

NEWS COVERAGE ON 'ARTIVISM' AND PROTEST ART IN THE HIJAB PROTESTS OF IRAN AND KARNATAKA

Ms. Vedhavarshini. T, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Media Sciences, Anna University

Dr Neelamalar. M, Associate Professor, Department of Media Sciences, Anna University

Abstract

Performing arts have been popular during different periods of conflict throughout history, and have often played an important role to the communities during difficult times. Activism (aka art activism) and protest arts have become increasingly prominent forms of protest in recent times, as they provide a powerful platform for artists to address issues and mobilize support. In early 2022, a group of Muslim women in India were asked to remove their hijabs for identification purposes during a school examination, which eventually led to the Karnataka State restricting hijabs in educational institutions. The incident sparked outrage among the Muslim community and led to a wider debate about religious freedom and discrimination in India. Months later, the women of Iran engaged in anti-hijab protests moral policing and the custodial death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini for not wearing hijab properly. Art has played a crucial role in hijab protests, serving as a platform for women to express their experiences and challenge their restrictions. Social media has also played a significant role with activists using them to connect with wider audiences. The form, medium and impact of activism or protest art in these women-led protests is elucidated in this study by analyzing the news coverage on arts and artists in hijab row.

Keywords: protest art, activism, online activism, hijab row, performing arts, visual arts

Background

The Hijab, burka, and niqab, are the traditional headscarves of Muslim women that have become a symbol of religious and cultural identity. Hijab has been mandatory for Iranian women who are legally obliged to wear loose long clothes and cover their hair in public, including participation in sports. Mandatory hijab was passed into law five years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Gasht-e Ershad, or the moral police was established to spread the culture of modesty. Their powers include the ability to mandate female head covering and arrest individuals who violate the moral codes of Islam. 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was arrested for breaching the Islamic dress code by wearing her hijab improperly. The officials claimed that she had suffered a cardiac arrest at the Moral Policing Centre. She died three days later at a hospital which ignited protests in Iran's capital Tehran, where the protestors gained support from all over the world.

In Karnataka, the protests however were against the attempts to ban hijab-wearing in educational institutions in their State. A group of Muslim students was asked to remove their hijabs for identification purposes during a school examination. Similar incidents sparked

outrage among the Muslim community and led to a wider debate about religious freedom and discrimination. It is to be noted that till then wearing a hijab was neither mandatory nor a problem for Muslims in India. Other students, stimulated by certain political parties, countered the protests by wearing saffron scarves against hijab. Thus, the hijab row in Iran is a long-standing issue regarding a national law, while the hijab row in Karnataka is a specific instance of hijab-related discrimination.

Role of Art in Conflicts

Throughout history, art forms have played an important role during times of conflict. Performing arts include theatre, music, dance, opera, and other forms of live entertainment where the artist uses their body, voice, or objects to convey an artistic expression. Historically, Greek theatre was often used as a tool for social commentary, political satire, and as a means of examining the human condition during war and political turmoil. In India, theatre has been used since the struggle for independence, and various other movements for social justice. (Pushpa Sundar, 1989) To date, street play, mime, and other forms act as means of communication to educate and mobilize people. The use of music as artistic expression also promotes social and political activism by challenging the dominant cultural narratives. Rap, for instance, is a genre that emerged in African American culture which is used to address issues like racism, police brutality, and social injustice. Activists in recent times, use their bodies and their actions to make a statement. For example, dancers and actors have used their performances to address gender equality and LGBTQ rights, while musicians and poets have used their music and lyrics to call for political and social change. Activism and protest art have also been embraced by various social movements and protest organizations, who use these forms of artistic expression to connect with wider audiences and build support for their cause. These art forms have been used to highlight the struggles and experiences of women as well which is relevant to the Hijab row as well. It is significant to focus on the news coverage of such events to understand the political and cultural significance of the performances and their impact on the wider debate around the hijab requirement. By using their art to inspire and engage people, activists are helping to bring about meaningful and lasting change in society.

Activism and Protest Art in the Protests of Iran and Karnataka

With only an internet connection, online news is accessible to stay informed about current events and developments from everywhere effortlessly. (Van der Meijden, A. 2017) More than the mainstream media online articles seem to give extensive coverage of lifestyle and culture-based soft news. The online news articles on hijab-based art and performances were collected from online news websites and the Google news. The final set of articles was put together using purposive sampling. A qualitative content analysis of the articles is done to identify the common themes and patterns. This type of analysis clarifies people's experiences and perspectives so that a nuanced interpretation of the topic can be provided. (Krippendorff, K. 2004)

Thus, this study aims to analyze the representation of art and artists in the hijab protests of Iran and Karnataka in online news; to identify the types of performances and their narratives in media coverage; to differentiate between activism and protest art and examine the role of social media in shaping the protests.

Performing art

It was found that the performing arts covered by the online news media included songs, dance, rap, stage shows, street plays, and fashion shows that were practiced during the hijab protests. Other unique performances included women braiding each other's hair, which meant bringing people together. Shervin Hajipour's 'Barayae' was played in the protest spots. Eventually, it became the unofficial protest anthem and even won a Grammy for the best song for the year for social change.

Type of Art	Name of the Artist
Fashion	Mehrnaz Abdollahian, Sepideh Moafi
Music performance	Ehsan Karmi and Mandana Khazraei
Streetplay	Sania Saifi
Dance	Astiyazh Haghighi and Amir Mohammad Ahmadi
Song	Gola, Shervin Hajipour; Samin and Behin Bolouri; Melek Mosso, Shayan Javadi
Stage show	Farida Jiraphan
Rap	Toomaj Salehi

Table: 1. The list of artists and their performances

The protestors had recited the Persian version of the song 'Bella Ciao' on the streets of Iran. The sister duo first performed the song on their social media handle without wearing a hijab. Both Bella Ciao and Baraye became synonymous with the protests in Iran. Apart from the Iranian artists, Turkish Singer Melek Mosso chopped her hair during her performance on stage to support Iranian protests. In fashion, actress Sepideh Moafi represented the Iranian women's uprising at the Golden Globe Awards by wearing a black outfit with a growing red flower on her right hip.

Thespian Farida Jiraphan, staged a 75-minute solo performance named 'Hijab' in a theatre in Thailand. Her performance also portrayed the functions of hijab and how it is banned in a few countries but is required in others. In addition to the revolutionary performances, the artists raised their voices on hijab row through interviews, blogs, and social media handles. Delhi-

based Hijabi theatre artist, Sania Saifi, recalled her experiences when the hijab was banned at her school in Delhi between 2013-2015. To substantiate her devotion to Islam, she then decided to wear a hijab even during her performances. The ‘hijabi’ performer also discussed bullying, religious shaming, and discrimination for wearing it. Since the news coverage focused solely on the artist's personal experiences rather than offering a comprehensive representation of the challenges posed by Muslim artists in India, her decision to wear the hijab during the performances may or may not have had any impact on the discourse surrounding hijab.

Visual art

The news articles that reported visual art as a medium of protest had extensively covered the works of both Iranian and artists from other countries. The curators from New York and Texas also provided an opportunity to enhance people's voices through painting, photography, and sculptures at the art exhibitions. One of the photographs even coincided with United Nation's initiative against gender-based violence. From paintings to photographs, the most common themes were struggles of self-censorship, pain from violence, sentiments of the Iranian diaspora, identity, internal conflict, female body experience, and most importantly, “Women, Life, Freedom”. This however was witnessed only outside of Iran. News reports mentioned how art galleries in Tehran are closed and events and art classes are being cancelled because the artists were at the protests. Digital designs and posters also played a significant role in the protests in Iran and Karnataka. Artist Farhadkiaei designed a queen from playing cards cutting her hair, which is a gesture of mourning in Iranian tradition, and became a common sight in Iranian protest.

Type of Art	Name of the Artist
Art Exhibition	JR, Danie Gomez-Ortigoza, Multiple artists
Digital Art	Adeena Hasan, Mark Eisenman
Graffiti	Unknown artist,
Mural Art	Cloe Hakakian, Todd Goodman, AleXsandro Polombo
Painting	Paris Haghighi, Marjaneh Goudarzi
Photographs	Newsha Tavakolian, Maryam Eisler, Neshat
Posters	Ghazal Foroutan, Mahdiah Farhadkiaei, Smishdesigns, Jalz
Sculpture	Maryam Takalou

Table: 2. The list of artists and their artwork

Paul Salopek (2011) in his thought-provoking analysis on the significance of graffiti, explores and discusses how graffiti is used to express dissent, resistance, and opposition to oppressive regimes or dominant powers. This was evident when the graffiti against the hijab verdict surfaced anonymously on the walls of the coastal town of Malpe in Udupi, India. A mural of the sitcom character Marge Simpson chopping off her hair was painted by Italian artist AleXsandro Palombo in front of the Iranian Embassy in Milan. Iranian American Artist and Muralist Cloe Hakakian collaborated with Todd Goodman who is well known for his powerful political pieces, to come up with a mural of Masha Amini. All of these were based on, celebrating the courage of the protestors, supporting the brave women, and immortalizing the symbol of women's rights and freedom.

Other Protest Art

Artivism is the practice of employing art to promote positive social change. Protest art can be classified as artivism, however, it is generally created as an immediate response to a particular political issue. (Sturken, Marita, et al, 2018). Such protest art need not necessarily be a traditional art form, as creating them could take time. When the government implemented the Internet blackout in Iran, a small room-like place was created by artist and art therapist Nazanin Ahmady out of PVC pieces covered in black fabric at an art gallery in Texas. The visitors can take a seat in a lone chair and may utilize a set of headphones that plays a sound that is unsettling and gives the vibe of loneliness and imprisonment. Named "No Signal" this was done to depict how it is to live in modern-day Iran, cut off from the rest of the world without the internet and basic rights, like freedom of speech and expression.

Protest Art	Artist
Dye-in event	Multiple artists
Smearing the fence	Zehra Doğan
Blood red foundation	Unknown
Isolation booth	Nazanin Ahmady

Table: 3. Examples of Protest Art

Artists in New York organized "Baraye Azadi: An Evening of Resistance Through Art" which is a die-in event. The fashion brand "Azadi Co" launched t-shirts printed "young women trampling the patriarchy" advocating the feminist movement. The most powerful and symbolic illustration of protest art by making the public sphere as the place of protest was the fountain at a park that was painted red by anonymous. The fountain's red hue served as a potential statement on the violence and suffering of women in Iran, as red is frequently used in art and protests as a symbol of violence, revolution, and blood. The act of coloring the fountain enhances the powerful message of resistance against the government's efforts to suppress opposition and artistic expression. Similarly, in Berlin, the rails of the Iranian

embassy were splashed with a mixture of henna, hair, and menstrual blood by Zehra Doan, a Kurdish journalist, and artist in exile.

Arrests

The 'Baraye' song became the unofficial protest anthem and even won a Grammy for the best song for the year for social change. However, the Iranian singer and songwriter Shervin Hajipour who came up with the song was arrested. Instagram bloggers Astiyazh Haghighi and her fiancé Amir Mohammad Ahmadi were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for dancing in public and Haghighi was not wearing a hijab. Since both are considered illegal in Iran, the couple was convicted of encouraging corruption, public prostitution, and gathering with the notion of disrupting national security. Haghighi was put to prison which is considered notorious. Another artist who was prosecuted for his song was the hip-hop artist Toomaj Salehi. This depicts Iran's disregard for artistic freedom and its attempt to instil fear among the artists. Although there were mentions of the prison being notorious, no adequate coverage was given to raise concerns about the rights and safety of the female inmates.

Role of social media

Throughout history, protest art has been in physical form. Paula Harper's article on protest art in California against the administration policy in South East Asia concluded that the youngsters who engaged in protest felt that the traditional art forms cannot compete with Television and films and therefore the artists wishing to make a political statement must move to these forms. Today, web 2.0 has replaced the radio and television. In Iran, the usage of social media has given rise to digitally-rendered forms of protests like videos of women cutting their hair and setting their headscarves on fire. The Barayae song was played in the protest spots and was widely shared on social media. Since Haghighi and Ahmadi had a huge social media following, of which the video went viral, ultimately grabbing the judiciary's attention. The Persian version of the song 'Bella Ciao' went viral on social media platforms after being posted on Instagram by Sammin and Behin. Other visual works of digital artists and illustrators spread across the internet and ultimately dispersing the sentiments of women to the world. Apart from the traditional art forms, there were short videos of women cutting their hair and other visuals from the protest spots that spread around. From creating art to disseminating, the impact of social media was so high that the Iranian government imposed an internet- blackout.

In India women issues appears to be the reoccurring theme of the digital illustrations in social media; among them are marital rape, rape culture, and domestic abuse. (Chandrakar & Nayal, 2022) In Karnataka, Muskan, a pre-university college student in burkha shouted back the "Allahu Akbar" slogan against the mob. She soon became the poster girl of pro-hijab protests in India after the video went viral. Followed by this incident, the social media was filled with illustrations that were widely shared all over the world.

Findings and Discussion

- More coverage on art and artists were found on the Iran protests than that of Karnataka.
- Artists of the Iranian diaspora from around the world contributed to the protests.
- Most of the artists supporting Iranian protests were from the USA (San Francisco, New York, Washington, Texas, Los Angeles); other countries included Thailand and Milan.
- Despite the internet shutdown in Iran, Iranian-American artists and exiles continued to have access to social media and were instrumental in getting the information out to the rest of the world.
- Activism in Iran lead to multiple arrests and imprisonment of artists living in Tehran.
- Intervention of USA in the affairs of Iran could be found - the protest song was awarded the Golden Globe; exhibitions and performances in the USA were collaborated with UN.
- TikTok and Instagram are found to be the most used social media platforms in Iran; while in India, the digital arts were circulated on Twitter.
- Minimal news coverage on art and artists was found in the case of Karnataka's hijab row.
- The participation of 160 cities, and 143 universities, and the impact of social media made the hijab protests in Iran more impactful than that of Karnataka.
- With social media platforms, the convergence of performance and visual arts was made possible.

To conclude, women in both countries are resisting against a law that interferes with their rights. The issue comes down to the political climate and the nature of protests in both countries. Iran has been under Islamic rule for decades and the protests were led by broader sections of women, whereas a smaller number of activists led the protests in Karnataka, which were concentrated on the dress code for female students in a particular State. In this particular study emphasizes lies only on the significance of protest art and activism in the hijab row of Iran and Karnataka. While the news coverage discusses the various art forms, it is evident from the findings that the role of social media in amplifying the reach of these art forms has been inevitable. In Iran, even when the artists and the protestors were imprisoned, their works were out there to the world, through Instagram, and Tik Tok which played a major role in propagating the issue. In the context of Karnataka, there was less scope for artistic expression in physical form, given the religious polarization in the State of Karnataka. It was only due to social media, the artworks inspired by Muskan's bravery were shared with the hashtag #AllahuAkbar. Therefore, the protests in both places were a combination of online activism and offline actions based on art. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to consider social media a vital tool for promoting activism through visual means.

References

1. Chandrakar, S., & Nayal, T. (2022). Digital illustrations as a medium of social awareness, with relation to women's issues. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 3(1), 415–425. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.121>
2. Van der Meijden, A. (2017). The impact of online journalism on the traditional press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(3), 298-317
3. Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Sage Publications
4. Pushpa Sundar - Protest through theatre —The Indian experience - *India International Centre Quarterly* 1989, Vol. 16, No. 2 (SUMMER 1989), pp. 123-138
5. Salopek, P. (2011). Conflict graffiti: The art of war. *Foreign Policy*, 189, 94-95.
6. Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2018). Art and Activism. In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 3rd Edition (pp. 329-330). Oxford University Press.
7. Paula Hays Harper (1970) California Art for Peace: May 1970, *Art Journal*, 30:2, 163-164.