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The Banality of a Medium: Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement in the Social Media Mirror

by Sara Naderi

Abstract: The tragic death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022 sparked the largest national movement in Iran since 2009. Iranian Women became the symbolic center and main actors of this movement, with the Kurdish slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" emerging as its defining motto.. This paper presents a theoretical and exploratory reflection on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) movement, focusing on how social media, as a medium, shaped its mainstream representations and trajectory. After a brief genealogical analysis of discourses that place women's veiling at the core of Iranian national politics, the paper examines how the hyperreal nature of modern reality influences social movements. It argues that social media amplifies the visibility of "hyperreal political subjects," making them dominant actors in the movement. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political actions. Finally, the paper explores how social media facilitates revolutionary and polarized political strategies, enabling the dismantling of dominant hegemonies while simultaneously discouraging radical and progressive political imagination in building counter-hegemonic discourses.

Keywords: counter-hegemony; hegemony; hyperreality; Iranian women; social media; veiling discourses; Woman, Life, Freedom Movement

Résumé : La mort tragique de Zhina (Mahsa) Amini survenue en septembre 2022 a déclenché le plus grand mouvement national en Iran depuis 2009. Les Iraniennes sont devenues les leaders symboliques et pratiques de ce mouvement, dont le slogan kurde qui signifie « Femme, Vie, Liberté » est devenu la devise. Cet article présente une réflexion théorique et exploratoire sur le mouvement « Femme, Vie, Liberté », centrée sur la façon dont les médias sociaux, comme média, ont façonné ses représentations dominantes et sa trajectoire. Après une brève analyse généalogique des discours qui mettent le voile des femmes au cœur de la politique nationale iranienne, l'article détermine comment la nature hyperréaliste de la réalité moderne influe sur les mouvements sociaux. Il soutient que les médias sociaux amplifient la visibilité des « sujets politiques hyperréels », faisant d'eux des acteurs dominants du mouvement. Cette transformation de la subjectivité politique s'est traduite par une limitation structurelle des médias sociaux, qui touche non seulement à la représentation, mais aussi à la « présence » des actions politiques. Enfin, l'article montre comment les médias sociaux contribuent à des stratégies politiques révolutionnaires et polarisées, et permettent le démantèlement des hégémonies dominantes tout en décourageant l'imagination politique radicale et progressiste dans l'élaboration de discours contre-hégémoniques.

Mots clés : contre-hégémonie; hégémonie; hyperréalité; femmes iraniennes; médias sociaux; discours sur le port du voile; Mouvement Femme, Vie, Liberté

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Introduction

Zhina! You will not die! Your name shall become a symbol.[1]

This potent sentence was inscribed on the grave of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini by her family. Yet, at that moment, perhaps not even Zhina's family envisioned how swiftly this visionary sentence would come true. The "woman, life, freedom" (WLF) movement became the realization of this promise, transforming Zhina's name into a symbolic echo of subaltern voices in Iran's modern history (Mahdavi 2023).

Zhina was a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who died in the custody of Iran's morality police for wearing an "improper hijab" on December 16, 2022 (Bayat 2023, 19). The "woman, life, freedom" slogan—miraculously resurrected like a whisper of revelation from Zhina's grave, in the Kurdistan Province of Iran and spread in the hearts and voices of Iranians like an untold messianic promise—initiated the "most severe and sustained political upheaval ever faced by the Islamist regime in Iran" (Bayat 2023, 19).

The movement began with a collective resistance of women against the Islamic regime's mandatory veiling laws and swiftly expanded across the country and transformed into a comprehensive uprising for regime change, drawing participants from diverse genders, classes, and "nations"[2] (see Vahabzadeh 2022) inside Iran. Notably, it marked the first national resistance movement initiated by women in the history of the Islamic Republic. This positioning of both women and marginalized nations at the forefront of a national liberatory movement has been unprecedented in Iran's modern history. The accumulation of progressive and promising features heralded new social and political possibilities in the Iranian political sphere, the possibility of collective life that has not been imagined or experienced in the past, and the possibility of more diverse, democratic, and inclusive national identity that is less suppressive toward visible (national, cultural, and gendered) minorities.

Similar to other contemporary social movements, social media played a pivotal role in igniting the WLF movement and became the primary medium for its global representation. However, the movement's representation on social media also paved the way for the rise of centralist androcentric and conservative voices, including the extreme right-wing populist and monarchist[3] groups mostly based outside Iran (Tohidi 2023, 5; Sadeghi 2023). These self-proclaimed leaders overshadowed the voices of women and marginalized groups inside the Islamic regime's opposition, citing the need for "national unity" in overthrowing the regime. Ironically, the most conservative forces in Iran's political sphere have gained popularity amid the most progressive movement in Iran's post-revolutionary history.

I acknowledge that I do not have any firsthand experience of the WLF movement, as I was not in Iran during that time. However, like many diasporic Iranians, I was able to follow the movement from a distance through its social media representation, which evoked a mixture of contradictory feelings. I also relied on the accounts of friends who actively engaged with the movement's reality inside Iran. Exploring the "virtual reality" of the movement from afar presents both risks and opportunities for a researcher. On one hand, there is a danger of reducing the movement to its online "representations," treating them as the movement sole dimension and possibility. On the other hand, this perspective offers a valuable opportunity for profound "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) reflection, providing a unique and critical lens through which to examine the movement. Throughout this research, I strive to avoid the former while exploring the possibilities of the latter.

As a researcher interested in both social media and social movements, what particularly captured my attention was the central role of social media representations in shaping the trajectory of actions within the movement's actual reality. Built on all above-mentioned observations and experiences, this paper aims to illuminate how social media as a "medium" or "scale" (McLuhan 2006,108) influenced the mainstream representations and trajectory of the WLF movement in Iran. The paper also draws on Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyperreality to illuminate how the social

media representations turned this movement into "pure simulacra," which extend the limitation of the medium (representation) to the social event's (WLF movement) presence.

In what follows, I will begin with a brief genealogical review of the discourses positioning women's veiling at the center of Iranian national politics. Then, reflecting on my observation of the movement in the social media mirror, I will demonstrate the discrepancy between the major representations of the movement in social media and the emancipatory political potential contained in the "woman, life, freedom" slogan as an iconic motto of the movement. Building on a literature review, I will highlight some structural limitations of social media as the main medium of the movement. The hyperreal character of modern reality affects social movements by turning the "hyperreal political subject" into the most seen and, consequently, the leading actors of the movement. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political actions. Finally, I hope to shed some light on how social media, as the "medium" of the WLF movement can facilitate revolutionary and polarized political strategies (in both form and intensity) in breaking the dominant hegemony, while simultaneously discouraging radical and progressive political imagination in building counter-hegemonic discourses.

This paper is a theoretical (based on literature review) and exploratory reflection on the WLF movement that draws on my personal experiences of observing the representations of the movement on social media[4] and engaging in friendly dialogues with a few people who participated in the actual movements inside Iran. Media literature provides me with theoretical lenses that enhance these observations and offer a more nuanced understanding of some paradoxical features of the movement that may not be easily observable by theoretically naked eyes.

A Brief History of Women and the Veiling Question in Modern Iran

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini's death was a tragic result of one of the most controversial discriminatory laws of the Iranian Islamic regime, a law which passed a few months after the 1979 revolution and mandated veiling [*hijab*] for all women in the Iranian public sphere. During the 1979 revolution, hijab or veiling was considered by Islamists as one of the central features of resistance against westernization and seen as moving toward the Islamization of Iranian culture (Ahmed 1992; Sadeghi 2008; Zahedi 2007). However, despite what is represented by mainstream mass media, the importance of veiling in representing the orientation of Iranian political culture first appeared through "mandatory unveiling act" about 40 years before the 1979 revolution. In 1936, King Reza Pahlavi [*Reza Shah*], the father of modern Iran in the monarchists' narrative and the founder of Iran's first modern nation-state, legislated the mandatory unveiling act, in which the presence of veiled women in the public sphere was prohibited (Naghibi 1999, 555). After announcing the unveiling legislation, the police were instructed to deal harshly with any woman wearing anything other than a European-style hat and dress (Ahmed 1992, 164).

Delving more into the history, the birth of discourse around women's veiling in Iranian politics dates back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It emerged alongside the constitutional scholars' attempts to find a convincing response to Iranian modernity's conventional question: Why did we remain backward? (see Najmabadi 1991; Ahmed 1992; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Zahedi 2007; Hirschman 1998; Naghibi 2007) "In the earliest formulations, in the mid-nineteenth century, 'the traditional woman' became the most visible symbol of backwardness. Correspondingly, the journey into modernity was signified by educating and unveiling this backward subject" (Najmabadi 1991, 51).

Both Leila Ahmed (1992) and Mayda Yegenoglu (1998) consider this spotlighting of Muslim women's bodies and their unveiling as a sign of the nation's development, an initial face of an Orientalist reading of Islamic culture. In fact, during the nineteenth century, Westerners travelling to Iran observed differences in women's dress as one of the most obvious visual differences between Western and Eastern public spaces (Ahmed 1992; Paidar 1995; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Naghibi 2007). As more and more educational, economic, and political encounters between Iranian intellectuals and the West occurred, Orientalist views of women and culture gradually echoed in Iranian modernists' portrayals of their homeland. Interestingly, despite their political antagonism, both Islamist and modernist discourses

share this Orientalist logic about veiling and unveiling, which materialized in mandatory veiling (1979) and mandatory unveiling (1936) acts.

Based on such reading of women's veiling/unveiling and cultural orientations, both the Pahlavi and Islamic Republic regimes exercised strategic manipulation and control of women's bodies and sexuality to represent their political ideologies. In both readings, the woman's body is idealized and even theologized to the extent that it symbolizes the "nation" [*vatan*], and the biopolitical governing of that body symbolizes the ideal way of governing the nation (Najmabadi 1991; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Naghibi 2007; Zahedi 2007). Consequently, the same biopolitical strategy that expands the female body to symbolize the nation simultaneously diminishes women's subjectivity so that women even lose control over their bodily territory, let's aside anything beyond it!

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement: Echo of the Past or Harbinger of Epistemological Emancipation?

From this viewpoint, the 2022-2023 WLF movement, particularly its virtual and media portrayals, appears to be another chapter in the ongoing narrative of Orientalist and androcentric identification of Iran's culture and Iranian women's body. The narrative equates the liberation of the nation from the oppressive Islamic despotic regime with the liberation of Iranian women from Islamic veiling. Unsurprisingly, this narrative aligns with prevalent Western academic and media representations of women in post-revolutionary Iran, where women's bodies and their covering signify their political stance toward the Islamic Republic (see Moaveni 2005; Mahdavi 2008; Khosravi 2008; Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012).

A brief glance at posters and pictures circulating in social media (See Figures 1, 2, and 3 as examples) supports an Orientalist identification of women and the nation's body as the legitimate interpretation of the WLF movement's message. In these images, women's unveiled hair and bodies represent Iran by either being represented as the country's map or flag.

Figure 1: Map of Iran (symbol of nationality) portrayed in the shape of a woman with unveiled long hair (unveiled woman equals national liberation)

Figure 2: Iranian flag in the form of an unveiled woman with long hair. The slogan "woman, life, freedom" [zan, zendegi, Azadi] is written at the center of the flag

Figure 3: Women at the center of the map of Iran, brushing clerics (Islamic regime leaders) free from her hair

Social media representations confirm the movement as a continuation of the dominant trend in modern Iranian national politics. Here, as in the past, women's body politics serves as a tool to signify the domination of a particular androcentric political discourse over the Iranian public sphere. Thus, the liberation of women from the Islamic Republic regime seems to mean little more than the replacement of one androcentric discourse with another in governing women, as seen in other moments of Iranian national history such as mandatory unveiling act in the 1930s. Viewing the movement from this perspective, it is not surprising that Orientalist and androcentric narratives find a strong voice in social media representations, contributing to the marginalization of women's voices.

I propose that what distinguishes the WLF movement as the harbinger of a new era is embedded in its symbolic motto "woman, life, freedom." To elucidate my interpretation of the slogan within the current intersection of women's issues and national dynamics in Iran, I must briefly situate the slogan within Kurdish Jineolojî. Jineolojî is rooted in the Kurdish words "jin" (woman) and "jîn" (life), as well as the Greek "logos" (reason or word) (Jineolojî Committee Europe 2018, as cited in Al-Ali and Kasar 2020, 213). Jineolojî developed epistemologically and politic-

ally as a result of Kurdish women's struggle against gender injustice (Düzgün 2016; Al-Ali and Käser 2022). It positions women at the forefront of the battle against patriarchy, capitalism, and the state in the Middle East (Schäfers and Neven 217, 2). Jineolojî's epistemology transcends mainstream Western (white) feminism's identity politics, yet it is politically aligned with feminist struggles to deconstruct the misogynistic and androcentric political domain (Al-Ali and Kasar 2022, 214; Schäfers and Neven 2017, 2). Within Jineolojî, women's life experiences are intended to form a foundation for a new anti-positivist, anti-hierarchical, and non-institutional knowledge production system rooted in Kurdish women's experiences (Al-Ali and Käser 2022). Mythology, spirituality, science, and various knowledge sources contribute to Jineolojî, provided they pass the life experiences filter.

Noteworthy for our current argument is that in Jineolojî, "woman" (jin) denotes actual women, not symbolic representations of liberating masculine geopolitical or biopolitical property. Men are encouraged to "[kill] their masculinity." That is, men need to overcome their tendency to dominate and oppress while women are urged to rediscover their femininity, distorted in misogynistic readings throughout the history of patriarchy (Öcalan 2013, 51, as cited in Al-Ali and Käser 2022, 220). However, due to the entanglement of gender, state, and capitalist oppression, the liberation of women extends beyond gender constraints. In Jineolojî, the history of women's oppression mirrors the history of all forms of oppression of life in the Middle East, epitomized in "woman, life, freedom." Therefore, Jineolojî seeks the emancipation of women as "subalterns," positioned at the intersection of devalued forms of life, subjected to the interconnection of patriarchal, capitalist, nationalist, and colonial domination. This conceptualization of women's emancipation as the "emancipation of the subaltern" extends beyond the gender identity politics of Western feminism, challenging its colonial and Orientalist implications on non-Western societies (see Najmabadi 2006; Lugones 2016).

With the Kurdish roots of the slogan in mind, the full significance of the slogan can be better understood. It begins with "woman" in simultaneous connection and disconnection to "life." Life, in turn, is defined by simultaneous connection and disconnection to freedom. Each word is treated as a separate yet connected noun, not serving as an adjective for the others.

The innovation in the current "woman, life, freedom" slogan, indicative of an epistemic revolution in Iranian context, is found in the emphasis on pure life without any additional qualifiers. In essence, altering it to an adjective clause like "freedom of women" or "free life" would fail to bring anything new to Iranian politics. In terms of life, modern politics in Iran has historically aimed to enhance life through utopian promises, whether in the pursuit of freedom, equality, independence, or salvation. In a secular context, the objective is to elevate life to a developed and dignified status akin to the West; while in an Islamic ideological framework, it is to empower life for the conquest and dismantling of the West. Following these promises, the contemporary history of the region is marked by bloody wars involving postcolonial modern nation-states imposing their meaning of bios (dignified, developed or simply good political life) (Agamben 1995) in various religious, ethnic, and cultural forms, on irreducibly diverse collective lives. The history of violence, massacres, and suppressions in Iran against women and national and religious minorities is indicative of the extremist definition of *bios* and demeaning of the rest as *zoe* (Agamben1995)—or as a politically killable life. Dignifying life, stripped of adjectives, at the heart of politics—captured in the WLF slogan—transgresses the rigid binary of bios versus zoe, of the good life versus the killable life, and ushers in a new political imagination. It whispers that, even if the enemy is seen as the embodiment of a "bad life," they still possess a life worthy of living. In dignifying the pure essence of life, it shatters all definitions of a good political life (bios), those definitions that have long nourished patriarchal hierarchies.

As discussed above, the word "woman" in the WLF slogan represents nothing beyond its literal meaning—the human who happens to be (become) a woman. This significance is noteworthy, especially when considering that in modern Iran's political discourse, the term "woman" has traditionally been used and abused as a symbol of the nation. However, beyond the patriarchal portrayal of women's bodies as the symbol of a nation or national flag, the actual lives of Iranian women, including their feelings, lived histories, and political agency have seldom mattered to various political ideologies, whether Islamic, leftist, or liberal. What we see here is a great example of Baudrillard's pure simulacra: the symbolic representation which becomes almost divorced from its actual reference. This over-politicization of women's

bodies also gives a fetishized (à la Marx 2004) quality to the notion of the "Iranian woman" in Iranian political discourse, juxtaposing it against the lived experiences of Iranian women. So, the more robust the "symbolic presence of Iranian women" may be, the less significant the lives and voices of actual women become. Thus, it is not surprising that Iranian utopian politics have always ended up degrading women's and all people's lives in the name of the nation and freedom. Hence, placing life without an adjective in between the two most abused words in Iran's modern history, "woman" and "freedom," manifests a capacity to deconstruct both Orientalist and androcentric frames of freedom and woman in Iranian political discourse. It heralds the emergence of an indigenous "standpoint" (Harding 1991; Smith 2005) of feminism, which first and foremost seeks emancipation inside the life of real people and not by imposing pre-prepared Orientalist, essentialized androcentric definitions of liberation upon those lives. My interpretation shares a family resemblance with Fatemeh Sadeghi's definition of the term "jiyanism" as the potential for indigenous feminism, embedded in the WLF movement, which is both "feminist and life-affirming" (Sadeghi 2023, 462). Given this, the key question is: Which structural mechanisms within the Iranian political sphere overlook the epistemological novelty embedded in the "WLF" motto and movement, causing it to be interpreted as a continuation of androcentric and Orientalist identifications of governing women's bodies and the homeland?

Indeed, addressing this question requires an in-depth investigation of many sociopolitical and historical forces inside Iran's political sphere. However, the focus here is on the role of social media as a medium of the movement in foregrounding the banal, neutral, and conservative reading of "woman, life, freedom" over its radical, and progressive spirit.

Social Media as the Medium of the Resistance

The social media age, emerging in the late 1990s and solidifying by the late 2000s has revolutionized the communication dynamics in the public and private sphere. Among many other features, internet-based communications allow individuals to possess a personal voice and to express themselves in various ways. Unlike the passive audiences of mass media, social media seems to have paved the way for the emergence of active and engaged audiences (Fisher 2015, 187) and consequently shakes up the hierarchical boundaries of the sender and receiver of information in the mass media age.

Social media platforms in Iran's political sphere facilitate the connection among activists, minorities, and marginalized individuals, offering them a platform beyond official institutional politics. These platforms enable the movement constituents to voice their perspectives beyond mass media channels that face censorship within Iran or biases in news networks outside Iran. Iran's Green Movement[6] (2009), the Arab Spring (2011), Black Lives Matter (2013, 2020), and #MeToo (2017) are examples of the many movements that were launched or expanded through social media (Manoukian 2011; Akhavan 2013; Fisher 2015; Nagle 2017; Alimardani and Milan 2018). However, some studies indicate that while social media successfully connects activists, mobilizes online movements (hashtag activism), and challenges mass media hegemony on social and political issues, it may not necessarily facilitate and disseminate radical epistemology and new collective political imagination (Manoukian 2011, Fisher 2015). Morozov (2012) coins the term "slacktivism" to describe the gap between social media performers' online and real-world impacts. Similarly, critically reflecting on "citizen photojournalism," Mortensen (2011) and Manoukian (2011) caution against reducing political activism to mere reporting. They argue that citizen photojournalism can lead to an overreliance on the dominant discourse of social media, thereby diminishing the subjective agency and authenticity of the actors and "witnesses" involved in the moment.

Other researchers highlight how social media can fuel false and violent polarization in society during moments of socio-political crisis (Gladwell 2010; Nagle 2017; Ghaffari 2022; Corey 2022). Given the tendency of social media to fail to disseminate radical epistemology, and to instead drive polarization, it is perhaps not surprising that the message of WLF movement was impacted by its representation on social media. In the following sections, I consider how the limitations of social media contributed to concealing the WLF movement's progressive critical spirits and its promising political imaginations.

Social Media Echo Chamber and Extreme Representation of Self/Other

Van Dijck and Poell (2013) coined the term "programmability" as a crucial feature of social media platforms, illustrating how specific algorithms in each platform contribute to the creation of echo chambers. This structural condition shields users from encountering opposing viewpoints and ideas, and successfully surrounds and secures them with an "echo chamber" of like-minded friends, pages, and news which resonates with their current value system (also see Sunstein 1991; Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015: Yardi and Boyd 2018). Put differently, while the virtual space provides a wealth of information, it simultaneously manipulates the discourse of knowledge production in a sophisticated and concealed manner.

In the world of local communication, we communicate with unshielded everyday reality, which is smaller in scale and provides a less comprehensive view of the world, but simultaneously keeps us more vulnerable to interacting with and facing people or events that do not follow some of our taken-for-granted perspectives. Exposure to individuals with undesirable characteristics fosters tolerance, discourages the demonization of others, and compels us to refresh and open our political imagination according to realities outside our comfort zone.

However, in the globalized virtual world, despite being bombarded with information, the discourse of the information that we receive is designed based on our intellectual/political/ lifestyle taste so that it rarely questions our major political values. This trend creates a cycle of consuming knowledge that reinforces existing beliefs and results in the creation of rigid, uncritical echo chambers in virtual reality. As Barberá explains, "the outcome of this process is a society that is increasingly segregated along partisan lines" (2020, 34), each of which resonates only within themselves. This condition, in moments of political crisis and unrest when compromises become impossible, positions people on two polarized sides of the ideological spectrum. Amplified by a lack of tolerance, during moments of political crisis this echo chamber structure intensifies "hate speech" (Siegel 2020) and exacerbates a "discursive spiral of hate" (Ghaffari 2022). This discourse easily boxes people with even slight deviations from one's perspective into the "demonized other" category (political, cultural, racial, etc.). In this nontolerant political sphere, particularly during moments of crisis, those who gain popularity in social media are often individuals capable of using aggressive language, employing hateful rhetoric, and demonizing their adversaries to an extreme. The WLF movement has not been immune from this political epidemic. At the movement's zenith, precisely when the need was most urgent to introduce new, alternative political imaginings and make historically significant decisions, numerous intellectuals and activists, particularly women, were condemned to silence as their analytical voices were marginalized and left unheard, overshadowed by the prevalence of irrational, sexist, aggressive, and violent language (Ganji 2022; Vahdati 2022) dominating social media discourse.

I remember that in one discursive trend, some monarchists, by enforcing the hashtag (I give my representative [to Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last king]) forged a dichotomy of "pro-1979 revolution" versus "anti-1979 revolution," categorizing individuals who do not denounce or demonize the 1979 revolution—which ousted the monarchical regime—as being automatically against the WLF movement and pro Islamic regime. This so-called "pro-1979 revolution" [*Panjah-o Hafti*] category entailed the majority of secular leftist and liberal activists and intellectuals who had a history of struggling against both despotic regimes during pre- and post-revolution and were tortured, suppressed, killed, or banished by both the monarchy and the Islamic Republic. In another disturbing case, even the mourning mother of Hadis Najafi[7], a young woman killed during the movement by the Islamic regime, became a target of cyber assault for not sharing an unveiled picture of her daughter at her funeral. Sharing a veiled (with Hijab) picture of an individual—an individual who lost her life protesting mandatory veiling—during her funeral was enough for numerous angry social media users to unjustly demonize the mourning family. Despite being victims of the Islamic regime's brutality, the family was unfairly labelled as pro Islamic regime, a series of events that highlights the harsh judgments prevalent on social media. The extreme polarization forced the mourning mother to record an unveiled video, pleading with people to stop harassing her family and affirming, basically confessing, her opposition to the regime and mandatory veiling. That a mourning mother of a martyr must prove loyalty to the movement in which her daughter has become a victim and symbol, that a mourning mother has to beg to be excluded from the "otherness" (or the pro-regime category), highlights the fragility of expressing thoughts freely in such a polarized environment.

Political Celebrity and Performativity

At first glance, it appears that social media provides individuals with more space to question hegemonic discourses. This observation carries a partial truth. In this and the next sections, I will show how social media structures can pave the way for the emergence of a political subject that, despite being radical in questioning the hegemonic discourse, is accustomed to appreciating and generating less critical and radical counter-hegemonic voices.

Despite being a less hierarchical and more democratic form of communication compared to mass media, social media users do not enjoy an equal voice in the virtual public sphere. Metrics such as shares, likes, reposts, and retweets, which are indicative of "popularity" as articulated by Van Dijck and Poell (2013), determine the reach of ideas deemed noteworthy in the virtual public sphere. The overdetermination of popularity shaping online identity is partially due to the distinct nature of "being" in virtual versus actual reality. In actual reality, one exists as long as one is alive. The actual self may be damaged as a result of unpopularity but it will not die because of it. In contrast, in virtual reality, one exists as much as one is seen by others (also see Utz, Tanis and Vermeulen 2012; Greenwood 2013). Utilizing Baudrillard's (1994) theory of representation (image) as simulacra[8], one can say that the virtual self is nothing but representation; it is solely a representation without any necessary reference to presence beyond that representation. It relies on others' gaze for its existence. This dependency on others' gazes for virtual survival intensifies the role of dominant discourses in constructing the virtual self. For instance, in the case of WLF pictures on social media, we have already seen how, unlike its Jineological roots, the term "woman" was divorced from actual women's blood and flesh, fetishized, and transformed into pure simulacra, read under the androcentric and Orientalist gaze (woman as the symbol of the culture/land) that dominated the Iranian virtual political sphere.

Moreover, social media platforms do not archive the history of knowledge in the same manner as print media libraries or mass media archives. In other words, unlike when writing a book, where unpopularity at the moment may still hold hope for future readership, a social media post that lacks popularity at the moment is less likely to gain attention in the future. Hence, not conforming to followers' tastes would lead to the virtual self's gradual disappearance.

Therefore, the goal for every social media user is to become the permanent celebrity of their echo chamber, requiring them to take extra caution not to offend their fans (followers). The quest for immediate and permanent popularity imposes an invisible self-censorship on users, even among the most radical activists and intellectuals. This tendency toward self-censorship or conformity to trends for the sake of popularity was noticeable in a recent movement in Iran. I remember in one trend, social media users blocked friends not for lack of political actions or opposing the movement but for not posting "enough statements" or echoing trendy hashtags in support of the movement. Returning to the WLF images in social media posts (see figures 1, 2 and 3) , one can easily see how the most androcentric and Orientalist reading of the slogan was praised and went viral. The wise reader knows that conformity of some representations usually goes hand in hand with the silent dismissal of other interpretations/representations.

Consequently, political actors are often judged not by their tangible actions but by the representation of these actions. These representations, often lacking authenticity, can involve simple acts like reposting or retweeting pre-prepared content. I concur with Pradhana and Tania (2021) in contending that "hashtag activism" has shifted the focus of political engagement away from social justice's liberatory goals, transforming it into a tool for "gaining more digital presence on social media" (Pradhana and Tania 2021, 288). This shift signifies the emergence of a hyperreal political subject, where performative acts consistently overshadow real actions, reducing meaningful engagement to mere representations.

Politics of Speed and Banality

Unlike the print media age, which, according to Habermas (1991), preserved citizens' private space, offering the necessary peace and quiet for reflections on personal and public affairs, the realm of social media is marked by speed and hastiness. Facebook and other platforms incessantly prompt users to share opinions. A pause in keeping up with

the news flow means falling behind on events. Constantly updating profiles and taking stances on events is crucial for visibility. In a sphere where one is always bombarded with news toward which one is urged to *take a standpoint*, one has no time to process, let alone critically reflect. As highlighted by Eran Fischer (2015), social media platforms "encourage users to think about themselves and express their thoughts and feelings about a wide range of issues in particular terms, identifying themselves according to preconceived and pre-packaged categories, thus rationalizing self-disclosure" (Fisher 2015,190). The role of hashtags is paramount, serving to locate posts within pre-prepared categories or knowledge commodities.

Analogous to the actual self, the construction of the modern virtual self is intertwined with questions of identity and distinction (Bourdieu 1984). However, while the distinction is the key to success in social media, a radical (and epistemological) distinction is not. Simply, one should be distinguished from others in an easily digestible way. Due to the bombardment of standpoints and discourses, and the "skim and scan" habits of users, less sophisticated, more easily digested discourses have a better chance of going viral in the virtual public sphere. The key to going viral on social media lies in being distinct and easily digestible. Consequently, the virtual public sphere is not a conducive space for radical or profound deviations from current hegemonic discourses. Instead, it promotes less radical and more banal voices in emerging counter-hegemonic discourses. This feature is vividly evident in the case of WLF slogan.We already discussed how, in the mirror of social media, the WLF slogan was read interpreted through the lens of already existing androcentric and Orientalist discourse often more than through its original Jineological foundations.One reason for this misreading is that Jineolojî initiates a radical epistemological shift in both Iranian national and feminist discourses. Any radical epistemological divorce from the dominant hegemonic discourse is difficult to digest and inevitably needs profound reflection, which is beyond the patience of the majority of social media readers. Hence, the urge to become "political celebrity," hand in hand with the "politics of speed," deprives many social media actors of the possibility of generating or engaging with new epistemologically radical counter-hegemonic voices.

The Hyperreal Political Subject

Some may argue that even by accepting all of these limitations of the medium in the (mis)representation of a political movement, it is still a "representation" and could not hinder the emergence of a new political imagination in actual reality. I argue that such claims do not take the hyperreal character of social media as a medium seriously. Reflecting on structural limitations of social media and expanding on Both McLuhan's (2006) and Baudrillard's (1994) theories, I would claim that "hyperreality" is the "scale" of life in the social media age.

The virtual space is basically a reality of images as simulacra; one exists there as an image (or representation) of oneself and one always communicates with images (representation) of the world and other humans. Of course, this is not a peculiarity of social media. Guy Debord (2002) defined "the spectacle" as a main feature of the mass media age. The spectacle is "not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (8). The difference between representation in social media and representation in mass media is the possibility of constantly living inside social media (our cellphones are on even when we are off!) and, more importantly, the more possibility of living in comfort zone in virtual compared to actual physical reality (as discussed above in the section titled *Social media Echo Chamber and Extreme Representation of Self/Other*). It is easier for us to remove books (print media) and TV (mass media) from our lives for months or years than it is to live even one day without a smartphone. Thus, living more in the virtual space has led to an increased tendency to live as images and interact more with images of others than with actual people. The more time humans live inside a world (a particular configuration of social relations with oneself and others), the more that world becomes their true reality. This new configuration of reality is best envisioned in Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "hyperreality." For Baudrillard (1994), in hyperreality the representation no longer even claims to imitate (or duplicate) the real; it is substituting itself for the real (4). The distinguishing feature of images as pure simulacra is that they go beyond the mere representation of reality—they become reality in the hyperreal world, where all boundaries between real and virtual are blurred and liquified. Thus, for the hyperreal political subject, the original reality, the original political action/thought, the original community, and even the original self(s) have been overshadowed by and become the virtual one.

Hence*, the banality of knowledge production and political imagination in social media is not just the banality of "representation" or "medium" but rather it directly banalizes social movements in actual reality*. To illustrate, Campbell (2021) employs Baudrillard's simulation theory to show how all antagonistic discursive political oppositions can melt into each other in hyperreality and rebuild new "false oppositions," which exhaust and deplete real political oppositions from their emancipatory political spirit. Campbell illustrates this false opposition through the Democrat/Republican opposition in the United States, in which both parties essentially serve the same capitalist neoliberal political imagination (Campbell 2021, 18). The false oppositions, amplified by the extreme polarization of self and other, create a fertile ground for "anti-establishment insider" (Ehteshami 2017, 58) leaders who claim or seize leadership of movements against the systems of which they are the privileged offspring (e.g. Donald Trump in 2016 election). In doing so, they dispossess the marginalized, suppressed voices (the subalterns) that initiated the radical movements and banish them to the periphery of the movement's counter-hegemonic discourse, exactly the place that they started from in the dominant regime's hegemonic discourse. In the case of Iran, the WLF movement and its motto embody subalterns (à la Gramci 1992) whose lives were demeaned and degraded by all national, gendered, cultural, and geographical hierarchies. Nevertheless, in social media debates, the potential emancipatory opposition between all subalterns and the oppressive modern nation-state turned into a series of "false oppositions" between the pro- and anti-1979 revolution standpoints, the opposition between national and ethnic identities, and between national and women's liberation.

Last Words

I concur with Mojtaba Mahdavi (2023) that Zhina (Mahsa) Amini is symbolically an embodiment of the "matrix of subjugation," her death represented the "matrix of domination," and the WLF movement represents the "matrix of emancipation" of subalterns. However, while being highlighted in the motto, the radical political imaginary of subalterns has been marginalized in major representations and the trajectory of the movement and its counter-hegemonic voices. In this paper, I tried to shed more light on the radical political imagination embedded in the WLF slogan and also reveal the structural role of social media in marginalizing and overshadowing this radical political imagination in the movement's trajectory and representations. In doing so, I discussed the *"social media echo chamber and extreme representation of the self/other,"* the *"politics of speed and banality,"* and *"political celebrity and performativity"* as the main structural implications of social media in representing the political reality. Spurred on by Baudrillard's theory, I also discussed how the hyperreal character of modern reality affects the social movement by substituting the "hyperreal political subject," for whom the virtual reality (being and action) always transcends the actual one, instead of the real political subject. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political action. That condition can explain my initial observation about the unprecedented role of social media, not only as a medium for representing the WLF movement but also in orienting and constructing the reality of the movement. *Hence, in the hyperreal world, the banality of the medium's effects is no longer limited to the movement's representations, rather, it also directly banalizes social movements' actual reality.* The condition perpetuates the domination of the least epistemologically radical and least politically progressive reading of a movement as its main and perhaps sole reading.

Indeed, remaining unread by both dominant hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses does not erase the silent, persistent presence of life without adjectives—the subaltern narratives of life that breathe through the 2022 movement. The "message" stands before us, sharp, clear, and vivid, yet our hyperreal "medium" enchants us, luring us into the creation and perpetuation of "false oppositions" and prescribed "performative actions" to navigate these oppositions. The banality of the movement's "medium" has locked its "hyperreal political subjects" within rigid, ossified political imaginations, clouding their vision and dulling their capacity to recognize the arrival of new possibilities on the horizon.

Endnotes

1. Translated from Kurdish sentence which was inscribed on Zhina's grave: ژینا گیان تۆ نامری، ناوت ئەبێتە ڕەمز [Jina gian,to namri, nawt ihbeth rrimz]

2. Based on a critical examination of the Eurocentric and colonial origins of the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity," Vahabzadeh (2022) argues that using "ethnic" to describe non-Persian Iranian groups (such as Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Azeris, etc.) results from the imposition of a colonial framework of modern state-building onto Iranian culture. This framework requires the hegemonic domination of one group (e.g., "White" in Europe or "Fars" in Iran) over other groups that have historically shared the same land. To challenge this Orientalist construct, Vahabzadeh (2022) asserts that Iran has historically been a multi-national region and proposes using the term "nation" or "people" to describe the various cultural and linguistic groups within Iran.

3. Monarchists in post-revolutionary Iran advocate for the return of power to the Pahlavi royal family, who were ousted after the 1979 revolution. A very brief historical glance shows that the monarchy has not had any brighter history regarding the violation of human rights or oppression of opposition and marginalized voices than the Islamic Republic (see Dabashi 2007; Abrahamian 2008; Dabashi 2016). This regime marked the inception of the modern Iranian nation-state, characterized by the oppression of ethnic minorities and the systematic Persianization of Iranian culture (see Ansari 2008; Abrahamian 2008; Dabashi 2016; Matin_Asghari 2018; Matin 2022). Although outlining the discrimination against and colonization of non-Persian people in the process of nation-state building is beyond the scope of this paper, the partial history of the monarchy and its role in continuing violations of women's rights is discussed in this paper.

4. It should be noted that this paper does not rely on systematic content analysis of social media posts related to the WLF movement. Neither do I aim to generalize to other movements or to the entire reality of the WLF movement.

5. The three figures are a few examples of artistic posters created by artists and activists inspired by the movement. Due to security concerns and the risk of arrest by the Islamic Republic, these artists often remain anonymous. As a result, these posters are anonymous and widely shared on social media.

6. The Green movement was the national movement that occurred in protest against the alleged fraud in the 2009 presidential election.

7. To learn more about Hadis Najafi please read her Wikipedia page (2024) and her mother's YouTube video (YouTube 2024).

8. For Baudrillard, simulacra, is the phase of image (representation) that neither has any relation nor make any reference to reality. Thus, Simulacra are "not unreal, but simulacrum that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (1994, 6).

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