



## The Evolution of the Veiling Discourse from the Constitutional Revolution to the End of Pahlavi I Era (1906 - 1941)\*

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| Article Info   | ABSTRACT   |
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| <b>Article type:</b><br>Research Article   | The issue of unveiling has been one of the most pressing socio-cultural challenges in Iranian society. Beyond its incompatibility with Iranian-Islamic cultural values, it has generated significant social, political, and national consequences for the Islamic Republic. Understanding this phenomenon within its historical context—particularly its early manifestations in Iran—is therefore of critical importance. This study explores the discursive transformations of veiling from the Constitutional Revolution to the end of the reign of Reza Shah, within the framework of discursive conflict. The study adopts a discourse analysis approach grounded in the theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The findings indicate that during the early Constitutional era, a pro-veiling discourse prevailed. However, anti-veiling voices increasingly framed Western-style dress reform around four central themes: freedom, chastity, education, and religious reinterpretation. This framing destabilized the dominant discourse, leading to the emergence of five defensive sub-discourses: Qur'anic-jurisprudential veiling, Weakness-Oriented veiling, Woman-Centered veiling, socio-political veiling, and Legalistic veiling. A central binary emerged—"domesticity and veiling" versus "social participation and unveiling"—reflecting the deepening discursive polarization. With the rise of the Pahlavi regime, the anti-veiling discourse gained institutional support, especially through civil registration and public education systems. The 1935 Mandatory Unveiling Law effectively neutralized public debate by coercively imposing one side of the discourse. |
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## 1. Introduction

The transformation of the hijab has been one of the most contentious socio-cultural issues in Iran's modern history. This study investigates the discursive evolution of hijab from the Constitutional Revolution (1906) to the end of the first Pahlavi era (1941), a period that witnessed the initial confrontation between the traditional hijab discourse and the emerging anti-hijab discourse. The developments of this era had profound implications for later debates on hijab in Iran.

## 2. Research Method

This study employs discourse analysis based on the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe. According to this model, discursive transformations unfold through five phases: crisis of the dominant discourse, competition over new myths, discursive hegemony, consolidation of a new social order, and the emergence of internal otherness (Hoseinzadeh, 2016). Key concepts such as availability, credibility, instruments of power, and antagonism were used in the analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2022).

## 3. Findings

During the Constitutional period, four major intellectual currents emerged regarding the hijab:

1. **Western-oriented intellectuals** (e.g., Akhundzadeh, Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi) advocated for full abandonment of hijab and the adoption of Western cultural norms.
2. **Moderate reformers** (e.g., Nasim-e Shomal, Mokhber-ol-Saltaneh Hedayat) supported selective reforms like women's education but maintained a more reserved stance on hijab.
3. **Modernist clerics** (e.g., Mohammad Sadegh Fakhr al-Islam, Seyyed Asadollah Kharaghani) sought to reconcile Islamic values with modern concepts like freedom and equality.
4. **Traditionalist clerics** opposed change, allowing only limited education for women in religious and domestic affairs.

These currents sparked discursive struggles along four principal axes:

- **Freedom and Equality:** Anti-hijab advocates described hijab as a symbol of imprisonment, though thinkers like Akhundzadeh retained patriarchal assumptions by supporting freedom for unmarried women only. Hijab proponents responded in two ways: some (e.g., Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri) rejected Western liberty altogether, while others distinguished between unrestricted freedom and Islamic human-centered liberty.
- **Education:** Critics portrayed hijab as an obstacle to women's intellectual development. Proponents accepted education but restricted it to areas aligned with domestic and religious duties.
- **Chastity:** Anti-hijab discourse redefined chastity as a moral quality unrelated to clothing. Defenders emphasized a strong link between hijab and chastity, citing moral decay in Western societies as cautionary examples.
- **Religion and Clergy:** While some critics challenged the religious legitimacy of hijab, others attempted theological reinterpretation. In contrast, defenders cited Qur'anic texts and traditions to assert hijab's integral role in Islamic practice.

These debates led to the development of five sub-discourses within the pro-hijab camp (Jafarian, 2001):

1. **Qur'anic-Jurisprudential Veiling** – Emphasized religious legitimacy through scriptural sources.
2. **Weakness-Oriented Veiling** – Highlighted natural gender differences.
3. **Woman-Centered Veiling** – Portrayed hijab as protective of women's dignity and rights.
4. **Socio-Political Veiling** – Cast hijab as a cultural defense mechanism against Western imperialism.
5. **Legalistic Veiling** – Advocated for state enforcement of hijab regulations.

With the ascent of Reza Shah, anti-hijab discourse gained practical traction through state mechanisms such as the Civil Registration Office (requiring unveiled photos) and girls' schools. The 1935 unveiling decree marked the height of this institutional effort, enforced through a combination of cultural influence and coercion.

#### 4. Conclusion

The discursive struggle over hijab during this period resulted in a polarized framework: hijab symbolizing domestic seclusion and unveiling associated with public participation. While the anti-hijab discourse found some traction among urban middle-class circles, it failed to gain widespread societal acceptance. Instances of resistance—from the Goharshad Mosque uprising to everyday acts of defiance during the unveiling mandate, and the mass return to hijab following Reza Shah's abdication—demonstrate the discourse's limitations (Zaeri & Yousefinejad, 2019). Its failure to reflect the pluralistic realities of Iranian society and its confrontational stance toward religion and the clergy ultimately facilitated the resurgence of the pro-hijab discourse.

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