

With no smoke in our eyes: the struggle of women in Muslim countries is a fire that has long been burning. Interview with Bani Khoshnoudi

by Chiara Antonelli

I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put in our hands.
- *The Spirit of Utopia*, Ernst Bloch, 1915-16 (published in 1923)

Iran. November 2, 2024. Outside Teheran's Islamic Azad University, the 30-year-old doctoral student in French literature Mahla Daryaei, walks with her arms folded dressed only in her underwear. The photo of her goes viral on social media and her body is at the center of an international discussion. A young woman in struggle for being confronted and harassed, her torn clothes, by the paramilitary Basij forces for failing to comply with laws on the mandatory wearing of the hijab in the country. For the Iranian government, her act is an obvious manifestation of 'mental problems' that violated public morality. Mahla Daryaei called Ahoo has been arrested, leaving behind her a trail of uncertain news about where she is being held, her condition and her fate. Her image is now the symbol of Iranian women's struggle for their freedom. On Mahla's body and image violently inscribed that Western fetishism child of the colonial heritage that shines a spotlight only on symbolic acts that correspond to the Western idea of women's liberation, of emancipation; where the gaze of what is 'white' feminism is also poured. This simplistic media selectivity is unable to confront the complexity, the pluralism, of the non-Western societies that it does not want to recognize, erasing their identity through an anti-Islam policy on which to establish instead its own imperialist sovereignty from noble cultural values. A political instrumentalization that overshadows the reality of the repression suffered daily by Iranian women, making their suffering invisible and reinforcing the regime's fascist propaganda. According to a compassionate belief in Western's fetishism, even feminist, a woman who strips her clothes off in Iran is a spokeswoman for a whole group of Muslim women who need to be saved.

In a video you posted on your Instagram profile where a woman stands up to a Basij who is filming her and accuses her of offending Imam Hussein by walking in front of a mosque without her veil, she responds: «Don't try to scare me. I will keep standing by my beliefs until the vein in my neck is cut. I'm a woman, and I will stand until the very end... Who the heck is Imam Hossein». Here it is that following one of the most common rhetorics, often relying on Orientalist discourses and in the name of sisterhood, a part of colonial, white-centric and neoliberal feminism asks: "Do Iranian women really need to be saved?"

Bani Khoshnoudi: I think there is a very big distortion in the way your question is stated, reducing the act of protest by Iranian women first of all to something that must be forcibly instrumentalized by or framed within a Western point of view, creating smoke in our eyes, blurring the issues that are really at stake. Positioning a dichotomy of West and Other can be profoundly simplistic, and although this dichotomy was an important part of postcolonial movements in the 60s and 70s, within today's global context of neoliberalism and neocolonialism, it simplifies our understanding when we precisely need to realize that the political issues are much more complex. This simplicity is not just annoying, it can be quite dangerous, as it allows for the

cultivation of manipulative language, authoritarian speech and acts, and ultimately reduces the world into divisive mindsets. How is it possible to speak as if each and every one of us is not influenced by the other, historically speaking, and as if the origin of women's struggle must be understood from coming forcibly from the West in the first place.

Edward Said has written extensively on this dangerous and simplistic dichotomy. He had repeatedly denounced the fabricated idea of a clash of civilizations as being at the root of a very colonial mentality, and ultimately at the service of structures of domination. "The constructions of fictions like 'East' and 'West', to say nothing of racist essences like subject races... were what my books attempted to combat. Far from encouraging a sense of aggrieved primal innocence in countries which had repeatedly suffered the ravages of colonialism, I stated over and over again that mythical abstractions such as these were lies, as were the various rhetorics of blame they gave rise to; cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident."¹

Now, despite the importance of the decolonial movement and the need to further its thought and actions in order to deconstruct the power structures we are living under, there are today various ideas and approaches that even seem not truly interested in the liberation of the so-called "third world" from Western frameworks, but which have given fodder for the continuation of the very structures and definitions that have permitted for the justification of the invasion and extraction of other lands. This might sound strange, because of course it does not follow the strict idea of decoloniality as in the academic books, which have become more numerous and more trendy as well by the day. Yet, I want to underline that I am worried about the way a lot of decolonial theory feeds into a similar dominating and manipulative usage of language and censorship in order to supposedly defend the downtrodden, while ultimately working towards a discourse that seems to even prefer to maintain them (the indigenous, the woman, the Muslim woman in particular, and other oppressed peoples), within a discursive framework of exploitation, in order to justify the furthering of its own contexts of research and publication.

We must be extremely rigorous when we start pointing fingers, classifying, canceling, reducing to simplistic terms the reality of peoples who have actually been oppressed and exploited, to avoid becoming precisely guilty of maintaining a simplistic and naive understanding of a given situation, with the goal of justifying our own discourse of anti-imperialism or anti-colonial resistance.

The hijab has become a tool of silencing, a tool of oppression, within this discourse as well, and not only on the body. Whether it is a woman's choice or not, is somehow beyond the point. I continue to defend, in the legacy of Arab and Iranian feminists that came before us, the profound conviction that no woman would decide to veil herself if there was not an oppressive, patriarchal framework to impose it, suggest it, or define as necessary, whether this be through law or through family dynamics. My answer would be, that the question should not be "Do Iranian women really need to be saved?" But why would this even be a question, when they are fighting and dying, risking their lives every day, and this since not only during these 46 years of Islamic Republic, but since over 100 years, within the context of modern Iran? There are traces of women revolting, demanding rights and equality all over the Muslim world, for decades. What is it about women's liberation in Muslim countries that makes the so-called decolonial mindset uncomfortable? Why is it so bothersome that Iranian and Algerian women fight to have equal rights? Do you not see that the veil is the tip of the iceberg? Why the necessity to victimize once again the Iranian woman

¹ *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Edward W. Said, Ed. Vintage, p. XI

(and the Muslim woman) as if she is an idiot being manipulated by the West? Is this how we understand and respect women from Iran, Algeria, Tunisia, Palestine, Egypt, etc. who have been secretly gathering collectively, educating their daughters to fight for change?

Regarding the anti-racist discourse in France for example, which focuses on the veil and its prohibition in the schools, and claiming that the veil is an identity issue, I have to reject this. I am of course very involved in anti-racism in whichever context, but to reduce the veil to a cultural sign, to an identity issue, is extremely naive. I will elaborate on this further, but I believe that there has been a very successful manipulation on the part of Islamic ideology, which I condemn, as I condemn all religious ideology, to bring the Left into its ranks as its foot soldiers. If a woman, if a girl, has the right to choose, then they should also let her choose. Veiling girls at 4, 5 years old, and later in a more permanent way at 11 years old, is not freedom to choose. This is where the confusion lies, not in if the veil is oppressive for women or not.

Let me bring this question to another issue, that of the manipulation and images of resistance, that has been bothering me recently. While the Palestinian resistance is one of the most noble struggles today, the world has quickly and blindly fallen into the trap of idolizing leaders whose politics are extremely authoritarian and fascistic. There is no if and but... there is no yes, but... applauding for and blindly idolizing, for example, the last image of Yahya Sinwar as he faced the Israeli drone is a symptom of this confusion. Despite his fight against Zionist occupation and the abominable Israeli violence, what about his questionable politics and methods? Can this be put on hold while Palestinian liberation is at stake. Maybe, but is it necessary to question and speak and think through the political implications, definitely. We lived through this in Iran, precisely, thanks to the Western Leftists who unabashedly supported the Islamists that took power, while of course throwing Iranian women under the bus of history. An image of Yahya Sinwar or of Ayatollah Khomeini is not questionable for anti-colonialists while the image of the Iranian woman is immediately brought under attack, most likely because it creates discomfort, and thus must be described and written off as being “a product of the West”.

Is this not violence against women once again?

Is this not working at the service of the murderous Iranian regime?

I must mention that the Ayatollah Khomeini, and his subsequent disciples and the current corrupt and fascist leaders of Iran, have always used this same excuse in order to attack us and to reduce us to objects meant to be silenced and eliminated. It is worrisome to see how the Left, my close colleagues sometimes, have once again become, despite themselves, confused, inarticulate and victims of self-censorship and censorship of others.

As much as I want to understand this confused “radicality” that may reside within decolonial discourse, I also want to make these thinkers take responsibility for their words and actions. I would think that after Michel Foucault’s huge mistake of whole-heartedly approving and also making propaganda for the birth of the Islamic Republic in Iran² – which would subsequently turn into one of the most corrupt killing machines in the region – that we on the Left would learn from our mistakes by now when claiming that the West is defining certain forms of protest, while we should be complying to a so-called ‘cultural essence’, which in and of itself is a very fascistic idea. In the end, this is what ultimately cancels and gaslights the women’s struggle in the Muslim World. Not the secular laws of France.

Women are not liberated by wearing veils. This is a delusional idea, one fabricated by Islamist propaganda, repeated and dispersed by the Left (once again), and which makes us ultimately at

² “Ritorno al profeta”, Michel Foucault, *Corriere della sera*, October 22, 1978.

the beck and call of fascistic thought disguised as ‘political correctness’, while basically abandoning women into the hands of religion and patriarchy.

Right now, my worry is not even Iranian women: we don’t need the West, and we don’t need to be understood necessarily by the West. We could care less, as we are much stronger than that and have been fighting on our own all these years. My main worry is for Afghan women who have basically been abandoned by Western decolonial feminists while the West has been so involved in their country for so many decades. Since their situation is beyond imagination, enslaved and basically erased from public life, closed into their homes as prisoners, traded between men at their leisure and for their use and pleasure... because their situation is so complex, it does not even enter into the perfect categories of decolonialism, that have reduced and described our resistance(s) as a ‘return to origins’, whatever that origin is, and as if it is possible to wipe away hundreds of years of history.

Of course, none of these thinkers actually live in the countries we are speaking about. Most of them live precisely in the West, in Europe in particular, and live quite well. Their careers and their publications have made space for themselves while many times erasing the long heritage of Muslim women or women in the Muslim world who have risked their lives to fight against the use of religion to dominate them, to control them and sometimes even enslave their bodies and minds. Nawal El Saadawi said, in a text written late in her life in 2008: “Blind faith leads to blind fundamentalism, blind fanaticism, blind racism, blind sexism, blind hate and blind love”³. From Sediqeh Dowlatabadi to Nawal El Saadawi... why do we not go back and learn from them?

CA: To the eyes of the Western world, the hijab is a symbol of oppression, of cancellation, of female subjectivity creating confusion between the rejection of the mandatory hijab and its rejection in general. Women wearing the veil are demonized and used to spread fear, and to prevent communal coexistence. Religious identity is stamped on their cultural identity for a policy of racist Western supremacy by legitimizing antagonism toward Islamic countries. Isn't the hijab rather a matter of individual freedom? What is its meaning in the present Iranian revolution?

BK: It is not just in the eyes of Westerners that the hijab is an oppressive object. The difference is that we who have lived in Muslim countries do not live with it as a symbol; we do not have that kind of privilege as you do. We have to live with it for what it is: an instrument meant to humiliate, silence and differentiate women from men. The confusion is also generated by this idea that you have to pick sides: that by fighting anti-racism, you must ultimately embrace the veil as if it is a beautiful thing in and of itself, as if it is ‘cultural essence’ (again that fascistic principle). Western, or I would rather say, White supremacy not only exists towards the veil, but towards anyone who comes from a country and a culture unlike itself. Whether the veil is involved or not. The veil has become a fetishized object, and by extension the woman’s body, has also become once again more of a debate piece than a real experience.

I ask those claiming “cultural essence” to actually learn something about the vastly different and complex cultures that run throughout the Muslim world, most of all the fact that “individual freedom” does not even exist within this framework. This is where the defense of the veil as an individual freedom becomes absurd. This is a liberal idea that all can decide for themselves. The French political attack (self-centered and simplistic as well) on the hijab has unfortunately led to

³ “How to fight against the Postmodern slave system.” Nawal El Saadawi, 2008, in *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader*, ZED Books, 2013

a heightened fetishization of this piece of cloth, as if it is what defines and encapsulates a culture. Worse, the full body chador, which was not really used in North African countries, has now become a trend within the younger generation of French girls, whose identity politics and revindications have been fed to them by higher powers, ones that are extremely organized and whose bloodline is antagonism to the French state. We know about ISIS now, it is also one of those uncomfortable elephant in the room situations. How can we actually pretend and defend that Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian... cultural identity is made of this and consolidated in the veil. Is it so difficult to admit to the manipulation and instrumentalization of these meters of cloth, that have only created more masses of women to be used and sacrificed for a certain idea of culture, one completely dominated by religious ideology?

Of course, I would never and have never confronted anyone about their use of the veil. The opposite is not true. As a gesture of silencing and censorship, it is forcibly at some point an issue. When I hear this nonsense that the veil is a sign of liberation, I just wish that any of those daring to say this would go and spend time in a place where it is actually an issue. I appreciate that girls under the age of 18 can be free of their family's politics and religious reglementations within the context of school, and live equal to the boys of their age. This is not the case within Muslim countries. There is no equality under the Sharia, and all equality under the law within Muslim countries comes from struggles that women have been able to win within the context of modernity. Not all aspects of modernity are bad. We need to avoid this dangerous dichotomy.

The interesting thing is that within our countries (where the issues are lived first hand and not hypothetically), the Left in our countries are actually mostly fighting to free us of religion, as any Left should be doing. I say this, but I should say, 'what remains of the Left' in our countries, as most of them have been imprisoned or killed off by the authoritarian regimes, whether it be in Iran, in Egypt, in Tunisia, Syria, Algeria, Palestine... there is a struggle in each and every one of these places that attest to this historical process.

CA: Tehran, September 16, 2022. The young Iranian Kurdish woman Jina Mahsa Amini was killed by morality police for a lock of hair outside her hijab. With her death, a cycle of disobedience protests under the shout of *Woman, Life, Freedom* has ignited its unprecedented fire. Who and what is *Woman, Life, Freedom* a spokesperson for? What is its role and aspiration; and how does it act? Can we say that its voice resonates in a broader context than just Iran, I would say worldwide context?

BK: I believe it is a horizontal, spontaneous, universal and anarchist slogan as well as movement. There is no head nor party that has organized any of this, yet it spread, like fire, from one end of Iran to the other. It started in Kurdistan, a potent hub of leftist resistance in Iran for decades. Its aspiration is to fight fascism, and to attack the very core of that fascism, because if we manage to stop the regime from veiling us, we manage to stop them from silencing us. Here, I would say that the veil becomes a symbol, yet a symbol with a very specific pragmatic intention as well. When you veil women, forcibly of course because so many women do not and did not want to be veiled, you mark them as lesser beings. Of course, the veil is a piece of cloth, but what is behind this piece of cloth is what is most worrisome. The veil is the tip of the iceberg, it is directly tied to the tremendous laws and regulations on the very existence of women within society, especially those countries which are still subject to Islamic law and the Sharia. In many countries like Lebanon, and Iran before 1979, the family laws and equality laws were reformed to protect women, and children for that matter.

At some point it is important to name things for what they are and stop feeling guilt about it as Western leftists. Islamic law is anti-woman. I don't see how we can debate this. It gives women half of the rights of men. None of these young French girls who put the chador on realize that they are completely naive to this, living protected under basic human and civil rights of equality, while being manipulated into someone else's political game using the veil as its instrument. Have they lived like Afghan women? The question is not one of choice. If women in Muslim countries can live with equal rights and still decide to veil themselves (on their own and not through family imposition), then of course the choice is respected, and honestly, I don't think that they would have the same 'worry' about the veil that you are bringing up. As many of the older generations of women in my own family, like in many Iranian families, the women aspire for the liberation of their daughters from male domination. This starts with the veil, just as fathers put the veil on the young daughters before they know what sexuality is. I think that *Women Life Freedom* is an audacious and noble movement that has made waves around the globe. It broke a taboo. It made a precedent. It has no fear, and unifies women, veiled or not, for the complete liberation of women, but also of LGBTQ+ and other oppressed peoples. This is real deconstruction, decolonialism. This is not a product of the West. Definitely not.

CA: During your performative lectures *Here and there: minutes on the new Iranian revolution* you tell that in the heated demonstrations that denote the climate of protest in Iran today, fire is used for its symbolic meaning of purification, as a rite of passage from a before to an after. What is the meaning of this magical-protective system within Iranian culture? How is it used in the revolution and why? Is its use related to the lighting of fires during the Chaharshanbe Suri, on the eve of Nowruz?

BK: It is my interpretation, but yes, fire is very present in our lives and in our rituals. It represents purity and renewal. We are cleaning ourselves continuously of the different layers of fascism that we must experience. Although it does not burn everything down so easily, the fire continues...

CA: Making reference to your work as artist, filmmaker, and activist, on your Instagram profile page you share that "standing here, my body disconnected and dislocated from its people and from its origin, I can only be a modest witness". How does your art relate to what is happening in Iran and how does this relationship happen? In recent years, you have been doing a great deal of archiving of the Iranian revolution, through numerous films and images: how do you live the physical distance that in some ways, I would say, has been imposed on you with your country, but also with your fellow artists and filmmakers?

BK: I cannot travel back there. My ideas would create a dangerous context for me. This is fascism. It silences and eliminates those who create a threat to its existence. The women in Iran are a threat to fascism. I can no longer be on the streets of Tehran crying out, protesting with my people, so with regards to the movement there, I must only be a witness and speak with and through images that I can collect at a distance. Images made and sent into the air by those who are there, in order to be archived. It is a collective, subconscious action to build this archive with no personal identities involved. No copyright, nor an idea of individuality that dominates over the collective. These are our images. Yet, I must underline that Iran is not my only country. I am an internationalist, and have created life and ties in other places, in particular in Mexico, my adoptive country. The fight against violence against women in Mexico is part of the same fight that Iranian women are leading as well. We do not want to have violence done to us by men, by

the state, by the Narco, by the institutions, by religion, by others who claim to defend us. So in many ways, I am in Iran without being there.

CA: The 60th Venice Biennale curated by Adriano Pedrosa has just ended, where you contributed to one of its most central projects: *Disobedience Archive (The Zoetrope)* by Marco Scotini. The project presented two of its sections *Gender Disobedience* and *Diaspora Activism*, where here you contributed with your film *Transit(s): Our Traces, Our Ruin* (2016) whose moving images retraced the traces of a central theme of your research, “the movement of human beings across the planet is a millenary and repetitive story. It follows the evolutions of our civilizations, the catastrophes and sometimes the downfalls”. What was the experience of the Biennial? An exhibition that started from a decolonial premise (without taking sides with the ongoing genocide in Gaza), with a film so humanly truthful about the identity and emotional complexities, the fears, of those who are defined as ‘foreign’ in relation to a place and how these instances function within the institutional system?

BK: I believe the space of the *Disobedience Archive* was particular in that it brought together individuals into a collective space. Individual artists, sometimes working in groups themselves, brought into dialogue in order to create a horizontal context of representation. No hierarchies, no highlights, no bigger and smaller, all part of an idea of resistance, archive, and struggle through the image.

CA: In these dark days, months, years so worldwide in which we seem to be traveling like on a *meaningless timeline* with an ever more rapid assertion of fascist policies and an unspoken intrinsic weakening of the left: where does hope reside for you?

BK: In my daughter, and in all of the new generations, here and there.

Iranian filmmaker and visual artist, Bani Khoshnoudi makes documentary and fiction films, as well as installations and photography. Her work explores the history of modernity in Iran, as well as the layers, stories and experiences related to exile and migration. Her 2009 documentary essay, *The Silent Majority Speaks*, banned in Lebanon and Iran, is a political fresco about 100 years of political revolt in Iran that was included in Georges Didi-Huberman’s exhibition project, *Uprisings* for the Jeu de Paume Museum and has been called by Nicole Brenez as one of ten essential films of the century. Her 2019 fiction feature, *Fireflies*, was made in Mexico, and won the HBO Best Ibero-American Feature award at the Miami International Film Festival. In 2022, she was awarded the prestigious Herb Alpert Award for the Arts for Film and Video, she participated in the 60e Biennale di Venezia main exhibit, *Foreigners Everywhere*, curated by Adriano Pedrosa.

Chiara Antonelli (Foligno, 2000) is a visual artist based in Milan. In 2025 she completed her studies with a MA in Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies at NABA - Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan, after a BA in Painting and Visual Arts. Her research stems from the encounter with the data that through a transformative process is re-presented in the present, starting from the symbolologies of its territory of origin up to contemporary political controversies. She has taken part in several group exhibitions in art institutions and independent spaces and with her first solo exhibition inaugurates her on-going project *For a Fire Constellation: distant stars, scattered sparks, now returned to the view*, a digital geophysical archive of the use of fire in actions of dissent in the global panorama.