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# Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman: The Howzevi (Seminarian), the Requisites of Marriage and Islamic Education in Iran

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## Abstract

The ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Iran reveals how some religious conservative howzevi (seminarian) women understand marriage and motherhood as constitutive of idealized womanhood. For them, the pursuit of marriage and motherhood simultaneously enables their participation in the highest levels of Islamic education and their religious and political authority in Iran. Such aspirations imposed both regulatory and emancipatory effects on the howzevi's life. Two self-imposed practices I observed from women were the practice of asking permission from the husband, and having the desire to marry a man whom she expected would want to be asked for permission. I underline the hidden yet enabling aspects of these practices. I show what a system of mutual exchange of responsibilities between *nafaqeh* (full financial provision) and *eta'at* (obedience) look like as features of a howzevi marriage. I argue that it was precisely the howzevi's observances of this mutual exchange and other constraints that facilitated her educational, social and political mobility.

## Keywords

Iran – Islamic education – seminarian – patriarchy – marriage – authenticity – feminism – mobility – revolution

## Introduction

We left the village of Mashhad-e Ardehal en route to Kashan about 45 kilometers away to pick up Maryam's sister. We had just visited the Sultan Ali<sup>1</sup> shrine in Mashhad-e Ardehal, and we were on our way to Qom to visit the Fatemeh Ma'soumeh shrine and Maryam's two brothers who were both howzeh (seminary) students. She wanted to give one of them a small investment for his startup bee farm, and to discuss the content of her father's newly published book on Allameh Tabatabaei,<sup>2</sup> as they frequently discussed matters of Islamic scholarly issues. We had just exited a one-lane road onto a freeway. Mirages appeared on the asphalt from the mid-October heat wave. It was unbearably hot. The Saipa's air conditioner did not make a difference. As I was falling asleep, Maryam was breastfeeding Fereshteh, who eventually fell asleep on her lap. Maryam was peeling an orange when I woke up. She tore a piece, removed the pits from it with her small fingers, and leaned slightly to her left to place the orange onto Mohammad's lips. Mohammad opened his mouth. His bearded jaws moved as he ate the orange. A few seconds later, Mohammad unfolded the palm of his right hand to signal for another piece of orange. Maryam put two in his hand. And, just as she had done earlier, he tore a piece and placed the piece of orange to her lips. The baby was fast asleep even as the wind blew in through the top crack of the window.

As a howzevi (seminarian), Maryam belonged to a group of religious conservative women mobilized by the 1979 revolution to directly contribute to building a Shi'i revolutionary Islamic society.<sup>3</sup> The howzevi women of this study are situated in institutions that guide the social development of a post-revolutionary Iran. Maryam had been married seven years to Mohammad when we embarked on this trip, and she had given birth to her daughter the

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1 The son of the fifth Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.

2 Seyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaei was one of the most outstanding philosophers and scholars in Shi'i Islam. He is famous for his Qur'anic exegesis, *Tafsir al-Mizan*.

3 Women like Marzieh Dabbagh (explained further), Massoumeh Ebtekar (part of the revolutionary student movement who took over the U.S. embassy in 1979 and became the head of the Department of Environment in 2000), Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi (the first woman Minister of Health), and the late Maryam Behrouzi (Jame'e Zaynab's figurehead, a conservative women's group, and served in the first four post-revolutionary parliaments), were mobilized by Khomeini and the revolutionaries for their participation beyond mosques and Islamic scholarly circles. They were positioned at the forefront of developing social programs after 1979. Thousands more were mobilized as volunteers for social services, literacy campaigns, health care and education, inspired by the idea of social justice (Bahramitash 2008). See Sedghi (2007); Najmabadi (2008); Afary (2009).

year previous. Maryam was one out of five women of this study who were students of Ayatollah Khamanei, the Supreme Leader, and Ayatollah Larijani, the Chief Justice of Iran, in their Dars-e Kharij-e Fiqh classes.<sup>4</sup> By the end of 2011, Maryam had already been a student in the Iranian women's religious seminaries (*howzeh elmiyeh*) for fourteen years. These are institutions of Islamic education for women that are directly linked to a revolutionary project of building a Shi'i Islamic society by attempting to produce women as ideal Muslims (*musalman*), mothers (*mādar*), and militants (*mubariz*) (Sakurai 2011).

Although this brief moment makes what we know little about, an Iranian *howzevi* woman's actions, familiar, it does not represent all social interactions I accounted for during my fieldwork. What this vignette does, however, is draw attention to the ethnographic focus of this article, the enabling mutual exchange that is often concealed in the more obvious disabling features of marriage and motherhood among the *howzevi*. Here, we see moments of affection and mutual exchange between Maryam and Mohammad. As I had observed in more meaningful ways, we also see a small opening into Mohammad's support for her Islamic practices and education by taking her to sites of pilgrimage and to her brothers, who both had also supported Maryam's educative trajectory, to discuss matters of religious studies.

I situate this paper in academic discussions on how patriarchal norms shape women's competing aspirations. Liberal feminist scholars often cite the unequal division of labor within families as a source of constraints on women's freedoms. Domestic labor is understood as a disincentive to women's progress in education and public participation in both poor (Haddad & Alderman 1997) and industrialized countries (Bergmann 1986; Folbre 1994; Mill 1869; Okin 1989). Domestic labor also leaves women vulnerable to poverty (Weitzman 1985) and subject to possible forms of abuse (Gordon 1988). The choice to choose motherhood and domestic labor over other opportunities outside the home is said to be caused by both the socialization of girls within families (Chodorow 1978) and the social structures outside the family that already position women at a disadvantage (Bergmann 1986; Okin 1989).

These limitations to women's freedoms appear to be more intense in the Middle East and in Muslim majority societies where particular patriarchal norms are advanced through diffuse social and political mechanisms. This is especially assumed for religiously conservative communities where such norms are ennobled in social interactions and religious texts. At times patriarchal norms are propagated by the state, as in the case of Iran. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini and his revolutionaries defined women's rights around gendered

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4 The highest level of a *howzeh* education.

division of labor within the family and society. These formulations circumscribed women to the role of wives and mothers, and motherhood became idealized (Saadatmand 1995; Yeganeh 1993).

There has been much debate about the impact of the 1979 revolution on Iranian women and their responses to it. A body of literature draws attention to how Iranian women were placed at a social and political disadvantage in the aftermath of the revolution. These focus on how women have responded to the continued suppression characterized by women's unequal access to resources, legal rights, and public space. Within this scholarship, Iranian women are held to a standard of defiance, understood as either complacent or waiting for the next opportunity to build alliances for an entirely new social order. Yeganeh (1993) argues that the foundation of the Islamic Republic depended on the Islamization of women. The state definition of women as only mothers and citizens increased the power of men in the family and significantly curbed women's autonomy. Similarly, Saadatmand (1995) equates post-revolution gender separation to sexual apartheid where gender division of labor became a detriment to Iranian women. Moghissi (1994) and Poya (1999) suggest that in order to overcome the dominance of patriarchy in Iran, Iranian women must continue to struggle in replacing the Islamic regime.

Two significant scholarly literatures about the women's seminaries in Iran both set women against state-authorized patriarchy. Sakurai (2011) details women's empowerment via participation in the *howzeh* state enterprise. Sakurai measures this empowerment against the objective of 'weakening the male-centeredness patriarchy' in Iran. She concludes that despite women's expansive access to the *howzeh*, they do not weaken patriarchy (Sakurai 2011:53; 2012:744). Similarly, through what they refer to female-initiative/male-invitation/state-intervention framework, Künkler and Fazaeli (2012) show how pre- and post-revolution regimes prevented women from becoming Islamic jurists (p. 128).

Some scholars have highlighted women's efforts in reinterpreting Islamic text about women in politics, education, and how Islamist elite women have formed alliances with secular women to resist the authority of men as sanctioned by the state (Afshar 1998; Bayat 2013; Kian-Thiébaud 2002; Sedghi 2007). Mir-Hosseini (1999) argues that change for Iranian women may be possible within the bounds of Islam due to the instability of gendered conceptions of inequality. For Mir-Hosseini, those who oppose women's access to the public sphere must be resisted. Sedghi (2007) refers to women's unveiling and veiling in three periods of Iranian history, and provides examples of different groups who have attempted to subvert the patriarchal rule in Iran in the past one hundred years. Afary (2009) analyzes historical and contemporary sources to argue

that Iranian women's activism has varied. By paying attention to class, Afary features the work of both secular and Islamist women who have defied cultural norms. She explains how the revolution provided a space for women in bazaar (the mercantile group) and clerical populations to participate in state-building. Comparably, Tohidi (2010) argues that women's groups continue to undermine the patriarchal regime by working within state institutions. By working within, such groups change policies, develop informal advocacies, and change social practices through cultural production.

I examine narratives of the *howzevi* in order to move away from explanations confined to resistance. I focus my attention on *howzevi* women like Maryam whose perspectives are markedly absent in the literature about women in post-revolution Iran. These are women who conceive of building a Shi'i Islamic society as an end to oppressive conditions. They work on strengthening that vision through the state and their Islamic education. With dedication to the study of the human subject, I complicate the arguments made by both liberal feminist scholars who argue that motherhood and domestic labor place women at a disadvantage, and by scholars on Iran who have presented Iranian women through the framework of resistance. I argue that there are important historical, social, familial factors that must be contextualized in attempting to explain what categories, such as 'advantageous' or 'disadvantageous,' look like in the lives of different women. Based on my fieldwork in Iran, we can see how some religiously conservative women experience marriage and motherhood in ways that forward their participation at the highest levels of Islamic education, and consequently religious and political authority in Iran. We can see how some women who are closely linked to the Islamic regime manage domesticity in ways that facilitate their mobility within male-dominated Islamic education settings.

My approach resonates with a different set of literature, which provides a nuanced account of how women continue to forge paths towards new and re-created opportunities for participation in spaces previously closed off to women. Kamalkhani (1998) argues that women's participation in Shirazi mosque activities provided women various ways of learning Islam and expanding social networks to advance their household economies and social needs. The Islamic domain was not solely for men. Adelpak (2000) argues that the Tehran *jaleseh* (neighborhood study groups) became transformative spaces for women. Torab (2007) exposes the gap between lived experience and religious practice among women in Tehran. Religious practice became the site of contention between the self and the environment, rendering gender an unstable category. Osanloo (2009) contextualizes women's conceptions of rights and argues that these are informed by local meanings and conditions specific to

Iran. Osanloo's fieldwork demonstrates how Islam, not the liberal modern state, authenticates women's equal footing with men.

I observed an element of 'bargaining with patriarchy'<sup>5</sup> among the howzevi of this study, in that they appeared to make certain sacrifices for larger gains in their familial and educative relationships. However, the howzevi's understanding of their participation was not necessarily always in direct opposition to the rule of men. Thus, in the following two ethnographic examples of how the howzevi expressed exclusive admiration for a gheyrati man and of their commitment to self-authenticated Islamic knowledge, I show how 'bargaining with patriarchy' is not always a viable explanation for the howzevi's participation. Becoming a howzevi was an ongoing process and howzevi women, like all people, engage in social environments undergoing continuous transformation. Therefore, women who appear subservient or 'passive' to authority or conditions are better understood if we account for their actions within the dynamic contexts in which they occur. Rather than focusing exclusively on causality (i.e. what causes the howzevi to participate in the maintenance of the Islamic Republic through their education), I suggest seriously engaging with what they experience during their participation in the seminaries. Taking stock of these experiences enables a more in-depth understanding of what it means to be a woman for the howzevi in this particular context.

The ideal woman for the howzevi was the revolutionary Shi'i woman who would 'mother' a nation of Shi'i believers.<sup>6</sup> This was to be achieved by way of marriage and motherhood, and by becoming a student of the Islamic sciences. That is, motherhood was a phase in a woman's life that was valued and sought after. Nevertheless, to educate themselves, their children, and 'the nation' about their beliefs and practices, the howzevi also regarded having an Islamic education through the howzeh. Therefore, to become the ideal revolutionary Shi'i woman, the howzevi had to combine two aspirations: becoming an exalted mother absorbed in her responsibilities at home and a student furthering her education in the Islamic sciences through the howzeh.

What were the howzevi women's ideals? How did they manage aspirations that were both enabling and disabling<sup>7</sup> in the howzeh social setting? What do answers to these questions tell us? Situated in the ethnographic present in

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5 Kandiyoti (1988) provides a comparative analysis of women's strategies to maximize security and options in the face of male-dominated oppression.

6 Paidar (1995) argues that in a similar way women's bodies defined nationalist ideals pre-revolution, women's bodies became the site for what was defined Islamic and non-Islamic in post-revolution Iran. The Iranian state established a link between gender and nation.

7 See Abu-Lughod (1990) and Najmabadi (1998; 2005).

Iran between 2008 and 2010 to 2011, I look not 'from above' but at the immediate, at the particulars<sup>8</sup> of a group of howzevi women in Iran. I consider the implications of the presence of howzevi women like Maryam in institutions intertwined with the 1979 revolutionary ideologies of the Islamic Republic. I analyze their social interactions, forms of participation, and methods of education. More specifically, I look at Maryam's passage through a significant sociopolitical space that most of the 30 million<sup>9</sup> men in Iran of her generation have not accessed, and the place of marriage and motherhood in this passage. In the following, I first show how pursuing a howzeh education, marriage and motherhood were seen as binding norms for the howzevi. I then look at the howzevi's attempts to become the ideal revolutionary Shi'i woman.

### Ideal Womanhood as Vanguard of the Islamic Republic

Howzevi women like Maryam belong to the ultra-religious conservative social population in Iran who historically kept women at home, away from schooling, and from public participation (Adelkhah 2000; Afary 2009; Bahramitash 2008; Derayah 2006; Kashani-Sabet 2011; Najmabadi 2008; Poya 1999; Sakurai 2011; Sullivan 1998). The 1979 revolution initiated a shift in this population. First, religious conservative families began to take advantage of primary schooling for girls initially made accessible in the 1930s. As observers of gender separation, religious conservative families in Iran were vexed by the policy of banning the veil in public spaces in 1936. They were affected to such a degree that they deemed the social space outside the home physically and morally unsafe for religious conservative women. They perceived public spaces, where the chador was devalued, and short skirts, tight fitting clothes, and gender mixing were encouraged, as inappropriate for women. Although schooling had been accessible to girls as early as the 1930s, girls from mainly non-conservative families, commonly from the upper and middle socio-economic classes, were able to benefit from access to formal schooling. Religiously conservative girls were not (Adelkhah 2000; Afary 2009; Najmabadi 2008; Sullivan 1998). There were exceptions, but overall, girls from religiously conservative families were kept at home and received some form of religious instruction (Afary 2009; Sullivan 1998; Torab 2007).

This situation changed immediately after the revolution. While specific laws such as mandatory veiling placed a population of Iranian women at a

8 See Abu-Lughod (2008).

9 "CIA—The World Factbook". Cia.gov. Retrieved 2012-12-04.

disadvantage, the same laws accommodated for the participation of religious women in public spaces (Bahramitash 2008; Poya 1999; Sullivan 1998). The new government's understanding of revolution translated into creating social conditions, such as normalizing gender separation and veiling, that it deemed necessary for an ideal Islamic Republic. Such initiatives aimed to protect women's honor, as defined by Shi'i Islam, and to ensure that public spaces were safe for Shi'i observing women and girls. Conservative Shi'is increasingly took advantage of the unprecedented access to schools for girls that resulted from an overhaul of Iran's school system. Given that the curricula privileged Islamic education from a Shi'ite perspective (Mehran 2007; Menashari 1992), family patriarchs had little reason to prevent women and girls from leaving the home to attend school.

Around 1984, this included taking advantage of access to Jami'at al-Zahra, the largest *howzeh elmiyeh* for women in Iran. Girls and women from a range of socioeconomic and intellectual backgrounds began to gain extensive access to formalized training in the Islamic sciences in the women's *howzeh elmiyeh*, which by the early 1990s had become a nationwide project financed by different private and religious endowments. This form of participation in such central sociopolitical fields would not have been possible for women from these families before the 1979 revolution. These social and economic transformations may account for the positive views of Khomeini in the narratives I collected from the women of this study, which stand in contrast to the critiques from Iranian feminists about Khomeini's tyranny over women's bodies (Mir-Hosseini 1999; Moghissi 1996; Poya 1999; Saadatmand 1995; Yeganeh 1993).

For the *howzevi*, Khomeini's leadership changed the social norms (*'urf*) among the religiously conservative population. I explain this further. A long-standing relationship exists between the *howzeh* and the religious conservative population for whom decisions based on Islamic laws mattered most (Fischer 1980; Zaman 2007). To remain independent of government funding, the *howzeh* relied on financial support from religious conservatives. For this reason, the religious conservatives helped influence what was socially acceptable in the workings of the *howzeh*. The *howzeh* could not advance its programs at a faster pace before the revolution because its *mujtahid* (Islamic scholar or jurist) avoided taking risks in his publicized edicts or research (Zaman 2007; citing Morteza Motahhari).<sup>10</sup> The *mujtahid* feared offending his supporters, who at any given moment could move allegiances to another *mujtahid*. Therefore, religious practices, opinions and edicts, which were acceptable among Islamic

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10 Mir-Hosseini (1998) accounts for this in a jurisprudential letter from Ayatollah Khomeini to Ayatollah Sane'i about a woman asking for a divorce.

scholarly families, were not necessarily acceptable among the very people who provided financial support for the howzeh. The idea that 'ordinary' religiously conservative women could learn to interpret the Qur'an was uncommon. Khomeini and the revolution changed these pre-revolutionary perceptions. By openly encouraging women to participate in becoming mothers to a nation of Shi'i believers through a howzeh education, Khomeini transformed the way that religiously conservative men viewed religiously conservative women.

The regime also legitimized alternative forms of religious authority for women through publicly encouraging women to acquire the skills and Islamic knowledge to do *ijtihad*<sup>11</sup> for themselves. If a woman was authorized to do *ijtihad* for herself, then she could subsequently publish books that would be read widely, even if these were mere commentaries or explanations on Islamic practices. It also followed that she, as a legitimate source of knowledge, could teach and be consulted about Islam. Women becoming part of the howzeh meant that religiously conservative men could no longer prevent religiously conservative women from participating in public affairs.

By 2008, a yearly average of 12,000 women attended the largest women's seminary in Qom,<sup>12</sup> and an estimated 45,000 women attended about 300 seminaries all over Iran.<sup>13</sup> This figure excludes the count of about 8,000 in Mashad (Sakurai 2011), and an unknown count from Esfahan. According to Sakurai (2011), there was an annual nationwide rejection rate of ten percent of the applicants due to lack of infrastructure. Graduates of the howzeh continue to have the option to further their Islamic education in various fields of the Islamic sciences. They also have the option to study law, to work as researchers for groups working on changing laws for women and families in Iran, and to work as researchers for *mujtahid*, professors, and research institutes. They are able to hold positions in offices of the various branches of the government depending on their level of education and past work experience. They serve as administrators, curriculum developers, and teachers in the howzeh system throughout Iran. Howzeh graduates may also work as counselors in universities and as instructors for different branches of the *Basij*.<sup>14</sup>

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11 The personal decision-making process in interpreting Islamic Law independent of any school of Islamic jurisprudence.

12 This number is taken from *Jami'at Al-Zahra's* 2008 prospectus for international students.

13 This estimate is derived from my interview with Khanume Akhtari, the head of a women's research center in Qom, who explained that there were about 300 women's seminaries in Iran with an average 150 students per howzeh.

14 Paramilitary volunteer militia established in 1979.

These opportunities provide insight as to why the howzevi women of this study, like Maryam and those born after the revolution, conceived of the revolution as an event that gave them unprecedented access to public participation. They protected this access by supporting the regime and promise of an Islamicized society. The maintenance of a post-revolutionary Iran in a sociopolitical sense was placed on their shoulders. To continue developing an Islamic society in contemporary Iran would entail furthering their education in the various Islamic sciences. Yet, education, even if Islamic, was not the first priority when dedication to it competed with a woman's responsibility towards raising future Shi'i members of society. At the same time, while pursuing an Islamic education may have been less of a priority, this education was necessary to becoming an exalted mother and serving a Shi'i Islamic society. We can see in the following that the double-bind of family and education became a source of mobility as Islamic education required the engagement of marriage and motherhood and vice versa. I draw attention to how and what facilitated the howzevi in their attempt to negotiate these two aspirations.

### **Aspirations: Marriage and Motherhood**

Marzieh Dabbagh's mobility within the revolutionary ranks behind the 1979 revolution is a poignant example of this enabling bind between marriage and motherhood. Dabbagh, with whom some of the more senior howzevi worked, married at the age of thirteen and had eight children. She learned the Islamic sciences privately from a cleric with her husband's permission, and she joined a small circle of students around Khomeini before the revolution. She traveled to different cities to give lectures to women, and participated in activities unbeknownst to women from villages before the revolution. She was able to navigate around injunctions of interacting with men. According to Afary (2009), Dabbagh learned how to drive by arranging a non-sexual temporary marriage between one of her daughters and the driver. Even if temporary and unconsummated, the temporary marriage made Dabbagh a mother-in-law, thus, non-marriageable to the driver. Dabbagh, who was arrested and tortured by the SAVAK in 1972, eventually became Khomeini's bodyguard in Paris in 1978, and became involved in mobilizing Shi'i fighters in Lebanon, Syria, and anti-Shah forces in Iran. She also served as a military commander in the eight year Iran-Iraq war (Afary 2009). Overall, Dabbagh had been a specific kind of Iranian woman, as I explain further below, who was able to engage in revolutionary activities because Khomeini authorized her actions.

Marriage for the *howzevi*, like other women in Iran, came with the expectation of eventually bearing, raising, and educating children. To add another layer, but also not unique to Iranians or Islamists (Paidar 1995), contemporary motherhood in Iran includes seeing women as markers, reproducers, and transmitters of Islam and nation or Iranianness (Afary 2009; Kashani-Sabet 2011; Najmabadi 1998 & 2005). This added layer of meaning<sup>15</sup> was grounded in the process of modernizing and creating heteronormative social ideals in late 19th century in Iran,<sup>16</sup> where various regimes of schooling and education produced new understandings of wifehood, motherhood, and citizenship. The purpose of women's education was to prepare a woman for her role as the first teacher to her children, the future citizens of Iran. Education for women was later thought to produce women as wives who would complement the scientific Iranian man. During the early 1900s, women's educational projects were geared towards producing women who would serve the nation (Najmabadi 2005). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the promotion of motherhood, also referred to as maternalism, gained women new opportunities within the family and workforce, and by becoming key actors in maintaining the state's political ideology (Kashani-Sabet 2011).

Although promoted by hegemonic institutions, the idealization of motherhood in Iran was "an adaptation of the pro-natalist ethos of existing Islamic social norms" (2011). That is, women championed the state-propagated notion of women becoming mothers to a family and the nation. Women's re-imagining of *Fatemeh*<sup>17</sup> in contemporary Iran, marking her birthday as International Women's Day, is another such example of mutual constitution. The special ceremony of the "Celebration of Responsibility" observed by Iranian families in schools and in their homes after the 1979 revolution is another example, where mothers and teachers introduce their nine-year old girls to the importance of reproduction for women (Torab 2007). This seems to have occurred in both urban and rural contexts in the early 1980s. Motherhood in the village of Deh Koh, as Friedl (1989) explains, influenced a woman's social standing. Pregnancy

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15 Najmabadi (2005) referred to this as 'wives of nation'.

16 Najmabadi (2005) has argued that as a response to the European encounter, Iranian modernists and reformists of the late 19th century pushed for an active social transformation in Iran in order for Iran to be identified as a civilized and modern nation. In this process, homosociality and heterosexuality masked forms of desire. Najmabadi argues that Iranian women's claim to equality, as equal partners with men, was attached to the imagination that modernity was none other than a heterosocial project.

17 The prophet's daughter and wife of Ali.

became a site of accomplishment, as well as a site of tension and disappointment for women who could not bear children (1989). Similarly, one of the most devastating outcomes for transsexuals who have undergone sex reassignment surgery in Iran is their inability to become pregnant. Both medical authorities and society at large regard them as incomplete women (Najmabadi 2013).

The significance of motherhood was undoubtedly promoted by the Islamic Republic through a collective remembrance of the life stories of Shi'i Islamic figures such as Khadija, Fatemeh, and Zaynab. However, like many women in Iran, the howzevi I knew regarded marriage, bearing, and raising children as deeply meaningful parts of their lives over and above the legal framework and state-sponsored ceremonies. This was not only encouraged in Qur'anic text and modeled by the Prophet Muhammad's family as "what Moslems do".<sup>18</sup> To have children was what the howzevi hoped for. In the words of Maryam, "When I was younger, I did not think it was possible for a woman to fall in love with her child, but when I first saw Fereshteh, I fell in love with her!"

As I have written elsewhere, there were howzevi who expressed their desire to delay marriage to further their Islamic education, an expression that often involved using Islamic text and stories of unmarried women in Islamic history to debate their seniors or teachers. Their insistence was on delaying marriage and motherhood rather than remaining unmarried. Perhaps this was because unmarried women in Iran are often marginalized because again marriage and motherhood were viewed as necessary components of women's lives. Unmarried women are considered to be "breaking the rules," even among non-religious Iranians (Poya 1999:149). Common descriptors among the general populace for unmarried women such as *pir dokhtar* (old maid) and *torshideh* (from sweetness, through time has become sour) signal this disapproval. The connotations of these descriptors are that unmarried women are 'unlucky' and/or dysfunctional. This was certainly the opinion among the howzevi. In this paper, I focus specifically on the howzevi who wanted to excel both in motherhood and their education, and those who wanted to pursue educative opportunities that may open up as a result of their howzeh education.

This desire to marry and experience motherhood created challenges for the howzevi's commitment to further their Islamic education. The howzevi believed that women faced a greater challenge, and would have to make more sacrifices than howzevi men. They would have to factor in pregnancy,

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18 During my fieldwork, I rarely encountered women citing Qur'anic text to express their desire to marry and become mothers except to say they were following the example of the Prophet's family. Citing Qur'anic text, however, was one of the ways the howzevi debated their instructors against the obligation to marry.

childbirth, breastfeeding, and child-rearing. Khanume (lady) Akhtari, one of the senior howzevi, argued that concerns regarding reproduction were a universal consideration for women, especially when making life choices. Arezu's example illustrates this point further.

Arezu and her husband, an engineer, had been waiting to have children for about eight years when we first met. They decided to hold off on having a family until Arezu finished her program at Madrasa Ali. She wanted to become a lawyer. Arezu eventually finished her master's degree at Madrasa Ali. In 2010, Arezu gave birth to her son and opened her own notary public office forgoing her law career. Other Madrasa Ali's howzevi explained that they were not interested in advancing their education because becoming a scholar in Islam or Islamic law "took a long time". Like Arezu, many opted to get married while they were students, and held off having children until they completed their programs. Some howzevi who were not at Madrasa Ali continued to take one class at a time, or attend study groups, while devoting most of their time to taking care of their husbands and children.

Though the howzevi have to balance aspirations for marriage and motherhood, neither was perceived as a hindrance or setback to the howzevi's education since these were part of attaining the ideals of becoming a Shi'i revolutionary woman. To clarify this point, I underline the support for the howzevi's educative choices, which I draw out in other examples below.

### Sources of the Regulatory and Emancipatory<sup>19</sup>

The tension between responsibilities towards the family and other aspirations is not unique to the howzevi. It is a general predicament for women (Abu-Lughod 2013; Adely 2012; Bachetta, and Power 2013; Kirk 2004; Lamphere 1987; Mehran 2003; Menon 2010). Yet, a single ideal of womanhood is impossible. First, the meaning and significance of ideals unfold as individuals participate in continuous social relations. Second, several aspirations may compete. Thus, while the tensions between motherhood and education appear to be similar in

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19 Abu-Lughod (1990) argues for looking at resistance as a diagnostic of power. Meaning, acts of resistance index other systems of power at play. In an earlier work on the turn of the century Iran, Najmabadi (1998) provides an analysis on the transformation of how an 'educated housewife' was socially constructed, where women's education was emancipatory at one level providing opportunities but was also regulatory in the service of other aims. She argued for a more profound understanding of transformations as not just emancipatory, but also regulatory or disciplinary.

form universally, the content of these tensions varies among women according to specific histories and contexts of life lived under varied forms of patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988). Of interest for us here is to understand the conditions and requisites by which the howzevi attempt to pursue marriage and motherhood.

In the following ethnographic examples, I examine how the howzevi experience tensions produced by their limitations while examining what is often overlooked in these. I argue that the visible limitations that seem to be regulatory may also be sources of emancipatory possibilities that are not so visible. Pregnancy and child-rearing pose challenges to an Islamic education, but these competing aspirations also enable mobility. One of the best examples of the regulatory and emancipatory (Abu-Lughod 1990; Najmabadi 1998; 2005) practices howzevi women engage in is nested in obtaining permission from husbands. For the howzevi, part of marriage and motherhood was to ask for a husband's permission regarding her and her children's mobility. The howzevi's practice of asking their husbands for permission about who could enter their homes, about leaving their homes, and about their children, was a display of their 'observing *eta'at*' (obedience). While doing fieldwork, I originally interpreted this practice as mere consultation with the husband. The howzevi's practice of asking for permission, however, was not just a matter of consultation or marital compromise in the hopes of finding common ground with her husband. Married women clarified this for me. The howzevi asked her husband for permission as a religious obligation, and did so with the acknowledgment that her husband would make the final decision.

I provide an analysis of this ethnographic example in part because here the appearance of patriarchy's choke-hold seemed obvious to me as an outsider. The requirement of 'obedience' is generally considered one of the features of Islamic marriage that reveals its deep inequality. However, for Maryam and the other howzevi, asking the husband for permission was a practice based on Islamic text. Elsewhere I write that this practice came with cultivating inherent sensibilities such as *tahamol kardan* (to bear down, endure or withstand) that could be applied in other social circumstances. Here, I engage the example to shake the common interpretation of this practice as evidence for the subservience or oppression of 'the Muslim woman' (Abu-Lughod 2013). By interrogating such practices, I hope to bring forth the not so obvious observation that the practice is a source of mobility for the howzevi. Asking her husband for permission was enabling in that she could therefore authenticate her expansive knowledge of Islamic contract law, including marriage contracts, in which parties of a contract were obligated to fulfill its conditions. The practice of asking permission could also limit her physical mobility. Only the disabling

aspect of this practice, however, one that usurps power for the husband, is commonly visible.

### **Eta'at (Obedience): the Subtleties of Expectations**

One evening in October 2011, Mohammad, Maryam, the baby and I passed by the toy store to look for a pair of plastic toy eyeglasses that the baby could play with instead of Maryam's eyeglasses. When we stepped out of the car, a slim sized woman with make-up, loose-fitting hijab, and eyeglasses asked me, "Khanum, what happened to my mobile? Did you see my mobile that day?" I recalled she was the customer who left her mobile phone on the glass counter at the optician's store while I waited to see a pair of glasses. The woman told Maryam that she remembered me, and asked if we could help her find her phone by accompanying her to the optician. An argument then ensued between the woman and the optician shortly thereafter. The optician's daughter later explained to me how the woman who lost her mobile phone was "bad". Her father took the phone to the police station because he found inappropriate pictures of that woman with a man from the neighborhood. They gave the phone to the police. Maryam became upset by this incident and expressed that even if the optician's story was true, the optician did not have the right to look through the woman's phone, make those conclusions, and then surrender the phone to the police. She wanted to find the woman to inform her that her phone was at the police station. She also wanted to hear the woman's side of the story, and speak to the optician. She waited for Mohammad to come home to ask for his permission for her to leave the house and take action. Mohammad did not give her permission.

As a howzevi student in Khamanei's Dars-e Kharij-e Fiqh class, Maryam clearly knew more about Islamic law than Mohammad. However, the requisite to ask for her husband's permission about her and the family's social relations transcended the fact that Maryam had more Islamic knowledge than her husband. Maryam consistently asked Mohammad for permission whether specific guests were welcome in their home, whether she could visit certain individuals, and what appeared to be any decision that involved leaving or entering the house.

Maryam, like the other howzevi, often referred to narrations about the Prophet's family and Islamic edicts to explain her actions and the actions of others. Maryam's practice of regularly asking Mohammad for permission was grounded on the system of mutual exchange between nafaqeh (full financial

provision)<sup>20</sup> and *eta'at*. Maryam explained matter-of-factly that in Shi'i Islamic law the marriage contract was considered an economic contract. By signing a permanent marriage contract, the woman was likened to 'the seller of access to her womb'. She would be offering her womb to the buyer. Her price was the *mehriyeh* (bridal payment), the amount of which she would have determined before agreeing to sign the marriage contract. The man, who was considered the buyer, would be the one to accept that offer by paying the price of the *mehriyeh*. The woman's acceptance of the *mehriyeh* validated the contract, and without this, the contract would be invalid.

The force of these contracts is found between the lines. What Maryam did not explain is the immense social cost of the contract on the lives of both the man and the woman. In selling the womb, the woman, as the carrier of that womb, also pays the man a lifetime of *eta'at*. Once the woman is given the bridal payment, the man has sole ownership of her womb. This ownership entails the right to sexual intercourse and her reproductive system.

A second obligation the wife has is to ask the husband for permission to leave the home, about who was allowed to enter the home, and with whom the wife may interact.<sup>21</sup> In purchasing the womb, the man is obligated to pay the woman a lifetime of full physical and financial security at the socioeconomic standard she had been brought up in as a child, and other material requests she stipulates in the marriage contract. Since the wife is the carrier of the womb, the husband is therefore obligated to provide *nafaqeh*, her financial support throughout the duration of the contract.<sup>22</sup> Since Mohammad supported her, Maryam should obey.

This obedience is commonly translated as 'obedience to the husband'. But, I propose to push that further by including what obedience points to. Marriage necessitated being observant of the system of exchange between *nafaqeh* (full financial provision) and *eta'at* (obedience)<sup>23</sup> through the body of both man

20 The total financial maintenance of the wife, which is obligatory for husbands to provide.

21 Sexual intercourse and asking the husband for permission were the only obligations a wife had towards the husband. Any "work" that could be categorized outside of these two obligations was assigned a price. If and when the marriage contract was to be dissolved, *qjratol mesl*, an hourly rate for this work- the price of which would be commensurate to the woman's level of education, was ideally granted to the woman.

22 Haeri (1989) provides a similar explanation.

23 These conditions appeared to be rigid and stripped away of sentiments commonly assumed as a default characteristic of a legal union between a man and a woman. Examined closely, these said conditions on a marriage contract provided enough ambiguity for men and women to extricate themselves from it. In Iran, this was evident in the increasing rates of divorce, increasing rate of the bride price, and the extensive research

and woman. 'Obedience to the husband' is only half the system of the mutual exchange on a marriage contract. The other half requires the husband to also obey the conditions of the marriage contract, including full financial responsibility for the wife. The exchange is not based on equal amount or sameness. It is based on mutual responsibility.

As I will describe later, meeting Mohammad's demands sometimes involved coming up with alternatives. For now, I underscore that *Maryam asking for Mohammad's permission in exchange for the nafaqeh* was the very evidence that she knew Islamic law. The act of asking permission indexes the space where theory and practice met, where knowledge and action converged. For the howzevi, what appeared to be the obligation to ask for permission was often a mere formality. However, it was still carried out. For Maryam, one of the ways 'knowing' of Islam manifested was through practicing *sadegi* (simplicity) and *khoshu* (humbleness). In other words, forms of deference<sup>24</sup> to the one understood to be responsible for one's well-being, whether that one was a parent, a husband, an elderly person, or teacher were manifestations of 'knowing Islam'.

According to Maryam, not asking Mohammad for permission would have taken away from her self-perception that she knew Islamic law better than her husband. She was not only concerned with the opinion that others would form about her, but also with an "an image of herself" *with herself as the audience*.<sup>25</sup> That is, the performance of asking permission is her evidence that she in fact was a "knower" of Islamic law. She held the power of that assessment. Framed in this manner, eta'at to Mohammad authenticated her knowledge and enabled her to continue learning, working, and attempting to excel in her endeavors. Her expertise allowed Maryam to transform her surroundings by teaching about the rights of women in Islam, by researching issues pertaining to family, and by providing legal advice to those who requested.

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being conducted by the howzevi on the legalities of *ojratol mesl*. Likewise, the different kinds of marriage contracts and how contracts are lived out as *desire* in the everyday lives of men and women in Iran are indices to how the law can serve personal interest as well as the importance of reproduction within the institution of marriage (Haeri 1989).

24 Although different in terms, see Abu-Lughod (1986) for a more detailed description of voluntary deference in the context of the Awlad 'Ali.

25 This is similar to the argument Deeb (2006) makes with regards to the women of al-Dahiyya who struggled against exclusion from public participation. Piety was authenticated by classical Islamic text and the interpretation of educated scholars, but more importantly, expressed through public participation. Making Islamic practice 'public' was understood as an expression of one's Islamically educated ideas of what it meant to be a good modern Shi'i Muslim. For more on the self as the audience, see Ewing (1997), Goffman (1959), Najmabadi (2013).

Furthermore, the howzevi attempted to make their knowledge of Islamic law legible to themselves and others by enacting the ideal of an Islamic marriage according to Islamic text. For instance, after an invitation or confirming plans with colleagues and friends, mentioning the very words “I have to ask my husband first” was considered a sign of success for the howzevi. The statement indexed intelligence because it exhibited that she knew Islamic text as well as its proper application. It showed diligence because the howzevi were fully aware of how difficult a task it was to commit oneself to a collective, the family. It was a sign that there was an order, a system, and a proper process of gaining the most out of a situation. More notably, it was a sign that the howzevi knew how to respect and be respected, and that her family valued her.

In the following, we see that notions of success in becoming the ideal woman extended well beyond legalistic terms in Islamic jurisprudence. I describe the desired characteristic of *gheyrat* in Iranian men below to further illustrate the importance of asking a husband for permission. We see that becoming an ideal woman included marrying a specific kind of idealized man: a man that needed or even deserved to be asked for permission.

### **“*Bi gheyrati mesle sib zamini*”: A Man Without Gheyrat is Like a Potato**

“I don’t want a husband who does not care where I am,” Zahra, a 23 year-old howzevi, explained. “He does not care who I talk to. He does not think about me. It means I have no value for him. Gheyrat is good, and the Iranian man, I think it is in his blood to have gheyrat.” We see another crucial dimension of marriage by looking at the idealized type of man the howzevi preferred to marry, a man with gheyrat, *a protective emotion of responsibility*. Even the howzevi who thought they were past marriageable age said that if they were to get married, the man would have to be gheyrati, a man with gheyrat.

Gheyrat comes from the Arabic word *ghīra*, which has a wide range of meanings, but has a specific meaning when situated in Islamic text through the narrations of the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>26</sup> I avoid translating the word as jealousy, even though ‘jealous emotion’ is one out of the many attributes of

26 *Ghīra*, furthermore, was attributed to both men and the divine. In Sunni sources, the use of *ghīra* is found in Sahih Bukhari, Book 62, (Chapter on Nikah), Chapter 30, Numbers 150–153. In these usages *ghīra* pertains to a kind of protective emotion of responsibility. See Myrne (2014) for *ghayra* in Abbasid poetry.

*ghūra*. The howzevi defined gheytrat by describing the qualities of a gheytrati man rather than explaining what gheytrat was. Elham explained, “[Gheytrat] It means mal-e mani (You are mine).” Expressed in jovial terms, I also heard, “(There is) no other man (for the wife), the husband will kill him!” “He loves you”, “He cares for you”, “He always knows about you”. Mehdiyeh, an unmarried 25 year-old howzevi, explained, “He just misses her all the time, and wants her by his side all the time, and pays attention to what she needs, and protects her from harm of others.”

A man who has gheytrat would shield the wife or woman in the family from the public gaze. While Maryam, the baby and I were walking to the park, a newlywed couple drove by with flowers on the hood and writing on the car. We could barely see the bride because of the tinted windows. The bride wore a white wedding gown with a bouquet of flowers on her lap. She had a white silky cloth draped over her head, with enough space for her to breath as it hung over some apparatus jutting over forehead. The groom had spiked hair and eyeliner. Maryam laughed and said, “You see, even if he is this way with some bad hair or ‘modern’, he has gheytrat. He does not let other people see his wife. It is the best.” Being gheytrati was also noticeable in social interactions. As Maryam explained, “He shows everybody he protects you.” One of the howzevi described similarly how men her grandfather’s age would not call their wives by their names in public. They would call their wives by another name, because they did not want other men knowing or saying their wives’ names.

Whether gheytrat was in fact attributed to their husbands or would-be husbands, a gheytrati man was the idealized man for the howzevi; Such a man who would, at the very least, expect to be asked by his wife for permission. He was a man who would not allow his wife, daughters, or sisters to come and go as they pleased. After explaining to me what a gheytrati man was, Mehdiyeh expressed this desire in exaggeration, “If I like a man, he has to be more than this (gheytrati)!” This was the howzevi’s ideal, and I attempt to illuminate the logic behind this ideal. Mehdiyeh explained, “Women like gheytrat because the men pay attention to them carefully, and they get full attention from the man. They themselves want a man with gheytrat for this reason. If a man does not have gheytrat, they know the man does not care about them. For the man, she is not important. Having gheytrat is a way for the man to show the woman has arzesh (value) . . . *Bi gheytrati mesle sib zamini!* (a man without gheytrat is like a potato!).”

Being married to a gheytrati man placed limitations on members of the household. As we were sitting outside the shrine of Abdul-Azim in Shahr-Ray, Leila and Aatike both explained that a father also had gheytrat for his

daughters and the other women in the family. Neda and Zaynab provided a similar explanation about brothers towards their sisters. An ethnographic example illuminates this idea.

Apart from asking permission about her own activities outside the home, Maryam also asked Mohammad for permission concerning activities outside the home involving her daughter, Fereshteh, who at the time of fieldwork was one and a half years-old. When the weather became warmer in the spring, Maryam began dressing Fereshteh in colorful dresses. These were dresses she had been waiting for a year to see Fereshteh wear. Mohammad felt this grooming would cultivate a sense of materialism in Fereshteh. He felt that it would develop a habit of beautifying herself in public “to catch attention”. Developing the habit of beautification would also then place Fereshteh at risk of drawing envy towards herself. Though not in these exact words, he eventually explained this to Maryam. Maryam no longer had the permission to dress the baby in colorful dresses unless it was at home when guests came to visit. He told Maryam it would be much better if the baby were to dress in “clean, but old clothing”.

Maryam followed through with what Mohammad wanted. She explained to me, “Mohammad does not like it.” The following month Maryam and I began taking afternoon walks to the park pushing the baby in the stroller. This usually involved an hour of sitting on a bench and talking. One afternoon Maryam explained that Mohammad no longer gave her permission to take the baby to the park because of the *gonah* (sins) of men and women flirting with each other there. Maryam stopped taking Fereshteh to that park.

For some of the howzevi, gheyrat was something Iranian men “had in their blood”, something they were born with. Some men were born with excessive gheyrat, which was no longer gheyrat, but *ta’asob*, an extreme and intolerable temperament. By way of Islamic text, the howzevi distinguished between a man with gheyrat and a man who was described as *ta’asob*. Gheyrat was a desirable attribute, and *ta’asob* was something to be ashamed of. Mehdiyeh explained, “The difference between gheyrat and *ta’asob* is that the one with *ta’asob* is sick. He has a problematic heart (inner self) or inside. He has some sickness and hurts the woman. This is not caring for the woman anymore if he is hurting her. He has an imagination that is not real, true to life. A man that has gheyrat does not hurt the woman. It hurts him when he is separated from her presence.” The right amount of gheyrat was confined within a specific set of unwritten rules. To violate these would make him an intolerable, often violent, *ta’asob* man. Stories of brothers getting into fist fights with men who glanced at their sisters was a common example of *ta’asob*.

For Khanume Alizadeh and Khanume Tabesh, two of the senior howzevi, Islamic teachings defined the right amount of gheyrat. Khanume Tabesh

explained that gheyrat was an admirable attribute of a man, and that gheyrat was grounded in Islam. She emphasized that the teachings of Islam guided men in finding the middle ground between gheyrat and ta'asob. If the man became unreasonably gheyrati, Islamic teachings would "tell the Iranian man what is correct". The women also acknowledged that the attitude towards gheyrat had changed through time. Again, Islamic teachings educated both men and women between extremes.

Curbing the amount of gheyrat a man had did not have a standard instruction booklet. Thus, gheyrat was something to be circumscribed by way of practice through social relations as a son, a brother, an uncle, and so on, as Mohammad, Maryam's husband, explained. The idealized gheyrati man was linked to an entire set of ethics, which men were called upon to uphold. Though the ethics of masculinity are not the focus of this paper, Mohammad's comments provide insights into the effect on a husband when members of his family ask him for permission.<sup>27</sup>

### Marrying a Gheyrati Man: A Mutual Exchange

For Mohammad and Maryam, being a man with gheyrat among other men who were constantly maintaining their positions and alliances within and between networks, such as neighborhood study groups and the different guilds of bazaris (merchants of the bazaar), was something both expected and worthy of respect.

Because I was observant of gendered boundaries between unrelated men and women, and given that my research was about howzevi women, I interacted with Mohammad only in the context of Maryam being in the same space of interaction. This gave me the latitude to observe Mohammad's role in Maryam's endeavors. Mohammad was devoted to Maryam's goal of pursuing her education along with assuming full responsibility for the household. For example, I first met Mohammad in 2008 with Maryam as he was picking her up from the howzeh. Before Fereshteh was born, Mohammad would wake up three times a week at 5 a.m. to bring Maryam to her class on Jomhuri Street. During my fieldwork from 2010, my interaction with Mohammad involved him

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27 Those set of ethics that play out in the social relations of the bazaar, the local neighborhood, the streets and larger Iranian politics, may be located in the term *javanmardi* ethics (Adelkhah 2000). A man cultivates virtues of courage and open-handedness, both of which were defined by and emerged through a man's ability to develop a *posht*, a backing network of alliances and followers.

being of service to Maryam and driving us to religious ceremonies, the howzeh, the doctor, family visits, and/or taking care of the baby when she had to teach a class. He blocked out his morning hours to take care of the baby while Maryam taught her classes. Only when pressed for time to run last minute errands would he leave the baby with me in my apartment. Mohammad's relationship with his mother and sisters, which is absent in this paper, also involved his frequent visits to their apartment to help them run errands. Mohammad had expressed that at times he wished he could split his body into three to tend to obligations towards Maryam, his mother, and his own work. "He is being ghey-rati," as Maryam explained.

Maryam pushed up against the familial boundaries. Mohammad did not give her permission to dress Fereshteh in pretty dresses when going outside the house, but Maryam did dress the baby in pants with light colored designs, and a sweater with a dainty flower or two. For Maryam, her choices were still within the bounds of *eta'at* since she did not dress Fereshteh in dresses or elaborately designed clothes. Mohammad no longer gave her permission to take the baby to the park, and Maryam ceased doing so. However, one afternoon Maryam explained that she had taken up a new routine. Instead of going to the park because she did not have Mohammad's permission, Maryam began taking the baby early evenings to the larger mosque about ten blocks from her home. The baby could sit, watch or imitate women performing the evening prayers, and afterwards socialize and play in the back with other girls.

A husband's *gheyrat* gave a sense of familiarity, part of the religious conservative Shi'i woman's sensibilities. That is, *gheyrat* was something desirable for Maryam and she expected no less from Mohammad. The visibility of a man's *gheyrat*, the familiar, also indexed a state of "order" or "certainty" for the *howzevi*. With familiarity, there were expectations. The character and behavior of a *ghey-rati* man was what she expected of her father, brothers and now Mohammad. She was not bargaining with Mohammad in order to undermine his authority or merely to survive. The kinds of constraints Maryam experienced with Mohammad were aspects of his behavior that she purposely chose before agreeing to marry him. Maryam's response conformed to her ideals and likewise was within Mohammad's expectations of how she would find a way to meet both their demands.

The value of a *ghey-rati* man for the *howzevi* woman was manifested in the feeling of being "loved and cared for" by a man who was perceived as having succeeded through his own effort in shaping an attribute of *ghey-rati* through his social relations. It was meaningful for the *howzevi* to be assured that she had been chosen as the wife with whom he will share that triumph, a triumph that entailed a struggle with his internal self in striking a fine balance between

gheytrat and ta'asob. For the howzevi, he could then be trusted to know the difference between the two.

The husband's assertiveness, which signified a guarantee of order ("I know where I stand in my relationship to you"), enabled his wife to progress through her educative endeavors. In other words, both clarity of where she stood in relation to his position, and that he could be trusted to know the difference between gheytrat and ta'asob, allowed Maryam to move forward. Mohammad's gheytrat gave Maryam a feeling of home<sup>28</sup> to which she could return in times of uncertainty. This resonates with the sentiments associated with howzevi's previous descriptions of a gheytrati man. Through expressions of his sentiments, there was a certainty that she was 'loved and cared for' by a man understood to have developed his 'self' (harnessing gheytrat in its proper form) and his social relations. Hence, marrying a gheytrati man was considered an enabling sign of success for the howzevi even while being disabling since it potentially limited her movements.

By marrying a gheytrati man, the howzevi was closer to actualizing the idealized womanhood through marriage, and eventually, motherhood. She would then come close to becoming a "specific kind of Iranian woman" that would obligate her husband and family to fully support her desire to further her Islamic education. That is, becoming a student of the howzeh was a matter of becoming a specific kind of Iranian woman with the willingness to observe strictures when called for, who married to a specific kind of man with gheytrat. Being this kind of woman gave women like Maryam the divine right to demand support from revolutionaries, clerics, a father, a brother, or a husband. For instance, Maryam's father and brothers facilitated Maryam's entrance into and progress in the howzeh before she was married. At the time of marriage, Maryam's father had stipulated in her marriage contract that Mohammad would see her through her Islamic education for her entire life. This stipulation included hiring household help, providing transportation, and financing her education. This exchange between those who facilitate Maryam's mobility as gheytrati men who have a sense of protective responsibility and herself is never equal or unequal on fixed terms.

## Conclusion

I began this paper by situating the howzevi's idealized womanhood through marriage and motherhood in conversation with the liberal feminist framing of

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28 This is analogous to the expression "*A home is not a place, it's a feeling.*"

these aspirations as obstacles to women's public participation. This framework has influenced much of the writing on Iranian women, especially because the state attempts to produce a specific kind of motherhood in service of revolutionary ideologies. I move away from the terms 'bargaining' and 'resistance' because these have a tendency to box women into oppositional binaries. Without resorting to the charge of false consciousness, these cannot fully explain the importance of self-authentication or how the howzevi women have chosen to respond to the historical problem of access to resources based on class and global politics that have impacted their lives.

In following Abu Lughod (1990) and Najmabadi (1998), I argued for a regulatory and emancipatory dialectic analysis to explain how ideals of womanhood are understood in post-revolutionary Iran. Through an ethnographic lens, we can see that marriage and motherhood facilitated the howzevi's education, and were not inherent setbacks. I made this argument by providing a brief overview of the impact of the revolution on howzevi women and their mobility. I explained the significance of marriage and motherhood for the howzevi. Although this was also propagated by the state, the howzevi desire to marry and become mothers. I explained that aspiring to further both their Islamic education and domesticity posed a challenge. Marriage and motherhood were visibly regulatory because these confined women's mobility. Two such sources of limitations were the howzevi's practice of asking permission from the husband concerning her and her children's comings and goings, as well as having the desire to marry a gheyrati man whom she expected would want to be asked for permission. Using ethnographic vignettes, I highlighted the imperceptible yet enabling aspects of these practices that are ultimately self-authenticating for the howzevi.

To end, I return to the themes of affection and mutual exchange in the opening scene of this article. Although the ethnographic examples I have provided do not represent what takes place in the lives of all howzevi, they provide thoughtful considerations about women with a different logic we know very little about, and are often associated with state repression. The answers to the questions I have attempted to answer allow us to consider what we have in common with the howzevi like Maryam by engaging concepts like 'obedience' and 'self-authenticity'. "To obey" or "obedience" strikes at the very core of our fear of constraints. They pluck at the very essence of circumstances that at first glance impede our individual choices and desires. Coming to terms with the howzevi's experiences forces us to reconsider our own encounters with self-chosen or involuntary injunctions to 'obey,' and what that means for understandings of autonomy, will, and the exchanges we rely on in our relations with others.

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