



Universiteit Utrecht

A JOINT BATTLE AGAINST THE HIJAB?

A critical discourse analysis of 'My Stealthy Freedom' and the western media coverage

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Abstract

In May 2014, “My Stealthy Freedom” was created, which is an online social movement where women of Iran can protest against the compulsory hijab by sharing pictures of themselves without hijab, as well as “represent a different identity than they inherited via traditional values and norms” (Karimi 229). The founder of the movement, Iranian journalist and expatriate Masih Alinejad, facilitates the protest and seeks to expand the campaign by engaging with Western media and by calling for international support from tourists and political delegates, under the hashtag #SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab. However, this thesis critically analyzes the different forms of representations of the campaign and the asymmetrical power relations in which it is embedded, resulting in a re-appropriation of its initial understanding. It argues that the highly acclaimed, and uncritical reception of the campaign by the West “can be understood in terms how it reiterates, in a modified form, the Orientalist tradition” (Rastgar 108). In addition, Alinejad’s call upon tourists and politicians to join the movement can be considered as an imperialist move, in which the West is summoned as a savior. Even though the movement seeks to challenge a monolithic understanding of contemporary Iran and women in the Third World, it ultimately reinstates the Orientalist binary – of the West as modern, civilized and superior, opposed to an East that is undeveloped, backward and inferior. Alinejad’s “representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a key component” to assert this binary (Rastgar 108). This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of women in the Third World and the veil, thereby contributing to the debate on postcolonial feminism and agency.

Key words: Iran, My Stealthy Freedom, hijab, Orientalism, Third World, agency.

Acknowledgements

The journey of completing this thesis was marked by many obstacles, from the struggle of finding a topic, to the process of research and writing. Fortunately, I eventually find a topic that suit my interests and fuelled my passion. By writing about My Stealthy Freedom I was able to combine two fields I am most intrigued by, that is, postcolonialism and cyberfeminism. I would like to thank my thesis supervisor as well as mentor, Milica Trakilović, who guided me throughout this year and was of great support when writing my thesis. Milica continued to motivate and encourage me, and gave me endless constructive feedback. I am also grateful for the assistance of Dr. Eva Midden, who introduced me to postcolonial theory and provided me with great knowledge within this field.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	4
1.1 Terminology.....	5
1.2 Background.....	6
1.3 Research question.....	8
1.4 Contribution and disposition.....	10
2 Theoretical Framework.....	11
2.1 Cyberfeminism.....	11
2.2 Orientalism.....	12
2.3 Representation	13
2.4 Agency.....	14
3 Methodology.....	16
3.1 Method.....	16
3.2 Material and mode of procedure.....	18
3.3 Delimitations.....	20
4 Analysis.....	21
4.1 Stealthy freedom fighters.....	21
4.1.1 Identity formation.....	23
4.2 A white savior narrative.....	25
4.2.3 Representing subaltern voices.....	28
4.3 The Orientalist tradition.....	31
4.3.1 The Third World woman.....	35
4.3.2. Reading agency.....	39
5 Conclusion.....	40
5.1 Cyberfeminism, Orientalism, representation, agency.....	40
5.2 Recommendations.....	43
Bibliography.....	45

1 Introduction

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the women of Iran are obligated to wear the hijab. However, due to globalization and the rise of novel technology, Iranian women, mainly the generation born after the revolution, have developed a strong resistance to the hijab. The hijab has become “a major site of ideological struggle between tradition and modernity” (Mozafari 2). Today, women are overtly protesting the law by removing the hijab in public, for example, when walking down the street or while driving a car, and by sharing pictures of themselves without hijab on social media accounts.¹

In 2014, “My Stealthy Freedom” was established. This online social movement features both secular and Muslim women sharing pictures of themselves without a hijab, accompanied by (anonymous) background stories, including the participant's opinion or grievances. The page was created by Iranian journalist and expatriate Masih Alinejad, who was forced to flee Iran due to her political activism.² In May 2014, Alinejad shared two earlier pictures of herself driving without a hijab in northern Teheran, and posed the question whether other women also felt like removing their hijab when no one, in particular the morality police, could see them (Threadgould). The picture went viral in the vast landscape of the Internet and the response was overwhelming, as dozens of women started to send Alinejad pictures of themselves without a hijab. Subsequently, Alinejad decided to establish a separate Facebook page to host the growing number of pictures. A movement was born, in which women of Iran could digitally protest against the law of the compulsory hijab, as well as represent their “true” identity.

The name of the movement, “My Stealthy Freedom”, is equivalent to the phrase “my guilty pleasure,” in which women of Iran, while hidden, can enjoy brief moments of freedom without the hijab, and therefore in stealth (Kahen-Kashi). According to Alinejad, the movement is not opposed to the hijab, but advocates for “the right for individual Iranian women to choose whether they want hijab” (mystealthyfreedom.net). Iranian women resisting the requirement to wear a hijab “recognize the power of their hair as a tool for civil disobedience and political agency” (Laneri). According to Raquel Laneri, “Iranian women are not looking to hide, but the very opposite: they’re looking to provoke, and perhaps even change the law.” Iranian women have been called brave for their actions in their struggle against the compulsory hijab, and

¹ Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram.

² “In 2005, as a parliamentary reporter in Iran, Masih Alinejad made a name for herself with exposing a bonus scandal in the Iranian parliament almost comparable in scale to that of MPs' expenses in Westminster” (Dehghan).

continue to push these boundaries. Nevertheless, removing the hijab does not go unpunished, and Iranian women still risk being publicly admonished, fined or even arrested.³

“My Stealthy Freedom” is recognized as an official online social movement and also has its own website. The movement is still growing in terms of contributors and followers, and enjoys support from neighboring countries⁴ as well as from the West. Alinejad increased support by identifying the issue of hijab as a human right, and framing the debate within a context of transnational feminism. Alinejad even received a Human Rights Award for establishing the campaign and giving the women of Iran a voice. Recently, Alinejad has also called upon tourists and political delegates to join the campaign in solidarity, under the hashtag “#SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab”, since non-Iranian women are also required to wear the hijab when visiting Iran. Alinejad claims that when the compulsory hijab affects all women, all women should raise their voices (Dearden).

Over the past two years, Iranian women have also received increased attention from Western media, mainly within the context of their struggle against the compulsory hijab. For example: “My Stealthy Freedom: How Women Take to Social Media in Their Protest against compulsory Hijab in Iran” (*The Huffington Post*, Threadgould); “Iranian Women are Cutting their Hair and Dressing as Men” (*New York Post*, Laneri) and “Iranian Women Call on Western Tourists to Violate Hijab Law to Fight against Oppression” (*The Independent*, Dearden). Furthermore, the Facebook page, as well as the campaign website, shares numerous articles produced by Western media outlets that present stories on “My Stealthy Freedom” and other struggles related to women’s rights and dress. In other words, “My Stealthy Freedom” enjoys, as well as pursues, great Western media coverage and international support in order to endorse its aims and beliefs about the hijab.

1.1 Terminology

The practice of veiling can have different meanings within different countries, cultures and religions. Therefore, it is important to discuss its meaning within Iran. In Iran, the practice of covering women’s hair is the most visible Islamic mandate, since the religion considers female head hair a symbol of sexuality that may arouse men. According to Zahedi:

³ In May 2016, eight Iranian models were arrested for sharing pictures without hijab on Instagram, “promoting Western promiscuity” (Spencer and Vahdat).

⁴ Women from Afghanistan and Saudi-Arabia have also joined the movement of My Stealthy Freedom (Varagur).

Female head hair has been theologized and politicized by religious as well as political authorities [who justify] the need for women to cover their hair on the grounds of religious and legal texts. Central to this justification has been the need to control female sexual power and, in turn, the male gaze, thus placing the responsibility entirely on women. (76)

In addition, the hijab symbolizes honor for a family. The hijab can refer to three different types of veiling: the chādor, maqna'e, and russari. The chādor is “a black full-body-length piece of clothing, mainly worn by religious people and government officials” (Koo 33). The maqna'e is worn as a uniform for students attending school and women who go to work (Koo 33). Lastly, the russari is similar to a headscarf, and is favored by modern, secular women (Koo 34). In this study, the use of the word “hijab” predominantly refers to the definition of russari. In addition, the words “veil” and “hijab” are used interchangeably, referring to the most basic form of head covering, which is the headscarf. Despite the contemporary religious mandate of hijab, its history and meaning is complex, dynamic and multifaceted in Iran, which is briefly canvassed in the following paragraph.

1.1 Background

The statement that the women of Iran have been obligated to wear the hijab since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has been embellished by Western media. However, the history of the veil is much more complex and dynamic than has been portrayed by Western media. As such, the symbolic meaning of the hijab in Iran is not fixed, but is tied to cultural and political contexts within certain historical periods.

Since the Persian Empire, veiling has been a normative dress code and was primarily practiced by urban, upper-class women, “signifying class distinction, and being a marker of prestige and status,” who wore the veil in order to “protect themselves from the impure gaze of commoners” (Zahedi 77). Islamic veiling as a religious practice became institutionalized under Safavid's rule “when religious authorities gained more power and pushed for the veiling of women” (Zahedi 80).

When Reza Shah came to power (r.1925-41), he aimed to modernize and Europeanize the appearance of Iran and its people. As such, the veil was abolished, since it was often “associated with backwardness, whereas unveiling was believed to signify progress” (Zahedi 81-82). In addition, the Shah implemented several reform policies to enhance women's position regarding dress, education and seclusion. The abolishment of the hijab, referred to as *kashfe*

hejab, “upset clerics and religious conservatives the most” (Zahedi 82). It also proved to be “a difficult and spiritual struggle for religious women” who did not dare to go outside unveiled, since they still regarded the hijab as a symbol of protection and virtue, and as part of their identity (Zahedi 82). However, the Shah had mobilized police forces to achieve full compliance with the new unveiling law. As a result, religious women were confined to their homes. In addition, even though unveiling was associated with improved educational opportunities from the outset, it had an adverse effect on religious women, since they were reluctant to let their daughters attend school unveiled (Zahedi 82).

In 1941, Reza Shah was removed from power by the Allied forces, and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi assumed power (Zahedi 84). Under Mohammad Reza Shah, the enforcement of the laws subsided, at which time religious women began to wear the veil again, whereas others continued to dress in a modern fashion. Thus, from 1941 to 1978, women enjoyed a brief period of freedom of choice. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Shah initiated some reforms which led to poverty and great disparities between the rich and the poor (Agshar 6). In addition, many started to criticize “the pro-Western regime of the Shah, considering it as a new form of political dominance and cultural imperialism” (Zahedi 85). As a result, many Iranians turned to religion “for a new social paradigm”, calling for a revival of authentic, Islamic values and norms, including traditional ways of dress (Zahedi 85). According to Zahedi, “In the context of the Authenticity Movement, the chador and headscarf found a new political meaning, conveying rejection of the shah and his Westernization” (87). As such, secular women also began to wear the veil out of solidarity and to make a political statement (Agshar 6). These developments eventually resulted in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Agshar 6).

When the Pahlavi Dynasty was overthrown, the Islamic Republic was established by Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini encouraged women to wear the veil again, and eventually made the hijab compulsory by law in 1983. Khomeini blurred the concepts of seclusion and veiling by stating that women should wear the hijab in order to protect themselves from the aggressive male sexual gaze, which objectifies women (Mozafari 4). However, the vast majority of women were outraged, since they had briefly enjoyed the freedom of deciding what to wear. Some women started to regard hijab as a symbol of social and political control, not as a religious mandate “since hijab should be a choice, a marker of one’s relationship with God” (Agshar 7).

Hence, since the Pahlavi Dynasty, Iranian political regimes have assigned meanings to the veil corresponding to their own political ideologies. Through imposed unveiling and re-veiling, they constructed an ideal image of Iranian women and, in turn, of Iran as either a

modern or an Islamic country (Zahedi 75). As a result, Iranian women's bodies have been politicized by the state, being the epitome of the ideological character that Iran wishes to present to the world. In this way, hijab symbolizes oppression by the state rather than by religion. In contemporary Iran, the hijab is still compulsory for women both residing and visiting Iran, "promoting the Islamic marker of the nation." Even though the current president, Hassan Rouhani, has adopted a more relaxed approach to Islamic dress laws, clerics and religious conservatives are still very strict and have recently mobilized 7,000 undercover morality agents to achieve full compliance with the law.⁵ Today, the hijab is primarily associated with gender discrimination and the denial of personal choice, since it "has been institutionalized as a distinction boundary of private and public spheres" (Mozafari 7-8). In this way, hijab predominantly limits women with regard to educational opportunities and work aspirations (Mozafari 9).

1.3 Research Question

The goal and concept behind "My Stealthy Freedom" are admirable, however, the movement can be problematized for several reasons. The campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom", which "seeking to represent the lives of Third World subjects to a western audience, must be understood as being produced in a field constituted by asymmetrical relations of power" (Rastegar 110). These asymmetrical power relations are partly construed through Masih Alinejad, who as an expatriate and journalist, assumes a transcultural position in which she both has access to Western media as well as to Iranian women's intimate lives. Masih Alinejad's role within the campaign is similar to those of the authors of the second wave of diasporic memoirs in 2000, which were primarily written by Pahlavi supporters and opposed the Islamic Revolution. Moreover, Alinejad's call upon tourists and political delegates encouraging them to join the campaign, frames the debate within the discourse of colonialism and imperialism. By arguing that compulsory hijab affects all women, the battle is elevated from a local issue to a global one; it is framed as a Western point of concern, which can be considered as a colonial gesture since it invokes an imperialist image of the West as a savior. Hence, this call for international support, but in particular Western support, can be problematized since it reinforces the Orientalist binary in which women of Iran are primarily represented as victims. Even though My Stealthy Freedom seeks to challenge a monolithic understanding of contemporary Iran and women in the Third World, through these colonizing discursive practices, it rather reiterates

⁵ According to recent numbers by the Iranian police, 3.6 million women were warned for not wearing a "proper" Islamic hijab (Varagur).

Orientalism. In this way, dominant conceptions and prejudices about ‘the Orient’ and women in the Third World remain largely unchallenged. In this context, the West is susceptible to understand My Stealthy Freedom as a campaign in which Iranian women resist the hijab and oppression within Islamic society, demanding freedom and seeking a savior. This becomes even more problematic since “My Stealthy Freedom” heavily relies on this Western media coverage and support, in order to promote and endorse its aims and ideology.

Therefore, this thesis critically examines how “My Stealthy Freedom” is re-appropriated within a Western dominant framework that is constituted by asymmetrical power relations. This thesis asks the following main question:

To what extent do (online) Western media discourses about “My Stealthy Freedom” reiterate Orientalism and represent a monolithic understanding of contemporary Iran and women in the Third World, and to what extent does the movement seek to challenge these notions?

The following sub-questions will structure this thesis:

- How do participants of “My Stealthy Freedom” represent the struggle against hijab and how do they negotiate a new collective identity through their political subjectivity?
- To what extent can the movement #SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab be interpreted within the imperialist narrative of white savior?
- To what extent is the campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom” similar to the second wave of diasporic memoirs, and how can Masih Alinejad’s role be considered as problematic within this view?
- How do Western media represent the struggle against the hijab and to what extent do they reiterate Orientalism?
- To what extent do western media reinstate the monolithic category of the “Third World woman”?

1.4 Contribution and disposition

Contribution

This thesis aims to contribute to social significance, as well as academic debate, concerning the hijab and women in the Third World. It aims to gain further knowledge regarding the multifaceted complexity of women in the Third World, touching upon themes such as culture, religion, resistance and agency. This thesis will approach the debate of the hijab from a post-colonial and feminist perspective, and seeks to gain a better understanding of transnational feminism, focusing upon women in Iran.

Disposition

Following this introduction, the next chapter provides the theoretical framework through which this research is analyzed. The methodological foundations, material and mode of procedure, as well the limitations of this study are outlined in the subsequent chapter. Since this research aims to examine different discourses, the critical discourse analysis method is used. In the succeeding chapter, the critical discourse analysis is performed, focusing on testimony shared on the Facebook page of “My Stealthy Freedom”, Masih Alinejad’s discourse and means of representation, and a small selection of (online) Western media articles. The final chapter reflects upon this research’s findings in conjunction with the prevailing theories, and ends with concluding remarks on further potential research.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework through which this research is analyzed.

2.1 Cyberfeminism

One of the dominant theoretical frameworks that guides this study is cyberfeminism. The significance of novel technologies has been recognized within feminist studies, observing how women make use of blogs, social media, and mobile applications to make themselves heard and seen. The term “cyberfeminism” was coined by Sadie Plant in 1994 and describes “the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general” (Consalvo 108). According to Sadie Plant, novel technology “offers women a space which is unbound by traditional constraints, and allows them new avenues to claim power and authority” (Consalvo 108). However, this vision fits into the feminist utopia imaginary of the early days of the Internet, when feminist scholars embraced novel technologies and were optimistic about the prospects it could offer. Today, that vision has been debunked, with feminist now arguing now for a more subtle, complex and relational approach to technology (Karimi 226). According to Consalvo, “Critics argue that that the idea of women gaining power and authority merely through greater use of new-media technologies is overly simplistic and reduces complex technological systems into mere tools, whilst ignoring their historical contexts of production and use” (Consalvo 108). In addition, they state that “technologies are embedded in structures of power, which are not always positive” (108). Other critics claim that summoning women to take up novel technologies is based on flawed assumptions about real life living conditions since not all women have access to computers or the Internet, a situation known as the “digital divide” (Consalvo 108). Even though these criticisms should be taken into account when analyzing whether technologies empower women in their liberation cause, this research adopts an affirmative approach in its analysis of how Iranian women are enabled to practice agency through “My Stealthy Freedom”, and to what extent it offers as a space to negotiate their identity. Nevertheless, this analysis it does acknowledge that “My Stealthy Freedom” faces criticism and delimitations since it only allows access to women who can afford novel technology.⁶

⁶ According to *The Sun*: “An estimated 46 million Iranians have access to the internet from an overall population of 79 million” (Collins).

2.2 Orientalism

Another dominant theory that informs this study is postcolonialism. Edward Said's pivotal work *Orientalism* (1978) laid the foundation for postcolonial theory. Said defined Orientalism as "an ideology which promotes the 'West-and-Islam' dualism and the idea that 'Others are less human,' while "legitimizing and promoting Western superiority and dominance" (Samiei 1145-1146). This Orientalist vision portrays "the West as superior, developed and humane, and the Orient as aberrant, undeveloped and inferior" (Samiei 1147). This flawed dualism demarcates the division between "us" and "them", based on a difference in an essential "otherness", which makes the other less human and therefore subject to domination (Samiei 1146). Said argues that "the West" and "the Orient" are two ideological constructs in which the latter is the antithesis of the former, aiming to legitimize the rule of power and hegemonic position in the the Middle-East. The Orient is often viewed as something static and uniform, and unable to represent itself, resulting in generalizing rhetoric from a western standpoint, which is regarded as scientifically true (Samiei 1147). As such, religious dogmas and abstractions about the Orient and the Islam are preferred over Orientalist realities. Lastly, the Orient is regarded as "something either to be feared, or to be controlled by pacification, research and development, or occupation" (Samiei 1147). Said's criticism can be applied to modern day examples such as the popular television series *Homeland* or the "War on Terror".⁷ Since this thesis centers on the topic of the hijab and, as such, the Islam, it is important to take Said's critical theory into account. This research explores how Western media and Masih Alinejad represent Iranian women's struggle against compulsory hijab, and to what extent they associate their resistance with Orientalist views of Islam as being oppressive, backward and irrational. In addition, the Orientalist tradition often portrays veiled women as passive victims of their culture and religion, who are oppressed within a male-dominated society, and therefore in need of savior by the superior, civilized West. As such, this research predominantly aims to address to what extent this Orientalist binary is present and endorsed within the campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom" itself and Western media representations.

⁷ Western imperial powers used the veil as a symbol of women's oppression to justify the US' invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001.

2.3 Representation

Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the issue of discursive colonization in Western feminist texts in her article, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1986). Mohanty argues that feminist scholars tend to homogenize women in the Third World as a powerless group, and as such produce the notion of “the Third World woman” as a singular monolithic subject (Mohanty 333). In addition, Mohanty addresses the hegemonic position and relations of power in which feminist scholarship are imbued, which has political and ideological effects when writing about and representing women in the Third World. Through this homogenous discursive practice, a “Third World Difference” is produced, in which all women are considered as oppressed and “the complexities and conflicts of women in the Third World are appropriated and colonized across different cultures, religions, classes, castes and races” (Mohanty 335). As a result, Western feminists portray an image of an average Third World woman who is type casted as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, [and] victimized” (Mohanty 337). This draws a sharp contrast to women in the First World, who represent themselves as modern, educated, secular, liberated, and having control over their own bodies (Mohanty 337). In other words, the average Third World woman is viewed as oppressed, powerless, victimized, and exploited, based on ethnocentric norms and references. Moreover, feminist scholarship places women outside of their social power relations instead of looking at women’s positions through these power structures; it does not take cultural contexts into account, rather only criticizes their position based on Western standards (Mohanty 351). Thus, feminist scholarship judges what is considered as oppression from an ethnocentric point of view, which it understand to be universally valid. Accordingly, Mohanty’s article is of great value in this research, since it seeks to explore to what extent Masih Alinejad and Western media – that both are inscribed in hegemonic, power relations when producing, publishing, and distributing information and ideas – homogenize Iranian women as an oppressed group within the context of struggle against compulsory hijab, and to what extent this representation fits into the singular monolithic subject of the “Third World woman”.

Gayatri Spivak’s essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), also addresses the problematic notion of representation of women in the Third World. Spivak introduces the notion of “the subaltern,” who is outside of power structures and does not have access to systems of cultural reproduction. Spivak argues that scholars can merely re-present, meaning presenting someone again, the subaltern since there is always slippage of representation. Therefore, Western scholars must be vigilant that speaking on behalf *of* the subaltern does not become speaking *for* the subaltern. In addition, in all questions of representation there is a

remaining of ‘unspeakability’ that cannot be grasped. The result of this ‘unspeakability’ is generalization: What is eventually told is what which is digestible within a Western context, such as human rights and global issues. As such representation is not neutral because feminist scholarship looks through an ethnocentric lens at women in the Third World and their power struggles. Moreover, Spivak states that scholars tend to represent the subaltern voice as a unified and homogenous for colonized people in general, ultimately “essentializing” the subaltern. As a result, the subaltern becomes an ideological battleground in which several dichotomies come into being such as, First World-Third world, black-white, man-woman, and modern-traditional. In addition, the particular sentence of “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 48), illustrates western scholars’ tendency of establishing a collective imperialist enterprise when they aim to represent women in the Third World, in which they are victimized and produced as imperial subjects. Spivak also states that through re-presentation – the way through which it is believed the subaltern can be heard – scholars separate out the real, authentic voice of the subaltern from the dominant discourse. In this way, the subaltern voice is again not heard, silenced and lost through re-presentation.

These problematic notions of representation can also be identified within the campaign of My Stealthy Freedom itself with regard to Masih Alinejad presence in women’s account. In addition, the intense western media representations tend to separate Iranian women’s voices from the dominant discourse and regard Alinejad’s voice as authentic and having authority. Moreover, Alinejad’s call upon tourists and political delegates directly ties in with Spivak’s imperial address of “white savior”. As a result of this re-presentation by western media and Alinejad, it becomes difficult to understand Iranian women’s struggle in an authentic way and to extinguish their voices from the dominant western framework in which My Stealthy Freedom is produced. In this way, the representation of My Stealthy Freedom itself, and in particular its participants, becomes stuck in different discourses – of Masih Alinejad and western media.

2.4 Agency

Another significant, recurring theme in this study is the notion of agency. Iranian women’s resistance against compulsory hijab can be understood as an act of “agency”, being the ability to act in any given environment. By taking off the hijab for a fleeting moment, Iranian women practice small acts of defiance and agency. However, agency is still an essentially contested concept in feminist studies. Saba Mahmood suggests that “we should not understand agency as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 210). Rosi Braidotti agrees

that agency should not “be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities” (Braidotti 1). However, she does argue that “oppositional consciousness is central to political subjectivity but is not the same as negativity” (Braidotti 16). In other words, Braidotti claims that an element of resistance should remain when understanding agency. According to Braidotti, “political subjectivity or agency consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions” (Braidotti 16). Thus, political subjectivity is to be understood rather as “a complex process of self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values” (Braidotti 1). In this sense, Iranian women’s agency can be understood within Braidotti’s definition of the term, since they practice this form of agency through small, daily acts – removing their hijab for brief moments – that are aimed at challenging dominant social norms. In addition, participants of “My Stealthy Freedom” aim to redefine their identity that is, to a certain extent, an amalgamation of traditional and modern traits. In this way, Braidotti’s notion of agency as a negotiation with dominant social norms, becomes more manifest through Iranian women’s reconstruction of their identity. This study explores to what extent Iranian women’s agency can be understood as an act of resistance and how they practice agency as a form of negotiation within “Braidottian” terms, with regard to identity formation.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of this research, and elaborates on the selected material and mode of procedure, while acknowledging the delimitations of this study.

3.1 Method

The aim of this thesis is to study an online social movement, that is, “My Stealthy Freedom”, which is produced in a field constituted by postcolonial power relations. These power structures are primarily established by Masih Alinejad, the founder of the movement, who assumes a transcultural position in which she has both access to Western media as well as Iranian women’s lives. Due to this transcultural position, Western media regard Alinejad’s knowledge of the Orient as authentic and objective, and therefore true. However, it can be argued that Alinejad endorses certain rhetoric about the Orient and the ‘Other’ to compel the western audience understand, and support Iranian women’s struggle, which is in turn, perpetuated by Western media. This Orientalist framing of the debate has become more manifest within Alinejad’s recent call upon tourists and politicians to join the movement. In addition, the movement promotes this Western media coverage on its own website and Facebook page. Thus it can be argued that the campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom” consciously participates and enters into a hegemonic discourse, in which it operates through, and tends to validate and solidify these power structures. For this reason, this research aims to investigate to what extent “My Stealthy Freedom” offers alternative knowledge regarding the veil and women in the Third World, and to what extent this effort is destabilized by Alinejad’s framing of the debate within post colonial power structures and the intense Western media coverage. By using the method of critical discourse analysis, post-colonial power relations that are present within the field in which the campaign is produced, will be revealed, exploring its detrimental effects with regard to the participants’ autonomous representation.

According to Teun van Dijk, a critical discourse analysis “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk 352). Through critical discourse analyses, it is claimed that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of these very unequal power relations and social dominance (cf. Jorgenson and Philips 63). As such, critical discourse analyses are not impartial, but take a socio-political stance, and align with the social group in question which it considers as oppressed, in order to realize emancipation (cf. Jorgensen and Philips 64). Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis contributes to the

construction of: social identities, social relations; and systems of knowledge and meaning (Jorgensen and Philips 67). Thus, through a critical discourse analysis, this study seeks to analyze to what extent the campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom” sustains the existing power dominance of the West with regard to producing knowledge, and how Western media reproduce asymmetrical power relations. In addition, Alinejad’s journalist expertise and transcultural position, is considered in light of her status as a native of Iran as well as resident of the United States. As such, her voice is viewed as authentic and assumes authority; it is accepted as valid, and true “impartial” knowledge. Therefore, the extent to which Alinejad’s voice and representation, downplay subaltern voices of women in Iran, which challenge such dominant systems of knowledge and meaning, is studied.

Michel Foucault was the first theorist who addressed the intertwined relation between power and knowledge. According to Foucault, power is productive and produces subjects, power relations make up our world and power is who we are. Foucault stated that when one produces knowledge, one always (re)produces power relations. One cannot step out of these power dynamics: they are always at work and omnipresent. As Foucault states:

It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (212)

This double bind is essential, as we are subjected to power and agents of power. This illustrates the tension within the campaign of autonomous self-representation of women within Iran, and the re-presentation of Masih Alinejad and Western media, in which Iranian women are subjected to hegemonic, western power relations. Ultimately, these power relations determine what becomes knowledge.

According to Jenny Pinkus:

Foucault's focus is upon questions of how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of 'truth', and dominate how we define and organize both ourselves and our social world, whilst other alternative discourses are marginalized and subjugated, yet

potentially 'offer' sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, challenged and 'resisted'. (Pinkus 1996)

Thus, the dominant questions that arise within a critical discourse analysis are: how some discourses maintain their authority, how some 'voices' are heard while others are silenced, and who benefits and in what manner (Pinkus 1996). In other words, by performing a critical discourse analysis, this study seeks to answer the question to what extent the campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom" creates alternative knowledge, produced by subaltern voices from women within Iran, juxtaposed against knowledge produced by Masih Alinejad and Western media who both assume a position of authority and power. As such, it reveals to what extent Alinejad and Western media silence Iranian women's voices, elevating Western discourses to a dominant position, and as such, gaining the status of "truth", thereby perpetuating myths and stereotypes about women in the Third World and the veil.

3.2 Material and mode of procedure

The critical discourse analysis is divided into three parts demonstrating the three different forms of representation within "My Stealthy Freedom": the participants' testimonies, Masih Alinejad's representation and the campaign's own activism, and the Western media coverage. The first part analyzing the testimonies and visual embodied practices of the participants, in order to understand Iranian women's resistance against the compulsory hijab. It also seeks to understand how women of Iran wish to represent themselves and how their agency can be interpreted. The analyzed testimonies date from May 2014 to June 2016. Since July 2016, the campaign has experienced a significant increase of male Iranian members, including husbands and fathers. However, this study only focuses upon testimonies made by women since it seeks to examine women in the Third World and their resistance to the compulsory hijab from a female perspective.

The second part of the discourse analysis focuses upon Masih Alinejad's call upon tourists and political delegates. By analyzing interviews, testimonies, speeches and documentaries, it seeks to address the extent to which Alinejad's attempt to expand the campaign and gain international support may be considered as problematic and reinforcing the Orientalist binary, in which women of Iran are primarily portrayed as victims. In addition, Alinejad's own transcultural position is critically examined within the asymmetrical power structures she operates.

The final part of this research studies how Western media have responded to Alinejad's campaign and how they represent the struggle against the compulsory hijab, addressing to what extent its discourses reiterate Orientalism and a monolithic understanding of contemporary Iran and women in the Third World. The website of "My Stealthy Freedom" provides for seven media platforms users may navigate to.⁸ For this reason, articles that were produced by these media outlets were primarily selected in order to illustrate the campaign's affiliation with western media. In addition, other media outlets were discovered that interviewed Masih Alinejad themselves such as *TIME*, *Vogue* and *The Independent*, which were often shared on the Facebook page of the campaign. However, in order to engage with western media as critical as possible, I also did an independent online research. By searching for 'My Stealthy Freedom' on Google, in combination with certain rhetoric such as 'oppression', 'rural', and 'agency', I was able to detect articles that were more vocal and allowed for a more critical approach.

The following six articles are analyzed in depth: (1) "Iranian Women Discard Their Hijabs On Masih Alinejad's 'My Stealthy Freedom' Facebook Page" (*Huffington Post*); (2) "My Stealthy Freedom: How Women Take to Social Media in Their Protest Against Compulsory Hijab in Iran" (*Huffington Post*); (3) "Controversial Facebook Campaign Asks Iranian Tourists to Remove the Hijab." (*The Daily Dott*) (4) "Meet the Facebook-savvy activist behind Iran's headscarf revolt" (*The Week*); (5) "Meet the Iconoclast Inspiring Iranian Women to Remove Their Headscarves" (*Vogue*); (6) "Iranian Women Call on Western Tourists to Violate Hijab Law to Fight Against Oppression" (*The Independent*). All articles date from May 2014, to July 2016, since the movement was initiated in May 2014 and Western media coverage on women in Iran increased accordingly.

The mode of procedure when analyzing these articles was to focus upon questions relating to power and discourse, for example:

- What is the context?
- Who is speaking?
- What type of rhetoric is used?
- What information is omitted?
- Who benefits from this discourse?

⁸ *Time*, *The Huffington Post*, *Bloomberg*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *ABC News*.

By asking these questions, it becomes evident how Masih Alinejad and Western media represent Iranian women's struggle against the compulsory hijab and to what extent it reiterates Orientalism. Subsequently, it exposes to what extent postcolonial power relations are present within the campaign and western media, resulting in reproduction of prevailing power dynamics, and the perpetuation of dominant discourses on Islam and women in the Third world, silencing subaltern voices and highlighting Western ones.

3.3 Delimitations

This research acknowledges that the small selection of testimonies and articles, is not fully representative of "My Stealthy Freedom" and the western media coverage. By only focusing upon Western media outlets that are featured on the website of "My Stealthy Freedom" itself, or media outlets that interviewed Masih Alinejad, other western countries are excluded from this analysis.⁹ However, this research does aim to offer a glimpse of the tension that arises when autonomous self-representation, produced by "My Stealthy Freedom" participants, is juxtaposed with the representation produced by Masih Alinejad and Western media discourses. This research seeks to elucidate how this online social movement, which is situated in a hegemonic discourse and embedded in post-colonial power structures, may become difficult to read in its authentic form by a Western biased audience.

⁹ Other western media outlets include: *La Repubblica* (Italy), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), and *Elsevier* (the Netherlands).

4 Analysis

In this chapter, the critical discourse analysis is performed, first focusing on the participants and testimony of “My Stealthy Freedom”, followed by Masih Alinejad’s activism and means of representation. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of (online) articles by Western media.

4.1 Stealthy Freedom Fighters

Today, the campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom” boasts over one million followers, and has shared over 2,000 photos of Iranian women without the hijab, thereby “promoting defiance, strength and personal freedom” (Meek). Commenters note that the campaign “has a simultaneously empowering and risky purpose: to collect and publish are images of women inside Iran who aren’t wearing the hijab”, transforming something stealthy into something public (Meek). By removing the hijab for brief moments, women of Iran can create small moments of liberation for themselves, “promoting agency and their right to personal choice” (Afshar). As one participant states,

I just want to have the right to CHOOSE! Maybe I would have even chosen to wear a scarf if I’d had options to choose from. But it hurts me so much when others make decisions for ME instead of myself.

(facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

In this way, the boundaries between the real world and the virtual world are blurred: What happens in the real world (in stealth), is represented and made public in the virtual one. As such, women of Iran seek to challenge the prevailing regime without the fear of being recognized (by name) or punished (Karimi 228). These small acts of defiance, embodied through visual practices, become “small acts of insurrection” (Dunn).

The overarching aim of the campaign is to represent a side of Iran that is not represented in western media of by Iranian propaganda, of women who do not believe in compulsory hijab, but who have been denied their autonomy by the Iranian clerics and religious conservatives. Therefore, the “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page offers an alternative media and shows the other face of Iran. As Alinejad explained in an interview with *The Guardian*: “Iran’s state television is only showing one side of society, only the people with hijab. It gives no airtime to people who have a different voice, who have a different lifestyle” (Dehghan). The most evident

way through which Iranian women wish to represent this image is by capturing visual embodied practices without the hijab in picture or video. The most iconic images of “My Stealthy Freedom” represents women who lift their headscarves above their heads, like defiant flags, and with their hair free-flying in the wind (Hafiz). The wind has become a recurring and powerful theme in the majority of photos and testimony, since the freedom to feel the breeze through their hair is something denied to the women of Iran (Threadgould). To cite a few examples:

I loathe the hijab. I too like my hair to feel the sun and the wind to touch my hair. Is this a big sin?

Third World is where the greatest girlish dream is the feeling of the blowing wind through their hair. ([facebook.com/stealthyfreedom](https://www.facebook.com/stealthyfreedom))

Alinejad also expresses this sentiment herself in an interview with *The Week*, stating, “Every time I feel the wind through my hair, it reminds me of the time when my hair was a hostage in the hands of the Iranian government” (Meek). Being able to feel the wind through their hair is one of the several things Iranian women are not able to enjoy due to the hijab. It is these small effects of, and daily struggles with, the hijab that cause women to protest against it (Threadgould).

Thus, the images’ captions mainly describe “the lack of freedom embodied in having to wear a hijab, or what it means to be briefly removing it in public” (Saul). However, “My Stealthy Freedom” also provides women with a platform to speak and as such, gives them a voice, since they have been silenced and marginalized within Iranian society. As Alinejad states, “by creating ‘My Stealthy Freedom’ I let the Iranian women who have no official voice inside Iran to be their own storytellers and own media” (Raj). Through this platform in cyberspace, women can share their thoughts and experiences regarding women’s rights and dress, resulting in a negotiation of a new collective identity. As such, women can also represent a different identity than “what they inherited via traditions and rules” (Karimi 229), and practice agency through this negotiation and redefinition, rather than mere resistance.

4.1.1 Identity formation

Participants of “My Stealthy Freedom” have emphasized that the issue of hijab represents an internal struggle of identity. As such, they argue that the issue of hijab is not about religion but about lifestyle and social control. As one participant states:

It's as though we are witnessing a daily cultural war between these women and the government. The war is about lifestyle. The lifestyle [women] have versus the lifestyle the government wants them to follow.

(facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

Since the hijab forms an integral part of one's identity, women feel like they lead a double life and have a dual identity: one which they must perform in public, and one which they can only express at home. For example, one participant claims,

When I wore the hijab, even for a short moment, I felt I was not myself anymore, and this is the worst feeling in the world and absolutely unacceptable for any liberated person. Women, when they leave home for the public everyday, have to leave their real identity back at home, and it's a horrible feeling to have a double identity for a lifetime.

(facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

In addition, with regard to the religious mandate and divine connotations of observing hijab, women argue that the practice of veiling should come from inside, identifying one's religious beliefs, and as such cannot be imposed from the outside. By sharing these thoughts and opinions about the practice of hijab, women of Iran are able to redefine and negotiate a new collective identity, in which they give their own meaning to the practice of veiling, women's bodies and values, and interpret religious texts in their own way.

The sharing of opinions and thoughts is the main facilitator through which Iranian women can redefine and negotiate a new collective identity, according to a research conducted by Alison Novak and Emad Kahzraee (2015). They argue that “storytelling acts as a mechanism to achieve shared meaning”. In turn, “this shared meaning is part of the process that creates a shared identity through the creation of shared frames” (Novak and Khazraee 2015). In other words, by sharing experiences and receiving feedback from others regarding women's rights and dress codes, a basis of mutual understanding and solidarity is established, resulting in a

new collective identity. The campaign creates a new sense of “one-ness” and “we-ness” for Iranian women (Novak and Khazree 2015). In addition, “the shared feeling of risk gained from participating in the campaign, also acts as a form of mechanism for creating solidarity among its members” (Novak and Khazraee 2015).

The new, redefined collective identity “aims to contradict popular representations of Iranian women as either women under the veil or the very Westernized elite youth”, produced by Iranian propaganda or western media (Novak and Khazraee 2015). The new collective identity is rather “an amalgamation of tradition and modernity” (Karimi 222). In Iran, the issue of gender is complex and paradoxical, which results in a complex gender identity that cannot be easily defined. For example, over the past few years, female enrolment in educational institutions has increased, and today women can also become members of parliament (though they cannot be nominated as presidents).¹⁰ However, while the Islamic regime encourages the education of women and participation in parliament, “it simultaneously limits women's legal rights and still pursues the policy of seclusion” (Karimi 228). In other words, “tradition and ideology are regulating Iranian women's daily life which makes them segregated but not prohibited, educated but legally subordinated, prepared to pursue a career but expected to submit to traditional gender roles” (Karimi 228). As an Italian tourist explains these inherent contradictions and paradoxes in Iran:

While travelling through this astonishing country Iran, I got the chance to discover its true soul, so different from Western perceptions and prejudices. It's the land of contrasts and paradoxes, of educated youth and welcoming traditions, a dynamic reality that struggles to survive within the imposed boundaries. (facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

Thus it becomes difficult for a Western audience to understand Iranian women’s struggle and resistance against compulsory hijab since they are not simply resisting traditional norms, rejecting religion or opposing the Islamic regime in its entirety. In their struggle against compulsory hijab, Iranian women practice a form of agency that is marked by complexity and ambiguity, in which they seek to redefine their identity in manner that suits, and represents, their participation and status within Iranian society, while still adhering to traditional norms

¹⁰ Over the past few years, female enrollment has exceeded 60 per cent (mystealthyfreedom.net).

and values to some extent. In other words, women of Iran do not oppose the Islamic regime in its entirety since they do not oppose its current policy with regard to women's participation in education and parliament. Also, they do not reject the Islamic religion, yet call for freedom of choice and expression. Thus the contradictory policies endorsed by the Islamic regime come to be reflected within Iranian women's negotiation of their identity.

In summary, the Facebook campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom" has provided the women of Iran with a platform where they have the power to speak, and as such, can negotiate a new collective identity. It is a space where Iranian women can feel empowered and liberated, and reclaim their bodies, minds and identity. The Facebook page has not only brought the women of Iran together but also attracted a large international audience. Masih Alinejad has made great efforts to expand the campaign and to increase (international) support, by communicating with Western media, speaking at global conferences, and calling for support from tourists and political delegates, which is discussed and problematized in the following paragraph.

4.2 A white savior narrative

Alinejad has attempted to expand the campaign by calling for international support from tourists and political delegates out of solidarity. However, within this move it can be argued that Alinejad primarily represents women of Iran as victims of state violence, ultimately reinforcing the Orientalist binary, in which she opposes a monolithic and barbaric Iranian state to the democratic, civilized West. Alinejad was inspired by an event on Air France that occurred in April 2016 (Dearden).¹¹ According to Alinejad, the debate showed that the issue of the hijab was not just confined to Iranian women, and as such could be considered as a global matter rather than a domestic one, thus not to be ignored by the international community. In an interview with *The Independent*, Alinejad argued that "when hijab affects all women, then all women should raise their voice" (Dearden).

One of the main ways through which Alinejad seeks to secure international support is by emphasizing that the hijab is not part of Iranian culture (Scott). However, as previously explained, this is inaccurate since hijab has been a normative dress code and Islamic mandate since Safavid's centralization. Thus this statement is false, misleading and lacks historical reality, since it presents the hijab as something foreign and Arabic, which is being imposed on

¹¹ Some female flight attendants of Air France refused to fly to Tehran as they had been ordered to cover their hair upon their arrival since the Islamic dress codes also apply to women visiting Iran (Chezan).

women from outside their culture. Nonetheless, female tourists have responded positively, joining the campaign by sharing “stealthy freedom” pictures of themselves without a hijab, using the hashtag #SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab. One woman from Belgium stated:

Before my departure for Iran, I knew that I had to wear the mandatory hijab, just because as a woman it was the only way to visit the beautiful country of Iran. I thought it would be easy. However, after 2 weeks, my opinion really changed; I developed a real hate relationship with my mandatory headscarf; I hated it every minute of the day.

(facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

Another caption by a female tourist stated:

Iran is beautiful and Iranian people are wonderful. Great hospitality and a strong desire for freedom and peace. Wearing the compulsory hijab gave me a terrible feeling of slavery. I didn't feel free to be what I am, which is horrible. For me, it was only 22 days of my life. For you, you always have to wear it!

(facebook.com/stealthyfreedom)

These statements address the issue from a Eurocentric perspective and appeal to Western “values, standards and ideals”, while ignoring Iranian traditional values, standards and ideals (mystealthyfreedom.wordpress). Moreover, both accounts fail “to utilize cultural relativism,” and consistently attempt “to inject a foreign perspective into the Iranian sensibilities” (mystealthyfreedom.wordpress). Accordingly, Orientalism is reiterated: comparing the experience of wearing the hijab with slavery is a patronizing, degrading and derogatory statement toward the Islamic religion. Furthermore, it draws a clear binary between “us” and “them”, in which “the other” – veiled women – are regarded as oppressed and submissive. In addition, a certain tone of pity is denoted by the sentence, “for me, it was only 22 days of my life. For you, you always have to wear it!”, denotes a certain tone of pity. Having pity for women from the Third World can also be considered as an Orientalist tradition in which the superior, civilized West looks down upon the inferior, undeveloped East. Hence, these statements are detrimental to the cause of “My Stealthy Freedom” because they reinforce the West-Islam dualism.

A Greek visitor of Iran proclaimed:

It's such a humiliation towards us women, we're being forced to wear something we don't want to, only because we visit the country. Where I come from we don't force Muslim women to take their hijab off, so they shouldn't force us foreigners to put one on either. Degrading women at its finest. Love from a Greek fan! (facebook.com/stealthyfreedom).

The rhetoric of “humiliation” and “degradation” is indicative of not recognizing cultural relativism and as such exposes the Orientalist view of Islam as backward and oppressive. The participant does not recognize the religious meaning of the veil which symbolizes modesty. In this sense, the sentiment of the hijab as being degrading is misplaced. This claim also endorses and reiterates Orientalist dualism, in which the West is diametrically opposed to the East, claiming that the former is a place of freedom whereas the latter is a place of repression, without recognizing cultural relativism in any form, however. Thus, the discourse endorsed within movement #SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab draws a sharp contrast between the First World and the Third World, in which First World women “are positioned as saviors of their poor Third World sisters” (Mendoza 319).

Alinejad has invigorated these claims by stating, “Iran is not an ideal place to be for women, and the more tourists visit this country, the more this will be generally acknowledged” (Dearden), thereby orienting the debate toward Orientalism herself. In addition, the call upon tourists and politicians to join the struggle against the hijab can be viewed as a colonial gesture in which Iranian women are portrayed as wholly victimized, and in which the West is called upon as a savior, making the hijab a western point of concern. Alinejad addressed this issue of “white savior” in 2014, when she spoke at a Women in the World Summit in New York:

I don't ask you to come and save [the] women of Iran, because they are brave and smart enough to be their [own] voice. (Scott)

However, on another occasion Alinejad stated something contradictory, calling for solidarity and asking Estonian Foreign Minister, Marina Kaljurand, who was visiting Iran on a trade and political delegation, to use her platform to address the issue:

We are pleading with you to bring up this subject during your conversations with the Iranian officials. Please ask them the following question: Can you hear the voices of dissent from Iranian women who do not want their freedom to be stealthy? Please do not respond by saying that one should not interfere in another country's law, because if you came up with a law forbidding women to wear the hijab, Iran would be the first country to interfere with regards to this law. (Scott)

Here Alinejad explicitly calls upon the Western politician to be involved in the debate of the hijab. In other words, Alinejad makes contradictory statements that are marked with ambivalence regarding Iranian women's voices. On one hand Alinejad asserts at the Summit (2014) that the women of Iran do not ask for, or a need savior as they can be their own voice, and therefore, do not need another to speak on their behalf. However, on the other hand, Alinejad does ask an outsider, and in particular a Western outsider, to lend her voice to address the issue of the hijab with Iranian authorities by posing the question as to whether or not the voices of Iranian women are heard. By asking for help from outside, and in particular from the West, Alinejad suggests that Iranian women do, in fact, need another voice in order to heard, and more specifically, a Western voice and form of representation. This aligns with Spivak's theory, which argues that subaltern voices are not heard, and need another form of representation in order to be heard. In this case, western tourists and politicians serve that role. Thus, this call by Alinejad is problematic because it appeals to the imperialist narrative of white savior, portraying the women of Iran as primarily victims who cannot fight this battle alone.

4.2.1 Representing subaltern voices

As previously mentioned, Alinejad has used her expatriate position and expertise to promote the campaign, by participating in interviews with major media outlets¹² and by speaking at global conferences. Alinejad's campaign and activism have resulted in a backlash within Iran, not only upsetting Iranian authorities¹³, but also drawing criticism from her former Iranian counterparts, who have dubbed her as anti-Iran and unpatriotic. Some Iranians feel that the highly acclaimed campaign is not the proper means to fight this battle. As a tourism worker in Teheran, who is not a supporter of the compulsory hijab, stated to *The Economist*:

¹² *Time*, *The Guardian*, and *Vogue*

¹³ Iranian authorities have started a smear campaign against Alinejad in which they try to discredit her by labeling her a heretic, a whore and even a CIA operative (Dearden).

This battle should not be fought by someone outside Iran. Attracting international attention means a crackdown. The clergy have been piqued by the campaign, since the hijab is a symbol of clerical control.

Accordingly, the campaign is being criticized for being represented by someone who currently lives outside Iran, and for garnishing international attention, arguing that it will only deteriorate the legal and regulatory situation. In the view of critics, the compulsory hijab is a local issue and the battle against it should likewise be addressed locally.

Alinejad's role as a spokesperson is problematic for other reasons related to her transcultural position, and as such, an additional source of representation. The campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom" shows many similarities with the second wave of diasporic memoirs in the 2000s. The majority of authors were members of the privileged elite during the Pahlavi dynasty. However, this changed with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 as they suffered social degradation. As such, these memoirs expose (impartial) criticism of (post) revolutionary Iran. The memoirs discuss Iranian women's oppression under the repressive Islamic regime, and aim to show the world the "real Iran" through "the ritual of unveiling" (Rastegar 112). Thus, in this light the campaign already shows a strong similarity. The following analysis draws resemblances with the critical reading of Mitra Rastegar "Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and "Liberating" Iranian Women", who analyzes the successful diasporic memoir of *Azar Nafisi Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*.

Alinejad was born in Iran but currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she works to expand the campaign. In this way, it may be argued that Alinejad, like Nafisi, can also be viewed as a native informant, and therefore considered as being an appropriate source and having an authoritative voice (Rastegar 111). Likewise, Alinejad's current expatriate and transcultural position enables and permits her to tell "the appropriate story in a way that sounds authentic to a Western ear" (Rastegar 111). In other words, Alinejad assumes and to a certain extent justifies the authority to represent other Iranian women, by occupying what Rastegar names, a "liminal position of looking in from the outside in order to speak out from the inside" (Rastegar 111). As Rastegar explains: "The transcultural quality of the account forecloses 'authenticity', and yet this 'authenticity' is attributed to the account in order to legitimate it for a Western audience" (111). However, like the majority of the elite authors, being someone who lives in the United States and is a critical journalist, Alinejad cannot be considered as an 'average' Iranian woman. As such, Alinejad's voice cannot be regarded as being representative

of all women in Iran. Nevertheless, the West does consider Alinejad's voice to be "authentic", who is believed to provide objective knowledge of the Orient, and which is evident having regard to the success of the campaign. In this way, it can be argued that Alinejad becomes a "critical guide" to the West, similar to the way Nafisi aims to deliver her memoir to a Western audience (Rastegar 122).

Alinejad, being the creator and facilitator of the movement, assumes an important role within the campaign, receiving emails from women within Iran who send her their stealthy freedom pictures. In this way, Alinejad is the first person with whom women share their personal stories and struggles with, before these stories are published online. In this way, Alinejad may be viewed as a person of trust for women who choose to participate in the campaign. Alinejad has acknowledged this responsibility herself, stating, "It dawned on me that people wanted to talk and I could be their guardian" (Mohseni). As such, it seems that Alinejad "lends authenticity to her account of her [participants] by claiming to have access to their personal feelings and desires" (Rastegar 114). However, Alinejad has emphasized that she does not represent women of Iran, but merely facilitates the protest, striving for Iranian women to become their own storytellers and media (Threadgould). Nevertheless, Alinejad is determined to represent an aspect of Iran that is unknown, and to address the shortcomings of the current Islamic regime. As such, Alinejad's main goal revolves around this exposure of women's "oppression" in relation to the regime, "highlighting her role as a guide to the Western audience through the ritual of 'unveiling' " (Rastegar 112). In this way, Alinejad's strongly resembles Nafisi's function in the memoir who also aims to show the "real Iran".

However, by being the campaign's spokesperson and occupying a transcultural position, Alinejad's voice becomes the voice of Iranian women, which mainly resonates largely through western media. In many interviews, Alinejad highlights the common experience in women's daily struggle with the practice of hijab, and continually refers back to her own life. In this way, Alinejad's "presumption of the universality of the experience of being a woman in a woman's body erases the difference between her own experiences and other women's experiences, and allows for the extension of her perspective onto Iranian women as a whole" (Rastegar 114) which also happens within Nafisi's accounts of Iranian women. In addition, Alinejad's "persistent presence in these accounts, as the one who reveals, guides, and ascribes," overshadow participants' own accounts and testimonies, "undercutting their authenticity" (Rastegar 114). Thus, within Alinejad's re-presentation of Iranian women through Western media speaking *of*, sometimes becomes speaking *for*. As a result, Iranian women's subaltern voices are silenced and dominated by the voice of Alinejad. With respect to this question the

campaign therefore demonstrates incongruity, since Alinejad does not always “erases herself or her authoritative voice from these depictions, putting into question a reading of her as speaking for anyone but herself” (Rastegar 112).

In other words, Alinejad’s transcultural position is complicated and marked with contradiction. Being an Iranian, expatriate journalist, Alinejad can be found at the center of two world major ideologies: the West and Islam. Alinejad’s position of authority and having an authentic voice may be disputed, since she appropriates Iranian women’s struggle in a way that a Western audience understands. As such, Alinejad’s campaign may be viewed as a similar endeavor to that of diasporic memoirs, in which the main goal is to demonstrate the real Iran through “the ritual of unveiling” and to expose women’s oppression within the Islamic regime. This twofold position, must be addressed by Alinejad in order to show accountability for the information she produces and circulates. In summary, Alinejad’s activism and means of representation reiterates Orientalism, in which the women of Iran are primarily portrayed as victims and repositioned as the subaltern. The campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom”, fuelling Orientalist ideas, comes to be perpetuated, decontextualized and manipulated by Western media propaganda of Iranophobia and Islamophobia, which is analyzed in the following section.

4.3 The Orientalist tradition

Since the campaign was established in May 2014, Western media have paid significant attention to the struggle against the compulsory hijab by Iranian women. As previously mentioned, “My Stealthy Freedom” relies heavily on this Western media coverage. However, preexisting prejudices and misconceptions about the Islam and the Middle- East “highly mediate” how the campaign enters, and is reproduced in, the larger discursive context” of the West (Rastegar 119). In addition, western media tend to represent a rather decontextualized and de-historicized portrayal of Iranian women’s struggle and, as such, reiterate Orientalist thoughts regarding the Islam and women in the Third World (Rastegar 108). The following analysis considers to what extent Western media perpetuate misconceptions, inaccuracies, and errors of omission regarding women’s rights and dress in Iran, Islamic religion and jurisprudence, and Iranian politics.

The majority of articles involving Iranian women’s struggle embellish the fact that the hijab has become compulsory since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Hafiz 2014; Threadgould 2014; Dearden, 2016). To name two examples, articles produced by *The Huffington Post* and

*Bloomberg*¹⁴ introduce the issue of the compulsory hijab without addressing its history prior to the Islamic Revolution:

[...] the Iranian government has mandated women to wear the hijab following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and morality police enforce these rules (Hafiz, 2014).

Since the 1979 revolution that brought Shiite Muslim religious leaders to power, women in Iran have been required to cover their hair and bodies in public with headscarves and loose-fitting coats. (Motevalli, 2014)

However, as has been previously explained, the hijab has been a normative, Islamic dress code in Iran since Safavid's centralization in the sixteenth century. Moreover, in pre-Islamic times, veiling was also already practiced by urban, middle-class women to signify class-distinction. As noted in an online comment, "It begins with bare-headed women, and it ends up with women in headscarf or veil" (mystealthyfreedom.wordpress). Thus, the narrative begins without presenting the targeted, Western audience with a complete background, and, as such, fails to represent the relevant historical context.

Western media also represent a one-sided Orientalist notion of Iran's history of repressive regimes, by downplaying the fact that under the repressive regime of the Shah, there was a history of forced unveiling, to the displeasure of many religious women. For example, in a report by the *BBC* it was stated:

When the Islamic Revolution came in 1979 many of the freedoms that had been slowly and painfully won by women in Iran were swept away. A new, more conservative orthodoxy allowed the clerics to regain much of the control they had lost. (Amidi 2015)

In this way, Western media tend to portray a romanticized representation of the period preceding the Islamic Revolution times, claiming that women at that time enjoyed greater rights and freedom. However, as previously mentioned, this was not the case for all women in Iran, since religious women were confined to their homes and unable to attend school. In reality, the

¹⁴ Both media outlets in question are also featured on the website of My Stealthy Freedom.

Pahlavi regime ‘staged’ the narrative of liberated women, seeking only to represent an image of a modern and united Iran. In addition, Western media de-historize and de-politicize the struggle of the veil in Iran, and do not recognize that the policy of hijab has been tied to the political ideologies of a political regime within a certain period of time. By only recognizing the struggle of the veil in relation to the repressive Islamic regime, the veil is solely associated with religion, not politics. In others words, by dismissing many of “the repressive and corrupt aspects of the secular Pahlavi government, politicized religion becomes constructed as the source of all the current government's repressive policies” (Rastegar 116-117). By neglecting the full, complex historical reality of the hijab, the Western view of the Islamic mandate of the veil, reduces the hijab to a mere symbol of oppression. Moreover, this selective media representation reinforces dualism of the West and the Muslim world, in which the secular regime of the Shah is considered as liberal in contrast to the Islamic regime, which is perceived as repressive (Rastegar 119).

Another dominant narrative has been embellished by the West, by sensationalizing “barbaric” Islamic laws regarding public indecency. For example, in an article by *Bloomberg* dealing with the story of “My Stealthy Freedom”, the headline states, “Iran Facebook Page Wants Women Lashed for Unveiled Photographs.” (Motevalli, 2014). In another article by *The Independent*, covering the topics of seclusion and unveiling, the title reads, “Iranian students get 99 lashes for attending mixed graduation party” (Mortimer, 2016).¹⁵ However, it cannot be verified if these laws regarding public indecency, including flogging, whipping, and lashing, are still in force, since there is a certain ambiguity regarding what constitutes public indecency and proper veiling. According to “My Stealthy Freedom’s” wordpress website, the current public indecency law contains only “general guidelines of proper behavior in public places, and does not mention anything about ‘veiled head’, ‘hair’, ‘hands’ or ‘legs’ ” (mystealthyfreedom.wordpress). In addition, website states:

Beside the general guidelines, the second section of the same Iranian law article refers to women and mentions a hijab (as female dress-code) in public places, but the possibility of physical punishment is excluded and replaced with fines ranging from 1.5 to 15 euros (or 2 to 20 USD). As such it belongs to the lowest levels offenses and usually ends in a verbal caution,

¹⁵ This article was even shared on the Facebook page of My Stealthy Freedom.

while the punishment by whipping (even if personally preferred) is simply impossible. (mystealthyfreedom.wordpress.com)

In addition, according to Mozafari, in 1983, when the hijab was made compulsory by law, Article 102 of the Law of Islamic Punishments did stipulate that a woman's appearance in public without hijab was punishable "by the penalty of up to seventy-four lashes" (4). However, the the law was eventually repealed and replaced due to severe criticism:

In 1996, "[...] the punishment for not observing proper hijab was changed from flogging to between ten days and two months imprisonment or a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 rials (Islamic Punishment Law, Note to Article 638). (Mozafari 5)

In other words, within the current law regarding public indecency, flogging has been abolished and whipping is rare, with the most conventional form of punishment being a fine or a warning. However, what is problematic about this kind of sensationalist and inaccurate media coverage is that in this way it reenacts the Orientalist gaze, "reinforcing stereotypes of Islam as an inherently violent religion" (Shirazi 120). By including the form of punishment in Western articles' main titles, the aim is to explicitly to shock and provoke, inviting critical responses, highlighting the alleged barbaric, draconian laws in Iran that oppress women, and stirring sentiments of Iranophobia and Islamophobia. In addition, it intensifies the Orientalist binary in which the West is viewed as civilized and superior, as opposed to the Islam as backward, and inferior; in which the former does not enforce these types of "barbaric" practices, opposed to the latter. In this way, a collective discursive imperialist enterprise is established, in which the West needs to save the Iranian women from these barbaric, conservative Islamic men. As Samiei argues:

[...]new barbarism has intertwined with neo-Orientalist imaginaries that highlight a deep cultural dualism between Islam and the West. These waves of new barbarism and neo-Orientalism are to serve as hegemonic strategies when the production of enemy imaginaries contributes to legitimizing continuous colonial economic or political projects (1149).

This particular account also aligns with Spivak's theory of discursive colonizing practices in which "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (48), since the barbaric elements present within punishments serves to justify the imperial narrative of white savior and the West's civilizing mission, saving Iranian women from the barbaric Islamic regime of Iran.

In summary, the de-historicizing of the hijab as a normative dress code, the omission of Iranian repressive regimes, and the misrepresentation of Islamic laws regarding public indecency, perpetuate Orientalist views of contemporary Iran and Islam as backward, barbaric and inferior, in which women of Iran are primarily portrayed as victims of this repressive, barbaric regime, and need to be saved by the civilized West. By not providing a complete historical context, Western media fail to represent an accurate image of the history of the veil and women's rights, drawing explicit connections between women's oppression and Islam, instead of political regimes. These means of representations also have certain effects with regard to the image of women in Iran, in which they are primarily portrayed as victims who are oppressed within Islamic society. The following paragraph further investigates the extent to which Western media reinstate the category of the "Third World woman".

4.3.1 The Third World Woman

Through the de-historicizing and omissions of media coverage of the West, the targeted audience easily falls into the pitfall of understanding the campaign of "My Stealthy Freedom" as "a cry for help", in which Iranian women are resisting compulsory hijab and oppression experienced within the Islamic society in which they live in. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Alinejad plays a key role in this Orientalist imaginary and the dominant portrayal of Iranian women as victims. This becomes even more problematic since the West regards Alinejad's voice as objective and authentic, and assuming authority with regard to her transcultural position, viewing her as "a critical guide to the West" (Rastegar 122). Accordingly, the West tends to adopt Alinejad's points of view on Iranian women and her knowledge of the Orient, establishing it as "true". This paragraph analyzes to what extent Western media perpetuate the notion of the "Third World woman" by homogenizing all women of Iran as oppressed, victimized and in need of a savior (Mohanty).

"My Stealthy Freedom" consists of various participants with different socio-economic backgrounds, and can be seen as a cross section of Iranian society, coming from both rural as well as urban areas, and secular as well as religious backgrounds. However, the Western media

often do not highlight or even mention this robust diversity. In this way, western media represent Iranian women as “an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions” (Mohanty 336-37). However, some activists have already expressed the view that not all women of Iran consider the issue of hijab as a priority or regard it as oppressive. Nevertheless, in seeking to summarize women’s oppressive conditions, Western media uncritically accept Alinejad’s campaign as an account of women’s issues regarding women’s bodies and dress, that represent the concerns and priorities of *all* women in Iran. As Mohanty states: “women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression” (337). In other words, the translation from campaign to Western media representations chiefly revolves around the oppressive conditions related to women’s bodies in contemporary Iran, instead of looking deep into women’s rights and status in Iran, deeming them wholly victimized by the Islamic state (Rastegar 120).

Western journalists read Alinejad’s description of Islamic dress policies as a confirmation and reiteration of their own view that Iran is uniquely oppressive to women, which is the most evident way in which Western media depict the women of Iran as oppressed. As such, a vast majority of articles mainly characterize the struggle against compulsory hijab and for control of their bodies, as being in response to an oppressive policy. According to Rastegar: “The repetition of these policies in list form helps to make them appear more inexplicable as they become increasingly” divorced from their context and lived, material reality” (119). In this way, Western media support a prevailing view that “conservative, religious men are motivated by a singular desire to oppress women” (Rastegar 119). For example, an article produced by *The Huffington Post* stated:

Not only is the headscarf a minute-by-minute struggle with a cumbersome garment, but for many it is also a symbol of the regime and thus it becomes the embodiment of oppression [...] The insignia of the inequality must be carried around at all times. Female friends in Iran have told me that they feel suffocated by it. (Threadgould)

The author here does acknowledge that the hijab symbolizes Iranian women’s struggle with the regime, however, omits a significant step by explicitly referring to it as “the embodiment of oppression”. Rather, the hijab currently symbolizes social control, in which the government does not permit lifestyles that are diverge from the traditional norm. In this way, the very nature

of the struggle is dismissed, falling, again, into the familiar pitfall of Orientalism, in which the veiled woman is viewed as oppressed. In addition, the author states that the hijab is an “insignia of inequality”; this claim may also be criticized. As previously explained, Iran is country of paradoxes: While it encourages women to be educated and to participate in parliament, it still pursues policies involving dress codes and seclusion. In other words, the hijab cannot necessarily be associated with women’s inequality in Iran, since they have made significant progress over the past few years regarding education and employment. This reading is therefore too reductionist, viewing the women of Iran solely as oppressed since it does not provide a relevant background regarding women’s rights within other fields.

Another article by *The Independent* it is states:

[...] thousands of Iranians have been risking punishment by taking off their hijabs (headscarves) in public and snapping photos as part of a defiant online campaign to counter the “oppressive” law. (Dearden)

The author does not elaborate on how the law can be considered as oppressive, leaving the targeted audience only with its existing prejudices and limited knowledge of the hijab. In addition, “oppressive” is not necessarily a suitable term, since hijab primarily restricts and discriminates against women in their pursuit of education and work ambitions which require wearing the veil. Thus, the author either should have explained the choice to label the Islamic dress law oppressive, or identified the law as “discriminatory” or “restrictive”, instead of choosing familiar, stereotypical rhetoric, without any further explanation.

Aside from the rubric of “oppression”, women under the veil are often portrayed by the West as rural, nomadic and poor. By contrast, the history of hijab is more complex and paradoxical, since historically, the covering of hair was only practiced by wealthy women living in urban areas, signifying class distinction, whereas rural women could not afford veils. Thus, having recourse to the history of the veil, this dichotomy of rural-urban is too rigorous. However, in an article by *The Huffington Post* it is claimed that the hijab has not been a normative practice in urban Iran before the Islamic Revolution, stating the following:

However, the hijab was not ubiquitous in urban areas of Iran prior to the Revolution, and not all Muslim women consider it a religious obligation. (Hafiz, 2014)

The author does not recognize that the hijab has been a normative dress code in Iran, and that the practice of veiling was initially performed by urban middle-class women. Furthermore, as previously noted, the Shah was in power prior to the Islamic revolution and had abolished the hijab, denying entrance of veiled women in public spaces. Hence, the statement that the hijab was not ubiquitous in urban areas prior to the revolution cannot be attributed solely to the fact that women did not wish to abandon the hijab, but also were required by law to do so. By not providing this context, the author seems to suggest that mainly urban women were largely unfamiliar with the veil, and that only rural women practiced veiling.

Moreover, in an episode of a documentary called, “Journalism is not a Crime: My Stealthy Freedom Takes Wings”, Alinejad talks about the popularity of the Facebook page, not only among modernized urbanites, but also among people from some of Iran’s most traditional villages. She stated:

One of the women who decided to publish her picture was from Lorestan, the mountainous province [...] When the picture was posted it led to widespread reactions. It made her happy and she sent me an email saying that,

‘Yes many people cursed me but I am happy that I talked because I know many women in small villages and provincial towns are like me’. (Mohseni)

Thus, contrary to frequent suggestions, it cannot be argued that only urban women resist the hijab, nor can the adoption of the veil be associated with rural women alone. Since both women from rural as well as urban areas resist the compulsory hijab, the homogenous, stereotypical view of the veiled woman as rural, backward and ignorant is contested, illustrating the diversity among the campaign’s participants. It further indicates that not only urban women are capable of resisting the compulsory hijab due to influences of secularism or globalization, but also rural women who live in more isolated areas, thereby creating resistance on their own, recognizing their agency as well.

Within Western media representations, by failing to address their background, women in Iran are conclusively divorced from their historical, material and lived reality. Furthermore, Western media dismissively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of Iranian women, representing them as a singular group who all resist the hijab and regard it as oppressive. As a result, the participants of the campaign, and thus the women of Iran, are homogenized as a singular group based on their shared oppression by the compulsory hijab. In this way, they are primarily represented as victims of the Islamic regime, which, on one hand

is fuelled by existing stereotypes and prejudices about the Islam, and on the other hand by Alinejad's activism and representation of women in Iran. In this way, participants' autonomous representations, which challenge stereotypes and monolithic understandings of women in the Third World, are reduced to a rather simplistic, decontextualized depiction in which they are primarily viewed as oppressed, instead of representing and addressing a more complicated, diverse, and nuanced lived reality of Iranian women and the rights they possess. As such, western media fail to go beyond defining of Iranian women's object status and position as mere victims, resulting in a misinterpretation and misreading of their agency and resistance in their struggle against the compulsory hijab, which is discussed in the final paragraph.

4.3.2 Reading agency

Western media representations of Iranian women as primarily victimized and oppressed, within a purportedly conservative and religious society, provided alongside a decontextualized historical reality, has a detrimental effect: women's agency is misread and misinterpreted. Iranian women's agency becomes solely understood as their resistance against the Islamic Republic. Western media do recognize women of Iran as active agents, able to practice resistance, however, do not place, and recognize, their political subjectivity in proper historical context and material reality. As previously explained, the history of the veil in Iran is complicated and paradoxical, and tied to past ideological regimes, in which one or the other group of women was ultimately "oppressed". Yet, by only addressing repressive, veiling policies by the Islamic regime, and dismissing the repressive regime of the Shah, the dualistic framework of Orientalism is reinstated. Western media solely associate women's oppression with Islam and not with the political regime in question, transforming the hijab from a socio-political issue into something religious again. As previously mentioned, the political subjectivity of women in Iran may be understood within Rosi Braidotti's definition of the term since they seek to negotiate with dominant social norms and want to redefine their identity which is rather an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. Therefore, it is crucial for Western media to give a proper historical account of women's resistance against hijab, acknowledging the complexity and dynamics of the hijab within Iranian culture, politics and history, as well as addressing the diversity and complexity within the different participants of "My Stealthy Freedom". In this way, the West can move beyond stereotypical views of the Orient and women in the Third World as oppressed and victimized.

5 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the findings of this research in conjunction with the prevailing theories and aims to reflect upon the main research question. It ends with concluding remarks for further potential research.

5.1 Cyberfeminism, Orientalism, representation, agency

This research has examined the popular campaign and online social movement of Masih Alinejad: “My Stealthy Freedom”. This thesis aimed to analyze the different means of representation endorsed within the campaign, resulting in a re-appropriation of its initial understanding. By using the method of critical discourse analysis, it aimed to expose the post-colonial power structures that are present within the field in which the campaign operates. The main research question entailed the following:

To what extent do (online) Western media discourses about “My Stealthy Freedom” reiterate Orientalism and represent a monolithic understanding of contemporary Iran and women in the Third World, and to what extent does the movement seek to challenge these notions?

This research has demonstrated that women of Iran, who have access to the Internet, have familiarized themselves with novel technology. The Facebook page of “My Stealthy Freedom” provides women of Iran with a space that can be described as “a virtual safe haven”, in which they are able to practice agency and to protest against compulsory hijab, without the fear of being recognized or punished (Dearden). More importantly, this platform offers Iranian women with the ability and tools to negotiate a new collective identity, via opposition with the government, in which they combine modern and traditional traits. In this way, participants portray an image that challenges a monolithic understanding of women in the Third World as passive, traditional and submissive. In addition, Iranian women’s agency can be understood within Rosi Braidotti’s definition of the term who states that political subjectivity may be understood as “a complex process of self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values” (Braidotti 1).

The founder of the movement, Masih Alinejad, has assumed a powerful position within the campaign, one that goes beyond the status of being a facilitator. Alinejad goes to extensive lengths to expand the campaign and to appeal to an international audience, and in particular

Western audience. Alinejad's call upon tourists and political delegates to join the movement has caused controversy and backlash, since it can be considered as a colonial gesture, invoking the West as a savior and portraying women in Iran as wholly victimized. In addition, by inviting non-Iranian women to join the debate, Alinejad reinforces the Orientalist binary, in which the West is viewed as civilized and superior, opposed to Iran as backward and inferior. The movement #SeeYouInIranWithoutHijab further aligns with Spivak's theory, since it repositions women of Iran as the subaltern, in which they need a Western voice and form of representation in order to be heard.

Alinejad's own transcultural position also proved to be a subject of critical inquiry, drawing strong resemblances with the authors of the second wave of diasporic memoirs, illustrated through Mitra Rastegar's reading of Azar Nafisi. Due to Alinejad's transcultural position and role within the campaign, she is viewed as having access to Iranian women's intimate lives. Even though Alinejad emphasizes that she merely facilitates the protest and does not represent women in Iran, her continuous presence within the accounts suggests otherwise. Alinejad is, like Nafisi, determined to represent the women in Iran "through the ritual of unveiling" (Rastegar). In this light, the West views Alinejad as an agent of change, who aims to bring liberation to the women in Iran, in which she may be viewed as a savior herself. However, through this transcultural position Alinejad assumes a position of authority and claims authenticity, in which her voice mainly resonates through the Western audience. In addition, since Alinejad frequently refers to her own experiences and struggles when talking about the campaign and women's accounts, her speaking *of* in some instances becomes speaking *for*, universalizing her experience as being representative of all women in Iran.

With regard to Alinejad's transcultural position, the West comes to read her account as authentic. However, according to Rastegar's reading of Nafisi, this "authenticity" emerges as a paradox: Alinejad's transcultural status enables her to tell an appropriate story that the Western audience understand (123). In other words, Alinejad's transcultural position transforms her into "a critical guide" for the West (Rastegar 122). Ultimately, this results in a reproduction of existing prejudices and misconception about "the Orient" and "the Other", confirming views of the Islam as backward and oppressive of women, while consolidating the superiority of the West. In other words, through Alinejad Orientalism is initially reiterated, with regard to her role as being a guide for the West and savior of the East. This account is authenticated by Western media who regard Alinejad as an insider and therefore able to produce objective and authentic knowledge of "the Orient", which in the Western framework of discourse and power comes to be regarded as "true" (Rastegar 124).

Western media adopt Alinejad's discourse in conjunction with their own prejudices and views of the East, becoming allies in this 'war against hijab'. Western media represent "My Stealthy Freedom" as a global spectacle, in which they primarily portray Iranian women's resistance against the repressions of the Islamic regime. Data of this research demonstrate that a vast majority of Western media articles decontextualize the struggle against hijab and do not provide a proper historical account. The hijab is continually linked to the repressive Islamic Republic of Iran, implicating that rejecting the Islam is the panacea to Iranian women's ills, while neglecting the fact that prior to the Islamic Revolution women were also repressed under the Shah regime. In addition, Western media sensationalize Islamic laws of public indecency, portraying the Islam as an inherently violent and barbaric religion. As a result, the dichotomy of West-Islam is reinforced, in which unveiling is linked to secularism and Western liberal values, opposed to re-veiling that is associated with the Islam and repression.

In other words, the stereotypical view of the veiled women who is oppressed is perpetuated. Western media homogenize women of Iran "an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions" (Mohanty 336-37) which is solely based on the assumption of their shared oppression of the hijab. By not providing a proper historical account and divorcing women from their material context and reality, women of Iran are homogenized as oppressed. However, participants of "My Stealthy Freedom" come from various socio-economic backgrounds, and include women from secular as well as Muslim backgrounds. These facts need to be taken into account in order to perform an accurate reading of their resistance against the compulsory hijab. The detrimental effect of this homogenous representation is that women's agency is misinterpreted and not accurately recognized. Western media do recognize Iranian women as active agents, but highlight in this process their resistance to the compulsory hijab, and allegedly the Islam, instead of their capacity for action to negotiate with dominant social norms.

In conclusion, Masih Alinejad's activism within the campaign and transcultural role of guidance to the West, in conjunction with Western media representations, allude to a joint battle against the compulsory hijab, one that is not necessarily desired. A joint battle transforms the struggle into a struggle between ideologies, symbolizing Huntington's "clash of civilizations". Alinejad intense presence and dominance within the campaign, enabled and endorsed by Western form of media, downplay Iran women's voices. In this way, the campaign ultimately becomes caught in discourses – of participants' own autonomous self-representation, challenging a monolithic understanding of women in the Third World and the Orientalist discourse of women as oppressed and victimized, reiterated by Western media and Masih

Alinejad – in this way the Western audience fails to go beyond a reading and understanding of the campaign in which Iranian women resist the repressions of Islamic regime, demanding freedom and (white) savior. As Spivak states:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (62).

In other words, within the campaign of “My Stealthy Freedom” women of Iran are primarily portrayed as victims, and as such, claimed as imperial subjects by the West who must save them, which is even, in moderate form, suggested by the campaign itself. Whether My Stealthy Freedom will be a true catalyst for change in Iran is unknown since the movement is still expanding to this day, drawing more attention, support and coverage. Time will only tell whether women of Iran are able to make the transition from virtual space to physical space, and ultimately to legal space. A recent development has gained attention in the West since Iranian men have also joined the campaign. This poses great prospects and advancements for the movement with regard to challenging stereotypes of women being victims of their own culture and religion and in particular, their “own” men within patriarchal society. Arguably, male inclusion will also contribute to gaining a better understanding of Iranian women’s resistance against the compulsory hijab, which is not a battle against the Islam, but against a repressive regime.

5.2 Recommendations

Suggestions for further potential research would be to do a study which research the campaign’s participants into more depth, analyzing different perspectives. For example, recently Iranian men have joined the movement, including husbands and fathers, by expressing their thoughts on compulsory hijab as well as briefly wearing the hijab themselves to experience women’s daily struggle. This new development of #MenInHijab gives rise to a new research since it challenges notions of patriarchy within Iranian society. It also contributes to understanding the struggle of hijab to an outsider, in the sense that it is not (only) about male dominance or Islam, but rather about a repressive political regime, speaking to a larger debate that is not exclusively gender specific. As such, exploring the movement from a male perspective would greatly enrich

the debate on the hijab and Iranian's complex history of politics and ideology.

Another interesting group within the campaign are Muslim women. As previously argued in this study, participants of My Stealthy Freedom include both secular as well as Muslim women. This religious aspect is interesting to explore, as it opens up an investigation to Muslim feminism and agency, perhaps applying Miriam Cooke's definition of the term as a "multiple critique" (Cooke 2015). It would be interesting to look into the phenomenon of how contemporary Muslim women living Iran, practice their religion and give meaning to it in different contexts.

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