The Veil as an Intersectional Lens into Experiences of Muslim Women:

Belonging, Resistance, and Solidarity Across Contexts

By

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Declaration

I hereby affirm that I have produced this dissertation without any inadmissible help from a third party or the use of resources other than those cited; ideas incorporated directly or indirectly from other sources are marked as such. In addition, I affirm that I have neither used the services of commercial consultants or intermediaries in the past nor will I use such services in the future. The dissertation in the same or similar form has not been presented to another examining authority in Germany or abroad, nor has it been published.

Bayreuth, July 22, 2025 Shirin Assa

Dedication

For my maman and baba.

And their mothers.

Acknowledgment

I extend my deepest gratitude to Susan Arndt, my supervisor, and to Mastoureh Fathi, my mentor—whose support was the unexpected lifeline in this long academic drama. Thank you for believing in this work, and in me, especially when I doubted both.

To maman Leila and khaleh Fati—for your determination to create change, for the ways you carved out space in a life that didn't offer it, and for the resilinece you passed down. I carry your hopes, your fears, your stories. I hope I've done you proud.

To Baba Naser, who taught me to live with humility and integrity, to always stand with the underdog, and to hold fast to what matters. It is an honor to be the child of someone who lived by the words, "we must attempt to lift as we climb" (Angela Davis).

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To khaharam, Nazanin—for showing me that cool can be grounded, ambition can be kind, and for you and Armin being the wings that helped me take flight.

If my life is a story, my family is that golden verse to which I always return.

Thank you—friends turned lovers, partners turned comrades. Thank you, Setareh, Elham, Golnar, Sahar, Onome, Jody—and to my single-woman army, Ahoo. In this lifetime and every lifetime, in every iteration, may we find each other again and again, and do life side by side.

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Special thanks to Amir Ali Nojoumian, the teacher I aspire to be—who discretely transformed a bookstore basement into a forge of critical thought, chipping away at the pillars of establishment, one student at a time.

These past years have not been easy. Loss ran deep. What was seen can no longer be unseen. I witness the pain, the resilience, and the songs of survival woven between the ashjār al-zaytūn, along the Kiir River, and across Çiyayên Zagros—and I carry the hope and responsibility of bridging them across time and place.

And to the woman I became while writing this: you made it. You were softer than you thought, and tougher than you knew. I see you. I honor you. Thank you, love. Thank you, anger. Thank you, grief. Thank you, kid self. Thank you, future self.

Abstract

In much of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), war has not represented a rupture but has persisted as a mode of governance in the postcolonial order. A lasting memory from a childhood visit to a border zone contaminated by landmines from the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) became a guiding metaphor for this dissertation. That fenced, abandoned terrain—strewn with hidden explosives—offered an early image of the landscape Muslim women must navigate. Like mined land, their lives unfold amid uncertainty, danger, and the constant threat of detonation.

The veil, instrumentalized across political, cultural, and religious discourses, does not function as a fixed symbol. Rather, it is a charged site—akin to those mines—saturated with imposed and contested meanings. It marks a terrain where regimes of surveillance, regulation, and violence converge, rendering Muslim women's lives politically disposable and materially depleted. Their existence is shaped by precarity, illegibility, and the erosion of both spiritual and bodily autonomy.

Navigating this terrain demands a collective reimagining of the ground itself. It also requires the unflinching labor of exposing power and reconfiguring relationalities. Under such conditions, one's struggle is always entangled with the possibility of others living otherwise. From this conceptual and affective ground, this dissertation asks: How does the veil function as an intersectional lens to unravel and reconfigure Muslim women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and solidarity across diasporic, national, and transnational contexts?

This dissertation theorizes the veil as a shifting dispositif through which Muslim women's belonging, agency, and relationality are mediated. It does not treat the veil as a fixed cultural symbol but as a relational analytic. Through this lens, the entanglement of racial capitalism, gender and religious normativity, and state and domestic violence becomes comprehensible.

The veil operates as both a mode of critique and a contested medium through which Muslim women navigate and resist the hierarchical logics of modernity, empire, state, and feminism. Intersectionality enables this mode of analysis by linking critical inquiry with praxis and grounding the dissertation in lived, situated experiences.

This framework moves beyond diversifying feminist knowledge or merely representing Muslim women's experiences of difference. It reframes the veil as a point of connection across asymmetries of power and situated struggles. Rather than viewing difference through oppositional logics, it emphasizes approaches rooted in context, relationality, and the complexity of lived experience.

The project comprises three peer-reviewed studies, each positioning the veil as an overarching thematic focus through which Muslim women's experiences are analyzed.

The first study, "Displaced Belonging: Poetics and Politics of Belonging in Leila Aboulela's 'The Ostrich' and 'Missing Out'," explores veiling and religious practices as mediators of inclusion and exclusion across Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Drawing on Yuval-Davis's (2006) sociological framework of the politics of belonging, it introduces the concept of displaced belonging to show how belonging is reconfigured across contested political landscapes. It traces how belonging is displaced, translated, and reiterated through overlapping political projects of belonging.

The second study, "Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' in Iran," examines how the feminist uprising reclaims the veil as a site of collective withdrawal from hegemonic structures of belonging. Here, belonging is not given but reconstituted through feminist struggle. Drawing on Veronica Gago's (2020) theorization of the feminist strike, the study demonstrates how unveiling—within a regime of compulsory veiling—extends the notion of the strike beyond labor or gender. It links the act to contesting material precarity and challenging broader restrictions on freedom.

The third study, "Decolonizing Solidarity with(in) Muslim Women: Toward an Intersectional Justice Movement," focuses on the veil as a site of regulation and disciplinary power in feminist discourse. It examines how feminist solidarities with and among Muslim women have fractured and converged around the veil during the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. The study critically engages how the veil functions as a dividing apparatus in feminist discourse, while also holding the potential to catalyze collective activism among Muslim women. Drawing on intersectional feminist thinking (Hill Collins 1991), it proposes decolonizing solidarity as a strategy for intersectional justice and collective empowerment.

This qualitative research draws on cultural studies and intersectionality as complementary methodological frameworks to analyze the veil as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's experiences across contexts. Each study engages distinct materials—literary narratives, cultural texts, practices, and discourses—across geographies including Kurdistan, Sudan, and the UK. Despite these differences, they share a commitment to theorizing from lived, situated, and politically urgent experience of Muslim women.

Cultural studies grounds experience in material and historical formations. Intersectionality complements this by analyzing lived experiences of difference through interrelated domains of domination. Together, they enable a multiscalar analysis of power—across micro, meso, and

macro levels—while remaining attentive to subjectivity, positionality, and the contingency of power.

All three studies employ abductive reasoning, allowing inquiry to remain responsive to conceptual and political developments. This capacity became particularly important amid unfolding events such as the feminist uprising in Iran, the war in Gaza, and the escalating anti-Muslim racism in Germany. Abduction enabled an iterative movement between empirical material, theoretical frameworks, and ethical-political commitments.

Intersectionality, as deployed in this dissertation, functions not only as an analytical framework but also as a political praxis oriented toward justice and relational engagement. Its emphasis on marginalized knowledge, political accountability, and multidirectional visibility informed the selection of materials, analytical categories, and interpretive strategies.

Religion and gender serve as anchoring categories throughout this dissertation. However, each study highlights different intersections. The first emphasizes race and migration; the second foregrounds nation-state, sexuality, and ethnicity; and the third focuses on coloniality, feminism, and state power. These variations demonstrate the versatility and comprehensive capacity of intersectionality beyond its foundational categories of race, gender, and class, while maintaining coherence in the project's overall orientation.

The three studies that form the empirical foundation of this dissertation are unified by a central analytical arc: they examine how the veil functions as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's lived realities across diverse contexts. The veil renders visible the entangled dynamics of gender and religion, while also operating as a site of racialization, (de)sexualization, and colonization. At the same time, it becomes a terrain of affective, political, and epistemic intervention—mobilized across local, national, and transnational feminist terrains.

The findings across the studies converge around three emergent themes: spectrum of belonging, topography of agency, and solidarities as interstices. The dissertation demonstrates that the veil, as an intersectional lens, reveals the differentiated and contested conditions under which Muslim women claim belonging, enact agency, and forge solidarity.

Belonging is not simply granted or denied; it is continuously produced, differentiated, and often weaponized. Agency emerges as historically situated and intersectionally constituted, shaped by negotiations within specific political and social possibilities. The veil regulates which forms of action are recognized as political agency, and which remain illegible. Solidarity is not based on categorical sameness but is theorized as an interstitial practice. It emerges through difference and is structured by situated relationalities. These solidarities do not erase difference but

mobilize it as a resource for collective contestation. In doing so, they open new grounds for feminist politics within and across Muslim women's struggles.

This dissertation advances intersectional, feminist, and postcolonial thought by theorizing the veil as a dynamic and relational site where race, gender, and religion intersect. It challenges colonial epistemologies that frame Muslim women's identities and struggles through binary logics anchored in the veil.

Building on and extending intersectionality's engagement with decolonial praxis, this project situates Muslim women's experiences within broader struggles for justice—within and across communities of resistance. It remains grounded in context-specific forms of oppression and difference.

Methodologically, the dissertation offers a model that resists extractivism and tokenization. It centers lived, situated, and politically engaged knowledge. Politically, it reconfigures the veil from a divisive apparatus into a connective terrain of relationality and collective contestation—mobilizing political love through difference and toward an intersectional justice movement.

This dissertation offers a timely and necessary intervention in a world where Muslim women's bodies, voices, lands, labor, and futures are relentlessly targeted, displaced, erased, instrumentalized, and subjected to disciplinary control. It affirms the urgent need to rethink feminism through intersectional frameworks that resist their erasure and atomization.

By uncovering relational ties and fostering mutual relevance with Black and women of color feminisms, this dissertation contributes to reimagining feminist practices and political imaginaries. In doing so, it offers not only a critique of dominant feminist paradigms but a vision for collective, embodied, and justice-oriented feminist futures.

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THE VEIL AS AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS INTO EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM WOMEN: BELONGING, RESISTANCE, AND SOLIDARITY ACROSS CONTEXTS

Introduction and Contextual Framing

In much of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), war has not been an exception but a defining legacy of the postcolonial order.[i] Rather than signaling rupture or conflict, it has persisted as a method of governance, displacement, and extraction in the region—shaping not only borders and regimes, but also the everyday lives of those living in its shadow. In postrevolutionary Iran (1979), the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq war (1980-1988) continued to structure daily life long after the ceasefire. Its traces were present in schools, streets, shops, courts, prisons, media, and cultural productions, as well as domestic or public relations and physical geographies marked by violence.

One memory that stayed with me—shaped by the very legacies described above—is from a trip to the southwestern border region of Iran, *Shalamcheh,* where parts of the land were still marked as minefields.[ii] These areas were abandoned, fenced off, inaccessible, and known to be filled with explosives left behind by both sides of the conflict. I remember standing at the edge of one of those fields as a child, warned not to move too close, trying to imagine how anyone could navigate such landscape. Occupied by mines, the land looked empty—even lifeless—but it was not. Similar to what I have seen on television, there was no clear path forward, and no way to walk through without risking detonation—not alone, and not with others. That memory would later come to frame how I think about the terrain of Muslim women's lives.

This affective memory helped me conceptualize how discourses surrounding Muslim women[iii]—across political, religious, and cultural registers—have turned the veil[iv] into something akin to those mines: imposed, pervasive, particular, and perpetually poised to erupt with the slightest movement. Planted across the social and symbolic landscape of Muslim women's lives by multiple regimes, the veil has become a site through which their subjectivities are defined and their bodies, lands, labor, relationalities, and futures colonized. Discursive regimes charge the veil by regulating its practice, instrumentalizing its symbolism, and inscribing contested meanings onto it. In doing so, they render Muslim women's lives politically disposable—marked by danger, illegibility, and a depletion of both the material and spiritual conditions of living. For Muslim women, this terrain is not only complex but further complicated by the politics surrounding the veil.

To walk through such a minefield demands more than agency and faith—abundant in Muslim women's histories. It requires reimagining the ground itself, and engaging in the slow, deliberate work of identifying and removing the mines that have shaped Muslim women's realities and relationalities. Over the course of this research, it became clear that this work is unavoidably collective, as one's struggle is entangled with the possibility of others living otherwise. This conceptual and political landscape is examined through the three peer-reviewed studies that form the basis of this research. The overarching question in these studies is: *How does the veil function as an intersectional lens to unravel and reconfigure Muslim women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and solidarity across diasporic, national, and transnational contexts?*

In this opening chapter, I outline the theoritical and conceptual framework that informs the three studies constituting this research. I then elaborate on the methodological orientation of the project, grounded in qualitative research and informed by cultural studies and intersectionality as praxis. This is followed by a synthesis of the three studies and a discussion of the academic and political contributions of the research. I conclude by reflecting on the limitations of the research and outlining directions for future inquiry. The three studies are included in their published or under-publication form directly following this chapter, in the order discussed.

Theoritical and Conceptual Framework

For too long, the veil has been *spoken for* rather than *spoken through*. Often cast within binary frameworks, it has been reduced to oppositional difference—flattening complexity and obscuring the relational dimensions of Muslim women's lives. This section outlines the veil as an intersectional lens that challanges such reductive framings.[v] Rather than *merely diversifying* feminist knowledge, this approach frames the veil as a point of connection among Muslim women—across asymmetries of power and situated oppressions. It is not treated as a fixed symbol or cultural artifact but as a shifting site of regulation, political struggle, and meaning-making.[vi]

Across the three studies, the veil is theorized as a dispositif that mediates Muslim women's belonging, agency, and relationality across diasporic, national, and transnational contexts. It is not merely a material object but a relational analytic that renders visible the intersections of racial capitalism, gender and religious normativity, state and domestic violence. This framework positions the veil as both a mode of critique and a contested medium through which Muslim women navigate, negotiate, and resist the hierarchical logics of modernity, state, empire, and feminism. By attending to how the veil is shaped through representations, practices,

and discourses, the research affirms the synergy between inquiry and praxis that defines intersectionality.[vii]

Intersectionality constitutes the core theoretical and methodological foundation of this research. It has transformed feminist studies by centering difference and challenging single-axis approaches in feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial activism (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Developed by Black feminists—namely Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990)—alongside other women of color, intersetionality offers a framework for analyzing how interlocking structures of power simultaneously position subjects across categories of gender, race, class, religion, and more (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

These categories are not viewed as additive or separate, but as relationally constituted through systems of domination. Intersetionality pursues two objectives: (1) making experiences of difference visible, and (2) rethinking how categories of difference are constituted and related (Hancock 2016). It offers both an analytic orientation and a methodological commitment to the recognition of difference.

Each of the three studies applies this intersectional framework to explore Muslim women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and solidarity. The veil serves as a conceptual thread across the studies, enabling critical engagement with the lived realities of Muslim women in multiple contexts.

The first study (Study I), "Displaced Belonging: Poetics and Politics of Belonging in Leila Aboulela's 'The Ostrich' and 'Missing Out'" (hereafter *Displaced Belonging*), examines veiling and other religious practices as mediators of inclusion and exclusion in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Drawing on sociological framework of politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006a), it develops the concept of *displaced belonging* to describe how meanings of belonging are dislocated from their initial political projects and cultural contexts.

This concept emphasizes how boundaries of belonging are fluid, context-dependent, and shaped by competing political projects. It highlights a rupture in social power, values, positionalities, and practcies, attributing new meanings to both personal and collective affiliations. Displaced belonging also introduces the idea of belonging's translatability—how belongings across different communities shapeshift and/or illustrate a continuum, even when constructed by opposing political forces. In addition to gender-based privileges and class and ethnic hierarchies across contexts, it traces how the veil—as a marker of belonging—translates into racialized unbelonging. The veil reveals how religious and gendered signifiers of inclusion are

reconfigured through processes of racialization. The veil captures the intersectionality of gender*sexuality, religion, and the nation-state, while simultaneously serving as the vehicle through which the Muslim woman navigates both racialization and belonging.

The second study (Study II), *"Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' in Iran"* (hereafter *Unveiling a Feminist Strike*), analyzes how the feminist uprising reclaims the unveiling as a site of collective withdrawal from hegemonic belonging. In this context, belonging is not predefined but reconstituted through participation in the feminist strike. Drawing on the notion of the feminist strike (Gago 2020), the study shows how unveiling—under a regime of compulsory veiling—expands the strike beyond conditions of labor and beyond simply gendered demands. In this context, the strike encompasses broader structural conditions of life and restrictions on freedom.

Here, the veil reveals the gendered precarity produced by spatial marginalization, criminalization of autonomy, and economic exploitation—what is theorized as Iran's *femicide machine* (González Rodríguez 2012). The study emphasizes the dialogical relationship between power and resistance. The veil becomes a medium through which diverse and situated agencies—across class, generation, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and religion—forge collective resistance.

Rather than viewing resistance as symbolic or individual, *Unveiling a Feminist Strike* frames unveiling as a relational and collective response to intersecting systems of domination. It further advances a collective, insurgent understanding of belonging—one no longer tied to integration into hegemony and dominant structures. It redefines belonging as the outcome of activist engagement and feminist withdrawal from state control. From diverse positionalities, women reclaim autonomy and reimagine the grounds of belonging.

The third study (Study III), "Decolonizing Solidarity with(in) Muslim Women: Toward an Intersectional Justice Movement" (hereafter *Decolonizing Solidarity*), focuses on the veil as a site of regulation and disciplinary power for Muslim women feminist activism. It examines how feminist solidarities with and among Muslim women have fractured and converged around the veil during Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom uprising.

The study critically explores the veil's ambivalent role in Muslim women's feminist activism—both as a catalyst for collective activism and as a mechanism of colonial reproduction. It theorizes the *coloniality of the veil* as a concept that reveals how feminist discourses remain fixated on the veil, thereby sustaining colonial logics. Within this dynamic, the veil becomes a

regulatory site where relationalities are predefined and disciplined, agency is misrecognized and instrumentalized, and activism is polarized and oppositional.

Reframing the veil as an intersectional lens, the study critiques how oppositional interpretations of the veil reproduce colonial relations of power. Drawing on intersectional feminist thought, it proposes *decolonizing solidarity* as a strategy of collective contestation. This shift calls for moving from recognition-based empathy to shared accountability, from visibility to structural dismantling, and from fixed identities to co-constituted struggles. The study centers collective empowerment across difference and reasserts justice as an intersectional political project.

Taken together, these three studies establish the veil as a critical intersectional lens through which Muslim women's shifting positionalities and relationalities can be rendered visible. By examining belonging, resistance, and solidarity through the veil, this research challenges the homogenizing, hierarchical, and categorical logics that reduce Muslim women's struggles to fixed, isolated, and contradictory positionalities. This research insists on approaches to Muslim women's studies that remain grounded in difference, situatedness, and relational accountability.

Methodological Reflections

This qualitative research draws on cultural studies and intersectionality as complementary methodological frameworks to analyze the veil as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's experiences across contexts. The thematic focus—belonging, resistance, and solidarity—requires engagement with everyday practices, lived experiences, and cultural representations.

Combining these two frameworks offers a multi-scalar methodology capable of addressing power, positionality, and contextual variation. While cultural studies and intersectionality bring distinct strengths, this research also engages critically with their limitations. It remains attentive to analytical blind spots—particularly the essentialization of cultural difference in some strands of cultural studies, and the risks of depoliticization or marginalizing religion within intersectional approaches. These critiques inform both the theoretical orientation and the selection of materials across the three studies.

Cultural studies offers a political critique of culture, centering lived experiences, social practices, and representational systems (Winter 2014). Firstly, its transdisciplinary scope enables the exploration of Muslim women's epistemologies and ontologies across and beyond disciplinary boundaries (Grossberg 2010). This is crucial, given how Muslim women's knowledge and experience are often misrepresented, selectively represented, or rendered

inaccessible. Researchers must navigate the fragmentation of knowledge systems and the structural inaccessibility of sources.

Secondly, cultural studies is shaped by radical contextualism, which enables nuanced engagement with diasporic, national, and transnational contexts (Grossberg 2009). This is particularly effective for resisting the homogenization and decontextualization of "Muslim women" as an ontological category (Mohanty 1988). In this framework, the veil is examined as embedded within specific cultural, social, and political conditions, rather than treated as a static or universal signifier.

Thirdly, reflexivity is a core principle of cultural studies. It centers the researcher's own worldview, positionality, and embeddedness within the cultural field (Denzin 2009; Winter 2014). This is especially relevant for this research, which is informed by my own experiences, assumptions, and political standpoint as a Muslim woman from Iran living in Germany. Reflexivity enables a methodological openness that recognizes how meaning emerges through situated encounters with power, history, and location.

Cultural studies also foregrounds historical formations and discursive dynamics—essential tools for analyzing the veil in both its historical complexity and contemporary political reach (Hall 1992; 2006; McRobbie 2010). This framework supports a multimodal and adaptive research design that draws on diverse sources and analytic strategies. These include narrative analysis, discourse analysis, visual and media texts, (auto)ethnographic insight, and political observation (McRobbie 2010; Winter 2014). Together, these features enable a methodology that is iterative, flexible, and deeply responsive to the contingencies of context and power.

Beyond its role as an analytical tool, intersectionality also operates as a methodological and political praxis (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins and Bilge 2016; Phoenix 2006). It complements cultural studies by centering positionality, marginalization, and situated knowledge. Intersectionality examines how systems of power—such as racism, patriarchy, and colonial capitalism—co-construct Muslim women's subjectivities and shape differential lived experiences (Hill Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989).

Crucially, intersectionality calls for engaging with experiences of difference not as abstract objects of study, but as sites of meaning-making that challenge dominant analytical frameworks (Combahee River Collective 1977; Hancock 2016). This methodological orientation rejects extractive and universalizing approaches, emphasizing historical materialism, contingency, and relationality.

The methodology of intersectionality is shaped by two central concerns: first, the selection of categories, and second, the differentiation between them (Christensen and Jensen 2012). In much feminist scholarship, religion is either overlooked or treated as a singular, determining force—particularly in Western studies of Muslim contexts (Salem 2013). These tendencies reflect broader failures in both how categories are chosen and how their interrelations are analyzed.

In this research, intersectionality offers a corrective by viewing analytical categories as relational and contingent—for example, understanding religion as shaped by historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts, and analyzing how it co-constructs power alongside race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class, and more. The selection of analytic categories in intersectional research is flexible and context-specific, determined by the socio-political and historical dynamics under study.

Scholars emphasize that the relationships between categories should be treated as empirical questions, not predetermined analytical structures (Herrera Vivar, Lutz, and Supik 2016; Lutz 2002; Phoenix 2006). At the same time, establishing provisional anchor points remains methodologically useful for clarity and analytical traction (Ludvig 2006; McCall 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006b).

In this research, religion and gender serve as anchoring categories across all three studies. However, each study highlights different intersections. The first emphasizes race and migration; the second foregrounds nation-state, sexuality, and ethnicity; and the third focuses on coloniality, feminism, and state power. These variations reflect the flexibility of intersectionality while maintaining coherence in the project's overall orientation.

A second key issue is the differentiation between categories. Analytical categories such as race, gender, and class do not function through identical mechanisms but operate through distinct, context-dependent processes (Christensen and Jensen 2012; Verloo 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006b). In intersectional methodology, no single category holds analytical primacy. Instead, intersectional analysis is dynamic and process-oriented, prioritizing context-specific configurations over fixed hierarchies.

Leslie McCall (2005) outlines three methodological approaches to intersectional research: (1) the anticategorical approach, which rejects fixed categories and aligns with poststructuralist critiques; (2) the intracategorical approach, which explores internal differences within a single category and addresses the critiques of identity politics; and (3) the intercategorical approach,

which examines relationships between categories to expose the co-construction of power and inequality.

Although this research did not begin with McCall's typology, her distinctions resonate with how the studies evolved and how their thematic directions took shape. The research engages elements of all three approaches, depending on the material and analytical focus of each study. These methodological modes support a flexible, layered framework attentive to complexity, difference, and situated forms of resistance.

Cultural studies grounds experience in material and historical formations. Intersectionality complements this by analyzing lived experiences of difference through interrelated domains of domination. Together, they extend the analysis from cultural representations to structural and relational dimensions of power.

This methodological synergy is especially important for research committed to collectivity and to resisting hierarchical structures across contexts—even when competing claims of suffering, urgency, or analytical primacy arise. Both frameworks emphasize complexity, but intersectionality brings a relational and justice-oriented commitment that centers marginalized voices without flattening difference.

Cultural studies' emphasis on contextualization enables movement across socio-historical and geopolitical settings. Intersectionality, in turn, facilitates multiscalar analysis (Christensen and Jensen 2012). This research spans multiple sites across the SWANA region—including Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, and Sudan—and engages with a range of Muslim ethnicities, including Pashtun, Hazaras, Persian, Kurdish, Arab, and African communities. It also addresses diasporic contexts, such as the UK, US, and Europe, and analyzes power and experience across three scales: the micro level of intimate and embodied subjectivities; the meso level of institutional and communal dynamics; and the macro level of structural and global systems of domination.

Both methodological frameworks share commitments to reflexivity and critical engagement, yet they diverge in epistemological and ontological underpinnings. Cultural studies draws on Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial traditions (Winter 2014), while intersectionality emerges from Black feminist, decolonial, and women of color epistemologies and ontologies (Hancock 2016).

Beyond the foundational importance of situated knowledge, epistemic accountability, and relevance in researching Muslim women, intersectionality stands out for its non-additive, relational approach to power and positionality. It rejects essentialist or hierarchical readings of

difference and instead examines how categories of difference co-constitute one another in specific contexts.

Cultural studies, however, can at times risk essentializing cultural difference—especially in dominant framings of Muslim women's lives, where practices such as veiling or female genital mutilation are dismissed as "cultural" and disconnected from broader structures of power (Mojab 2001; Narayan 1997; 1998). Intersectionality addresses these risks by emphasizing contingency, structural complexity, and relational analysis.

Conversely, cultural studies extends the creative methodological potential of intersectionality (Choo and Ferree 2010; Davis 2008) by enabling cross-disciplinary, multimodal, and context-sensitive inquiry. Its openness to diverse methods and materials supports a flexible and iterative research design, which is essential for studying complex and shifting power relations.

In this research, cultural studies' thematic focus on resistance complements intersectionality's justice-oriented commitment. This alignment supports the project's aim of contributing to the collective empowerment of Muslim women. The synergy between critical inquiry and praxis embedded in intersectionality creates space for a methodology that is both shaped by and responsive to Muslim women's activism.

Intersectionality not only maps intersecting positionalities and reveals contingency and relationality (Choo and Ferree 2010; Phoenix 2006), but also challenges dominant power structures and contributes to the reconfiguration of power within and across communities of struggle (Hill Collins 1990; Yuval-Davis 1999). As such, it offers both an analytic and a political framework for transformative research.

These methodological orientations are operationalized differently across the three studies, each of which engages distinct materials and modes of inquiry. Scholars emphasize the value of life narratives, everyday experiences, and grassroots activism as empirical entry points for intersectional research (Bilge 2011; 2013; Hill Collins 1990). Centering lived experience shows that intersectionality is not an abstract paradigm, but a material and affective reality—embedded in structures of power that shape everyday life, social belonging, and the conditions for political resistance.

Sources and Research Materials

The first study, *Displaced Belonging*, analyzes two short stories by Leila Aboulela (2010; 2018)—"The Ostrich" and "Missing Out"—as cultural texts that articulate experiences of racialization, religiosity, and gendered embodiment. Their significance lies not only in aesthetic

value or cultural expression but in their function as political, affective, and psychological spaces where negotiations of belonging are staged and reimagined beyond the fictional world.

This study approaches Muslim migrant literature through an intersectional lens grounded in everyday life, affirming that intersectionality is most meaningful when situated in lived experiences. This body of work remains marginalized within literary scholarship—particularly in migrant and postcolonial literatures—and within broader Anglophone cultural discourses (Hassan 2014; Nash 2012). These short-stories are not only sites for intersectional analysis but also cultural and political interventions that challanges the erasure and misrepresentation of Muslim voices, particulalry those of Muslim women.

The second study, *Unveiling a Feminist Strike*, focuses on the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising in Iran It draws on a wide range of materials produced during and through the movement, including protest slogans, chants, songs, graffiti, digital media campaigns, news reports, legal texts, and cultural commentary.

These materials are analyzed as cultural and affective expressions of grassroots feminist resistance, reflecting the urgency, performativity, and collective authorship of the uprising. Rather than relying on preselected datasets, the study works with real-time cultural production as it emerged, treating these expressions as embedded in feminist practices and histories. Their eclectic and situated nature affirms the study's commitment to engaging knowledge generated in resistance—knowledge that is affectively charged, historically grounded, and relationally produced.

The third study, *Decolonizing Solidarity*, draws primarily on academic literature and feminist discourses, alongside cultural materials such as political statements, performances, visual culture, media representations, and movement-generated texts. These sources are selected for their capacity to reveal how discourses on the veil construct social and psychological realities, position Muslim women relationally, and shape the affective and material conditions of their activism.

The study also engages with policy documents and theoretical debates in intersectionality and decoloniality, particularly where they intersect with the lived practices and political imaginaries of Muslim women. These materials are treated as discursive sites embedded in colonial, geopolitical, and epistemic power relations that regulate how meaning is produced around the veil. This selection reflects a commitment to contextual, relational, and critical knowledge that resists the essentialization of Muslim women's struggles

Methodological Implications of Intersectionality

Intersectionality emerged as a major paradigm in women's studies (McCall 2005). More than an analytical tool, it functions as a methodological and political praxis. As it travels across geographies and ontological frameworks, intersectionality adapts to diverse contexts and acquires new meanings (Knapp 2005). Scholars, however, stress the need to uphold its theoretical foundation within the epistemologies and ontologies of Black women and women of color. Examining interconnected systems of oppression and resisting the reduction of identity to singular social positions or universalized struggles remain central to intersectionality, though not its sole objective. A core principle of intersectionality is its non-additive and process-oriented approach, which underscores the interrelated nature of social categories and their role in shaping complex power relations (Lutz 2002; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

The methodology of intersectionality is shaped by two central concerns: the selection of categories and the differentiation between them (Christensen and Jensen 2012). The number of categories analyzed remains flexible, dependent on historical and socio-political contexts. Discussions on category selection emphasize that their interrelations should be treated as open empirical questions rather than predetermined structures (Lutz 2002; Herrera Vivar, Lutz, and Supik 2016; Phoenix 2006). However, establishing anchor points remains a strategic necessity for analytical clarity (McCall 2005; Ludvig 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006b). A second key issue is differentiation between categories, as race, gender, and class do not function through identical mechanisms but rather through distinct, context-dependent processes (Christensen and Jensen 2012; Yuval-Davis 2006b; Verloo 2006). No single category holds analytic primacy over others; intersectional analysis remains dynamic and process-oriented, prioritizing context-specific interactions over fixed hierarchies.

Leslie McCall (2005) identifies three methodological approaches to intersectional research: *the* anticategorical *approach*, which rejects fixed categories and aligns with poststructuralist critiques of identity as inherently unstable; *the* intracategorical *approach*, which explores differential powers and positionalities within a single category; and *the* intercategorical *approach*, which emphasizes the relationships between multiple categories to reveal structural inequalities. This dissertation does not adhere to a single approach but employs a dynamic methodological framework that shifts depending on each thematic focus. While "Displaced Belonging" examines how power operates differently through established categories, "Feminist Strike" and "Decolonizing Solidarity" focus on unraveling the instability of these categories, highlighting their historical and political contingency.

Beyond how categories are enacted in intersectional research, scholars emphasize the significance of life narratives, everyday experiences, and grassroots activism as empirical entry points for intersectionality research (Hill Collins 1990; Bilge 2013b; 2011). Christensen and Jensen (2012) argue that centering lived experiences offers a deeper understanding of power dynamics, demonstrating that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical construct but a material reality actively negotiated in daily life. This approach reflects a methodological shift toward dynamic and context-sensitive frameworks that challenge fixed analytical categories by grounding analysis in situated histories, lived experiences, and collective activism from the bottom up. By attending to the interaction between micro- and macro-level structures, this study reveals how Muslim women's experiences, both personal and collective, underscore the relational nature of power across different scales. A context-sensitive methodology in intersectionality research is therefore essential for making invisibilities visible and reconceptualizing the relationships between analytical categories at the micro, meso, and macro levels. These methodological considerations are reflected across the three studies in this dissertation, each employing intersectionality as both an analytical and methodological framework, yet applying it in different ways to engage with distinct themes.

Methodological Framework for Displaced Belonging

The first study applies a comparative methodology to two short stories by Leila Aboulela (2010; 2018)—"The Ostrich" and "Missing Out"—using literary narrative analysis to examine how Muslim experiences of belonging are politically constructed and contested. The research began with "The Ostrich" (first published in 1997), narrated by Samra, a Sudanese Muslim woman reflecting on life in London and memories of Khartoum.

This initial focus emerged from a broader engagement with Aboulela's work, which often centers Muslim women in diaspora.[viii] "The Ostrich" was selected for its nuanced depiction of diasporic belonging from a Muslim woman' perspective. However, the later discovery of "Missing Out"—a lesser-known story narrated by Samra's husband, Majdy—shifted the study toward a more layered and relational inquiry.

Pairing these narratives enabled a comparative analysis of two interconnected but distinct perspectives. This allowed the study to examine configurations of gender, racialization, migration, and religiosity. Rather than collapsing the protagonists into predefined identity categories such as "Muslim women" or "Muslim migrants," the methodology foregrounds relationality.

It challenges tendencies in literary and feminist analysis to isolate Muslim men's and women's experiences or treat their differences as oppositional. Instead, this approach resists racialized and binary framings, emphasizing the intersectional and relational construction of belonging within diasporic and gendered power structures.

The comparative analysis is both contextually sensitive and theoretically grounded, requiring methodological transparency throughout (Palmberger and Gingrich 2014). To situate the narratives, the study draws on sociological and ethnographic insights related to Sudan and the UK. It follows an abductive logic—beginning with a research question rather than fixed categories.

Thematically, the concept of displaced belonging emerges through focused engagement with narrative structure, setting, and character portrayal. Yuval-Davis's (2006a; 2011; 2016) framework of the politics of belonging provides the theoretical grounding that links textual analysis to social and political structures.

Character analysis highlights how gender and religion shape one's belonging. Narrative voice and focalization reveal how power and agency operate within the text—who tells the story and through whose lens (Gerald 2005). The inner voice, psychological disposition, and embodied knowledge—distinctive features of literary narrative—illustrate how belonging is felt, negotiated, and mediated.

These dynamics unfold through spirituality, interpersonal interaction, social structures, and political discourse. Setting functions as a meaning-making site, emphasizing continuity between colonial histories, migration trajectories, and racialized experience. The comparative framing between Sudan and the UK shows how the public sphere is experienced as personally political (Russo and Mohanty 1991), and how social hierarchies shape differential belonging.

Religion and gender serve as analytical anchors in this study. They are understood as historically constructed and politically contingent (Russo and Mohanty 1991; Mohanty 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997; 2011). This approach affirms that individuals and groups can be simultaneously excluded from certain relations of power while being included in systems of domination (Hill Collins 1990). Through comparative intersectional analysis, the study demonstrates that inclusion and exclusion are not structured by single categories, nor do such categories operate through identical logics.

Instead, categories function through context-specific, relational processes that are historically embedded. This produces distinct forms of inclusion and exclusion that are shaped by the

intersecting structures of power within and across the diasporic and national spaces in which the stories unfold.

Methodological Framework for Unveiling a Feminist Strike

The examination of Iran's 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising in the second study was analytically, politically, and personally motivated. Emerging from within a Muslim-majority society, the uprising reclaimed the veil—often overlooked by cultural relativist perspectives or hyper-politicized in dominant feminist discourses—as a site of collective defiance.

To engage with this reclamation, the study adopted cultural studies as a methodological framework for its emphasis on resistance, contradiction, and meaning-making within lived culture. It treats experience as an analytical resource (Pickering 2010), asking how experinces during the protests—particularly unveiling—are narrativized, visualized, and made socially and politically legible.

The study focuses on what is lived during the uprising, highlighting how the uprising surfaced feminist subjectivities long marginalized or suppressed. It traces how unveiling reactivated histories of resistance and embodied feminist politics grounded in intersectionality.

To analyze these layered dynamics, the study employs a three-level approach to cultural production of a resistance (Davis 2010): (1) a political economy analysis of how structural and legal contexts—such as compulsory veiling laws—shape protest conditions; (2) textual and discourse analysis of slogans, protest media, and visual imagery; and (3) ethnographic and sociological engagement, including everyday feminist practices, lived experience, and (auto)ethnographic reflection.

The empirical materials include protest performances, social media content, visual materials, journalistic texts, and narrative accounts. These sources reflect dispersed yet situated expressions of feminist resistance and highlight the lived, embodied, and affective dimensions of struggle.

The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom"—originating from the Kurdish feminist movement—called for a methodology that centers intersectional and marginalized feminist genealogies. From the outset, the study rejected abstract categories such as "Iranian" or "Iranian women."

These terms have been instrumentalized by the state to conscript bodies into hegemonic projects and by dominant feminist discourse to sideline non-Persian, non-heteronormative, and non-Shi'i subjectivities. In contrast, the study moves outward from the act of unveiling and the

slogan's historiography to map how feminist practices emerge across bodies, sites of oppression, and struggles.

This approach foregrounds feminist resistance that operates through intersectionality—even when rendered invisible or unrecognized as such. It affirms histories of subaltern feminism that challenge both state violence and the exclusions embedded in centralist feminist narratives.

The study draws on cultural studies' commitment to historicization and context, and intersectionality's focus on how intersecting power structures shape resistance and subjectivity. Unveiling is not treated as symbolic rupture or imported gesture of resistance, but as a materially grounded act—formed through state violence, situated agency, and collective defiance.

Working in real time as the uprising unfolded, the study followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between empirical material and evolving conceptual frames. The theoretical framework of feminist strike (Gago 2020) offers a conceptual lens for understanding resistance as collective participation in actions that disrupt domination, rather than as rooted in identity-based contestation of power.

Similarly, the metaphor of the femicide machine (González Rodríguez 2012) reimagines gendered violence as the convergence of bodily, spatial, legal, political, and economic control. These frameworks help theorize the uprising's dialogical relationship to oppression and its radical potential in confronting interlocking relations of power.

Finally, the study was guided by a reflexive feminist practice attuned to the researcher's own positionality and to the epistemic erasure of Kurdish and other minoritized feminist genealogies. This reflexive stance—expanded in later sections—shaped the research process and informed its ethical and political commitments.

Methodological Framework for Decolonizing Solidarity

The third study was politically and ethically motivated. It emerged at a moment when Muslim women's activism—brought to the center of feminist conversations by the women's resistance in Afghanistan (2021) and Iran (2022)—was increasingly tokenized and appropriated for institutional agendas, media narratives, or neoliberal white feminist framings. After October 7, 2023, this momentum toward transnational feminist solidarities was disrupted by the instrumentalization of antagonistic framings of feminism and Islam, particularly in the context of the war in Gaza. The study focuses on the contradictions between what is lived and what is institutionally or discursively recognized (Davis 2010).

These dynamics fractured emerging alliances and deepened polarizations in global feminist discourse. This study responds to that rupture by reimagining the practice of solidarity through intersectional feminist theorizing. It adopts a methodological approach that draws on cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, grounded in intersectionality and decolonial thinking.

The decision to engage cultural studies aimed to analyze the uprising not only as a political event, but also as a discourse which (in)forms cultural productions—i.e., how meaning is produced through language and what that meaning does in the world (Willig 2014a; 2014b; Winter 2014). The notion of epistemic disobedience provided a decolonizing praxis, enabling the study to challenge dominant frameworks and foreground plural ways of knowing and resisting (Mignolo 2010).

The study is grounded in decolonial reflexivity and intersectional critique. This enables a layered reading of feminist discourse and its institutional, cultural, and geopolitical implications. It asks how meaning is regulated around the veil and how discursive power operates across transnational contexts. It draws on cases from Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, France, Germany, and Palestine to explore how colonial epistemologies within feminist practice fracture, erase, or silence Muslim women's agency and collective activism. A distinctive feature of this methodology is the use of contradiction and erasure as analytic entry points. Tensions, exclusions, and silences—such as the absence of solidarity—are not treated as gaps, but as manifestations of domination and political ordering.

Intersectionality was employed as both a strategic and political method to rethink feminist solidarity. It attends to power, positionality, and the uneven landscapes of recognition and visibility within transnational and regional feminist politics.

This research follows an abductive logic of inquiry (Reichertz 2014). In this study, abduction is oriented toward identifying ruptures around the veil, contradictions, epistemic violence (Spivak 1985; 1994), and acts of silencing within transnational feminist discourse. Rather than testing a fixed hypothesis, the study engages critically with mainstream and neoliberal feminism, third world feminism, Islamic feminism, situated observations, and lived experience.

The study engages a range of materials reflecting both feminist discourses and grassroots activisms. These include public feminist statements and campaigns, digital archives and reports, media coverage, and social media conversations. They are complemented by autoethnographic insight, political observation, and activist engagement in diasporic and transnational feminist spaces.

Together, these materials provide a textured account of how solidarity with(in) Muslim women is forged, fractured, or foreclosed in different political and discursive contexts. The study uses a multi-scalar orientation to trace how feminist discourses circulate, sediment, and exclude—across scales ranging from global institutions to local activist settings and interpersonal solidarities.

Because the veil is neither singular nor uniform—but shaped by divergent histories, contested meanings, and varied modes of regulation—this study adopts an anti-categorical approach to the figure of the Muslim woman. It rejects essentialist framings and challenges the tendency to treat positions of oppressor and oppressed as fixed or predetermined.

Emphasizing the differential and contingent nature of power, the study juxtaposes the visibility and invisibility of Muslim women in feminist discourse. It asks which struggles are recognized, and which are met with silence, appropriation, or violence—and under what conditions.

Through cross-cultural comparison, the study shows how Muslim women's voices are either amplified or subsumed. It exposes the political and discursive forces that render some legible while silencing others. Rethinking solidarity through an intersectional and decolonial lens, it reclaims difference not as a barrier but as a generative resource for cultivating differential and intersectional consciousness (Hill Collins 1990; Sandoval 2000)—a political capacity to forge solidarities across asymmetries of power, experience, and positionality.

Positionality, Reflexivity, Ethical and Political Commitments

Reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative research, especially within cultural studies and intersectionality-based methodologies (Hancock 2016; May and Perry 2014; Winter 2014). It requires continuous interrogation of how knowledge is situated, and how the researcher's position, experiences, and values shape the research process—including the selection, interpretation, and use of data.

In intersectionality studies, reflexivity demands an acute awareness of epistemological, political, and ontological positioning. It actively engages with the power relations embedded in research to ensure that analysis remains accountable to the voices and struggles it seeks to represent. Importantly, it requires seeking out perspectives that may be obscured by the researcher's own epistemic location, and actively resisting the reproduction of erasure and invisibility (Pillow 2003; 2015).

As a queer Muslim woman researcher and activist, I was born and raised in Tehran, Iran, and have been residing in Berlin, Germany. My Shi'a and Persian identity, shaped within the socio-

political context of Iran's capital, informed my early experiences of gender, class, and religious politics. Migration to Germany further shaped my understanding of race, sexuality, and neoliberal governance—particularly through the entanglement of racism, patriarchy, and anti-migrant policy regimes.

I occupy a position marked by both privilege and marginalization, requiring continuous reflection in my research and activism. My access to higher education and citizenship allows entry into academic and social institutions. Yet, within these spaces, I often encounter tokenization and discrimination. Identifying as both Muslim and queer is frequently treated as a contradiction—seen as unintelligible within dominant cultural logics. These dynamics position me as an outsider within: embedded in, yet estranged from, both scholarly and activist spaces (Hill Collins 1990).

My contemporary experiences as a Muslim woman in diaspora have critically shaped this research. This research emerged in response to three defining political moments I lived through: (1) the post-2015 resurgence of anti-Muslim racism and restrictive migration policies in Europe and the U.S.; (2) the 2021–2022 women-led protests and uprisings in Afghanistan and Iran; and (3) the ongoing genocidal war in Gaza since 2023. These events not only framed the urgency of the research but also underscored the stakes of feminist, intersectional, and decolonial engagement in the face of multiscalar violence and exclusion.

My personal and political experiences directly shaped the central question of this research: how the veil functions as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's experiences across contexts. As an Iranian living in Germany, I was not immediately identified as Muslim due to my lack of veiling.

However, once identified, I encountered forms of racism that revealed the deep entanglement of religion, race, and gender. I witnessed how Muslim identity—even without visible markers—could provoke surveillance, suspicion, or exclusion: being asked to leave a train, facing hostility from flatmates, or having my academic work dismissed as "too subjective."

The contrast was even starker for visibly veiled Muslim women, often portrayed as religiously extreme, socially isolated, or culturally regressive. Their marginalization was framed as self-inflicted rather than structurally imposed through hegemonic racism and Islamophobia. In contrast, I was positioned as the "different Muslim woman"—tolerated because I did not wear the veil and conformed to dominant expectations of gender norms. My partial inclusion was thus both contingent and conditional.

The veil, as a result, became a hidden presence in my life—something I would discreetly put on in my student dorm during moments of homesickness and disorientation. In diaspora, it carried emotional and symbolic weight, marking both disconnection and continuity. Though I had long resented it in Iran, where it was legally enforced and central to many of my experiences of violence and exclusion, it became a site of contradiction. The veil was a deeply ambivalent object that I could navigate affectively but had not yet found the language to articulate the complexity of my experiences with it. That tension became a point of departure for rethinking the veil beyond fixed symbolism or binary interpretations.

My education in postcolonial cultural studies—with a focus on literary and scholarly works by Black women and women of color—reframed my lived experience as legible and politically meaningful. Intersectionality offered both a critical method and a praxis through which I could engage with experience, discourse, and power, and begin theorizing the veil as a situated lens into diverse Muslim women's lives.

The interdisciplinary nature of my educational background in literary and cultural studies—combined with multilingualism and activist engagement—enabled me to move between sources, materials, and knowledges across multiple communities and contexts. This positioning allowed me to think beyond both Persian and European knowledge reservoirs.

It also shaped my ethical and political engagement with the diverse experiences of Muslim women, including those for whom the veil is central to feminist and political struggle and modes of belonging. These insights led me to understand the veil not merely as an object of regulation, resistance, and belonging, but as a complex, connective, and situated lens.

The veil reveals the uneven, intersectional terrain of my life. It functions as a mode of inquiry into how gender, race, religion, class, and national belonging intersect—whether in conditions of constraint or in acts of solidarity and refusal. This orientation informed not only my conceptual approach, but also my ethical stance toward knowledge production and relational accountability.

Conducting research on Muslim women's experiences and activism in politically volatile and discursively contested contexts raises profound ethical and political questions. These terrains are shaped by risks to safety, security, and representation. This research does not treat those challenges as peripheral but takes them as central to its ethical and methodological inquiry.

Key questions emerged: How can marginalized voices be represented without reproducing victim/hero narratives? How can one engage with struggle without appropriating it? And how can researchers speak with, rather than about, communities in resistance? A core dilemma I

faced was how to remain accountable to feminist voices and movements I am both embedded in and distanced from.

This challenge became especially urgent as geopolitical circumstances—such as war, displacement, and humanitarian crises in Sudan; violent repression, decades-long sanctions, and the constant threat of war in Iran; the ongoing genocide and colonial displacement in Gaza; and deepening poverty, instability, and violence in Afghanistan—demanded engagement, while also stretching collective capacities across multiple causes in real time. Rather than adopt a detached analytical stance, this research is situated within these struggles, resisting the hierarchical distinction between researcher and subject.

Navigating this space required attentiveness to the risk of being instrumentalized—as a "native informant," an "apologist," or a token representative. It also meant resisting the flattening of Muslim women's struggles into singular or essentialized narratives. One moment that stayed with me occurred during the carpet bombing of Gaza and the height of Islamophobic feminist advocacy in Europe (Al-Taher and Younes 2024; Guardian International Staff 2024; Hoog et al. 2024; Marquardt 2024).

A state-funded feminist academic network—publicly committed to intersectionality—asked to feature a photo of me mobilizing in Berlin to represent the bravery of "Iranian women." I suggested instead an image from Iran: veiled and unveiled students walking toward a university entrance beneath a quote from Khomeini in Persian script. The organization accepted. But when they sent me the preview of the report, the Persian script had been cropped out.

When I asked about the removal, they cited space constraints and replaced the image altogether. That polite act of erasure—removing even the visual trace of a Muslim-coded text—spoke volumes. It illustrated how certain forms of visibility are instrumentalized precisely to render others invisible, and how intersectionality can be quietly depoliticized within liberal academic feminist discourse (Bilge 2013).

While intersectionality offers a powerful framework to engage subjugated knowledges—such as women's activism in Iran or the anti-colonial struggles of Kurdish and Palestinian women—its application across contexts requires ethical attention. Without ethical and political commitment, it can be stripped of its political force and reduced to symbolic inclusion.

As Sirma Bilge (2011; 2013) warns, the institutional uptake of intersectionality can depoliticize it, severing it from its roots in anti-racist and decolonial feminist praxis. This research resists that risk by grounding its intersectional methodology in the epistemologies and ontologies of

Black, Indigenous, and Global South women. This grounding is both an ethical and political commitment that shapes how knowledge is produced and used (Hancock 2016).

It affirms that connections between struggles must not be extractive or merely representational, but rooted in mutual empowerment, self-reflexivity, and multidirectional visibility—what Ange-Marie Hancock (2016, 21–24) describes as "intersectionality stewardship."[ix]

The political stakes of this research have been heightened by my own activism, particularly through mobilization around ruptures in feminist discourse on Muslim women. These engagements have exposed me to risks beyond the academic realm. My migration has become a form of exile due to political dissent, and my activism in Germany has compromised my safety, sense of belonging, and economic security.

These experiences underscore the political and ethical urgency of integrating decolonial and feminist frameworks. Their convergence offers a necessary corrective to dominant knowledge production, enabling a research praxis that is justice oriented.

Cross-Study Methodological Coherence

This research is methodologically anchored in the synergy between cultural studies and intersectionality. While each study in this cumulative project engages distinct research questions, materials, and contexts, they are held together by shared methodological commitments: reflexivity, attention to power, rejection of essentialism, and the pursuit of decolonial, justice-oriented inquiry. Coherence lies not in uniformity but in a relational and evolving methodological stance—one shaped by contingency, critical engagement, and accountability.

Across all three studies, intersectionality functions as both a theoretical and methodological orientation. It informs how categories of difference are selected, how they interact, and how power operates relationally across them. Each study mobilizes intersectionality differently: *Displaced Belonging* uses an intracategorical lens to examine differentiated migrant experiences through literary narrative; *Unveiling a Feminist Strike* combines intercategorical and anticategorical strategies to explore feminist protest in Iran; and *Decolonizing Solidarity* adopts an anticategorical logic to interrogate epistemic ruptures within transnational feminist solidarity. This variation reflects intersectionality's insistence on contextual specificity and methodological flexibility.

Cultural studies reinforces this coherence through its commitments to radical contextualism, transdisciplinarity, and critique of representation. It enables a historically and politically

grounded approach that foregrounds experience, discourse, and cultural production. All three studies used abductive reasoning, allowing inquiry to remain responsive to conceptual and political developments—especially as the second and third studies unfolded in real time during uprisings and war.

The studies differ in method and mode: literary and comparative narrative analysis in the first study; multimodal cultural analysis and discourse analysis in the second and third studies. Yet all treat lived experiences and cultural productions as empirical sites of knowledge. They challenge dominant paradigms and centralize subjugated perspectives, prioritizing feminist, Black, Indigenous, and Global South epistemologies. This aligns with an ethical commitment to intersectionality as political praxis.

The methodology deepened across the research, evolving in response to crisis and struggle. As geopolitical events unfolded—from the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising to the war in Gaza—methodological choices became not only epistemic but political. This progression reflects a cumulative commitment: not only to study intersecting systems of power, but to contest them through relational, reflexive, and situated ways of knowledge production and political activism.

Synthesis of the Studies

The three studies that form the empirical foundation of this research are unified by a central analytical arc: they examine how the veil functions as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's lived realities across diverse contexts. Positioned within Muslim-minority, Muslim-majority, and transnational settings, each study interrogates how the veil mediates subjectivity, navigations of power, and contested relationalities. Rather than treating the veil as a static cultural or religious symbol, this research reclaims it as a conceptual entry point into the shifting terrain of Muslim women's lives—across positionalities, structures, and affective geographies.

The studies collectively trace how the veil renders legible the mutually constitutive dynamics of gender and religion, while also illuminating how it operates as a site of racialization, (de)sexualization, and colonization across micro, meso, and macro levels. Simultaneously, they foreground the veil's role as a site of political, affective, and epistemic intervention—mobilized in relation to community-based practices, nation-state structures, and global feminist discourses. Though each study approaches this analytical arc differently—through literary analysis, cultural production, and feminist critique—they are held together by their grounding in intersectionality, shared methodological orientations, and commitment to theorizing from within lived and situated knowledge. This synthesis unfolds across three emerging thematic arcs: (1) belonging across spectrum, (2) topography of agency, and (3) solidarities as interstices.

Belonging Across Spectrum

Across all three studies, the veil emerges as a multi-scalar and relational lens through which the shifting spectrum of Muslim women's belonging becomes visible. At the micro level, the veil signals inclusion and exclusion in relational and context-specific ways (Study I; Study II). In Sudan, it marks Samra's gendered belonging within hegemonic moral frameworks; in the UK, Majdy's association with his veiled wife places him outside normative racial and national regimes of belonging (Study I). These parallel yet contrasting experiences highlight how the veil functions as a socially coded site through which racialization, gender norms, and religiosity intersect and configure differentiated access to belonging (Study I; Study II; Study III).

At the meso level, the veil serves to gauge women's belonging within both Muslim and non-Muslim societies—shaping how their visibility, religiosity, comportment, and social roles are read and assessed, while simultaneously regulating their participation and exposure to precarity across public and domestic spheres (Study I; Study II). It operates as a site where processes of racialization, class stratification, ethnic differentiation, gender and sexual normativity, and religious morality converge (Study I; Study II; Study III). These processes co-determine who is recognized as a national subject and who is rendered deviant, non-integrable, or disposable within hegemonic regimes of visibility and recognition (Study I; Study II; Study III). In this way, belonging is not simply withheld or granted but is continuously differentiated, conditioned, and often weaponized—as illustrated across the contexts of the UK, Sudan, and Iran (Study I; Study II).

At the macro level, the veil is instrumentalized through transnational discourses that reduce Muslim women to polarized types: either submissive or subversive, religious or secular, feminist or anti-imperialist (Study I; Study II; Study III). These binaries erase the contingent nature of belonging, while imposing moral economies and epistemic hierarchies around veil. Attending to the multiplicity of (un)veiling—as a practice shaped by social, political, and affective conditions—enables a more layered reading of how belonging is navigated relationally, differentially, and contextually (Study III). This spectrum of belonging reveals not only the heterogeneity of Muslim women's positionalities but also the asymmetries and relational dynamics among them—structuring how difference is read, how proximity or distance is produced, and how relationality emerges across contexts (Study II; Study III).

Topography of Agency

Building on the spectrum of belonging, the three studies reject the reduction of Muslim women's agency to singular acts of resistance. They demonstrate that agentic possibilities are

intersectionally constituted, historically situated, and contextually negotiated—emerging through specific configurations of power and belonging across diasporic, national, and transnational sites.

In *Displaced Belonging*, Samra navigates racialized regimes and gendered hierarchies in the UK through strategic compliance in public life and partial accommodation of dominant norms, while asserting religious agency within the domestic sphere. Homemaking becomes an affective form of contestation against the politics of exclusion. Her agency is shaped by ambivalence and relationality, informed by displacement, affective attachments, and the constraints of diasporic life.

In *Unveiling a Feminist Strike*, the collective act of unveiling in Iran—within a regime of compulsory veiling—is configured as a historically grounded expression of feminist resistance. It emerges from intersectional grievances rooted in gender apartheid, state violence, and economic precarity. Yet even in moments of collective defiance, agency is neither symbolic nor uniform. It assumes divergent forms and motivations across class, generation, geography, and political subjectivity.

Decolonizing Solidarity critiques the discursive tendency to tether the veil exclusively to resistant agency. It shows how this reduction flattens lived experience and forecloses other modes of agency—such as care, refusal, survival, or affective negotiation—that do not conform to dominant scripts of resistance. The symbolic coding of the veil as either oppressive or liberatory constitutes a disciplinary frame through which agency is legitimized or dismissed, often by those situated outside the communities being analyzed.

As Patricia Hill Collins remarks (1990), binary logic, oppositional difference, and objectification function as core mechanisms of intersectional domination. These discursive operations constrain the intelligibility of complex, ambivalent, and non-resistant forms of agency. They also entrench a regime of legibility in which certain actions are valorized as political, while others are rendered private, irrelevant, or apolitical.

Together, the three studies unsettle hegemonic frameworks that either render Muslim women's agency invisible or recognize it only when it aligns with its own prescription of resistance. They foreground the multiplicity of agentic expressions—rooted in lived experience, historical continuity, and situated contestation. The veil, in this context, functions not merely as a sign of resistance or compliance, but as a discursive site that regulates which forms of action are intelligible as political and which are denied recognition.

Solidarities as Interstices

Building on this topography of agency, the studies demonstrate how feminist solidarities with(in) Muslim women are formed, fractured, or foreclosed. They argue that solidarity cannot be premised on categorical sameness but must be rethought as an interstitial practice—one that emerges through situated relationalities across difference. The veil plays a central role in structuring or disrupting these solidarities, particularly when it is discursively mobilized as a binary marker of submission or subversion (Study II; Study III).

The studies show that the veil is often interpreted through dominant frameworks—liberal, feminist, postcolonial, or anti-imperialist—which impose fixed meanings and deny Muslim women the capacity to define their own political subjectivities (Study I: Study II; Study III). These interpretive discourses reproduce epistemic domination, replacing dialogical relationality with predefined typologies (Study III). Dissociating the interpretation of Muslim women's agency from the dominant doxa of resistance inscribed onto the veil (Bilge 2010) enables the reclamation of unveiling from colonial epistemologies—without severing veiling from the material and spiritual conditions that shape Muslim women's lives (Study III).

When relationalities are no longer obscured by rigid analytical categories or oppositional narratives of veil, the contours of agency across the continuum of belonging become visible (Study II; Stuyd III). This topography of agency weaves solidarities through interstices—fostering connectivity and mutual relevance rather than imposing a teleology of atomization, antagonism, or essentialist difference (Study III). Without such reorientation, relations with(in Muslim women remain constructed, apolitical, and, at best, empathetic—lacking the analytical and political relevance necessary for collective contestation (Study III).

At the micro level, Samra's solidarity with Majdy—complying with the racialized politics of belonging in the UK by not veiling—reflects a merely contractual and hierarchical relation (Study I). In contrast, Majdy's revisiting of their religious difference to affirm his relationality to Samra constitutes a shift toward mutual empowerment, even though enacted within the confined domestic domain (Study I). At the meso level, the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising demonstrates that relationalities are not grounded in abstract identifications or gendered sameness, but in collective participation across intersectional differences to resist domination (Study II). At the macro level, transnational discourses structure Muslim women's relationalities through binary codings—particularly through the veil—with the effect of fragmenting solidarities and foreclosing the conditions for collective activism across geopolitical and ideological contexts (Study III).

Taken together, the three studies bring afore practices of feminist solidarities that are not categorical, hierarchical, or oppositional. They show that solidarity lies in the uncovering of relationalities, mutual relevance, and collective empowerment against intersecting oppressions. Solidarities as interstices do not erase difference but mobilize it toward collective contestation, forging new grounds for feminist politics with(in) and across Muslim women's struggles.

This research demonstrates that the veil, when viewed as an intersectional lens, illuminates the relational and contested dimensions of Muslim women's belonging, agency, and solidarity. They challenge binary paradigms that reduce Muslim women's struggles to oppositional categories of oppression and resistance. Instead, they foreground the multiplicity of experiences and practices through which Muslim women navigate intersecting structures of power. By attending to the spectrum of belonging, the heterogeneity of agency, and the interstitial practice of solidarity, this research contributes to the reimagining of intersectional feminist and decolonial frameworks—centering the lived, affective, and situated struggles of Muslim women across contexts.

Contribution to Knowledge

This section outlines the original contributions this research makes to scholarly knowledge, conceptual thinking, methodology, and feminist praxis. Across three interlinked studies, the research advances new ways of theorizing Muslim women's experiences of belonging, agency, and solidarity through the veil as an intersectional lens. Rather than offering isolated findings, the research develops an integrated framework that challenges binary logics across multiple domains in feminist and postcolonial discourses, foregrounds the intersectionality of Muslim women, and proposes new grounds for decolonizing feminist engagements. The contributions emerge both from the specific interventions of each study and from their synthesis that reimagines the veil as a multi-scalar site of relational contestation and connection.

This research makes several critical conceptual and theoretical contributions that reshape existing understandings of Muslim women's lived experiences and feminist theorizing. First, it challenges the framing in gender research that view Muslim women's experiences solely through gender and dismiss religion as analytically irrelevant, reaffirming ontologies that impose categorical separation and hierarchy among social differences (Salem 2013). Instead, it shows that gender and religion operate simultaneously across diverse political and cultural contexts, without excluding or minimizing the relevance of other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality. More specifically, it demonstrates that Muslim women's agency and feminist activisms often emerge not in opposition to religion and religiosity, but through

navigating the historical and spiritual possibilities formed by them—creating innovative terrains of feminist struggle.

Second, the research contributes to intersectionality's twofold intellectual goal: making invisibilities visible and reconfiguring the analytical relations between categories of difference. In a further step, it addresses a critical gap within intersectionality itself, where religion has remained underexplored (Hancock 2016). The research is attentive to the asymmetries in the representation of Muslim women's experiences across the Global South and Global North, while also addressing intersectionality's US-centric focus (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mahmood 2012; Mohanty 2003; Narayan 1997). It contributes to intersectionality's growing engagement with decolonial and transnational feminist thought without displacing the political centrality of race or erasing its groundedness in the experiences of Black women and women of color in the U.S. (Abu-Lughod 2015; Bilge 2013; Lugones 2010; Nash 2019). This research embeds intersectionality within broader global struggles for justice and epistemic decolonization.

Third, the research repositions the veil as an intersectional, rather than treating it as a fixed cultural, religious, or political symbol. It reveals how the veil has become a yardstick for assessing Muslim women's identities, agencies, and activism, situating them within binary frameworks—modern or traditional, submissive or subversive, feminist or Islamist—that obscure their situated complexities. Instead, the veil is theorized as a dynamic site through which processes of racialization, gendered regulation, secularism, and coloniality are made visible. It also exposes the relationalities between Islamic authoritarianism, neoliberal and capitalist democracies, as well as centralist and colonial feminisms.

The research introduces several key conceptual innovations across the three studies. The first study conceptualizes *displaced belonging* to theorize the contingency, relationality, and shifting meanings of Muslim women's belonging, dissociating it from essentialized cultural or territorial claims. The second study frames gendered precarity through the operation of intersecting systems of domination—conceptualized as the *femicide machine*—and advances the *feminist strike* as a situated and insurgent reconfiguration of collective resistance. This rearticulates feminist imaginaries beyond Eurocentric frameworks of gender equality and rights into broader intersectional justice movements. The third study conceptualizes *the coloniality of the veil* to expose how Muslim women's agency and relationalities are disciplined through binary codings within feminist discourses. It proposes *decolonizing solidarity* as both a theoretical intervention and political strategy for mobilizing Muslim women's agency and activism across difference.

This research offers empirical contributions to literary studies, the feminist international, and transnational intersetional thinking. Across three situated studies, it grounds theoretical developments in concrete analyses of Muslim women's lived experiences. The first study contributes to Anglophone migrant literature by examining Muslim women's perspectives—both authorial and fictional—as a site where literary aesthetics and political structures intersect, revealing the entanglements of whiteness, global capitalism, and heteropatriarchy with colonial histories. The second study documents the political economy of the feminist uprising in Iran by mapping bodies and struggles through experiences of violence, precarity, and discrimination . The third study offers empirical insight into feminist conversations and practices regarding Muslim women, often structured around the binary coding of veil (Abu-Lughod 2015; Bilge 2010; Farris 2017; Mahmood 2012; Zakaria 2017). By foregrounding practices of solidarity grounded in intersectional consciousness and collective empowerment, it contributes to reimagining Muslim women's feminist activism beyond binary frameworks (Ahmed 1992; Asad 1996; Salem 2013). Taken together, the three studies develop a body of empirical knowledge that highlights the relational, situated, and contested dimensions of Muslim women's experiences of difference.

This research offers a distinct methodological contribution by combining cultural studies and intersectionality to develop a political, transdisciplinary, and reflexive approach to analyzing Muslim women's experiences across diverse contexts. It integrates cultural, literary, and discursive materials not simply as representations but as sites of knowledge, contestation, and power.

The three studies operationalize this approach across different empirical fields. The first study develops a comparative narrative method that bridges literary analysis and sociological inquiry, positioning Muslim migrant literature as a site of empirical significance. It demonstrates how racialization, migration, religious norms, and gender normativity are relationally and affectively negotiated, employing literary texts not solely as aesthetic and cultural expressions but as resources for intersectional knowledge production (Chadwick 2017; Ferguson 2004; Spivak 1985; 2003). The second study adapts intersectional and cultural studies methodologies to analyze feminist resistance as an unfolding, embodied, and affective political practice (hooks 2015b; 2015a). It shifts the focus from centralist narratives of the movement to everyday insurgencies, tracing how feminist histories and subjectivities are formed within conditions of marginalization. The third study advances a discourse-oriented methodology for examining transnational feminist conversations, treating fractures, silences, and contradictions within feminist alliances as structured sites of epistemic violence and political regulation (Mignolo

2010; Spivak 1985; 1994). Rather than assuming solidarity as stable, it reads its disruptions as analytically generative for exposing power and layers of coloniality within feminist discourse.

Taken together, this research advances a cumulative methodological intervention by operationalizing intersectionality as a situated, critical, and relational methodology. It positions intersectionality as both a theoretical intervention and a methodological strategy for dismantling binary logics and racialized categorizations of oppressed versus oppressor (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hill Collins 1990). Rather than assuming pre-existing categories as stable sites of oppression, the research adopts a process-centered approach (Choo and Ferree 2010), mapping how intersecting structures of exploitation and violence shape both the pervasiveness and particularity of women's precarities and resistances.

This research avoids treating Muslim women's experiences merely as objects of analysis and instead engages with them as sites of agency, knowledge production, and political labor. By integrating literary analysis, cultural studies, discourse analysis, and decolonial critique, it strengthens intersectional research as a responsive, justice-oriented praxis. It demonstrates how intersectionality can be dynamically adapted across contexts and scales without creating analytical hierarchies or isolation.

Rather than reproducing binary frameworks that position one Muslim woman's situated experience against another through oppositional comparison, the research foregrounds intersectionality as an evolving praxis attentive to relational configurations of power, belonging, and agency—within, across, and beyond identity categories. Finally, this methodological convergence directly responds to what Chela Sandoval (2000) describes as *the neoliberal apartheid of academic knowledge*—an institutional structure that obstructs transdisciplinary coalitions and reinforces regional, racial, and disciplinary hierarchies. By centering Muslim women's experiences as both empirical and epistemological, this research offers a methodological model that resists extractivism, essentialism, and tokenization, while fostering multidirectional visibility and differential consciousness grounded in shared struggle.

This research offers political contributions by advancing intersectionality as a strategy for decolonizing feminism, collective activism, and feminist praxis—rather than treating it as merely an analytical framework for identifying difference (Bilge 2013; Hill Collins 1990; Hancock 2016; Lugones 2010; Vergès 2021). By approaching Muslim women's lived experiences and practices of agency as politically laden, the research foregrounds relational solidarity and mutual empowerment across categorical difference. It brings to light the interplay between local and global levels of feminist struggle and challenges the binary frameworks that

often define Muslim women's activism in relation to the veil. In this framing, the veil is reconfigured not as a divisive symbol, but as a connective site of relationality—capable of mobilizing collective contestation and reviving long-silenced histories of feminist solidarity and political love among Muslim women, regardless of religious norms or gender normativity.

Through its engagement with grassroots mobilizations and marginalized narratives, the research demonstrates that Muslim women's agency often emerges through religiosity rather than in opposition to it (Mahmood 2012). Feminist resistance of Muslim women in Muslim-majority/minority societies, it argues, cannot be reduced to opposition against religious structures, nor contained by liberal or nationalist hegemonies (Babakhani 2024). The research integrates politically engaged approaches—foregrounding knowledge co-production within activism (Collins and Bilge 2016) and resisting the academic abstraction of intersectionality (Bilge 2013). It returns the veil to feminist conversations where it has either been buried under cultural relativism or dismissed by dominant narratives in postcolonial and Islamic feminism (Mojab 2001). It affirms Muslim women's agency as situated, contingent, and relational to historical, material, and spiritual structures, and contributes to rethinking feminist justice movements that engage with difference without reproducing isolation, opposition, or hierarchy.

The research situates Muslim women's struggles for belonging, resistance, and solidarity within broader critiques of colonial histories, whiteness, and the hegemonic structures of feminism. It aligns Muslim women's activism with transnational and decolonial justice movements, including Black and women of color feminism as well as Indigenous and Third World feminist traditions. Politically, the research confronts the racialized academic structures that isolate, appropriate, and exclude the knowledge and labor of women of color, offering an alternative grounded in multidirectional visibility, epistemic accountability and mutual empowerment.

Taken together, these political contributions argue for a reconceptualization of difference away from colonial logics. They foreground intersectional feminist solidarities with(in) Muslim women as embedded in, rather than opposed to, diverse political, cultural, and religious landscapes. While the research foregrounds the veil as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's experiences, it also insists that the veil itself—when approached through an intersectional consciousness—can become a site for mobilizing collective activism and transnational feminist connection.

Limitations and Future Avenues of Research

While this research offers critical interventions into the analysis of Muslim women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and solidarity, it is important to acknowledge its

methodological, theoretical, and conceptual limitations. These limitations highlight areas where future inquiry could deepen, expand, and refine the analysis, particularly in ways that further resist the marginalization and epistemic erasure of Muslim women.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, transdisciplinary approach that draws on cultural studies and intersectionality across three distinct studies. This methodological breadth allowed for a context-sensitive and situated analysis of Muslim women's experiences across multiple sites. However, the use of distinct methods—from literary narrative analysis to real-time cultural studies of protest materials and discourse analysis—inevitably produced variations in methodological depth and coherence. Each study was shaped by its material and political conditions: the first by the limits of literary corpus, the second by the impossibility of direct fieldwork in Iran, and the third by the dispersed and uneven nature of transnational feminist discourses as well as geographic and lingustic limitations of the researcher. As a result, the research prioritizes deep, contextual readings over empirical generalization. Future research could build on this work by complementing cultural analysis with expanded ethnographic, participatory, or community-based methodologies that foreground the lived experiences of Muslim women beyond textual or discursive representations, particularly from contexts that remain structurally silenced or inaccessible to researchers.

Theoretically, the project commits to intersectionality, integrating analytical frameworks to engage the entangled structures of race, gender, religion, coloniality, and nation. Yet, intersectionality itself—while deployed here as a politically committed praxis—bears limitations when applied to contexts where religion is not merely an identity marker but a lived ontological category. As Muslim women's subjectivities are often mediated through religious, spiritual, and embodied practices, future research could advance this project by further engaging Islamic feminisms, indigenous epistemologies of Muslim communities, and decolonial theories that are rooted in Muslim-majority societies. This would extend the methodological promise of intersectionality while addressing its shortcomings in accounting for religion as a dynamic category of experience and power.

Conceptually, the research frames the veil as an intersectional and multiscalar lens through which to examine Muslim women's experiences. This framing offered critical insight into how racialization, (de)sexualization, and coloniality operate across contexts. However, it also inevitably privileged the politics of visibility and representation—areas where Muslim women are most often made hyper-visible or invisible in global feminist discourses. While this choice was strategic, given the symbolic centrality of the veil in colonial and contemporary political

imaginaries, future research could move beyond the politics of veil to engage more systematically with less visible dimensions of Muslim women's activism: their engagements with colonial and theocratic states, labor struggles, ecological justice, education, and health, particularly in rural, indigenous, or non-metropolitan spaces where the veil is not the primary or only marker of struggle or avenue for relationality.

Another limitation relates to the geopolitical focus of the research. While the studies were situated within the lived and political experiences of Muslim women across Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine, and diasporic spaces in Europe, the geographic concentration inevitably reflects certain linguistic, historical, and political proximities—particularly to Southwest Asia and North African contexts. As such, the analysis remains less engaged with Muslim women's movements and epistemologies from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin American Muslim communities, where different colonial and racialized histories of veiling, belonging, and solidarity might offer critical points of dialogue or contestation. Future research could address this partiality by expanding the geographic, linguistic, and cultural scope of inquiry into Muslim women's experiences and movements across a broader transnational field.

Finally, an important limitation arises from the structure of academic knowledge production itself. Despite efforts to foreground marginalized epistemologies, the research remains constrained by the unequal distribution of access to knowledge, publishing, and academic discourse that systematically privileges certain voices while silencing others. Many Muslim women activists, scholars, and communities whose insights would be crucial to further decolonizing feminist knowledge are systematically excluded from the spaces where academic research is circulated and recognized. Addressing this structural limitation calls for future research that not only documents but actively co-produces knowledge with marginalized Muslim women's communities—through methodologies grounded in relational ethics, collective empowerment, and epistemic justice. Such an orientation would resist the continued extraction and instrumentalization of Muslim women's struggles for academic recognition while affirming their self-determined forms of knowledge-making and activism.

In sum, the limitations of this research—methodological, theoretical, conceptual, and positional—are also sites of future possibility. They call for research that deepens intersectional and decolonial methodologies; expands the political and geographical terrain of analysis; and centers Muslim women's lived experiences, ontologies, and resistances in ways that challenge the structures of epistemic and political exclusion that continue to shape feminist and academic landscapes.

Conclusion

This research has developed the veil as an intersectional lens into Muslim women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and solidarity across diverse contexts. Moving beyond fixed, binary understandings, it conceptualized the veil as a shifting, contested site through which multiple and intersecting structures of power are rendered visible and navigable. Across three interlinked studies, the research has foregrounded the relational, multiscalar, and contingent dimensions of Muslim women's lives, centering their struggles not as isolated or oppositional, but as dynamically shaped through collective histories, political structures, and embodied practices.

By bringing together cultural studies and intersectionality, this research has challenged the epistemic hierarchies that often marginalize Muslim women's experiences within feminist, postcolonial, and academic discourses. It has demonstrated that belonging, agency, and solidarity among Muslim women cannot be meaningfully understood without attention to the interplay of gender, religion, race, coloniality, and nation—nor can these be reduced to visibility or resistance alone. Instead, Muslim women's navigations of power emerge as complex, situated, and relational, demanding new methodological and theoretical approaches that refuse extraction, objectification, and epistemic violence.

The conceptual and methodological innovations of this research—displaced belonging, the feminist strike as insurgent praxis, and the coloniality of the veil—open pathways for rethinking feminist solidarities across difference. They argue for a collective politics grounded not in categorical sameness or recognition-based empathy, but in differential consciousness, mutual relevance, and situated empowerment. In this framing, solidarity with Muslim women becomes a project of collective struggle against intersecting forms of domination, rather than a symbolic affirmation of inclusion.

Yet, this research also acknowledges its limitations—methodological, conceptual, and geopolitical—which point to necessary future directions. Expanding the geographic and epistemological horizons of Muslim women's struggles; engaging more deeply with indigenous, Islamic, and decolonial feminist frameworks; and co-producing knowledge through relational and justice-oriented methodologies are essential tasks ahead. These future pathways are not mere extensions of the research but critical interventions needed to challenge the ongoing structures of marginalization and epistemic exclusion that persist within and beyond the academy.

Ultimately, this project affirms that the veil, approached through an intersectional lens, reveals not only the violences and fragmentations imposed on Muslim women but also the possibilities

for collective reimagining. It calls for feminist engagements that center relationality, intersetionality, and political commitment—recognizing that the struggles of Muslim women are not peripheral but central to broader movements for justice across the world.

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APPENDIX: PEER-REVIEWED STUDIES

Study I:

Assa, Shirin. 2023. "Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' in Iran." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 44 (2): 53–71. https://doi.org/10.7202/1109372ar.

Study II:

Assa, Shirin. 2024. "Displaced Belonging: Poetics and Politics of Belonging in Leila Aboulela's 'The Ostrich' and 'Missing Out'." *Irish Journal of Sociology* 32 (1-2): 128–151. https://doi.org/10.1177/07916035241264091.

Study III:

Assa, Shirin. 2025 "Decolonizing Solidarities with(in) Muslim Women: Towards an Intersectional Justice Movement." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Accepted-Under Revision)

Notes

[i] The Southwest Asia and North Africa region hosts the highest number of active armed conflicts globally, despite its relatively small geographical and demographic footprint. This disproportion reflects the region's entanglement in overlapping legacies of colonialism, authoritarianism, foreign intervention, and geopolitical contestation. The use of *Southwest Asia and North Africa* instead of Middle East follows the critical intervention proposed by Arab American feminist scholarship, is intended to challange the conflation of race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and language that has obscured the region's diversity and complex dynamics of belonging (Jamal and Naber 2008). Nadine Naber argues that this conflation has contributed to the racialized construction of "Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern" as a singular category, neglecting that not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslims (2008, 5). The region is home to diverse religious groups, including but not limited to Christians, Jews, and Druze, as well as non-Arab ethnic minorities, including but not limited to Kurds, Amazighs, and Armenians.

[ii] *Shalamcheh* is a border city between Iran and Iraq that was heavily targeted and mined during the Iran-Iraq War due to its strategic location. After the war, it was largely abandoned but occupied by military forces, retaining a symbolic significance. The Islamic Republic institutionalized *Shalamcheh* as a national site of sacrifice and suffering. It also serves as a key religious crossing, especially during Arbaeen, for pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala. This position mediates both spiritual and geopolitical ties between Iran and Shia communities in Iraq. I invoke the memory of *Shalamcheh* as a borderland in the sense articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999)—a space marked by violence, rupture, and contested meaning, but also by the possibility of transformation, meaning-making, and relevance. Anzaldúa invites us to think of borderlands not only as geographic zones but as psychological and political terrains, where cultivating *fluency* means developing an ethical and affective capacity to navigate contradiction, complexity, and collective healing.

[iii] The reference to Muslim women includes a heterogeneous network of women, queer, and trans individuals who are religiously, culturally, or politically Muslim—or identify as such in varying ways. This includes communities governed by Islamic law, those with generational or diasporic ties to Islam, and converts living in non-Muslim-majority contexts.

[iv] I use *veil* to refer to diverse forms of Muslim women's dress, including the hijab, headscarf, chador, burqa, and etc. in line with common practice in the literature.

[v] This is the imposition of binary coding on veil that erases the contextual and layered spectrum of Muslim women's veiling practices.

[vi] See Atieh Babakhani (2024) for a recent critical review of the veil and its impact on Muslim women's lives and bodies.

[vii] Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge distinguish between intersectionality as critical inquiry and as critical praxis, noting that while both analyze power, praxis aims to transform it and disrupt the status quo (2016, 33).

[viii] The literary corpus initially considered included British Muslim migrant women writers such as Leila Aboulela, Monica Ali, Hanan al-Shaykh, Farhana Sheikh, and Kamila Shamsie. Aboulela's work stood out for its appropriation of the domestic novel form (Newns 2020) and the critical debates it stirred. While Nash (2012) describes Aboulela as producing "neo-Muslim" writing that offers a sympathetic insider's voice, others, such as Santesso (2013) and Abbas (2014), critique her fiction for ideological alignment with patriarchal norms. After engaging with a broader selection of her works—including *Minaret* (Aboulela 2005), and some stories from *Elsewhere, Home* (Aboulela 2018), and *Bird Summons* (Aboulela 2019)—the final focus narrowed to the two short stories analyzed in this study, based on their relational narrative perspectives and intersectional insights.

[ix] *Intersectionality stewardship* is an ethical and collective responsibility, rooted in literacy practices that care for intersectionality's transformative potential rather than owning it—preserving its depth, resisting appropriation, and sustaining its capacity for social justice work (Hancock 2016).

Article

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Displaced belonging Poetics and politics of belonging in Leila Aboulela s 'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out

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Abstract
This paper offers a political analysis of belonging in postcolonial and migrant literature, focusing on Leila Aboulela s short stories 'The Ostrich 2018) and 'Missing Out 2010). As a British Sudanese writer widely acknowledged for her 'authentic portrayal of Muslim experiences in non-Muslim societies, this paper explores how the politics of belonging are re ected in the poetics of these literary narratives, including the structures, settings, and character portrayals. It employs Nira Yuval-Davis s analytical framework of belonging 2006) to emphasise the role of politics and political projects in the construction and deployment of belonging in the United Kingdom and Sudan. Conducting a comparative analysis of Muslims experiences of belonging in the diaspora, this paper unfolds the contestation of belonging in the aftermath of migration and provides the concept of displaced belonging. Displaced belonging is characterised by navigating through multiple political landscapes of belonging, as demonstrated in the experiences of Muslim migrants. The conclusion highlights the impact of the politics of belonging on domestic dynamics and daily experiences of belonging at home, as well as the way homemaking in the diaspora challenges these politics. This paper sheds light on the intersectionality of Muslims experiences in non-Muslim societies through the poetics and politics of belonging. Doing so encourages the consideration

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of Aboulela s works as revered interlocutors of Muslim experiences across various disciplines and provides an interpretive-theoretical framework to enhance the analytical repertoire of literary studies.

Keywords
Belonging, politics of belonging, intersectionality, identity, literary studies, Leila Aboulela

Introduction

This paper examines the application of the sociological concept of politics of belonging in the literary narratives of Leila Aboulela, a renowned British Sudanese writer. It will analyse Aboulela s short stories 'The Ostrich (2018) and 'Missing Out (2010), utilising poetics, succinctly de ned as 'the study of literature as literature (Hrushovski, 1976: xv). The analysis will explore how narrative structures, settings, and character portrayals depict Muslims experiences of belonging and the politics shaping them. Ultimately, the paper unveils the intersectionality of Muslims belonging in non-Muslim societies, reflecting on the politics thereof.

Aboulela s signi cance emerges from her adept navigation of contested literary and cultural landscapes. At one level, her writings challenge the historical and political legacies of Orientalism (Said, 1978; Werbner, 2000). More importantly, her representations diverge from those of the 'native informants (Spivak, 1999), who lend their insider voices to the orientalist tropes, con rming the racist hegemonies in neoliberal societies and global imperial agendas (Nash, 2012).

Hence, the signi cance of Aboulela s narrative unfolds on various levels. She portrays 'ordinary Muslims navigating faith in challenging situations and unsympathetic societies , deliberately avoiding the depictions of 'good Muslims and rejecting framing Islam as a rigid identity (Hassan, 2008: 310). In her work, Muslimhood is not predetermined but a perspective through which individuals navigate life. Simultaneously, Aboulela provides a nuanced perspective on Sharia, extending beyond cultural or legal dimensions. Her narrative sees Islam as a dynamic pathway to belonging, emphasising the adaptability of Sharia, which 'blur[s the lines] between personal and public affairs (Chambers, 2011: 111). Aboulela challenges the conventional view of Islam as solely a societal norm, reintroducing it as intricately tied to individuals beliefs and aspirations, free from being perceived either as a personal possession or cultural property. This unique approach has established Aboulela as a signi cant gure in migrant literature, representing Muslims in the West and Anglophone literatures, and her works as distinct from predominantly secular Arab ctions (Hassan, 2008; Malak, 2004; Newns, 2020).

While gender, migration, postcoloniality, and religion have been thoroughly examined in Aboulela s works, the politics of belonging have received comparatively less attention (Ball, 2010; Hasan, 2015; Taha Al-Karawi and Bahar, 2014). Critics, speci cally Waïl Hassan (2008), assert that Aboulela s inclination towards the spirituality of Islam, rather than its politics, positions her writing as ideological. Nonetheless, her works

have sparked political inquiries into ideology, faith, and culture (Abbas, 2011; Edwin, 2013; Morey, 2018; Phillips, 2012), offering insightful analyses of (collective) identity, agency, and af liative feelings and performances. However, in her scholarship, belonging remains a self-explanatory and apolitical notion—a mere sense of at-homeness, sometimes inadvertently relegated to identity (Butt, 2009; Canpolat, 2016; Chaoui, 2023; Osei-Nyame, 2009; Steenkamp, 2022). Efforts to disentangle belonging from these co-implications are infrequent and conclude prematurely, often lacking precision in delineating its dynamic nature (Englund, 2020).

This paper addresses the identi ed gap by exploring belonging as an analytical category in Aboulela s writing. It aims to discern identity from belonging, where the former encompasses myths and stories about self and others while the latter involves experiences of being part of communities of 'us and 'them. Furthermore, the paper seeks to illustrate the politics of belonging, explicitly addressing the boundaries within and between political communities, demarcating the distinctions 'that separate the world between "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 204). This signi es an understanding of how communities of belonging are shaped by political boundaries of belonging, which, in turn, are influenced by their respective political projects. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the intersectionality of Muslims belonging in non-Muslim societies.

Intersectionality primarily accounts for the invisible experiences of difference as the pervasive relations of power operate and converge (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990). It challenges the severability of social and analytical categories, advocating for their intertwined ontologies, aiming to 'reformulate the analysis itself (Combahee River Collective, 1977: 13). Intersectionality s project is twofold: unveiling the obscured experiences of difference and restructuring the analytical categories of race, gender, class, etc., emphasising their co-constitution (Hancock, 2016). Exploring belonging within the framework of intersectionality then involves recognising diverse positionalities across a spectrum, moving away from the monolithic binaries of belonging versus unbelonging into differential belongings.

Therefore, this paper provides a comparative analysis of 'The Ostrich , rst published in 1997, and 'Missing Out . These are two interlinked narratives about a heteronormative Muslim Arab Sudanese couple named Samra and Majdy residing in the United Kingdom. Although 'The Ostrich was written before 'Missing Out , its narrative timeline succeeds that of 'Missing Out , offering a look into the year Majdy spent alone before marrying Samra. In the aftermath of their migration, they struggle with belonging separately and together. While 'The Ostrich centres on Samra s viewpoint, 'Missing Out portrays Majdy s perspective, comparing and connecting their experiences.

Displaced belonging, as used here, refers to the contestation of belonging in the aftermath of migration both at macro and micro levels, serving as the overarching theme in these narratives. This concept draws upon Nira Yuval-Davis s analytical framework of belonging (2006), which proves pertinent for distinguishing belonging from the politics of belonging through the lens of intersectionality. Applying Yuval-Davis s framework, the complexities of displaced belonging are similarly navigated from an intersectional perspective, highlighting how the migratory process triggers a rede nition, confrontation,

or invocation of the subject s belonging. This concept accounts for the dynamics and diverse experiences of belonging as migrants navigate different communities.

In what follows, the imperative of intersectionality is discussed, emphasising moving beyond identity politics, which often renders inter-community differences invisible and becomes a source of tension between communities (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242). The paper then explores the development of belonging as an analytical concept and conceptualises displaced belonging. It subsequently employs Yuval-Davis theoretical framework for a comparative analysis of 'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out . Considering elements such as narrative structure, characters, and setting, the paper nally delves into their poetics reflections on the broader political landscape of belonging, depicting displaced belonging in the intersectionality of Muslim migrants experiences as public and private realms converge.

This interdisciplinary research spans literary and cultural studies, sociology, migration studies, and political history, intending to extend the consideration of Aboulela s works as revered interlocutors of Muslim experiences beyond the con nes of literary studies. Literary texts serve as exemplary vehicles for sociological explorations, encapsulating subjective experiences and reflecting structural dimensions. This paper brings forth an interpretive-theoretical framework for scrutinising poetic representations of belonging, thereby enriching the analytical repertoire of literary studies. Moreover, it facilitates political engagement with the intersectionality of Muslims, transcending identity politics by mobilising the concept of displaced belonging.

Intersectionality of Muslims experiences

Intersectionality, primarily developed through the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), challenges assumptions of inherent homogeneity and normative inclusionary approaches. It resists the reproduction of homogenised categories and identity-based (re)construction of communities, diverging from identity politics (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 1997). By embracing the contingency and multidirectionality of visibility (Hancock, 2016), intersectionality resides in difference (Lorde, 2005). Moreover, it stresses that everyday experiences of power, oppression, and violence do not submit to mathematical calculations or additive approaches (Cho et al., 2013). Intersectionality, thus, ensures that no one category is a priori, akin to prioritising religion in the experiences of Muslims or gender and race in equality projects of feminism and anti-racism (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020). These traits of intersectionality hold signi cant relevance for Muslims experiences of belonging.

Islam operates in particular ways within Muslim communities, where individuals identify with Islam in varying degrees and multiple ways, leading to distinct experiences of Muslimhood. Gender-based, racial and class structures as well as the political project of nation-states play a more signi cant role in shaping the type of Muslim one is and their sense of belonging than religion itself. Whether living a Muslim life within a society that shares the same faith or navigating it in a non-binary body, the experiences of power, violence, and belonging differ signi cantly. This underscores the pertinence of

intersectionality, prompting a shift from identity politics towards the structures and apparatuses of belonging.

The prioritisation of religion proved instrumental in the rebuilding of nations, including within the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, as exempli ed by post-revolution Iran (1979) and post-independence Sudan (1958) (Assa, 2023; Fábos, 2011; Hale, 2003). Benedict Anderson (1983) famously argues that categories such as ethnicity operate as imaginary boundaries, dividing individuals between the communities of 'us and 'them. Analogously, religion performs as a boundary of belonging, shaping the hegemonies of the nation or groups exclusively by imposing a speci c identity narrative.

Similar to ethnicity, the invocation of religious belonging transcends the con nes of the nation-state, a phenomenon advocated by the transnational concept of Ummah (McLouglin, 1996). A noteworthy manifestation of this transnational religious identity was witnessed after the publication of Salman Rushdie s *The Satanic Verses* (1989), particularly in the United Kingdom. The global reaction in the Islamic world and among Muslims, known as the Rushdie affair, underscored a perceived offence and threat to Islam, catalysing the construction of a unifying identity based on religious af liation. The invocation of religious identity effectively brought together various marginalised communities in the United Kingdom, organising them along the vector of Muslimhood. As a collective narrative, Muslim identity empowered marginalised groups of South Asians in Western societies, providing them with political visibility and addressing the perceived threat. However, the simultaneous dismissal of internal differences, including gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class, and the imposition of homogenous Muslim identity on these communities, as observed in the experiences of Sikhs in the United Kingdom, revealed a dual function with the rise of Islamophobia, fostering an imagined community of 'them within and beyond the United Kingdom (Birt, 2009).

Challenging nationalist boundaries, 'diasporas as scattered, uncontained and uncontainable minorities have historically been the target of racialised and xenophobic nationalist imaginings (Werbner, 2000: 308). The homogenisation of the multi-ethnic demographics with different religions as Arabs and Muslims both within SWANA region and its diasporas reflects the conflation of religion, ethnicity, language, and nationality (Naber, 2000). This oversimpli cation overlooks signi cant historical communities, such as the longstanding Jewish population in the region, and non-Arabic-speaking like Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, not to mention rendering other ethnicities, such as Kurdish people, invisible. The conflation further extends to the problematic merger of belonging with identity, contributing to the racialisation of these diverse groups (Modood and Werbner, 1997; Volpp, 2003).

While scholars lack consensus on categorising Muslims within the framework of race, as discussed extensively by Andrew Shryock (2008), there is a substantial exploration of the material and political consequences of this essentialisation. The implications include the criminalisation of Muslims, legal bans, and emergence of hostile political discourses such as 'clash of civilisation and 'war on terror, stereotypical representations in Western media, state-sponsored sanctions, and imperialist military interventions in Muslim countries—most notably observed in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars

(Abu-Lughod, 2015; Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Jamal and Naber, 2008). Post-9/11, these consequences have come to light, underscoring the material and political impacts of anti-Muslim racism on the lives of Muslims (Alsultany, 2013; Cooke, 2007; Puar, 2007).

In the context of the monolithic conceptualisation of Muslim diasporas, often portrayed in identitarian terms as a homogeneous bloc and reduced to the paradigm of 'us versus 'them, there is a tendency to override the nuances of identity and the complexities of belonging. To address this limitation, understanding Muslim diasporas histories and the intricate interplay of power in their experiences becomes crucial. Before engaging with Aboulela s nuanced representation of Muslim diasporas and the intersectionality of belonging, it is necessary to lay out the theoretical framework of belonging.

Belonging An analytical category

Addressing 'the tightly groupist and the more loosely af liative forms of self-understanding—as well as the transitional forms between these polar types (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 20) necessitates moving beyond identity, as the conceptual category lacks analytical purchase. Floya Anthias (2008) notes a 'symbiotic connection between identity and belonging in contemporary discussion of migration, often addressed together, with an undue focus on identity and neglect of its structural dimensions. She offers a foundational distinction between the two concepts:

> Identity involves individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labeling, myths of origin and myths of destiny with associated strategies and identi cations. Belonging, on the other hand, is more about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds and ties are manifested in practices, experiences, and emotions of inclusion (2008: 8).

While identity revolves around stories, representations, performances, and institutions that shape one s sense of self, belonging is fundamentally concerned with the dynamics of 'exclusion, inclusion, access, and participation (Anthias, 2008: 8).

Recent migration studies have introduced new perspectives on belonging, marking a shift from prior conceptualisation as represented by Anderson (1983), Barth (1998), and Elwert (1989). The discourse of belonging in the aftermath of migration has sparked a focus on the spatial dimension of belonging (Anthias, 2002, 2006; Valentine and Skelton, 2003) and its intersectionality (Anthias, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2007).

Yuval-Davis notably advances the understanding of belonging by deconstructing it as an analytical category and emphasising its intersectionality. Premised upon belonging as feeling at home and safe (Ignatieff, 2001), Yuval-Davis (2006) identi es three different yet interconnected components: (1) social locations as positionalities along multiple power axes; (2) identi cations and emotional attachments representing the personal aspect of belonging, encompassing the cognitive and affective dimensions; and (3) ethical and political values that undergird belonging, assessing and evaluating one s and other s belongings. She unfolds the politics of belonging, stating that 'the politics

of belonging comprises speci c political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways (2006: 197). Yuval-Davis highlights the multidimensionality of belonging by exploring how individuals and groups create bonds through social processes, practices, political pursuits, and personal compliance. Her work expands the understanding of belonging beyond mere identi cation and collective association, transcending the questions of rights and duties, entitlement and status, and delving into the dynamic nature of boundaries that determine belonging and hierarchies within and across them. Referencing John Crowley s (1999) description of the politics of belonging as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance , Yuval-Davis (2006) emphasises the role of belonging in determining the degree of explicit or exclusive allocation of resources, access to power and conditioning the feelings of safety and at-homeness.

While politics of belonging regulate and replicate collective af liations within a community, displaced belonging emerges as an alternative that involves the dissociation of belonging from its meaning-making context and the political projects that shaped it. Displaced belonging is characterised by navigating through multiple political landscapes of belonging, as demonstrated in the experiences of migrants. In the light of intersectionality, it acknowledges shifts and relationality in social power dynamics, values, positionalities, and performances, attributing new meanings to personal and collective af liations. Moreover, displaced belonging recognises the translatability of belonging; oftentimes, these af liations are translated into experiences of unbelonging. However, as migrants traverse and transcend the political landscapes of belonging across different communities, boundaries of belonging between communities shapeshift or illustrate a continuum, despite being erected by different, even opposing, political projects. In this context, one s gender performances, which once signi ed belonging within a distinct political landscape, fail to retain signi cance as markers of gender belonging and instead undergo a translation into racialised (un)belonging within a new community. Similarly, while religious af liation may suggest af liation with opposing communities, social class maintains its translatability and transitions from boundaries of belonging to a connecting bridge, ensuring that class belonging preserves its enduring signi cance. Building on this conceptual and theoretical clari cation of displaced belonging, the following argument will analyse the poetics of belonging at multiple narrative levels—examining narrative structures, settings, and character portrayals—through a comparative reading of 'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out .

The poetics of belonging

In 'The Ostrich , Samra returns to London after a short trip to Khartoum, concealing the news of her pregnancy and having doubts about her sense of belonging in the life she shares with Majdy. Despite a romantic subplot with a former admirer, Samra s feeling of unbelonging in London triggers deep reflections on and emotional attachments to Islamic practices in Khartoum. Her religious performances, constrained by Majdy due to concerns about societal integration, prompt Samra to question the authenticity of

their life in London. The narrative unfolds through Samra s memories, traversing borders between Sudan and the United Kingdom, ultimately creating a circular narrative where belonging and unbelonging become ‘inextricably linked (Christensen, 2009).

In contrast, ‘Missing Out begins with Majdy s recollections of his migration to London before and after Samra entered his life. The story concludes with her absence as Samra leaves to visit Khartoum. From Majdy s perspective, there is a straightforward trajectory to belonging in London, involving the right to enter the country, reside, work, and plan a future. However, this pursuit, promising English belonging and a secure future, uproots his belonging to his faith. Ironically, the journey depletes Majdy s faith in London, leaving him uncertain, alone, and distanced from the people, things, and places he loves. Far from the anticipated future, Majdy immerses himself in past memories. Together, these narratives present personal experiences of displaced belonging and collectively stage the intricate politics of belonging.

A social location called the third world

In both narratives, there are explicit references to the concept of the Third World, shedding light on its implication in the United Kingdom. Majdy s opening remark in ‘The Ostrich , as Samra arrives at Heathrow Airport, sets the tone: ‘“You look like something from the Third World” (85). Historically, the term ‘Third World denoted societies not aligned with the Western bloc in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, in ‘The Ostrich , the characterisation of Samra as a ‘third-worlder extends to fellow passengers who, despite merely sharing a northward journey, food, and smiles on board, come to share a social location as they arrive in London. Their belonging, disrupted by the border crossing, is displaced. Their dislocation is symbolised by their ‘clothes that seemed natural a few hours back, now crumpled and out of place (85). The narrative subtly uses linguistic allegory to portray their subsequent de-contextualisation, with Samra saying that in the terminal, they were: ‘chastened by the perfect announcement, one after another, words we could understand, meanings we could not (86). The concept of the Third World is rei ed by race, ethnicity, and nationality, further invoking gendered implications of ‘backward Arab men and their ‘oppressed women.

Within this construct, Western nations hierarchically position themselves as ‘ rst-world, complementing their self-image as ‘modern and ‘civilised (Said, 1978, 1994). London, as one of the settings in ‘The Ostrich , embodies ‘ rst-world ideals which Majdy enumerates for Samra as gender equality, the insigni cance of disabilities, and inconsequential class differences in shaping the future. Majdy explicitly acknowledges the hierarchical divide, declaring, ‘[e]very one of them is better than us , while pointing out derogatory graf ti on the mosque wall: ‘Paki go home and ‘Black bastards (92–93). Samra reflects on the ubiquity of whiteness, questioning her visibility: ‘How would I recognise them while they can so easily recognise me? (93). The narrative represents English belonging as nearly invisible, selectively utilising features such as blue eyes and yellow hair to capture the centrality of whiteness in the hegemonic formulation of English belonging. Although these features are perceived as markers of English belonging from Samra s perspective, they do not represent the inherent complexity and diversity

of ‘Englishness . Instead, they serve to construct the hierarchies shaping Samra s experiences as a non-white person in London. In parallel, speci c differences such as Samra s name, skin colour, lips, and hair become hyper-visible and ‘de-naturalised in the context of the United Kingdom (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Harding, 1991), contributing to the differential power of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

In contrast, ‘Missing Out offers insights into the distinct politics of belonging in the United Kingdom. Majdy characterises London s beggars as having a ‘Third World style . In his view, ‘[it] did not look right or feel right that white people should be poor […]. It was unnatural that he was better off than them . This positionality becomes inscrutable to him, instantiating Anthias concept of ‘translocational positionality. ‘A translocational positionality is one structured by the interplay of different locations relating to gender, ethnicity, race and class (amongst others), and their at times *contradictory* effects (Anthias, 2008: 15). Majdy s position on the class power axis clashes with his situatedness along the axes of ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc., showcasing the inherent nuances within imagined communities of the Third and First World.

Both stories delve into the multiplicity and sometimes contradictory interplay of power axes within these categories, i.e., intersectionality thereof, portraying the Third World as a social location. They demonstrate that social locations are power locations since they are de ned based on ‘the grids of power within society (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In ‘The Ostrich , belonging is contingent and context-speci c, while ‘Missing Out frames its differential and relational nature. Belonging is depicted as a spectrum, a multifaceted continuum of relational dynamics involving inclusion and exclusion.

Yuval-Davis cautions against the conflation of social locations with identity, stating that this conflation is ‘often essentialist and racialised (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 202). Remaining vigilant against the tendency of social locations to homogenise collective attributes, enforcing one-directional af liations is crucial. Belonging cannot be exclusively con ned to social locations. The performative, experiential, and narrational dimensions of belonging are pivotal in its construction. Attributing belonging requires compliance and enactment from individuals. Yuval-Davis s framework facilitates the recognition of agency, thereby complicating the operation of belonging. This framework elucidates how characters navigate, reject, subvert, or comply with their social locations, providing insight into the imposition of belonging within the broader socio-political context. Moving to the next section, the focus shifts to identi cation and emotional attachment.

‘I not ‘we : Identi cation and emotional ‘pegs

Identities are selective narratives, according to Yuval-Davis (2006), which are crafted by and about individuals or communities to articulate who they are, demarcate distinctions, and clarify who they are not. These narratives involve strategic identi cations and are relational, contextual, and recursive. The recursive aspect underscores broader sociological complexities. Identi cation with a speci c narrative, no matter how strong, may encounter restrictions imposed by external factors—objective measures like social

categories, societal power structures, and/or racial hierarchies—a dynamic unfolding in the narratives to be explored.

'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out centre around a middle-class, cis-heteronormative Arab Muslim Sudanese couple navigating life in London. Each narrative is ltered through the perspectives, thoughts, and emotions of Samra and Majdy, respectively. The lens of character focalisation provides direct access to their personal identi cations and (non-verbal) experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Samra and Majdy s viewpoints illustrate the ways they navigate their identity towards and away from their multiple, shifting, and contradictory social locations.

In 'The Ostrich , an unexpected encounter with her former admirer, whom she had nicknamed Ostrich back in university, and his bride during the plane journey introduces a romantic subplot. This narrative layer interweaves stories about Samra s past in Khartoum and who she was. In London, she describes herself as '[a] stranger suddenly appearing on the stage with no part to play, no lines to read (93). However, memories resurface of her vibrant university days when she was cheerful and con dent, a desirable and sociable woman, even exhibiting a playful and somewhat cruel attitude towards Ostrich. She reminisces:

> Jangly earrings, teeth smacking chewing gum, and kohl in our eyes. The tobes slipping off our carefully combed hair, lifting our hands, putting them back on again. Tightening the material, holding it under our left arm. I miss these gestures, already left behind. Majdy says, "If you cover your hair in London they ll think I am forcing you to do that. They won t believe it is what you want." So I must walk unclothed, imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary tobe. (94–95)

Here, Samra identi es with a group of educated Muslim Sudanese women leisurely walking in public. Drawing on Sara Ahmed s argument (2006) that emotions coalesce around social objects, the veil becomes a signi cant emotional peg for Samra, a belonging deprived of her in London. Yuval-Davis contends: 'As a rule, the emotional component of people s constructions of themselves and their identities becomes more central the more threatened and less secure they feel (2006: 202).

Samra s narrative of her and the group of girls thus takes a new turn, portraying a collective narrative, where Samra incorporates a gamut of sensory perceptions to vividly evoke what stands out as the most elaborate scene in 'The Ostrich . Samra recalls: 'The sunset prayers […] I will always see the grass, patches of dry yellow, the rugs of palm bre laid out. They curl at edges, and when I put my forehead on the ground I can smell the grass underneath […] we must hurry, for it is as if the birds have heard the azan and started to pray before us (95). She recollects the ritual of congregational prayer at the university—a gathering of students, professors, girls, boys, birds, and the surrounding natural world in unison. Whether praying or not, Samra says: 'I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong (95). However, in London, where 'the birds pray discreetly , Samra prays alone, and Majdy does not pray (96). This stark contrast prompts Samra to question her sense of belonging to London and Majdy, symbolised by her confusion regarding her pregnancy.

In ‘Missing Out , the romantic conflict centres around Majdy s different identi cation as Muslim Arab Sudanese, beginning with his inconsistent prayer practices. The initial clash occurs when Samra arrives at his student flat to nd out he does not have a prayer mat and has not prayed during his solitary year in London. This revelation disappoints Samra, leading to their rst disagreement. To mend the situation, Majdy takes her to the central mosque to purchase a prayer mat and compass to Mecca. By embracing the possibility of praying again, Samra uses “‘I” not “we” when discussing prayer, differentiating their religious identities, a detail Majdy perceives as ‘proper and respectful . However, the conflict resurfaces when Samra asks: ‘Was he not a believer? In response, Majdy con rms, albeit half-heartedly. He also thinks he is ‘lazy and disinterested in his religious commitment, which is a distraction and inconvenience in London.

Despite the honeymoon days ending and the ongoing struggle, Majdy values Samra s caring, supportive, and generous presence, describing her as holding his days up ‘with pegs. Five prayers, ve pegs . In the closing lines of ‘Missing Out , the absence of Samra s prayer mat brings forth a profound reflection, leading Majdy to recognise his emotional anchor of belonging—metaphorically in the prayer mat, but in fact, to Samra, his faith and the community encompassing them. As such, Samra s characterisation transcends the con nes of her role as a romantic partner, defying traditional heterosexual relations into an anchor of belonging in the aftermath of displacement.

In ‘The Ostrich , Samra rarely describes her togetherness with Majdy in terms of ‘we/us . Only when she remembers the happy moments of their marriage or mainly when upon her return home, Majdy lays his fears and feelings bare before her:

> I was afraid you wouldn t come back […] When I saw you in the airport today, you brought back many memories to me. Of people I love and left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you, and you nd that funny, don t you, but it s true. I envy you because you are displaced, yet intact, unchanged, while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore. (102)

Samra continues to remember: ‘And it was only then […] that I told him about *our* baby (emphasis added 102). These instances highlight the dynamic and ever-changing nature of identity narratives, oscillating between being and becoming (Fortier, 2000; Hall, 2007; Probyn, 1996).

Samra s self-characterisation is deeply grounded in her faith, manifested by her frequent remembrance and the gender enactment of Muslimhood, notably veiling and daily prayers. While Samra is selective about her religious identi cation, where her faith serves as the wellspring of her belonging, Majdy s character evolves with the realisation of his lack of faith. In ‘Missing Out , he acknowledges that ‘this country chips away at one s faith […], even faith in itself, unveiling a fresh exploration of belonging that problematises the centrality of religious category in the identi cation of Muslims. Identi cations and emotional attachments are dynamic and diverse, depending on the participatory and performative aspects thereof (Butler, 2006). The extent of belonging relates to how individuals engage with, enact, or resist collective identi cations. As discussed in

the following section, these constituents of belonging, as well as desires for future belongings, are shaped by ethical and political values.

Values of belonging

In addition to social networks, identi cations, and practices, the shared values among individuals constitute a pivotal element of belonging, influencing belonging in both public and private domains. Speci cally, it is the ethical and political values that serve as the foundation for social locations, identities, and emotional connections. In the previous section, Samra and Majdy s emotions and psychological dispositions were communicated through character focalisation. The character focalisation is a narrative vessel that also provides access to characters norms and values, as well as their knowledge and judgement systems.

In 'The Ostrich , Samra sees the 'essence of her country as 'the poise between normality and chaos. The awe and the breathtaking gratitude for simple things (98), as '[a] place where people say, "Allah alone is eternal" (98). Aligning with Samra s core values, she admires people who exhibit a culture of generosity, piety, and intimacy despite economic poverty and a corrupted system. Conversely, Majdy perceives these behaviours as a 'primitive tribal mentality and so inef cient (98). Majdy is critical of Khartoum s economic deprivation, injustice, and political suppression.

In 'Missing Out , he shares his disappointment with Khartoum and his reasons for leaving, including the lack of infrastructure, ideological favouritism, and a tight net of community. Majdy s desires for an uninterrupted daily life, for people to be supported, encouraged, and equal, and for the future to be based on hard work and accomplishment rather than mere speculation point to a new direction—London. He enumerates his reasons for remaining in London and building a future. The abundance of opportunities and resources, for example, advanced living conditions, ef cient educational system and well-functioning transportation centre his desire for English belonging.

Yuval-Davis s insight is pertinent for understanding Majdy s value judgements as the politics of belonging in effect. She emphasises that '[e]mancipatory ethical and political values can, under certain conditions, be assimilated into inherent personal attributes of members belonging to speci c national and regional collectives. In practice, these values can become exclusionary rather than inclusive markers of identity (2006: 212–213). In the early scenes of 'The Ostrich , Majdy overtly expresses disapproval of what he perceives as regressive gender practices among Arabs and Africans, particularly citing the use of black abayas and the practice of women walking behind men. Conversely, he proudly extols the equitable treatment of women in London, asserting moral superiority over other Arabs and Africans due to his embrace of these emancipatory values of feminism. In this context, the portrayal of London as a 'civilised and 'modern society becomes intertwined with attributing these characteristics to its residents.

As residents of the United Kingdom, Samra and Majdy are implicitly expected to align with these values, thereby distancing themselves from other religious and ethnic gender practices that indicate different values. Majdy s perception of Sudan as backwards in

nature prompts his process of disidenti cation with it. Simultaneously, Samra s commitment to the values of Sudan creates a contradiction that possibly hinders their belonging and potentially is perceived as a threat to the liberal values of Western societies. The transformation of the emancipatory values associated with feminism and gender equality as the inherent traits of Western societies, therefore, translates them into exclusionary and racialised markers for non-Western identities.

Having observed the centralisation of certain ideologies and political values within communities and the consequential impact on individuals inclusion or exclusion, the subsequent section delivers analysis of the discussed components of belonging as they form the boundaries of belonging. This dynamic encapsulates the intricate interplay known as the politics of belonging.

Politics of belonging

Beyond being a mere relic, a possessive attribute, or individual performance, the malleability of belonging implies intricate political dynamics shaping its formation. Yuval-Davis clari es that 'the politics of belonging is all about potentially meeting other people and deciding […] whether they are "us" or "them" (2006: 204). In other words, politics of belonging reflect not only the political pursuits of these communities or shape them but also encompass the establishment and maintenance of their identities, delineating value systems, structuring the power grid in the community, and determining community boundaries and their permeability.

The United Kingdom and Sudan represent distinct communities of belonging in 'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out . Exploring the spatial setting enables readers to understand the juxtaposition of Khartoum and London, comparing their socio-political and cultural contexts. More signi cantly, attention is drawn to the boundaries between these geopolitical settings and the crossing of these boundaries. Therefore, this section investigates the politics of belonging in Khartoum and London, highlighting each nation-state s distinct political agendas. However, given that the characters actions primarily unfold in their flat in London, the attention veers towards the politics of belonging s permeability in the diaspora home, their interconnections across time, space and communities, and the intersectionality of belonging in domestic spaces.

The narratives of 'The Ostrich and 'Missing Out unfold against the backdrop of Khartoum in 1985, extending to early 1990s London. Samra s revelation in 'Missing Out coincides with the 1985 student protests, a pivotal period in Sudanese history marked by widespread civil protests and demonstrations. These events were triggered by economic hardships, political discontent, and the implementation of traditional Sharia law in September 1983, aiming to fortify the government by appealing to the powerful Muslim population in Sudan and building an Islamic state (Scott, 1985; Woodward, 1985). This legislative change impacted family law, criminal law, and public morality. It had profound and enduring effects on Sudanese society, including non-Muslim demographics, ultimately leading to the ousting of Jafaar Nimeiry s government (1969–1985) and ushering in a transitional period followed by military coups and civil wars.

‘Missing Out implicitly alludes to the execution of Islamic political gure Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1908–1985), symbolising broader opposition by Muslims. A democratic approach to Islam and its separation from state politics brought many Sudanese, including Samra, to the mass protests in the spring of 1986. While trying to get a scholarship and leave Khartoum, Majdy s attempt to leave the country foreshadows an upward swing in migration since independence. In ‘The Ostrich , Samra s recent visit to Khartoum con rms that life is normal, yet society is grappling with economic challenges. In Khartoum, she observes that the desire to emigrate and feelings of depression are pervasive (90).

According to Anita Fábos (2011), the construction of the hegemonic post-independent Sudanese identity can be traced back to 20th-century Anglo-Egyptian colonialism. Sudan s independence aligned with the surge of nationalism, during which the Muslim Arab community centralised their religious and ethnic identity, shaping Sudan s hegemonic boundaries of belonging (Fábos, 2011). This hegemony, intertwined with elements of nationalism and colonialism, underscores speci c social locations along hierarchies of ethnicity, religion, class, and gender. Fábos (2011) sheds light on the racial tensions in Sudan, highlighting the divergent circumstances faced by Muslims and Arabs compared to Africans, blacks, and Christians.

‘The Ostrich addresses the racial landscape of Sudan, mainly through Majdy s observations, which unveil the distressing racism exhibited by northerners towards southerners (88–89). This racial tension, involving the Muslim and Arab demographics predominantly located in the north of Sudan, contrasts starkly with the impoverished and deprived black and Christian populations residing mainly in the oil-rich regions of South Sudan. This racial divide played a pivotal role in bringing about South Sudan s secession in 2011.

Compliance with Islamic practices and identi cation as Arab, expressed through performances of Muslimhood and embodiment of Arab whiteness, particularly bestows privileges upon those who adhere to these practices, as outlined by Fábos (2011). Women, in particular, receive these privileges through their gender performances, playing an integral role in Sudan as bearers of responsibility for upholding the boundaries of an Islamic nation (Hale, 1995). The national belonging in Sudan equates Arabness with whiteness and female Muslimhood with propriety (Fábos, 2011). Racialised and gendered boundaries consequently shape Sudanese belonging, and, as Samra exempli es, women s inclusion in Sudan is regulated through their religious performances and ethnic identi cation.

As a heteronormative Muslim Arab woman, Samra is educated, independent, politically active, socially mobile and sexually desirable in the urban spaces of Khartoum, epitomising belonging to the middle class. In contrast, Ostrich, a Muslim Arab heteronormative man who belongs to a lower social status, implied by his clothes, and who could not nish his education due to his visual impairment, becomes a less desirable prospect for Samra. In ‘The Ostrich , Samra recalls a signi cant moment of decision, where she chose Majdy over Ostrich: ‘a big wedding, a good-looking bridegroom and the chance to go abroad. No reason for me to refuse (88). Samra s migration to London as part of the student diaspora is compared to Ostrich and his bride s migration to Egypt as labour migrants, revealing the continuum of the axis of class transnationally.

The scrutinisation of the setting in ‘The Ostrich highlights class-based, racial and ethnic struggles that disrupt the idealised portrayal of belonging that Samra paints based on her social location.

Heathrow Airport, serving as the immediate spatial setting in ‘The Ostrich , symbolises not only borders but also their permeability. During the bus ride between the airport and home, Samra contrasts the landscapes of London and Khartoum, measuring her familiarity and strangeness with the environment and the weather. Upon returning to their student flat, the perforated computer printouts at home and racial slurs on the wall of the mosque set the context for early 1990s English society. This period coincides with debates surrounding the inclusion of a burgeoning Muslim diasporic community in Europe. It signals a more extensive transformation in the migration policies of the United Kingdom, moving away from the politics of multiculturalism towards neoliberal agendas and assimilationist strategies for the years to come.

Multiculturalism and integrationist policies, historically linked with the Labour government in the United Kingdom, served as strategic measures designed to tackle labour shortage in the post-World War II and constituted an integral part of Britain s reconstruction. The British Nationality Act of 1948 granted citizenship to the British Empire and Commonwealth people based on their economic contributions, giving rise to a generation of migrants from the West Indies and South Asia, including Muslims (Modood and Werbner, 1997). However, the infamous speech by Enoch Powell (1912–1998), a Tory politician, underscores that English belonging in the post-imperial era continued to be determined by ‘skin colour and descent (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 210). Samra s consideration of the overt attributes such as yellow hair and blue eyes in ‘The Ostrich underscores the persistent role of whiteness in shaping the hegemonic belonging in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Majdy s realisation that attaining English belonging after building a future in London would forever lack that ancestral connection to London faces a bitter realisation in ‘Missing Out .

Diverging from the political project of multiculturalism, which had become an identi er for the Labour Party, Margaret Thatcher s Conservative government (1979–1990) pursued neoliberal agendas that similarly emphasised economic contribution, allowing for the integration of immigrants into society via their labour (Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, following the Rushdie affair and the anti-war sentiment among British Muslim minorities in the months leading up to the Gulf War (1990), new debates surrounding immigrants and their belonging in the United Kingdom emerged (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). In the context of the perceived threat to national identity, Muslim migrants outrage and solidarity were interpreted as disloyalty to the British nation. This interpretation gave rise to the controversial statement by Norman Tebbit, another Tory politician from Thatcher s government, famously known as the ‘Cricket Test (1990). The ‘Cricket Test was Tebbit s proposal for assessing the loyalty and assimilation of ethnic minority groups, particularly immigrants from South Asia, into British society. It was controversial for its nationalist undertones and oversimpli cation of belonging as merely performative, potentially exacerbating feelings of alienation among those who did not overtly perform these sentiments. As a result, migrants were

pressured to assimilate and express loyalty and emotional engagement with the United Kingdom and British values (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Performative politics of belonging: New and old gestures

In 'The Ostrich , Samra observes Majdy deliberately adopting new gestures, emulating speci c gender performances to align with the 'modern expectations in the English context, despite his Arab and African identity. This intentional effort to identify with English values and distance himself from stereotypes of being fanatical or non-modern is recurrently portrayed in the narrative to the extent that Majdy s gaze internalises the hegemonic norms, vocalising the boundaries of English society (Fanon, 2008). Majdy s internalised value system reflects the premise that Muslim Arab men, including himself, are inherently oppressive, and their wives are inevitably oppressed. Consequently, when he advises Samra not to wear a tobe, it not only reinforces racial bias but also compromises Samra s agency. This speci c instance sheds light on the intricate politics of belonging, where racist, sexist, and Islamophobic hegemonies mutually reinforce each other.

Building on the earlier discussion, it becomes evident that Samra s social status in Sudan was intricately tied to gender dynamics, not derived from formal rights and a discourse of equality, as emphasised in English values. Her status was interwoven in her role within the broader social hierarchy, speci cally among women like herself. In this context, she garnered honour and pleasure, as evidenced by her preferences in wearing tobe and Islamic practices. This example further underscores the politics of belonging, where racist, sexist, and nationalist hegemonies interlink. It prompts reflections on the complex interplay between gender and sexual freedom and their interaction with other forms of oppression. Additionally, it emphasises that an exclusive focus on gender equality or sexual liberation overlooks the intersectionality of belonging, particularly concerning the power dynamics of race and religion (Bilge, 2010; Puar, 2007).

Therefore, belonging in English society has been contingent on social location, emotional attachment, and identi cation with English values of gender equality, democracy, and performative patriotism. This political climate set the stage for the emergence of Samuel Huntington s political thesis of the 'clash of civilisations, portraying Islam as irreconcilable with the West and inherently patriarchal and anti-democratic (Bilge, 2010; Werbner, 2000). These prevailing misconceptions perpetuating dichotomies of Muslim women as victims of oppressive Muslim men framed them in common but distinct ways as a threat and incompatible with the democratic values of Western societies (Moallem, 2001, 2008). The watershed moment of 9/11 instigated a paradigm shift, propelling Muslims from being invisible citizens to hypervisible subjects, casting them through a series of controlling images portraying them as potential terrorists, inherently violent, and culturally subservient (Alsultany, 2006; Cainkar, 2002). Controlling images 'are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life (Hill Collins, 1991: 68), thereby depoliticising the nuanced experiences of living. Subsequently, this period saw an increase in the United Kingdom s military intervention in the SWANA region in the name of democracy,

human rights, and liberal ideals of gender equality (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Jamal and Naber, 2008).

While discussions on the politics of belonging have predominantly unfolded in the public sphere at national and transnational levels, the subsequent section shifts focus to explore the impact of racist and Islamophobic politics of belonging within the private space. After all, the essence of belonging, encapsulating feelings of safety and being at home, becomes intricately interwoven with the dynamics of the domestic space.

Intersectionality of belonging: A domestic case

While the setting in these two narratives oscillates between Sudan and the United Kingdom, for the most part, it lingers at home, the domestic space. 'The Ostrich vividly depicts Samra and Majdy s student flat, characterised by its claustrophobic and temporary nature, with thin walls. This space is portrayed as permeable, allowing elements from the outside world to enter, such as images, messages, and interactions through windows, memories, and sentiments from public spaces. 'Missing Out demonstrates how Majdy s public life is directly influenced by their domestic life, which settles and unsettles him, refuting the divide between public and private spaces. 'The Ostrich narrates how, in this flat, Samra often sits on the floor to make strings out of Majdy s computer printouts, unrolling her memories. She nds solace in the moments when Majdy forgets about the outside world and 'would whistle the tunes of Sudanese songs [they] knew long ago (96). Therefore, their student flat in London resembles a diaspora space by superimposing sensory elements and experiences from Khartoum and London, and the influx of news and goods contributes to this merging and fusion.

On another front, the narratives challenge the conventional association of home as a female space and, more signi cantly, Samra as a Muslim woman con ned within the domestic realm, lacking agency. Comparing Samra s engagement with the public sphere in Khartoum and London highlights how the politics of belonging influence her social presence. Samra s performance of her identity as a Muslim Sudanese woman allows her participation in public life in Khartoum, marked by her mobility, political involvement, and her appeal as a heterosexual, educated woman.

In stark contrast, Samra s alienation originates from daily interactions, whether with the librarian or the bus driver. The racial tensions she confronts in London drive her to retreat into the domestic sphere. An illuminating incident in 'Missing Out highlights this tension when a teacher s condescending remark, upon discovering her origin from a war-torn region, causes Samra to recoil and seek refuge in her home. These experiences challenge the conventional notion of Muslim women as insular and resistant to integration, contradicting cultural essentialist views. Samra s presence in the public sphere of Khartoum often exceeds that of Muslim men. At the same time, her social participation in London is hindered by xenophobia and racism, con ning her in domestic space. According to Avtar Brah, '[t]he question of home, therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances . She continues: 'It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of "belonging" (1996: 189).

‘The Ostrich challenges the association of home with feelings of safety and belonging. Instead, it depicts home as a space where belonging is not always granted and is negotiated along multiple axes of power. After a dinner party where Samra mentions the permissibility of polygamy in Islam, Majdy punishes her, necessitating her to conform and comply with Western values of belonging internally when she cannot belong externally. In Majdy s words: ‘“It s worse when you don t understand. […] At least have a feeling that you have said something wrong. They can forgive you for your ugly colour, your thick lips, and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts, be like them on the inside if you can t be from the outside” (94). This highlights how the politics of belonging in the public sphere continues in the relationship and at home. With racism and Islamophobia shaping the politics of belonging, the dynamics of othering rooted in power disparities give rise to gender-based oppressions at home. Samra s experiences of being othered at home are an extension of her unbelonging to London.

In parallel, Samra observes the cherished moments of their marriage in the same flat when memories of Khartoum bound them and their emotional attachment to one another protects them from the world outside. ‘Missing Out expands on Majdy s emotional attachment to Samra, challenging racialised perceptions of Muslim Arab households as inherently oppressive and violent, adding depth to his character. Brah (1996) offers a fresh perspective on ‘home in the diasporic context. She highlights its tangible sensory elements and everyday experiences, dispelling the notion of it as a purely mythical construct. Lucinda Newns (2020) further builds upon this idea, focusing on the concept of ‘homemaking and its connection to the material conditions and daily activities of migrants in a new and often precarious environment. She critiques James Clifford s ‘roots and ‘routes paradigm of diaspora (1999), arguing that it overlooks the importance of dwelling within the diaspora experience. Homemaking, therefore, re-establishes roots and anchors belonging. Home is a central point shaped by various spatial codes, mutually shaping daily life and carrying political implications, known as ‘domestic intersections (Newns, 2020).

Both narratives emphasise the importance of everyday activities involved in homemaking, including cleaning, cooking, dressing, decorating, and caring, which contribute signi cantly to Majdy s sense of belonging in the diaspora. In ‘Missing Out , he understands the value of her presence and care work to maintain their home. When Samra is homesick and can no longer be the ‘homemaker, Majdy shares: ‘It is frightening to come home at the end of the day and nd your wife […] silent, look[ing] at you as if you don t exist … .

In her absence, Majdy not only desires her romantically but also realises the value of Samra s labour, conduct, and ethics. Her practices and presence starkly contrast with the silence and loss he experiences without her. Whereas Majdy often refers to himself as the one building a life in London, his pursuit of belonging contrasts with Samra s creation of belonging. In fact, Samra s presence, her daily labour, and her adherence to Muslim identity contribute to his sense of belonging and feelings of being at home. Samra s performance disrupts the essentialist gendered social location and the imposed values on them within the U.K. society. Her transformation into a homemaker opens avenues for

agency and resistance in the face of denied belonging. ‘The Ostrich and ‘Missing Out stage the domestic sphere as a potential yet often overlooked site for anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance (Newns, 2020: 7).

Political projects within the United Kingdom, spanning colonial legacies, neoliberal approaches to human rights and democracy, and imperial feminism, signi cantly shape the dynamics of belonging, delineating its contours at different levels. In ‘The Ostrich and ‘Missing Out , the narratives frame the implications of displaced belonging by simultaneously emphasising the centrality of home in the fabric of belonging and the challenges to belonging in the state of diaspora by politics of belonging. As illustrated, single-perspective feminist agendas not only establish racist and nationalist boundaries of belonging but also exacerbate gender inequalities and Islamophobia in public and private spheres. Nevertheless, it becomes evident how homemaking, as a foundational element of belonging, emerges as a potent force capable of challenging and subverting the political structures of belonging and their entrenched power hierarchies.

Conclusion

To summarise, this paper examines the poetics of ‘The Ostrich and ‘Missing Out in connection with the politics of belonging, drawing on the insights of Yuval-Davis. Her contribution is instrumental in deconstructing the category of belonging, shedding light on the politics of belonging and their entanglements with the political projects of communities. The discussion encompasses the reconstruction of hegemonic identity in Sudan and the shift towards Islamophobic policies of the United Kingdom, regulating the Muslim diaspora s belonging through racist boundaries of belonging. This underscores the contingency of belonging and unbelonging as the characters cross borders.

Navigating the political landscapes of both Sudan and the United Kingdom, the characters grapple with multifaceted factors such as social locations, identi cations and identity narratives, emotional attachments, and ideological values, delineating the contours of these imagined communities of belonging. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of narrative structures, characters, and settings in the two short stories to highlight the differential belongings both within and between communities. In the process, it unveils the distinct politics that shape belonging collectively and separately while also mapping the relational dynamics between Samra and Majdy s belonging.

Displaced belonging emerges as the overarching theme in these narratives. It refers to the multifaceted contestation of belonging that appears in post-migration, encompassing struggles at different social levels. It entails grappling with the complexities of identity, confronting racial biases, and engaging with political projects that interlink public and private spheres. Furthermore, it underscores the signi cance of homemaking within a diasporic context as a crucial avenue for cultivating belonging, serving as both a space for resistance and an opportunity to subvert intersectional politics of belonging. While the political project of belonging effaces differences both within and between communities, these narratives unfold the politics of belonging on two interconnected levels: (a) it involves confronting biased perceptions and racialisation and (b) it is constrained by identity politics, notably heightened within the pervasive context of Islamophobia. Moreover,

Leila Aboulela s narratives depict the nuanced relationship between the politics of belonging in the public sphere and the persistence of a feeling of at-homeness within private realms. As a homemaker in the diaspora, Samra resists the contestation of belonging imposed by external politics, making home a creative source of belonging.

This paper advocates for a shift beyond mere identity politics, endorsing the embrace of intersectionality to comprehensively account for Muslims diverse experiences of belonging. By rendering invisibilities visible and scrutinising context-speci c power dynamics, it challenges the essentialisation of the positions of the oppressed and oppressor and unravels the racist agendas behind their designation in Muslim cultures. By providing an interpretive-theoretical framework that integrates sociological concepts with ontological accounts, this study encourages a consideration of Aboulela s works across sociology and cultural studies as one of the critical interlocutors of Muslim experiences. This paper serves as a stepping stone towards a more comprehensive exploration of SWANA communities diverse experiences of belonging, whether in their places of origin or the diaspora.

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Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in Iran

by Shirin Assa

Abstract: In the wake of the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a powerful image emerged: women in Iran defiantly casting aside their hijabs and rallying under the slogan of "Woman, Life, Freedom." This paper explores and reflects upon what I call, following Verónica Gago, a feminist strike in Iran that organizes disorderly and cross-sectoral withdrawals of women from structures that exploit and assault them and restores their bargaining power and agency. Through the analytical perspective of intersectionality, this paper inquires into how the political underpinnings of the gendered apparatus in the Islamic regime of Iran have propelled the imagination of a common body among the diverse array of women. Further, it scrutinizes how the #WomanLifeFreedom uprising unveils a feminist strike and what it entails. This paper aims to show how the feminist strike in Iran expands the notion of strike as a tool against the conditions of work and showcases its all-encompassing basis against living conditions and restrictions on freedom.

Keywords: femicide machine; feminist strike; Iran; unveiling; veiling; "Woman, Life, Freedom"

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Introduction

The #WomanLifeFreedom revolutionary uprising in Iran was sparked by the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini on September 16, 2022. A 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Jina, died in the custody of the Guidance Patrol for not *properly* complying with the state-imposed mandatory veiling. People started to #SayHerName: #Mahsa_Amini #Jina_Amini, as pictures of her lifeless body lying on a hospital bed went viral. At her funeral, women chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" (Woman, Life, Freedom) and spontaneously removed their headscarves, which resonated with many in Iran. More women joined in taking off their hijabs, cutting their hair, and burning their headscarves in mourning and fury. This awakened gender consciousness and feelings in millions, as if by an electric shock, and soon morphed into force that brought masses of people into the streets to chant "Woman, Life, Freedom," attempting to topple the Islamic Republic regime of Iran.

Unveiling and chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom" have symbolized the ongoing resistance of women in Iran's current insurgency. Having centralized women's rights amidst all demands, their resistance has become the prominent oppositional force against one of the most authoritarian states, leaving it desperate to recover power. Pervasive, decentered, and situated, the ongoing insubordination of women is what I call a feminist strike in Iran, following Verónica Gago's concept of feminist strike. According to Gago, feminist strike organizes disorderly and cross-sectoral withdrawals of women from structures that exploit and assault them and restores their bargaining power and agency (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018).

The collective act of strike, as conceptualized by Verónica Gago, presents a potent response to the political violence aimed at negating women's agency (2018, 662). It extends beyond conventional notions of labor strikes, encompassing a wide array of actions that address the conditions of living, surpassing the confines of work. The feminist strike emerges as a transformative force, seeking to dismantle systems of sexist oppression and envisioning a new relationship between bodies, territories, and feminist internationalism. According to Gago, "a feminist strike […] creates a new notion of what it means to strike based on expanding what we recognize as work, and a feminist internationalism that creates a new notion of how we define the relationship between bodies and territories and the relations between one territory and another" (2020, vii).

The history of women's struggles reveals their political marginalization, despite multiple institutions extensively capitalizing on their bodies and labor (Federici 2021). This multifaceted subjugation is perpetuated through a complex array of apparatuses, which systematically normalize coercion and naturalize exploitation (Segato 2003). These converge and co-construct common precarity for women and materialize differently in their lives (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020).

A recent report based on the official statistics spanning 2021 to 2023 reveals that, on average, every four days, a woman in Iran tragically loses her life at the hands of men (Lotfi 2023). The primary perpetrators are husbands, followed by distant male family members, such as ex-husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons (Lotfi 2023). What is particularly striking is how the causes of these murders are attributed. The report identifies family conflicts as the primary reason in 87 cases, with honor killings accounting for 38 cases. Notably, 30 cases remain categorized as unidentified causes, while financial reasons are cited in 10 cases. This unsettling pattern primarily accounts for the depoliticization of these systematic murders by the state in official records, often viewed as instances and incidents. Against this backdrop, politicizing women's oppression and exploitation is the basis upon which a feminist notion of strike can be imagined.

Through the analytical perspective of intersectionality, this paper inquires into how the political underpinnings of the gendered apparatus in the Islamic regime of Iran have propelled the imagination of a common body among the diverse array of women. Further, it scrutinizes how the #WomanLifeFreedom uprising unveils a feminist strike and what it entails.

This paper provides an interpretive and analytical framework for understanding the defiant act of unveiling in Iran as a feminist strike that beckons a revolution in the name of Woman, Life, and Freedom. The first section discusses the intersectional struggles of women in Iran by invoking Sergio González Rodríguez's model of the "femicide machine" (2012), which directs attention to the political underpinnings of veiling and the entanglement of gendered public spaces, criminalization of women's autonomy, and exploitation of their care and reproductive labors. Second, the paper analyzes the roots and routes of a political consciousness that has come to mold Iran's feminist strike and thrust forward a revolutionary pathway for people.

The history of women's resistance to compulsory veiling in Iran dates back to Tāhira Qurrat al-Ayn, with a continuous struggle since 1848. This paper does not engage in the historiography of unveiling but instead emphasizes the political histories that centralize compulsory veiling as a juncture for the resistance of women in Iran. While this paper primarily centers on Kurdish women's movements, it is crucial to note that this focus does not seek to dominate the discourse on ethnic feminist movements or downplay the pivotal roles of other ethnic women's movements during the Woman Life Freedom uprising. Rather, the primary intention here is to examine the *intersectionality of women's struggles*, i.e., the links between multiple precarities. A thorough engagement with women's diverse positionality and experiences of violence and abuse also stays out of scope. The timely issue of transnational solidarity across the spectrum of Muslim women's agencies is a central focus of my forthcoming paper, warranting its own dedicated space.

The Building of the Femicide Machine in Iran

González Rodríguez (2012) identifies the brutal murders of women in Juárez, Mexico, to result from systemic violence fueled by intertwined economic and political structures. He employs the metaphor of a machine to depict "an apparatus that not only facilitated the murders of numerous women and girls but also established institutions that ensured impunity for these crimes and even legalized them" (2012, 7). While initially rooted in Juárez, González Rodríguez cautions that

similar femicide machines may be emerging worldwide (2012, 14).

A complex net of politics has always been growing against women's bodies and labor. Yet, the politicization of their struggle is never a given. Notably, women of the global south can hardly escape the intricately culturalized maze that confines them and that they must navigate before arriving at its deferred political core. As Spivak argues, "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (1994, 102).

This is illustrated by the state agendas on the Islamic veil across Europe, notably the recent ban on female students wearing abayas in France (Goksedef 2023). These agendas result from a history of radical measures against Muslim women and their communities.

However, perhaps the example par excellence would be Iran's case, which, in less than half a century, drastically shifted from compulsory laws on unveiling women (1936) to veiling them entirely (1979), solely as a result of a change in the state's regime. Therefore, the issue of veiling and the associated dilemmas in the East, West, or diasporas, appears subsidiary to the politics of modern nation-states and their relations (Bilge 2010; Rashid 2023). The essentialism of culture or the reduction of agency to "a (universal) property of (transcendental) individuals" renders both the struggles and resistance invisible (Bilge 2010, 24; Narayan 1998).

The act of unveiling women in Iran, a globally contentious expression of self-determination, represents an agency molded by historical possibilities (Asad 1996; Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari 2014). The politicization of women's bodies in contemporary Iran traces back to Reza Shah (1925–41) who aimed to modernize and homogenize the country through coercive practices, including the unveiling of women (Najmabadi 2016). The Islamization of Iran after the revolution (1978–79) similarly instrumentalized women's bodies, justifying extensive coercion as a response to the previous regime and Western influences. Women's rights were frequently curtailed during times of political crisis to reassert control and divert attention. The oppression of women was not an isolated issue but rather indicated a broader deterioration of human rights and living conditions.

The systematic victimization of women in Iran, which was significantly aggravated after the revolution, operates on three levels: (1) gendering public spaces, (2) criminalizing women, trans, queer, and non-binary peoples' autonomy, and (3) exploiting women's care and reproductive labor. The suspension of the Family Protection Act (FPA) marked the beginning of a series of assaults against women. This act was the legal legacy of previous generations of women's activists who had worked to shift women's rights and family laws from Shari'ah courts to family courts. This suspension occurred on February 26, 1979. Additionally, on March 3, 1979, women judges were removed from their positions. Notably, on March 6 of the same year, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a compulsory veiling decree. Collectively, these events set in motion Iran's femicide machine immediately after the revolution. These actions consolidated power within the Shi'i clergy, transforming public spaces into ideological checkpoints, perpetuating the cycle of gender oppression, and entrenched a complex and outright system of violence against women.

Gendering Public Spaces: The Launch of Gender Apartheid

On March 6, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree that marked the inception of Iran's gender apartheid. This decree mandated that women could not enter or work in government offices without wearing hijabs (Matin and Mohajer 2013; Moghissi 2016; Nategh 1986). Behind his fervent anti-Shah and anti-imperial rhetoric for independence, Khomeini aimed to regain the power of Shi'i clergy in the post-revolution turmoil. This move catalyzed the Islamization of the state, rallying a politically divided nation around patriarchal traditions and religiosity (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023; Sedghi 2007; Paidar 1997). In doing this, the public spaces effectively turned into ideological checkpoints.

The gendering of public spaces had far-reaching consequences, obstructing women's participation in formal labor and perpetuating generational feminized poverty. Since the summer of 1980 (Tabasi 2019), women were compelled to surrender bodily autonomy in exchange for the right to work, but this exchange came at a cost as they were effectively removed from formal labor markets, exacerbating gender discrimination and financial disenfranchisement (Afshar 1997).

The manifestation of the rising Islamic ideology and its assaults on public space had its roots in early February

1979 and in the heart-wrenching burning of Shahre-No, traditionally Tehran's red-light district on the fringes of the city. Within its confines, approximately 1,500 women in Shahre-No were employed and worked as sex workers until the provocation of Islamic sentiments at the onset of the revolution set it on fire. During the rise of Islamic forces, these women faced the horrors of being burned, beaten, imprisoned, and even subjected to execution while others were coerced into (public) acts of repentance.

Furthermore, the impact of the gender apartheid regime extended beyond spatial dimension and discrimination against women. It touched the lives of LGBTQIA+, as the state imposed strict dress codes and enforced veiling while simultaneously offering state-sponsored gender reassignment surgery for trans people and prohibiting homosexuality for queers. This seeming contradiction was part of a broader strategy to reconstruct and re-arrange bodies within binaries of space, gender, and sexuality. Thus, it divided society into cisgender and heteronormative men versus others. It all served to reinforce the regime's grip on public morality and maintain control over the public imagination (Najmabadi 2011).

Amid mass executions of political dissidents in the 1980s, veiling became mandatory by law in 1983, with penalties introduced for noncompliance (Sedghi 2007). Under the successive leadership of Ali Khamenei (1989–), veiling remained a steadfast policy across different administrations (Randjbar-Daemi 2017). However, mandatory veiling's function as a basis for gender segregation evolved into an apartheid regime, particularly during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and since the beginning of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97) (Shahrokni 2020). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed presidency (2005–13) introduced the "Morality Police" (Gasht-e-Ershad), an update on the Islamic Revolution Committees (1979–91), ushering in a new era of policing public spaces and women's bodies (Afary 2009). His tenure witnessed a violent and widespread assault on women who had reemerged in social spaces following the expansion of civil society during his predecessor, Mohammadreza Khatami (1997–2004) (Alikarami 2019). As subsequent administrations faced aggressive economic decline, new surveillance methods such as facial recognition in private cars, social media monitoring, and fines were implemented, culminating in the Ebrahim Raisi administration (2021–). Mandatory veiling laws since 1983 have played a pivotal role in controlling women's political activism and participation in civil society, often serving as legal grounds for their mistreatment, imprisonment, intimidation, and acts of violence against them (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Conversely, mandatory veiling has also become a point of juncture for women's resistance, encompassing struggles for self-determination among ethnic, migrant, and religious minorities and individuals across the gender spectrum. As such, veiling in Iran materializes women's oppression.

Criminalizing Women, Trans, Queer, and Nonbinary Peoples' Autonomy: The Legalization of Heteropatriarchy

During the "White Revolution" led by Mohammadreza Shah in 1963, the Family Protection Act (FPA) was introduced as part of the modernization project, aiming to integrate Western norms into Iranian society. Initially proposed in 1967 and revised in 1975, this law faced opposition from clerics who were already against women's suffrage (Randjbar-Daemi 2022). The act sought to transfer family matters, such as marriage, divorce, and custody, from Shari'ah courts to newly established family protection courts, which would limit clerical power and impose restrictions on marriage age and polygamy (Paidar 1997; Aghajanian 1991). However, as long as the legislative politics accommodate the state's politics, they remain embedded in class, gender, and racial/ethnic structures (Davis 1983; Crenshaw 2018; Sedghi 2007). FPA revoked exclusive men's rights in family matters, although its implementation largely favored urban and economically privileged women, remaining a top-down initiative (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Sanasarian 1982).

Following the revolution, the FPA was suspended. On March 1, 1979, Iran's syndicate of female jurists wrote a letter to the emerging government. Although they had initially planned to further women's rights, encompassing economic and political dimensions, their letter primarily underscored the general importance of improving women's condition of living (Hosseinkhah 2018) without mentioning their agenda for the future or alluding to the suspension of the FPA a few days prior. In response to their letter, Ayatollah Khomeini promptly revoked women's right to serve as judges (Sedghi 2007). With men assuming complete control over the legal sphere and gender politics, the prospects for women's rights began to decline significantly (Afary 2009; Moghissi 2016). More than a mere retaliation, the suspension was, in fact, the reconquest of the private do-

main by Shi'i clergy. The new Islamic family legislation, signed into law in October 1979, reinstated unilateral men's rights while further eroding women's personal rights and social entitlements (Alikarami 2019; Afary 2009). This included the repeal of abortion rights, prohibition of contraception, lowering the marriage age for women to 9, and delegating various rights such as work, travel, custody, divorce, and marriage to husbands and male family members (Moghissi 2016).

The Qesās Law (1980–83), also known as the Bill of Retribution, was a highly contentious legal tactic to Islamize the post-revolution state (Alikarami 2019). Khomeini declared that the bill adheres to the writ of the Quran and hence is God's law, giving a warning to its many opponents ("The Consequences" 1981). This law reduced the legal worth of a woman to half that of a man. Further, it restricted women's legal rights by devaluing their testimony which served deadly in cases involving death sentences, such as adultery (Sedghi 2007). The Qesās Law not only affected inheritance and wealth distribution but also introduced severe punishments, such as lashings and stoning, for transgressors who refused to adhere to the state-imposed dress code (Poya 2010; Sedghi 2007). The law was an unequal system where killing a man was considered a capital crime while killing a woman was considered a less serious offense that could be compensated by paying blood money to descendants and legal guardians (Afshar 1997). The Qesās Law has been used to criminalize dissent, agency, and autonomy, mainly targeting women and religious, ethnic, and gender/sexuality marginalized groups.

The legalization of patriarchy in Iran has drastically reinforced heteronormativity. In November 2021, Ebrahim Raisi enacted the Bill of Protection of the Family and the Rejuvenation of the Population, which incentivizes childbearing through financial support packages (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). This has led to increased child marriages due to rising poverty rates. Contraception has been forcefully removed from the market. Abortion is illegal and carries severe punishments for individuals and places that enable or facilitate it, making it either too expensive or fatal. The reconstitution of legal spheres has resulted in impunity for violence against women, queer, and trans individuals, even in extreme cases such as femicide, rape, and child (sexual) abuse. The law has promoted and perpetuated a widespread culture of precarity. At the intersection of Islamic family legislation and the Qesās Law, men serve as the state administrators in the family by constraining women to domestic spaces and acting as their guardians (Alikarami 2019). The extreme disparity between men's and women's rights has turned families into battlegrounds, intensifying the oppression faced by women, and LGBTQIA+ people (Hajnasiri et al. 2016; Saffari et al. 2017; Moghissi 2016; Afary 2009). The legalization of heteropatriarchy has not only regulated victims' positions but also made it nearly impossible for them to hold aggressors accountable, exacerbating the cycle of violence and oppression (Alikarami 2019). In this context, in the words of Sedghi: "Law is politics by another name" (2007, 135).

Exploiting Care and Reproductive Labor: A Case of Domestic Slavery

Building upon Rita Segato's perspective, Gago emphasizes examining women's precarity as political crimes rather than mere cultural conditions or sexually motivated acts (2018, 661). These crimes are the direct consequences of the state's systematic order (Segato 2003). This approach seeks to understand commonalities amidst differences. She writes this is "to understand something that speaks to all of us [...]. Because something of that geography is replicated […]. It is the composition of a common body that produces a type of resonance and result: a politics that makes the body of one woman the body of all" (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018, 661). Consequently, femicidal crimes intertwine public and private spaces, intersecting different forms of exploitation, violence, and economic disenfranchisement (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018; Federici 2021).

The Islamic regime in Iran has implemented various state-sponsored measures to increase fertility rates and regulate reproduction, considering it inextricable for its economic and political power. Traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals of the family have been propagated through the dominance of Shi'i–Islamic values, particularly in the educational system, relegating women to the roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers while erasing homosexuality (Naeimi and Kjaran 2022). The concern over expanding the Shi'i population has been present among clerics even before the revolution, but it gained significant political attention in Iran after 2000 (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Motherhood, as a romantically feminized teleology, has long been respected in Iranian society. However, since the Iran–Iraq war, motherhood has become a preoccupation for Iran's leaders and is particularly valued when it contributes to ideological allies for the state or the growth of the Shi'i population (Afshar

1997). Consequently, women's labor has been recognized primarily for the services they provide to men, God, and the state and their bodies are regulated for value extraction, "compatible with capitalist social relations prevailing in Iran" (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023, 8).

Having been advocated as *raison d'être* and divine duty, social reproduction and care labor remained unpaid. Even with a shortage of male labor after the war, women's labor contribution was unwanted and marginalized (Afshar 1997). Gender segregation in workplaces pushed women to the margins of labor sectors (Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011). Despite their high participation in agricultural sectors, women's work remained invisible, and official attempts were made to minimize their participation in formal economic sectors (Moghadam 2009). Whereas the number of educated women has risen exponentially since the revolution, their social and legal restrictions led to defeminizing economic sectors and, in turn, heavily feminize informal and domestic labor units, as well as care labor professions in general, such as teaching or nursing (Farvardin 2020).

At the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal social relations, the exploitation of women's labor has an economic and psychological aspect to it (hooks 2015). In capitalist patriarchy, women's economic empowerment is class continuous and reinforces the exploitation of underprivileged groups. The low-paid or unpaid nature of women's work assigns a lower value to their labor, dehumanizing and endangering them within the system (hooks 2015). While the lack of job opportunities facilitates the exploitation of women's sexuality and labor, it is crucial to shift attention to the broader context in which the economic exploitation of women emegerges.

The institutionalization of poverty in Iran, influenced by increasing class and gender conflicts, has made poverty a common experience among various groups of women. The "feminization of poverty," or the impoverishment of women, disproportionately affects ethnic minorities, migrant women, and nonbinary individuals in Iran (Ehrenreich and Stallard 1982). These groups engage in extremely low-paid and often degrading work, enduring precarious working conditions (AleAhmad 2023; Karamouzian et al. 2016; Hoodfar 2004). Poverty is widespread among women and is a common source of precarity, pushing rural women to migrate to larger cities and work as caregivers in middle and upper-class families. Their labor is poorly paid, menial, and often perpetuates "ethnicized forms of structural violence" (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023, 8). In response to the economic hardships women face in Iran, different groups have examined the impact of their social and legal rights and the effects of marriage and divorce on their impoverishment. This struggle against poverty has fostered solidarity among women from various ideological, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Bahramitash 2014).

The political underpinning of veiling in Iran delineates a femicide machine within the authoritative Islamic regime. Mandatory veiling serves as the starting point for the subsequent control over women's bodies, agency, the exploitation of feminized labor, and the perpetuation of violence and feminized poverty. The mandatory act of veiling and the control over women's bodies function as crucial components within Iran's femicide machine, employed as an axis for the state's radicalization.

Figure 1:† Graffiti stating: "Femicide by The Law of God, State, And Father." Shared on: https://bidarzani.com/30718/

Feminist Strike: Woman, Life, Freedom

The systematic victimization of women has constituted a common body among women in Iran, and Jina's (Mahsa's) death has animated this body. The uprising of Woman, Life, Freedom has transformed everyday social life into the time and the place for unwavering protests, occurring in universities, offices, public events, bazaars, cafés, restaurants, streets, and public transportation. Powerful images have emerged of individuals defiantly setting their scarves on fire, symbolizing courage and resistance. The chant "We Are All Mahsa, Come on and Fight" echoes through the streets as the writing on the wall reads, "Courage Can be Propagated."

Elderly veiled and unveiled women fearlessly confront counter-insurgency forces, reclaiming public spaces and generating feelings of safety and care. Their presence serves as a reminder of intergenerational solidarity and an extension of the home. The display of the schoolgirls' defiance and the government's violent response has been an emotionally devastating sight, exposing the failure of state propaganda. Funeral sermons have shifted their focus to the chant of "Woman, Life, Freedom," inspiring individuals to fight for justice rather than succumb to victimhood. The streets have witnessed protests echoing with the collective voice of women saying, "Cannons, Tanks, and Guns Won't Work Anymore, Tell My Mother She Doesn't Have a Daughter." Women from all walks of life, veiled and unveiled, stand side by side, celebrating solidarity, love, and joy, reclaiming their bodies and rejecting shame. Graffiti on walls proudly proclaims, "No Matter How Much You Try to Harm Me, I Will Not be Wounded; I Will Keep Sprouting."

The state's relentless crackdown on women's bodies and lands has exposed the gruesome reality of the femicide machine. Women have been targeted with direct shots to their genitals, heads, necks, and faces, resulting in loss of life and eyesight (Parent and Habibiazad 2023; Amnesty International 2022; Ghorbani 2022; Wintour and Foumani 2022). Among the victims are children who witnessed their mother's death and mothers who mourn their children (Wintour 2023; Dehghanpisheh 2022; BBC 2022). Bodies of women have been found, slaughtered during the protests, including nurses and doctors who provided secret assistance (Safi 2022; Daneshgari 2023). Women have been brutally beaten, pushed from buildings, unlawfully arrested, and faced mental and physical torture in detention centers and prisons. Reports indicate widespread sexual molestation and rape (Qiblawi et al. 2022). Chemical attacks, primarily targeting girls' schools, have been employed to spread fear (Parent 2023a). Veiling laws have been reinforced through severe sanctions, summoning individuals to comply and reinforce them.

Most recently, the Iranian state has pushed for drastic punitive measures to control women's large-scale noncompliance with the state's dress code. The proposed Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, currently under review in the Iranian parliament, seeks to legalize the detention and incarceration of women, impose substantial financial penalties on them and the establishments they frequent, and threaten closures. Underaged girls face potential passport confiscation and denial of their rights to education and work. In defiance, protesters question, "You kill, you arrest, you beat; what would you do with the regeneration (of resistance)?" This oft-quoted verse encapsulates the determination and the significant involvement of Generation Z in this uprising and the reminder of transgenerational and continuous resistance (Shams and Gott 2023; Tohidi 2023; Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi 2023).

Women in Iran continue to organize informally and persist in forming solidarity coalitions, exchanging small gestures of support and encouragement in public spaces. By amplifying previously unheard voices, they establish grassroots and interpersonal networks rooted in intersectional sisterhood and resonances. Asef Bayat conceptualizes women's activism in Islamic authoritarian states as a "non-movement" distinct from traditional organizational and networking methods, as well as mobilization tactics such as street marches, picketing, strikes, or disruptions, yet it effectively expands their range of choices (2007, 160). Compared to other strikes, the feminist strike has achieved greater success in maintaining daily life and orchestrating widespread acts of sabotage (Bayat 2023; Jafari 2023; Tohidi 2023). One particularly striking moment in this uprising is the outright declaration of support for the feminist movement by men, especially those from working-class, ethnic, and different religious backgrounds (Tohidi 2023; Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi 2023). These men challenge and reject the state-imposed gender stereotypes, reclaiming their autonomy against their portrayal as having no control over their sexual desires. This is exemplified by the chant in which men address morally corrupt authorities, especially male figures in power, saying: "You Are Lewd, You Are Dissolute," while women's voices complement it saying: "I Am A Free Woman." This signifies that the feminist strike has also formed diagonal and unexpected coalitions. Thus, the movement extends beyond isolated circumstances, connecting various fields, lands, and marginalized groups. Among the slogans, there are: "Kurdistan, The Graveyard of Fascists," "From Zahedan to Tehran, I Sacrifice Myself for Iran," "Bread, Labor, Freedom, Council Government," and "Kurdistan, a Role Model for Iran." These attest to the lateral coalitions and the shared understanding of intersectional resistance.

Refusing to be mere victims, women in Iran assert their agency and position a "relational essence" (Zack 2005, 8) between themselves, which not only brings educated, poor, devout and veiling women together, but also transcends hegemonic values, showcasing how commonalit-

ies bridge differences (Hancock 2016; Yuval-Davis 1997). Openly defying state authorities and the patriarchal legal order, women express contempt for norms advocated as divine law. They reject prescribed roles, connecting their waged and unwaged labors to make them visible, meaningful, and non-hierarchal. Feminist strike laterally connects homemakers, workers, migrants, rural women, students, professionals, and activists from diverse backgrounds. Beyond their individual predicaments, they confront precarity in various fields. As connections form daily, a broader resistance emerges, envisioning mass sabotage. This growing counter-power holds the potential to halt the femicide machine that sustains the Islamic regime, becoming the harbinger of a revolution. Borrowing from Gago, the Woman, Life, Freedom feminist strike in Iran, similar to other international feminist strikes, namely #NiUnaMenos, "showed the potential of an action that allowed us to go from mourning to taking our rage to the streets. […] We came together based on our doing, and in our multiplicity we became accessible as a common ground"(2020, 10).

Figure 2.† The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" written by a Baluch woman. Shared on: https://x.com/Mehrnaz_Mjt/status/1587653396768600064?s=20

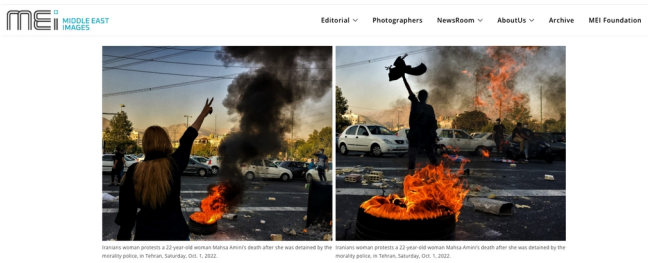

Figure 3.† The act of defiance by women in Tehran during the 2022 uprising. Shared on: Middle East Images

Figure 4.† Two Kurdish girls, dressed in their chosen ethnic attire, symbolizing "Woman, Life, Freedom" in the protest in the city of Mahabad, on November 18, 2022. Shared by: https://x.com/NatalieAmiri/status/1593678929801379842?s=20

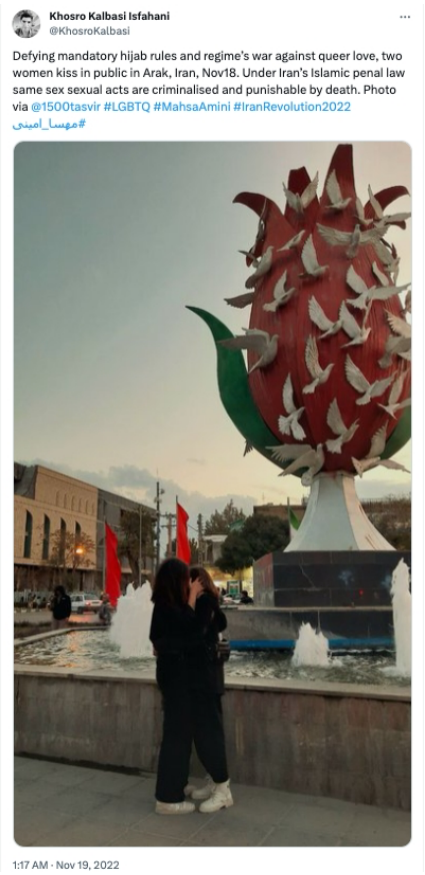

Figure 5.† Resistance against compulsory hijab regulations and the government's crackdown on LGBTQ+ relationships, two women publicly share a kiss in Arak, Iran, in November 2020. Shared on: https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211185879

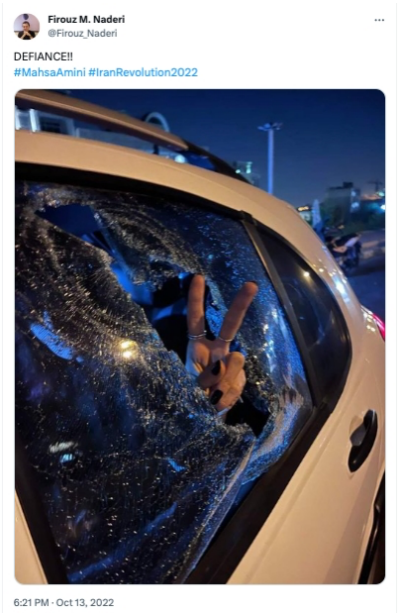

Figure 6.† "No Matter How Much You Try to Harm Me, I Will Not be Wounded; I Will Keep Sprouting." Shared on: https://9gag.com/gag/aGEwrQw?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=post_share

Figure 7.† Amidst a series of chemical attacks on girls' schools, a student defiantly holds a sign reading, "'Woman, Life, Freedom' Until My Last Breath." March 4, 2023. Shared on: https://x.com/1500tasvir_en/status/1632061803063640064?s=20

Figure 8.† Several university students entering Al Zahra University without mandatory hijab, Tehran, April 2023. Shared on: https://x.com/1500tasvir_en/status/1645410408453292034?s=20

Unveiling the Process

Jina was a young Kurdish woman from Saqqez who was killed in Tehran by the Islamic state's police for not *properly* wearing her hijab. What distinguishes Jina's death from other femicides and the countless killings and executions of Kurds and ethnic minorities in Iran is the profound politicization surrounding her untimely demise. Politicization was made possible by a dialectical process intertwining the longstanding political subjectivity of women in Rojhalat and the intersectional feminist practices within Iran.

Jina's body and death converge with the history of systematic gender and ethnic oppression in Iran. The ethnic oppression of Rojhilat, the Kurdish region in Iran, dates back to the time of Reza Shah and persisted under the Islamic Republic regime, despite differences in their political systems (Cronin 2010; 1997; Cabi 2020). According to Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Kurdish oppression is based on three pillars: the unification of diverse territories of Iran, the centralization and industrialization of the country, and the homogenization of Iran under the Islamic state (2023). It is important to note that the Kurdish people have a long history of resistance shaped by their transnational struggles for self-determination against totalitarian states in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. While it is not possible to delve into the entire history of Kurdish resistance in this limited space, it is pertinent to address the resistance of Kurdish women as it relates to the provenance of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" and the development of solidarity beyond Bakur, Başur, Rojava, and Rojhilat.

Kurdish women did not have the same opportunities as Kurdish men. While for both Kurdish men and women entry into the political realm in Iran was hindered, men took a detour by using their mobility and going to big cities, universities, and work sectors (Karimi 2023). On the other hand, Kurdish women vehemently organized various local, ethnic, political, and gender-based movements, gaining a significant presence in Rojhalat (Qubādī 2015). The Komala, a far-left Kurdish political organization, played a significant role in fostering political awakening among Kurdish women and their political subjectification, as Karimi argues (2022; 2023). Although the first feminist party in Kurdistan dates back to the 1960s, it was the grassroot organizations led by Kurdish women that transformed cities like Sanandaj, Marivan, and Saqqez into centers of women's political engagement (Qubādī 2015; Ghoreishi 2018). The Aichi cemetery, where Jina's funeral took place, is located near these cities. In sharp contrast to what seems a sudden reaction of local women to Jina's death, the unveiling and chanting of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" at the Aichi cemetery throws into sharp relief the spontaneous organizational capacity of Kurdish women rooted in their histories of political agency in Rojhalat and Kurdistan.

The genesis of the slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî," as historicized by Rostampour, finds its roots in its earlier form, "Jin, Jiyan," emerging from the struggles of women within the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) during the late 1980s (2023a). The guerrilla women within the party faced societal pressure to discontinue their involvement, driven by the belief that women should not participate in combat roles. In response, these women demanded immediate action to address this issue and challenge prevailing patriarchal norms within their ethnic community (Rostampour 2023a.). This slogan evolved to become a source of inspiration for Abdullah Öcalan, the charismatic leader of the PKK. Through conversations with co-founder Sakîne Cansiz and other women within the movement, Öcalan conceptualized an inextricable link between the aspirations of Kurdish liberation and women's liberation. In this background, "Jin, Jiyan" evolves into "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî," casting light on the mutual dependency of gender equality and ethnic liberation in Kurdistan (Rostampour 2023a).

In the late 1990s, the Peace Mothers and later the Saturday Mothers adopted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî." Drawing inspiration from the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Peace Mothers united against the Turkish government's kidnapping and forced disappearance of their children, bringing together Kurdish women in Bakur and Rojava. This resistance led "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" to be embraced on International Women's Day in Turkey since 2006 and in Syria from 2012 onwards (Rostampour 2023a).

In 2014, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" became the prominent slogan in the fight against ISIS, showcasing the courage and power of Kurdish women against brutal and oppressive states in Kobanî, Rojava. Furthermore, at the funerals of political prisoners, such as Heidar Ghorbani in 2021, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" echoed in Rojhalat. Kurdish women rejected the state's dress code, wore Kurdish clothes, positioned themselves at the forefront of the demonstrations, and led the crowd (Ghoreishi 2023). In short, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" encapsulates the trajectory of Kurdish women, transforming from intersectional victims to

transnational warriors, and the inevitable relations between women's rights, conditions of living, and scope of freedom.

Following the announcement of the decree on veiling in 1979, women from various groups protested for six days in large numbers. These women organized the first demonstration against freedom restrictions, driven by the political awakening of the revolution (Matin and Mohajer 2013; Hosseinkhah 2018). However, their protests lacked solidarity and support from religious nationalists, secularists, liberals, leftists, and intellectual groups, who regarded the women's movement as derivative, divisive, unimportant, and secondary. This lack of support and political neutrality towards the suppression of women worked in favor of Islamist groups, leading to violence and the slogan, "Either Headscarf or a Smack on The Head" (Meskoob 2001; Sedghi 2007).

Due to the abrupt announcement of the decree and the lack of prior preparation, there was insufficient time for organizational efforts to extend beyond Tehran, thus limiting the incorporation of other demographics of women across Iran. The ramifications of the forced unveiling during Reza Shah's reign on conservative families were also overlooked. These included girls' withdrawal from schools, secret and overnight trips of veiling women to use public baths, migration to Iraq in some cases, and memories of physical assault and public humiliation, to name a few. These experiences consolidated anti-Shah sentiments and propelled many women to embrace veiling as their disapproval of the Pahlavi regime, ultimately enabling its co-optation by the religious ideology in power (Chehabi 1993).

While veiling was not a mutual predicament for Kurdish women since Rojhalat is dominantly Sunni and their ethnic hair cover is a small piece of cloth called "lachek" (Ghoreishi 2023), they organized a demonstration on March 11, 1979 and immediately called out the anti-democratic nature of the decree (Qubādī 2015). In solidarity with the women's protest in Tehran, women in Sanadaj, amongst them leftist men and people from Saqqez, chanted, "Neither Headscarf Nor a Smack in The Head, (but) Death to This Dictatorship" (Qubādī 2015, 170). It is worth noting that this protest received limited support in Rojhalat, as it occurred just days before the Kurdish population's hope for the new government began to wane. Nonetheless, their intersectional efforts and feminist solidarity, particularly in connection with the protests in Tehran and other major cities, proved instrumental in delaying the enforcement of mandatory hijab legislation for a period of two years.

It is crucial to contextualize this moment within the larger Kurdish struggle for self-determination which was intentionally portrayed as an attempt to achieve separatism from Iran, even though it served as a pretext for the government to open fire on a politically organized ethnic population. While the horrific events of the 1979 Bloody Nawroz in Sine (Sanandaj) are etched into the collective memory of generations of Kurds in Rojhalat, their mass boycott of the referendum for the Islamic Republic and withdrawal of their support surely remain ingrained in the memory of the nascent state (Cabi 2020). This tragic history has led to unremitting state-sponsored violence against the people and land of Rojhalat since 1979. As a consequence of the ethnic suppression, Kurdish women's struggles have been marginalized, with their solidarity and resistance often expected to primarily align with ethnic struggles above gender precarity.

While the One Million Signature Campaign in 2006 aimed to repeal discriminatory laws and involved various groups of women, it had limitations in its scope and impact. This brings to light the need for a broader perspective that takes into account the history of Islamic nationalism and its implications for women at the ethnic, religious, and sexual peripheries in Iran. This campaign involved various groups of women and aimed to collect one million signatures with a grassroots approach. However, the campaign became divided as some of its advocates sought redemption through legal reforms, placed faith in the state and top-down reforms, and directed their attention to the political center of power. All campaign advocates were eventually detained and incarcerated.

The campaign's merits are widely discussed by Afary (2009), Alikarami (2019), and Rivetti (2020), amongst others. Rostampour critically views that the campaign disproportionately consisted of Persian and middle-class women and was limited to the concerns of educated women in urban areas. According to Rostampour, this narrow perspective rendered the campaign irrelevant due to its alignment with Shi'i and nationalist discourses. The One Million Signature Campaign, had it not been banned, could only succeed in centralizing a minor demographic of women before coming close to delivering on its reforms for gender equality. Therefore, Rostampour associates it with "féminisme réformateur centraliste" (centralist reformist feminism), and high-

lights that the proposed reforms could reinforce hierarchical and hegemonic social structures. Consequently, this approach falls short of achieving the political objective of feminism (2023b). The One Million Signature Campaign should have examined the history of Islamic nationalism for the substantial demographic of women at the ethnic, religious, and sexual peripheries. Had they done so, they might have understood how essential it was for women's struggles in Iran to undo its nationalist deeds.

In 2014, Masoumeh (Masih) Alinejad launched the #MyStealthyFreedom campaign from the diaspora. This campaign popularized the act of unveiling as a form of women's civil disobedience and emphasized the secretive nature of women's pursuit of freedom in Iran. However, the campaign drew criticism for its Orientalist imagery and alignment with neoliberal discourses in the West (Seddighi and Tafakori 2016). In 2017, the campaign took a new direction with the introduction of #WhiteWednesdays, encouraging both women and men to protest mandatory veiling by wearing white scarves or clothing. This weekly practice made women's resistance visible, welcomed male participation in the fight against women's oppression, and turned resistance into a regular practice (Shirazi 2019). On December 27, 2017, on Revolution Street (Khiyaban-E-Enghelab), one of the most crowded streets in Tehran, 31-year-old Vida Movahed stood alone on a utility box. She held her headscarf on a stick in silence. People were captivated by her courageous act and called her the Girl of Revolution Street. Her iconic act promoted other women to do the same, and together they have become the Girls of Revolution Street.

The most longstanding grassroots feminist practice in Iran since 1979 happened to be largely neglected for its feminist implications, with only a few notable exceptions (Khosravi Ooryad 2022; Behkish 2022). For several decades, the Mothers and Families of Khavaran (often referred to as Mothers of Khavaran) have played a pivotal role in Iran through their grassroots feminist practices. Inspired by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, they comprised mothers and families of political dissidents who disappeared or were executed by the Islamic regime in the 1980s (*Guardian* 2012; Muhāğir and Davis 2020).

The Mothers of Khavaran gathered at Khavaran, traditionally a burial ground near Tehran for religious minorities, which had been repurposed to bury unidentified bodies of their family members. They deliberately formed a political collective for #Justice-Seeking. As such, Mothers of Khavaran have established a network that transcends generations, including other mourning mothers like Mothers of Laleh Park and Mothers of Aban, who lost their children during Iranian protests between 2017 and 2022. Together, they form the Iranian Justice-Seeking Mothers and have gained unprecedented political significance amongst the people in Iran and massively contributed to their political awakening (Behkish 2022). By relying on grief, empathy, and intimacy as resources for political activism, they displayed the resilience of feminist practice and an informal and intimate organizational possibility. The justice-seeking mothers #دادخواهی. are the epitome of the non-hierarchical and counter-hegemonic feminist collective in Iran that forge solidarities beyond social, national, ideological, religious, and gender borders, connecting one's loss "away from and in relation to others in the world" (Hancock 2016, 126). Moreover, Khosravi Ooryad calls attention to how they reclaimed the role of mothers as political agents and family relations from the patriarchal discourse (2022).

The roots and routes of these feminist movements unveil the processual coalescence of political subjectivities amongst women in Iran. This trajectory not only maps the transnational coalitions of women but also activates the intersectionality of their struggles across generations. By bringing domestic into public and public to domestic, they subvert the hierarchies of labor and waging. Building upon and away from their predicaments, they decentralize and connect in an often indirect and unexpected way. Meanwhile, they are establishing a foundation to articulate the meaning of feminism in Iran, navigating the ambiguities surrounding its usage and claims of ownership. Drawing on Gago, the resistance describes the geography of fear and risk to make sense of their abuse and the pervasiveness of violence. The fear that does not relegate them to victims but instead empowers them to strategize. Therefore, "[i]t is translated into a sensitive map of the exploitation experienced in connection to one another and into formations of other ways of thinking about territory and, in particular, about the body as a territory (body-territory)" (Gago 2018, 663).

Figure 9.† Women's Syndicate of Marivan 1980s. Shared by: https://x.com/Sh_Mouselchi/status/1250513012399669250?s=20

Figure 10.† Mothers and families of Khavaran at Khavaran burial ground. Found as: Courtesy photo: https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-montazeri-comes-back-to-haunt-1988-mass-killings/27975961.html

"Jin, Jiyan, Azadî"

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement reveals the intricate interplay of political and societal dynamics that perpetuate the subordination of women. Within the authoritarian Islamic regime of Iran lies a deeply entrenched and systematic apparatus of violence against women—a femicide machine. This machine employs women's bodies and mandatory veiling as its gears and pins, regulating the state's radicalization. It enforces gendered public spaces, criminalizes women's autonomy, and exploits their care and reproductive labor, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence and feminized poverty.

This paper underscores the evolution of women's protests and resilience throughout Iran's tumultuous history. Women have steadfastly pursued political change, playing pivotal roles in key moments—from the 1979 revolution to the student protests of 1999, and the 2009 Green Movement. The world watched in horror as Neda Agha Soltan bled to death in one of the world's most peaceful protests. Figures like Gohar Eshghi, an "ordinary" elderly woman, emerged as one of the most powerful voices in the justice-seeking movement against the state's atrocious repression of the protestors. Subsequent insurgencies since 2017, sparked primarily by economic grievances and price hikes, or the 2020 anti-government protests following the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, were strongly advocated by women such as Sepideh Qolian, Fatemeh Sepehri, and Bahareh Hedayat, among many. From solitary confinement to hunger strikes, these fearless women have displayed the strength of their voice, bodies, and conviction, to the world and the state.

Building on these collective memories of resilience and suppression, the politicization of Jina Amini's state murder not only marked a turning point— propelling a full-fledged feminist uprising from the ashes left behind by the femicide machine— but also unveiled the intersection of many injustices that extend beyond the realm of gender. Even after a year has elapsed, the strike endures. It persists in disrupting the entrenched hegemonies of heteropatriarchy and poses a formidable challenge for the state, all the while reshaping the ongoing struggle for women's rights in Iran reaching far beyond its borders.

In the wake of Jina's death at the hands of the morality police, the government has taken extensive measures to suppress women's defiance (Amnesty International 2023). After more than four decades of enduring systematic discrimination, violence against women, queer, non-binary, and trans individuals, and the weaponization of public moral against them, the proposed bill for unveiling punishments has compelled United Nations experts to contemplate the notion of gender apartheid in Iran (OHCHR 2023).

Women in Iran firmly reject the role of passive victims (Parent 2023b), shaping their resistance into a feminist strike in its recent phase. The feminist strike in Iran brings together women from diverse backgrounds and social positions, surpassing hegemonic values and forging a decentralized collective. Through their joint en-

deavors, they challenge prescribed gender roles, confront the perils of precariousness across various domains, and envision a mass mobilization capable of sabotaging the femicide machine, ultimately ushering in revolutionary change. Their activism and unwavering resilience epitomize the continuous coalescence of political subjectivities, both within Iran and across transnational coalitions, as they bridge differences and activate intersectionality within their struggles. The recent case of Armita Garavand‡ (#ArmitaGaravand), a 16-year-old girl who is currently in a coma after being assaulted for not wearing a hijab on public transportation, bears a striking resemblance to that of Jina Amini (Wintour and Parent 2023). These women's activism and resilience are levelled at the femicide machine. While their resistance serves as an inspiration and a beacon of hope for a nation, their strike calls on feminist solidarities, not least from the international body of Muslim women.

In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, a strike is "a wide basis against the conditions of work," and the feminist strike in Iran showcases its all-encompassing basis against the conditions of living and the restrictions on freedom (1976, 67). In this light, the resounding slogan of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" acquires its profound significance, encapsulating the essence of their struggle.

Figure 11.† Women, public space, and daily life. The writing on the wall reads: "Woman, Life, Freedom." Shared by: https://x.com/lila2052/status/1645423004245979138?s=20

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Endnotes

† Amidst the current events in Iran's uprising, images shared online often obscure people's faces and the identity of the photographers due to security concerns. The images included in this article are all screenshots of images that have been circulated online through social media to raise awareness about the protests.

‡ As this paper undergoes its final proofreading before publication, it commemorates the solemn 40-day period since Armita Garavand's passing. Throughout her coma, Armita remained under the strict surveillance of the Islamic Republic regime in the hospital, meticulously controlling details and news surrounding her condition and her death to suppress potential uprisings. Her family endured incarceration and threats to remain silent. The striking parallel between the tragic inception and conclusion of this paper serves as a poignant reminder: Even as the femicide machine operates in Iran, resistance perseveres.

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Signs

Decolonizing Solidarities with(in) Muslim Women:

Toward an Intersectional Justice Movement

--Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	This article rethinks solidarity through the lens of intersectionality. It asks: What horizons for collective activism emerge when solidarity is reimagined through difference rather than despite it? Engaging the recurring trope of the veil as a site of multiple inequalities and exclusions in feminist and political conversations about Muslim women, the article examines how diverse solidarities coalesced around the veil during Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, transforming a feminist revolt into an intersectional justice movement. In contrast, when feminist discourses remained disciplined by the coloniality of the veil, solidarities with(in) Muslim women fractured. The article critiques oppositional framings that exploit Muslim women's relationalities—to faith and self, to kin and men, to body, land, society, and world. It argues for decolonizing solidarity as a strategy for collective activism: rooted in difference, enacted as a political practice of love, and urgent for an intersectional justice movement that links Jin, Jiyan, Azadî with Free Palestine.
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Title:
Decolonizing Solidarity with(in) Muslim Women: Toward an Intersectional Justice Movement

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Acknowledgments:
This writing was conceived as a quest for love, feminist solidarity, and community. It is dedicated to my sisters and brothers in Germany whose families and homes have been destroyed in Palestine and Lebanon, and to my Afghan friends and comrades who stood with me as I witnessed the devastation in Iran. It also belongs to exile and diasporic spaces where, together, we confront the shock and absurdity of life on both sides of the world and search for love and meaning amid the ruins. I am deeply indebted to the generous reviewers, whose thoughtful feedback brought care to this work, and to the patience and professionalism of *Signs*.

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Abstract:
This article rethinks solidarity through the lens of intersectionality. It asks: What horizons for collective activism emerge when solidarity is reimagined through difference rather than despite it? Engaging the recurring trope of the veil as a site of multiple inequalities and exclusions in feminist and political conversations about Muslim women, the article examines how diverse solidarities coalesced around the veil during Iran's *Woman, Life, Freedom* uprising, transforming a feminist revolt into an intersectional justice movement. In contrast, when feminist discourses remained disciplined by the coloniality of the veil, solidarities with(in) Muslim women fractured. The article critiques oppositional framings that exploit Muslim women's relationalities—to faith and self, to kin and men, to body, land, society, and world. It argues for decolonizing solidarity as a strategy for collective activism: rooted in difference, enacted as a political practice of love, and urgent for an intersectional justice movement that links *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* with *Free Palestine.*

Keywords:
solidarity, decolonizing, intersectionality, veil, Muslim women

Introduction

Four months into Israel's genocide in Gaza—weeks after the International Court of Justice declared a plausible risk of genocide—the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy hosted a Berlin panel, *Strongmen and Violence: Interlinkages of Anti-Feminism and Anti-Democratic Developments*. The consultancy is closely tied to Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (2021–2025), who has made feminist foreign policy central to their political brand.

I attended on behalf of Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) activists in the United States and fellow Iranian scholars—one year after what many hailed as a feminist revolution. Yet Iran was reduced to an afterthought, collapsed into the category of anti-democratic outliers alongside Russia, while Ukraine dominated Germany's feminist concerns. By neglecting Iranian resistance, the event redrew feminism's geopolitical borders: on one side, women appeared as victims of anti-gender men; on the other, they were elevated as feminist agents of democratic progress.

The farce crystallized in opening remarks, when Gesa Braeutigam, a Foreign Ministry delegate, warned against being "distracted" by anti-colonial conversations. Their words echoed Staatsräson with a feminist gloss, reaffirmed by Baerbock on 11 October 2023. Staatsräson—Germany's unconditional support for Israel's security—remains central to its foreign policy.[1] Invoking Holocaust guilt, the German state instrumentalizes solidarity, shielding arms exports to Israel and complicity in genocide (Forensis 2024), while criminalizing Palestinian solidarity as antisemitism (della Porta 2024). As a leading EU force, Germany has shifted the goalposts of racism from Jewish communities to Muslim populations by regulating solidarity itself (Loewenstein 2025).

The impact was unmistakable. Oblivious to the repression of ceasefire protestors and genocide in Gaza, European feminist and queer activists rehearsed willful blindness and defiant

ignorance as “strongwomen” (Hancock 2011).[2] Seeing the interlinkages of colonial feminism and violence against Muslim women (Palestinian Feminist Collective 2023), I left reflecting on Nada Elia’s reminder that “feminist praxis entails engaging in solidarity with the decolonial struggle” and its resonance for activism in Iran (2017, 47).

This reflection frames the central question: what horizons for collective activism emerge through reimagining feminist solidarity with(in) Muslim women? In 2022, Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, died in custody of Iran’s morality police for not fully complying with mandatory veiling (Khatam 2023). Images of their body circulated on social media, sparking protests within and beyond Iran. Women removed hijabs, set them on fire, and chanted “Woman, Life, Freedom,” which reverberated globally (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). While the uprising morphed into an intersectional justice movement, images of unveiling remained controversial. This paper examines both meaningful and failed solidarities with the WLF to show how feminist solidarity coalesced and fractured around the veil.

Building on this context, the argument is both theoretical and political. I advance the concept of the coloniality of the veil—a framework exposing how feminist conversations about Muslim women remain anchored in the veil, enabling the discursive colonization of agency. Against this coloniality, revisiting solidarity through intersectional feminist thinking offers decolonizing possibilities for Muslim women’s collective activism.

To develop this framework, I draw on intersectionality, which highlights how multiple categories converge in lived experience (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989; 1991) and how interlocking hierarchies shape subordination. Beyond analysis, intersectionality matters epistemologically: it centers difference and rejects additive models by conceptualizing power as relational and contingent (Hancock 2016). Methodologically, I adopt an anticategorical

approach (McCall 2005) to account for the fluidity and multiplicity of Muslim women's identities and agencies across time and context.

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, it explores Muslim women's agency, then introduces the coloniality of the veil. Next, it develops a poststructuralist critique of solidarity through feminist intersectionality, exposing liberal assumptions that make it susceptible to instrumentalization. It then turns to instances of meaningful solidarity during the WLF, contrasted with failed solidarities. Finally, it argues that decolonizing solidarities are forged through dynamic consciousness attentive to difference (Collins 1990) and enacted through the political practice of love (Sandoval 2000) as a strategy for collective activism. This approach affirms situated struggles, heterogeneous subjectivities, and differential agency without binding difference to fragmentation and opposition. It opens a path toward an intersectional justice movement.

Muslim Women's Agency

The evolution of Muslim women's agency as an analytical category reflects broader shifts in feminist scholarship. Agency has often been defined as the capacity to act against custom, authority, or divine will—a view famously critiqued by Saba Mahmood (2005) for tethering agency solely to resistance. Drawing on the pious practices of Muslim women, Mahmood reframed agency not as simple transgression but as an open epistemological question. Talal Asad offers a discursive framework for religion in which agency emerges from "semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself" (2003, 78). In this vein, Mahmood (2004) unsettled liberal feminist assumptions of choice, autonomy, and freedom.

Sertaç Sehlikoglu (2018) traces the genealogy of Muslim women's agency in feminist anthropology and sociology across Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), identifying

four waves. The first two, spanning the late 1960s to the 1990s, challenged the erasure of Muslim women's agency by exposing male bias that fueled colonial sensationalism and exotification, while critiquing ethnocentric feminist paradigms (Kandiyoti 1996). The third wave, emerging in the early 2000s, reframed agency as rooted in subjecthood rather than primarily in power (Sehlikoglu 2018). From this perspective, Mahmood (2005) showed that agency may also be enacted through compliance and pious self-making, marking the "piety turn" in feminist scholarship. As anthropological research revolved around this locus, "'the pious Muslim' became *the only visible* Muslim" (Deeb 2015, 95, original emphasis).

The centralization of pious subjectivity in this turn inadvertently reproduced dichotomous understandings, casting Islamic contexts as essentially different from the West and reinscribing Muslim women's otherness (Soares and Osella 2009). In response, what Sehlikoglu (2018) identifies as the fourth wave looked beyond religious domains to everyday life, advocating an epistemological framework that accounts for multiplicity in subject formation. Here, keeping agency open requires engaging with "the multiplicity of Muslim women's subjectification, which inevitably embraces realms of aspiration, desire, and enjoyment" (Sehlikoglu 2018, 87).

In the post-9/11 resurgence of the essentialization of re(li)gion, Fuzia Husain (2025) underscores that Muslim women's agency is often trapped within the binary of compliance versus resistance. Neither pole, they argue, secures women's integration into relations of power or redresses their structural exclusion. Husain identifies three recurrent framings: (1) the toolkit model—instrumentalizing cultural or religious resources for women's interests; (2) the transgressive model—subverting established norms; and (3) the compliant model—internalizing norms as self-cultivation (2025, 3). Because these models privilege norms, schemas, and symbols, they collapse agency into a symbolic register. Yet as Husain notes, "[a]gency is not only about actions individuals take for themselves but also about the actions

they prompt others to take on their behalf" (2025, 3). At the same time, accounts of relational agency often obscure its performative dimension, which aligns actors with broader principles rather than narrow self-interest (Adams 1996; Reed 2017). On this basis, Husain contends that agency is multidimensional: it involves both doing and mobilizing others. Attending to symbolic, relational, and performative dimensions clarifies how agency operates across sites and scales. While relational aspects remain constrained by broader social structures, this multidimensional account renders binaries "meaningless at the interpersonal level—where one person's resistance is another's compliance" (2025, 11).

Yet despite this expanding scholarship, the veil persists as the central symbol in feminist conversations about Muslim women, attracting disproportionate scrutiny and regulation. This fixation conflates veil and wearer, ossifying both meaning-making possibilities of the veil and Muslim women's subjectivity. It also functions as a disciplinary apparatus that regulates bodies, belonging, and agency, particularly in its relational dimension. Detached from historical possibilities (Asad 1996), situated specificities (Mohanty 1988), and ethical motivations (Mahmood 2005), agency becomes anchored in a decontextualized symbol. Reducing the veil's performative capacity to veiling versus unveiling strips Muslim women's subjectivity of intersectionality, fluidity, plurality, and temporality, while depleting their agency of ethical, political, and affective relationalities. For this reason, inquiry into the veil is analytically critical and politically necessary to the study of Muslim women's collective activism.

Coloniality of the Veil: Relational Discipline and Epistemic Violence

The veil is not uniquely Islamic; its practice predates Islam (Saʿdāwī 1980). Within Islamic discourses, veiling was reconfigured within a moral order that sexualized the female body and tied its regulation to communal ethics and piety (Mernissi 1987). By contrast, modern

problematizations of the veil emerged in Orientalist imaginaries (Said 1978) and became central to colonial domination (Abu-Lughod 2002; Fanon 1959). Walter Mignolo's (2000) "colonial difference" names the hierarchy between colonizer and colonized that underpins modern global power. Building on this, María Lugones (2010) argues that categorical, dichotomous, and hierarchical thinking constitutes colonial modernity's logic. The coloniality of gender shows how race, gender, and sexuality are co-constructed as interlocking systems that reorganize relationalities—intimate, affective, and spiritual—in the service of capitalist colonial modernity (Lugones 2010).

Aníbal Quijano's (1991) "coloniality" underscores the persistence of global power beyond formal empire. As early as the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft (1790) leveraged Muslim women to expand white women's rights within European civilizational claims. From such texts to later "feminist wars," white feminism evolved into colonial and imperial feminism, elevating white women by subordinating others (Davis 1983; Spivak 1985; Vergès 2021). Across these contexts, the veil persisted as a symbolic site translating domination into renewed civilizing missions (Abu-Lughod 2002; Puar 2007; Zakaria 2017; 2021).

Chandra Mohanty (1988) shows how fixation on cultural markers such as the veil produces "Third World difference," homogenizing non-Western women while universalizing Western gender hegemonies. In this frame, Muslim women's agency appears absent or merely subversive. This dynamic enacts what Gayatri Spivak (1985; 1994) terms epistemic violence: rendering subaltern voices intelligible only through misrepresentation—or erasing them altogether. The symbolic obsession with the veil thus sustains domination beyond formal colonialism. I call this enduring formation the coloniality of the veil.

The coloniality of the veil names how the veil operates as a site of multiple inequality and exclusion. It sustains intersecting hierarchies of peoples, lands, and knowledges and persists

through the veiling/unveiling binary, which casts Muslim women in categorical, oppositional, and hierarchical terms. In doing so, it racializes patriarchy, confines it to specific geographies, and naturalizes heteronormative colonial fantasies of lands and bodies.

Regardless of its diverse meanings, the coloniality of the veil reorganizes relationalities in the service of white-supremacist, heteropatriarchal, colonial capitalism.[3] In Iran—under both the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) and the Islamic Republic (1979–) (Moallem 2005; Sedghi 2007); in secular-liberal states such as France and Canada (Fernando 2014; Scott 2007; Thobani 2007); and in minority or majority-Muslim societies such as India or Egypt (Ahmed 1992)—the veil has generated dichotomies: pious/profane, secular-liberal/Islamic-conservative, modern/traditional. Beyond the national scale, it shapes identity politics in transnational projects such as the Umma, feminist equality agendas, and multicultural politics (Bilge 2010; Moallem 2001; Göle 1997). Debates on the veil repeatedly reproduce binaries: good/bad Muslim, good/bad migrant, feminist/Islamist. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "multiple binaries demonstrate the power that binary thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield within intersecting oppressions" (1990, 71).

Since the 2010s, scholarship has turned to everyday practices, asking whether every act of Muslim women must be tethered to Islam (Soares and Osella 2009). This shift destabilized the veiling/unveiling binary (see, Fadil 2011; Topal 2017; 2022). Although these studies highlight (un)veiling as an agentive capacity, they largely examine individual practice. By contrast, the coloniality of the veil draws attention to the governance of bodies. It functions as a technology of power that disciplines relationalities—within, across, and beyond Muslim communities.

For too long, the veiling/unveiling binary has pitted Muslim women's agency against itself, creating a hierarchy of struggles and suffering by granting visibility to some forms while discrediting others. The coloniality of the veil forecloses multiplicity, contradiction, and

nuance in subjectivities and (un)veiling practices. Examining agency through the relationalities it mobilizes shows how reliance on the veil as symbol constrains collective action. By conditioning relationalities with(in) Muslim women, the coloniality of the veil narrows the horizons of collective activism.

Rethinking Solidarity through Intersectionality

Grounded in Black feminist and women-of-color activism, intersectionality predates its academic articulation by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins in the 1980s (Hancock 2016). It has become indispensable for analyzing domination across intersecting systems (Cho et al. 2013; Knapp 2005) and functions as a political strategy in global movements (Collins and Bilge 2016; Gago 2020).

As intellectual and activist intervention, intersectionality has been mobilized to challenge essentialist notions of collective identity in anti-racist and feminist movements. It moves beyond severe categories of analysis by offering a relational understanding of power (Collins 1990). Rather than evading difference, it approaches varied experiences and resists hegemonic and counter-hegemonic reductionism. Coalition-building across differences is fundamental to collective activism. Solidarity is central to intersectionality (Tormos 2017), rooted in political commitment and emancipatory values. Multiple formulations—political intersectionality (Cho et al. 2013), movement intersectionality (Davis 2016), intersectional solidarity (Hancock 2011; 2016), and intersectional praxis (Townsend-Bell 2011)—reveal it as both a means of contesting power and a site of collective empowerment.

Despite these advances, dominant practices of solidarity remain rooted in liberal traditions that emphasize perceived commonality and mutual interests (Waterman 2001; Wilde 2007) or shared identity and aims (Hunt and Benford 2004; Taylor and Whittier 1992). For Émile Durkheim, solidarity signifies mutual support grounded in presumed sameness and equality

(Crow 2002). Such framings falter before the colonial divide. Within Eurocentric paradigms, solidarity tends toward homogenization and participates in othering by remaining within a humanistic frame. Against this politics, intersectionality scholarship offers critique. Intersectional frameworks reject essentialized relations of domination and fixed categories of victimhood. By scrutinizing the racialized identifications of oppressed and oppressor, it maps relationalities that unfold through difference and contingency.

Without undoing hierarchy, solidarity becomes patronizing (Ortega 2006). Ange-Marie Hancock contends that solidarity must be distanced from empathy or good deeds enacted as "political tolerance, altruism, or public service" (2011, 63). In intersectional terms, solidarity requires tracing relationalities that connect situated struggles to broader organizations of power through collective contestation. Rather than constructing connections in universal terms or abstract categories, intersectional approaches attend to relationalities that emerge through—and because of—difference. They unravel differences while interrogating the convergence of struggles (Gago 2020).

By refusing to organize solidarity around shared victimhood or hierarchies of suffering (hooks 2014), intersectional solidarity opens possibilities for collective action toward justice. It becomes "the strongest politics" for resisting separatism, cooptation, and tokenism—affirming that "justice is never a single group's achievement" (Combahee River Collective 1977, 138–39). In practice, it does not rely solely on reciprocity or strategic alliance. It entails ongoing negotiation of differences in relation to power and access to resources—knowledge, care, and forms of subjectivity across communities (Collins 1990). Solidarity is contingent on collective empowerment, mutual relevance, and affirmative advocacy (Strolovitch 2007). Within intersectional activism (Doetsch-Kidder 2012), solidarity emerges as a political practice of love, grounded in dynamic—and differential—consciousness (Collins 1990; Sandoval 2000).

Intersectional consciousness entails the capacity to assess, map, and reconfigure interrelated domains of domination. It fosters counter-hegemonic knowledge by connecting experiences across social groups (Collins 1990; Greenwood 2008). This consciousness relies on reflexivity, contingency, and multidirectional visibility (Hancock 2016), "[linking] liberation from oppression to collective liberation for all" (Gago 2020). As Collins notes, "A dynamic consciousness is vital to both individual and group agency" (1990, 285). Yet consciousness and agency are also subject to disciplinary conditioning.

Collins's (1990) notion of dynamic consciousness is resonant in Germany, where the imperative "Nie wieder" ["Never Again"] has hardened into a binary. What began as a call against genocide has narrowed through the fossilization of consciousness. Rather than opening a path toward accountability and justice, Germany's relation to Jewish communities has turned inward—toward the self—by inverting relationality: instead of turning outward to the other, it recasts the oppressor as oppressed. This is Ovid's Narcissus at the pool: a gaze mistaking reflection for relation. Empathy instructed by categories, or grounded in presumed sameness, cannot yield solidarity. It withers into what Hancock (2011) terms compassion deficit disorder. As long as Palestinians are denied their humanity, borrowing from James Baldwin, white people remain "barricaded inside their history" (1965, 727). To ground these conceptual insights, I now turn to how the veil has operated historically and politically as a site of regulation and struggle.

From Defiance to Collective Contestation: Woman, Life, Freedom

In Rojhelat, the Kurdish region of Iran, the Aichi cemetery holds Jina Amini's body and marks the birthplace of the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement. At their funeral, Kurdish women removed headscarves and chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" ["Woman, Life, Freedom"] (Mohammadi 2022).[4] Coined in the late 1980s in conversations between Abdullah

Öcalan and Sakine Cansız of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the slogan affirmed the inseparability of Kurdish and women's liberation (Rostampour 2023b). It also amplified women's voices within Kurdish anti-colonial struggle across Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (Bader 2022).

The uprising's lexicon was forged through embodied defiance: unveiling as open disobedience, burning headscarves, and cutting hair in rage and mourning. Anchored in "Woman, Life, Freedom," the veil took on political significance beyond liberal feminism or secular/Islamist debates (Bayat 2023). The WLF uprising was distinguished less by unveiling than by the relationalities it revealed.[5] Drawing on historical and transnational Kurdish solidarities across Rojhelat, Rojava, Bakur, and Başûr, WLF was the transformation of individual defiance into collective force.[6]

Minoo Moallem (2005) shows how the invention of the Umma positioned the veil as a key signifier of an imagined community in postrevolutionary Iran, semiotically recruiting subjects vis-à-vis the West. Within this nationalist order, women were hailed as "sisters" to brothers who became warriors in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). As Moallem notes, "[t]his call divided my generation of women and determined the conditions of our belonging—staying in the homeland to either join or resist, or becoming diasporic" (2005, 5). WLF reconfigured this order, reclaiming the veil from a state-imposed marker of belonging into a generative site of solidarity across actors, geographies, histories, and struggles. The veil thus became a site of mutual relevance and mobilization, unsettling its colonial role as a divisive apparatus and articulating multidimensional agency—symbolic, relational, and performative in everyday collective experience.

This collective agency enabled solidarities that exceeded symbolic representation, even as relationality remained conditioned by broader social patterns. Two forms of meaningful

solidarity emerged in Iran. First, intracategorical solidarity unfolded among women across a spectrum of religion, religiosity, and (un)veiling practices. Second, intercategorical solidarity formed across gender categories. As Hancock (2011) notes, solidarity is not uniform but contingent, situational, and continuously negotiated. These solidarities disrupted entrenched binaries of gender and veil that had long structured nationalist and colonial imaginaries.

The Political Practice of Love: Spiritual and Affective Solidarities

The unveiling of women during the WLF uprising constituted a collective act of agency, distinct from binaries that cast actions as submission or subversion. Since 1983, compulsory veiling in Iran collapsed women into a monolithic category, erasing differences of ideology, religion, religiosity, and social position (Moallem 2005; Sedghi 2007). The uprising disrupted this order by dismantling oppositions between veiled and unveiled women—images of them walking hand in hand made this visible—and displaying a gamut of (un)veiling across pious and non-pious women (Jamali 2024; Radio Marz 2023b).

Women's agency proved more complex than binaries. It spanned diverse embodied practices of (un)veiling, negotiated through social, political, and personal contexts. Solidarity was neither confined to protests nor to non-religious spaces (Alami Fariman and Hakiminejad 2024). It emerged in neighborhoods, families, universities, schools, and commemorations (Moqadam 2025). Through gestures of care, women forged bonds of love and ethical commitment, challenging feminist orthodoxy and the state's theocracy. Here, the veil functioned less as division than as connective tissue, binding solidarities across binaries and polarized positions.[7]

Public figures amplified this force. Artists, athletes, and professionals—long compelled to veil for economic participation—removed headscarves after Jina's death.[8] What was once an

agentive strategy became complicity in repression. Their visible acts signaled that veiling was no longer reducible to religious or cultural identity, asserting bodily autonomy (Bostani 2024).

Solidarities also unfolded among devout women. Some continued pious practices in private yet appeared unveiled in public as dissent. Others modified the veil's style and use to express bodily self-determination while navigating structures. Unveiling was not equally possible: more accessible in cities than rural areas, shaped by class and family dynamics (Radio Marz 2023a). These heterogeneous practices blurred divisions between pious and profane, secular and Muslim women. They refigured the veil not as rupture but as ground for solidarity, enabling justice-oriented activism (Radio Marz 2023b).

Generational solidarities deepened this fabric. In October 2022, Gohar Eshghi, an 80-year-old working-class woman and mother of Sattar Beheshti—killed in state custody in 2012—unveiled in a widely shared video. Declaring, "for our youth, after 80 years, because of a religion that kills people, I am removing this hijab," they enacted solidarity that crossed generations and struggles. Their act underscored that these gestures sought justice beyond bodily autonomy.[9]

Religious discourse also became grounds for dissent. Kamelia Sajadian, whose son was killed during the uprising, continued to wear the veil. At their funeral, Sajadian condemned the regime's brutality, invoking Imam Hossein and calling themself the "Zaynab of this time," the voice against the tyranny.[10] Their invocation of Shi'a lineage showed how faith can animate political agency. Similarly, Tara Roozbahani, mourning their brother, removed their chador[11] while keeping their scarf, rejecting the regime rather than their faith. Mourners responded: "Whether with or without veil, march on to revolution."[12] A group of activists from Gilan Province—veiled and unveiled women and men accused of contacting victims' families—were collectively sentenced to sixty years in prison.[13] During WLF, activist Fatemeh Sepehri kept

their chador while their daughter appeared unveiled to read their mother's letters from prison.[14] These family practices of (un)veiling were not fractures but constitutive of solidarity.

Intellectual and religious solidarities deepened this fabric. Sedigheh Vasmaghi, a theologian and Muslim feminist, has long opposed compulsory hijab. After the death of Armita Garavand, a 16-year-old student pushed into a coma by hijab enforcers in 2023, Vasmaghi appeared unveiled in a public video.[15] In their recent book, they reflect on unveiling as a gradual process shaped by historical conditions and evolving subjectivity (Vasmaghi 2025). At times, compliance enabled them to study, debate, and publish; over time, their strategies shifted between compliance, subversion, and transcendence, transforming solidarity into one grounded in justice. From prison, they extended this endeavor by standing with persecuted Bahá'í women, one of Iran's most repressed minorities—showing how solidarity reconfigures visibility as multidirectional.[16]

Taken together, these examples show that solidarity during WLF was forged through difference. Unveiling became a prism through which differences—across gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and religion—were made visible. Alongside (un)veiling practices, generational, familial, and religious transformations reoriented the veil from divisive apparatus to connective vector. In these solidarities, difference became the ground of collective struggle. The political practice of love emerged as both ethical commitment and mobilizing strategy—expressed through spirituality, religious relationality, and same-gender affective bonds (Radio Marz 2023b). Solidarity extended across gendered boundaries, forging relationalities that unsettled categorical severability.

Beyond Binaries: Solidarity Across Gender Difference

The WLF uprising challenged hegemonic gender roles and generated subjectivities resisting state-constructed norms. In Iran, hegemonic masculinity is sustained through honor

discourse and anxieties over women's sexuality (Afary 2009). As Raewyn Connell (1995) notes, it defines itself against women while excluding queer, trans, and non-binary lives. It also sustains hierarchies with subordinated masculinities—gay and trans—and with marginalized masculinities shaped by class and ethnicity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This binary, foundational to colonial and nationalist imaginaries, reflects a global order of power (Karimi 2016; Sabsay 2012). Counter-hegemonic masculinities emerged during the uprising through evolving consciousness, yet faced contestation and continual reconfiguration that shaped men's solidarity.

Although WLF is often characterized as women-led, men's participation was immediate and substantial. The invocation of *woman* in the slogan was neither symbolic nor biological. It marked "the interconnection of patriarchal, capitalist, nationalist, and colonial domination," where *woman* signified the subaltern (Naderi 2025, 14; Spivak 1994). This relational meaning mobilized young and working-class men—especially from marginalized regions—whose lives were shaped by repression, poverty, and disenfranchisement (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Their solidarity complicated neat oppressor/oppressed categories, revealing simultaneous domination and vulnerability across gendered positions.

Men's solidarities did not emerge as paternalism but as commitments aligned with women's struggles and grounded in their own grievances (Spanoudi 2022). In one defiant exchange, male protesters turned the regime's moral rhetoric against it—"You are lewd, you are dissolute"—followed by women responding, "I am a free woman" (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). These performances modeled an intersectional diagnosis of domination and enacted new gender relations: recognizing women's struggles while reclaiming honor as integrity, equality, and respect. Beyond protests, private interrogations of masculinity moved into public discourse. One account framed reflexive engagement with masculinity as a continual struggle

toward “becoming woman” (Alef. 2025). Men’s solidarity was not a chivalric display but unfolded through humble and everyday practices: confronting moral policing, disrupting harassment, dancing in joyous defiance, creating safer spaces, offering flowers, and exchanging gestures of care (Imran 2023)**.** Such solidarities express the political practice of love (Sandoval 2000), a praxis that, as bell hooks writes, demands transformation: “To know love, men must be able to let go the will to dominate. They must be able to choose life over death. They must be willing to change” (2005, 14). Love here disentangles intimacy, kinship, and care from nationalist-capitalist framings that confine them to heteronormativity and reproductive labor (Lugones 2010).

These embodied solidarities reflected epistemic shifts. As Collins (1990) argues, collective agency depends on alternative knowledge that dismantles hierarchies. WLF’s transformative consciousness unsettled binary logics and opened space for counter-hegemonic imaginaries. Such solidarities exemplify Hancock’s (2011) “strong solidarity”—alliances marked not only by sacrifice but by a deep commitment to equality. In this context, passive witnessing signaled failure of integrity, recalling men’s disengagement during the 1979 women’s protests and complicity in subsequent subordination (Meskoob 2001). By contrast, men’s solidarities during WLF marked an ethical shift and a generational rupture in gendered political consciousness.

For many men, solidarity meant denaturalizing their position within patriarchy, reassessing roles, and accepting accountability. Imprisoned and flogged for producing anthems of the uprising, Mehdi Yarrahi redirected visibility toward a self-critical reckoning with male privilege, refusing to be its economic beneficiary.[17] Political prisoner Farhad Meysami staged radical solidarity from prison. Images of his emaciated body—after an extended hunger strike—demanded the release of incarcerated women activists and testified to new

relationalities of care.[18] Public figures in football and hip-hop also declared solidarity, investing social capital to amplify women's struggles in male-dominated arenas.[19]

WLF's evolved consciousness was enacted through an outpouring of artistic production. Poetry, music, and digital and performative arts contested normative representations and state control beyond mere opposition (Ashoori 2025; Nikzad 2022). Feminist solidarities assumed aesthetic form, depicting men as active participants and emphasizing togetherness and mutual empowerment. By contrast, 1970s cultural production erased women, preserved patriarchal aesthetics, and rendered freedom as abstraction. Both secular and Islamist revolutionary songs of the time—*Aftab Karan*, *Baharan Khojaste Bād*—were carried by masculine voices, whether solo tenor, dominant choirs, or heroic lyricism, consistently centering men (Siamdoust 2023a; 2023b). There, solidarity was ideological rather than affective. Shervin Hajipour's *Barāye*, what became the WLF anthem, diverged: a polyphony of voices and motives (Rezai 2024). Composed from tweets and delivered in a soft masculine register, it displaced the leading male figure with humility, weaving the individual into the collective and grounding solidarity in shared pain, desire, and materiality.

The regime's repression of male protesters—arrests, torture, executions, forced disappearances—exposed the organization of domination (BBC 2022; The New Arab 2023). Men were not peripheral allies but integral participants in a feminist uprising. Their solidarities disrupted state gender expectations and challenged colonial constructions that rigidly cast Muslim men as oppressors and women as their passive victims. WLF was site where gendered political consciousness evolved, showing how solidarities across gender difference materialize through epistemic transformation, creativity, and affect.

Failed Solidarities

In contrast with meaningful solidarities—grounded in dynamic consciousness, affective practice, relational accountability, and multidirectional visibility—the following cases show solidarity invoked yet emptied of substance. These failed solidarities redirected and reorganized collective contestation to align with global power. They took two dominant forms: performative solidarities**,** shaped by neo-Orientalist gazes and politics of visibility; and hierarchical solidarities, forged through colonial–nationalist frames that erase intracategorical difference. Both reproduced the coloniality of the veil—the former by reducing Muslim women's agency to spectacle and fixing victimhood as identity, the latter by essentializing and racializing difference while reinforcing categorical hegemonies.

Performative Solidarities: Neo-Orientalist Gaze and the Politics of Visibility

Beyond Iran's borders, the WLF uprising circulated through one image: unveiled Muslim women (Times 2022). This shorthand narrowed the movement into a consumable code for Western audiences. What passed as solidarity was staged through spectacle, not engagement.

The precedent was clear. By the 2000s, Orientalist portrayals of Islam as oppressive gave way to neo-Orientalist framings centering Muslim women. After 9/11, white liberal feminists and mainstream media spotlighted Afghan women as subjects needing rescue, justifying the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as a feminist mission (Abu-Lughod 2002). Women in Afghanistan and feminist activists resisted from the outset. Groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and allies like MADRE denounced the intervention for fueling nationalism, empowering ultra-conservatives, and worsening conditions for women (Chattopadhyay 2021). Afghan women became tokens of liberation while their material lives declined.[20] As Jennifer Fluri (2023) notes, they were reduced to "currency" exchanged between NGOs and governments—proof of democratic progress that could not buy security, wages, or

childcare. The 2021 U.S. withdrawal, carried out with disregard for Afghan women's voices, crystallized the intervention as imperialist in both design and outcome (Sobat 2022). As RAWA declared, "the U.S. claims of democracy and women's rights and progress in any country, including Afghanistan, is a blatant lie," a lesson for feminists globally (2021).

The same gaze was levelled at WLF uprising. The unveiling of women in Iran allowed Western advocacy to recycle hero–victim narratives (Cooke 2007). Images of schoolgirls unveiling, raising middle fingers, or standing in flames were consumed as spectacle. Rebellion—not resilience—was celebrated, so long as it mirrored Western feminist aesthetics and anxieties (Zakaria 2021). Media and advocacy amplified figures like Masih Alinejad, whose visibility relied on neo-Orientalist scripts portraying Iranian and Afghan women as victims of Muslim men and Islamic regimes.[21] Their claims of leading a grassroots uprising, alliances with far-right evangelical politicians, and calls for sanctions and military intervention exemplify solidarity weaponized (Filkins 2022).[22] By calling for collective punishment rather than situated empowerment, such advocacy deepened suffering while reinforcing colonial divides (Tafakori 2021; Ziabari 2022).

In Europe, the pattern persisted. In France, gestures like hair-cutting, slogan recitation, and even cis women stripping in public recentered liberal claims to women's rights and naturalized secular imaginaries of the body (Varma and Shaban 2024). State actors used WLF to revive anti-Muslim's veil campaigns in schools and the Olympics, reasserting control over their bodies (Durie 2021). In Germany, conservative and populist politicians instrumentalized unveiling in Iran to intensify Islamophobic campaigns, while liberal feminists remained idle with generic solidarity statements.[23] Initiatives such as Article 19's (2022) statement gathered many organizations from North and South but failed to challenge punitive policies that isolated

Iranians globally. Reliance on the women's rights rhetoric and predetermined strategies substituted genericness for analysis and prescription for engagement.

After October 7, instrumentalization intensified. Alinejad was invited to Germany as a feminist voice while endorsing Israel's assault on Gaza, pinkwashing militarism in the name of anti-gender struggle (DIE WELT 2024; Federal Foreign Office 2024).[24] WLF was repurposed as cover for imperialist and illiberal projects, showing how performative solidarities travel across contexts to sustain domination.

Against this backdrop, the coloniality of the veil was laid bare: it rendered Muslim women's precarity visible under Islamist gender-apartheid regimes in Iran and Afghanistan, yet concealed their plight under the Zionist colonial-apartheid state in Israel. Selective solidarities uncreatively iterated WLF's symbolic defiance while reinforcing hierarchies with(in) Muslim women's communities. This recalls Mohanty's reminder that white, middle-class women become the "true subject" of feminism by marginalizing others (1988, 351). Instead of revisiting assumptions about Muslim societies and women's struggles in SWANA, performative solidarities reduced WLF to spectacle, fueled anti-Muslim sentiment, and recentered the coloniality of the veil.

Hierarchical Solidarities: Colonial-Nationalist Frames and the Erasure of Difference

Colonial and nationalist relationalities, grounded in essentialist ideas of gender, religion, race, and ethnicity, have long shaped solidarities with(in) Muslim women. During WLF, the centrality of the veil obscured diverse bodies, desires, faiths, and histories, fracturing possibilities for collective activism. It became a foothold for heterogeneous politics that reasserted racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies—what scholars describe as far-right convergences in world politics (Anievas and Saull 2023). Populist, illiberal, and conservative

actors move in fugitive ways across racism, coloniality, nationalism, and border regimes, often securing support in mainstream (Altay et al. 2025).

Essentialist depictions of the veil remained central to Western media narratives and mainstream feminism, disregarding decades of Muslim feminist warnings (Gashtili 2025; Zakaria 2022). Echoing Huntington's "clash of civilizations," WLF framed as evidence of Islam's incompatiblity with democratic values, while misogyny was contained within SWANA (Jamal and Naber 2008; Puar 2007; Sabsay 2012). Feminism and human rights—presumed intrinsic to Europe—were positioned as corrective authorities, in which anti-gender politics and homophobia were treated as exceptional to Muslim cultures or aberrational in Europe (Altay et al. 2025).

Even progressive feminist debates fell back on cultural essentializations of the veil (Narayan 1998; Lazreg 2009). Such careless engagements came at the expense of women in Iran, for whom mandatory veiling remains a pillar of the regime's femicidal machinery (Assa 2023). With coloniality of the veil prevailing, far-right political actors in SWANA and the Global North amplified religious, regional, and racial divides despite migration, globalization, and colonial histories. In these contexts, alliances and feminist coalitions proved hierarchical and condescending, leaving no space for feminist politics of care.

Colonial logic also undergirded revolutionary nationalism (Fanon 1963). During the uprising, the slogan "Man, Homeland, Prosperity" appeared as a complement to "Woman, Life, Freedom." Instead of reinforcing plural and intersectional ethos, it re-centered gender divides and nationalist zeal, undermining feminist initiatives and reproducing exclusionary structures (Moallem 2005; Mohanty 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997). Queer and feminist activists denounced the slogan for erasing LGBTQ lives and overwriting Kurdish and multiethnic histories within WLF (Keshavarzian and Stewart 2025).

As Sara Naderi argues, social media facilitated WLF's mainstreaming and deradicalization, creating "false oppositions" that disciplined its imagination (2025, 17). Promoted by populist and homophobic diaspora figures, the slogan aligned with monarchist agendas seeking to restore Reza Pahlavi as opposition leader. Nationalist recruitment relied on secular Persian identity, distancing itself from Muslim affiliations (Nikfar 2024). Earlier nationalist projects—the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) and the Islamic Republic—though ideologically opposed, both marginalized non-Persian ethnic populations while homogenizing gender through dress codes (Cabi 2020; Sedghi 2007).

Unable to mobilize locally, monarchist diaspora actors turned to Western powers (Dabashi 2024). Reza Pahlavi openly welcomed U.S. and Israeli intervention as Iran's path to "freedom." The twelve-day Israeli war on Iran in June 2025 exposed grotesque spectacles: as bombs fell, Pahlavi rebranded Trump's "Make America Great Again" into "Make Iran Great Again," unmasking the ethos of "Man, Homeland, Prosperity" (Keshavarzian and Stewart 2025).

Categorical logics also permeated feminist advocacy. Conversations about women in Iran often remained ethnocentric and heteronormative, erasing ethnic histories and non-binary bodies (Rostampour 2023a). Likewise, feminist debates on "gender apartheid" homogenized women in Iran and Afghanistan, conflating struggles across borders and erasing differences in resources, histories, and positionalities. Afghan women were often hastily re-membered as tokens of transnationality rather than engaged as agents whose decades-long anti-war knowledge offered vital lessons. Deeper engagement with Afghan women's diverse ethnic backgrounds could have challenged racial hierarchies within and across these struggles.

These omissions foreclosed the reconstruction of relationalities across racial and ethnic hierarchies in Iran and beyond. The regime's attempt to reassert authority after Israel's assault shifted toward securitization and racism. The execution sentences of Verishe Moradi, Pakhshan

Azizi, and Sharifeh Mohammadi revealed the violent targeting of Kurdish and Turkish feminist activists (Pinar 2025), alongside a surge in executions, many of whom were non-Persians and Afghan refugees. By reestablishing hierarchies through anti-migrant measures, including Afghan mass deportations and xenophobic campaigns, the state demonstrated how its power emerges from regulating relationalities and belonging through categories of gender, race, and ethnicity (Latifi and Khan 2025; Sahar 2025).

By failing to dismantle categorical logics, paternalistic relationalities reinstalled oppositions and hierarchies that deprived solidarities of care while depleting feminist imagination. Categorical divides, nationalist homogenizations, and feminist neglect restricted WLF's capacity to reconfigure connections across difference and account for plural subjectivities. The notable absence of veiled women in diaspora demonstrations highlighted the coloniality of the veil. Despite repeated clarifications by WLF activists and scholars that unveiling should not be conflated with Islam or seen as denouncing Muslim identity, these critiques were not widely embraced in broader Muslim and Islamic feminist debates.[25]

Decolonizing Solidarity with(in) Muslim Women: Toward an Intersectional Justice Movement

The WLF uprising illuminates the increasing persistence of colonial and Orientalist frameworks in debates on women's rights in SWANA. Post-1979 Islamist revivalism and the post-2001 resurgence of imperial and colonial rhetoric mark two moments when the veil was mobilized to organize global power. Despite divergent ideologies, both instrumentalized the veil to redraw geographies of identity and belonging. Across SWANA and Europe, queer feminist critiques show how these logics intersect with nationalism, populism, and religious orthodoxy while targeting marginalized groups and feminist/queer movements (Altay et al. 2025).

Feminist initiatives have not escaped this trap. Transnational campaigns such as World Hijab Day (2013) and My Stealthy Freedom (2014)—diagonally opposed in their performances of the veil—converge in tethering agency to subversion.[26] Both polarize solidarities with and among Muslim women and fail to reconcile tensions between feminist demands and religious commitments (Rahbari et al. 2021). The result is visibility without inclusion, popularity without mobilization, and frequent tokenization. Thus the coloniality of the veil continues to structure the horizon of Muslim women's activism.

Four contemporary instances illustrate this condition:

1. *Afghanistan.* In 2001, feminist concern for Muslim women legitimated U.S. intervention; by 2021 it had largely vanished. Decades of anti-war organizing, demands for "Bread, Labour, Freedom," and insistence on education were eclipsed by the veil's symbolic codification. Despite surviving war, famine, occupation, and violence, their struggles remain illegible to global feminism. If resilience and accountability are invisible, what can unveiling reveal?

2. *Sudan.* The 2023 abduction and sexual assault of young girls provoked scant response from liberal feminists and women in power, whereas the alleged assault of an Israeli soldier drew immediate global outrage. This asymmetry exposed a racialized landscape of feminist concern, tethering significance to geographies of power rather than lived suffering. When concern adheres to the veil, what political meaning does suffering hold without its symbolic function?

3. *Iran.* Women face incarceration, torture, and execution, resisting through hunger strikes, prison sit-ins, and anti-execution campaigns. Despite WLF's visibility, these struggles remain marginal within transnational feminism. Resistance becomes a spectacle of unveiling rather than a continuum of feminist praxis. How did the veil

come to mark the culmination of struggle rather than a point of departure for women's activism?

4. *Kurdish and Palestinian contexts.* Women resisting authoritarian regimes and settler-colonial violence are overlooked. Kurdish women who defeated ISIS in Kobani 2014 were reduced to exoticized guerrilla images rather than recognized as anti-colonial feminist militants. In Palestine, the veil is mobilized to dehumanize women, obscuring decades-long dispossession of bodies and lands by Israel. Whether through masculinist terror, colonialist militarism, or orientalist exotification, how does the veil erase Muslim women's political significance across Islamist and "democratic" regimes?

These moments show how the coloniality of the veil reorganizes women's relations—to faith and self, to kin, land, society, and world—entrenching patriarchal control, normalizing gendered and sexual violence, targeting queer and trans lives, and hardening race*ethnic and class hierarchies across borders.

Decolonizing solidarity therefore requires more than rejecting binaries. It demands a method for re-stitching fractured relationalities and transforming the grounds of struggle. Intersectionality provides this framework. Intersectionality approach redirects solidarity from recognition to accountability, from representation to mutual relevance, from empathy to care, and from visibility to dismantling structures of domination.

Moving toward an intersectional justice movement requires dynamic, differential consciousness that adapts to shifting politics, remaps geographies, rewrites histories of violence and survival, and recovers love and affect. Through the WLF uprising women in Iran were reconnected to internationalist struggles. The solidarity statement by Iranian feminists in diaspora and signed by over 2,500 scholars and activists modeled a meaningful engagement with the uprising in Iran by insisting on "a queer-feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist

agenda that does not reduce the struggles of our allies in Iran to the issues we confront in relation to the Global North" (Open Letter 2022). Diaspora networks, encounters between academics and activists, and both mainstream and popular feminisms linked struggles in Iran to those in Chile, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, and elsewhere (Hamidi and Drabent 2023; Moradian 2024; Zakaria 2022).

When Angela Davis, Silvia Federici, Verónica Gago, Sirma Bilge, Nadine Naber, Mona Eltahawy, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore stood with women in Iran, they acted as nodes within internationalist feminism. Their digital feminist placemaking situated struggles in Iran within anti-war, abolitionist, decolonial, and anti-capitalist projects, amplifying a vision of inseparability across fronts. Emerging across geographies, such solidarities reached women in Iran—silenced and isolated with internet shutdowns—as affective, transcontextual signals that their voices were heard, without the burden of translation, appropriation, or instrumentalization.

In short, decolonizing solidarity moves Muslim women's activism from spectacle to strategy, from categorical advocacy to intersectional justice, and from the coloniality of the veil to the interdependence of struggles. It calls for feminist politics willing to be undone and remade by the complex lives, refusals, and alliances of those long spoken for. Only through such reorientation can solidarity with(in) Muslim women become a practice of collective empowerment within an intersectional justice movement.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the coloniality of the veil functions as a regulatory dispositif that fractures Muslim women's relationalities within, across, and beyond communities. The veil is instrumentalized to sustain categorical, oppositional, and hierarchical logics in service of racism, nationalism, border regimes, and coloniality. Framing agency and identity through

veiling/unveiling misrecognizes the multiplicity, fluidity, and temporality of Muslim women's subjectivities. As a result, relationality is regulated, difference policed, political urgency reduced to symbolism, and feminist solidarities too often remain spectacle or tokenized recognition.

Decolonizing solidarity with(in) Muslim women, today more than ever, is less a moral corrective than a political urgency. It requires intersectionality as analysis and praxis—mapping connections through difference and tracing convergent systems of domination across contexts. Decolonizing solidarity regards difference as generative, demands accountability to histories, locations, and positionalities, and builds multidirectional visibility. It grounds feminist claims in struggles against the deprivation and dispossession of bodies, lands, and love.

Solidarity, in this sense, is not conditioned by legibility within dominant scripts. It emerges when feminist politics are willing to be undone and reimagined. In this undoing—and the radical imagination it requires—conditions for collective empowerment take shape. Analysis of solidarities around Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) shows how Muslim women's activism exposes epistemic and political limits of dominant solidarity practices. It also underscores the urgency of an intersectional justice movement across SWANA and beyond, grounded in material struggle yet sustained by spirituality, intimacy, and creativity.

In a modest YouTube video, an Afghan girl, Zahra Hasti, dances alone on a rooftop for Jina (Mahsa) Amini, the Kurdish girl whose name became a call (Hasti 2022). In Herat, Kabul, and Baghdad, women took to the streets—spaces ruined and occupied by their murderers—alongside women in Iran (Hamidi and Drabent 2023). As Israeli bombs—some inscribed with "Woman, Life, Freedom" or the names of WLF's fallen butterflies, and even celebrated by female soldiers—fell on homes, streets, and prisons in Iran, feminist voices named the

perpetrators across Iran, Israel, the United States, and Germany,[27] building bridges to their sisters in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon (Pezeshki and Rasooli 2025). Let these moments make visible the inseparability of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" and "Free Palestine," and the love that saves as it lifts.

Notes

[1] The term *Staatsräson* ["reason of state"] was articulated as Germany's unconditional commitment to Israel's security by Chancellor Angela Merkel in her 2008 address to the Israeli Knesset. In 2022–23, Germany became Israel's second-largest arms supplier, with per capita exports surpassing those of the United States during the Gaza genocide, see Forensis (2024).

[2] Ange-Marie Hancock (2011) defines willful blindness as the deliberate disregard of others' oppression in favor of one's own, and defiant ignorance as the denial of systemic injustice to preserve privilege. Both are structurally sustained through mechanisms that avoid discomfort and deflect accountability within intersecting systems of oppression.

[3] For a recent critical overview of the veil in feminist debates about Muslim women, see Babakhani (2024).

[4] This act, though spontaneous, was not merely reactionary. It draws on a historical legacy of Kurdish women's political subjectification, rooted in PKK organizing since the 1960s and intersectional feminist practices in Iran (Assa 2023; Karimi 2022; Qubādī 2015).

[5] Feminist unveiling in Iran dates back to the figure of Tahere Qurrat al-ʿAyn in 1848.

[6] These are the Kurdish regions in Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, respectively.

[7] For an example of how pious women are compelled to justify their veiling as "choice" rather than political affiliation with the state, see Radio Marz (2021). Following the uprising, as the state sought to recover power, it intensified anti-unveiling laws and recruited pious veiled women to act as hijab enforcers. One such encounter led to Armita Geravand's tragic death.

[8] Iranian actors and athletes unveiling in solidarity: Iran International; Euronews.

[9] Gohar Eshghi's unveiling in solidarity: BBC Persian.

[10] Kamelia Sajjadia speaking at their son's funeral: X/Twitter post

[11] A *chador* is a full-body cloak worn by many women in Iran. Under the Islamic Republic, the *chador* has been standardized as black and promoted as the proper dress for Muslim women.

[12] Tara Roozbahani removing their black *chador* while keeping the scarf and denouncing the government: VOA Persian.

[13] This group is named *Women of Gilan*: RFE/RL report.

[14] Fatemeh Sepehri's condolence and solidarity after Jina Amini's death: YouTube video; her daughter reading a letter on her behalf: YouTube video.

[15] Sedigheh Vasmaghi publicly denouncing the hijab after Armita Gerawand's death: Iran International.

[16] Sedigheh Vasmaghi's solidarity letter with Bahá'í women Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet: Instagram post.

[17] Mehdi Yerrahi: YouTube video.

[18] Farhad Meysami's hunger strike: RFE/RL report.

[19] Most notable figures include Toomaj Salehi (Amnesty International); Ali Daei (Economic Times); and Voria Ghafouri (CNN).

[20] By 2019, hundreds of billions had gone to war-making, while women's rights received only a fraction of that investment (Chattopadhyay 2021).

[21] See Rajvanshi (2023).

[22] While meeting with anti-abortion and homophobic political actors such as Mike Pompeo (United States Department of State 2019), Alinejad has nonetheless received several feminist accolades, including the Geneva Summit Women's Rights Award (2015), the American Jewish Committee's Moral Courage Award (2022), the Oxi Courage Award (2022), and *Time*'s Women of the Year recognition (2023).

[23] For a general overview of exchanges on the unveiling in Iran among German politicians: Volksverpetzer.

[24] During the WLF uprising, Berlin became a central hub for diaspora organizing, with queer feminist collectives and leftist activists leading the largest solidarity demonstration for Iran on 22 October 2022, drawing over 120,000 participants.

[25] According to a confidential national survey leaked in February 2024, 70% of Iranians still identified as religious or somewhat religious, with religiosity significantly higher among women (83%) than men (54%). At the same time, 66% of women and 58% of men opposed compulsory veiling. Notably, 70% of respondents believed religiosity had declined in the past five years, and 73% supported the separation of religion and politics—indicating a broader societal shift toward secular governance despite persistent religious identities. In surveys by Iranian authorities, however, "religion" typically refers only to Shi'a Islam, excluding minorities and other forms of religiosity. See, Bastani (2024).

[26] The *World Hijab Day* campaign, launched in 2013 in the United States, encourages non-Muslim women to wear the hijab for a day to promote religious tolerance and solidarity. *My Stealthy Freedom*, started in 2014 by Masih Alinejad, is an online campaign where women in Iran share photos and videos without their hijab to protest compulsory veiling laws. See Rahbari et al. (2021)

[27] At the G7 summit in Canada, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz endorsed Israel's attack on Iran, stating: "This is the dirty work that Israel is doing for all of us. I can only say that I have the utmost respect for the Israeli army and the Israeli leadership for having the courage to do this." In Nazi discourse, *Drecksarbeit* ["dirty work"] was a euphemism for the killing and disposal of Jews and other targeted groups, often delegated to collaborators to obscure responsibility.

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