Embodied Resistance, Memory, and Social Imaginary in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement: A Study of Participants' Experiences

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Abstract

In one of my artistic research-based projects, *Kariznew*, performed at the Attakkalari Biennial in Bangalore in 2011, I explored the concept of *Collective Gesture Memory (CGM)*—a repertoire of gestures, body movements, forms, and associated concepts embedded in the cultural memory of a community, serving as a resource for creating dance and physical theatre. According to the hegemonic social imaginary, some of these gestures are regularly used in daily life, while others appear rarely or are reserved for specific events and contexts. In that project, we revisited CGM through a creative process that reinterpreted elements—particularly those from religious rituals—as new artistic materials to reveal fresh dimensions of otherwise rigid religious bodily practices.

A similar process could be seen in the Woman, Life, Freedom protest in Iran in 2022. One major theme of the protest was resistance against the oppression of women's bodies and the hegemonic gender performativity imposed by religious doctrine. Protest participants performed and shared subversive gestures—embodied expressions that had been banned or suppressed by the dominant social imagination.

Social movements are fertile grounds for collective creativity. In this context, creativity connects collective memory to the formation of social imaginaries. Artistic research can analyze these connections and the processes of transformation rooted in collective creativity. My inquiry explores the relationship between the process of collective embodiment and its impact on hegemonic social imaginaries in protest contexts, as well as its potential for artistic research focused on embodiment, memory, and imagination. How do participants extract gestures from collective memory, revise and share them, and generate new symbolic forms that contribute to emerging social imaginaries?

This study presents a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with four women from Bandar Abbas and Tehran, focusing on their embodied experiences, cultural memory, and imagined futures during the 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. The findings highlight how the body and performativity served not only as sites of resistance but also as mediums of creative political expression and gender redefinition amid state violence and cultural repression.

Participants described performative acts—such as walking unveiled, burning headscarves, clapping as part of local wedding rituals, collectively stamping the ground, shouting slogans, and standing silently in protest—as symbolic and creative actions. These embodied gestures redefined what it means to be a woman in public space. Emotional transitions—from fear and shame to pride and collective empowerment—were deeply interwoven with these bodily expressions.

These gestures were not only reactions to oppression but also citations of collective and cultural memory. Some referenced legendary figures, past movements, maternal heritage, or familiar images from television and cinema. For example, group clapping was inspired by wedding traditions in southern Iran. Nonviolent acts such as standing silently or unveiling recalled iconic protest images, such as Vida Movahed's.

Regarding social imagination, women envisioned a future where bodily autonomy and gender expression were no longer controlled. Several observed cultural shifts after the protests: increased courage among young women, changing attitudes among men, and the normalization of personal choice around wearing the hijab.

In sum, this study reveals how women's bodies in southern Iran became living archives of resistance, reclaiming cultural space through gesture, emotion, and memory. These embodied narratives contribute to a feminist social imaginary that challenges hegemonic gender norms and fosters new collective visions of freedom, bodily autonomy, and women's rights.

Keywords: embodiment, collective memory, social imagination, artistic research