

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

Martha C. Nussbaum on America's Emptiest Feminist • Jed Perl on Bernini

## VEILED THREAT

THE IRANIAN  
REVOLUTION'S  
WOMAN PROBLEM  
BY AZAR NAFISI



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# THE VEILED THREAT

By Azar Nafisi

I would like to begin with a painting. It is Edgar Degas's *Dancers Practicing at the Bar*, as reproduced in an artbook recently published in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Under the heading "Spatial Organization," the book gives a two-paragraph explanation of Degas's placement of the ballerinas: "The two major forms are crowded into the upper right quadrant of the painting, leaving the rest of the canvas as openspace...."

So far, everything seems normal. But, like most things in Iran today, it is not. Upon closer inspection, there is something disturbingly wrong with the illustration accompanying this description, something that makes both the painting and the serious tone of its discussion absurdly unreal: the ballerinas, you see, have been air-brushed out. Instead, what meet the eye are an empty space, the floor, the blank wall, and the bar. Like so many other images of women in Iran, the ballerinas have been censored.

Of course, the irony is that, by removing the dancers, the censors have succeeded only in making them the focus of our attention. Through their absence, the dancers are rendered glaringly present. In this way, Degas's painting is emblematic of a basic paradox of life in Iran, on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. On the one hand, the ruling Islamic regime has succeeded in completely repressing Iranian women. Women are forbidden to go out in public unless they are covered by clothing that conceals everything but their hands and faces. At all government institutions, universities, and airports, there are separate entrances for women, where they are searched for lipstick and other weapons of mass destruction. No infraction is too small to escape notice. At the university where I used to teach, one woman was penalized for "laughter of a giggling kind." And, just recently, a female professor was expelled because her wrist had shown from under her sleeve while she was writing on the blackboard.

Yet, while these measures are meant to render women invisible and powerless, they are paradoxically making

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women tremendously visible and powerful. By attempting to control and shape every aspect of women's lives—and by staking its legitimacy on the Iranian people's supposed desire for this control—the regime has unwittingly handed women a powerful weapon: every private act or gesture in defiance of official rules is now a strong political statement. Meanwhile, because the regime's extreme regulation of women's lives necessarily intrudes on the private lives of men as well (whose every interaction with women is closely governed), the regime has alienated not just women but many men who initially supported the revolution.

This tension between the Islamic ruling elite and Iranian society at large has been vastly underestimated by Western observers of Iran. In part this is because, over the past 20 years, American analysts and academics, as well as the Iranian exile community, have had little or no access to Iran. Thus they have relied unduly on the image presented by Iran's ruling clerics.

At present that image is one of increased openness—as symbolized by the election of the moderate cleric Mohammed Khatami to the presidency back in 1997. Recently, for example, CNN cheerfully informed us that, after 20 years, the Islamic Republic has begun to show Hollywood movies. What CNN failed to mention was that Iranian television's version of, for example, *Mary Poppins* showed less than 45 minutes of the actual film. All portions featuring women dancing or singing were cut out and instead described by an Iranian narrator. In *Popeye*, all scenes involving Olive Oyl, whose person and whose relationship with Popeye are considered lewd, were excised from the cartoon. Meanwhile, even as the regime purports to have softened its hostile stance toward the United States, it has not softened the punishment meted out to Iranians who dare show an interest in American culture. In fact, soon after he was appointed, Khatami's new education minister issued a new directive forbidding students to bring material bearing the Latin alphabet or other "decadent Western symbols" to class.

However, these are just the mildest examples of the many ways in which the new openness that characterizes Khatami's rule has been accompanied by increased repression. The brief spring that followed his victory—

during which freedom of speech flourished in public demonstrations and new newspapers—was brought to an end with an abrupt crackdown. The government has since banned most of the new papers and harassed or jailed their editors. (They have since been released.) Many of the progressive clergymen who took advantage of the opening to protest the current legal system were also arrested and, in one case, defrocked. The regime has also taken the opportunity to clamp down on members of Iran's Bahai minority.

Meanwhile, the parliament has passed two of the most reactionary laws on women in the republic's history. The first requires that all medical facilities be segregated by sex. The second effectively bans publication of women's pictures on the cover of magazines as well as any form of writing that "creates conflict between the sexes and is opposed to the Islamic laws."

This past fall, two nationalist opposition leaders, Daryush and Parvaneh Forouhar, were murdered, and three prominent writers disappeared. All three were later found dead. Many Iranians were outraged, and tens of thousands attended the Forouhars' funeral in a tacit protest. The government's initial response gave these Iranians some reason for hope. President Khatami condemned the killings and set up a committee to investigate them. The committee's first conclusion was that those responsible were members of the Information Ministry. However, within days, the committee was proffering a different story, alleging that, on second thought, the murderers were just part of a rogue group within the ministry and that the killings were not political. The committee also has yet to name the killers—much less bring them to justice. Furious, Iranians have flooded the progressive newspapers with angry calls and letters.

To the extent that the Western media have taken note of such incidents, they have mainly cast them as the symptoms of a struggle between the moderate Khatami and his reactionary fellow clerics. More often than not, the media portray acts of repression as measures taken by the hard-liners against Khatami—as if he, and not the people who were actually murdered or oppressed, was the real victim.

This simplistic portrayal of Khatami versus the hard-liners completely misunderstands the current situation in Iran. Khatami does not represent the opposition in Iran—and he cannot. True, in order to win a popular mandate he had to present an agenda for tearing down some of the fundamental pillars of the Islamic Republic. But in order to even be eligible for election he had to have impeccable political and religious credentials. In other words, he had to be, and clearly is, committed to upholding the very ideology his constituents so vehemently oppose.

Khatami's tenure, then, has revealed the key dilemma facing the Islamic regime. In order to maintain the people's support, the government must reform, but it cannot reform without negating itself. The result has been a kind of chaos, a period marked by the arbitrariness of its events. One day a new freedom is granted; the next day an old freedom is rescinded. Both events are symptoms of the deep struggle under way in Iran today, not just between Khatami and the reactionary clerics, but between the people of Iran and all representatives of the government. And at the center of this struggle is the battle over women's rights.

A second image comes to mind—a woman from the past, Dr. Farokhroo Parsa. Like the ballerinas, her presence is felt through her absence. I

try to conjure her in my mind's eye. Parsa had given up her medical practice to become the principal of the girls' school in Tehran I attended as a teenager. Slowly her pudgy, stern face looms before me, just as it did when she used to stand outside the school inspecting the students as we entered the building. Her smile was always accompanied by the shadow of a frown, as if she were afraid that we would take advantage of that smile and betray the vision she had created for her school. That vision, her life's goal, was for us, her girls, to be "truly" educated. Under the Shah, Parsa rose to become one of the first Iranian women to be elected to the Iranian parliament, and then, in 1968, she became Iran's first female Cabinet minister, in charge of higher education. In that post Parsa tried not only to raise the quality of education but to purge the school textbooks of sexist images of women.

When the Shah was ousted in 1979 by a diverse group

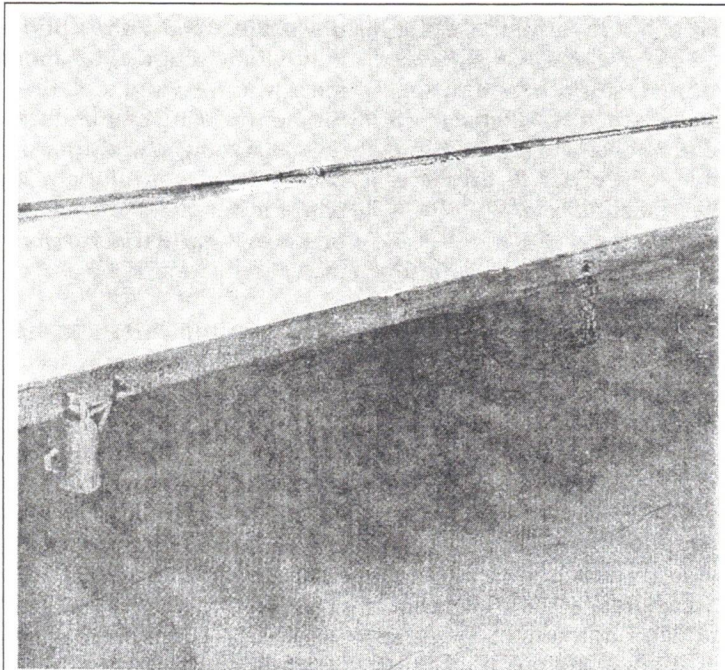


Figure 5-4. Edgar Degas. *Dancers Practicing at the Barre*. 1877. Oil, freely mixed with turpentine, on canvas; 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 32". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.

DEGAS, ACCORDING TO IRANIAN CENSORS.

functionaries of the previous government whom the revolutionaries summarily tried and executed. At her trial she was charged with "corruption on earth," "warring against God," and "expansion of prostitution." She was allowed no defense attorney and was sentenced by hooded judges.

At the time, the new revolutionary regime took a great deal of pride in its executions, even advertising them and printing pictures of its victims in the newspapers afterward. But Parsa's photograph was never published. Even more exceptional, in that exceptional time, was the manner of her death. Before being killed she was put in a sack. The only logic behind such an act could be the claim that Islam forbade a man to touch the body of a woman, even during her death. There is some debate about the method of her execution. Some say she was beaten, others that she was stoned, still others that she was machine-gunned. Nonetheless, the central image of her murder remains the same: that of a living, breathing woman made shapeless, formless, in order to preserve the "virtue" and "dignity" of her executioners.

I had not thought of Parsa for many years until the news of her execution resurrected her in my memory. Since then, time and again, I have tried to imagine her moment of death. But, while I can see her living face with its smile and frown, I cannot envision her features at the specific moment when that smile and frown forever disappeared in that dark sack. Could she have divined how, not long afterward, her students and her students' students would also be made shapeless and invisible not in death but in life?

For this, on a broader scale, is precisely what the clerics have done to all Iranian women. Almost immediately upon seizing power, Ayatollah Khomeini began taking back women's hard-won rights. He justified his actions by claiming that he was actually *restoring* women's dignity and *rescuing* them from the degrading and dangerous ideas that been *imposed* on them by Western imperialists and their agents, among which he included the Shah.

In making this claim, the Islamic regime not only robbed Iran's women of their rights; it robbed them of their history. For the true story of women's liberation in Iran is not that of an outside imperialist force imposing alien ideas, or—as even some opponents of the Islamic regime contend—that of a benevolent Shah bestowing rights upon his passive female subjects. No, the advent of women's liberation in Iran was the result of a home-grown struggle on the part of Iranian women themselves for the creation of a modern nation—a fight that reached back more than a century. At every step of the way, scores of women, unassuming, without much sense of the magnitude of their pioneering roles, had created new spaces, the spaces my generation and I had taken for granted. This is not to say that Iranian women—including those of my own generation—never made mistakes, never wavered in their commitment to freedom. But the

struggle for modernization.

Probably the first of these leaders was a poet who lived in the middle of the last century, a woman named Tahereh who was said to be stunningly beautiful. At the time, Iran was ruled by the despotic and semi-feudal Qajar dynasty, whose reign was supported by fundamentalist Muslim clerics. The alliance between the mullahs and the despotic regime prompted various groups to begin questioning the basic tenets of Islam. One such group were the Babis—a dissident movement of Islamic thinkers who were the precursors to the Bahais—who eventually broke with Islam to create a new religion, and who are the victims of vicious persecution by the Iranian government to this day. Tahereh was one of the Babis' most effective leaders. She was among the first to demand that religion be modernized. She debated her ideas with men and took the unprecedented step of leaving her husband and children in order to tour the country preaching her ideas. Tahereh was also the first woman to unveil publicly. Perhaps not surprisingly, she paid for her views with her life. In 1852, she was secretly taken to a garden and strangled. Her body was thrown into a well. She was 36.

As Iran began to have increasing contact with the West, many sectors of the population—intellectuals, minorities, clerics, and even ordinary people—became increasingly aware of their nation's backwardness as compared to the West. From the mid-nineteenth century these forces continually struggled with Iran's rulers over the degree to which Iran should close the gap by modernizing itself. By 1908, this struggle had come to a head, with the ruling Shah threatening to undermine the constitution that the modernizers had forced his predecessor to agree to accept in 1906. The new Shah soon began bombarding the parliament.

Once again, women were at the forefront. Many of them actually fought in the violent skirmishes that ensued, sometimes disguised as men. They even marched to the parliament, carrying weapons under their veils and, once inside, demanded that the men holed up there hand over the jobs if they could not protect the constitution.

The constitutionalists prevailed, and, although the constitution contained no language advancing women's rights, the next 20 years saw significant progress in this area thanks to the determined efforts of countless women. Leafing through the books about the women's movements from this era, one is amazed at their members' courage and daring. So many names and images crowd the pages of these books. I pick one at random: Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, daughter of a learned and religious man from an old and highly respected family, who was the editor of a monthly journal for women. In the 1910s she was beaten and detained for three months for establishing a girls' school in Isfahan. One can only guess the degree of her rage and resentment against her adversaries by her will, in which she proclaimed: "I will never

forgive women who visit my grave veiled." It was only appropriate that those who murdered Farokhroo Parsa should also not tolerate Dowlatabadi, even in her death. In August 1980, Islamic vigilantes demolished her tomb and the tombs of her father and brother who, although men of religion, had supported her activities.

It was an American, Morgan Shuster, who best appreciated the efforts of Iranian women during Dowlatabadi's period. "The Persian women since 1907 had become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world," he wrote in his 1912 book *The Strangling of Persia*. "That this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference. It is the fact."

As part of their push toward modernization, the women of Iran also supported a general movement in favor of greater cultural pluralism. Writers and poets led heated and exciting debates on the need to change the old modes of artistic and literary expression, with many calling for a "democratization" of the Persian language. New literary and artistic forms were introduced to Iran.

The reactionary elements in the clerical ranks and other supporters of despotism rightly recognized that the ideas in these cultural products represented a threat to their dominance and immediately attacked them as "poisonous vapors" coming from the West to destroy the minds of Iranian youth. To the mullahs the idea of women's rights fell in the same category—and they opposed them in the same breath. Two prominent clerics, Sheikh Fazolah Nuri and Sayyid 'Ali Shushtari—mentors of Ayatollah Khomeini—even issued a fatwa against women's education.

But the charge that Iran's women's rights activists—and the modernizers in general—were agents of the West is patently unjust. To be sure, they were keenly interested in bringing in Western ideas. But this desire stemmed from their acute awareness of Iran's shortcomings and their belief that Iran's road to independence and prosperity lay in understanding and internalizing the best of the Western systems of government and thought. It also meant fighting back when the Western nations began brutally exploiting Iran's wealth and natural resources. And Iranian women were at the forefront of this battle—for instance, organizing a large-scale boycott of foreign textiles in favor of Iranian-manufactured products and frequently demonstrating in support of national independence. In fact, it is safe to say that, more than any other group, women, the same women who were several decades later demonized as the agents of imperialism, symbolized the nationalistic and anti-imperialist mood of those times.

Over the ensuing years, the modernizers gained ground. Whatever else might be said about him, Shah Reza Pahlevi, who came to power in 1925, was a committed modernizer who in 1936 even attempted to mandate that all women cease wearing veils. When this failed due to popular outrage, he worked to encourage unveiling in other ways. His son, Shah Muhammad Reza, who was in power at the time of the 1979 revolution, continued in this tradition—for

example, granting women the right to vote in 1963. (Of course, it should be remembered that, contrary to the claims of both the Shahs and the clerics who opposed them, these actions merely ratified the progress that had been achieved by Iranian women themselves. Long before the mandatory unveiling law was imposed and long after that law was annulled, scores of Iranian women chose to throw off their veils of their own volition.)

By 1979, women were active in all areas of life in Iran. The number of girls attending schools was on the rise. The number of female candidates for the universities had risen sevenfold during the first half of the 1970s. Women were encouraged to participate in areas normally closed to them through a quota system that gave preferential treatment to eligible girls. Women were scholars, police officers, judges, pilots, and engineers—active in every field except the clergy. In 1978, 333 of 1,660 candidates for local councils were women. Twenty-two were elected to the parliament; two to the Senate. There were one female Cabinet minister, three sub-Cabinet undersecretaries (including the second-highest ranking officials in the Ministries of Labor and Mines and Industries), one governor, one ambassador, and five mayors.

That Khomeini ousted them by resorting to the clergy's old tactic of accusing them of betraying Iranian culture and tradition was not surprising. What was surprising was that the leftist members of his revolutionary coalition went along. The leftists had traditionally appeared to support women's rights. However, this support never ran very deep. The leftists operated under a totalitarian mindset that was ultimately far more at ease with the rigid rules espoused by the reactionary clerics than with the pluralistic approach favored by the women's movement. Thus, when the Ayatollah began his crackdown, he had the leftists' full support.

Most Iranian women, on the other hand, were not so pliant. Another image surfaces—this one a photograph that appeared in an American magazine, I can't remember which. I found it recently among the scraps I had kept from the early days of the revolution. It was taken on a snowy day in March 1979 and reveals tens of thousands of shouting women massed into one of Tehran's wide avenues. Their expressions are arresting, but that is not what is most striking about this photo. No, what draws my attention is how, in contrast to today's pictures of women in Iran—depressing images of drab figures cloaked in black cloth—this photograph is filled with color! The women are dressed in different shades—vibrant reds, bright blues—almost as if they had purposely tried to make themselves stand out as much as possible. In fact, perhaps this was their objective, because, on that March day, these women had gathered to express their resistance to—and their outrage at—Ayatollah Khomeini's attempt to make them invisible.

Some days prior, the Ayatollah had launched the first phase of his clampdown on women's rights. First, he had announced the annulment of the Family Protection Law

that had, since 1967, helped women work outside the home and given them more rights in their marriages. In its place, the traditional Islamic law, known as *Sharia*, would apply. In one fell swoop the Ayatollah had set Iran back nearly a century. Under the new system, the age of consent for girls has been changed from 18 to nine. Yet no woman no matter what age can marry for the first time without the consent of her father, and no married woman can leave the country without her husband's written and notarized consent. Adultery is punishable by stoning. On the witness stand it takes the testimony of two women to equal that of one man. If a Muslim man kills a Muslim woman and is then sentenced to death, her family must first pay him compensation for his life. As if all this were not enough, Khomeini also announced the reimposition of the veil—decreeing that no woman could go to work unless she is fully covered.

The March 8 demonstration began as a commemoration of the International Day of the Woman. But, as hundreds of women poured into the streets of Tehran, its character spontaneously changed into a full-fledged protest march against the new regime's measures. "Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western; it is global," the women shouted. "Down with the reactionaries! Tyranny in any form is condemned!"

The March 8 event led to further protests. On the third day, a huge demonstration took place in front of the Ministry of Justice. Declarations of support from different associations and organizations were read, and an eight-point manifesto was issued. Among other things, it called for gender equality in all areas of public and private life as well as a guarantee of fundamental freedoms for both men and women. It also demanded that "the decision over women's clothing, which is determined by custom and the exigencies of geographical location, should be left to women."

In the face of such widespread protest, the Ayatollah backed down. His son-in-law emerged to say that Khomeini had merely meant to encourage women to dress "respectably" in the workplace. But the Ayatollah's retreat proved only temporary. Even as he was officially relenting on his proclamation on the veil, his vigilantes continued to attack unveiled women in public—often by throwing acid at them. And the Ayatollah soon proceeded to reinstate the veiling laws—this time taking care to move step by step. In the summer of 1980, his regime made the veil mandatory in government offices. Later, it prohibited women from shopping without a veil. As they had before, many women resisted and protested these acts. And, once again, they were attacked and beaten by government goons and denounced by the leftist "progressive" forces. Later, the veil was made mandatory for all women regardless of their religion, creed, or nationality. By the early '80s, and after much violence, the regime had succeeded in making the veil the uniform of all Iranian women.

Yet, even as it enabled the regime to consolidate its control over every aspect of its subjects' lives, this act firmly established the separation between the regime

and the Iranian population. In order to implement its new laws, the regime created special vice squads that patrol the cities on the lookout for any citizen guilty of a "moral offense." The guards are allowed to raid not just public places but private homes, in search of alcoholic drinks, "decadent" music or videos, people playing cards, sexually mixed parties, or unveiled women. Those arrested go to special courts and jails. The result was that ordinary Iranian citizens—both men and women—immediately began to feel the presence and intervention of the state in their most private daily affairs. These officers were not there to arrest criminals who threatened the lives or safety of the populace; they were there to control the populace, to take people away, and to flog and imprison them. Bazaars and shopping malls were surrounded and raided; young girls and boys were arrested for walking together in the streets, for not wearing the proper clothing. Nail polish and Reebok shoes were treated as lethal weapons. Young girls were subjected to virginity tests. Soon, even people who originally supported the regime began to question it.

The government had claimed that only a handful of "Westernized" women had opposed its laws, but now, 20 years after the revolution, its most outspoken and daring opponents are the very children of revolution, many of whom were the most active members of Islamic students' associations. To cite just one statistic, of the 802 men and women the vice squads detained in Tehran in July 1993, 80 percent were under the age of 20. The suppression of culture in the name of defending against the West's "cultural invasion" and the attempts at coercive "Islamization" have made these youths almost obsessed with the culture they are being deprived of.

The regime has also succeeded in alienating many of the traditionalist women who had initially supported it. Committed religious believers, these women had long felt uncomfortable with the modernization and secularization that had taken place in Iran during the century leading up to the revolution. So, when Ayatollah Khomeini first arrived on the scene, they welcomed him with open arms. So powerful an ally were they that Khomeini, who had vehemently protested when women were granted the right to vote in 1963, decided against repealing it so that he could rely on these women's votes.

After the revolution, these women began to venture into the workplace—which they now deemed sufficiently hospitable to their traditionalist lifestyle. There they encountered those secular women who had not been a part of the Shah's government and who had therefore been allowed to remain in their jobs so that the regime could benefit from their know-how. As time went by, the traditionalist women began to find that they actually had quite a lot in common with their secular counterparts, who they had previously criticized as Westernized. The line between "us" and "them" gradually blurred.

One issue that solidified this bond was the law. For some traditional women, the imposition of the veil was an affront to their religiosity—changing what had been

a freely chosen expression of religious faith into a rote act imposed on them by the state. My grandmother was one such woman. An intensely religious woman who never parted with her chador, she was nonetheless outraged at those who had defiled her religion by using violence to impose their interpretation of it on her grandchildren. "This is not Islam!" she would insist.

Meanwhile, other traditional women felt alienated by some of the more draconian aspects of *Sharia*. The debate around the Islamic laws inevitably led to a critical reappraisal of the basic tenets that had created them. It also led to a discussion of more fundamental issues pertaining to the nature of male-female relations as well as public and private spaces. The regime had changed the laws, claiming that they were unjust, that they were products of alien rule and exploitation. Now that the "alien rulers" were gone, these claims were being tested. Iranian women from all walks of life were discovering that the biggest affront to them was the law itself. It did not protect the most basic rights of women; it violated them. As Zahra Rahnavard, the wife of the last Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi and an ardent Islamist, has lamented to the Iranian press: "The Islamic government has lost the war on the *hejab* [veil]. . . . The Islamic values have failed to protect women and to win their support."

The incompatibility of these laws with the reality of modern Iran thus became apparent to the more open-minded elements that had previously supported the regime. Many of them distanced themselves from the official policies and joined ranks with those on the "other" side. The transformation of the editor and part of the staff of an official women's journal, *Zan-e Rooz*, is a good example. They left office in the mid-'80s and created a new magazine, *Zanan*, sharply critical of many government policies and practices. They invited secular women to participate in the publication of their journal. Some from the ranks of clergy joined them in criticizing the existing laws on women. Such transformations have frightened the hard-liners into passing even more reactionary laws, further suppressing the progressive elements working for creation of a civil society and, in the process, fueling a vicious cycle.

The consequence has been that the regime has become far more dependent on women for its survival than women are on the regime. The regime can make all sorts of deals with the imperialist powers, even with the Great Satan itself, but it cannot allow its women to change the public image imposed on them: since the regime's legitimacy rests so heavily on the notion that its rules represent the will of the Iranian people, the presence of even one unveiled woman in the streets has become more dangerous than the grenades of an underground opposition. And Iranian women appear to have taken notice. Young girls in particular have turned the veil into an instrument of protest. They wear it in attractive and provocative ways. They leave part of their hair showing from under their scarves or allow colorful clothing to show underneath their uniforms. They walk in a defiant manner. And in doing so they have become a constant reminder to the ruling elite that it is fighting a losing battle.

I would like to end with a final image—this one a joyous one that negates the other mutilated half-images of women I have described. It happened in 1997, when the Iranian soccer team defeated Australia in the World Cup qualifying tournament. The government had repeatedly warned against any secular-style celebrations. But, as soon as the game was over, millions of Iranians spilled into the streets, dancing and singing to loud music. They called it the "football revolution." The most striking feature of this "revolution" was the presence of thousands of women who broke through police barricades to enter the football stadium, from which they are normally banned. Some even celebrated by taking off their veils. Time and again I replay not the actions but the atmosphere of jubilation and defiance surrounding this event. The Iranian nation, having no political or national symbols or events to celebrate as its own, chose the most nonpolitical of all events, soccer, and turned it into a strong political statement.

As usual, the Western press described these events as a message to the hard-liners from Khatami's supporters. But the main addressees of the football revolution's message were not the hard-liners; they had heard the message many times before and had ignored it. If anyone were to learn any lessons from this event it should have been the more "moderate" faction. It was clear then, and it has become clearer since thanks to subsequent demonstrations, protest meetings, and publications, that the majority of Iranians see the current Islamic regime as the main obstacle to the creation of a civil society.

It is this problem that faces President Khatami today. He has impressed the West by proclaiming himself a man who stands for the rule of law. But the law in the Islamic Republic is what most Iranians today are protesting against. In reaction the hard-liners have become increasingly repressive; the small openings and freedoms enjoyed by the Iranian people at the start of President Khatami's victory have come with arbitrary crackdowns in which ordinary citizens are stoned for adultery; writers and prominent members of the opposition are not only jailed but murdered; Bahais are deprived of their most basic human rights; and the revolutionary guards and morality police treat the Iranian citizens as strictly as ever.

But these actions are taken from a position of weakness, not strength. Unlike in the past, repressive measures have failed to quell the protests. Side by side with the daily struggle that has turned the business of living into a protracted war, there are public debates, protest meetings, and demonstrations, reminders of those sunny-snowy days 20 years ago. And, just as in those days past, women are once again playing a decisive role.

In fact, there is an almost artistic symmetry to the way Iranian women at the end of the twentieth century, as at its beginning, are at the center of the larger struggle for the creation of an open and pluralistic society in Iran. The future twists and turns of this struggle are uncertain, but of one thing I am sure: a time will come when the Degas ballerinas return to their rightful place. •