”³⁰ She also became interested in psychology and the arts. Rahnavard had great trouble, however, reconciling her new found political and philosophical interests with her religious commitments and artistic inclinations. The democratic principles of a modern society, plurality of organizations, of newspapers, and of institutions were appropriate goals to her. But Rahnavard could not accept the alternative value system that modernity brought about. “Like two edges of a pair of scissors, Marxism and Modernism had declared a war against traditions and Islam.”³¹ What she particularly abhorred in modernity was the rejection of religious rituals and traditions and the advocacy of “sexual and moral freedoms”:

The modernization that the shah and his American masters had planned for Iran involved opposition to religion, the elimination of beautiful Islamic and national symbols, an emphasis on appearance and frivolity, Westernization, and sexual and ethical freedoms. Alongside such cultural goals, the political autocracy, dependent capitalism, the lack of political parties, the chaos in the government continued. Despite the efforts of many authentic [Muslim] families, this modernization was infecting families and corrupting the young generation.³²

By her own account, Rahnavard did not find much support for her views among her high school teachers and college professors; as a result, she felt even more isolated. The progressive teachers of her high school in the 1960s, many of whom also had leftist sympathies, encouraged her greater political awareness, but frowned upon her religious explanations of events and insisted that she abandon what they considered to be her

29. See further Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 258.

30. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 3, no. 5 (Mordad 1373 [July/August 1994]): 7.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

32. *Ibid.*



irrational, simple, and mystical beliefs.³³ She reports that at the Teachers Training College of Tehran, one of her teachers accused Muslims who participated in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and circled the shrine of the Ka'bah of actually being “idol” worshippers, something severely proscribed by Islam.³⁴

Iranian society had experienced a period of greater political freedom from 1941 to 1953. A number of liberal and left wing political parties, such as the social democratic National Front or the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party were formed in this period and attracted tens of thousands of young students to their ranks. After the progressive nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mosadeq was overthrown in a U.S.-British orchestrated coup in August 1953, the reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi banned political parties and set up an extremely authoritarian political system. Many left wing and liberal activists of the 1940s, however, had become teachers and professors by the 1960s and 1970s. They continued to express a fervent belief in social and scientific progress and an equally passionate opposition to Western imperialism, aimed especially at the United States. Rahnavard was attracted to these left-wing ideologies and began to explore the class contradictions of Iranian society. As a teacher, she was particularly appalled by the impoverished lives of her young students, whose parents often were unemployed and addicted to drugs. At the same time, however, she could not accept the secular perspectives of her own professors, or many of her college classmates at the Teachers Training College and was convinced that they had been “brainwashed” by the government and by the West. When Rahnavard began to politicize her young students against the U.S.-backed government, she was fired from her teaching job; authorities accused her of mental instability.³⁵

Out of a job, and unwilling to marry immediately, Rahnavard decided to pursue graduate studies in Islamic Arts. Tehran University in the early 1970s was a hotbed of left-wing ideologies, ranging from Existentialism to various forms of Marxism, such as pro-Soviet Communism and Maoism. The overthrow of Mosadeq in 1953, the US war in Vietnam, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, all helped produce a new generation of left-wing intellectuals who were highly critical of the West. They attacked not only Western political and economic domination, but also Western cultural

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

35. *Ibid.*



values. An exception, however, was the Art Department, which was supported by Empress Farah Diba and received substantial funding from the government for projects aimed at modernizing Iranian art. According to Rahnavard, “It was one of the shah’s greatest investments. [He hoped] to train a new generation [of artists] who could revamp the art and culture of this nation and defile it with cultural colonialism.”³⁶ During these years Rahnavard studied art history, exhibited her works, became involved in the student movement, and joined clandestine left-wing groups. However, she defines these years as some of the “bleakest” and loneliest ones of her life, calling them her “period of annihilation,” and suggests that, once the religious scaffolding of her thinking cracked, she was no longer capable of making any sense of her world. Good and bad, proper and improper, sin and virtue, all became one big muddle:

I was like a speck of dust floating between the sky and the earth ... Nothing seemed to be in its proper place. An unrelenting earthquake, spewing tormenting verses everywhere ... if someone, in describing an event said that such and such an incident was good, I would be baffled by their ability to judge. Good and bad were ambiguous terms to me. I would ask, ‘by what measure is it good or bad’ and my friends would laugh at me ... I only had one clear classification in my mind. Based on my old teachings in the family I divided all events and things into two types: Worldly and Godly. Foods, objects, colors, accidents, people, shapes, even times of the day, clothing, directions, were either of a material, worldly nature or of a godly nature.³⁷

Rahnavard, who was brought up in a strict religious environment, where everything and everyone had its proper place, had entered a new phase of her life. She was being influenced by her teachers and her more modernist classmates to abandon some of her basic religious beliefs, reevaluate others, and develop a new secular concept of ethics that was in more harmony with the expectations of a modern world. Unable to do so, she initially withdrew into herself and her studies, while her sense of isolation from others intensified. Eventually, she turned to religious studies. By the late 1960s, Rahnavard had found a group of like-minded friends, both inside and outside the university, and had become an Islamist political activist. In 1969, she married Mir Hussein Musavi, who shared her strong

36. Ibid., p. 11.

37. Ibid.

religious devotion and criticism of Western cultural values: “I thought he was a godly person whose eyes were focused on the heavenly horizon. There was something in him other than materiality.”³⁸ They married in a very simple ceremony. She wore no wedding gown and there was no customary feast for friends: “We were not happy. How could one be happy when the fully armed government tortured the youth?” It was “just the union of two people who were moving in the same [political] direction,” a struggle to the point of “martyrdom.”³⁹ In this description of her marriage, she, therefore, plays down any sexual or emotional feelings and also the fact that this was a non-traditional marriage, hardly arranged.

Eventually, Rahnavard joined the circle of ‘Ali Shariati, the Sorbonne-educated Muslim theologian, whose lectures at the Hoseiniyeh Ershad Theological Seminary, as well as his publications, helped to galvanize a new generation of students. Shariati called for a revolutionary interpretation of Shi’ism, one that was based on social justice and concern for others. He advised the acceptance of Western technology and science, but rejected much of the rest of Western culture, particularly its sexual mores.⁴⁰ In the early 1970s, Rahnavard began to teach art to women at the Hoseiniyeh Ershad. By 1974, Rahnavard had organized an Islamist art exhibit at the Hoseiniyeh Ershad, was running a study group in which students read Shia religious texts, and had published two small books, *The Migration of Joseph* and *The Uprising of Moses*. During these years, when Rahnavard maintained an active political life, her mother helped raise her two small children. When the government cracked down on Shariati’s Seminary, Rahnavard, who was known as one of the first Islamist woman writers to challenge the Pahlavi regime, fled abroad with her children.⁴¹ In 1976, she joined the left-wing Confederation of Iranian Students in the United States. In 1977, when the Confederation splintered into various subgroups, Rahnavard sided with the Islamist wing. She returned to Iran shortly before the Revolution and through Musavi’s personal acquaintances, joined the circle of Khomeini supporters.⁴²

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ali Shariati, *What is to be Done?* edited by Farhang Rajaee (Houston: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986).

41. Zahra Rahnavard, *Safar be diyar-e zanan-e botparast* (Tehran: Soroush Publications, 1987), p. 31.

42. Thanks to Dr. Akbar Mahdi for information on Rahnavard’s activities in the United States in 1976-77.



Erich Fromm had turned to Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* to express a common human sentiment, wherein a person has "no more pressing need than the one to find someone to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which, he, the unfortunate creature was born with."⁴³ Eliminating the self-reduced burden of freedom. Fromm argued that, for some individuals, "moral aloneness" and "lack of relatedness to values, symbols, and patterns" were as "intolerable as psychical aloneness." As a result, human beings turned to "religion or nationalism for refuge from what man most dreads: isolation."⁴⁴ Likewise a generation of Iranian students (though not all) willingly placed their fate, and that of their nation, in Khomeini's hands. The radical intellectual rupture with modernity and the task of rebuilding Iran after the shah's departure were simply awesome projects. Many unquestioningly followed Khomeini's leadership, claiming he could build an entirely different society by returning to traditional religious values and breaking decisively with the cultural legacy of the West.

As a young urban Iranian woman who lived in Iran in the 1970s, I also remember the intense sense of alienation that my classmates and I experienced. The new reforms in education, health, and hygiene, the possibility of attending college and delaying marriage, and the new mass media that exposed us to the more open gender roles of the West, all alerted us to new social and economic choices available to women. These changes had begun to redefine gender relations, family values, and the whole concept of sexual morality. Rahnavard belonged to this generation of Iranian women who attended modern schools, went to the university, and lived a life that seemed to offer many new choices, certainly more than those available to her mother and grandmother. By becoming a political activist in the Islamist movement, Rahnavard found a compromise solution. She retained many of the old ethical principals, without abandoning her desire for new ones, such as an advanced education or professional and economic progress for women.

43. Quoted in Neil McLaughlin, "Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: *Escape from Freedom Revisited*," *Sociological Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1996): 249.

44. Ibid.



Marziyeh Dabbagh:

Escape from Tradition Through Militant Shi'ism

In contrast to Rahnavard, Marziyeh Hadidchi Dabbagh belongs to an older generation of women who became politically active years after marriage. Although she does not acknowledge it, her activism allowed her to break through the limitations of tradition and channel her energy and creativity into new directions. In the process, Dabbagh crafted a very different identity for herself, though she seemed to have convinced herself and others that it was all for the sake of Khomeini and Islam, rather than any autonomy developed on her part.

Dabbagh was a confidant of Khomeini in Paris in 1978 and also served as one of his bodyguards. She participated in the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1988), serving as a military commander on the battleground. She later served four terms in the Majlis until 2000. In the late 1980s she went to Moscow, as part of a delegation to negotiate with Mikhail Gorbachev. For much of the last two decades, she has headed the Islamist Women's Society, which is affiliated with the government.⁴⁵

Dabbagh, was raised in a very strict and traditional family in the western city of Hamadan in the early 1940s. Her father was a small bookseller who also taught ethics. Unlike Rahnavard, who married a comrade while she was in graduate school studying the arts, Dabbagh experienced an arranged marriage at age 13. The couple soon moved to Tehran, a turning point in her life where her social isolation increased. In her interviews, Dabbagh remembers these difficult years in the late 1950s after she had moved to Tehran and speaks of the great sense of injustice she felt:

Why shouldn't girls study? Why shouldn't they choose their own husbands? There were many other questions, for none of which I had an answer. I had to find answers to my questions, to understand who brought about this cruelty, injustice, and discrimination against women, to learn how the distinction between me, as a "woman," and the other sex, "man," was created. I had many discussions with my husband. He said "I don't know the answers; you should talk to someone who knows. It is best that you study theology because all comes from the Quran, the Tradition, and the rules of Islam"⁴⁶

22. 45. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January-February 1993]):

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.



Seemingly, Dabbagh wanted to know why she had been deprived of a higher education, a chance to select her own husband, and perhaps even an opportunity for a professional career, while many other women she met in Tehran were not so deprived. She was questioning the theological reasons for gender subordination in her own life. Her husband's permission provided her with a way out of her highly troubled life. She could now leave the house for weekly lessons with a male theologian, Haji Ali Khavansari. Still, she remembers, something was sorely "missing" in her life: "Though I was studying I still had not found the one I was missing (*gomshodeham*)."⁴⁷ In 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini was placed under house arrest because of his opposition to the shah's reform program, the so-called "White Revolution."⁴⁷ At this point, Dabbagh decided to join the circle of Khomeini, where she could learn more about his militant interpretation of Shi'ism.

By her account, from the moment she first glanced at Khomeini, he became the very center of her life. This was the religious figure she had once seen in her dreams, the one she was missing.⁴⁸ Now, Dabbagh's only wish was to join Khomeini's circle of close comrades. But how did this highly traditional woman, the mother of four children and a housewife, free herself from her numerous familial obligations to accomplish such a task? She writes that on the way back from her first visit with Khomeini she cried the entire way. Soon she became severely depressed and ill from her strong desire to follow the path of Khomeini. After seeing Khomeini only once, she claims:

I was crying, I was no longer calm. I was distraught in a way that my entire life was disturbed. For three or four months that was all I did. I cried. I was ill. I couldn't eat. During my illness, I kept asking my husband to sell our house and belongings so we could move to Qom, so that I might be a maid in the house of Aqa [Khomeini], to see him once a day, to ask him my difficult questions. In fact, when Khomeini was exiled [to Iraq] not much later, I truly became ill. For about 42 or 43 days I was

47. For details of this period see Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An interpretive History of Modern Iran*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Abrahamian, *Iran: Between Two Revolutions*; Eric Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); and Shaul Bakhash, *The Religion of the Ayatollahs*, (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

48. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January-February 1993]): 24.

unconscious.⁴⁹

After her recovery, Dabbagh continued to plead with her husband to move to the city of Qom to enable her at least to be near some of Khomeini's comrades and supporters. Her husband did not agree to this but eventually allowed her to join a study group in Tehran that was sponsored by a protégé of Khomeini known as Ayatullah Sa'idi.⁵⁰ Dabbagh and sixteen other women with similar inclinations met at the back of a nearby mosque for private lessons. There was now a guiding principle in her life. She recounts that she no longer experienced her periodic "Satanic temptations" such as the desire for "buying a dress, going on a trip, or having a dinner party."⁵¹

By 1967 Dabbagh had proved herself the most dedicated member of the group and was groomed for the next stage of the movement, becoming an underground revolutionary. Her new assignment was to travel to small and large cities and lecture among women, in order to gain new adherents for Khomeini. But in order to avoid the dreaded Savak, and find a way into urban military circles, where she looked for new recruits to the Islamist cause, Dabbagh needed to change her traditional appearance. She had to look like a modern woman and she had to drive a car. But how could she drive a car when Khomeini explicitly had recommended against women's driving? The solution was very simple and was suggested by Khomeini himself. In the Shia tradition of Islam it is incumbent on each believer to follow a living religious scholar as a *marja' taqlid* (source of imitation) and to receive guidance from him on all difficult matters of life. But one can choose to change the *marja'* one follows and select another. Khomeini, through one of his disciples who trained Marziyeh, advised her "to find another *marja'* [one who did not object to women's driving, and to ask for his permission] to learn [driving]; there would be no problem."⁵² He thereby taught her how to circumvent the technicality of ignoring his own rulings on this matter. And how was Dabbagh to learn driving from a strange, unrelated man? Again, this was very simple, since Shi'ism, as a pragmatic religion, has a solution for such a problem as well. Dabbagh would arrange a non-consummated temporary marriage between the driver and a close

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.; Sa'idi later was arrested by the secret police, known as Savak, and died under torture.

51. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January-February 1993]):

24.

52. Ibid.



relative, whereupon the driver became *mahram* (related) and she could take lessons from him.⁵³ Finally, she had to change her appearance. She took up multiple identities for different lectures, pretending sometimes to be the wife of a nonexistent engineer.⁵⁴ In this way she was able to work within the military circles, among a group of officers' wives. Dabbagh's transformation shows that for the good of the cause almost anything was possible and acceptable. At the same time that Khomeini was criticizing the advocates of women's rights for wearing Western clothes, for driving cars, for mingling with men, unrelated to them by birth or marriage, and blaming the government for encouraging such "immoral" acts, his close follower Dabbagh was doing all this and much more. Yet because her actions were for the greater cause of bringing about an Islamist revolution, she was encouraged, rather than reprimanded.

In 1972, the Savak arrested Dabbagh, who then was in her thirties, and severely tortured her.⁵⁵ After a second detention, when her health clearly began to fail, Savak officers decided to release her. It was not politically prudent to have a mother of eight (seven girls and a boy by this time) martyred in the shah's prisons. Soon Dabbagh left Iran for Europe; she traveled to England and France where she participated in hunger strikes on behalf of Iranian prisoners. She went to Saudi Arabia and distributed Khomeini's clandestine fliers among Muslim pilgrims in Mecca. In Syria, she helped set up a military camp where anti-shah combatants were trained. With the help of dissident Shia cleric Imam Musa Sadr, a Palestinian commando (Abu-Jihad), and the activist Dr. Mustafa Chamran, Dabbagh trained a new generation of young Iranian combatants in paramilitary tactics. She recounts that "after completion of guerilla and destruction tactics" they secretly were sent back to Iran via the Persian Gulf, often armed with explosives.⁵⁶ During these years, her parents and her married oldest daughter raised her children. Dabbagh tells us that her husband, who was supportive of her political activities, played only a nominal role in the life of the children. He held a job in the southern city of Ahwaz, away from the family, and visited only every two or three months. Thus, in effect, neither the mother nor the father of Dabbagh's children was living with them in the

53. Ibid.; for more details on such practices, see Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 1989).

54. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January-February 1993]): 25.

55. Ibid., pp. 25-26.

56. Ibid., p. 28.



seven years before the Revolution.⁵⁷

In 1978, after Khomeini was expelled from Iraq and went to France, Dabbagh finally got her wish. She joined him in Paris and became his close advisor, bodyguard, and housekeeper. Dabbagh, who had adored Khomeini for much of her adult life, remembered a special night in Paris as the best memory of her life:

The best and the most beautiful night of my life was the night I entered the house of the Imam [in France] and I was given the responsibility of running it. I truly could not go to sleep until morning; I kept saying to myself, ‘Marziyeh, is it you? Could it be that God had been so kind as to place on your shoulders the responsibility of being a slave [*keniz*] at the house of the Imam?’ After performing my prayers I was sitting and thinking when I heard the rattling of tea glasses in the kitchen. I quickly went to the kitchen and saw that the Great Imam had brewed tea. He had placed a tea glass and a saucer in a tray and with his blessed hands was carrying it to his room. I said, ‘Haji Aqa, why you?’ He said, ‘I wanted to lend a hand to my wife.’ I took the tray from his hands and carried it myself to the room. I will never forget this memory.⁵⁸

Dabbagh, the revolutionary woman who left her husband and children to the care of her parents and her older daughter, who lived a clandestine life for years, and who traveled abroad to train commandos, has two passionate memories in her life: the night in 1963 when she first dreamt of Khomeini and received her “calling,” and the night in 1978 when she exchanged common words with him in a Paris kitchen. Even years after his death, the adoring sentiments that Dabbagh expresses toward Khomeini are very similar to what Fromm terms the authoritarian character. As noted earlier, Fromm speaks of a desire for total submission as an underlying principle of the Nazi ideology and its adherents. Followers were told repeatedly that “the individual is nothing and does not count. The individual should accept his personal insignificance, dissolve himself in a higher power, and then feel proud in the strength and glory of this higher power.” Their idealism should lead them to willingly become a “dust particle” in this higher order.⁵⁹ Dabbagh expresses this same desire for total annihilation in morbid terms, “I always wished someone cut me up and made a carpet of me for under his

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., p. 75.

59. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 231.



feet. My feelings about him were the same until his death and will always remain the same. I wish we died and he lived and led society.”⁶⁰

The Islamic Republic, Twenty Years Later

Both Rahnavard and Dabbagh held important positions in Iran, and both headed women’s organizations. Despite their similarities, in many ways they represent a dichotomy that exists in the leadership of the Islamic Republic and has manifested itself more clearly since Mohammad Khatami was first elected president in 1997. Rahnavard and other highly educated Islamist women, for example, had hoped that their early devotion to the Revolution would assure them leadership roles in the post-revolutionary society. Soon after the Revolution, Rahnavard became a founder of the Women’s Society of the Islamic Republic (WSIR), along with Azam Taleqani (daughter of Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani), and also a founder of the Islamist Women’s Society. She was an editor of *Rah-e Zaynab*, a popular women’s journal that before the Revolution was called *Ettela’at-e Banuan* [Women’s news]. But when WSIR criticized the hard-liners within the government because of their policy of forced Islamization, including the mandatory observance of *hijab* by women and girls, the government clamped down on her and other Islamist advocates of women’s rights; Islamic Republican Party (IRP) supporters attacked chapters of the WSIR in Tehran and several other cities in May 1981.⁶¹ More orthodox members of the (IRP), such as Dabbagh, were given greater authority in women’s affairs. These were women whose primary dedication was directly to Khomeini. They mobilized women in his service and for the Islamist movement, rather than for women’s issues.

It took over a decade before Rahnavard’s embrace of a few feminist concerns matched her political leadership in women’s organizations. In the first decade after the Revolution, she used her considerable oratorical skills and talents as writer to propagate Islamist values in Iran and abroad. In one of her best-known publications, a travelogue she wrote during her state visit to India in 1986 (when her husband was prime minister), her polemics against Hinduism, Western feminism, and more liberal interpretations of Islam show her intolerance toward other competing ideologies and

60. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January/February 1993]): 74.

61. Parvin Paydar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 240-241; and *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 3, no. 6 (Shahrivar 1374 [August/September 1995]): 4.

religious perspectives.⁶² Rahnavard is concerned with the plight of India's Muslims and the abuses that the Hindu upper-caste population has visited on Muslims and lower caste Hindus. Rahnavard also speaks of the plight of Indian women. One finds scattered references to "dowry burnings," when wives who have not brought enough dowry to their husband's house "accidentally" catch fire in the kitchen and die. All of this could have made her a strong advocate of women's rights. One could argue that by calling attention to the plight of Indian women, she also is implicitly criticizing the violence against women in Muslim societies. But one quickly realizes that she does not develop a parallel understanding between the abuses that women and Muslims face in Hindu India, and those that dissident Muslim women and non-Muslim minorities face in Iran. Rahnavard can see the prejudices of Hindus toward Muslims in India, but she cannot see the prejudices of Shia Muslims toward secular Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenians, and especially the intensely persecuted Baha'is of Iran. Instead, she unleashes a heap of contempt and scorn on the Baha'is, "the misguided faction."⁶³

Rahnavard's compassion toward Hindu women of India is channeled into the injunction that "all Indian women should convert collectively to Islam" to save themselves from the sexism of the Hindu culture.⁶⁴ Nor is there any compassion for dissident Iranian women (often Muslim) whom she meets in India, women who chose a difficult life in exile in order to receive a better education or to avoid segregation and social confinement in the Islamic Republic. By this date, i.e. 1986, Rahnavard expresses some anxiety about repression in the Islamic Republic, but she seems to be more appalled by the more moderate Muslims she visits in India, people who reject her militant appeals or politely ignore her.⁶⁵ Rahnavard's highly ideological position on women's issues and the wide gulf that divides her from many Muslim Middle Eastern feminists can be seen in her reaction to the well-known case of Shahbanoo, a highly contentious divorce that made international headlines in 1980. Shahbanoo was a sixty-five year old Muslim woman in India whose husband, a wealthy lawyer, had repudiated her after forty years of marriage and left her only the three month and ten

62. Zahra Rahnavard, *Safar be diyar-e zanan-e botparast*.

63. Ibid., p. 21ff. For presentation of Iran's non-Muslims, especially Baha'is, see Janet Afary and Reza Afshari, ed. *Non-Muslim Communities of Iran*. Special issue of *Iran Nameh*, vol. 19, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2001).

64. Ibid., p. 27.

65. Ibid., p. 88.



days maintenance (*nafaqeh*) that the Qur'an requires for divorced women. Shahbanoo took her case to the civil courts and in 1985 won a judgement against her husband. However, the decision of the court added fuel to the already existing animosity between Muslim and Hindu communities of India. Eventually Rajiv Gandhi, president of India, intervened; the decision was overturned, Shahbanoo retreated, and women's rights were sacrificed to smooth over ethnic and nationalist hostilities.⁶⁶ Rahnavard expresses some sympathy for Shahbanoo but she does not ask for a reform of Muslim family laws. Instead she argues that Shahbanoo's request for life-time alimony from her wealthy husband was "against the explicit text of Islam and an affront to the holy laws of Islam that limit the period in which a woman can receive an alimony."⁶⁷ Her loyalty to the Islamic Republic and her absolute commitment to Islamic law prevented her from showing support for women who suffer from the limitations of the same laws, be they in Iran or abroad.

Over the past twenty years, and despite family responsibilities, Rahnavard has remained active in politics and has not limited her involvement to household duties. She founded the International Association of Muslim Women and was director of the Cultural and Social Association of Women, a branch of the Ministry of Science. She published several more books and held exhibits of her art works. Rahnavard admits that her husband, the former prime minister, helps with the housework, and that he is basically in charge of their daughters' affairs, leaving her to pursue her intellectual and social interests.⁶⁸ In 1999 her oldest daughter was in graduate school studying nuclear medicine, the second one was graduating with an MA in the arts, and the youngest one was in high school.⁶⁹

66. For summaries of the issue, see Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder RajanRajan, "Shahbanoo," *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1989): 558-81; and Nadita Haksar and Anju Singh, *Demystification of Law for Women* (New Delhi: Lancer Press, 1986). On how Shahbanoo's case fueled the Hindus' campaign against the Babri Mosque, see Nikki R. Keddie, "The New Religious Politics and Women Worldwide," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 18.

67. Rahnavard, *Safar*, p. 82.

68. Mir-Hosain Musavi, Rahnavard's husband, was criticized while he was prime minister because of her pre-revolutionary conduct; pictures of her dressed in a miniskirt were reprinted in order to discredit him. Information from Azar Nafisi, personal communication, 2000.

69. Hirmand Hassas, personal communication, 1999.



Since 1997, Rahnavard has adopted a more progressive stance on certain women's issues, even if she continues to insist that the West commodifies women, while "true Islam" does not. In one of her latest interviews with the feminist journal *Zanan*, she complained that Iranian women are treated as the "second sex," presumably a reference to Simone de Beauvoir's book by the same title. She now asks for laws to punish sexual abuse, rape, and murder of women by male relatives. She speaks out against wife battery, demands that women be given custody of their children after divorce, and celebrates the fact that in 1998 a majority of those who were admitted to the universities (52.1 percent) were women.⁷⁰ Seemingly, her views have undergone a significant change.

Dabbagh had a more prominent career after the Revolution. She took over the Queen Mother's Volvo, thus symbolically anointing herself Mother of the Revolution, and immediately became involved in repression of the opponents of the new theocracy. She joined the Pasdaran paramilitary group and took an active role in destroying all rival organizations, from the Kurdish Komeleh and Democrat parties to the secret cells of the leftist People's Feda'iyān and the left Islamist People's Mojahedin organizations.⁷¹ She was a founder of the Women's Auxiliary branch of the Basij (Mobilization), a volunteer militia of mostly young men and boys who are recruited to defend the values of the Revolution against external and internal enemies. Dabbagh's women's organization helped recruit these youth and provided them with food and other basic necessities. Dabbagh also is proud that through her efforts scores of Islamist mothers and sisters betrayed their sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, who had joined rival political organizations, such as the People's Mojahedin and the People's Feda'iyān.⁷² On this activity, she said:

We were able to gather these women from various communities and set up classes for religious discussions for them in the Mosque. In this way we turned them into loyal informants. I asked them to report to us immediately when men in their family held meetings or invited [strangers] to the home. I remember one night that six group homes [of presumably the Feda'iyān or Mojahedin dissidents] were revealed to us by the mothers and sisters of the [activists] themselves. Our troops circled the houses and

70. *Zanan*, vol. 7, no. 51 (Farvardin 1378 [March/April 1999]): 9.

71. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Khordad 1372 [May-June 1993]): 7 and 11-12.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 74.



destroyed them. It was a very successful experience that later was repeated in other provinces.⁷³

In addition to serving as Majlis deputy for four terms, Dabbagh headed the conservative Islamist Women's Society of the Islamic Republic, the same organization that Rahnavard and the younger generation of women originally had founded. In the parliament and as leader of this association, Dabbagh proposed several laws related to women such as legal child custody rights for wives of martyrs (a right that under Islamic law is allocated to the paternal grandfather), and certain benefits for part-time female employees.⁷⁴ But her main concern has remained the defense of Khomeini's legacy and the Islamic Republic to the outside world. In 1995, after the British Parliament published a human rights report on Iran that emphasized the status of Iranian women as second-class citizens, Dabbagh claimed that as a military officer and active participant in the Revolution she had "never felt that women were behind men in achieving social positions;" she scoffed at reports of extensive domestic violence in Iran and argued that "unlike Western women, Iranian women are at the center of activity and decision-making in the family." Nor, like their Western sisters, she added, are they "obligated to work for a living like men do."⁷⁵ Two years earlier, however, she had complained publicly about the lack of respect toward her and other women in the Majlis and expressed her frustration that for many deputies, women's issues were limited to "cooking, washing clothes, and sweeping."⁷⁶

Dabbagh's commitment to the ideological legacy of Khomeini is also evident in her private life. In the years before the Revolution, she pulled her daughters out of high school because Khomeini had recommended against male teachers in girls' high schools: "Several of my daughters received their diploma after the Revolution... since Imam [Khomeini] had issued a *fatva* [that warned us] about the sanctity of education when the teachers were male. Based on that *fatva* I did not allow [my daughters] to continue their education" after ninth grade.⁷⁷ Only after the revolution did she allow

73. Ibid., p. 13.

74. *Zan-e Ruz*, vol. 26 (Khordad 1375 [May/June 1996]): 8.

75. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 3, no. 13 (Esfand 1373 [February/March 1995]): 26.

For further information about domestic violence in Iran, see Mehrangiz Kar, *Khoshunat 'aleyheh zanan dar Iran* (Tehran: Roshangaran va mutale'at-e zanan, 2000).

76. *Payam-e Zan*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Khordad 1372 [May/June 1993]): 10.

77. *Idem*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Bahman 1371 [January-February 1992]): 75.

her younger daughters to finish high school. Recent reports from Iran suggest that Dabbagh, who was not elected to the reformist Sixth Majlis, has gone into “retirement.” She has made few public appearances. Evidently, she has not made the transition that Rahnavard has made by becoming more supportive of feminist concerns, and backing the reform movement.⁷⁸

Conclusion:

The differences between Rahnavard and Dabbagh help us to gain a more intimate view of the current conflicts within the leadership of the Islamic Republic and the complicated question of who is an advocate of women’s rights. By joining the Islamist movement, Dabbagh was able to break through numerous obstacles that bind women in traditional marriages in Iran. Her absolute submission to Khomeini allowed her to exercise absolute power over many others. She owes her very existence as a political leader to the Islamist ideology of Khomeini (rather than to her education, creative accomplishments, political affiliations, or class background) and is committed to preserving it at all cost. However, Dabbagh actually prides herself on being a defender of women’s greater role in society. She opposed gender segregation during the war, supported unsuccessful bills in the Majlis that would have limited the husbands’ uncontested right to divorce and custody of the children.⁷⁹ Dabbagh speaks well of her husband, who encouraged her political activities and is very angry with other men who prevent their wives, including highly educated ones, from holding socially responsible jobs.⁸⁰ Dabbagh even refers to many examples of sexism in the Majlis, such as the time when, despite her considerable expertise in military matters, she was excluded from the Defense Commission only because she was a woman, while men who had no military experience were selected.⁸¹ None of these pronouncements or actions, however, makes her a feminist or an individual with compassion for human rights, because the only reason Dabbagh wants women out of the house and involved in society and politics is for them to contribute to her version of a militant Islamist society. She remains a sworn enemy of any woman-- feminist, leftist, or secular-- who suggests that a woman’s education and employment should bring about *her* emancipation, give *her* the choice to decide what to do with her life. In her view women are to be liberated from traditional life styles only to become

78. Idem, vol.3, no.12, (Esfand 1373 [February-March 1995]): 26.

79. Idem, vol. 2, no. 3 (Khordad 1372 [May/June 1993]): 10.

80. Idem, vol. 2, no. 6 (Shahrivar 1372 [August/September 1993]): 17.

81. Idem, vol. 2, no. 3 (Khordad 1372 [May-June 1993]): 9.



soldiers and martyrs for the cause of Islamization. Those who argue against this position and demand choice, including the right to live under a more secular state, deserve nothing but death.

But what about Rahnavard? She was a budding intellectual and an artist who gave up the life of a modern woman to join the Islamist Revolution, hoping to improve the lives of poor women by abandoning the cultural imperialism of the West. Since the Revolution, Rahnavard has witnessed many new restrictions affecting the lives of her three daughters. Despite her continuing avowals of support for Khomeini, her recent interviews suggest that she is reexamining some of her earlier perspectives. However, she is still quite uncomfortable with the Western model of gender relations, ostensibly because it includes women's bodily and sexual freedoms, and not just social and political ones. Her young educated daughters are expected to observe strict *hijab* and this very act seems to convince her that the younger generation has not completely sold out to the West.⁸² But how far would she go today? Would she allow, for example, young women, including her young daughters, the freedom to challenge and reject her Islamist principles? Can they choose not to wear the veil? Can they advocate secular marriage and divorce laws? Would Rahnavard be able to overcome her own intense religious prejudices and allow, for example, the Baha'is to practice their religion, or secular Muslims not to do so? These are not hypothetical questions, since a new generation of Iranian feminists, including many children of the Revolution, is asking precisely such questions.

The intellectual accomplishments of the new generation of feminists in Iran cannot be underestimated even though it has yet to result in any significant political transformations due to the hostility of the conservative wing of the government to the reformers. Supporters of women's rights have criticized the lack of civil liberties under the Islamic Republic and have demanded a rewriting of the constitution. In the year 2000, they helped prevent the re-election of many conservative deputies to the Sixth Majlis, and in June 2001 they re-elected Khatami, giving him 76 percent of the total vote. The liberal religious thinkers (*now andishan-e dini*) such as Mujtahid Shabastari have condemned the narrow legalistic reading of Islamic texts and called for a more tolerant interpretation of Shia Islam. Despite numerous obstacles, the educational and artistic accomplishments of Iranian women have been outstanding in the last decade. The field of women's studies gradually has found its way into

82. Idem, vol. 3, no. 6 (Shahrivar 1373 [August/September 1994]): 4.



the universities and into woman's magazines and newspapers. In a steady stream of articles, writers, historians, and major political figures of the twentieth century are being questioned for their lack of concern or limited perspectives on gender issues. There is even a heated debate on cultural particularism and universalism, and an attempt to adopt the best arguments from both sides.⁸³

In 1979, Rahnavard and Dabbagh became guardians of the Islamic Republic and upholders of its conservative morality by denouncing the moderate gains that urban middle class and upper class women had made during the royalist Pahlavi era. Both Dabbagh and Rahnavard also helped to silence a generation of secular and left-wing activist women who had participated in the revolution yet faced a dramatic setback in women's rights once the Islamic Republic was instituted. By becoming leaders of the conservative Islamist movement, Rahnavard, Dabbagh, and other Islamist women gained a remarkable degree of political and even personal freedom in their own lives. Ironically, the very success of the Islamic Republic in forcing a repressive traditional society upon a new generation of youth has also robbed the government of its most important source of support. The fact is that the highly alienated, anti-modernist generation of 1979 cannot be recreated under the Islamist theocracy. Dabbagh is a great deal more conservative than Rahnavard, who has sided with the reformist government of Khatami. Neither, however, is open toward some of the new discourses we find in the new generation. The new feminists, who write for journals such as *Zanan* (Women), *Hoquq-i Zan* (Woman's rights), and *Jens-e Dovvom* (The second sex), regard themselves as part of the global feminist movement. They belong to a wide political spectrum and no longer speak of organizing women for the purposes of their respective (male) political parties. Their focus has shifted to a woman's right to choose her own life style (including the right not to wear the veil). The new feminists, with their insistence on a more secular government and opposition to the Islamist structure, tacitly recognize the rights of less religious, non-religious, and non-Muslim minorities as equal citizens of the state. Finally, the student activists, and other advocates of civil liberties, also are making more of an effort to link issues of human rights and civil rights to feminist concerns.

Dabbagh openly is opposed to political liberty and equality and Rahnavard has yet to speak out, or show any inclination, in this direction. Both women are representative of a paradox: How the Islamist movement

83. See further Afrary "Bar amadan az Zolmat," pp. 194-219.



in Iran, which espoused the subordination of women to men, nonetheless developed strong women leaders who experienced real power inside the Islamic Republic. Women like them are classic examples of what Fromm and the Frankfurt School called authoritarian personalities. These are individuals, who, fearing the insecurities that the freedoms of modernity bring, seek to escape from their anxiety by joining authoritarian movements. They gain a sense of security from these movements in two ways: 1) as followers conforming to a structure that makes their decisions for them, and 2) as leaders who gain security from exercising power over others. I have tentatively explored these theories of authoritarianism in a more dialectical manner, pointing to sites of change and resistance. We see that after twenty years of the Islamic Republic, the authoritarian solution has become unworkable as the government confronts the emergence of mass discontent among a new generation of youth and women, a generation that is coming of age long after the Revolution and has suffered the injustices of the theocracy. The future of Iran's reform movement is now in the hands of this new generation, but it remains to be seen if it can create a new national consensus over such issues as new civil liberties that clearly demarcate the boundaries between religion, state, and the individual; a more inclusive concept of citizenship; a more egalitarian concept of gender relations; and a new relationship to the outside world and the complex phenomenon of modernity.