**Resisting silence: Moments of empowerment in Iranian women’s blogs**

**Abstract**

This paper illustrates how women in Iran use blogs to write about their relationships and feelings as a way of providing momentarily empowerment in a society that places restrictions on their freedom. We examine a relatively under-explored form of blogging, common to Iran, which we call love-blogging, and we carry out a qualitative analysis of a small sample of four blog postings from different Iranian women which are used to illustrative different techniques that women use in order to challenge hegemonic gendered discourses in their society. We show how Iranian women use blogs as a way of revealing their inner-most thoughts, creating alternative identities and articulating what is left ‘unsaid’ to their partners. The postings chosen highlight the disempowered status of women in Iranian society, from staying at home to carry out service-work to cases of marital rape and other forms of violence which Iranian women are expected to silently endure. The blog postings also indicate how women use techniques to avoid censorship, including use of metaphor, ambiguity, altered idioms and images.

**Introduction**

This paper pursues two themes, women’s empowerment and women’s speech/silencing which have been driving issues in the field of Gender and Language since the 1990s. Silence (or the lack of communication, either written or spoken) in itself should not be seen as disempowering, for example, it may indicate that one interlocutor has made a choice not to engage with another. The phrase ‘strong silent type’ is usually applied to men as a way of indicating a form of masculinity deemed by many societies to be attractive and Ulsamer (2002: 171) thus refers to ‘powerful silence’ as a male communicational style. We are instead more interested in the verb form: *silencing*, which indicates that someone has had silence coercively imposed upon them. This may involve a range of practices, from directly telling someone to be quiet, to not remembering or recording their contributions (Schröter 2013: 131).

Silencing is often gendered: for example, Perumal (153) notes that ‘patriarchal discourses have systematically and incessantly excluded women and their contributions from the stories of science and history’, while Cameron (1990:5-6) has discussed how controlling access to literacy has been an important way in which women have been silenced and denied opportunities. Stereotypes of the gossiping woman or the woman who cannot stop talking (see Coates 1986: 35) also imply patriarchal society’s view that women should talk less. More recently, research by Baxter (2003, 2006) and Lazar (2008) has focussed on women’s exclusion or inclusion within the public sphere, and such work indicates that public speech, particularly speech that societies view as highly valued tends to be symbolically and materially associated with hegemonic masculinity. Lazar (2008: 97) describes how despite growing numbers of women entering the public sphere at work, the idea of a neutral public space is a myth, as the ‘equality and liberty extended to women have been granted on the same terms as men… the yardstick used for women is one that has already been set by men.’ Baxter (2003), notes that in both senior managers’ discussions in business meetings and in classroom contexts, female speakers are often ‘silenced’ by dominant social discourses, and she advocates an analysis which ‘means making space for voices that may have been repeatedly silenced by others’ (ib id 189).

While much work on silencing and empowerment has been conducted in western or western-influenced societies, in this paper we examine a lesser-studied context, the silencing and empowerment of women living in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 19791, the status of women in Iran has been strongly linked to strict interpretations of *feqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The imposition of the Islamic dress code, along with sexual segregation, and restrictions on women appearing in public has arguably made it difficult for women to lead the sorts of lives that are enjoyed by many of their counterparts in other societies.

This paper examines how Iranian women use blogging as a means of achieving moments of empowerment. Gender inequality persists across all societies, although can be realised in different ways. We believe thatthe study of different strategies for empowerment is essential in terms of understanding how different societies make steps towards equalisation. We view empowerment as multi-faceted but also dependent on societal context and thus aim to show how blogging in the Iranian context can be used as means of resisting silencing and providing *one* means of empowerment, given the restrictions that Iranian women face.

The activity of blogging (derived from the term web-logging, and referring to the practice of writing online journals) occurs throughout most of the world, at least in countries where people have access to computers. Myers (2010: 2) postulates that blogs deserve attention because there is a need to know how blogs work as a growing part of “political, social and economic life”. Also, the study of blogs as an emerging media allows researchers to “think better about other media” (ibid) that are taken for granted.

Iranians are monitored and censored in expressing or showing their feelings in public – for example, kissing is frowned upon. Perhaps due to these taboos around intimate relationships, a popular topic of blogging in Iran is to write about love relationships, a genre we have called وبلاگ عاشقانه (love blog). We argue that love blogs comprise a relatively unexamined form of media, which seem to be particular prevalent to the recent social context in Iran. The study of love blogs not only reveals something new about how people construct their identities and orient to various discourses in online contexts when writing about love2, but it also reveals much about the everyday lives of ordinary Iranians, whose voices are normally unheard in public and international contexts. A main objective of this study is to give space to “the competing voices” (Baxter, 2003: 72) of a group or groups who might otherwise be silent or silenced.

While love blogs are a key means that Iranians have found to express aspects of their identities that are publically suppressed, blogging is closely monitored by the government, and a second aim of this paper is to demonstrate that repression will result in resistance, often creative resistance, as bloggers continuously find new ways to circumnavigate censorship.

After briefly discussing blogging (particularly in relation to gender), we move to examine the situation in Iran for bloggers. We then describe how we selected a small set of women’s blog postings for a qualitative analysis in order to answer the research question ‘How do Iranian women use language in blogging as a means of achieving moments of empowerment?’ Following this, we present a qualitative analysis of blog postings from four Iranian women. The paper concludes with a summary of main findings and a discussion of implications and further directions for this study.

**Blogging and Gender**

Matheson (2005: 182) defines the blog as “an internet genre, which depends on cheap or free software that makes it easy for people to create websites made up of diary entries. Some blogs are personal diaries; others are collections of links to websites, usually with commentaries attached.” Several studies have investigated what makes blogs a legitimate genre (Herring et al, 2004; Miller and Shepherd 2004; Nowson et al, 2005). These studies argue that blogs are a genre because they include common structural features such as dated entries displayed in reverse chronological sequence and sidebars containing links and calendars (Herring et al., 2004), a culturally recognized name (cf. Swales 1990), along with the general aim of the blogger to share content with others through the Web.

Blogs make use of both the attributes of on-line, informal *spoken* language, and those of the conventional written monologue. Therefore, it could be said that weblogs are socially interactive, immediately revisable, and somewhat spur-of-the-moment. While some blogs can be written in ways that conform to standard language, many incorporate aspects of Netspeak: “a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet… arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive” (Crystal; 2001: 18). Crystal (ibid: 26-28) argues that online language is neither a written or spoken genre, instead combining a range of different features from both. Additionally, Netspeak can include devices like emoticons which are found in neither traditional writing or speech.

Linguistically, as Myers (2010: 77) explains, “[b]loggers use a range of devices, direct and indirect, that can make readers feel like they are being talked to, included in a group, and involved in the blog”. For example, some bloggers use “direct address; the development of an in-joke around song-based post titles; the use of insider technical language; the use of ‘first person’ video narrative, sharing local knowledge and making it accessible”. (Davies, 2011: 238). Additionally, CMC texts, images, video or sound clips from other sources can easily be copied and pasted (or linked) to a blog entry. Such appropriated texts can be altered by the blogger, or may be left in their original form but the blogger may comment on them. It could be argued that even the act of moving a text from its original place to a new blog entry is altering it because its context becomes altered.

In line with looking at the blog as a “gendered medium” (Hans et al., 2010)it has been found that certain types of blogs are more likely to be written by either males or females. For example, males tend to write filter blogs3 while women seem to favour writing journal blogs or diary blogs (Karlsson, 2007; Wei, 2009).

However, blogs can be seen as a “gendered performative space” (Hans et al., 2010), particularly as a result of the anonymity they afford. The anonymity of the internet provides a space in which people can perform on-line gender identities that may be different to those they perform off-line (Depoy and Gilson (2007), and while the bloggers we examine in this paper present themselves as women, it should be borne in mind that we do not make any claims about their off-line identities (“I log in and now I’m a woman. And I’d log off and I’m a man again” (Bruckman, 1993: 5), and such findings should be borne in mind when analysing other studies of gender and online language use. However, we also note another aspect of online anonymity as performing a vital role in guarding bloggers’ security and providing a safe space for them to construct their identities.

**The Context of Blogging in Iran**

In this section, we provide some background information about access to the internet in Iran around the period we collected our data (2005-2006), particularly with regard to censorship of websites. It is not always possible to obtain this information from official sources (such as the government), and so we have relied on a combination of formal documents, websites, informal interviews, and participant observation. We have tried to use only information that can be verified by other sources and have disregarded what appears to be conjecture.

Iranians have been using the internet since the 1990s, and a report (2007) of the Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI) indicated that the proportion of families using the internet in 2006 was 12.13%. Tehran (37.36%) and Sistan Baluchistan (9.71%) provinces were respectively the highest and lowest provinces. Internet penetration in urban areas was said to be 16.35% and in rural areas 1.87%. Although there is little information available about gendered use of the internet in Iran, these figures would suggest that the typical Iranian female internet users would be middle-class and urban with a reasonably high level of education and literacy.

In 2001, the High Council of Cultural Revolution issued the first approval for providing rules and regulations on filtering and supervision of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) as well as internet users under the title of “Laws and regulations on Information and Communication Technology (ICT).”

In 2002, the High Council of Cultural Revolution formed a committee in charge of determining unauthorised web sites. As a starting point, ISPs were given a list of 111,000 URLs of unauthorised sites to be filtered. An ever-increasing list of forbidden words was applied which blocked access to any website which contained those words. If any of these words existed in an URL or its content, the user was banned from accessing it and received a filtering message instead. Some of these words are: زن (*woman*), دختر (*girl*) and عشق (*love*)4 as well as many words referring to bodily parts and functions. These words were most likely to have been blocked as they were considered to occur in pornographic sites, although they have the effect of making female identity somehow illicit *per se* in Iranian cyberspace. They also had unintended consequences, for example, filtering Islamic decrees about women appearing on the site of Ayatollah Saanei, a former official of the Iranian justice, because the site contained the word زن (*woman*). In May 2006, MICT announced the formation of a central filtering office, reportedly to filter illegal content, identify Internet users from their IP address, and keep a record of the sites they visit.5

As a response to the measures taken to limit access to websites, some Iranians have developed ways to bypass filtering by upgrading their IT skills and using new technologies. For example, people have used anonymisers (which keep IP addresses private) as well as circumnavigators, web proxies and virtual private networks (VPNs) which all allow blocked web pages to be viewed. Additionally, bloggers use linguistic strategies such as euphemism and letter spacing to avoid filtering software which looks for banned words. The use of figurative language is also used as a way of avoiding censorship. Such censorship results in interesting uses of language in Iranian love blogs, sometimes making certain blog postings appear incomprehensible to those who first encounter them. Part of the challenge in our analysis of such blogs is in interpreting the possible meanings behind the often opaque uses of language, and presenting them so that they make sense to non-Iranian readers.

**Method**

The main source of data for this study is the host server PersianBlog6, which is one of the first and leading Persian publishing tools on the Internet. Altogether, almost 10,000 blogs were initially considered, although this amount was reduced to a final set of 100 for closer qualitative analysis. In particular, we have focussed on bloggers who write about love relationships, and we tried to select a range of bloggers who possessed different identities (relating to gender, sexuality, age, social class, religious observance and relationship status) who utilised various linguistic and discursive strategies when writing about their relationships. The four blogs which we analyse in this paper thus form a much smaller set and are chosen because they are all written by bloggers who identify as women and demonstrate how language is used to construct an empowered female identity in different ways. Due to space limitations we cannot claim that the blogs cited are typical of how every woman uses blogging in Iran. Instead we note that they indicate what is possible and how *some* women have used blogging to respond to their individual situations. We have chosen to examine blogs where the blogger has taken care to hide their own identity. Additionally, we have avoided citing the website address of discussed samples, because doing this could result in such blogs being censored at a later date.

Our analysis was qualitative, resulting in a process that was non-linear and non-sequential (Kumar, 2011, p. 104). As noted above, the analysis of Iranian blogs results in special challenges. Due to lack of access to the text producers (the bloggers themselves) and the fact that the language they used is often purposefully oblique, we cannot claim to provide complete interpretations. Instead, in ambiguous cases we have tried to consider the possible range of ways that a word or sentence may be interpreted. One of the authors of this paper has spent most of her adult life in Iran so was at times able to draw on relevant social and cultural context in order to make sense of the postings. It is sometimes the case that bloggers do not provide information because they can take for granted that they are writing for an audience that has a large amount of shared knowledge. At times, this can render some postings difficult to understand to non-Iranians. Part of the analysis involves identifying when taken-for-granted knowledge is missing from postings and needs to be articulated. Additionally, reading the whole set of blog postings by a particular blogger helped us to gain a greater understanding of her situation and language use.

After presenting the original Persian-language text, we provide a translation of that text in English. The translation did not play a role in the analysis, as it was always carried out on the original Persian versions of the texts. However, in order for the analysis to be understood by English speakers, we include a translation under the original.

Considering the syntactic and semantic differences between English and Persian languages, translation was not always carried out at the sentence level: sometimes, we needed to translate a sentence into a clause or vice versa.

A particular problem regarding translation was the use of metaphors in the blog postings. In translating them, we tried to find the nearest English equivalents, though the wordings of the original metaphors are considered too.

After presenting the text and its translation, we give a general descriptive overview of the posting (and the blog it came from), focusing on who wrote it (and what their personal situation is), what is it about, how it could be summarised, what themes are in it, what types of language use are potentially interesting.

We then carry out a more detailed line-by-line discourse analysis of the posting. This involves two stages, which are carried out concurrently. First, we identify linguistic features such as metaphors or euphemisms. We particularly focus here on any aspects of the text that either make it difficult to understand or are instrumental in maintaining or challenging a particular discourse. McConnell-Ginet (2014) argues that meaning-making is a socially-conditioned process and that linguistic forms alone are not always particularly helpful in determining meaning. Instead, text producers expect audiences to be able to go beyond the literal meanings of utterances by making inferences about meaning which are often linked through to shared cultural assumptions. It should not be assumed though, that cultural assumptions will be shared, and thus we have had to draw on our own cultural assumptions (both from an insider and outsider perspective) in order to make interpretations about the bloggers’ meanings. However, by being purposefully vague and requiring readers to make these inferences, bloggers are able to escape censorship which is more likely to ‘catch’ the more literal forms of writing that could be identified via black-lists of words.

Having given a description and interpretation of the blog posting, we then consider how the blogger has used language specifically to construct references to gender (and sexuality) and love relationships, in relation to herself and others. In the final, explanatory stage of the discourse analysis, we try to clarify how the constructions identified in previous part relate to power, by focussing on linguistic strategies to avoid censorship where relevant, as well as the ways that the blogger constructs herself and her relationship.

**1: “Sometimes I become a tea pot”.**

Posting 1: Blog posting from ‘Lost Gender’.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

من تنها زنت نیستم گاهی می شوم یک قوری چایی که وقتی تو خسته ای و تازه از سر کار آمده ای آنرا جرعه جرعه بنوشی و توی چشمهای من زل بزنی و با وقاحت مردانه ات بگویی هیچ چیز به اندازه یک قوری چایی خستگی آدم را در نمی برد. و من نگاهت کنم و لیوان چاییم ساعتها روی میز بماند و یخ کند!

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 01 | I am not just your wife. |
| 02 | Sometimes, I become a tea pot [for you] to swig it[s tea], |
| 03 | when you are tired and you have come back from work, |
| 04 | you gaze at my eyes and with your manly rudeness tell me that nothing more than a pot of tea is able to refresh you. |
| 05 | And I look at you |
| 06 | And my glass of tea stays on the table for hours, and becomes cold! |

This posting belongs to a blogger who identifies as a female heterosexual artist. Her lover has left her some years ago and now she is married to another man. In most of the postings in the blog, the blogger writes about her previous love and her sorrow stemming from what has happened to her, rather than writing about her relationship with her current husband. In a few postings, such as the one above, the blogger writes about her feelings for her husband and current relationship.

The original text was written as a paragraph (in Persian language). We have divided the translated text into six parts. Each part includes one complete sentence in Persian language embedded by several clauses which are connected by adjunctive elements like *و* (*and)* or punctuation, like commas.

In this post the blogger objectifies herself as *a pot of tea*, an object associated with domesticity. The picture at the beginning of the post contributes to this objectification. It is probable that the blogger has been inspired by the work of surreal Belgian artist, Magritte, called the Great War (1964).7 The woman in this picture is wearing a traditional Islamic covering called a ‘chador’. The textile pattern of chador, which is called “Persian pickles”8 is a traditional pattern rooted in Iranian culture. The pot in front of the woman’s face stands as a visual metaphor for the objectification and domestic role of women in Iran. This is echoed in the words of the blog posting, particularly line 02. Looking closely at the steel tea pot, it is possible to see the reflection of another figure in it. It is difficult to know who this is, but one interpretation (particularly in light of the blog posting), is that it is the woman’s husband.

In line 01, the blogger uses the focus-sensitive exclusive expression *تنها* (*just)* to imply that although she is a wife, she has other roles as well. In this way, the blogger appears to reject the role of wife, perhaps leading the reader to expect that she will describe other roles.

However, rather surprisingly, in line 02, the blogger says that sometimes she becomes a teapot. This appears to be a symbolic rather than literal role. Tea is a popular drink in Iranian culture and serving tea is a traditional role for Iranian women in traditional families. The metaphor of *becoming a pot of tea*, could thus refer to a further restriction of the identity of the blogger, from a wife to a ‘male server’ engaging in the emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) of ‘husband carer’. In other words, the women likens herself to a tea-pot (in her husband’s eyes), because she is merely an object which pours tea.

In line 02 the woman implies that she is consumed by her husband via the verb جرعه جرعه بنوشی (*swig)*. The possessive pronoun *آن* (*its)* implies that the woman constructs herself as being owned by her husband. Another interpretation of this part of the posting is that the woman is describing how her husband uses her sexually, so ‘taking a swig’ could be a sexual metaphor. The same implication could be given in line 04 where the pot of tea is described as the only thing that can refresh the man. In line 04, the verbal phrase *gazes at my eyes* refers to what is normally viewed as an impolite manner of looking at somebody in Iranian culture, which correlates with directness and shamelessness. As there is no shame (indirectness) in this way of looking and shame is viewed as a sign of love in Iranian culture, it might be said that the woman (blogger) doesn’t see love in man’s eyes. By using the adjective مردانه (*manly)* with the word *وقاحت* (*rudeness)*, she generalizes her husband’s rude behaviour as a gendered norm for Iranian men.

In line 06, the blogger refers to *her* glass of tea. Comparing *لیوان* (*glass)* to *قوری* (*pot)*, which are serving respectively woman and man, the woman might be referring to fewer rights for her in this legitimized and institutionalized relation. The description of the woman’s glass of tea as remaining on the table for hours and becoming cold can perhaps be interpreted as a symbolic description of how the woman feels – e.g. she feels neglected, unfulfilled and cold. This posting could perhaps then, be interpreted as a description of a woman who feels trapped in a loveless marriage.

The posting demonstrates a number of ways that love relationships relate to gender and power in Iranian society. Firstly, married women take on domestic roles, and are expected to serve their husbands. In Iran it is still women who do most of the domestic work necessary to keep households running and most of the emotional labour necessary to maintain married relationship (Van Every 1996). The consequence of this is that the blogger first views herself as a domestic object, rather than a human being, one which is consumed by a man, and then later, she describes herself as another object, which is neglected.

Secondly, the blogger’s descriptions of the man’s reactions imply that he is unaware of the woman’s feelings. This hegemonic system puts the woman in a less powerful position, though by expressing her feelings and thoughts as well as network formation, the woman resists this oppression and provides a competing discourse rather than accepting the dominant discourse.

**2: This is the sixth slap.**

Some female bloggers talk about violence in their relationships. For example, Dokhijoon, a woman whose blog is called “This is a woman” depicts the following situation.

Posting 2: Blog posting from ‘This is a woman’

این سيلی آخری که زدی از همه محکم تر بود

چيه معلومه که خيلی دوستم داشتی

خوب تو هم مثله بقيه خنگی... با همون نگاه اوّل بايد

 ميفهميدی که *آتيش* *نگاه من* با يه نمه اشک تو خاموش نميشه

 ....

يه سيلی ديگه !

حالا چرا اینقدر ميلرزی ... قوی باش ... تویی که داری ميزنی

....

این سيلی ششمه !

ها ها ها بگو ديگه ... نترس ... بگو ... بگو که هنوز که هنوزه

 عاشق يه *"****جنده****"* هستی

.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 01 | This final slap was the hardest one |
| 02 | What’s up? It’s clear that you loved me a lot |
| 03 | Indeed, you are a fool like others.... from that first look, |
| 04 | you should understand that the fire in my eyes will not be put out with a drop of your tears |
| 05 | ... |
| 06 | Another slap! |
| 07 | Now, why are you so trembling... be strong.... this is you who is beating |
| 08 | .... |
| 09 | This is the sixth slap! |
| 10 | Ha ha ha tell me ... don’t be scared.... tell me ... tell me that you still and still love a “**whore”** |

The above blog posting dramatizes an interaction between a woman and her partner. The partner is physically punishing the woman. We cannot be certain why the woman is being punished, but, from the use of the word *whore* in line 10, it may be that the man feels that the woman has had a relationship with someone else. In other postings, Dokhijoon refers to being beaten and called a *جنده (whore)* many times.

This blog posting is written directly from the perspective of the woman – we are shown the woman’s speech or thoughts. However, even from reading other blog postings we do not know whether the poster is writing from her own point of view e.g. whether she is describing a situation that has happened to her, nor do we know whether she said any of the words in the blog, or whether she merely thought them. Nor do we know whether this was a ‘real’ event. It could be that the poster is writing about fictional characters or someone that she knows.

An interesting aspect of this blog posting is that only the woman’s speech is represented. The man is not shown as speaking, and his presence is only implied because the woman appears to be directing her speech (or thoughts) towards him. Additionally, while he does not speak, he is represented as engaging in the physical action of hitting the woman (described in more detail below). Therefore, power is presented in two ways: verbal and non-verbal.

In line 01, the woman is reporting what is happening. She writes that the last slap she received was the most painful, implying that at the start of the blog posting, she has already received multiple physical attacks from the man. The man is therefore exerting physical power over the woman. It could be argued that the man is silent, yet communicating non-verbally (via his violence).

In line 02, the woman conceptualizes the man as having loved her in the past. In line 03, she belittles the man by saying he is *مثل بقیه خنگی* (*a fool like others)*. It could be argued that she constructs herself as powerful in relation to him, by labelling him a fool. The implication that other men are fools, also indicates that she constructs herself as powerful in relation to a range of men, not just the one who is beating her.

In lines 03-04 the man’s sorrow (which is referred to as a tear drop) is contrasted with the *آتش* (*fire*) in the woman’s eyes. Here, she refers to a Persian metaphor *مثل آبی که روی آتش بریزند* (*like some water that put out the fire*) but modifies it. The metaphorical constructs based around eyes are used to describe emotions – the ‘fire’ describes the woman’s passion, though normally it is unusual for an Iranian woman to talk about passion. It is of note that the blogger has highlighted *آتيش* *نگاه من* (*the fire in my eye*) in a red colour in the original text. The man’s emotions (a tear drop) are constructed as weaker as and smaller than the woman’s (fire), which is ineffective at countering the woman’s passion.

In lines 05 and 08, ellipsis is used to refer to the man’s silence and his incapability to answer the woman. Instead he is described as continuing to hurt her physically. After every three dots there is the word *سيلی* (*slap)*. The use of ellipsis indicates that the man’s actions are backgrounded, whereas the woman’s responses to being slapped are foregrounded. Therefore, the ellipsis appears to have the effect of subverting the power relationship between the man and woman, as normally the woman would be in a less powerful position. However, in the text, she constructs herself as powerful through foregrounding her responses which contrast with the man’s silence.

In line 07, the woman asks why the man is trembling. She remarks on the irony that it is she who is receiving the violence, not he, and (perhaps sarcastically) uses the imperative *قوی باش* (be strong). This implies that she views him as weak. She does not refer to her own pain, implying that she is able to stand the beating, and is therefore stronger than him.

In the final part of the blog entry, she refers to herself as a*جنده* (*whore)*, although puts the word in scare quotes, perhaps implying that it was used by the man to describe her, perhaps for some form of behaviour which is viewed as transgressive in their relationship. This may also explain why he has been beating her. She also uses ها ها ها (laughter), suggesting that she finds the situation amusing. The overall tone of this posting is one of defiance, with the woman constructing herself as able to withstand physical beating because her spirit is stronger than the man’s.

**3: Another death that is on the way.**

‘Marital rape’ is another aspect of male violence in Iranian society which is institutionalised in Iranian marriage law. According to law, women are always required to meet the sexual needs of their husbands as a ‘marital duty’, while their own readiness and satisfaction to meet sexual needs of their husbands is not taken into account. As Kar9 (2008) asserts, “Women who do not tend to their husband's needs, according to these laws, can be punished with severe fines and the maintenance paid to them by the husband is forfeited” (see Article 110810 of the civil law)”. Islamic law is silent about the existence of the concept of “marital rape”, which implicitly encourages women to accept it as a part of their marriage duties task. Some women refer to such practices in their blogs. For example, Baran identifies as a married woman and she appears to reference “marital rape” in the following posting:

Posting 3. Blog posting from ‘The hidden thoughts of a woman’

**نیمه... اما اشتباهی**

...

صدای کلید توی قفل مو به تنم راست می کنه... حالم داره به هم می خوره...کاش در باز نمی شد

صدات تو گوشم می پیچه: چطوری خانوم خوشگله...

دستم و جلو دهنم می گیرم تا داد نزنم خفه شو! حرفمو قورت می دم لبخند می زنم

از پشت بهم می چسبی نفس چندش اورت رو توو گردنم حس می کنم

می گم برو کنار غذام خراب می شه

می گی امشب شام نمی خوایم!!

به مردن دوباره ای که در راهه فکر می کنم...

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Half ... but by mistake** |
| 01 | ...  The sound of key turning inside the lock makes my hair stand on end... I feel sick... I wish the door didn’t open |
| 02 | Your voice is echoing in my ear: how are you, belle? ... |
| 03 | I put my hand in front of my mouth to prevent shouting, “shut up!” I swallow my words and I smile. |
| 04 | You stick to me from the back. I feel your disgusting breath on my neck |
| 05 | I say go away, my food is being ruined. |
| 06 | You say, we don’t want dinner tonight!! |
| 07 | I think about another death that is on the way... |

Bara describes an interaction that occurs between her and her husband as she is preparing dinner at home and he returns home from work. As with the previous two posts, this blog post describes an interaction between the wife and husband where the wife appears to be directly addressing her husband, using the second person pronoun. The title of this blog ‘The hidden thoughts of a woman’ indicates that the woman is revealing information through her blog that she has not made known to her husband.

In line 01, she uses the expression *مو بر تن راست شدن* (*to make one’s hair stand on end*) and *حال بهم خوردن* (*feel sick*) which gives the impression that something terrifying and disgusting is happening. This theme is continued in line 02, though the word *خانم خوشگله* (*belle*) at the end of the line 02 indicates a pet name that her husband refers to her. It is clear that the newcomer has ownership of the place (he has a key) and he calls the writer using an affectionate term.

The blogger’s reaction in line 03, shows her dissatisfaction and disgust. At the same time, she describes how she must hide her reaction and instead swallows her harsh words (*shut up* (*خفه شو*)) and smile. Masking her true feelings implies that she is less powerful in the relationship.

In line 04, she describes how the man makes physical contact with her by approaching her from behind and sticking to her (this may simply describe the man’s physical contact to her or it could be a euphemism to indicate her feeling his aroused sexual state). She refers to his *نفس چندش آور* (*disgusting breath*), again showing her true feelings for him.

In line 05, Baran describes how she attempts to keep him away by referring to the food which may be ruined if she does not attend to it. But in line 06, the man refuses dinner, implicating that he prefers something else. Using the plural pronoun *ما* (*we*) instead of the singular pronoun من (I) implies his more powerful position to include woman as a part of his decision. From previous lines and the description of the man’s reactions, there is the implication that he wants to have sex with Baran.

And in line 07, it could be said that Baran uses *مردن* (*death*) as a metaphor for unwanted sex. The word *دیگه*(*another*) indicats that this is something that has been experienced before.

In this posting, the blogger never uses the word ‘sex’ but implies it through metaphor and the man’s physical and intimate behaviour towards her.

Baran shows her inner dissatisfaction by constrasting the words in her inner monologue: *مو به تنم راست می کنه ([it] makes my hair stand on the end), حال به هم خوردن (feel sick), خفه شو(shut up), چندش آور (disgusting), and مردن (death)* with the word لبخند (smile) which descrbes her outward behaviour towards the man.

Additionally, the title of this posting is representative of the mood constructed during the posting. The word *نیمه (half)* stands for the idea of gender complementarity in Iranian society where a man and woman are together viewed as two halves of a whole. However, wthe adjunct of *اما (but)* and prepositional phrase *اشتباهی (by mistake)* makes it a contradictory statement. The blogger indicates that in this case, her relationship is a mistake.

**4: The woman inside me.**

Posting 4: Blog posting from ‘Staircase’.

**زن سنگین**

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

زن درونم   
روزی چند بار سنگسار شود خوب است؟  
باور نمی‌کنید  
سبک بلند می‌شود از خاک  
دوش می‌گیرد  
موهایش را با شامپوی خوشبویی می‌شوید  
با دقت پوستش را کرم می‌زند  
سیگاری می‌گذارد میان لب‌های سحرآمیزش  
به چشمان حیرت‌زده‌ی من می‌گوید  
آتیش لطفن

.  
.  
.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Gentle Woman** | |
| 01 | The woman inside me, |
| 02 | How many times per day is enough for her to be stoned? |
| 03 | You don’t believe |
| 04 | [She] wakes lightly up from the soil |
| 05 | [She] takes a shower |
| 06 | [She] washes her hair with an aromatic shampoo |
| 07 | [She] rubs creams on her skin carefully |
| 08 | [She] puts a cigarette between her magic lips |
| 09 | [She] says to my shocked eyes |
| 10 | Fire pliz |
| 11 | .  .  . |

The title of the posting is زن سنگین. The word سنگین literally translates to the English word *heavy*, although this word has a meaning in Persian which relates to adherence of rules, specifically sexual rules, due to the fact that something which is heavy cannot easily move around. Therefore, we have translated سنگین as *gentle* rather than *heavy*.

In Persian, *gentle* (*heavy*) has two meanings: one in the area of sexual behaviour, and the other in the area of day to day life. In terms of sexual behaviour, it is attributed to a person who is modest, is not sexually attracted to others, and does not enter into a forbidden sexual relation, while in terms of non-sexual behaviour, it is attributed to a person who is obedient, respects older people and is not otherwise ‘controversial’.11

The picture at the beginning of the post has a number of interpretations. It is likely that the gesture of the person in the picture also represents an obedient person, perhaps someone who the woman identifies with or wishes to represent her. The woman’s hands are clasped together and close to her neck. The feminine ring depicted in the picture suggests that this person is a woman, which her face - specifically her lips- is cut out of the photo. This position could represent the woman as a silent person. Additionally, the ring might indicate that this woman is married.

In line 01, the blogger presents the main topic of the posting ‘the woman inside me’, which is described in more detail in the rest of the posting. The posting is thus set up to describe a symbolic or metaphorical situation. Literally, it is not possible to be a woman inside another woman, so the woman must be referring to some sort of discrepancy between her outward (public) self, and her inward (private) feelings.

Line 02, clarifies the existence of an irony between the title of the post *زن سنگین* (*the gentle woman*) and the woman inside her who is expected to be stoned (referring to *چند بار در روز* (*how many times per day*)). From here, the reader expects a description of a woman who is *not* gentle or obedient (line 03 emphasises this contradiction). We interpret the word *سنگسار* (*stoning)* as most likely referring to the Iranian punishment for adultery. This interpretation is also based on her reference to waking up from *خاک* (*soil)*, in line 04. As here the soil stands for the ground in which the body of adulteress (wrapped head to feet in a shroud) is buried up to her breasts12. Thus, ‘the woman inside’ Sara is described (we presume hypothetically) as receiving punishment for adultery. This perhaps refers to the fact that Sara would like to commit adultery but cannot.

In lines 05 to 07, the woman describes how ‘the woman inside her’ cleans her body smoothly and carefully. In order to take a shower, wash her hair and rub creams on the skin, a woman needs to be naked. In Iran, making reference to the naked female body (even implicitly) is tabooed and viewed as shameful. Thus, writing about a nude body in the shower could be seen as breaking a taboo, and may be interpreted by some Iranian readers as an erotic description.

In lines 08-10 the blogger describes how she engages in smoking. In Iran, smoking for women is viewed as less acceptable than it is for men. It is notable that in line 08 Sara uses the word *سحرآمیز* (*magic)* as an adjective for *لب* *ها* (*lips)*. This could be interpreted as describing the woman’s lips as having the power of speech and being heard (rather than being silenced). Or it could refer to the fact that her lips are free to smoke. As with the woman who is showering, this is a representation of ‘the woman inside the writer’, who carries out acts that the writer is not able to do. This disjunct between the writer and ‘the woman inside the writer’ is also referenced in line 09 with the adjective phrase *چشمان* *حیرت‌زده‌ی* *من* (*my shocked eyes*). Here Sara attempts to depict the gap between her outward identity and the woman inside her who is a more sexually expressive being.

Sara has used a formal and poetic language in the posting. The only exception to this is in line 10, where she uses the informal imperative sentence *آتیش* *لطفن* (*fire pliz*) instead of آتش لطفا" (‘lighter/fire, please’ or ‘May I have a lighter, please?’). Following a phonological rule in Persian which is used for changing the formality of words by using a different vowel, Sara uses آتیش (/ātish/) as informal form of آتش (/ātash/). She has also used a non-standard spelling for لطفاً (please (‘pliz’)) to show informality. We would suggest that her use of informal and non-standard language is strategic, again to represent the woman inside herself as not conforming to society’s rules in terms of expected language norms for women.

As an additional level of interpretation, Sara’s use of the word آتیش (fire) has a connotative meaning of ‘passion’. Therefore, it could be said that line 10 highlights the difference between Sara, who describes herself as a سنگین (gentle or obedient) woman in Iranian society, and the woman inside her, who has passionate feelings which would not be considered gentle – Sara wishes for fire (passion).

Throughout this posting, Sara describes her inner self as sexualised – claiming that she would be stoned for adultery, that she is naked and rubs cream on her body and that she smokes, uses informal language and is passionate. Sara thus constructs two versions of herself, a ‘gentle’ and obedient public version and a sexualised private one. Within Sara’s blog, both versions are able to co-exist.

**Conclusion**

In her discussion of dominant gender ideologies, Lazar (2008: 107) writes that ‘the potency is in their internalisation and acceptance by both women and men in their everyday communities of practice. An emancipatory discourse politics, therefore, is important for mobilising theory to create critical awareness for resistance and change of existing social structures.’ The existence of the resistant discourses in Iranian women’s love blogs indicates that such critical awareness exists and will find a way to express itself. Similarly, Baxter (2003: 39) notes that ‘oppressed groups are not permanently trapped into silence, victimhood or knee-jerk refusal by dominant discursive practices; rather there are moments within discourse in which to convert acts of resistance into previously unheard, but nonetheless intertextualised forms of ‘new’ expression’. Along these lines we argue that blogging in the Iranian context, and love blogs in particular, could be seen as offering such ‘moments’ of new expression. Love blogs have the potential to play an important role in providing a relatively safe space for Iranian women to anonymously articulate private aspects of their relationships and feelings with regard to a range of issues that are normally tabooed in Iranian public discourse. In particular, blogs afford Iranian women the chance to counter the dominant discourses around gender and relationships that are strongly supported by governmental and religious structures in Iran, instead articulating resistant discourses which could be interpreted as momentarily empowering.

However, we may want to question the extent to which blogging is actually empowering. For example, the first three excerpts examined involve cases where women describe how they are repulsed by the behaviour of their partners, although ultimately they must accede to them. In Excerpt 1, the blogger must do domestic work for her partner, in Excerpt 2 she must withstand his violence and in Excerpt 3 she has to endure her partner’s sexual advances. Even Excerpt 4, which does not discuss a disempowering relationship, is accompanied by an image which suggests the blogger is silenced, and she asks with regard to the woman inside her: ‘how many times a day is enough for her to be stoned’, implying some form of violence towards herself. Clearly these women are disempowered so to what extent does writing about their situation offer any form of empowerment or change? We would argue that in spite of offering few possibilities for immediate improvement of one’s situation, blogging can be viewed as intrinsically empowering because it affords a voice to people who do not have the opportunity to be heard in their everyday lives. In particular we note how bloggers use their blogs to reveal their true thoughts about their husbands and indicate dissatisfaction with their relationships. Love bloggers remove love from the private sphere and put it in the hands of public networks. Blogging also allows such people to make contact with others who may be in a similar position or are at least sympathetic to their circumstances. Blogging thus helps to create cohesive social networks, alleviates a sense of isolation and powerlessness, and can engender exchange of information including information about coping strategies. Blogging can also be inspiring, causing others to change their views or even their behaviour. Even the sense that you are not alone, that you are not the only person who feels disempowered by hegemonic discourses of love and sexuality, is empowering. Particularly in the Iranian context where discussion of love and relationships is taboo, love blogs are a way of over-turning this taboo, setting an example to others and alerting potentially hundreds or thousands of readers to the problems Iranian women face. By giving concrete examples and narratives from people’s lives, they also help to personalise the situation that many Iranian women are in, which can have a greater impact on readers than impersonal and general statements about Iranian women’s oppression.

However, we refer to blogging as *momentarily* empowering because we acknowledge that it most likely will not result in immediate changes for the bloggers in question, nor has it resulted in a dramatic over-turning of hegemonic discourses in Iran. Of course, the effect of such blogging may be cumulative and eventually contribute towards wider social change. It is particularly notable that the Iranian government seems to recognise the potentiality of online social networks for spreading new ideas, hence their efforts to censor the internet. It is also worth noting that social networking played important roles in the Arab Spring of 2011, where the governments of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were over-turned (see for example, Cottle 2011). As Foucault (1979: 95) notes, “where there is power, there is resistance”. We hope that by giving a wider platform to voices that are rarely heard on an international stage we can encourage social change in Iran and other contexts where people conduct their daily relationships under difficult circumstances. This paper has only considered women’s blogs although we also identified other types of bloggers, including gay men, who used love blogs to challenge heteronormative and homophobic discourses. We believe that the examination of blogs and other social media helps language and gender analysts to identify emerging discourses in societies, which may yet have not been taken up by mainstream media and are thus important sites of analysis.

**Endnotes**

1 The revolution involved events which led to Iran’s modernising monarchy being overthrown and replaced with an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was the leader of the revolution.

2 The excerpts from love blogs we examine in this paper tend to be discussion of non-loving relationships so the name ‘love blog’ may seem a misnomer. However, having examined hundreds of these blogs, we attest that their main focus is on loving relationships, although this sometimes involves discussion of unhappy or loveless relationships too and this is what we have focussed on in the paper.

3A filter blog is a blog which mainly contains links to other blogs.

4 Tonekameidical. طرح يكپارچه‌سازي فيلترينگ Retrieved 18 June, 2011, from <http://tonekamedical.asoon.com/index_files/Filtering.htm>.

5 ISNA News Agency. (2006). شناسايي مراجعات كاربران اينترنت به سايت‌ها؛ قانوني يا غيرقانوني؟ Retrieved 18 June, 2011, from <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-705642>.

6 پرشین بلاگ. Retrieved 20 June, 2007, from http://persianblog.ir/

7 Christensen, B. René Magritte. *Bert Christensen's Cyberspace Home* Retrieved 14 August, 2011, from <http://bertc.com/g9/magritte3.htm>.

8 It is also called Paisley Design.

9 Kar, M. (2008). Discrimination Against Women Under Iranian Law. Retrieved from http://www.mehrangizkar.net/english/archives/000416.php

10 “Article 1108 - If the wife refuses to fulfill her duties without legitimate excuse, she will not be entitled to the cost of maintenance. Legitimate excuse means period, sick, IHRAM (pilgrimage clothing).” From: Zarrokh, E. (2007).

11 Vahdati, S. (2005). عملکرد واژه‌ها در سرکوب زنان؛نجيب وسليطه Retrieved 30 September, 2011, from <http://www.rahekargar.net/zanan/amalkardevagehnvsarkob.html>.

12 Article 102 from Panel Code of Iran says: “men should be buried up to their waists and women up to their breasts” “The stoning of an adulterer or adulteress shall be carried out while each is placed in a hole and covered with soil, he up to his waist and she up to a line above her breasts.” (From: Mission for Establishment of Human Rights in Iran (MEHR IRAN). Islamic Penal Code of Iran Retrieved 15 August, 2011, from <http://mehr.org/Islamic_Penal_Code_of_Iran.pdf> )

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