



## From Male Authority to Female Agency: A Genealogical Study of Discursive Shifts in Contemporary Theology of Hijab

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### ABSTRACT

In the years preceding the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the gradual incorporation of modern epistemic frameworks into Iranian intellectual life posed profound challenges to the authority of established, tradition-bound modes of thought. Confronted with these epistemological disruptions, religious discourses could no longer rely exclusively on doctrinal rigidity or devotional orthodoxy. At the same time, the deeply entrenched character of traditional knowledge—shaped by centuries of religious and cultural continuity—significantly constrained its capacity for adaptation and reconfiguration in response to emerging paradigms. Within this context, interpretations of the hijab, grounded in premodern epistemologies and largely devoid of women's subjective presence, were frequently shaped by patriarchal assumptions and, at times, explicit misogyny. Such readings increasingly proved untenable amid the shifting intellectual and social dynamics of modern Iran. As traditional epistemes fractured and were reconstituted under the pressures of modernity, religious thought was compelled to reassess its foundational premises. Drawing on Michel Foucault's archaeological method, this study investigates the nature and conditions of this epistemic rupture within contemporary Islamic thought. By dividing the historical trajectory into three key periods—pre-Pahlavi, the Pahlavi era (excluding its final decade), and the years immediately preceding the Islamic Revolution—the study traces transformations in discourses surrounding the hijab. It argues that the entanglement of religious tradition with cultural norms, together with the emergence of female agency in public and intellectual life, necessitated a reformulation of religious language—one that is gender-inclusive and responsive to a transformed epistemological landscape.

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## 1. Introduction

The discourse on hijab in Iran has long constituted a significant site of tension between traditional and modern perspectives, evolving in response to broader social and intellectual transformations. The introduction of modern epistemic concepts challenged inherited knowledge systems and compelled religious thought to move beyond purely dogmatic responses. Early interpretations of hijab, often marked by the absence of female agency, reflected gender bias and misogynistic assumptions that became increasingly unsustainable within Iran's changing intellectual environment.

This study seeks to analyze the transformation of theological explanations of hijab in contemporary Islamic thought, with particular attention to the role of female agency across distinct historical periods. The central problem examined is the evolution of these explanations from a patriarchal framework toward interpretations that recognize women's autonomy and conscious choice in matters of dress.

## 2. Methodology

This research employs a Foucauldian archaeological approach to analyze epistemic ruptures and conditions of possibility within contemporary Islamic discourses on hijab. The historical period under study is divided into three phases: the pre-Pahlavi era (pre-1925), the Pahlavi II period (1941–1979, excluding the final decade), and the pre-revolutionary years (1969–1979). Emphasizing discontinuities rather than continuity, this approach focuses on the underlying and often unconscious rules that shape discursive formations. Through this method, the study elucidates how shifting epistemic frameworks influenced interpretations of hijab in each period.

## 3. Findings

The analysis identifies significant discursive shifts across three historical phases:

### **Pre-Pahlavi Era (Discourse of Imposing Maximal Hijab):**

Interpretations of hijab during this period were predominantly articulated from a male-centered perspective, emphasizing control over female sexuality, preservation of family honor, and prevention of social disorder. Women were largely constructed as objects of male authority, deprived of agency or autonomy in determining their attire. Religious arguments frequently invoked presumed intellectual and emotional deficiencies in women to justify domestic confinement and strict veiling. The benefits of hijab were framed primarily in terms of safeguarding male interests and social stability, with minimal attention to women's perspectives.

### **Pahlavi II Era (Discourse of Hijab and Modern Control):**

This phase marked a gradual discursive shift in which traditional justifications were increasingly supplemented by arguments emphasizing women's protection and independence. Religious discourse began to address women directly and to stress reciprocal responsibilities within the family. Although essentialist assumptions regarding women's sexuality persisted, women were increasingly recognized as active social agents, particularly through an emphasis on family sanctity and motherhood. Linguistically, religious texts adopted a more women-oriented tone, even as their underlying logic remained largely intact.

### **Pre-Revolutionary Era (Discourse of Islamic–Social Participation of Women):**

In this period, earlier gendered assumptions were subjected to sustained critique. Religious discourse increasingly acknowledged women as full and independent members of society,

emphasizing shared human capacities and equal valuation of knowledge, piety, and virtue. Interpretations of hijab moved toward gender-inclusive and non-gendered language, reflecting the growing influence of female agency and broader social transformation.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study demonstrates that contemporary theological discourse on hijab has undergone a substantial transformation, departing from a patriarchal framework that historically positioned women as passive subjects devoid of agency. Driven by social change and the expanding presence of women in intellectual and public life, these discourses have increasingly acknowledged women's autonomy and conscious choice. This shift necessitates the development of a gender-inclusive theological language capable of transcending misogynistic and exclusionary interpretations. The findings underscore the decisive role of cultural–religious entanglements and female agency in reshaping contemporary understandings of hijab within Islamic thought.

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