



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN  
CONTEMPORARY IRAN***

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CONTEMPORARY IRAN**

**By**

**MOHAMMADPOUR KACHALAMI KOBRA**

**This is submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**February 2019**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**February 2019**

**Chair: Assoc. Prof. Lee Yok Fee, PhD**  
**Faculty: Human Ecology**

The Iranian political system oppresses Iranian women by legislating gender discriminatory laws, oppressive representation of women in media particularly Iran's national television (TV) network and repressing the Iranian women's movement by restricting public activities, jailing, and sentencing their activists.

This study was guided by three research questions: 1) What is the current state (2015 and early 2016) of women movement in Iran/ in the context of Iranian political system? 2) How do Iranian women's movement activists view gender representation in the media through critical analysis? 3) How do the Iranian women's movement activists discern the influence of Iran's national TV programs on further oppression of women?

The study deployed critical media literacy framework which focuses on politics of representation and ideology critique. The theory helps refine and construct research questions, guide research processes, select research method, and analyze data and findings. A qualitative approach was used to address the research questions. Based on purposive and snowball sampling techniques, fifteen Iranian women's movement activists voluntarily participated. The data were collected through face to face and semi-structured interviews. The data derived from transcripts of the interviews were analyzed through coding and categorizing into themes.

The findings reveal that the Iranian women's movement has been severely oppressed by Iran's political system since a major protest during the 2013 presidential election. Despite this oppression and periods of silence the movement will revive itself. The most

significant obstacle to developing an Iranian women's movement is oppression by the political system. Iranian women's movement activists fight for many women's issues, including violence against women, discriminatory laws and political participation. The activists use media for struggle against gender discrimination, particularly the Internet and social media as it is more accessible in the current repressive state.

Iranian women movement's activists discern structures of gender oppression in media representation and understand how Iranian national TV tries to naturalize and reinforce patriarchy and sexism through its TV series and commercials. Drawing on core concepts of critical media literacy, the findings of this study demonstrate that the politics of representation with a focus on sexist ideology are the most prominent concepts considered by Iranian women's movement activists. Furthermore, they discern other core concepts of critical media literacy except recognizing media languages and representation techniques.

The study concludes that the major reason why the Iranian women movement has declined in recent years is due to the increasing suppression by the state-Islamic system since 2013. One technique used to suppress the movement is the way Iran's national TV and mainstream media tries to reinforce patriarchy and sexism through its portrayal of women in many TV series and commercials. Through critical analysis of media messages, the Iranian women's movement activists not only resist media manipulation and women oppression, but also participate in political movements struggling for transformation of oppressive gender politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran through the accessible Internet and new media.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
Sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**GERAKAN WANITA DAN REPRESENTASI MEDIA DALAM  
KONTEMPORARI IRAN**

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Sistem politik Iran menindas wanita dengan menggubal undang-undang diskriminasi gender, menindas representasi wanita di media khususnya rangkaian televisyen nasional dan mengekang gerakan wanita Iran dengan menyekat kegiatan umum, menahan dan menghukum aktivis mereka.

Kajian ini berpandukan kepada tiga soalan penyelidikan: 1) Apakah keadaan semasa (2015 dan awal 2016) gerakan wanita di Iran / dalam konteks sistem politik Iran? 2) Bagaimana gerakan aktivis wanita Iran melihat representasi gender dalam media melalui analisis kritis? 3) Bagaimana aktivis gerakan wanita Iran mentafsir pengaruh program TV kebangsaan Iran, mengenai penindasan wanita?

Kajian ini menggunakan kerangka literasi media kritis yang memberi tumpuan kepada representasi politik dan kritik ideologi. Teori ini membantu memperhalusi dan membina soalan penyelidikan, membimbing proses penyelidikan, memilih kaedah penyelidikan, dan menganalisa data dan penemuan. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk menangani soalan penyelidikan. Seramai 15 aktivis pergerakan wanita Iran mengambil bahagian secara sukarela berdasarkan teknik pensampelan bertujuan dan bola salji. Data dikumpul melalui temu bual bersemuka dan separa struktur. Data yang diperolehi daripada transkrip temu bual telah dianalisa menerusi pengkodan dan dikategorikan kepada tema.

Penemuan ini mendedahkan bahawa pergerakan wanita Iran telah ditindas oleh sistem politik Iran sejak bantahan secara besar-besaran diadakan semasa pemilihan presiden 2013. Namun gerakan ini akan bangkit semula walaupun mereka ditindas dan melalui tempoh berdiam. Halangan paling penting dalam membangunkan gerakan wanita Iran

adalah penindasan oleh sistem politik. Aktivis gerakan wanita Iran berjuang demi isu-isu wanita, termasuk penyertaan politik, undang-undang diskriminasi dan keganasan terhadap wanita. Aktivis menggunakan media untuk perjuangan menentang diskriminasi gender, khususnya Internet dan media sosial kerana ia lebih mudah diakses dalam keadaan semasa yang menindas.

Aktivis gerakan wanita Iran melihat struktur yang menindas dalam representasi media dan memahami bagaimana televisyen nasional Iran cuba menggarap dan memperkukuhkan patriarki dan seksisme menerusi siri dan iklan televisyen. Berdasarkan konsep utama literasi media kritikal, penemuan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa aktivis gerakan wanita Iran menganggap representasi politik berfokuskan ideologi seksis merupakan konsep yang paling menonjol. Tambahan lagi, gerakan ini melihat konsep teras lain yang lebih penting dalam literasi media kecuali mengiktiraf bahasa media dan teknik representasi.

Meskipun peranan media yang menindas, terutama sekali televisyen nasional Iran dalam meminggirkan kaum wanita, aktivis pergerakan wanita Iran menggunakan media dalam pembebasan dan perjuangan menentang penindasan gender politik Iran, khususnya Internet dan media sosial kerana ia lebih mudah diakses. Malah, pergerakan wanita Iran telah menjadi pengantara dalam perjuangan mereka menentang penindasan politik di Iran sejak 2009.

Kajian ini membuat kesimpulan bahawa sebab utama mengapa gerakan wanita Iran menurun pada tahun-tahun kebelakangan ini adalah disebabkan oleh sistem negara Islam yang semakin menindas sejak tahun 2013. Satu teknik yang digunakan untuk menindas pergerakan ini adalah dengan cara TV nasional Iran dan media arus perdana yang cuba memperkukuhkan patriarki dan seksisme melalui representasi wanita dalam banyak siri TV dan iklan. Melalui analisis kritis terhadap mesej media, aktivis gerakan wanita Iran bukan sahaja menentang manipulasi media dan penindasan wanita, tetapi juga mengambil bahagian dalam gerakan politik yang berjuang untuk mentransformasi politik gender Republik Islam Iran yang menindas melalui penggunaan internet dan media baharu yang amat mudah diakses.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Equality, justice, liberty and being free from all forms of domination and discrimination are imperative for robust democracy and an egalitarian society. These concepts and goals have been the most significant aims made by human beings throughout history. People have struggled, strived and made many sacrifices to achieve these goals. Like in other parts of the world, Iranians have also struggled for equality, justice and democracy, having established the parliament and mitigated the King's power in the constitutional era one century ago.

It is within this context that "the struggle for women's rights began in the nineteenth century, during which the Iranian society experienced an organized attempt by women to change their social conditions" (Mahdi, 2004, p. 16). The struggle has continued, even after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1978, when gender oppression not only continued, it intensified. Women do not have rights equal to those of men; hence, they encounter male domination and gender discrimination in families, employment, education, economy and power.

Iranian women have not only been oppressed by discriminatory laws, they have been socialized by oppressive representation in the media. As the dominant political system controls all forms of media, it produces media messages that reinforce and disseminate dominant sexist ideology. As Giroux (1983) illustrates, media as a cultural tool is a significant political issue, because it promotes the dominant culture and transforms society. Considering this, in Iran, "the rulers perceive media channels such as television an instrument with which to advance their ideology and re-enforce their hegemonic position" (Barraclough, 2001, p. 26).

In the case of gender ideology, media functions as among the most important institutions for socializing Iranian women and men into patriarchy. The media provides the resources and means to create identities and teach them how to be men and women. Media reinforces a sexist ideology, making gender oppression look normal and natural. When women and men internalize gender stereotypes, discriminatory laws are not questioned, as they seem fair and just.

The oppressive role of the media to subordinate women and socialize people into patriarchy in Iran means that reading media messages critically is imperative. By focusing more on ideological critique such as sexism, racism and classism, critical analysis of media can help explain how media culture can progress injustices such

sexism, racism, ethnocentrism and other forms of prejudice, as well as misinformation, problematic ideologies and questionable values (Kellner & Share, 2009).

Therefore, critical reading of media offers the tools and framework to help people become not only better users of media, but also active in the process of transforming injustice, expressing their own voices, and struggling against discrimination and domination in creating a less oppressive and egalitarian society. So citizens not only learn to resist media manipulation by critical media literacy, but also the skills that will make them good citizens who are motivated to be involved in social life (Kellner & Share, 2005b).

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The Iranian political system oppresses Iranian women in different ways: through legislating gender discriminatory laws; the oppressive representation of women on Iran's state TV; and repression of the Iranian women's movement.

Iranian women have suffered from sexism and patriarchy that considers them irrational and immature. They have experienced discriminatory policies that affect their entire lives, from birth to death (M. Mohammadi, 2007, 2018). The Iranian ruling group, through legislating gender discriminatory laws, deprives Iranian women of their family, education and political rights. The most notable of these unjust laws are outlined in the following section.

According to Iranian civil law, women in Iran need to obtain formal permission for their movement and actions from their father or paternal guardian prior to marriage ("The civil code," article 1043), and their husband, who is the head of the family ("The civil code," article 1043) once married. This law results in the restriction of women's rights, including choosing a place of residence or job; pursuing an education or leaving the country when they desire. In addition, women do not have rights regarding how they dress, as they are forced to wear a headscarf or veil in public. If a woman is seen in public without the prescribed Islamic hijab, she will be condemned to 74 strokes of the lash ("Islamic penal code," article 638).

In addition to the unjust laws regarding family, Iranian women are deprived of their political rights due to the legislation of unfair laws in the country. Women are not allowed to run for the office of president ("The constitution," article 115), and are prohibited from government positions such as Head of the Justice Department and Attorney General ("The constitution," article 116).

Unfair gender discrimination by the Iranian political system also impacts education by restricting women pursuing higher education. In August 2012, Mehr News Agency report found that women were prevented from admission in 77 majors in 36 universities, including such areas as accounting, education, advising and counselling, historical



restoration, chemistry and engineering. The government has also imposed a quota for the enrolment of women in some public engineering universities. Details of announced capacities indicate that Shiraz University has allocated a higher capacity for men in all majors of mathematics, science and technology ("Women's Education ", 2015).

The Iranian governing group not only subordinate Iranian women through gender discriminatory laws, it also attempts to marginalize them through oppressive representations of gender on Iranian state television (TV), particularly in TV series and advertisements. For example, family structures presented in Iran's national TV dramas reproduce gender role stereotypes and recreate a patriarchal gender hierarchy. These series, *Stranger*, *Death of a Dream*, *Solace of Heart*, *Neighbors* and *Mansion of The Sun*, promote gendered divisions of labor, in which men work outside the home to support their family and women stay at home to take care of children and look after the home (Ahmadi, Agili, & Mehdizadeh, 2015; Khoei, 2016; Mosavi & Kamalidini, 2009; Sadeghi & Karimi, 2007).

Women are depicted as dependent on men, weak, poor at making decisions, and unintelligent. In *Time* series, women are represented so passively that it causes problems for them in both their personal decisions and in taking care of their children and husbands (Ahmadi et al., 2015). In contrast, men are portrayed as independent, influential and intelligent in TV series, such as in *Death of a Dream* and *Mother's Chants* (Rezaei & Afshar, 2010).

Likewise, TV commercials on Iran's national stations reproduce dominant sexist ideologies, hegemonies and power. Men are represented as superior, powerful, logical, management-oriented and wise in commercials, while women are portrayed passive, dependent and emotional (Hajimohammadi, 2012; Kosari, Azizi, & Azizi, 2015). Besides the advertisements naturalizing patriarchal divisions of labor (Mehdizadeh & Azarbragozaar, 2016; Ravardrad & Mohammadi 2016), the media attempt to reinforce a predefined identity on gender and teach its audience how to be men and women.

Therefore, Iranian state television functions as an ideological state apparatus in legitimizing and perpetuating oppressive gender politics through the reinforcement and naturalization of the state-Islamic sexist ideology. By socializing Iranian women into the dominant patriarchal ideology, they accept the gender oppressive politics of Iran, and consider it unchangeable. By making gender oppression appear normal and natural, the media naturalize and legitimize gender discrimination and the oppressive gender politics in Iran's society.

Iran's political system not only subordinates Iranian women through legislating discriminatory laws and oppressive representations on Iranian state TV, but it also oppresses the Iranian women's movement and those who struggle against oppressive gender politics and women subordination in Iran. Repressing the women's movement began with the governing group after the revolution in 1979. They closed the women's

rights organization, forced Iranian women to wear the hijab and limited them being in public places (Mahdi, 2004).

They are also banned from forming any non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by having to negotiate numerous bureaucratic hurdles and a long process of group registration to gain permission (Zangeneh, 2015). Furthermore, their rallies and demonstrations against discriminatory laws are repressed by the dominant political system. Their rally for changing discrimination against women and family law was actively and severely suppressed by the political system the activists faced continuous government harassment, repression and imprisonment (Hoodfar, 2008; Rafizadeh, 2014).

After the 2009 presidential election, the Iranian women's movement faced severe oppression with many activists arrested ("Immigration and Refugee," 2014). In the latest public demonstration against Iran's oppressive gender politics, in front of the Ministry of Labor on 8 March 2018, the Iranian women's movement activists met with violence and further arrests ("Iran Arrests Women," 2018).

Regarding the suppression of Iranian women by the state-Islamic system, there are some gaps which the current study is going to address. There is a lack of study about the Iranian women's movement since its severe oppression in 2009, its obstacles and problems and ways of their struggle particularly from the viewpoint and experience of those involved in the movement.

In addition, considering the subordination of the Iranian women through oppressive gender representation in Iran's national TV, there is a gap in research investigating how the Iranian women's movement activists discern and resist oppressive gender representation in the media through a critical media literacy framework. As literature review shows all pervious researches studied gender representation in the media through content analysis of the TV programs. But the current study is going to analysis gender representation from viewpoints of the Iranian women's movement activists and how they view gender ideology in the state TV. In other words, there is a lack of research demonstrating how Iranian women's movement activists view the structure of gender oppression in Iranian state TV and how ruling group employs the state TV to legitimize the subordination and marginalization of Iranian women.

Besides, there is a gap to investigate about influence of the state TV series and commercials on subordination of the women. Then the current research is going to address the gap particularly from viewpoints of those who struggle against gender discrimination.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Regarding the stated problem and theoretical framework, this study sets the following research questions:

1. What is the current state (2015 and early 2016) of the women movement in Iran/ in the context of Iranian political system?
2. How do Iranian women's movement activists view gender representation in the media through critical analysis?
3. How do the Iranian women's movement activists discern the influence of media on further oppression of the Iranian women?

### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The following objectives have been set for the investigation:

1. To explain the current state (2015 and early 2016) of the Iranian women movement in Iran/ in the context of Iranian political system.
2. To demonstrate views of Iranian women's movement activists on the critical analysis of gender representation in the media?
3. To analyze Iranian women's movement activists' views on the influence of media particularly Iran's state TV programs on further oppression of women.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This research is significant since almost half of the Iran's population who are women are subordinated and marginalized. In fact, half of the Iran's population are deprived from their basic rights in family, education, economy and politics.

This study is useful for Iranian civil society in terms of having a less oppressive society and more egalitarian democracy, as it helps Iranian women develop their resistance to oppressive gender politics. It also benefits the Iranian women's movement by understanding their obstacles and problems and finding ways to overcome them and improve themselves.

This research will further benefit the Iranian women's movement by helping them recognize the oppressive role of media such as Iran's national TV in perpetuating gender discrimination and understand the importance of critically reading media messages for resistance against gender oppression. This study will help the Iranian women's movement recognize how Iranian women can be empowered through critical reading of media, and how a lack of critical analysis distracts Iranian women from questioning the oppressive gender politics that are legitimized by Iran's media.

## **1.6 Definitions of Key Terms**

The key terms and concepts used in this dissertation are defined as follows:

### **1.6.1 Women's Movement**

There is no consent between scholars regarding a definition of the women's movement and no clear guidelines distinguishing the women's movement and the feminist movement, which are often used interchangeably. Some writers distinguish between the women's movement and the feminist movement in terms of their aims (McBride & Mazur, 2005). For Beckwith (2000, 2007), a women's movement aims to involve women and women's issues, but differs from feminist movements by not necessarily involving challenges to patriarchy.

Some scholars believe the true meaning of the term "women's movement" is wider than the feminist movement (Beckwith, 2000; Ferree & Mueller, 2004; Ferree & Tripp, 2006). Feminist movements are subcategories of women's movements (Beckwith, 2007; Kramarae & Spender, 2004; McBride & Mazur, 2005). All feminist movements are women's movements, but not all women's movement actors express feminist aspirations. The feminist movement is a type of women's movement with a specific feminist discourse. Accordingly, Ferree and Mueller (2004) define women's movements as:

Mobilizations based on appeals to women as a constituency and thus as an organizational strategy. Women's movements address their constituents as women, mothers, sisters, daughters. Regardless of their particular goals, they bring women into political activities, empower women to challenge limitations on their roles and lives, and create networks among women that enhance women's ability to recognize existing gender relations as oppressive and in need of change (p. 577).

They define feminism as "the goal of challenging and changing women's subordination to men. Feminist mobilizations are informed by feminist theory, beliefs, and practices, and also often encourage women to adopt other social change goals" (Ferree & Mueller, 2004, p. 577). Therefore, the feminist movement entails the movement of those fighting for the elimination of women's inequality and subordination to men.

There are also no clear guidelines distinguishing between the women's movement and the feminist movement among Iranian scholars and activists who struggle for gender equality, as they also often use the women's movement and feminist movement interchangeably.

This study utilizes Ferree and Mueller (2004)' the aforementioned distinction between the women's movement and the feminist movement. It employs the term women's movement for the current research as it is more appropriate to Iranian women's struggle because it incorporates more than the goals of the feminist movement. The Iranian women's movement is wider than women's inequality and subordination to men, as they also try to bring women into political activities and empower women to challenge limitations on their roles and lives.

In Iran, although some follow feminist theories and aspirations, and struggle for the elimination of women's subordination to men, such as discriminatory laws that marginalize women, many are fighting to change and improve women's situations, including women's health, going to stadium and eliminating the obligatory hijab. Therefore, the women's movement in Iran is wider than the feminist movement and that is the reason the term "women's movement" is utilized in the current study.

### **1.6.2 Media**

Media is the plural of medium, which is defined as "the technical or physical means of converting messages into a signal capable of being transmitted along a channel"(Fiske, 2010, p. 16). Some examples of the medium are newspapers, TV, telephones, films and computers. In the current research, TV, films, the Internet, social media networks, magazines and newspapers are mostly considered.

### **1.7 Limitation of the Study**

The population for the study comprises women's movement activists and those who are women. This is because they are women and experience gender oppression and marginalization, and women's movement activist who experience struggle against the gender politics of Iran.

Moreover, this study mostly focuses on media as it is a prominent and common apparatus for the socialization of today's Iranian women, and the easiest and most convenient one to use in the struggle against women's subordination in Iranian society. Among the media, particularly in respect of gender oppression, it mostly concentrates on Iran's national TV series and commercials, which have a mass audience in Iran.

## **1.8 Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis structure is organized into six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study, problem statement, research questions and objectives. The second chapter reviews related studies in the existing body of literature on women's movement in Europe, Middle East and Iran, gender representation on Iran's state TV network. The theoretical framework also is explained in the chapter. Research design is discussed in the third chapter. In the fourth and fifth chapters, the results and findings are analyzed and discussed. Finally, in the sixth chapter provides a summary of the study and conclusion.

## **1.9 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the problem of oppressive gender politics of Iran and oppressive representations of gender on Iran's national TV were stated. Repression of the Iranian women's movement and a gap of knowledge in the area from a critical media literacy framework was discussed. Accordingly, the research questions and objectives were stated and key terms, including women's movement, and media, were defined



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