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# Torches in the Dark: Embodied Acts of Utopian Hope in Iranian Women's Protests

By Amir Akbarpour Shiraz

## Abstract

This article examines three emblematic, body-centered protest actions in Iran's women-led movements—standing on an electrical box, cutting hair, and burning the hijab—as performative gestures of utopian hope that transform urban and bodily spaces into stages of political imagination. In the face of Iran's suffocating repression and economic crisis, these are not just brief acts of protest. They are gestures that insist on imagining a future still beyond reach—gestures that, through repetition, silence, and the raw presence of the body, pierce the darkness with fleeting yet defiant light. Drawing on theories of performance, spatial politics, and embodied archives (Butler, Rancière, Taylor), the article argues that these actions resist stabilized representation by positioning themselves in a liminal zone between visibility and invisibility, permanence and transience. Through the accumulation of “political mass,” these performances disrupt the gravitational pull of dominant power structures, opening new configurations of the sensible. The article contends that hope, in these performances, is not articulated through slogans or visionary promises, but emerges through fragile gestures, dangerous silences, and ephemeral rituals enacted by oppressed bodies—an embodied hope that pulls the spectator out of passive observation and into a shared process of transformation.

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# Torches in the Dark: Embodied Acts of Utopian Hope in Iranian Women's Protests

By Amir Akbarpour Shiraz

There is a well-known metaphor that likens hope to a faint light at the end of a dark tunnel. Yet the cynics respond by saying, yes, there is indeed a light at the tunnel's end—but it is the headlamp of a speeding train rushing toward us. The terrifying image they conjure is not one of salvation, but of an inevitable and violent collision that leaves no room for escape. This is precisely the position in which contemporary Iranian society finds itself. On one side, the suffocating pressures of a theocratic regime that permeates every aspect of daily life; on the other, the crushing weight of Western sanctions that have driven the economy to the brink of collapse. Trapped in this suffocating tunnel, people see not a glimmer of escape in that distant light, but the oncoming glare of a train destined to crush them under the threat of an all-out war.

And yet, within this bleak horizon, Iranian women have emerged as the vanguard of a movement that dares to offer an alternative reading of that light. To them, it is not a signal of imminent catastrophe, but the promise of a yet-unseen horizon, a path not yet taken. This is not the cold beam of a train's headlamp, but the warm, defiant glow of a torch lit by the burning scarves of Iranian girls.

This article examines three protest actions central to the Girls of Enghelab<sup>1</sup> (Revolution) Street and Woman, Life, Freedom movements: standing atop an electrical box, cutting hair, and burning the hijab. In these performances, Iranian women's creativity reclaims silence, the body, and space as mediums through which they craft fleeting moments of

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<sup>1</sup> Enqelab/Enghelab Street (Persian: خیابان انقلاب اسلامی) is a major avenue in Tehran, named "Enqelab," meaning "revolution," to commemorate the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

utopian hope—not simply as acts of resistance, but as performative gestures that render a freer, more just, and more humane future imaginable for those who witness them.

In this dynamic, a continuum emerges between political resistance and performance—on one side marked by the urgency of intervention, on the other by an aesthetics of risk and presence. This dual quality casts spectators both as witnesses and as potential agents in shaping collective memory and political force. For this reason, the language of the essay moves between terms such as audience, witness, supporter, and observer.

As bell hooks reminds us, “What we cannot imagine, we cannot bring into being” (195). From this perspective, the political task becomes one of conjuring images of hope—gestures of a future that has yet to arrive but already insists upon its potential presence, casting its light upon bodies here and now. In this spirit, Iranian women are not merely setting scarves aflame; they are igniting radical imagination itself—inviting the world to witness a future they have already dared to perform.

## **STANDING ATOP AN ELECTRICAL BOX**

On the morning of December 27, 2017, Enghelab Street in Tehran still lingered in its heavy slumber of daily routine. The noisy sidewalks, the scent of coffee wafting from the cafés, the crowd of book vendors—all moved in the familiar weave of the city’s ordered rhythms, unaware that a scene was about to unfold that would shatter this repetition. At the well-known intersection of Enghelab and Abureyhan streets—where the city’s history had long been overshadowed by government banners and patrols—a young woman quietly climbed onto an electrical box<sup>2</sup>. A simple

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<sup>2</sup> See Azadeh Moaveni, “Women of Iran: Heroes of the Year 2022,” *Time*, 7 Dec. 2022, <https://time.com/heroes-of-the-year-2022-women-of-iran/>.

act, yet in that space, it echoed like an explosion. Her body stood there, defenseless, unprotected, with loose hair and trembling yet determined hands.

The white scarf she tied to a stick was no flag of defeat, but rather a silent gesture of peace, carried only by her body. To the passersby, this was something far beyond an ordinary protest; it was as if, for a moment, they found themselves suspended between habit and possibility. Breaths were held, and a silence heavy with dread fell over the street. Everyone knew the consequences this act would bring. Yet, in that fleeting moment, Vida Movahed's body turned the electrical box into a stage where the female body was no longer a victim but a force capable of conjuring futures.

That image did not remain confined to that street. In the days and weeks that followed, women across Iran repeated her gesture, standing on electrical boxes, holding up their scarves—and from those acts, the Girls of Revolution Street movement was born: a wave that transformed solitary bodies into a collective force, turning the streets into new stages for reimagining space and envisioning futures.

## **CUTTING HAIR**

In the turbulent days of September 2022, the streets outside Kasra Hospital—streets that had long carried the scent of Tehran's smoke and anxiety—were transformed into a space of furious mourning. Grieving women and men, heavy with the sorrow of Mahsa Jina Amini's death<sup>3</sup>, engaged in an act as old as the cultural memory of Iran itself: cutting their

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<sup>3</sup> For documentation of the death of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini, see Amnesty International, "What Happened to Mahsa/Zhina Amini?" Amnesty International, 15 Sept. 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/what-happened-to-mahsa-zhina-amini/>.

hair. Amid the crowds of tears and chants, women, with trembling yet determined hands, grasped their hair between their fingers, raised scissors into the air, and in a wordless, piercing gesture, cut away their locks.

It was not merely an act of mourning—it was the eruption of a rage long held beneath the surface. Those severed strands flew from the streets of Tehran to the squares of Brussels and Paris<sup>4</sup>, suspended in an air thick with the scent of death and defiance. In that moment, the Iranian woman's body was no longer confined by silence or veiled in submission; it became a figure that performed anger and grief in its rawest form—a body that, even in mourning, set hope into motion, like a bleeding poem, from the fragments of its shorn hair. Those brief moments turned the street into a ritual of hair and tears, where history, the body, and space intertwined to carve out a new horizon for the politics of the body in contemporary Iran.

## **BURNING THE HIJAB**

In the fevered nights of October 2022, the streets of Iran turned into stages where fire was not merely a tool of protest, but a language of silence, speaking what words could no longer carry. Angry women climbed onto platforms, electrical boxes, or any elevation they could find; they raised their headscarves—symbols of coercion and decades of forced submission—like dusty flags of repression, spun them into the air, and set them alight<sup>5</sup>. The flames that leapt from the thin fabric did more than

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<sup>4</sup> For documentation of the global spread of the hair-cutting protests and the solidarity actions of French women artists, see Kim Willsher, "French Women Cut Their Hair in Support of Iran Protests," *The Guardian*, 5 Oct. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/05/french-women-cut-their-hair-in-support-of-iran-protests-juliette-binoche-marion-cotillard>.

<sup>5</sup> For reports on Iranian women burning their hijabs during the September 2022 protests, see Jessie Yeung et al., "Iranian Women Burn Their Hijabs as Hundreds Protest Death of Mahsa

illuminate the darkened streets; they etched into the collective visual memory of Iranians a counter-image to the veiled women of the 1979 revolution, whose photographs had once symbolized revolution itself.

The burning of headscarves quickly became a collective ritual across the nights of Tehran, Mashhad, Kermanshah, and Sanandaj—women whose bodies, moving in unison with the flames, embodied their cries without the need for slogans, their defiance erupting in the crackling fire of the scarves. In those moments, the acrid smell of burning fabric mingled with the chants of "Woman, Life, Freedom," transforming the space into something altogether different—into a liminal zone, poised between fear and courage, where the female body was not only resisting but exposing itself to the flames so that freedom might rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes.

These three acts, beyond their immediate defiance, created moments in which meaning, power, and hope became woven into the fabric of everyday spaces, opening new stages for imagining alternative futures.

## **PERFORMED RESISTANCE AND THE GRAVITY OF PROTEST**

These acts, though different in form, share many features: from silence to repeatability. But one central element links them all: space. In classical physics, space is seen as something neutral and independent from objects. It has three dimensions—length, width, and height—and serves only as a location through which things pass or rest. But in modern physics, space is intertwined with time and can be affected by the

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Amini," CNN, 21 Sept. 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/21/middleeast/iran-mahsa-amini-death-widespread-protests-intl-hnk/index.html>.

presence of objects. Massive bodies can bend the fabric of space-time; smaller ones can't. Only objects with enough mass can create distortion.

Politics is spatial—it organizes bodies, practices, and perceptions in relation to one another, within specific distances and proportions. In his political philosophy, Jacques Rancière argues that politics is aesthetic in nature. Through his concept of the "*distribution of the sensibles*," he shows how politics organizes what can be seen, heard, and felt in the world (Rancière 13). He says:

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. It is a partition of the sensible, the cutting up and distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (Rancière 13)

This distribution amounts to a kind of spatial mapping, in which space is partitioned. These partitions, like masses, can exert influence on one another. In the most ideal configuration, the weight and gravitational pull of these partitions are balanced in such a way that they form a coherent and orderly system, where everything stays in its assigned place. In other words, a dominant order emerges, sustained by the gravity of political forces that stabilize the orbits of society.

Like celestial systems, dominant political orders are held together by the gravitational pull of power. And small objects—minor actions or individuals—rarely disturb this balance. They're usually absorbed into the system without real impact.

So, for a political act to truly disrupt the existing order, it needs enough "political mass"—symbolic weight, repetition, and visibility—to bend that space and shift what is sensed, seen, and felt. As Judith Butler

explains in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, the physical presence of bodies in spaces not equally accessible to all—even in silence or without explicit slogans—constitutes a political claim to space and recognition (Butler, *Notes Toward*). In other words, it is not only language that carries the potential for political action.

J. L. Austin, whose work laid the foundations of speech act theory, demonstrates in “How to Do Things with Words” that certain utterances are not descriptions but actions in themselves. He writes: “To say something is to do something; or in saying something we do something” (Austin 205). He calls these kinds of statements “performative utterances”—sentences that don’t merely state something, but actually do something. His classic examples include phrases like “I promise” or “I declare.” Political slogans and chants often rely on this performative quality of language. Phrases such as “We are the majority,” “Down with the dictator,” or even “Woman, Life, Freedom” are not just expressions of anger or demand; their very utterance enacts a political gesture—one that challenges domination and brings a new political reality into being.

But as Butler, extending Austin’s theory, reminds us, political performativity isn’t confined to speech alone (Butler, *Notes Toward*). Bodies, too, act—they carry meaning through what they do, not just what they say. In moments like a woman silently standing still atop an electrical box, cutting her hair, or burning a hijab, it is the gesture itself that speaks. When bodies show up, take a stand, or occupy space, they’re doing more than just being present—they’re making a political demand. They ask to be seen, to be treated as equals, and to reshape the way space is used and shared. Butler writes: “The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it works, according to Arendt,

only when relations of equality are maintained” (*Notes Toward* 88-89). The issue, however, is that the appearance of a single body, like a small meteor, may not carry enough weight to disrupt the political orbit. As Butler points out, it is not the lone body, but bodies coming together that bring a space of appearance into being (*Notes Toward*).

When Vida Movahed stood silently on top of an electrical box, alone, her act was initially dismissed by both government supporters and even some opposition groups as a moment of madness, a personal breakdown quickly managed by official authorities as an isolated case of deviant behavior. Similar interpretations were made of the hair-cutting protests and the burning of hijabs, which were also initially seen as isolated, individual acts.

At first glance, Vida Movahed’s solitary act seemed like a small meteor—an isolated gesture, lacking the “political mass” to disrupt the established orbits of power. But just as in physics, a meteor’s path can change if it enters a particular gravitational field, her action, too, became the nucleus of a new constellation—one charged with utopian performativity.

As performance scholar Jill Dolan explains, “utopian performatives” are those small but profound moments in which performance gathers an audience into a shared sense of hope—lifting them, however briefly, above the present into the possibility of another world (Dolan 5). She writes, “Such performances lift everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan 5).

For a brief moment, Vida Movahed’s stance gave viewers a glimpse of a different future, one where life isn’t governed by coercion, where forced veiling has no place, and where the right to protest is possible. It

didn't last long, but its emotional force and striking simplicity pulled people out of their everyday reality and pointed toward another way of living.

As women across Iran—on major streets and in alleyways—began to repeat Vida's act, what first appeared as a singular gesture turned into a repeatable form. The same happened with the hair-cutting performances and the burning of hijabs. Each time a woman climbed a utility box, set her scarf on fire, or cut her hair, the "political mass" of the act grew, and in this way the initial nucleus gradually expanded and became a fuller constellation of embodied resistance, one that not only reshaped physical space but also altered the very geometry of political perception.

In this emerging constellation, space is no longer a neutral backdrop for events, it becomes an active participant. Through its dialectical relationship with the resisting body, space generates meaning, challenges power, and helps shape a shared memory.

Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral container, but rather the site where a particular need intersects with a particular object, an encounter through which space itself is defined. In this view, space is saturated with invisible needs and visible objects. He writes: "Space is thus populated by visible crowds of objects and invisible crowds of needs" (Lefebvre 394).

In the protest actions of Iranian women, the body functions as a political object, one that reclaims and redefines space in response to the need to be seen and to resist. Places once perceived as neutral or ordinary become charged sites, fertile grounds for the formation of a constellation of resistance. This constellation draws its orbit from individual bodies, shaped through repetition, transmission, and the renewal of desire, gradually becoming a repertoire of embodied defiance. As performance theorist Diana Taylor explains, the repertoire captures embodied practices

that transmit communal memories, gestures, and histories across generations. She writes:

The repertoire, for them, holds the tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations, in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and invalid forms of knowledge and evidence. ... multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, reconstituting themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. (Taylor 193)

As Taylor shows, the repertoire doesn't merely transmit memory; it enacts it (193). The repertoire formed through the protest acts of Iranian women affects its witnesses, placing them in a position where transformation becomes possible, where they are invited into a process of becoming.

The spectators of these actions are not mere passive observers; they become part of the scene—bodies touched by the affective charge of the performance, turning into carriers of memory and hope themselves. Encountering these acts—from the tense, tear-filled silence of the hair-cutting rituals to the flickering flames of burning scarves—not only provokes fear or astonishment in the audience, but also evokes moments of empathy, shame, and even sudden surges of hope.

It is a hope that, through the audience's emotional participation in the scene, reshapes the space and inscribes a collective memory of the possibility of change onto bodies and landscapes. These performances do not merely unfold before the spectators—they pull them in, inviting them to co-create space and meaning. They are not simply seen; they are felt. And it is within this affective encounter that their disruptive power resides—subtle, internal, yet profoundly unsettling to the established order.

In this process, the spectator is not simply a bystander. They are pulled into the orbit shaped by the performance's force. What the viewer faces isn't simply an image of a woman in defiance. It's a ritual, an act that invites them into a space of transformation. In that brief encounter—marked by wounded beauty, loud silence, and something deeply moving—their way of seeing is disrupted. And in that disruption lies the chance for a new kind of political awareness to take shape.

Through her analysis of a performance by Marina Abramović, Erika Fischer-Lichte shows that there are performances which place the body at the center of a transformative experience, one in which the spectator does not remain untouched, but is altered through the very act of witnessing (16). She writes: "Such a performance eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. [...] In short, the transformation of the performance's participants was pivotal" (Fischer-Lichte 16).

This transformation happens in a dialectical interplay with space, and with each repetition, its impact grows stronger. Butler asks, "If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: what possibilities exist for the subversive repetition of gender norms whereby such norms might be exposed as such, rendered contingent and open to resignification?" (*Gender Trouble* 45).

To answer Butler's question, it's important to look at how the state's official image of the Iranian Muslim woman has been shaped through covered hair, a disciplined body, and political silence (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 45). The women who pushed back against this image, by cutting their hair, uncovering it, or burning the hijab, created a repertoire of resistance. In doing so, they practiced a kind of subversive repetition, one that directly challenged the dominant norms and forms imposed on them.

They created a moment of visibility that not only disrupted entrenched norms around gender and feminine honor, but also, through the ritual repetition of their acts, reshaped space itself. What had once served to discipline and contain the female body was transformed into a stage for the emergence of the resistant subject.

At the same time, the hope generated by these embodied acts is far from immune to threat or appropriation. The images of protesting women produce moments of hope in the heart of darkness, yet these same images, as much as they hold the promise of freedom, are equally vulnerable to being co-opted and reframed by structures of power. The desire of the performers to be seen in public space, while creating cracks in the dominant order, also exposes them to the very systems they seek to resist. In this way, the hope born from these acts remains fragile and precarious—a hope suspended between the risk of being absorbed into the machinery of representation and the possibility of slipping toward horizons that still elude capture.

## **HOPE AND THE RISK OF REPRESENTATION**

Feminist performance theorist Peggy Phelan explains in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* that an exclusive focus on visibility can actually weaken the potential for resistance, since representations are easily appropriated and neutralized by dominant discourses, whether state power, capitalism, or even neoliberal feminism. She writes: “I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the “proper” political agenda for the disenfranchised, but rather that the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal” (Phelan 6).

In light of Phelan's argument, a critical question arises: have Iranian women's protest actions fallen into the trap of visibility, a visibility prepared by dominant discourses to neutralize resistance? There is evidence suggesting that the Iranian state has attempted to appropriate these acts for its own ends. For instance, during state-sponsored marches, images and interviews of unveiled women have been broadcast, women who, despite not wearing the mandatory hijab, express support for the government and its so-called freedoms. Yet, outside of these carefully staged moments, the same appearance is often met with punishment and repression.

That contradiction shows something important: state institutions, by using the media, have tried to shift how these protests are understood. They've attempted to fit them into their own narrative—one that moves away from real demands for freedom and turns women's resistance into something less threatening and easier to manage.

But the protest acts examined in this paper operate precisely at the tension point between the desire to be seen and the need to avoid being captured. These performances are not built for fixed representation, but for moments of encounter—and even disappearance. In such moments, the body enacts a pure gesture of resistance, touches space, and then vanishes. It is this fleeting, liminal quality that makes these acts so disruptive.

Striking examples like Vida Movahed's protest or the ritual of hair-cutting escape the trap of fixed representation. Despite media attention, Vida never gave a formal interview or released a personal narrative—she remained silent, and that silence became part of her act. The videos of hair-cutting were not circulated through official channels, but spread directly through social media, often without explanation. And it is precisely this absence of stabilized representation that gives these acts their ritual

force and liminal potential. These acts aren't meant to last, they draw their strength from a brief moment of transformation, slipping between being seen and fading away.

In conclusion, the three protest actions examined in this article—standing atop an electrical box, cutting hair, and burning the hijab—did more than transform the female body from an object of subjugation into a subject of resistance. They also changed the way space is understood, no longer just a backdrop, but a place where politics is actively contested. Rooted in silence, repetition, and their liminal nature, these performances blurred the lines between presence and absence, stability and movement, control and defiance. While they revived and circulated a repertoire of memory and defiance, their refusal to conform to stable representations made them harder to appropriate by dominant political narratives. Though brief and seemingly simple, these gestures carried enough “political weight” to disrupt not only the perception of bodies but also of space, memory, and spectatorship, offering a powerful new mode of political expression rooted in the everyday.

In the face of this all-encompassing darkness and the speeding train hurtling toward the people of Iran, these body-centered acts of protest by women are not merely fleeting moments of resistance—they are torches of utopian hope rising from the ashes. Through their bodies, they transform space into a stage where another future begins to flicker into view—a future not yet arrived, but glimpsed in every repeated gesture, in every disruptive silence, and in every ephemeral ritual. These performances do not simply call us to critique the present world; they urge us to imagine another world altogether—a world where bodies are no longer objects of subjugation, but vessels of collective, creative hope. A hope that moves beyond resistance toward the labor of world-making, of living into new possibilities.

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