

The Evolution of Symbolic Struggles Between Supporters and Opponents of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Official Discourse (January 2000–October 2025)

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ABSTRACT: This article, grounded in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, explores the evolution of symbolic struggles between the supporters and opponents of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2000 to 2025. Drawing on the author's field observations, media archives, and qualitative data, it identifies three historical phases in this ongoing discursive conflict.

First phase (2009–2017): during and after the Green Movement, opponents engaged in a struggle over significations by reinterpreting official symbols without rejecting their signifiers. These acts aimed to destabilize the semantic authority of the state while preserving its symbolic language.

Second phase (2017–2022): the struggle shifted toward the signifiers themselves, culminating in the “Women, Life, Liberty” movement. Opposition forces created new symbols and alternative rituals, and summoned mythological symbols. The female body emerged as a site of resistance, while mythic and national imagery articulated a new nationalist discourse in opposition to the ummah-oriented official discourse.

Third phase (2022–present): the positions of the supporters and opponents of the Islamic Republic have been reversed. Marks a return to the struggle over significations, in which the ruling power seeks to reappropriate national symbols and redefine their meanings to justify the legitimacy of its own, employing national myths and symbols once monopolized by its opponents to redefine the boundary between insiders and others.

The article concludes that contemporary Iran's socio-political arena has become a field of symbolic and semantic confrontation, where both sides compete to redefine the nation's collective identity and legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: Discourse, Signifier, Signification, Symbol, Symbolic Struggle, Legitimacy, Hegemony, Social movements

1. INTRODUCTION

The transformations in the struggle over symbolic power between opponents and supporters of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past four decades—particularly from the spring of 2009 to the summer of 2025—are important, because by mapping the components and dimensions of this struggle, we can gain a deeper understanding of contemporary Iranian political culture and more accurately trace the shifting dynamics of power, especially in the construction of social power. On this basis, I provide a chronological narrative of these changes and transformations, according to my own lived experience, sociological observations, and the data and documentary sources I have collected, and I seek to answer the following questions: through which symbols did supporters and opponents of the official discourse engage in meaning-making between 2000 and 2025, and which transformations have the opponents passed in establishing the foundations of an alternative symbolic order in opposition to the symbolic power of the official discourse?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, which considers language structures and symbols as sites of power and struggle. As Laclau suggests, competing social or political forces or discourses struggle for hegemonic position. In this framework, symbols act as “floating signifiers”—their meanings are never fixed but constantly reshaped and reappropriated through ongoing contestation. When a particular discourse succeeds in redefining these symbols, it can become a source of identification for a large number of people, attract their loyalty, mobilize their dispersed social power, and become the hegemonic discourse, and this means the discourse ultimately establishes itself as the dominant and legitimate source of power (Laclau, 1996).

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This is why it is particularly important to frame the cultural and social roots of “symbolic conflicts”. In this regard, I have derived the configuration of the concept of “symbolic conflicts” from the works of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu considers symbolic power to be a “specific form of power” that operates through social recognition and the institutionalization of meanings, rather than through coercion. Symbolic power depends on acceptability, which is effective when individuals consider it legitimate or “natural” (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu shows how school, language, art, or even food can be the scene of symbolic domination or the scene of its challenge by the resistant subject (Bourdieu, 1984).

Within Bourdieu's configuration of the concept of symbolic conflict, Stuart Hall shows how representation and media imagery play a role in political-cultural conflicts (Hall, 1997). In this respect, He and others such as Therborn, Sarah Ahmed, and Anthony Cohen offer concepts such as “resistance through the symbol” and “struggle over meaning” to explain the arena of challenging the symbolic dominance of the ruling power, to show this arena is so broad that everything from public space to bodies can be part of the symbolic battlefield (Ahmed, 2004; Cohen, 1985; Hall, 1997; Therborn, 1980).

3. METHODOLOGY

A large part of the data that the researcher refers in this article is the result of his travels and self observations of street conflicts, social or political campaigns, and the daily cultural life of Iranians over the past four decades, especially from the winter of 2000 to the end of summer 2005 in the cities of Tehran, Qom, Kashan, Natanz, Khorsouq, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kazerun, Kerman, Mashhad, Gorgan, Sari, Chalus, Nowshahr, Ramsar, Tabriz, Zanjan, Hamedan, Kermanshah, Khorramabad, Ahvaz, Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, Kish, Qeshm, Chabahar, Zahedan, Iranshahr, Khash, Nikshahr, and some villages in Baluchistan in Qasr-e-Ghand County. These observations have been collected in the form of notes, travel reports, photographs, films, or audio files. In addition, to verify and develop the estimates derived from the observations, the researcher has referred to news, media analysis, archival videos, and images, as well as content on social networks.

The researcher has analyzed all of these data and observations within the framework of the qualitative method of critical discourse analysis. Within this approach, he seeks to construct his own interpretive narrative of the events and the historical changes. It should be acknowledged that another scholar or observer might assess and recount the sequence and magnitude of these events differently.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the concepts of (symbolic power) and (symbolic struggles) have been used in the analysis of social movements. From the color revolutions in the republics that gained independence from the former Soviet Union to the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the United States, from the “Green” movement in Iran to the “Women, Life, Liberty”¹ movement, all have characteristics that encourage researchers to study them under the concept of (symbolic power) and (symbolic struggles).

These studies have addressed topics such as the genealogy of symbols, the body as an arena of conflict, and the role of digital spaces and media, some of which we mention here:

- Color Revolutions—such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005)—serve as prominent examples of mass mobilizations that strategically employed symbols and colors to articulate dissent. Numerous studies of these revolutionary movements show how colors functioned as symbolic resources for constructing collective identity and facilitating large-scale mobilization (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Tarrow, 2011; Torbakov, 2005)
- In an article entitled “*The Colour Revolutions in the Rearview Mirror: Closer Than They Appear*,” published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers* in March 2011, Way (2011) analyzes the role of symbols and colors in these movements, underscoring how such symbolic elements functioned as tools of political and social protest.
- The “Black Lives Matter” movement, which emerged in 2013 in response to police violence against African Americans in the United States, made use of powerful symbols such as the raised fist to express solidarity and resistance. This symbol, with its roots in earlier civil rights struggles, was reinterpreted within BLM as an emblem of subaltern power and their solidarity in political contestation. An article entitled “*The Raised Fist: A History of the Symbol*,” published by the People’s History Museum, traces the historical trajectories and diverse meanings of this symbol and examines its role in various movements, including BLM (Human Rights Watch, n.d.).

4.1. Changing the Meaning and Reappropriation of Symbols by Social Forces

¹ In Persian language, the word “Azadi” carries both meanings of *freedom* and *liberty*. Most politicians, social activists, and journalists during this movement translated its slogan as “Woman, Life, Freedom.” However, this translation is inaccurate because the protesters in this movement are striving to establish the social and political rights of Iranian citizens. Therefore, the correct translation, in this context, is “Woman, Life, Liberty.” According to general usage, *freedom* refers to the personal state of being free from restraint, while *liberty* denotes the social or political rights guaranteed by law (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025).

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Within this field of research, a number of studies have explored instances in which protest or opposition groups have reappropriated symbols originally associated with dominant or rival discourses, transforming their meanings in ways that are inverse or even antithetical to their initial connotations. This process—commonly referred to as symbolic reappropriation or symbolic inversion—is widely recognized in social and cultural studies as a significant mechanism in discursive and identical struggles (Hall, 1997; Hebdige, 1979; Turner, 1987). Several notable examples of this phenomenon in social movements are outlined below:

- During the Gezi Park protests of 2013, then-Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan referred to demonstrators as *çapulcu*—a derogatory term meaning “looters” or “thugs.” Protesters, however, reappropriated the term, transforming it into a symbol of resistance and collective pride. They emblazoned the word on T-shirts, incorporated it into songs, and even introduced the neologism *chapulling* into English, redefining it as a synonym for the “struggle for democracy” (Gürcan & Peker, 2015; Yörük & Yüksel, 2014).
- In another example from the United States, American football player Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans. Although initially perceived as disrespect toward the flag and the political order of the United States, this gesture gradually evolved into a powerful symbol of peaceful protest and the broader demand for racial justice. Through this process of symbolic reappropriation, national emblems such as the flag and anthem were transformed into sites of discursive contestation over justice and equality (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Kaufman, 2018; Bonilla & Tillery, 2020).

In all of these cases, protest groups either employed symbols of the dominant discourse or reappropriated symbols originally associated with the dominant discourse, transforming their meanings in ways that were inverse or antithetical to their initial connotations. This process enabled them to redefine their collective identity, strengthen internal cohesion, and communicate their message to society more effectively, ultimately challenging the symbolic power of the official discourse and compelling changes in the political power structure. However, the trajectory of symbolic struggle in Iran, while initially resembling these cases, has subsequently followed a distinct path.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. History of Symbolic conflicts in Iran after the Islamic Revolution

The social life of Iranians in the years after the Islamic Revolution, and especially after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, was never devoid of symbolism. Throughout all these years, both supporters and opponents of the Islamic Republic carried signs and symbols in their daily lives that allowed them to identify like-minded individuals or convey symbolic messages to society and others. For example, men supporting the government, who were generally Shiites and believers in the ruling religious system, wore simple shirts in dark or neutral colors. They left the tails of their shirts over their trousers so that the prominences of their bodies were less visible. They had beards and mustaches, wore agate rings on their fingers, and constantly held rosaries in their hands. Women in this group also traditionally appeared in the public arena wearing black chador that covered their entire bodies and even part of their faces. In contrast, women who did not believe in or opposed the official discourse of the government, after the Islamic hijab became mandatory in the early years after the Islamic Revolution, began to wear long coats or manteau, generally in dark colors, and a kind of wimple, headdress, or scarf. If they had the opportunity, they would apply a little makeup to their faces, and men in this group, based on the choices that the market gave them, tried to wear shirts with bright colors. They would tuck the ends of their shirts into their trousers, and if they had the opportunity, especially at celebrations and weddings, they would wear ties. They shaved their beards, and some of them wore gold or silver rings or necklaces (Rahgozar & Moridi, 2016). The official discourse opponents' men were wearing in this style, while shaving their beards and wearing gold or silver jewelry is forbidden for men according to the Sharia in the Shiite religion. In this way, women and men who did not believe in the official discourse were distinguished from supporters of the official discourse and were able to recognize themselves and the others.

After the end of the exceptional state of war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini as a charismatic leader, and with the beginning of the leadership era of Ayatollah Khamenei, who came to power through a bureaucratic process, and simultaneously with the beginning of the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, there were gradual social openings that to some extent in the lifestyle and clothing of Iranians, some diversity in appearance and style of clothing emerged, especially among Iranian women who did not support the official discourse. However, never during this period was this difference in the appearance and clothing of women and men who did not support the official discourse intended to challenge or undermine the ruling symbolic power. In fact, in a way, these two styles of clothing and lifestyles, one of which relied on the full support of the ruling political and military power, and the other had created a cautious and even secretive aspect for itself behind the walls of houses, were simply two different life worlds that did not share a common symbolic aspect.

During this period, numerous protest movements occurred. From the first street protests (1992) in the Tollab neighborhood of Mashhad (IRNA, 2018), the Qazvin protests in (August 1994) over issues such as national divisions (Ettelaat Online, 2024), the marches and unrest in Islamshahr in (April 1995) that originated from livelihood and economic issues (Al Arabiya Farsi, 2021), to protest gatherings with political goals such as those in (December 1998) to protest the serial killings (BBC Persian, 2016), in (July

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1999) to protest the suppression of the press (Hawzah News, 2019), in (November 2002) to protest the apostasy and execution sentence of Hashem Aghajari (ISNA, 2004), and even in campaigns such as "one million signatures" (BBC Persian, 2007) that was a women's movement's egalitarian campaign in (June 2006), all of them shared one common characteristic: none directly contested the symbolic power embedded in the official discourse. They pursued demands, but they did not seek to construct symbolic power against the symbolic power of the official discourse.

In such circumstances, as I have observed, the first symbolic confrontation occurred around the winter of 2000. It is not clear whether its root was a plan by opponents of the Islamic Republic or whether it was simply a coincidence in fashion design. In several major cities, particularly Tehran, some modern young women began using the chafiyyah² as a headscarf. Since the years following the Islamic Revolution—and especially during the Iran–Iraq War—volunteer Basij members and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps soldiers had worn the chafiyyah as a headband or draped around their necks. In this context, the chafiyyah became a powerful symbol associated with jihad, martyrdom, and, more broadly, loyalty and devotion to the official discourse of the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the use of the chafiyyah as a headscarf by young women who did not follow the lifestyle approved by the government was considered an insult to the official discourse and even a conspiracy by the enemies of the Islamic Republic to alienate Iranian youth.

On the other hand, Ayatollah Khamenei was a non-charismatic leader who, in the absence of the exceptional conditions of revolution and war that naturally had a mobilizing effect, had to create a symbolic system to form a network of his loyalists, shape the emotional and behavioral construction of his followers, and redefine the boundary between "self" and "other" as enemies. Just a few months after the modernist girls began using the chafiyyah, during his speech in the Tehran mosque in May 2000, he recalled the "chafiyyah" as a symbol of jihad and martyrdom. He added it to his official attire, opened a battle line in the conflict between opponents and supporters of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic, and officially set the stage for the symbolic conflict (Etemad Online, 2024).

However, since no other case of this kind has been observed before the formation of the "Green" movement in the spring of 2009, it seems that opponents of the official discourse probably did not recognize the significance of confronting the ruling symbolic power at the socio-political level before the formation of the "Green" movement and did not perceive a strong need to generate meaning-making symbols aimed at contesting the government's symbolic power. Consequently, until the beginning of the presidential election campaigns in the spring of 2009, they practically did not use specific symbols even when advancing their social, economic, and political demands through street protests or demand campaigns.

5.2. The "Green" Movement; the Beginning of Struggle over Significations

During the 2009 presidential election, for the first time, the Ministry of Interior announced that it would assign a color to the campaign headquarters of each presidential candidate, so that they would draw lots with balls of these colors to determine the order in which the candidates' advertising programs would be broadcast on the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio and Television (IRNA, 2009). This idea led to the campaign headquarters using these colors symbolically in the design of their advertising elements and posters. Red was introduced for Ahmadinejad's campaign headquarters, blue for Mohsen Rezaei's campaign headquarters, yellow for Mehdi Karubi's campaign headquarters, and green for Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign headquarters. However, this green color, which was initially used as a symbol of Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign, quickly became a symbol of the government's opponents after the start of the protests against the election results. This color, which was historically associated with religious concepts, became a symbol of resistance, hope, and transformation in this protest movement (Milani, 2010).

The confrontation of the color green in the "Green Movement" turned into a confrontation of two definitions of the color green. Supporters of the government introduced themselves as the supporters of (Alavi Green), and called the supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign and the "Green Movement" as the supporters of (Umayyad Green). By pointing out that Muawiyah, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, lived in a green palace as a symbol of aristocracy and corruption, the supporters of the official discourse represented that the supporters of the "Green Movement" were in fact supporters of an aristocratic and corrupt type of Islam and did not believe in the principles of "true Islam". They considered themselves true followers of the first Shiite Imam, Ali, and his descendants, and believed that their path was the path of true Islam. Although they also respected the color green, they actually considered this color to be a genuine green color when it evoked support for the method and character of the first Shiite Imam and his family, as well as complete obedience and subservience to his successor, the leader of the Islamic Republic (Javan Online, 2009). If symbolic reappropriation can be understood as a process through which opposition or critical groups appropriate symbols that previously had a specific meaning in the dominant discourse and, by redefining them as "floating signifiers," place them in the service of their own goals (Laclau, 1996; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Hall, 1997), then my observations suggest that—alongside the contest over the color green noted above—verbal and even physical clashes also emerged around the symbolic reappropriation of

² The chafiyyah (keffiyeh) is a large scarf worn by Arabs, especially Palestinian Arabs, as a headscarf. Years of war in the Palestinian territories and the oppression of its people have made the chafiyyah more visible in the media and recognized as a symbol of struggle and resistance against the dominance of imperialism.

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the official flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These confrontations were visible in both slogans and street practices up until the end of 2010, when street clashes subsided. Protesters, through their chants, urged Mir Hossein Mousavi to reclaim the Iranian flag³, which they believed had been appropriated by a government lacking genuine popular legitimacy. Conversely, supporters of the official discourse asserted themselves as the rightful custodians of the official flag, framing it as the sacred inheritance of the thousands of martyrs who had perished during the struggle for the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Iran–Iraq War.

This symbolic confrontation over the re-appropriation and re-signification of symbols was also evident during the funeral of Ayatollah Montazeri, who had become one of the emblematic figures of the “Green Movement.” At the ceremony, I observed how, while a representative of the mourners attempted to deliver a eulogy in his honor, government supporters sought to drown out the speaker by mounting large loudspeakers on the back of a pickup truck and broadcasting Quranic recitations at high volume. In response, some mourners, invoking a slogan⁴ that symbolically recalled an event from the Battle of Siffin⁵, stormed the pickup truck and forced the loudspeakers into silence.

I also observed protesters participating in official marches—such as the government-sponsored march on the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution and the Quds Day march, held annually on the last Friday of Ramadan—which are traditionally monopolized by supporters of the official discourse. In these instances, protesters symbolically attempted to reclaim the public arena and the streets from the government’s supporters, presenting themselves as the true heirs of the values and ideals of the 1979 Revolution while framing the government as the actor that had deviated from these founding principles. Such practices can be understood as paradigmatic instances of symbolic actions aimed at reclaiming public space and time on occasions that are themselves highly charged with symbolic meaning (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Lefebvre, 1991; Butler, 1997; Tilly, 2004).

On the other side of this conflict, the owners and supporters of the official discourse have also been trying to construct symbols in their own semiotic system during the years 2009 and 2010 and in the events following the decline of the “Green” movement until now. Among these symbolic practices, one notable example is the color and type of gemstone embedded in the rings worn by the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran on different occasions. These choices appear to function as semiotic signs through which he communicates political preferences, disapproval, or broader ideological messages to both his supporters and society.

During the protests against the results of the 2009 elections, Ayatollah Khamenei, who considered the protesters to be seditionists, alien agents, and enemies, wore a ring with Khataei jasper, which according to Shiite religious beliefs is used to confront Satan and the enemies of God (BBC Persian, 2015). In the following years, just at the same time as the presidential elections were held and Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013 and Masoud Pezeshkian was elected as president in 2024, the color of Ayatollah Khamenei's ring was exactly the same color as the election campaign of these two people. The former became president with a very fragile majority (Dehghan, 2013), and the latter, as Masoud Pezeshkian himself said, became president “with the support of the Leader of the Islamic Republic” (Pezeshkian, as cited in Euronews, 2024).

If the repertoire of symbolic actions performed by both the opponents and supporters of the official discourse during the “Green movement” can be conceptualized as a conflict over the semantic re-appropriation of symbols (Bourdieu, 1991), then this struggle essentially revolved around attempts by each side to determine the meaning of shared symbols and to align them with their own understandings of the self, the other, and the surrounding world.

During this protest movement—which can be regarded as the first symbolic confrontation between opponents and supporters of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic after the end of the state of exception marked by the Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War—the opponents sought to challenge the *signifieds* within the same semantic system of the official discourse while leaving the *signifiers* intact. For instance, as I observed, they chanted “Allahu Akbar” from their rooftops at night in response to the call to prayer broadcast from mosques under government control, insisting that the true meaning of the words of the call resided in their own way of life rather than in that of the government’s supporters. In another case, while affirming their respect for the foundational philosophy behind the creation of the *Basij* as a volunteer paramilitary force affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, they distinguished in their slogans between the “true Basij” and the forces that violently suppressed the protests under the same name⁶. Meanwhile, supporters of the “Green Movement” tried very hard to express respect and loyalty to the principles of the official discourse and to avoid insulting or challenging them. For example, in incidents such as tearing and burning the portrait of Ayatollah

³ The protesters' slogan was: “Mousavi! Mousavi! Take back my Iranian flag!”

⁴ “This is the Quran that is on the spearhead.”

⁵ During the Battle of Siffin, when the defeat of the Syrian army (Muawiya’s forces) was imminent, Amr ibn al-As suggested to Muawiya that in order to halt the war and create doubt among Ali’s troops—the first Imam of the Shiites—they should raise the Qur’an on the tips of their spears and call out: “Let us return to the judgment of God.” This act caused confusion among a portion of Ali’s army, within which there were some simple-minded individuals, leading to hesitation, silence, and ultimately, the defeat of Ali and his followers in that battle (Tabari, 1973/1352, Vol. 5, p. 1823).

⁶ “The true Basij were Hemmat and Bakeri.” In this slogan, the chanters refer to two commanders of the Basij forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, stating that these two were the true models of a Basiji because they defended their homeland against Iraq’s invasion and sacrificed their lives for the Iranian people but never suppressed them.

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Khomeini⁷ or pulling down and burning the flag of the Islamic Republic, supporters of the "Green Movement" condemned and excluded these types of actions and their perpetrators (RFE/RL, 2009).

It should be emphasized that the opponents of the official discourse were not confined to the supporters of the "Green Movement." A variety of other political groups and factions, both inside and outside Iran, were simultaneously active in opposing the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, the narrative presented in this article focuses primarily on the most significant and influential socio-political current at each historical juncture.

5.3. Struggle over Signifiers

Based on the evidence presented above, it may be argued that during the "Green Movement," the central strategy of a symbolic confrontation between opponents and supporters of the official discourse was a struggle over meanings and signification. However, following the decline of the "Green Movement" and the understanding of the limitations of this strategy, the collective mentality of the opponents appears to have gradually shifted toward adopting an alternative strategy in the ongoing symbolic struggle.

In the following years—particularly during the protests of January 2018, August 2018, and November 2019, as well as the unrest from winter 2020⁸ to summer 2022—opponents of the official discourse moved toward a reformulation of symbolic struggle. They increasingly sought direct confrontation, simultaneously targeting both the signifiers and signifieds of the official discourse. This shift ultimately reconfigured the discursive battleground in the emergence of the "Women, Life, Liberty" movement.⁹

In this regard, opponents of the official discourse fundamentally reshaped the discursive battleground by evoking the collective unconscious and reactivating national myths and symbols rooted in both historical memory and everyday life-worlds. The culmination of this approach is evident in the slogans and symbolic repertoires of the "Women, Life, Liberty" movement. The following examples illustrate these transformations:

5.3.1. Emblem and Icons

During the street protests since January 2018 up to now, opponents of the government have repeatedly burned icons of the leaders of the Islamic Republic and the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in across various regions of Iran. There have also been numerous photos of the raising and replacement of the "historical national emblem of Iran", featuring the lion and sun, with the official flag of the Islamic Republic, both in public and in cyberspace. The symbolic confrontation between the two sides of the battle over the lion and sun symbol emblem intensified in subsequent years. A striking example is found in the case of Majid Reza Rahnava; a protester arrested and later executed whose hand—tattooed with the lion and sun emblem—appeared visibly broken and injured in widely published photographs (VOA Farsi, 2022).

Moreover, in the continuation of the protests and in the following years, the raising of the so-called "Kaviani flag" alongside the lion and sun emblem further reinforced the mythological dimension of flag-raising practices. The invocation of the "Kaviani flag" constitutes a symbolic reference to the legendary uprising of Kaveh the Blacksmith as narrated in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Daryaei, 2009).

5.3.2. Attacks on religious centers and turban-removal

In the January 2018 protests and subsequent protests, opponents of the government attacked some mosques, Husseinis, and religious schools. (HRANA, 2019; BBC Persian, 2019; DW, 2018) There have been no reports of attacks on Sunni religious centers or other religions. This approach suggests a kind of symbolic anger towards Shiite religious centers as the official origin of the Islamic Republic. This trend spread in the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement. In addition, in several cases, images of attacks on Shiite clerics and the removal of their turbans were published, which is called the "turban-removal movement" (Al Arabiya Persian,

⁷ What I witnessed during the commemoration of Student Day (December 7, 2009) in front of the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Tehran was that a group of unidentified individuals tore up a photo of Ayatollah Khomeini. This act was later followed by the release of videos showing the burning of his picture and, in some cases, the burning of the flag of the Islamic Republic in other locations.

⁸ After the Ukrainian International Airlines Flight PS752, departing from Tehran to Kyiv, was hit by missiles fired by the air defense system of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on January 8, 2020, all 176 passengers on board were killed. Despite extensive evidence indicating that the plane had been struck by IRGC missiles, the Islamic Republic of Iran denied the missile attack for three days. However, following the disclosure of documents as well as international pressure, the government ultimately accepted responsibility on January 11, 2020. The majority of the Iranian passengers on this flight were young people who intended to leave Iran to pursue education and migration opportunities abroad.

⁹ The Mahsa Movement, or the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, was a protest movement that began in late summer 2022 following the suspicious death of a young woman named Mahsa Amini. She had been arrested by the morality police for allegedly violating the mandatory hijab regulations and died under suspicious circumstances while in custody. Her death sparked a widespread wave of protests against the violation of citizens' rights, particularly those of women. Although the initial focus of these protests was opposition to the laws enforcing compulsory hijab for women, they quickly evolved into a revolutionary movement with national and even international dimensions, and its street manifestations continued extensively for nearly five months. (Amnesty International, 2022)

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2022, November 3). The turban is a part of the official Shiite clerical dress that they wear like a hat, and the attack on it can be interpreted and considered a narrative of a symbolic attack on the signifiers of the semantic system of the dominant discourse.

5.3.3. The Female Body

During the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement, the female body emerged as both a medium and a subject of resistance, a stage for alternative rituals, a locus of social drama, and a symbolic battleground. By publicly removing or burning their hijabs, women opposing the official discourse transformed it into a powerful symbol of resistance against bodily coercion, a claim for bodily autonomy, and a broader demand for civil rights (Najmabadi, 2023; BBC Persian, 2023).

5.3.4. Construction of alternative rites

The evocation of mythological symbols situated outside the symbolic power of the official discourse, while being an attempt to construct a narrative of resistance and link contemporary struggles to deeper historical and identity-based roots, on the other hand, constitutes an act of generating alternative rituals in opposition to the official discourse and the standardized ceremonies.

Victor Turner, in presenting the concept of social drama, demonstrates that societies, when confronted with social or discursive conflicts and crises, enter a stage of “symbolic transition” by creating rites of passage. In this process, new cultural structures and forms emerge that serve to redefine the social order. To this end, opponents of the dominant discourse go through three stages: (a) Rupture and confrontation, which manifests itself in street conflicts and symbolic battles. (b) Construction of alternative rites or rites of passage. (c) Reconstruction and consolidation of the new discourse and permanent split from the defeated discourse (Turner, 1969, 1974). In the course of Iranian protest movements in recent years, at least three intertwined sets of these alternative rituals can be observed:

5.3.4.1. “Siyâvash mourning” or “Siyâvashân,” and the ritual of “gisoo-boran (cutting of hairs)”

Perhaps the first signs of the emergence of alternative rituals can be traced to the aftermath of the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752. The aircraft was struck by two missiles launched by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Air Force, resulting in the death of all passengers on board. The incident was kept secret from public view and denied for three days. Although the commander of the IRGC Air Force eventually officially took responsibility for the mistake and apologized, the three-day cover-up and denial of the news brought many angry and grieving people to the streets. During these collective mourning practices, the myth of Siyâvash received particular resonance, especially given that many of the victims were young and educated Iranians who had left the country under adverse political and social conditions (Khezel et al., 2020).

The similarities between the mythological story of Siavash and the young people killed in this flight led to the evocation of the rituals of the “Siyâvash mourning” or “Siyâvashân,” and a mythological reinterpretation of his story.¹⁰ The ritual of gisoo-boran (hair cutting) in the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement can be considered as a continuation of this mythological evocation as an alternative ritual. Recalling Ferdowsi's narrative of what Farangis did during the Siyâvash mourning (Ferdowsi, 2006), women removed their compulsory hijabs and cut their hair in an act of protest.

Through these rituals, Iranian women who removed their hijabs, set fires, and cut their hair in the streets, emerged from a position of obedience and passivity and became symbol-making activists who made the female body the stage for the creation of a social drama to provide models for resistance and foundations for a new and alternative discourse by constructing new rituals.

5.3.4.2. Innovation in mourning practices

Another turning point in the symbolic battle and the creation of alternative rituals can be seen in the mourning ritual for the dead who opposed the government.

Videos of the dead from the protests of the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement and even those killed in previous protests, all of which showed beautiful young people dancing and rejoicing, were compiled in 1401 and released many times after that. At the same time, Ali Akbar Raefipour, one of the influential supporters of the official discourse, who proposed the theory of a “conspiracy against the government”, confirmed that the targeting of beautiful young people was intentional:

“I said if you are beautiful, do not participate [in the protests]... [the enemies of the government] say he/she was killed, what a young he/she was: a symbol of beauty, and modernity”

(Raefipour, 1:50:05 2022)

¹⁰ “Siyâvash mourning” or “Siyâvashân,” is one of the ancient and symbolic Iranian rituals that originates from the myth of Siavash, a prominent character in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. This ritual, which combines elements of mourning, purification, and rebirth, has been practiced in various regions of Iran—particularly in Khorasan, Sistan, Baluchestan, and even among Zoroastrians—in diverse forms and under different names. Siavash is a virtuous and innocent prince who becomes the victim of court conspiracies and his father's (Kay Kavus) injustice. To prove his innocence, he passes through fire and demonstrates his purity. Grieved and disheartened, he is then compelled to migrate from Iran to Turan, where he marries a woman named Farangis but is eventually wrongfully killed. Farangis and all the women who heard of his death cut their hair in mourning. Siavash thus becomes a symbol of purity against corruption and an innocent victim of tyrannical rulers. (Bahar, 2002; Sattari, 2003; Mirfetros, 2012)

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In this way, an epic image of mourning for the deceased opponents was represented and narrated. In this narrative, beautiful and freedom-loving youth, full of music, dance, and passion for life, are represented and depicted as encountering a cruel massacre.

This narrative is, in fact, a retelling and evocation of the mythological story of Zahhak from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Ferdowsi, 2006). During those days, and in mourning for the deceased opponents, many published videos in which they retold the story of Zahhak for themselves, their children, or the audience (YouTube, 2022a). Many artists created works inspired by this mythological story and represented this confrontation (Bagheri, 2022).

In such an atmosphere, instead of holding traditional and religious mourning ceremonies, reciting the Quran and praying over the bodies of the deceased, their families symbolically played music, sang, and danced over their graves (Wintour, 2022). And even one of the protesters, Majid Reza Rahnavard, minutes before his execution, asked people in front of the official television camera not to hold religious ceremonies, not to pray, and not to read the Quran in his mourning, but to rejoice at his grave and play happy music (Aparat, 2022). Also, in some cases, contrary to traditional funeral ceremonies within the framework of patriarchal relations of official discourse, where men carry the coffin on their shoulders and women follow them, it was women who carried the coffin and refused to recite Islamic *adhkar* during the funeral ceremony. The two latest examples of this can be seen in the funeral of Shiva Arastouee, a very well-known Iranian poet and writer, attended by women in May 2025, and Naser Taghvaei, one of the most famous cinema directors, in October 2025. In the first, contrary to the patriarchal tradition of the official discourse, women carried the coffin, and in the second, contrary to the religious and traditional rules of the official discourse, all those present wore white clothes instead of black. Instead of reciting the Quran and Islamic *adhkar* during the funeral, music was played, and the mourners clapped and danced to the rhythm of the instruments as they accompanied Nasser Taqvaei's body. (Radio Zamaneh, 2025; BBC Persian, 2025)

5.3.4.3. *Transformation of Mourning and Religious Celebrations*

Beyond innovations in funeral practices, alternative appropriations can also be observed in the performance of traditional mourning rituals and religious celebrations. Over the past decade, the government has invested public funds to institutionalize Shiite rituals in the public sphere by setting up *mukeb* (street stations) on occasions such as the mourning of the third Shiite Imam, Eid al-Ghadir, and other religious commemorations. These state-sponsored sites typically feature ritual music and the distribution of free food and drinks to passersby.

However, what I observed is that many participants—especially young people whose clothing styles clearly distinguished them from government supporters—frequented these stations not out of religious devotion but to access free food, socialize, and reclaim the surrounding public space. By disregarding the ritual protocols and traditional attire associated with such occasions, they symbolically stripped these ceremonies of their intended sacrality, reducing them to sites of consumption and leisure. Moreover, because these ceremonies historically permitted a degree of openness and inclusivity, opponents of the official discourse were able to occupy the public arena of these events with minimal confrontation. In doing so, they not only appropriated the rituals' spatial and temporal dimensions but also hollowed out their official meanings by creating a secular ritual marketplace, designing clothing, accessories, and thematic makeup for both men and women to participate in these occasions, and transform these rites into opportunities for alternative cultural expression rather than strictly religious ceremonies.

5.3.5. The God of Rainbow

A discourse that has been emerging in opposition to the official one, although secular, is not atheistic. During the protest movements of recent years, particularly the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement, the floating signifier “God” was redefined and contested. Opponents of the official discourse have sought to imagine a God different from the God of the official discourse, who, in their opinion, is bloody and violent.

By articulating notions such as the “God of Iran” or the “God of Rainbow,” they point to a God of peace who embraces and loves all, regardless of gender, religion, or ethnicity. Stressing the relationship of this God with Iran represents a symbolic counter-formulation against the God of the Ummah-centered discourse.

The articulation of such a God, in effect, represents the projection of the ideals and aspirations of the opponents of the official discourse—those who long for a life of peace and tolerance, and who demand that the state prioritize the needs of its citizens.

During the street protests of the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement, the killing of a ten-year-old boy named Kian Pirfalak became one of the turning points in the narrative articulation of such a god. The release of videos of his tragic death and then his speech introducing the boat he built, beginning with “In the name of the God of the rainbow,” constructed an image of a mythic God in the emerging discourse (YouTube, 2022b). Since then, those who mention the “God of the rainbow” in their speeches or social media posts are, in fact, signifying symbolic affiliation with this new discourse and identifying themselves against the “other” (Asr Iran, 2022).

5.3.6. Three-day strikes

During the “Women, Life, Liberty” movement, a call for nationwide three-day strikes on December 3, 4, and 5, 2022, on the eve of National Student Day, was circulated in cyberspace. The posters of this call were welcomed by diverse social groups—including merchants, taxi drivers, shop owners and academics— and became the most extensive wave of strikes since those of the 1979

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revolution. The posters were invoking a mythological narrative from Tazkirat al-Awliya, about the hanging of Hossein Mansur Halladj¹¹ and the notion of enduring pain and suffering on the path of true love.

5.3.7. Mythological Animals

One of the most prominent symbolic aspects of the protest movements of recent years, particularly the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, is the symbolic evocation of mythological animals from ancient Iranian literature and beliefs, or the retelling of mythological narratives of the birth and death of animals. The most prominent examples of this symbolic evocation and narrative retelling include:

5.3.7.1. *Phoenix*

For the first time in February 2022, former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's Instagram page published a painting by Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnavard, leaders of the "Green" movement who are under house arrest. The painting depicts a dense volume of red paint in a black frame with a flaming bird burning in the center (Kalani, 2022)

In Iranian mythology, this bird is the Phoenix. The Phoenix is a mythical bird that is known in many cultures, including Iran, Greece, and ancient Egypt, as a symbol of death and rebirth, rebirth from ashes, hope, and resistance to destruction (Kavousi, 2015).

A few days after the release of the image of the phoenix, the former Queen of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, said in a message to Iranian society on February 10, 2022: "Iran will rise from its ashes like a phoenix once again." (VOA Persian, 2022)

After that, and during the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, artists, poets, graphic designers, and cyberspace users turned to representing the concepts of resistance, suffering, hope, and rebirth, and the phoenix was the central symbol in the works of these artists. Hashtags referring to the phoenix were also used to symbolically refer to the situation in Iran and the hopeful future of protest movements opposing the official government discourse. In addition, many visual artworks showed the phoenix in the form of women rising from the flames (Iranian Women of Graphic Design, 2022).

5.3.7.2. *Simorgh*

In October 2020, a text titled "The Third Feather" attributed to the contemporary poet, Houshang Ebtehaj, was published on social media. This text received such public attention that Houshang Ebtehaj's son issued a public statement denying the attribution to his recently deceased father (ISNA, 2020). This text is about the Simorgh feathers in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. The anonymous author cites evidence from several mythological stories in Shahnameh and claims that the Simorgh gave three feathers to Zal and his son Rostam so that, in times of danger or confusion, they could burn them and summon the Simorgh to provide a way to solve problems with the power of wisdom and be a source of salvation. The author recalls that by burning the feathers that the Simorgh had given to Zal, he appears twice and shows the way to salvation, but despite other critical moments that occur for the mythical heroes of Shahnameh, the third feather is never used. The author then asks the question: What happened to the third feather, and where is it? And he himself answers that Ferdowsi entrusted the third feather of the Simorgh in the history of Iran with a mysterious and symbolic statement so that at the moment of confusion and helplessness of the Iranian nation, it would be set on fire and the power of the Simorgh's wisdom would be summoned to show the Iranians a way out (ISNA, 2020). The point here is that it does not matter to what extent this story corresponds to the reality of the Shahnameh. What is important is how this story is understood in the intersubjective social space and why it is welcomed. Republishing this text, especially during the years when many Iranians are dissatisfied with the government's performance and consider it illegitimate, and on the other hand, they are severely suppressed after each nationwide protest and are practically helpless in finding a way out of helplessness and confusion, actually means a collective desire to invoke the Simorgh as a mythological wisdom symbolically.

5.3.7.3. *Pirouz*

On May 1, 2022, three Asiatic leopard cubs were born. The mother of these three leopard cubs was named "Iran". She gave birth to the three cubs by field cesarean section, but two of the cubs died soon after, and hopes for the survival of "Pirouz", the only remaining cub of Iran's three children, were dashed (DW, 2022a). "Pirouz" went through many challenges after his birth, and at the same time, as the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement began, news of his health also gained attention. "Pirouz," as the only surviving child of "Iran," became a metaphor for the fragility of hope. It was as if "Pirouz" was symbolically considered a representative of the young generation of the land of Iran, whose survival or the possibility of extinction evoked the survival of hope or the failure of Iranian youth (Arman Emrouz, 2023). Therefore, "Pirouz" became a mythical animal in the eyes of the public. News of his health was followed daily. And his wish for health and survival even made it into the song "Baraye," performed by Shervin Hajipour, and was repeated and heard millions of times (GRAMMY, 2023). But finally, "Pirouz" died on February 28, 2023, at the Tehran Veterinary Hospital. The cause of his death was announced to be the injection of the wrong drug (Rouydad24, 2023), which brought anger and

¹¹ Then once again they took Hossein away to crucify him... It is related that a dervish among them asked him, "What is love?" He replied, "You will see today, you will see tomorrow, and you will see the day after tomorrow." That day they killed him, the next day they burned him, and on the third day they scattered his ashes to the wind—meaning, *this is love*. (Attār, 1905, part 71)

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sadness to Iranians. Pirouz's death was interpreted and narrated by public opinion as an elegy for the fate of the young and protesting generation, tired of the inefficiencies, failures, and the unclear future of Iran. (Setareh Sobh, 2023)

5.3.7.4. *White Raven*

A report by several social media users of a white raven being seen on Valiasr Street in Tehran, at the height of protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, was interpreted as a mythical sign and attracted such attention from opponents of the government that the Javan newspaper affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) published an article on it and attacked it (Javan Online, 2023). In Iranian culture, the raven has long been a multifaceted symbol. In ancient Iranian beliefs, and especially in the Mithraic religion, the raven is considered the messenger of Ahura Mazda to Mithra; According to iconographic evidence and traditional sources, Ahura Mazda sends a raven to deliver the order to kill the first cow to Mithra, and from the cow's carcass all creatures, plants, and the fertility of the world emerge (Ulansey, 1991). Also, the first spiritual degree in the Mithraic religion is named Corax (raven), which symbolizes the beginning of the path of consciousness and mythological wisdom (Vermaseren & vanEssen, 1980). Furthermore, in Iranian folk culture, the white raven, which is very rare, is interpreted as a symbol of "suppressed but reversible truth" or a symbol of "a rare truth that finally appears," and its sighting is a sign of an unexpected transformation of the dominant order (Farhangi, 2013). Accordingly, the sighting of a white raven at the height of the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement was interpreted as a sign of imminent change in the government.

5.3.7.5. *Hōmā*

A year after the rise of the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement in March 2024, social media quickly paid attention to the news of the sighting of the hōmā in the Alborz mountains, and then reports of its repeated sightings and even the bird hatching (IRNA, 2024a). In Iranian mythological and epic texts, "hōmā" (from the Avestan root hōmā) has a place beyond the biological characteristics of a bird of prey. It is considered a celestial and auspicious bird that carries the "divine glory." In Iranian mythology, the divine glory is the power of God that always guards Iran against its enemies, and it is through the light of this glory that Iran always remains strong, independent, and wealthy. Therefore, the hōmā, which carries the "Divine Glory," can bestow legitimacy and authority on an individual to rule Iran, or if he/she loses the ability to rule, it can revoke legitimacy and authority from him/her and bring death and destruction upon him/her (Behboudi, Azar, & Ardestani, 2022). On this basis, many on social media interpreted the sighting of this bird not as a natural phenomenon but as a symbolic sign and historical event. In cyberspace narratives, the sighting of this bird was interpreted as a "heavenly message of the return of the divine glory" a symbol of hope for change, the legitimacy of the struggles of the government's opponents, and most importantly, given the deaths of politicians associated with the official discourse of the Islamic Republic, as a symbol of the "fall of the oppressive government" (IranWire, 2024; Aftab News, 2024).

5.3.8. *Tying up hairs*

During the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, a video was released of a young woman with military forces standing a few steps away in front of her, and she is tying up her hair on top to prepare herself to face them. This action quickly turned, which was taken from women's daily lives, into a symbolic and feminine act of preparation for confronting the government (France 24 Observers, 2022). It was then that several female artists and protesters released videos of themselves removing the compulsory hijab and tying up their hair on top (The Guardian, 2022; Euronews Persian, 2023). The symbolic aspect of this action had such a resonance in society that it found its way into a protest song called "Woman," written by Mona Borzouei and performed by Mehdi Yarahi. This song became one of the symbolic artworks of the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement and a unifying anthem during the struggles of the government's opponents (Yarahi & Borzouei, 2022).

5.3.9. *Cinema and Performing Arts*

In Iran, censorship has long pushed filmmakers and artists to rely on symbolism to express their ideas. Yet, in the years leading up to the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, this symbolic language began to speak more openly and powerfully. Cinema and the performing arts found clearer voices, and they are trying to be representatives of generational gaps, expose systemic patriarchal discrimination against women, and claim bold critiques about the government's policies and the official discourse. Below, we will look at three prominent examples from this period in Iranian cinema and performing arts:

5.3.9.1. *Leila's Brothers* (Saeed Roustaei, 2023)

The character of "Leila" in this film symbolizes women who are trying to assume the role of leader and savior in the midst of the economic and moral collapse of society and family. The film's narrative is an allegory of the historical exclusion of women from decision-making and, at the same time, a protest against the male-dominated order. In this film, the most important and bold sequence of the film that caught the attention of the government's opponents is the sequence in which the female protagonist rebels against her father, who symbolically evokes the patriarchal system, and slaps him in the face. The film was banned on charges of "violations and defiance of regulations by its producer and director" and was finally released unofficially on the Internet in the winter of 2023. (Hoodin Shad, 2023)

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5.3.9.2. *The Secret Women's Network Series* (Afshin Hashemi, 2022)

The series, which began airing in July 2022, was repeatedly stopped and eventually banned due to its similarities with the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement. After the beginning of the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, some of the female actors in the series lifted the mandatory hijab, and some of the male actors in the series organized political activities against the government, but what stopped the series from airing was the content and name of the series, which directly evoked current events in society. In the fictional world of the series, women are narrated who have been ignored throughout history but have played a decisive role in the political and social developments of Iran have now come together to form a women's center in the era of the first Pahlavi dictatorship. At one point in the series, a sign is shown with the slogan of the center written on it: "Woman, Power, Glory," which evokes the famous slogan of the 2022 nationwide protests, "Woman, Life, Liberty." (Mokhtabad Amraei, 2022; FILM NEWS, 2024)

5.3.9.3. *Once Upon a Time in Mars* (Qasemkhani and Chegini, 2022)

This series, the first episode of which aired in July 2022, is a humorous narration of a fictional society in the future whose social system is based on feminism, and men try to fight against this feminist system by creating a secret network to achieve their rights, such as the right to education or the right to choose a job. (FILM NEWS, 2022)

What significantly distinguishes cinema and the performing arts from the era before the protest movements of recent years, especially the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, is the change in the role of artists from observers to participants. Artists (especially young women) in this era are no longer simply narrators of suffering, but are also recklessly leading parts of the symbolic battlefield. Many artists openly opposed the official discourse and either symbolically removed the hijab, cut their hair, or tied their hair up as a sign of readiness for confrontation (Euronews, 2023). The most important aspect of this symbolic approach has been the return of the female body to the art scene. The female body, as the bearer of the message of protest, once again became the main subject of the performing arts and, of course, the visual arts, but this time as an activist

5.3.10. Symbolic Food of Resistance

Although Bourdieu shows that culinary taste provides the ground for the reproduction of the symbolic domination of the hegemonic discourse, and that food "constructs the social body" to create a distinction between the rulers and the subordinates (Bourdieu, 1984), by observing the flow of symbolic protests of the opponents of the Iranian government since the winter of 2019, Bourdieu's theory can be expanded from another perspective.

In this period, food goes beyond its class-based function, and references to certain foods or their preparation at specific times and occasions become tools for subverting the symbolic order of the dominant discourse. This can be called the "symbolic food of resistance."

The characteristics of this symbolic food of resistance are:

- (a) embodiment of the violence and humiliation of the ruling power by reducing its symbols and signs to unvalued daily stuff;
- (b) the creation of metaphors to keep daily political dialogues safe in spaces under government control; and
- (c) rebellion against the linguistic and aesthetic frameworks of the dominant discourse through the use of humorous language that sometimes includes obscene expressions.

In this framework, food becomes an instrument of inverted domination and serves as a means of symbolic resistance. Here, we are faced with a phenomenon in which micro-subjects, through linguistic play, metaphor-making, and humor, attack the majesty of the symbols of power.

For instance, the slogan "sabzi polo ba mahi" (herbed rice with fish)¹², which was accompanied by obscene words, turned into an ironic expression of hatred and violence by the protesters toward the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Likewise, the metaphor of "cutlet" was used to destroy the tragic death and mythical image of a military commander within the semantic system of the official discourse. In another case, by creating a popular metaphor from a particular kind of ketchup packaging in the shape of a bear, the bloody death of the great leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon was pointed to.

5.4. The National Matter: Return to Struggle over Significations

The government's attention to nationalism and its symbols and signs over the past two decades was very occasional, limited, and mostly tactical. However, in an unprecedented shift following the "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, this approach changed.

The government, which in the past mentioned to nationalism (Bastani, 2020), to epic-national anthems, symbols, and national heroes (Aparat, 2024) only at times of mobilizing people to participate in elections and to increase voter turnout, after the widespread protest movement of 2022 significantly reduced the use of ummatic (pan-Islamic) language and symbols, and in its propaganda and policy explanations, paid special attention to national symbols, signs, and narratives.

¹² A type of Iranian dish made from a combination of rice and green herbs. Since the color of this dish is green and resembles the uniform of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a group of anti-government protesters—who believe that Iran's disorders are the result of the IRGC's activities—created this slogan to express their resentment toward this military organization.

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It even strives to present itself and its supporters as the true owners of the nationalist discourse. In this way, it challenges the collective identity of its opponents, who recognize themselves through loyalty to the symbols and signs of the nationalist discourse, thereby designing a new scene in the battle of significations.

The culmination of this new approach can be observed during the twelve-day war and the military attack by Israel and the United States on the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is considerable evidence of this discursive shift, a few examples of which I will mention below:

- Around 2005, the statue of Kaveh, who, according to the mythological narrative of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, holds his blacksmith's apron in the form of a flag as a symbol of rebellion, was removed from Azadi Square by the Isfahan Municipality under the pretext of a metro operation only three years after its installation, and transferred to the municipality's warehouse. What happened was due to concerns that supporters of the official discourse had about the symbolic aspect of "Kaveh" in leading the uprising against Zahhak as a symbol of a bloodthirsty and oppressive ruler (IRNA, 2022). The reinstallation of the statue of Kaveh the Blacksmith in Isfahan's Azadi Square in May 2017, despite having been removed from its installation site for more than a decade, can be considered within the framework of developments that have led to the dominance of alternative discourse over official discourse (Amordad news, 2017). In this regard, we can evaluate the installation of billboards with the theme of Arash the Archer as the legendary border guard of Iran in various parts of Tehran, simultaneously with the Islamic Republic's drone and missile attack on Israel in March 2024 (Hamshahri Online, 2024) and then the installation of his huge statue in (June 2025) in Vanak Square on the eve of the Twelve-Day War between the Islamic Republic and Israel (IRNA, 2025b). Also, in the spring of 2025, music videos were made on the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, which invoked the myth of Arash the Archer and Rostam, the legendary hero of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, to the political and military conflicts between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel and the United States (Motamedi, 2025). Continuing this trend, in October 2025, a statue of Rostam's battle with the dragon was installed in Ferdowsi Square in Shahinshahr, Isfahan, during an official ceremony, accompanied by the performance of national and epic orchestral pieces (IRIB News, 2025). These are events that can be considered as the manifestations of the dominance of the alternative national discourse over the ummah-oriented official discourse of the Islamic Republic.
- During the Israeli missile attack on the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network, the female anchor of this channel bravely remained in the studio until the last moment. Based on her attire (chador) and her role as a "messenger," she perfectly embodied the image of Zainab, the sister of the third Imam of the Shiites, as represented in the official government discourse. However, the government's billboards and posters praising her likened her to Gordāfarīd, one of the national mythological warrior women in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (IRNA, 2025).
- Also, as I personally observed (June 22, 2025) in Tehran's Revolution Square, the official tribune raised the slogan "We are the children of the *Shahnameh*" at a rally attended by the president and supporters of the official discourse in protest against the US attack on Iran's nuclear sites, which was repeated and approved by those present. This event can be considered a sign of the official discourse big shift to a nationalist approach.
- After the end of the Twelve-Day War between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel, a campaign was launched by the Tehran Municipality. Billboards titled "Soldier of the Homeland" were installed throughout the capital, featuring images of pre-Islamic kings. This campaign began during the days of Muharram, which is the month commemorating the epic martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam. While it was expected that the campaign would emphasize on the holy icon of him and his disciples, its focus was on Shapur the first, the Sassanian emperor who defeated the Roman emperor Valerian (Rahimi, 2025). This can be interpreted as an unprecedented turning within the framework of the official discourse or semiotic reconfiguration toward a nationalist narrative.
- According to the values of the official discourse, it is not acceptable to depict the faces of women who have died. Therefore, their images are not used even in their obituaries or on their tombstones. However, in recent years, despite resistance from supporters of the ruling patriarchal discourse, society's approach to the image and social body of women has changed. Accordingly, I have observed that many people do not follow the official values in cemeteries in various cities of Iran. They not only use the passed away women's images in obituaries or on the tombstones, but even in many cases, images of women without the Islamic hijab are used, contrary to regulations. Municipalities and religious figures who support the official discourse have repeatedly attacked these tombstones, vandalized them or taken them away, but the highlighting of women's social bodies continues and is increasing day by day in cemeteries and mourning ceremonies (Asianews Iran, 2022; DW, 2022; Shams News, 2021). In such a situation, during a ceremony commemorating Iranians who died in Israel's Twelve-Day War against the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian President delivered his speech while a poster behind him depicted, for the first time, the faces of young women who died in this war without Islamic hijab (Jahane Mana, 2025).
- It could be argued that the turning point in the transformations of the official discourse up to the time of writing this article was observed in the mourning ceremony for Ashura - the day of the martyrdom of the third Imam of the Shiites - in the presence of the Leader of the Islamic Republic. In his first public appearance, just a few days after the end of the twelve-day war between

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the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel, in a dramatic moment when all the symbolic elements of a religious spectacle were available within the framework of the ceremony known in the Islamic Republic and, according to the procedure of such an occasion, in accordance with the past years and decades, it was expected to talk about the epic creation of religious heroes in Karbala, he asked the host of the mourning program to sing a national song titled "O Iran" and the crowd of participants, all of whom are the highest officials and relatives and confidants of the Islamic Republic, sang this song in chorus. At the end of this ceremony, the Leader of the Islamic Republic also asked the host of the program to sing another song titled "Iran, the House of Hope" for the next time (Donya-e-Eqtesad, 2024)

6. CONCLUSION

It can be said that the symbolic battle aimed at gaining power and political legitimacy between opponents and supporters of the Islamic Republic in Iran has taken on a widespread form, mainly since the spring of 2009, during the "Green" movement, and has so far gone through three historical stages:

6.1. Phase One: Reappropriation of Symbols and the Struggle over Significations (2009–2017)

In this period, the opponents of the official discourse—mainly represented by the Green Movement and possessing a louder voice within Iran's political atmosphere—seek to reinterpret or reappropriate the symbols embedded in the official discourse, such as the color green, the Iranian flag, religious slogans, and other rituals, ceremonies, and symbols associated with it. In other words, they attempt to transform the semantic position and political signification of these symbols and employ them in the service of their critical and protest-oriented aims, without necessarily rejecting the signifiers themselves.

6.2. Phase Two: The Struggle over Signifiers (2017–2022)

With the decline of the strategy of "the struggle over signification," the collective consciousness of the opposition turned toward the creation of an alternative discourse grounded in new symbols, myths, and rituals. In this period, not only the meanings but also the signifiers of the official discourse were challenged, and new symbolic forms emerged. The main characteristics of this emerging discourse include:

- a) Summoning of national myths such as the Phoenix, Simurgh, Siyâvash, Hōmā, and the Kâveh emblem within the contemporary lifeworld of Iranians;
- b) The transformation of the female body into the subject of resistance in the scene of social drama creation;
- c) The creation of alternative or transitional rituals, such as the cutting of hairs and non-religious mourning ceremonies;
- d) The transformation and resignification of state-sponsored and religious rituals;
- e) The reconstruction of the image of God as the "God of Rainbow"
- f) Symbolic resistance through the inversion of domination expressed in language play, performance, and visual arts.

If we assume that the official discourse of the Islamic Republic has, from the outset, been articulated in opposition to nationalism and defined within an ummah-oriented framework, then the discourse that has emerged from the protest movements of the past decade can be interpreted as a nationalist one. During this period, protest movements became a symbolic battleground in which opponents of the official discourse developed a deeper understanding of Iran's mythic-historical foundations, as well as its contemporary spaces and temporalities. Drawing on national traditions and myths, the body as a site of resistance, artistic works, and everyday practices, they transformed the public sphere into a scene of discursive confrontation. Through the invocation of collective memory and national consciousness, this alternative discourse seeks not only to deconstruct the symbols, narratives, and semantic structures of the official discourse but also to consolidate a new form of symbolic power within the public and political arena.

6.3. Phase Three: Return to the Struggle over Significations (2022–Present)

The government's unprecedented attention to Iranian national symbols and mythologies, and the simultaneous weakening of the ummah oriented approach, which can be clearly seen in the days of the Twelve Day War and the military attack by Israel and the United States on the Islamic Republic of Iran, can at first glance be considered a sign of the dominance of the new nationalist discourse over the traditional discourse of the Islamic Republic.

However, the supporters of the alternative nationalist discourse, although they have come a long and difficult way over the past two decades, still have a long way to go to shape a sustainable semantic order. So far, they seem successful in eroding the hegemonic position of the nationalist discourse of the first decades after the Islamic Revolution, but they now face a much more complex challenge. While they are still engaged in articulating and consolidating the central signifiers of an independent national discourse, they have simultaneously entered a new battleground of the struggle of significations and must confront their opposing current, who have control of all the official power tools.

In this new struggle, the ruling power and its supporters, within an organized framework, are trying to present themselves as the custodians of the national matter. This is done through the re-appropriation of national signifiers and their association with new significations. They are trying to configure the national matter in a way, appropriate the symbols and signs of the new national

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discourse, and derive new meanings from it that justify the legitimacy of the ruling power and the existing status quo, and present the established political power and its supporters as (the insiders) and their opponents as (the others) and (the enemies of the state). They adopt the literary forms, musical styles, clothing, and overall lifestyle of the opponents of the Islamic Republic, and they celebrate national events and perform national rituals, but they transform their content and meanings, thereby redefining spaces, temporalities, and instances of the national matter. From a Foucauldian perspective, this process represents the construction of a new "Truth regime," in which the authority to define and validate space, time, national rituals, instances of the national matter, and the boundaries between the insider and the other remains under the control of the ruling political power.

Therefore, for example, they introduce the leader of the Islamic Republic, who was previously referred to as the "guardian of the Muslims of the world", as the "father of the nation" and the living and rightful successor of Cyrus and a descendant of Darius of the Achaemenid dynasty. Similarly, the foreign policy strategy aimed at developing the Shiite crescent (DW, 2015) is reinterpreted as part of a vision to revive the Achaemenid Empire (Dana, 2022).

It seems that, just as religious rituals have been previously transformed by opponents of the Islamic Republic and distanced from their original and traditional meanings; another similar struggle over significations has now emerged. But this time, the positions of the supporters and opponents of the Islamic Republic appear to have been reversed, and for the advocates of the new national discourse, the boundaries between the insider and the other have become barely discernible.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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