

Introduction

The sweeping victory of Hassan Rouhani in the Iranian presidential elections of 2013 was followed by high-profile declarations of his commitment to recover Iran's relationship with the West, improve its economy, and resolve the country's social dilemmas. On various occasions since he was elected, Rouhani has articulated the significance of equal opportunities and rights for women, the need to eliminate gender discrimination, and an effort to loosen government censorship of the internet and the press.¹ These declarations did not prevent his government from taking legal actions against the magazine *Zanan-e Emruz* (Women of Today) in September 2014, only four months after its launch. Accusations were made against the editor, Shahla Sherkat, who previously edited *Zanan* (Women) for 16 years until it was shut down in 2008 for promoting un-Islamic ideas and feminist views that were harmful for the public's mental health. Sherkat was once quoted saying that "journalism in developing countries is like walking on a tight rope. You have to be careful where you step, otherwise you will fall." Notwithstanding the obstacles, women journalists still believe that the pen is mightier than any other weapon.²

The hope for greater freedom for the media and women evokes the persistence of these principles, their relevance and intricacy in modern Iranian history. Concomitant with their enduring implications are broader aspirations to achieve freedom of expression, social justice, economic progress, technological development, and national self-reliance. In the early 1960s, controversies over which tenable route Iran should follow in achieving these goals spurred great sociopolitical expectations alongside nationalist anxieties and cultural alienation in

¹ *Rooz*, July 3, 2013; *BBC* July 3, 2013; *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, July 13, 2013.

² VOA, "Women Journalists from Bangladesh, Iran and Germany Honored for Courage," *Voice of America*, October 13, 2005; Hendelman-Baavur, "Iran Bans 'Women.'"

the face of the Pahlavi monarchy's enthusiasm for sweeping modernization. The growing sense of discontent, epitomized by the popular neologism "westoxication" (*gharbzadegi*), came to encompass all the problematic and negative influences of the West on Iran. For Iranian intellectuals the metonymic usage of women, to represent the ills of western modernity, proved instrumental for the articulation of the growing discontent that triggered the revolutionary tidal wave of the late 1970s, and ended the country's 2,500-year monarchy.³

The downfall of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), followed by the establishment of the Islamic Republic, directed much of the scholarly and non-scholarly attention on Iran to the religious and intellectual roots of the 1979 Revolution.⁴ Multifaceted aspects of the failures of the Pahlavi monarchy and the anti-Shah movement have been discussed in an often asymmetrical and state-centered analysis, on the backdrop of the historical encounter between Iran and western modernity. Marking the nineteenth century as the consensual starting point, one scholar suggested that Iranians, like most other people at the receiving end of capitalist modernity, encountered the European culture through the gun barrel of colonialism.⁵ Another scholar depicted this encounter as a Faustian bargain in which many Iranians felt they had to sacrifice their traditional and native identities for monotonous materialism.⁶

In the wake of the 1960s, the flow of information, capital goods, and other industrial products from developed to developing countries generated suspicion and acute concerns over the system of domination and dependence, endorsed by western-oriented media culture, and the homogenizing conditions they purportedly entailed.⁷ One of the main structuralist theses to emerge from these concerns—identified in international communication research as "media imperialism" or "cultural imperialism" in broader context of dependency theories—evoked very important questions as to the hegemonic implications of western mass media for the receiving societies. Emerging in the Cold War era, this

³ On the legacy of Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* I have elaborated somewhere else, see: Hendelman-Baavur, "The Odyssey of Jalal Al-Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*," 258–286.

⁴ De Groot, "Gender, Discourse and Ideology in Iranian Studies," 29; Chehabi, "The Pahlavi Period," 495.

⁵ Dabashi, *The World Is My Home*, 132.

⁶ Boroujerdi, "Iranian Islam and the Faustian Bargain of Western Modernity," 2.

⁷ On media imperialism see: Fejes, "Media Imperialism: An Assessment," 281–289.

thesis gained momentum at a time when the world was perceived in terms of divisions between the capitalist West, the socialist East, and the underdeveloped South. It was decidedly critical of earlier assumptions regarding development, advanced by western analysts (mostly in the United States), that adhered to the potentiality of popular mass media in shaping people's behavior and attitudes through propaganda. Daniel Lerner is credited with being the first to systematically link media studies and the modernization theory in his 1958 book *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. At the core of the modernization theory was an oversimplified assumption that a package of western manufacturing technology, political structures, liberal values, and systems of mass communication would be embraced enthusiastically by Middle Eastern countries – and much of the postcolonial world after the end of World War II. The notion that this package will lead non-western countries through transformation from “traditionally backward” to modernized and democratized societies did not materialize as its originators expected.⁸

In Iran, the major modernization enterprise for reform was enforced from above in the form of “the White Revolution.” Endorsed by the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), his supporters and under debatable pressure of the Kennedy administration, the White Revolution meant to facilitate Iran's transition from an agrarian to an industrial, modern economy without bloodshed of class conflict.⁹ The initial plan of reforms had consisted of six points, the main being a land reform that aimed to dismantle the big inherited landholdings and redistribute them to former tenant farmers. It also prescribed the nationalization of the country's forests, the privatization of state-owned factories, and full franchise rights for women. The remaining points of the reform program were to implement profit-sharing for industrial workers and to fight illiteracy by the establishment of Literacy Corps. To gain public support for the program January 26,

⁸ Shah, *The Production of Modernization*, 1.

⁹ Although the White Revolution has received much attention of both scholarly and non-scholarly literature, certain details remain controversial. While some describe this reform program as a “package of policy guidelines” staged by the Americans, others point out the Shah used American fears of communism to gain increased financial aid, military support, and influence in the United Nations. See, for instance, Matin-Asgari, “The Pahlavi Era,” 358 and Summitt, “For a White Revolution,” 560–575.

1963 was scheduled for the plebiscite that was approved by an overwhelming majority (5.59 million voters, 4,115 opposed).¹⁰ These results, which remain a source of controversy even today, reinforced the Shah's conviction that the launch of this revolution was to be considered as the starting point of Iran's modern history.¹¹ Beyond the official celebration of its programs, the White Revolution encountered objections from the very beginning, and vilified as "the black revolution" among the burgeoning opposition to the Shah's policies.¹²

By the early 1970s, the emerging anti-colonial westoxication discourse, inspired by neo-Marxist dependency theory and cultural imperialism, generated some totalizing generalizations about the print media as an important component implicated in the broader scheme of the West, the Pahlavi state, and class control of capitalist development. The Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati described the disturbing conditions under which all means of communication, advertisement, and social, technical, artistic, and educational possibilities in underdeveloped countries were used in service of propaganda, promotion, and distribution that formed a new religious trinity of exploitation, colonialization, and despotism.¹³ Subsequent observations noted that the interest of US media companies in economic control of the world's markets corresponded with the need of the Pahlavi government for political control of the culture industry; censorship was the handmaiden of the program for the revitalization of Iran, and dissenting opinions were not tolerated.¹⁴ The exploitation of developing countries, as concerned social critics also pointed out, involved new forms of women's oppression by western capitalism in the name of future progress and national revitalization that succumbed to exploitative materialistic consumption.

Popular culture was a central feature for both Iranian modernization and westoxication discourses, and hence, for the formation of the radical political identities of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the triumph of the 1979 revolution, the new regime was keen on "sanitizing" the media

¹⁰ *Ettela'at*, January 31, 1963. Important to note that women's votes in the referendum were counted separately.

¹¹ Pahlavi, *The White Revolution*, 4.

¹² *Ettela'at-e Banuvan*, 318, June 17, 1963; *The Michigan Daily*, December 9, 1979.

¹³ Shariati, *Fatima Is Fatima*, 89–90.

¹⁴ Naficy, "Cinematic Exchange Relations: Iran and the West," 257; Sandler, "Literary Developments in Iran," 247.

from what it viewed as “moral impurities” the Pahlavi dynasty promoted.¹⁵ Despite the significance of popular culture, much of the history of the Iranian print media of the late Pahlavi era has often receded to footnotes, or has been abridged to couple excerpts of background details for discussions on the emergence, ideology, or politics of the Islamic Republic.¹⁶ Furthermore, the integrity of Iranian journalists and editors has been pitted against the repression of the authoritarian state (Qajar, Pahlavi, and the Islamic Republic), as Michael Amin points out in broader historical perspective of twentieth century Iran.¹⁷ Somewhat ironically, criticism of western forms of domination on the one hand and western-centered academic analysis of the print media in non-democratic countries, with its focus on state control and political oppression, on the other hand, have brought the discussion on popular journalism in Iran under the second Pahlavi monarchy to an endpoint. Drawing on selective ideological lenses while paying little attention to diverse meanings that derive from popular culture texts at the level of reception, many accounts since then list similar offenses and affects for almost every aspect of the Pahlavi modernization agenda.¹⁸ Whereas a long line of academic and non-academic discussions still echo vestiges of the media imperialism take, others have challenged it.¹⁹

The globalization of media distribution systems along with the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of Soviet-style socialism, and the aftermath of a decade of revolution and war in Iran (1979–1988) coincided with a wave of scholarly shifts and reconsiderations of previous premises in social science and the humanities. A more critical reflection on writing historical narratives generated in the 1980s and 1990s. Writing of history had become more self-consciously aware and resistance to the idea of a single, unexamined and hegemonic “truth,” especially one that is intimately linked to political ideologies, surfaced.²⁰ Ways by which political vicissitudes have generated contradictory evaluations in existing literature on Iran were addressed by

¹⁵ Amanat, “The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” 7.

¹⁶ See, for instance, the discussion in Farhadpour, “Women, Gender Roles, Media and Journalism,” 91–106.

¹⁷ Michael Amin, “The Press and Public Diplomacy in Iran,” 269.

¹⁸ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 150. For later studies, see: Motamed-Nejad and Badii, “The Problems of Press Freedom in Iran,” 47–62.

¹⁹ On media imperialism, see the discussion in Sreberny-Mohammadi, “The Many Cultural Faces of Imperialism,” 49–68.

²⁰ Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 230.

Afsaneh Najmabadi in her discussion of the changes in the status of women. She mentions the tendency of pro-Pahlavi sources to invoke the legislation under Pahlavi rule that expended women's participation in the social, economic and educational life of the country. Secular critics of the Pahlavi monarchy emphasize the limited nature of the White Revolution's reforms, underscoring that they were more cosmetic than substantive, while inequalities prevailed along class lines. Islamic critics of the old regime consider the changes brought about by the pro-western Pahlavi monarchy completely undesirable, and find them responsible for moral corruption and subordination of an Islamic society to neocolonial powers.²¹

My earliest perceptions about Iran under the Pahlavis, as a young student of Middle Eastern history and social sciences in the 1990s, were absorbed in these contradictory (and often confusing) evaluations. They were also shaped on the backdrop of overwhelming paradigm shifts and critical theories, especially those provided by subaltern studies, and the legitimization of the academic study of popular culture genres by feminist scholarship. Calls for a necessary de-westernization of Orientalist frameworks coupled with the introduction of multi(s) and posts- in contemporary literature gave way to rethinking about identity and multi-culturalism, feminisms, and post-feminism instead of feminism, gender as a replacement for sexual differences, modernity in terms of "multiple-modernities,"²² post-modernity or late modernity, and the conceptualization of the world's nations as "imagined communities."²³ Media communication addressed within cultural studies were also offering a more flexible paradigm of asymmetrical interdependence in which culture exchange is viewed more fluid and occasionally shifting. Subsequent postcolonial scholarship has taken into consideration how globalization, nationalism, and preoccupation with nativism and grassroots authenticity have combined to create "glocal" or hybridist culture forms.²⁴ New approaches in Iranian studies of recent years also reflect cultural history and social history in works that are set against the grain of the dominant state-centered analysis, while pointing to the general

²¹ Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality," 49–50.

²² Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," 1–29.

²³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²⁴ Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism," 39–59.

lack of scholarly interest in Iranian popular culture studies of the Pahlavi era.²⁵

This book is meant to fill this lacuna in existing literature. It explores the convoluted interactions between global features of modernity and local notions of identity in Iranian popular culture.²⁶ These interactions are investigated by focusing on the history of Iran's print media, with specific emphasis on the development of commercial women's magazines of the late Pahlavi era, and their formation of the modern Iranian woman. From the outset, the intention was not to elaborate too extensively on major political developments that are well familiar to many, or to negate the significance of arguments raised in previous studies regarding the post-World War II expansion and preponderance of power enjoyed by the United States and of western culture industries. Rather, the point was to elicit essential ways in which Iranian print media in general and commercial women's magazines in particular developed and operated, while confronting some unavoidable cultural anomalies of their modern age. More specifically, this book is concerned with how the print media for women evolved and performed as a cultural site where local and international influences, trends, and experiences converged, how they were articulated, imagined, and received, and how the Iranian national discourse of modernization and gender shaped the contemporary women of modernity in the popular press.

The focus on popular magazines, as a site where Iranians negotiated with and translated western modernity into their local context, enables to show a less conventional and more dynamic part of the picture of the press in Iran between the two revolutions that frame this book. Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's comparative research of media systems in Asian countries suggests that freedom of the press is always contingent, because certain intervention of the state or other groups of interests and certain degree of censorship are a norm rather than an exception.²⁷ Unlike other authoritarian states in Asia (China in the late 1960s and presently North Korea), Iran under the autocratic rule of

²⁵ Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 4, 11; Devos and Werner, eds. *Culture and Cultural Politics under Reza Shah*; Rahimieh, *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity*; Partovi, *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution*.

²⁶ Identity is used here to refer, essentially, both to the culture of people and to common identification with a collectivity or social category (such as age, gender, parentage, and pedigree). Based on distinctions made by Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," 284.

²⁷ McCargo, "Partisan Polyvalence," 213.

Mohammad Reza Shah was not a closed society. It witnessed a vast migration of people and a flow of information, ideas, finances, and technology, evoking Arjun Appadurai's five "scapes" that participate in shaping the global "imagined world" we inhabit.²⁸ Previous studies have shown that the relationship between the Pahlavi state and the media was not always consistent; traditional channels of communication (gossip, rumors, the mosques, and the bazaar) were less regulated and contained than the broadcast media, and most of the loyalist print media remained in private hands.²⁹

Treating commercial magazines of the late Pahlavi era as the main research focus reveals that much of their operation and content resulted from the interplay of internal and external factors. This includes issues relating to structural factors and macro-level influences such as small readership, reading habits, social mores, high cost of newsprint, competition with broadcast media, advertising, distribution impediments, accessibility to technology, national and international events, etc. Hence, they were far more complex and conflicted enterprises than instruments of a repressive regime, passive recipients of westernization or products of forced cultural imperialism deployed by external forces.

Why Iranian Women's Commercial Magazines?

In spite of their critics and the challenges brought about by new media, magazines prevail as a central element of our modern-day life and of popular culture, whereas gender remains at the core of how people conceptualize their sense of identity.³⁰ Focusing on years of expanding mass media, when the cultural diffusion of westernization (especially American influence) reached apex, anti-colonial notions of modernity

²⁸ Appadurai suggests the following five fluid dimensions of cultural globalization: ethnoscapas (the movement of people across cultures and borders), mediascapas (production capabilities and dissemination of information via different media outlets), technoscapas (cultural interactions via technology), financiescapas (the flux of capital across borders), and ideoscapas (the global flow of ideologies). His most cited article on the subject: Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 1–24.

²⁹ On the important role played by traditional forums of communication (mosques and bazaar) and use of "small media" (leaflets and audio cassettes) in the revolution that deposed the Shah, see: Srebereny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media*.

³⁰ Several scholars advanced this argument in different context, see: Snow, *Creating Media Culture*, 90; Gauntlett, *Media, Gender, and Identity*, 1.

were consolidating and women gained suffrage in Iran, this book concentrates on the most popular weekly magazines of the late Pahlavi era: *Ettela'at-e Banuwan* ("Ladies News," 1957–1980) and *Zan-e Ruz* ("The Modern Woman," 1965–).

Academic literature on women's magazines in other countries has merited considerable attention since Betty Friedan's pioneering work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), paved the way to feminist criticism of women's stereotype depictions in the mass media, and their implication in the patterns of discrimination operating against women.³¹ Examination of the role of women's magazines as an oppressive instrument of cultural domination, perpetuating the subordination of women to unrealistic social standards of physicality, witnessed a revival following the publication of Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* in 1990.³² Although general media-based studies on Iran are gaining more ground in recent years, Iranian studies have neglected to produce analysis similar in the scope of Cynthia White's *Women's Magazines 1693–1968*, Alison Adburgham's *Women in Print*, Margaret Bitham's *A Magazine of Her Own?* on British magazines, or Beth Baron's *The Women's Awakening* on Egyptian magazines.³³ The most comprehensive study remains Pari Shaikholeslami's 1972 seminal book in Persian on the pioneer women journalists and thinkers of Iran.³⁴ A series of more recent articles have focused on the noncommercial *Alam-e Nesvan* (Women's World), the longest-running women's journal in the first half of the twentieth century, published under the auspices of the Presbyterian missionary school for girls in Tehran.³⁵

The general impression emerging from the sparse studies on the history of Iranian journalism in the West, and to an even lesser extent on popular culture (with the exception, perhaps, of Iranian cinema and Iranian Diaspora) as well as from the literature on Iranian women and gender, is that women's magazines of the late

³¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

³² Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*.

³³ White, *Women's Magazines 1693–1968*; Adburgham, *Women in Print*; Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*.

³⁴ Shaikholeslami, *Zanan-e Ruznameh-negar va andishmand-e iran*.

³⁵ Rostam-Kolayi, "Foreign Education, the Women's Press, and the Discourse of Scientific Domesticity," 182–202 and also "Expanding Agendas For the 'New' Iranian Woman," in *The Making of Modern Iran*, 157–180; Zirinsky, "A Presbyterian Vocation," 51–69.

Pahlavi era have little or no special historical value. Although widely read and circulating, at times, in greater numbers than local daily newspapers, Iranian commercial magazines are often dismissed or ignored throughout existing literature for several interrelated reasons. Firstly, it derives from their association as semi-official publications. Secondly, there is a tendency to regard them as perfunctory “girlie” publications preoccupied with lowbrow entertainment, exhausted with advertisements and visuals. Thirdly, there is an inclination to view them as “western-style gossip sheet” immersed with commercial femininity and commodity culture that was out of tune with the reality of most Iranian women or misrepresented them.³⁶ Much of this line of critique, originating from attitudes toward popular mass media and its audiences that prevailed in the 1960s and most of the 1970s, serves a starting point and an important point of reference for the discussion throughout this book.

With very few exceptions, studies that acknowledge commercial women’s magazines in Iran had some significance, mention them as background reminders in discussions on wider topics and minimize their functions. In his 1971 review on the role of the mass media, Amin Banani observes that a quick glance at *Ettela’at-e Banuvan* and *Zan-e Ruz* “reveals a competitive adherence to the same formula: feminine glamour, sex, exposé biographies of entertainment stars, and general advice on “modernity,” but he fails to elaborate on what this “advice on modernity” constituted.³⁷ Relating specifically to *Zan-e Ruz* in a chapter dedicated to women’s press and the gendered nature of the public sphere (2010), Gholam Khiabany, in accordance with Parvin Ardalan’s series of articles on Iranian women’s periodicals (1999), mentions the magazine has “avoided politics and devoted most of its pages to cooking, health, and beauty, family, gossip, and beauty contests in Iran and around the world . . . and occasionally ran some serious articles on changes in family law.”³⁸ Hossein Shahidi identifies *Zan-e Ruz* as the most significant publication for women “in the oil-rich 1960s and 1970s,” and comments it had many pages with titles

³⁶ Vaziri, “Caught in the Middle;” Mowlana, “Technology versus Tradition,” 108; Khiabany, *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity*, 187–188; Siavoshi, *Liberal Nationalism in Iran*, 46.

³⁷ Banani, “The Role of the Media,” 321–340.

³⁸ Ardalan, “Zanan nashriyat-e zanan-ra mo’arefi mikhonad,” 2–6; Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 187–188.