

## (THE USE OF A) KEY-IMAGE FOR THE POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE *HIJAB*

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,  
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

**ANA MARIA RICCI MOLINA**

Faculdade Anhanguera, Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil, 14080-730 –  
secretariastrictosensu@anhanguera.com

ORCID  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7302-3559>


### ABSTRACT

This article is about a photo from the photo essay *Prostitute* (1975-1977), by Kaveh Golestan. It is presented as a key photograph, able to promote an exercise of the look and enable an understanding of the islamic veil, given by the coverage of the body as the initial reason, followed by its variations in the way of use. Added to these variations are the prostitute woman's pose with the veil representing subversion (in an anti-Islamic environment) and transgression (by the desacralization of the body), manufactured by the photographer with the one photographed in relation to her place in the community, as a criticism exercise.

**KEYWORDS**  
Religion; Bahia;  
Ritual; Gift;  
Identity.

The impression was that “my eyes twinkled” at the sight of *Prostitute* (1975-1977), a photo shoot by Kaveh Golestan. Promptly, I glimpsed at its aesthetic potential. Furthermore, an ethical need took over me regarding said work, with the intention of managing the narrative by it created.

Therefore, a collection of photographs was taken from Golestan's album, becoming the main source for my postdoctoral research in psychology at the University of São Paulo. The reading of essays addressing the artistical and technical memorial of the photo



shoot and the reading of texts regarding Iranian culture were essential to the comprehension of the photographs in question, which to Trainotti e Trainotti (2018), portray a secondary source of information. There was, in this process, an articulation between the interdisciplinarity and the intertextuality regarding the chosen sources (Campos e Cury 1997).

So that the photographs were the central point of the incursion intended, a deeper methodological approach towards the vectors for the better understanding of said images was needed, as according to Miriam Leite (1993-1994). When it came to addressing the pictures, the intention was to capture something about them that could be read and written: from its spatiality to the context they were preserved in, from the experience of photographing it and being photographed in it, from defining the symbology by the pictures presented as the focal point to the meanings one could gather from them, all the way to the semi presence of those who them admire in the attempt to meeting with them. In any case, this approach lead me into a process of “decomposing” them.

At first, I took upon the task of visually analyzing the pictures to understand the elements that ruled the creation of the photo shoot. I searched for implicit information contained in the images, such as the author’s biography, the history of the place/scenario where it was shot and the meanings in it contained. The pictures were labelled with dates and locations, as well as tuned by the cultural and historical enunciation concerning the people and objects by it captured.

Notwithstanding, the search led to a narrative point where a singular picture became the key image: that one which is able to open the configuration for a breakthrough regarding one’s point of view. It singled out the investigation and defined a new pathway towards the intended narrative. Because of it, I identified and selected three alike pictures to give continuity towards a now interpretative state.

The key picture invokes something that immediately drove me into an amazed state!

That place called ground zero, quickly establishing itself; place where all questions become one and where the thought wanders. However, soon enough, or at the same time, it becomes grounded once more. Although I had seen that picture before, that instant was what made it extraordinary to me.

That intermediate place, that isn’t inside (subjective reality) nor outside (objective reality), where requests are made and it creates something concrete enough to delimit the ownership of an illusion. The picture is

the ownership of an illusion, for it consummates time, space and its intentionality in itself.

Therefore, with Barthes (1984) I approached a new perspective regarding the thread between alive and real. That moment which was captured by the lenses of Golestan does no longer exist, but remains stained by the effects of the everlasting image. Such presence allowed me to develop a perception of the characters, the narrative, the actresses, the director the outfits and the date of this rehearse-performance. A set of ideas was made, evoking a first impression of such instant, aware that the daily life captured by the photographer also revealed a representation analog to the theater and the theatrical, with the insertion of a dramatic perspective towards reality, as according to Erving Goffman (1983), which led me towards an inevitable question regarding the key picture: “what is this?”.

One of these days I looked at the picture from top to bottom, and all I saw was a piece of fabric covering a woman’s head. Suddenly, that piece of fabric became an Islamic veil (a hijab). Consequently, a connection with the sacred was made, and all I could see was a Muslim woman. Now, I ask for permission to present said picture cropped and reframed, just like I saw it.



**IMAGE 1**  
Kaveh Golestan.  
Série Prostituée.  
1975-1977.



**IMAGE 2**  
Kaveh Golestan.  
Série Prostitute.  
1975-1977

So I once again looked at the picture, from top to bottom, and then noticed that her legs were out. A contradiction was established, for a religious Muslim woman would not dress herself up in a way that shows her body, unless if she were non-practicing of the religion.

After questioning myself regarding my cut-out awareness of the image before noticing it as a whole, I must admit that it was the outfit – ah, the outfit! – that gave my mind the means to see the elements in it as a diacritical religious sign of Muslim origin and of notable presence in Iranian culture: the veil.

The device of emptying a sign took over the picture in such way that it promptly led to the obtuse emptiness that exists in it as a referent. However, this empty, or ground zero, condition regarding the sign allowed an infliction to take over my gaze, now as an allusion to the *hijab*. In this moment, I wandered: why would the photographer insert something so sacred to the Muslim Community, such as the veil, in an anti-islamic setting, as was *Shahr-e No*?

*Shahr-e No* was what we now call a sex district, found in the city of Teerā (Iran), which had its daily life captured by the photojournalist Kaveh Golestan, between the years of 1975-1977. It is a fact that the photo shoot conveys both the photographer's sensibility and the protagonism of the women who so gladly posed for his portraits. Both were involved in the construction of a visual message manifesting criticism and protest against local and national society at the time.

However, in this day and age, the photo shoot acquires a historical importance, and, why not, an archeological importance as well, for the setting and the people (prostitutes and her children, clients, *sayeb*s/pimps) in them seen ceased to exist during the Iranian revolution.

Said ejection was initiated by street protesters, who assaulted peasants and workers (physical assault, imprisonment and death) in addition to setting the place on fire. Subsequently, in 1980, Aiatolá Khomeini, ordered that a square were made where once stood the ashes of this place, containing in it a fountain representing the purification of it's settings.


This afterglow of knowledge evoked Barthes and his thesis regarding the rationality contained in our attires as a "social conversion of symbols in reasoning" (Barthes 1980). The author believes that our clothes are an inherent substitutes for our own bodies: while it touches our skin, it also protects our frames from the stanger's gaze . From this thought unravels the idea of our attires as something everlasting, for infinite variations regarding it's use can be found, as well as all of them being implicitly present in the space and time where they are worn.

The *hijab*, established as a piece of clothing, also promotes the covering of one's body, although it carries within itself a religious dimension. In this sense, it becomes the depiction of the union between the being and the divine, which, as stated by Francirosy Barbosa (2013), implies the practice of the religion, as it is overflowed with the comprehension, the respect and the obedience towards both the customs prescribed by the religion as well as of the devotion that women have towards Allah.

In such way, the veil ends up embracing a system of significations aiming towards the social construction of women and their bodies, therefore, stemming from the relationships settled in primary and secondary groups (family and mosque), both in the subjective and objective dimensions of reality. The socialization of the individual occurs in these groups, with the aim of asserting them as a member of their culture, accordingly, immerse in the different subsystem that make it what it is.

I adopted a xiita sheik's words as they were said during an interview as a pinpoint to understand the normative and practical condition of his islamic practices, as in connection with native writings (Al-Musaui 2006, Al-Khazraji 2012 e Ayyatulla 2008), to present essential information to understand the act of wearing the *hijab*.

The body is considered a sacred soil in Islam, whichever are its jurisprudences, for according to it's believers, it is one of Allah's creations, one we shall dwell in and call home. When one is born a muslim, or when



one converts to Islam, there is an assortment of laws and instructions that one shall follow regarding cleansing/purifying the body from all debauchery present during the time of birth. In such manner, the intention is to make it ready and available to experience the bond with the "Other" – the divine, first and foremost, followed, in a parallel way by the people who compose the individual's surroundings.

When it comes to women, the use of the veil is also regimented by the religious practices and in favor of sanctification of the body. When one prays, for example, wearing the hijab is essential, so that she can be detached from anything but God (Barbosa 2007;2017). During the moment of prayer, the body will be the bond between her and Him. The knowledge and the protection of faith alongside the gestures and sounds depict such delivery and devotion, as says Barbosa-Ferreira (2009).

However, so that she can have a sexual encounter with her partner, the Woman shall adjust her body according to the sacralization of sex. According to Paiva e Barbosa (2017a; 2017b), converted muslim women who were interviewed said that such encounter carries within itself an imaginary apex towards the divine, for it reflects sex as another divine creation brought to us a way to use our bodies. Sex isn't something illegal in Islam, as long as it regulated by the marriage in which it is practiced. The hijab can and must be removed when the woman is alone with her husband, for in presence of each other nudity and visible body parts are permitted.

As reported by the authors quoted in the last paragraph, sex between a married couple can cause good mental effects, as well as to make one feel safe and comfortable, for there is God's permission, the permission of both involved in the act and the purifying of both before and after said act. Everything so that the couple can touch each other and find each other in what is most intimate and deep to any muslim: the body, their bond of communication with God.

This consideration should be relativized and contextualized, of course, according to the many existing muslim communities. However, body and sex become prosperous objects of studies concerning the sexual acts in a religious context, for they overlap in a setting where certain truths and ethics are constructed and divided, where one can find the recommended social roles regarding gender that come along with the religious life.

Therefore, it is said that, coexisting with the divine living in the sacred body, there are figurative "others" that might put the body's sanctity at risk, as according to Islam and its referential groups. As a way to prevent the risk, the veil tends to emerge as an affirmative conscience of the feminine body, as this consciousness is set by biological and cultural

markers, when the veil takes the place of the body and acts as a protector of one's corporal nature.

In this sense, one of said "others" is prostitution, which, regarding religious perspective, is a territory marked by social and sexual practices that "disharmonizes" the lifestyle established by Islam. It is a place socially occupied by people who practice what is so called secularized sexual practices and whom, therefore, follow along with an estrangement from the muslim life. The ethics written by Islam towards body and sex are broken when one sells sex and when one practices said act outside of matrimony, especially with uncountable partners.

The prostitutes become the receptacle of these imaginary plans of impureness and profanity. They cross the lines of what is typically a muslim woman for they break the rules of keeping one's body guarded. Understanding the ways in which pleasure is built in Islam, according to this axiomatic perspective regarding religious normative, I allowed myself to think that, in a general way, these women become represented by the fallen veil, and therefore, are estranged from ever getting in touch with the divine. They are trapped within a body that practices the debauchery of sexual relations alienated from the muslim beliefs, therefore they are called *animalesque*, for they are dismissed from their bond with the divine (Autora e Barbosa 2017; 2020).

Now pointing out the critics regarding said thoughts, lets analyze one of Bouhdiba's (2007) discursive works of scientific connotation that discusses the path that muslim and arabian women walk once they become prostitutes. The author, based upon the freedom of choice available in Islam, promotes that said women go through a process of psychopathologization, for he considers that any women who falls onto said path does so as a way to satisfy their sexual instincts.

He fails to take into consideration the way said reality is produced and it's maintance by the men-clients who delight themselves in the sex market, as he only translates the implications of the masculine regarding the practices of prostitution through the influences of arabian culture as a way to create a flexibility so that single muslim men may delight themselves with the sex market (as long as They are observant of the purification rituals), and never addresses a possible comprehension of women prostitute's actions in in the same light.

Therefore, the religious practice inserts the being into this world in a certain way, allowing said being to both feel like he belongs within his community as well as recognize his own status regarding his peers (Chagas 2010). In this way, as I thread up a comprehension regarding the

relationship between body and islam and the sexual ethics anchored to the beliefs of sanctity, I noticed a certain play scene enunciated by the key photo and the photographer, directing the following steps of this study.

A policy of existence was implemented regarding these women. Even though the act of prostitution goes against what is socially established regarding moral and sexual, the photographer inquiries the arrival and permanency of said women in Shahr-e-No, as well as the outturns of living in such conditions – as a systematical fragility and a responsibility of all.

Did the photographer intend to bring attention towards Iranian secularized society, when the veil is a reflect of commonly worn clothing in the region? Did the photographer intend to catch the attention of local muslim communities, when the veil represents the broken bond between being-not-being muslim, but at the same time it can symbolize a possibly real rescue from such condition?

Thus, in a slightly contrarian way, the key photo (and those followed by it regarding the allusion of the veil) symbolizes a transgression concerning muslim prescriptions: the debauchery present in the practice of prostitution and the subversion represented by the way the veil was put against the women's body – and in such way photographed. Once again clarifying in case there were any doubts: the act of imprinting in the hijab the role of a cloth that covers a prostitute's head but reveals her legs, in an Iranian society built around the muslim religion, is an important simulacrum created by the artist's vision.

Which reinforces Barthe's thesis of everlasting clothing, quoted at the start of this article, and which allowed me to start a cartography of clothing variations, especially when researching pictures of muslim women on the internet as a way to study the many ways in which they wear their hijabs. Initially, I noticed there was a certain visibility towards an identitary composition, shown through by the variations regarding the ways in each the hijab covered these women's bodies in private and in public. The way in which the women expose themselves when using the hijab is highly connected with the culture that surrounds them, keeping them in an spectrum that respects the normative and the resistances promoted by them.

Iram has a majority of muslim habitants, and it follows the xiita jurisprudence. It is known that in said country the common wear is a black cloth worn in a way that covers the whole body except the face and is called a chador/xador, and it is an tradicional clothing piece for xiita muslim women considered "conservative", which exists alongside other configurations of the hejab – as it is called in persian. Said clothing is



considered traditional and remains alongside other ways of “dressing muslim”, as we’ll see in the next paragraphs.

While searching for images I came across a blog about the history, culture and traditions of Iran (<https://chadelimadapersia.blogspot.com/>). It’s especially interesting for it’s existence and the content in it found is approved by the Iranian embassy in Brazil as a reliable source about native culture. In such way, it becomes a relevant source for description, compression, analyses and interpretation of information.

It was in such manner that I came across the following terms: *bad-hejab* and *bi-hejab*. The *bad-hejab* is a veil worn loosely over one’s head, a cloth that doesn’t cover the whole body. It can be worn short and tight, with or without a *manteou*. This configuration is considered inappropriate when compared to the traditional ways of wearing a hijab. But, as found in the blog previously mentioned, it is a configuration nowadays worn as a sign of resistance towards the obligatory use of hijab. The *bi-hejab*, in succession, is a term nowadays used to describe muslim Iranian women that chose not to hide their heads and bodies under the veil, a behavior ever growing in Iran. An interesting fact is that, until the 1980s, the *bad-hejab* was considered a *bi-hejab*! In such way, women who presented themselves wearing said veil configuration, were, in reality, announcing their position of resistance (!) – which was very characteristic of and won over the streets during the Iranian revolution.

During the period that *Prostitute* was shot by Kaveh Golestan, the wearing of the veil was prohibited by the State. Said prohibition was a result of a secularization project during the Pahlavi Dynasty, reinforced by the instutualization of practices, which was called modernization of the State and culture. Practices that were observed alongside a critical reading regarding the ocidentalization in the social relations and by the voices of nationalist and religious entities (Costa 2013, Rial 2008.) There is a photograph in Costa’s thesis (2013) where one can see women alongside xa’s presence. They were dressed accordingly to these modernalization policies, which were implemented through the forceful removal of the veil from women’s bodies when in public and in the presence of men.



**IMAGE 3**  
Fonte: em Costa (2013, 108).

It's not about understanding the industrialization of practices related to a Laic State, for it would be necessary respect towards and the freedom to practice one's beliefs for that.

It's more about the governmentalization of practices and habits through cohibition and repression of it as a mean to eliminate said practices; religion as a place of resistance against foreign policies of colonization. In this scenario, the objectification of women and the many ways to use the veil were subalternized and oppressed (Costa 2013).

But they resisted! How? Although the prohibition of the veil was implemented at the time, I was able to find photographs of women wearing the hejab during the Iranian march of 1979. During this march, many voices became one in favor of a nationalist perspective. Iranian women were present and characterized different segments. (Afery e Anderson 2013).



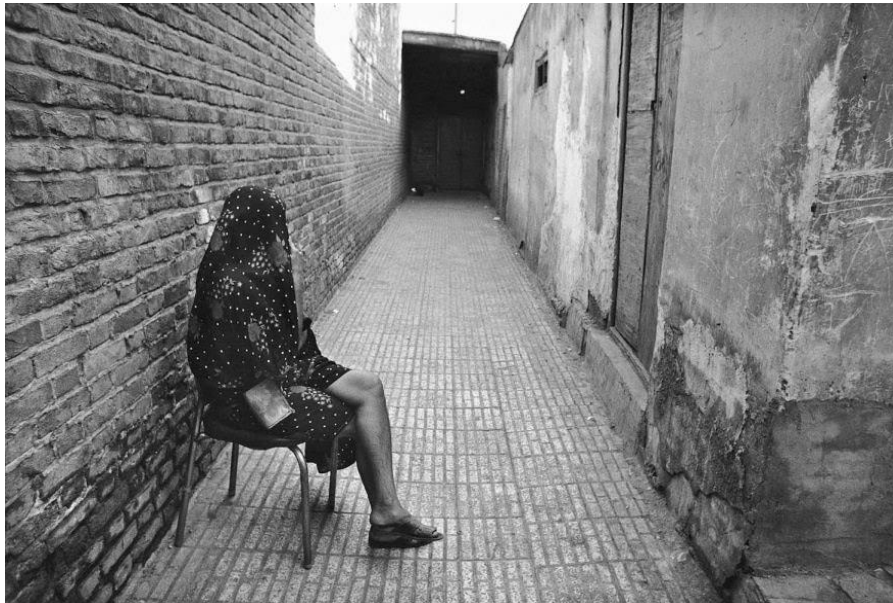
**IMAGE 4**  
Disponível em: <https://lithub.com/my-return-to-tehran-on-family-restlessness-and-revolution/> (acessado em 31/01/2022).

I was able to notice that alongside the *hijab-less* women, there were ones that wore a cloth covering only their heads, distinctively. In the upcoming photograph, taken on May 1<sup>st</sup> f 1979 (source Getty Images), one can see women wearing the veil loosely laid against their heads, some their bodies too, some not, although they aren't tightened and still cover their figures until their feet. In any case, it seems like said cloths were held together by the women themselves.



**IMAGE 5**  
Disponível em <https://aventurasnahistoria.uol.com.br/noticias/reportagem/historia-ira-da-revolucao-de-1979-teocracia.phtml> (acessado em 03/05/2021).

When I look at the two pictures recently presented and then look back at the key photograph, I noticed that the cloth in it covers not only the women's head but also her face, something that can be shown when the chador/xador or other configurations of hijab are worn, while her legs are publicly exposed. The body hasn't been substituted by the clothing, and the modesty, moral inherently linked to one's way of dressing inside muslim communities, doesn't reflect the right configuration to express the ways in which a muslim woman should appear socially.



**IMAGE 6**  
Kaveh Golestan.  
*Série Prostitute.*  
1977-1979

In the simulacron aimed towards the key-photograph, the veil, while an everlasting piece of clothing and a proclamation of a system of signification regarding the muslim religion, was manipulated to unify the sacred and the deviance, to blur the lines between permissions and prohibitions and to water down what's pure and impure. This was the moment in which the key-photograph took me to the paradoxal reality photographed by Golesman.

Although aware that the individual lives their own sanctity, which refers to the fact that spirituality or it's experience is inherent to each one of us, I shall point out that this essay is oriented by a world view experienced through the repertoire found in Islam. And that in this particularity, I take upon myself the job to try and thread up an interpretation of the hijab, configurated as an element of discursive production in the frontier between historical materialism of the body and it's relationship with the world, in the cross section of social relations.

Therefore, the veil captured by Kaveh Golestan became a bad-hejab/bi-hejab, for it doesn't only defile a traditional islam piece of clothing, but also transgresses completely the promise of a female decorum and the different ways of wearing the hejab within it. An allusion of the muslim veil implied on it's fall and the exposure of a woman by her spiritual and religious covering, that in this "inside-outside" game, the prostitutes provide the hifen.

In this sense, I understood that the variations of wearing a veil are crossed by the regularity that exists in the reason of being hijab. Therefore, it's possible that Golestan and the model-prostitute chose to Include the

veil as another variation of its many ways of wrapping, be it as a religious or cultural sign. But, another point of view leads us towards a new inquieriment: could its presence be rationalized by the subversion (in an anti-Islamic ambient) and the transgression (through the de-santification of the body) captured by the photographer and the model-prostitute for the creation of a critical message?

This notion came into place after finding the following photograph. In it we can see the same women pictured in our key-photograph, now alongside another prostitute and a man, their *sayeb* (pimp). Now, we can see her face as she looks towards the camera. Apparently, with her naked body wrapped by a veil, there is an implicit reality within this: the ethical-aesthetical dimension of her life in community “inside” of her. however, their community insists that they are “outside”, for, at the end, they are part of this disturbing and obscure “other” that threatens the community and needs to be refuted, banished.



**IMAGE 7**  
Kaveh Golestan.  
Série Prostitute.  
1975-1977

In such way, even within the multiplicity of configurations of the veil or in the de-sacralization incorporated by Iranians born around the 1970s, I reflected that the woman of Prostitutes, as seen in the key-photograph, was included in the Iranian society, for she reflects her identitarian religious background as she wears her veil. However, Even with the subversion intended with the allusion of the veil in a an extremely offensive environment if put in a religious context, maybe the intention behind yearning for the attention of the local communities was to achieve some type of feeling of belonging and appreciation concerning these women's daily lives.

At the end, the veil became a transitional object, through analogy. It's not The Veil, but it is a veil. The possession of an illusion! (as is the photograph), which represents the distance established between the secularization of the Iranian society (maybe the reason why the veil is worn differently in the photograph, therefore, subversive) and the ritualistic practices within Islam that did not belong alongside *Shahr-e No* and it's protagonists (therefore why the veil is worn by non-religious women in the photographs).

The veil in the picture isn't a sacred veil, but it is a veil that denounces what is hidden and withdrawn from sight of its community. I then put into record here, my interpretation. The photograph reflects a strategy implemented by the photographer: to manifest a promise of humanization towards these women. To humanize a crippled body, shut down, submissive, taken from a dignified life in the perspective built by the other, the photographer, who captures through the reality of his camera lenses.

I interpreted it as a request to the photographer, a way to try and repair the lives of those considered (un)dignified, a spot already known in my professional and academic life. The imagery captured by his photo shoot, however, contained the impossible, for before getting to know Islam, I did not have enough background to understand the detachment between the Islamic religion and prostitution (given by the dimensions of the sexual ethics within the religion and the illegality attached to the prostitutes) (Author and Barbosa, 2017). Hence, nowadays, I can notice the incongruity between both territories. Incongruity that allowed policies of annihilation towards *Shahr-e No* and its partakers, in spite of Kaveh Golestan's suggestive critic with his photo shoot (author and Barbosa, 2020).

Our clothes are, at the end of the day, a technology of care towards our bodies, for it prevents the social exposure of its nudity. For Islam, covering your body with clothing relates to the specific way in which each community is going to deal with such holy soil, as well as the way in which each muslim woman is going to impose herself regarding religious rules,

prescriptions or social practices concerning the way a woman should dress herself in.

Therefore, regarding the hijab, one can understand the religious basis of separating women from the world through its use, in order to preserve holy dimensions regarding the bond between the body and the divine, justified by the clothing, although many criticize the way in which one should do so

However, the rehabilitation of the religious dimension regarding women who are prostitutes, through the illusion of a non-present Islamic veil, gives back to them the right of belonging in their local communities, even though they aren't recognized as such by those who surround them. In such way, the plurality of variations of the *hijab* also reflects the plurality of women and the domain they have concerning their bodies and the way they dress it.

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**Ana Maria Ricci Molina** is a professor in the Psychology course at Faculdade Anhanguera, in Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo. She is postdoctoral in the Psychology Department of the Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto of the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). She is a Ph.D. in Education from the Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFSCAR) and a Master's degree in Psychology from USP. She is a member of the Group of Anthropology in Islamic and Arab Contexts (GRACIAS) at USP. E-mail: amrm1amrm@gmail.com

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