Chapter 5

Emerging forms of masculinity in The Islamic Republic of Iran

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This chapter aims to illuminate and reflect on the emerging forms and expressions of Iran's variegated masculine identities through the ownership, sensation, presentation and management of the body. [1] This is occurring both in the private and intimate as well as the public and social spheres. My research findings demonstrate that among the generation of males born after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-8) the idea and the role of the masculine body is neither monolithic nor influenced by the state's messages of 'Islamic' corporeal restraint and modesty. My observations indicate that young men are increasingly taking ownership of their bodies, each adopting it as a tool to relate individual perceptions and lived experience. I define this as the sovereign body, the resource to make meaning and mark differentiation. I will argue that whilst such manifestations are personal and cultural in form, they encompass a chain of ideas that are political in nature. They demonstrate the young men's critique of their sociopolitical location, their resistance and objection to a lack of freedom of expression and persistent forms of censorship, and their demand for autonomy. I argue that seeking differentiation through body presentation is to alter expected male identities in order to reconstruct and project more layered, complex and individual identities. The chapter ultimately posits the question of how changes in masculine identities might indicate a demand for change in the patriarchal and constricting societal structures. I reference the interplay of the elements of a rich masculine discourse of the body, which is evident in classical literature, the rituals of Shi'i Islam, and the performing arts on the one hand, and the development of urban space related to the dynamics of the Iranian higher education system, which I define as Iranian cosmopolitanism, on the other.

Why masculinities?

The terms 'masculinities' and 'masculinity studies' are increasingly used in interdisciplinary scholarship in cultural studies, humanities and the social sciences to discuss a vast range of ideas and concepts relating to and documenting power differentiation in male gender sexuality. While studies are often devoted to addressing the historical imbalance of the male as an absolute or 'implicit subject,' they tend to place men and masculinity at the centre of analysis, thus positioning them as 'explicit subjects' (Adams and Savran, 2004). I use the term 'masculinities' to mean the range of inherited, constructed and adopted sociocultural ideas and patterns in behaviours that male participants in Iran have projected. The biological qualities of the participants are not of concern. Rather, I subscribe to the notion that masculinity is a set of fluid social and cultural performances, which are not necessarily a product of men's hormonal states (Whitehead and Barrett, 2001). There has been much focus and discussion by scholars in Iran and in the diaspora about women, their lives and shared histories, and their often neglected legal status in the past hundred years. In comparison, studies of men and forms of masculinity have been lacking so the subject area and the nature of my enquiry consolidate a highly relevant and new area of knowledge construction.

Educational revolution and Iranian cosmopolitanism

The initial site for my fieldwork was the metropolis of Tehran and my interviews were conducted in April 2009, before the controversial presidential elections of 2009. Most of the young men I interviewed had migrated to Tehran so to contextualise the site of research I highlight some of its significant characteristics.

The capital city has increasingly become a demographic melting pot and as one of the largest cities in the Middle East, Tehran offers demographic complexities and a wealth of potential research participants from diverse cultural backgrounds and regions. Economically, these include the wealthy and powerful who are able to access a wide range of material goods, the financially challenged, and the considerable majority who fall in between the two categories. The 17 young men I interviewed for this study are from financially challenged backgrounds, even though some of their families have improved their economic circumstances by deploying more members of the family, including mothers, to become wage earners to various degrees. For example, the mother of one of the young men in this study who is from a

farming background has managed to take advantage of her weaving skills in recent years to make and sell rugs on occasion.

Since the 1930s Tehran has undergone processes of urbanisation in waves that have brought educational, economic and civic development. This was intensified by the oil boom in the 1970s and the catastrophic and devastating eight-year war with Iraq escalated the process, as the war-weary and war-damaged were driven to the capital city in search of both shelter and economic survival (Bayat, 1997; Keddie, 2003). Furthermore, the government's efforts in urban reconstruction during the post-war decade and a discourse of globalisation attracted substantial numbers to urban centres from the country's regions. People came looking for opportunities whether empty handed and in search of any form of employment with the hope of improving their lives, or with the intention to invest their capital and take advantage of growth opportunities. Further, and with the state's encouragement in the aftermath of the war and the tragic scale of the loss of lives, Iran witnessed a baby boom resulting in an unprecedented rise in the population. As a consequence a steep population rise during the post-war period worked in parallel with urban growth and resulted in Iran becoming young, urban, and increasingly cosmopolitan (Nooshin, 2005).

Urban reconstruction in the post-war era has also meant the expansion of educational opportunities. 'Educational Jihad', the Islamic Republic's goal to narrow the gap between those who had a familial tradition or the financial ability to go to university and those who previously had no such ambitions, has facilitated the means for significant numbers from rural areas to join the urban mainstream in pursuing higher education. Since the republic's 'cultural revolution' in 1983 and the reopening of higher education institutions after a three-year period of closure and academic and administrative 'cleansing' the Islamic regime has responded to the demand for an increase in the number of universities across the country. This, alongside the cross-disciplinary cross-regional nature of the new higher education system, has created unprecedented fertile ground for the development of Iranian cosmopolitanism with specific qualities.

Iranian cosmopolitanism has developed organically and is plural, indigenous, widespread and intellectually fluid in nature; this is contrary to the state's isolationist stance. It is the result of significant and intersecting elements implicated in the increased access to higher education, intra-national mass migration, and a discourse of political reform. It reflects the people's creative and layered identities, and greater understandings of their socio-political location and place in society. As such, Iranian cosmopolitanism possesses the potential to overcome imposed social, cultural and religious

barriers, accommodating ethnic, religious and class diversity to unprecedented levels. It is unlike the enlightened but highly exclusive social groups that developed in the 1940s interconnected with the politics of the left and left-over aristocrats, and the few among those branded, rightly or wrongly, as 'Westernised' in the subsequent decades.

The national university entrance examination, the *concour*, and the standardised student selection and placement procedures, have forced thousands of first-year university students from Tehran to take up their studies in cities as diverse as Qom, Shiraz, Isfahan, Mashad, Tabriz, Karaj, Kerman, Zahedan or Yazd. In turn it has become possible for large numbers of students from the country's regions to end up on the capital's numerous campuses, and many stay behind after completing their studies. Thus, Persians, Azeris, Lors, Kurds, Baluchis, Armenians and Arabic speakers from the four corners of the country, possessing varied ethnic identities and belonging to diverse religious and cultural practices, come together and occupy and share urban space. The scale is highly significant because by the time they complete their studies, several million young people will have shared spaces of public transport, restaurants and coffee shops, parks and cultural centres as well as the university campuses, which also provide high speed access to the internet. While the internet has been available in Iran since the late 1990s, many students will have first encountered its possibilities upon arrival in higher education. Thus, considerable numbers will have heard one another articulate aspirations and ideas, engaged in political debate, participated in social acts, and more often than not explored physical intimacies and sexuality for the first time in this urban space. Whilst class differences persist in universities, ideas and demands from the grassroots can unlock and spread in such an environment more than ever before due to its diversity. Youth consciousness, political awareness, the understanding and exchange of new ideas (both real and imagined) and, most significantly, the recognition of the rights of the individual and the need for a more developed democracy and civil society, are among the specific goals and qualities of this Iranian cosmopolitanism.

Considering the desire and struggle for reform from the mid-1990s, including the work of political activists, journalists, and women's press demanding change in the legal system, which led to the 1997 election of Mohammad Khatami as president (1997-2005), and juxtaposing this with the worsening civil rights and economic situation and the hardline politics of fear imposed during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency since 2005, this cosmopolitanism is political at its very heart. It is concerned with freedom of speech and expression, human rights, democracy, transparent governance and the sanctity of the rights of all citizens. Its potential power is yet to be realised.

Two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, over three and half million aspiring youth are in higher education, [2] and the national literacy rate is projected to be 92.1 per cent by 2015 (Salehi-Isfahani, 2008). These demographic and educational figures, when coupled to the power of the internet and contemporary digital technologies, suggest the extent of Iranian cosmopolitanism and posit major implications for the country's political and cultural trajectories (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010).

A heritage of the discourse of the masculine body

Many aspects of Iranian cultural heritage implicitly or explicitly engage with a discourse of the masculine body. The disposition and construction of male identities, as indeed any process of identity construction, are dependent on histories and social influences past and present. While the paradigm of maleness in Iran is as complex and layered as it would be anywhere in the world, it is nevertheless clear from the interviewees' reflections on the male body that it is grounded in their heritage. This is contrary to the views of the authorities in Iran who consider the young generation's expressions of individuality alien and irrelevant, and borrowed from and planted by foreigners. Indeed, the young men's conceptualisations draw on Iranian mythology with contemporary referents including frequently cited poetry, literary fiction, religious ritual and visual and performative art forms.

In the grand narrative of the *Shahnameh*, Hakim Abolghasem Ferdowsi Toosi's *Epic of the Kings* (1009 CE), we read of the legendary Rostam, the *pahlavan* of noble birth and the eponymous symbol of absolute masculine might. [3] We become aware of and familiar with the force of Rostam's body and his endurance during the course of his seven trials and exploits. His might, we are told, is comparable to that of lions and elephants, and his grip is leopard-like (*Shah Nameh Ferdowsi*, nd, 93-7). He is given to us as the ultimate hero, the chivalrous and noble warrior, the defender of the territory of *Iranzamin* the land of the Aryans. The performative arts of *naghali* and *pardeh khani* - narrating and enacting stories from a painted canvas for an audience - have kept the narratives of Rostam's exploits alive in the minds and hearts of Iranians. This is despite the Islamic regime's desire to eradicate teaching and referencing of the *Shah Nameh* in the education system. [4] Nevertheless despite this opposition, Iran has its first officially licensed female *naghaal* (storyteller), Gord Afarid under the tutelage of Morshed Torabi.

Further, the third Caliph of Islam, Ali Ebn Abi Taleb (600-1 CE), and his son, Hossein Ebn Ali (626-80 CE), who was killed in the Battle of Karbala

(680 CE), embody the concept of selfless sacrifice and martyrdom in Shi'i Islam. To the Shi'i believers, the two imams are symbols of purity, spirituality, chivalry and brotherhood, or *javanmardi* and *fotovat*. (*Nahjolbalagheh*, 1980; Aslan, 2006). The youth are called upon by the state to emulate such qualities and protect Shi'i identity, especially during Ashura, the anniversary of Imam Hossein's martyrdom, when *ta'ziyeh* (passion plays) are performed in remembrance (Beyzaei, 2000; Chelkowski, 1998). However, spirituality and male aesthetics are taken to a different realm in Persian classical mystic poetry. Some of the most renowned was written in the thirteenth century by Mowlana Jalal-al-Din Mohammad Balkhi (1207-73), also known as Rumi. In his love odes Mowlana reflects on his passionate love of the divine through the physical presence of his beloved Shams (d. 1248) (Holliday, forthcoming; Andrews and Kalpakli, 2005; Shamissa, 2002). We are frequently reminded of Shams's cypress-like body and tulip-like face, his touch, his sweet breath, his agate and ruby lips, the subtle and seductive movement of his eyelashes, and the locks of hair upon his forehead that the lover longs to behold. Shams embodies cosmic love, and who knows maybe earthly love too, for Mowlana (Kadkani, 1370/1997; Chittick, 2005). Both homo-eroticism and desiring the male friend have been intertwined with Sufi love poetry and practice since the mid-ninth century, with particular attention placed on the figure and face of the young adolescent man (Javadi, 2008).

Young men in Tehran

I conducted biographical interviews in Tehran and my interviewees introduced me to other young men with whom I could speak, and as we talked we focused on their life histories and their lived experiences. The majority were students, some of whom were also relatively recent arrivals in Tehran. The data presented here comes from the young men's accounts of their lives and lived experiences, and is not as a result of my direct questioning about their bodies.

Educated under the government's 'Islamic' ethical codes and theories, any regard for bodily 'self' should be inhibited if not totally prohibited by law. Haadi, a student in mechanical engineering at Sharif University, illustrates this point.

> Look, there is some kind of a confusion and cover up about male bodies, about all bodies. … As far as the government is concerned we should not know anything about bodies at all, they only connect it to the sexual act.

> The scientific teaching of anatomy for the sake of understanding it at the very least is totally lacking in our education system unless you are specialising in medicine at university. Our Islamic Ethics tutors are clerics, and their teachings in upper secondary and university education allude to a confused picture of the male physique oscillating between sin and sacrifice. The message is to ignore the *nafsani* or bodily desires and functions in order to maintain Islamic modesty and purity. Certainly in my books at school the whole physical appearance of the male body and organs were either censored or distorted, whilst from the age of four I understood something about bodies which I now relate to gender difference, warmth, beauty, and humanity.

Confusion and differentiation among governmental organisations exists. While the complete anatomical illustration of the body is deemed unsuitable in textbooks, discussing it in the context of injury in war and martyrdom are highly desirable if only to prompt the youth to emulate attitudes of sacrifice and selflessness. When I consulted a respected war veteran in high office, a member of the Basij Revolutionary Guard volunteers who went to war at the age of 14, about pained, maimed, and chemically affected bodies of veteran soldiers, he announced unexpectedly that his body belonged to his wife and was not up for discussion! He momentarily confused my academic interest in the topic with illusions of implied intimacy. The very mention of the word 'body' made him nervous. Yet in the later stages of the interview he managed to speak at length about the mental torment related to the physical injuries he both witnessed and sustained, which are central to his own fiction and non-fiction writing and film-making. He explained that when he was injured and lost in battle away from his battalion he found the charred crouching body of an Iraqi soldier, which he was not able to ignore and leave behind. He said that although he was alone, injured and frightened, he was compelled to think about the burnt body as an emblematic representation of a life, belonging to someone and deserving of attention and buried the charred remains out of respect for another human being.

One student explains that he has given up his studies because of lack of finances. He has borrowed and raised a small amount of capital to keep a stall in a busy shopping precinct, where he sells jeans and t-shirts for young men. He is aggrieved that his stall has been shut by the morals police and that his work licence taken away. His crime? His upper arm was exposed. His shirt sleeves were rolled up according to contemporary fashion trends. While he knows that he can pay a fine and renew his licence, he is angered and devastated by such harassment, the prospects of a lack of income for several weeks,

and the infringement on his sovereignty and civil rights. He is not alone, the morals police regularly harass shop owners for displaying items of clothing such as a short skirt or sleeveless top in their shop window because in their view they are suggestive of sexual misconduct and therefore morally corrupt.

Resistance however is widespread. The youngest men I interviewed were 19-year-old Hooshyar and 20-year-old Ashraf, who study in one of the universities in the south-east of Iran (see figure 5.1) The two spoke at length about how disillusioned they are with the country's politics, the lack of relevant cultural activity and programmes for youth, the prevalence of media censorship and the pressures put on young people's freedom by the morals police in the street, on campuses and in coffee shops. They said they feel 'mentally squeezed' because they are constantly under surveillance. They said there is no political accountability and the regime has no plans for the future of youth and employment. Ashraf added that at times he reverts to self-harm, cutting his own skin in deep frustration. They spoke for each other using 'we' and analysed their thoughts and actions as follows:

> For us, our bodies represent our minds, the way we think is reflected in the way we dress and style ourselves. We use our bodies as the point of identification [*ta'een-e hoviyat*] and differentiation [*tafavot sazi*]. We want to show our sensitivity through the details of our appearance, our sense and choice of colour and our attention to the textures, designs, and materials of our clothes. For example, when Ashraf shaves his eyebrows off, or when he

Figure 5.1 Hooshyar and Ashraf.

> wears black nail varnish, or when we design and paint our own t-shirts, we mean to say something specific and particular about us, we present ourselves in this fashion to say something about our very personhood.
>
> We share an attention to detail. I look at something and I look at Hooshyar and he gets it, and we say yes, that's it. … Then we create together. The ideas we had already seen in our minds become realities on our bodies. It's a personal system, it is a system of control, it gives us the possibility of being at least in peace with ourselves. This is how we can best be who we are against all the difficulty for young people here.
>
> As well as the political pressures, as soon as we turned 14, even our sisters and mothers started treating us differently; they suddenly didn't play around with us as they did before and they watched their language, being careful not to mention anything to do with sexuality. They closed themselves to us all of a sudden just because our bodies were changing. … Hooshyar and I have created a kind of trust, deep trust, to experiment with ideas to do with our bodies, even our sexuality. We feel we are exploring what our body means, we want to know how it functions. We are not homosexual, but we discuss and explore our sexuality openly with each other, and if there are girls who want to join in the discussion, well that is also great.

These accounts show how Hooshyar and Ashraf make meaning through body management and presentation. Their use of words such as 'identification' and 'differentiation' demonstrate intent and resistance. These young men are determined to construct personal identities that relate to their own perceptions and lived experiences rather than adopting the deferred sense of identity promoted by the regime. Their initiation of a free and private space for being, labelled with terms such as 'a personal system' (*yek system-e shakhsi*) and 'deep trust' (*e'temad-e amiqh*) reflect their anxiety about their environment and their need for expressions of sovereignty. Ashraf and Hooshyar are representative of considerable numbers of young men - and women - who face harassment and are denied freedom of speech and expression, and political voice. For them the body becomes the central and sovereign tool needed to escape alienation, perceiving and creating a meaningful and personal lifeworld.

Attention to grooming, stylised eyebrows and hair, facial and body piercings and cosmetic surgery are becoming widespread among young men in Iran. While many progressive parents in Iran view and tolerate these forms of grooming in relation to freedom of expression and economic ability, others tolerate them simply because these young men are bringing home salaries.

The following account given by a thoughtful and sensitive 21-year-old conscript illustrates the point. Sporting a delicately bandaged nose because of a recent cosmetic operation he spoke of his impatience to complete his military duties in order to look like himself again and to go back to work earning proper money.

> I have had to tell my sergeant major that the nose operation was because it had broken when I was a child and was preventing me from breathing properly. But in fact I wanted to change the shape of my nose to fit my face better. He will not understand these things though. He thinks this is the military and we should only be thinking of defending Iran from the foreign forces. He reprimanded me for shaving one side of my hair in criss-cross patterns. My hair was very short anyway but I wanted to see one side with a pattern because that's how I am. I have paid for my nose operation myself, I saved up for it when I worked in the catering industry before military service. I am counting the days of the seven remaining months when I will finish my service and can be myself again, wear my own clothes, have my hair style and have a new girlfriend.

Abbas, who refers to himself as 'Joljota' to mark his intellectual transformation, is an art student about to graduate in painting. He explains that his adopted name means a journey of resurrection. He often speaks in verse, reciting poems by himself as well as Ferdowsi, Mowlana, and Shamloo. He does this to either make a point about what he believes in or to suggest parallels between his own philosophical contemplations and those of the great poets. Born and brought up in a small and at times financially struggling farming community, military service has been fruitful for Joljota as it has facilitated the possibility to train and become a primary school teacher for the villages near his hometown. This training has enabled him to benefit from governmental regulations and skip the national university entrance examination and enter university for a degree in art. He explains to me that he felt he could no longer breathe in his birthplace Zarin Shahr and had to leave in search of new experiences and ideas. He speaks of the landscapes and soundscapes of his childhood and of his grandfather who was the village *chaavush* (harbinger and orator), with a good voice, sound knowledge of epic poetry, and excellent ability for religious recitations.

Performing is rooted in Joljota's family history and is part of his cultural capital. It has shape-shifted significantly and been influenced by his new environment at university and his art training.

Aware of his own transformation he has persuaded his parents to allow his younger sister to learn the violin. Joljota himself routinely participates in classical dance sessions, which are held sporadically in private homes in Tehran because of the political climate. He regards his body as his primary tool of communication when facing an audience; it has been his key to enter new and imagined worlds (see figure 5.2). While he is struggling with the economic challenges and demands of the capital city he thrives on the shared intellectual and artistic trajectories of his peers. In the following extract, he reflects on his childhood near Isfahan and speaks of his body as as an archaic tool.

> I have a special mental and physical relationship with movement and space, it is part of my childhood in farmlands in a village near a small town near Isfahan; open spaces are free spaces and you can claim them. I have left all that behind now. I live with the sensation and emotion those wide open spaces provoked in me. I want to be a performance artist, I am a

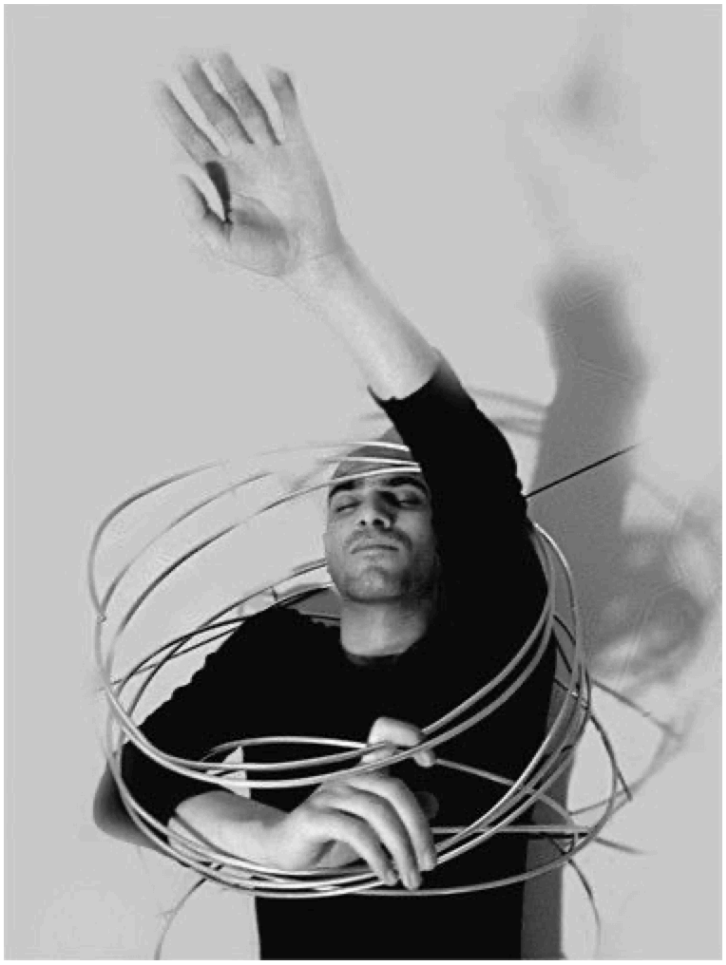

Figure 5.2 Joljota bound in metal cable in performance.

> performance artist. I have stepped out of the cocoon, I have resurrected in my body. … First I did figurative painting, then sculpture, and then I brought my real body into real space. You see, my body is all I possess, it is my archaic mythic tool for creating new myths. It has become my pen, with it I write a story in space, I tell that story with movement, I draw in space with my body leaving traces of ideas, hanging there in the mind of the audience. It is then that I feel I can breathe again! If anything I imagine and wish I could return to the landscapes of our origins and perform in the nude using my body as an archaic element. Well, isn't that what it is. … I use metal cables to show struggle and entrapment and small bells to create rhythmic soft sounds born out of movement, a faint echo of the sounds of my childhood.

A similar case for using the sculptural qualities of the body as a tool to express intellectual and political location comes from an interview with Mahmoud. He is from Sabzeh Vaar where Ashura processions (*dasteh*) are taken to heart and performed by representatives of every trade. As tradition demands, groups of men, led by physically stronger men who carry large heavy metal standards decorated with peacock feathers, march down the city's main streets in an organised and precise fashion towards the mosque. Stopping and starting, they chant the names of the sacred imams to the sound of drums and beat their chests or whip their shoulders and backs with chains in sympathy and rhythm. Mahmoud explains how, influenced by such traditions, he and his friends have employed the sculptural qualities of their bodies to make a political point about their own experiences, rejecting the constant surveillance of the morals police and a change in the ownership of the public space. Mahmoud's design of a group performance on campus suggests the profound and synergistic relationship he draws between the sovereign body and the ownership of public space. He explains,

> I organised a group performance involving 40-50 students. … Here, right here, in front of all of them. We wanted to stand out, so we got ourselves kitted out in black, highly tailored suits, black ties, the whitest shirts you could find, and dark glasses. Walking in clusters we paused for short intervals, sometimes closing in towards each other and sometimes on the verge of dispersing. We marched through the campus, we stunned them all, they did not know what was happening for a while. Who were these men in black suits and what were they doing? Eventually they realised, or were told that we were sculpture students considering versions of ourselves in space.

Evidently religious ritual carries deep significance for many young men and they are alert to the potential wider meanings such acts could project. Energised and motivated by intellect and a fertile imagination they give themselves permission to transform such acts and to juxtapose their own experiences and struggles with those of the imams. They thus register new personal and collective identities and claim the public space even if momentarily.

Hojat is from a pious farming family in Lorestan. His knowledge of Persian mystic poetry is impressive and, as a devotee of Imam Ali, he frequently references him in verse and describes him as the just and magnanimous prince of the Shi'is. Hojat's father, uncle and other relatives are participants in the yearly *ta'ziyeh* passion plays enacting the Battle of Karbala. He stresses the belief that Imam Hossein symbolises peace and a love of humanity and that he was forced into battle for the sake of freedom.

Hojat jokingly commented that when he was an art student he told some of his relatives and the bus drivers shuttling him back and forth between Tehran

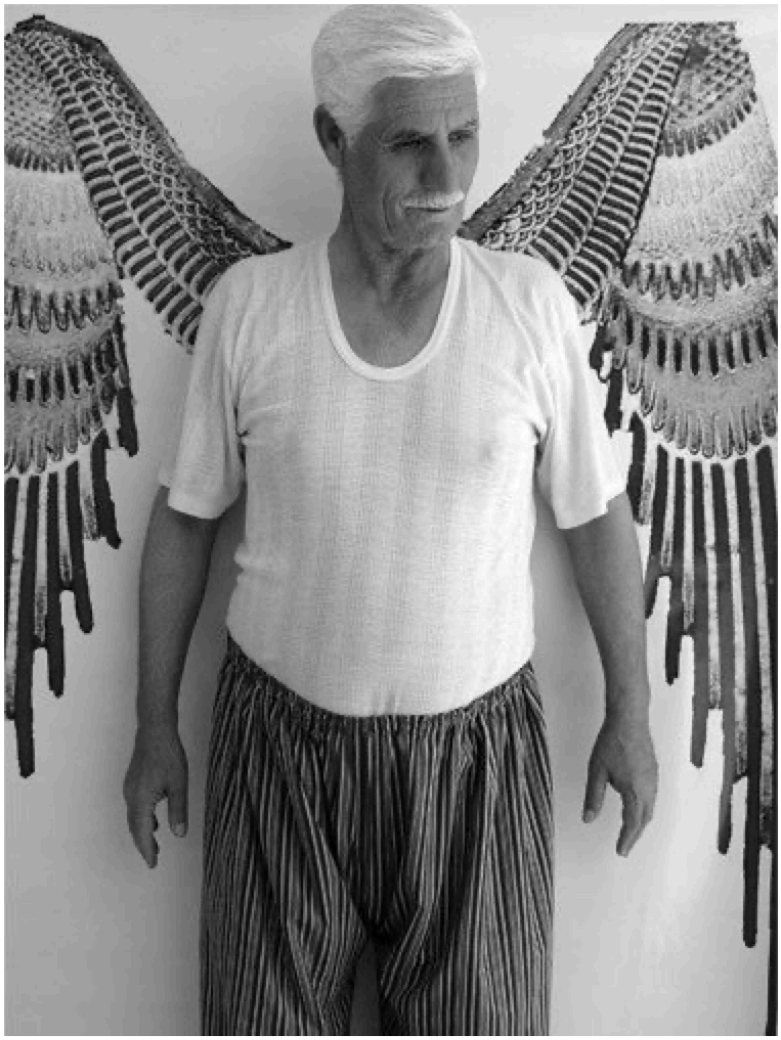

Figure 5.3 Winged Man.

and his hometown that he had become a plasterer in Tehran because they were too traditional to understand what it means to be an artist. Hojat's photographic works draw on *pardeh khani* performance and co-constructs, but he resists the expected norms by replacing the sacred and the noble with the ordinary. He carries his canvas of painted wings to public spaces and invites members of the public to collaborate, imagining themselves as if angels and about to take flight (see figure 5.3). The idea of flight and the concept of the winged deity are deeply rooted in Iran's history and iconography; they symbolise Ahura Mazda, the deity in Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Iran. Hojat's work suggests the conquest of self rather than its subduing:

> When I return to Lorestan I take myself to the massive rocks with carvings and reliefs from thousands of years ago. I lie there touching the rock, feeling the rock energising my body, imagining that my body is part of the solid rock sensing eternity itself. (figure 5.4) My photographic works with angel wings create a moment for self-identification where imagination and desire meet; I hope to capture the integrity of the self. So the wings say something about possibilities, resisting limitations and the mundane. I wish to restore to the body the possibility to signify both the inner longing and desire and the outer physical presence.

The few commercial billboards in uptown Tehran often adopt the masculine figure to promote forms of consumerism. Regardless of the merchandise,

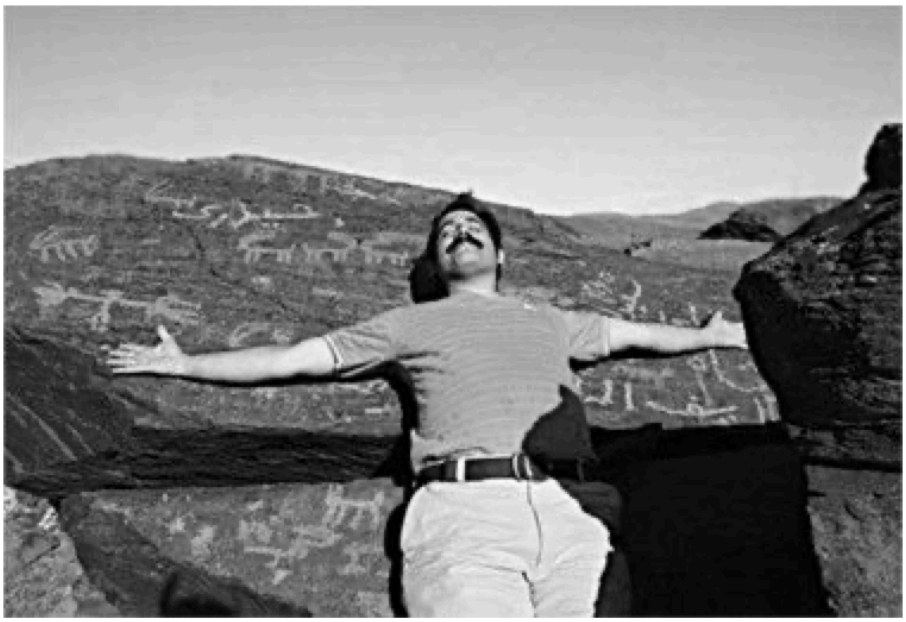

Figure 5.4 Hojat and the Lorestan rock.

Figure 5.5 Billboard in Tehran.

it is the image of the well-attired man, often in a pose comparable to those of late Renaissance painting and sculpture, which dominate (see figure 5.5). The goods appear to be a secondary concern. Recently some of these images have been removed by the government because of their 'immodest' messages of desirability. Noteworthy is the erasure of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, also known as the *Cannon of Proportions* symbolising divine proportional values shared between geometry and the male figure, which was placed in the corner of several large billboards promoting men's clothing.

Consumerism's link to the male body also springs to mind when considering the recognisable and iconic image of Imam Hossein, which I found placed in the window of a framer's shop (see figure 5.6). The large, mass-produced framed poster introduces the imam as 'the standard-bearer of Karbala' in an inscription in the upper right-hand corner. Unusually he is shown wearing a delicate open-fronted shirt rather than a heavy cloak concealing anatomical detail. He suffers a small and neatly painted wound on the forehead instead of the slashed throat often depicted. Most significantly however the imam is shown to possess a well-proportioned, toned, and muscular upper body.

We might question who executed this image and for whom, who does this image aim to represent, and why is this poster allowed to be published and displayed in the shop window when our young man's clothes stall was shut down and he was fined because of exposing a muscular arm? As Haadi put it earlier, the state is 'confused'. Does the imam represent youth, and is the poster evidence of youth resisting the absolutist moral stance of the state

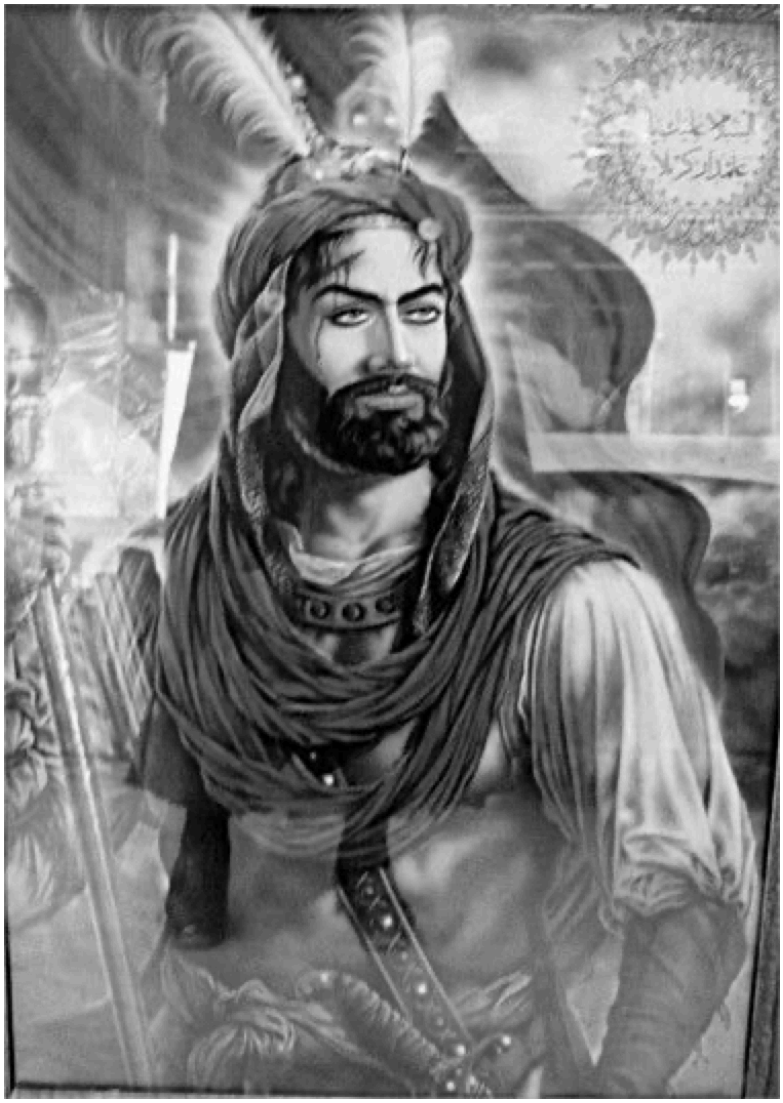

Figure 5.6 Contemporary poster of Imam Hussein.

about the body, engaging in reidentification and redefinition of identities through it? We see in the poster that the past runs into the future, and that the imagination and self-perception of youth allow the image of the Imam to reflect creative expression and freedom relevant to the narratives related above and disallowed by the regime.

Conclusion

Being masculine and 'becoming a man' in contemporary Iran is neither monolithic nor controlled entirely by the discourses of the state. Further, the state has not been successful in implementing its Islamic model of maleness based on a discourse of martyrdom and suppressed bodies under the banner of

religion. Rather than suppressing masculinity this particular discourse has intensified the promotion and projection of sovereign bodies by many young men in order to make meaning and relate a rich cultural heritage of masculinity. Narratives of resistance and reidentification thus emerge where young men adopt bodies as tools of differentiation and expression, with specific perceptions of themselves and who they wish to be as individual citizens. The young men I interviewed demonstrated the ways in which their 'sovereign body' facilitates the means for communicating ideas relating their inner and outer worlds, both social and psychological, as well as complex and fluid identities.

The post-election events of summer of 2009 in Iran brought millions of citizens together in public space, on campuses and streets, disputing the election results collectively and enquiring about the plight of their votes. Though treated brutally by the regime, the contingency of young reformists demonstrated to the world that they resist and reject the regime's ideological stance and modes of governance. This study has demonstrated that a demand for change in both culture and politics runs through the grassroots in young people's daily social acts, beyond the narrow interpretations of the state. Further, Iranian cosmopolitanism and the educational revolution are increasingly bringing the young generation together to jointly participate in a battle of ideas. Young women especially have been at the forefront of civil society debates in mind and body in recent decades, insisting to be visible in all aspects of life. Equipped with self-knowledge, education, and the desire to be seen and heard they have sought reform in the legal system and equality based on human rights (Honarbin-Holliday, 2009). It is increasingly the case that young men are joining forces with the women in new ways, emulating their self-knowledge and desire for self-definition. Together they reinforce a civic demand for the recognition of the rights of the individual whilst also consolidating the nation's demand for justice and rule of the people in a democratic system of governance. Together, they will no doubt return to the streets afresh when the time is right, demanding their individual rights to freedom of speech and expression and a more developed civil society.

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Notes

1. The material and discussion presented here grows out of the first leg of my research in Tehran and Isfahan in April 2009 for a volume entitled *Masculinities in Urban Iran; Men in Contemporary Iranian Society* to be published by I.B.Tauris.
2. Author's calculations based on the figures released by the Office of Iran's National Statistics in Tehran in 2005. Over 15 million Iranians are in education, and the sum of the male and female participants in tertiary education comes to 3 million. However, in her plenary address at 'Thirty years on: The social and cultural impacts of the Iranian revolution' 5-6 June 2009, The Centre for Media and Film Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Professor Shahshahani of Tehran University suggested a figure of over 3.5 million.
3. *Shah Nameh Ferdowsi*, with an introduction by Mohammad Ali Foroughi Zaka-ol Molk (1877-1942) published by Sazman-e Entesharat-e Javidan, Tehran. This volume is not dated and carries over 60 plates, and has been in my family for decades which I have inherited.
4. These were among the views expressed by Naghal Khoshhal Pour of Esfahan in an extended interview with the author in April 2009. Mr Khoshhal Pour comes from a long line of Naghals or narrator-interpreters of *Shah Nameh* and has dedicated his life to continuing with the tradition and training two young assistants.

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