The Art of Resistance in Islam

The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond

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IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH

Consonants

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k *or* g	k *or* ñ	k or n
ب	b	b	b	b *or* p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				j *or* y	j *or* y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				*or* ğ	*or* ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	s	s	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ş	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ż	ż	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h[1]	h[1]
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v *or* u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g *or* ğ	g *or* ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	z	z	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a[2]			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	ḳ	k	ال	[3]			

Vowels

ARABIC AND PERSIAN			OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH	
Long ا or	ىٰ	ā	ā	Words of Arabic and Persian origin only
	و	ū	ū	
	ي	ī	ī	
Doubled	يّ	-iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	
	وّ	-uww (final form ū)	uvv	
Diphthongs	وَ	au *or* aw	ev	
	ىَ	ai or ay	ey	
Short	◌َ	a	a *or* e	
	◌ُ	u	u *or* ü / o *or* ö	
	◌ِ	i	ı *or* i	

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

Preface

"She is a Shii in her heart," said a *mullaya* once to another woman in a religious gather (*majlis,* pl. *majalis*) in London who asked me whether I am a Shii or not. Those of us who spend a lot of time in the field doing research know exactly what challenges we all might face in how we present ourselves, on the one hand, and how we are perceived, on the other hand. This was also true when I was interrogated for hours at the airport during one of my research trips in the Gulf. Various officers coming in and out of the room I was sitting in insisted that I am a Lebanese Shii despite my numerous explanations that I am not. Whether among officials at countries' border checks or among Shii communities I visited, I was always perceived in the way people wanted to see me.

There is however no doubt that my Palestinian background contributed to the way people perceived and treated me. Whether in Europe or in the Middle East, Shiis I talked to very often made a comparison between the Shii and the Palestinian political struggle, self-sacrifices and displacement. As a second generation migrant who grew up in Europe, it was however very difficult for me to imagine what it is *really* like to live under threat, violence and oppression. As a young researcher when I started to conduct research among Muslim women communities in the Republic of Ireland, I was initially interested in what I thought are the challenges in living as Muslims in Europe. I therefore prepared my semi-structured interviews around issues I thought were important for Muslim women such as discrimination, restrictions of religious expressions in the public sphere etc. Once I visited the Shii community in Dublin in 2009 however, I realised that these women had different challenges. It was during the research I conducted among this community that I have developed my interest in transnational mobilization of Shii women through religious practices, ideas, materials and images.

The more I participated in Shiis religious ritual practices the more I was able to understand their pain of loss and displacement. Still at the heart of militant sectarian conflict in Iraq, Shii women I met in Dublin were less concerned whether they might face discrimination because of their headscarf in the public sphere. They were rather worried about whether they will receive a phone call in the middle of the night carrying the news of the death of one of their family members killed in Iraq. The struggle this group of migrants were facing at that time was not to be compared to the experiences of other Muslim women groups I conducted research with in Ireland. What caught my attention the most was how this struggle is translated in religious ritual practices; what affect it generates among the congregation, how contemporary issues are linked to Shiis' historical past; what roles women play and how diverse these practices are.

"If you want to see more and if you want to learn more, you have to go to London", was an advice that a Shii woman in Dublin once gave me. My visit to London in 2013 allowed me to visit various Shii communities of diverse backgrounds and religious affiliations. I was particularly impressed by the variety of religious practices and narratives surrounding these ritual performances. With my background in Literary and Cultural Studies, I was also interested in the relationship between language, performance and gender and the amount of affect generated through language within these practices. As a researcher who spends a lot of time with research participants, I was able to gain deep insights into the lived realities of Shiis living in Europe. I have been very fortunate that I was very often invited to

stay at the homes of Shii women who were very eager to tell me more about their lives, feelings and fears. I am therefore forever indepted for the trust they have provided me with and thankful for allowing me to be part of their lives.

Although my research for this book includes Twelver Shiis who adhere to a variety of religious authorities, I have a particular interest in the followers of the religious cleric Muḥammad Al-Shirazi (1928–2001). 'This is the Shirazi way' used to be a comment I heard repeatedly in non-Shirazi *majalis* which made me even more interested in researching them further. I was very lucky to be able to accompany one of the Shirazi female leaders in London who gave me the opportunity to not only visit a large number of Shirazi *majalis* but also to participate in them. I had the opportunity to observe the ritual practice of (self-)flagellation, *tatbir* – a practice developed among women for the first time in London in 2007. I am indepted to this Shirazi *mullaya* who allowed me access to her spaces in London and to witness the act of *tatbir* among Shirazi women no other researcher had had access to before. Shirazis enjoy a wide transnational reach through women being active netizen, introducing "the Shirazi way" of religious practices worldwide. Shirazi Shii women in London claim that they have initiated the practice of *tatbir* among women in London and since then empowered other women to practice *tatbir* becoming thereby a marker of Shirazi's factional identity: "Every woman is doing *tatbir* in Kuwait now". This sentence encouraged me to visit Kuwait in order to observe the practice of *tatbir* among women there. Since Shirazis are known to be a closed community and for outsiders very hard to access, I had difficulties getting in touch with Shirazis in Kuwait.

With the continuous politically unsettling atmosphere in the Gulf, it was very difficult to get in touch with any Shii in Kuwait from the UK. Still without any contacts, but in order not to miss Shii mourning period (*Ashura*), I took my flight from Manchester to Kuwait via Amsterdam in 2015. In Amsterdam, our flight had a long delay and a change in the gate number. Not knowing about these changes, a woman with her young children was still waiting in front of the original gate. I went over to her and informed her about the gate change and the lunch voucher the airline has provided us. Later, I saw her again at one of the restaurants and while waiting in the line at the till, we started a conversation in which she told me that she is flying to Kuwait to leave her children with her mother so she can go with a group via a bus to Karbala to attend *Ashura* there. Consequently, I expressed my condolences for the death of Imam Husayn and wished her and her children a safe journey. Still few hours before our flight to Kuwait, I saw the woman for the third time at the new gate. She came over to me and told me how surprised she is about herself revealing her Shii identity to a stranger. It was at this moment where I told her that I am an academic and that I am flying to Kuwait to conduct research among Shii communities there. Upon her request, I told her more about my research not only while waiting for our flight but throughout the eight hours flight to Kuwait. She invited me to accompany her to Karbala which I was very hesitant to decline but I wanted to conduct research in Kuwait particularly to witness the practice of *tatbir* among women. The woman offered me something else which caused a turning point in my Kuwait experience: "One of my best friends who is not coming with me to Karbala this year has her own *majlis* in Kuwait. If you like I can introduce you to her". I was over the moon when I heard this as this was my first ever contact with a Shii living in Kuwait. My joy was however even stronger when I heard this friend's full name who appeared to come from one

INTRODUCTION [<mark>RESTRUCTURED: MAIN CHANGES</mark>]

In 2014, I visited a private women-only religious gathering (*majlis* pl. *majalis*) organised by an Iraqi Shii in her house in London. When I entered, everyone was still very busy preparing the *majlis*: some were sorting out the seating area by laying down additional cushions on the carpet while others were busy making food and drinks in the kitchen. The smell of black tea, cardamom and saffron filled the house. The walls were covered in black with numerous Islamic Shia embroideries in yellow, green and red colours hanging throughout the rooms. Various paintings and pictures of the prophet's grandson, Imam Husayn, and other Shii figures were displayed. The rooms were decorated in a style to aesthetically evoke a sensational atmosphere of commemoration and imaginaries of death, loss and pain. It just took few minutes until the house was filled with women. The rooms on the ground floor were all used for the *majlis,* which became very crowded. Once the female reciter (*mullaya*, pl. *mullayat*) entered, lights were dimmed in order to set the sad atmosphere in the room. The *mullaya* started her *majlis* by greeting the Prophet and his family (*ahl al-bayt*) and sending her commemoration wishes to everyone in the room in memory for the death of the Imam Husayn who Shiis commemorate yearly during the month of Muharram. Such commemoration rituals involve various bodily expressions and emotional experiences such as weeping and self-beating. During such *majalis*, some women stand up and built a circle rhythmically moving their bodies while hitting their breasts and faces. The other women, who remain sitting, support the rhythmic self-beating of the standing women through their own loud weeping and hits on their legs, breasts and faces in unison.

I have been attending and participating in Shii commemoration rituals since 2009 but that particular *majlis* felt different that night. While standing with the women in the circle supporting their grief for the killing of Imam Husayn, I observed and felt something slightly unsettling– at that moment however not giving it much attention. The next day, the *mullaya* leading that particular *majlis* asked me whether I have noticed something different in last night's *majlis.* She also asked whether I have noticed a woman in the crowd who was wearing a very old Iraqi Bedouin style ʻabaya, called *hashimiyya* that was full of dust. She explained that some saw a woman whose face was completely covered wearing an ʻabaya coated with sand sobbing heavily between the crowd. The women at the *majlis*, as the *mullaya* explains, believe that this woman was Sayyida Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muḥammad and the mother of Imam Husayn. Women at the *majlis* believe that Sayyida Fatima came because of my presence in the *majlis* that night:

As you know, Shi'is believe that Sayyida Fatima has been roaming between the various *majalis* since the death of her son in order to see how the Shi'i communities mourn his death. She is, however, only seen by certain women and only for a particular reason. You are the reason for Sayyida Fatima's appearance.

Inner-Shii Communal power dynamics and the figure of Fatima

The *majlis* I attended above, was hosted by the sister of the mullaya who is also the religious head of a Shi'i religious centre (*husayniyyat* pl. *husayniyya*) in London which belong to followers of the religious cleric, Muḥammad Al-Shirazi (1928–2001) - generally referred to as the Shirazis. During my research on Shii communities in Europe and the Middle East, I became particularly interested in the followers of Muḥammad Al-Shirazi due to their marginalized position within the wider Shi'i communities but also because of their particular and controversial approach to producing a unique style of Shii aesthetics within their religious ritual practices and activities. Shirazis, as this book will illustrate, also are active netizen bringing these controversial ritual practices to a wider transnational reach through the use of their networks worldwide.

Private *majalis* are known to be for invited participants only. Who is invited and who is not invited is not randomly chosen but rather strategically planned. The host's socio-political and religious standing in the community determines the list of invited community members. Within a very short period of time, I became the personal companion of the Shirazi *mullaya* in London who invited me to attend the *majalis* she was leading. We sometimes went to up to three or four *majalis* per day within the ten days of Shiis commemoration period (also referred to as *Ashura*). Accompanying a Shirazi *mullaya* who gave me access to spheres of Shi'i private spaces that are usually very difficult to access, was in itself a declaration of power. By doing so, the *mullaya* allowed an outsider access to very private circles – a step not welcomed by everyone particularly not by those Shi'is who are already critical towards the Shirazi approach to Shi'i Islam. The *majlis* I attended above was my first Shirazi private *majlis* to which I was invited to by the *mullaya* herself. Taking me to her sister's private *majlis* was a declaration of strength and power the *mullaya* wanted to express to her invited community members.[1] Instead of introducing me in the *husayniyya*, she chose to take me to her sister's *majlis* to meet the most influential women within the Shi'i

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[1] If it has only been for the mere support of my research, the *mullaya* could have introduced me to her community in the general *husayniyya*.

community – those who belong and those who do not belong to the Shirazi group. My visible presence in such a large number of private *majalis* was regarded by some non-Shirazi women with scepticism who criticized the *mullaya* in allowing me access and became a reason for some intra-communal disputes.

The anecdote on the appearance of the prophet's daughter Fatima in the *majlis* above demonstrates how these inner Shii communal disputes were handled. Women who believed to have seen Fatima that night used her apparition to call for women's self-reflection and to counter such sceptical voices expressed towards the *mullaya*. Fatima's appearance was interpreted as a response to support the *mullaya* and to reassure her position within the community after allowing an outsider to participate in their rituals.[2] In addition, it facilitated the community's belief of my contact with the sacred figure of Fatima and, by doing so, gave me the social and religious capital needed to support (or at least to ignore) my participation in the *majalis*.

The appearance of Fatima serves however a larger goal beyond the *mullaya*'s own position within the community. Shirazis claim that their *majalis* are the most often visited *majalis* by Fatima because they represent the 'true' Shiis. Fatima's apparition above reassures their claim of authenticity. The appearance of one of the most important female religious authority figures within Shi'a Islam, is meant to reaffirm the Shirazi's claim of 'true Shi'aness'. Fatima's apparition is a way of resisting existing power discourses within Shi'i communities particularly among those sceptical towards the Shirazi faction within Shii Islam.[3] Intra-Shi'i disputes were countered through the use of Fatima which, as will be illustrated more in chapter 5, has the ultimate power of intersession on the Day of Judgement.

Fatima's apparition however also contributes to wider discussions on the researcher's impact on the community one researches. The incident above shows how our research can shape discourses and practices of extraordinary religious experiences – in this case Fatima's apparition. It can also reveal intra-communal cleavages and power dynamics that are in constant negotiation and development. What meaning these extraordinary religious experiences have on certain religious subjects? To what extent these experiences impact Shi'i women's, particularly Shirazi women's, position within communities and finally how are the

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[2]   See al-Haidari and Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad. Metamorphosen einer frühislamischen Frauengestalt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002).

[3]   John P. Mitchell argues that apparitions and their messages reflect "broader socio-religious concerns". John P. Mitchell, "Performing Statues," in *Religion and Material Culture: the Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (Oxon; Routledge, 2010), 264.

experiences of Fatima's apparitions linked to women's empowerment within their communities are questions that will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Scope of the book

My research among Shi'i communities in Europe started in the Republic of Ireland in 2009. Through snowball effect, I have been granted access to further communities in the UK and later to various communities in the Gulf. This book is based on fieldwork research carried out since 2009 among Shi'i women communities in London[4] and Dublin[5] as well as Kuwait and Bahrain.[6] I joined religious gatherings of women in *husayniyyat* in both mixed gender as well as women-only spaces. I have participated in over 260 public, semi-public and fully private ritual female spaces in both Europe and the Middle East. I was however mainly interested in women-only *majalis* held in homes either in those which were open for everyone or those for which only certain people were invited to. Those *majalis* organised in Europe where either performed by first generation migrants, their children and grandchildren or by convert Shi'i women.[7] In the Gulf, the book focuses on two countries- Kuwait and Bahrain - which are less represented in the literature on Shi'i women providing thereby new insights into areas of research within Shi'a Islam in the Gulf no other researcher has had access to before.

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[4]   Regarding Shi'i diasporic communities in the UK, I interviewed around 186 Shi'i women in the UK who came originally from Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain and live for the most part in London. A small sample of women I interviewed also came from Iran and Lebanon. The majority of ritual gatherings I attended were in houses of individuals, Iraqis, other Gulf Arabs and Iranian primarily living in London and Dublin – gatherings which not only Shi'is but also Sunnis attend. In the Gulf, women-only *majalis* in semi-private and private spaces as well as homes were predominantly Shi'i, however due to the inter-Muslim marriage practices in countries such as Kuwait and Bahrain and Sunnis participated in *Muharram* events. Therefore, some of the women I interviewed have also been Sunnis. Among first generation Shiis living in the UK, I concentrated on those who have come to the UK since the 1970s, some of who arrived through a trajectory of displacement having settled in Iran (during and after the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988)), or in Jordan (after the invasion of Kuwait 1990) or have settled in other European countries such as the Netherlands or Sweden before finally moving to the UK.
For more studies on this group in the UK, see Yafa Shanneik, "Shia Marriage Practices: Karbala as lieux de mémoire in London," *Social Sciences. Special Issue: Understanding Muslim Mobilities and Gender* 6, no. 3 (2017), accessible via http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/6/3/100; accessed March 2020.

[5]   For more research on Shi'i communities in Ireland, see Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala," 89–102; Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam"; Yafa Shanneik, "Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora: Shii Women in Ireland," in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, ed. Niamh Reilly and Stacey Scriver-Furlong (New York: Routledge, 2013), 70–80.

[6]   I conducted overall around 210 interviews with women in Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE and Iran. The reason for this additional fieldwork research in Iran (Tehran, Qom and Mashhad) has been to examine the gendered power dynamics within Iraqi Shi'i communities in relation to their ritual practices outside of an Arab and sectarian dominated context.

[7]   More on the generational differences and power relations between Shi'i converts and born Shi'is, see Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam".

I was a participant observer and took part in all ritual activities of each *majlis* I attended – except for the practice of (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*) and walking on hot coal (*mashy ʻala al-jamur*). Apart from my conversations with converts with whom I have spoken in English, all other interviews were conducted in Arabic either in Modern Standard Arabic or various Gulf dialects.[8] Repeated visits provided me access to women's lives and gave me the opportunity to understand their socio-religious and political positions and views better.[9] In Europe as well as in the Gulf, the gatekeepers of the *majalis* (usually the *mullaya*) granted me access to communities no other researcher had had access to before – particularly among the Shirazis who are known for being a closed community and for an outsider difficult to access. The *mullaya* usually would introduce me before the *majlis* to let everyone know of my presence and the purpose of my research.

The socio-economic and educational backgrounds of all women in this study, whether in Europe or the Middle East[10] vary, as does their religious affiliation to certain religious Shiʻi scholars.[11] It is therefore impossible to generalise which group in this book follows exactly which religious scholar. There are several leading Shiʻi scholars of different nationalities considered to be the *marjaʻ al-taqlid*. Every Shiʻi believer needs to choose one of these Shiʻi scholars and emulate his teachings, interpretations and religious edicts (religious *fatwas*).[12] Because of the resulting diverse nature of the congregations sharing one space within *majalis,* different religious practices and ideologies meet and sometimes clash as various Shiʻi groups and subgroups compete for authority and status within these spaces.[13] Issues of power relations are central within this context: who has the right to speak for the community or lead a *majlis*, whose practice is presented as the 'right' practice and what

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[8]   Whether in the Gulf or in Europe, the fusion of backgrounds expressed through various languages (Arabic, Persian and Urdu (as well as English in the UK and Ireland) and accents spoken, types of poetry recited, commemoration styles employed and objects displayed characterised their *majalis*.
The citations in this book are all the author's own translations. I would like to thank Angham A. Abdullah who helped me to translate the majority of poetry from Arabic to English.

[9]   For the ease of referring to the group of women I talked to, I use the word 'interview' and 'interviewees' but I regard these talks more as conversations rather than interviews.

[10]   For a psychological study on Shiʻi ritual practices in the Middle East, see Ibrahim al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie des schiitischen Chiliasmus. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des irakischen Passionsspiels* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1975). Later al-Haidari publishes an Arabic version of his book which intensively builds on his German PhD thesis entitled *Trājīdīyā Karbalā: Sūsiyūlūjīyā al-Khiṭāb al-Shīʻī* (London: Dar al-Saqui, 1999).

[11]   See Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shiʻism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) as well as Yafa Shanneik, "Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora: Shii Women in Ireland," in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, ed. Niamh Reilly and Stacey Scriver-Furlong (New York: Routledge, 2013), 70–80.

[12] Some Shiis in the diaspora in Europe tend to combine two *marajeʻ* together, see Shanneik, "Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora".

[13]   See Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam".

meanings are associated to which objects are all questions this book will be critically engaging with.

This book focuses mainly on Shirazi women when talking about factional specific practices and beliefs in chapters 3 and 4 as well as 5. Apart from these chapters and if not indicated otherwise, when talking about Shi'is in general I refer to interviews conducted with other Twelver Shiis who follow a diverse range of *maraje'*. This is important in order to demonstrate and to understand existing intra-communal power relations within Shii communities more generally and Shirazis' positionality within wider local as well as transnational political contexts.

As will be explained in chapter 1, the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 played a major role in changing sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East but also impacted intra-sectarian relations among Shiʿis in the diaspora. The Shirazis' political and religious standpoints have always been controversial and until today viewed with scepticism by other factions in contemporary Twelver Shiʿism. One of the reasons lies in their open rejection of Khomeini's innovative interpretation of the political leadership and authority of clerics ex-pressed through *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), their opposition to the policies of the Islamic Republic and its leader Khamenei and their strong anti-Sunni sectarian discourse.[14] Shirazis who have traditionally been marginalized within Shiʿa Islam, have come since 2003 to the centre of increased political attention within the wider Shiʿa and non-Shiʿa communities. This book focuses on the role of Shirazi women in changing gender power dynamics within Shiʿi communities through the aesthetic performance of the political on the female body.

Shirazi women use self-inflicted pain practices as part of their ritual performance provoking thereby strong responses from various circles within and outside of Shii communities. These critical voices are sceptical towards women's recently emergent but increasing self-consciousness of empowerment and resistance expressed through Shiʿi ritual practices. Shiʿi women's recent intensification and politicisation of individual and collective performances of politics through ritual practices contribute to sectarian power dynamics as well as inner- Shiʿi power structures. This book illustrates to what extent the performativity of power dynamics but also the performativity of women's actions resisting these power structures lead to a female Shiʿi transnational collective reordering of power. Resistance to

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[14] For more details, see Scharbrodt 2020.

power is both told[15] as well as expressed through everyday resistance and everyday practices of the marginalised.

Questions that will be discussed throughout the book are: Why would such an increasing number of women decide to use self-inflicted pain practices to express resistance to anti-Shiʿi politics and sentiments? Why would women inflict pain on their bodies as an expression of gender equality and present it as a new way of emancipatory possibility within religious terms? What does Shiʿi women's participation in religious ritual practices tell us about the gendered body? How is the female body politicised but equally how is politics expressed through and on the female body? What does the politicisation of the body tell us about gender equality? And above all, what does it tell us about female agency and our perception of female empowerment in general? This book explores for the first time the wider conceptions of the gendered body and the technologies applied for the construction of the female self, expressed within religious terms among Shiʿi women as a way to counter hegemonic political but also religious communal structures.

Shiʿi women in this study share and articulate nationally and transnationally their role in contributing to the historical continuation of Shiʿis' actions of resistance against injustice that relates back to the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Muslim community at that time started disputes on who will succeed the Prophet and assume leadership over the Muslim community after him. Shiʿis believe that Ali, the Prophet's cousin, companion and husband of his daughter Fatima, should have been the successor of the Prophet Muḥammad after his death. He only however became the fourth Caliph. After Ali's assassination, Muʿawiya (d. 680 CE) became the ruler and turned the caliphate into a dynasty, through the appointment of his son Yazid (d. 683 CE). With many rejecting the introduction of dynastic rule in Islam, Yazid demanded an oath of loyalty from Husayn, the only living son of Ali and Fatima and grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, to gain legitimacy from the family of the Prophet for holding the caliphate. Husayn refused and instead joined those in Kufa, southern Iraq, to revolt against Yazid. While making his way to Kufa, Yazid increased his pressure on the people of Kufa who are believed to have abandoned Husayn allowing Yazid's army to ambush them and kill Husayn and most of his

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[15]   For Butler, the materiality of the body is expressed through the model of language. She examines the power of bodily performances in form of signs expressed through language. For Butler, language is both a tool for but also a form of power. See Butler's critique of Bourdieu's understanding of language and power, in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997c); Judith Butler and William Connolly, "Politics. Power and Ethics: A Discussion between Judith Butler and William Connolly," *Theory and Event* 24, no. 2 (2000), https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/2220; accessed March 2020.

supporters. According to Shiʾi traditions, Husayn fought against an army that out-numbered his by thousands for ten days (also referred to as *Ashura*).[16] On the 10th of the Islamic month *Muharram* in 680 CE Husayn was killed, decapitated and his head taken to Yazid in Damascus together with his son Zayn al-ʻAbidin and others mainly women, children and elderly members of his family, including his sister Zaynab.[17] During *Ashura*, Shiʻis mourn[18] the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters and remember the battle of Karbala in the form of a narrative through annual mourning rituals. The memory of this battle was transformed to a revolutionary narrative of Shii political struggle, persecution and self-sacrifice, particularly after the Iranian revolution, a new reading that is referred to as the 'Karbala paradigm'.[19]

The Politics of Our Selves[20]

I have been inspired, as so many other scholars, by Saba Mahmood's ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic revival in Cairo. Mahmood's study moves beyond providing solely an ethnographic account of that movement. Instead, she places it within a larger discussion around key analytical concepts in liberal thought, such as human freedom and agency that have informed various aspects of poststructuralist feminist theory and have thereby become an integral part of "our humanist intellectual traditions."[21] What has inspired me the most are her critical discussions around

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[16] On a historic analysis of Shiʻi identity, see Maria Massi Dakake, The Charismatic Community: Shiʻite identity in early Islam, Albany: State University of New Work Press, 2007.

[17] See Ibrahim al-Haidari, *Trājīdīyā Karbalā: Sūsiyūlūjīyā al-Khiṭāb al-Shīʾī* (London: Dar al-Saqui, 1999); Yafa Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala in the Diaspora: Religious Rituals among Iraqi Shii Women in Ireland," *Religion* 45, no. 1 (2015), 89–102 and Chelkowski, *Eternal Performance*.

[18] The word *taʻziyeh* literally means "to mourn and is an expression of sympathy, mourning and consolation" Chelkowski, *Taʻziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde*, 2. See also Peter J. Chelkowski, "Time Out of Memory: Taʻziyeh, the Total Drama," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4, Special Issue on Taʻziyeh (Winter, 2005), 3. The physical place in which people gather together to mourn and lament the dead is called *ma'tam* as David Pinault explains "[m]atam in its most general sense is an Arabic term denoting acts of lamentation for the dead. In Shiʻi Islam it refers to gestures of mourning for the Karbala Martyrs, most typically in the form of repetitive and forceful breast-beating." David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala. Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 78. I would like to note here the cultural and linguistic differences to such terms as they differ according to context. The terms used in this book will however refer to these mentioned definitions.

[19] See Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Khalili, 2007, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Hegland 1998, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning". *American Ethnologist* 25(2): 240-266.

[20] This subheading is taken from Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves. Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[21] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

our understanding of agency[22] which is based, as she argues, on a Western normative liberal framework and the general belief that all human beings follow/or have to follow the same understanding in order for their agency to be recognised and acknowledged as such. Mahmood has pointed to the degree of this understanding in academic scholarship on gender and feminists' general tendency to understand women's agency mainly as resisting the "dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meaning of cultural practices and redeploying them for their 'own interests and agendas'".[23] In addition, feminists have turned to religious traditions and sought ways in redirecting, adapting and "recoding"[24] discourses within them to suit women's needs, interests and agendas.[25] Mahmood points to the link liberal traditions pose between self-realisation and individual autonomy understood as the ability to realise oneself and to fulfil one's "true will".[26] Mahmood does not agree with such poststructuralist feminist scholarship that locates agency within subversion and resignification of social norms limiting its understanding within the binary model of subordination and subversion. She rather suggests "to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics"[27] to analyse various forms of power that shape different kinds of subjectivities and their bodies.[28] As Mahmood explains

> Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility
> from a progressivist points of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that
> can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that

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[22]   Understood as the political and moral autonomy of the subject. Mahmood expands this understanding by discussing agency in relation to bodily performances and a means of subject formation.

[23]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 6.

[24]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 6.

[25]   See more examples within the Muslim context: Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Sondra Hale, "Women's Culture/Men's Culture: Gender, Separation, and Space in Africa and North American," *American Behavioural Scientist* 31, no. 1 (1986); Mary Hegland, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales: Northwest Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Signs* 23, no. 2 (1998); Arlene Elowe MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency". See also Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, "Politics, Culture, Religion: How Hizbullah is Constructing an Islamic Milieu in Lebanon," *Review of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 2 (2009), 198–206; Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Fouad Gehad Marei, "From the Throes of Anguished Mourning: Shi'i Ritual Lamentation and the Pious Publics of Lebanon", Religion and Society: Advances in Research 11 (2020): 133-147.

[26]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 11. On the 'true inner self', see Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[27]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

[28]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.[29]

Mahmood's discussion relies on power, subject formation and the conceptualisation of agency as discussed extensively by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Power, according to Foucault, should not solely be understood as a pre-set and constant model of domination but rather as a combination of factors related to one another with the ability to construct and produce new discourses. The subject, understood as an individualised consciousness, argues Foucault, is produced and formed by these forces which ultimately produce modes of agency.[30] Foucault focuses on power expressed through institutions which is exercised on the subject through various mechanisms and strategies he calls "techniques" that secure the sustainable domination of the subject in a process, he calls subjectivation.[31] In other words, power dominates and forms the subject but it is only through this subjectivation that one comes to a realisation and self-awareness of one's position – it is only at this stage, as Foucault argues, that one is capable to perform agency.[32]

Based on Derrida's understanding of performativity as an "iterable practice"[33], Butler develops her theory of subject formation. For Butler, performativity, which involves both speech and bodily acts, plays a focal role in which the subject is "formed and reformulated".[34] Therefore, "no social formation can endure without becoming reinstated, and that every reinstatement puts the "structure" in question at risk, suggests that the possibility of its own undoing is at once the condition of possibility of the structure itself".[35] In other words, the subject's speech acts and bodily performances, as a form of iterable practice, sustains, on the one hand, social formations and power structures. On the other

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[29]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15 [author's emphasis].
[30]   Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. and transl. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1983) but also Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler however differs from Foucault in talking about performativity as a technique of power, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Butler and Connolly, "Politics. Power and Ethics".
[31]   Foucault, "Truth and Power"; Foucault, "The Subject and Power".
[32]   See also Judith Butler, "Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time," *Diacritics* 27, no. 1 (1997), 13–15.
[33]   Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
[34]   Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997a), 160.
[35]   Butler, "Further Reflections," 14.

hand, the iteration of norms have the potential of destabilising social formations and power structures as these re-enactment of norms are open to change and resignification – i.e. agency.[36] Butler's notion of performativity lays the ground for her theory of agency: "the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency".[37]

Politics has been increasingly relocated to Shii women's private and semi-private spheres in which the aesthetics of the performance is expressed on various individual, communal and transnational levels. These performances although individually performed, operate within a collective setting within which each individual influences one another within a space of aesthetic sociality. The individual gains self-recognition but is at the same time recognised by others during the performance.[38] In his own example of political performativity within the public sphere, Tripp discusses the link between the subject, the performance and the spectacle giving attention to the performer/audience relationship:

> We perform for others, we comport ourselves, and act aware of the gaze of others–
> possibly only of certain designated others–seeking recognition but also a kind of
> validation of the self. Thus, the Other for whom the performance is enacted becomes a
> constitutive element of the performing subject in two intertwined senses: first, as the
> active subject who directly impinges on the performance through approbation, or
> possibly violent rejection; second, as the imagined and thus internalized recipient of
> the performer's enactment of the role, shaping through inner projection the styles,
> idioms, and gestures of the performance.[39]

There is however another component that is important for the subjects performing in the current study: the transcendental. Shii women's enactment of politics through the performance of ritual practices empowers them to connect to the transcendental articulated through gendered terms however operating within existing internal and external power structures. The link to the transcendental can only be materialised if existing power structures are internalised and critiqued, possibilities for subversive changes explored and ways of aesthetic expressions recognised. Only through the subject's realisation of these components, a performance to which not only the individual but also the collective is attached can achieve resistance both locally and also transnationally. Through social media, the women's

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36   Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 147–150.
37   See the preface of the second edition of Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiv.
38   See similar observations by Tripp, "Performing the Public," 207.
39   Tripp, "Performing the Public," 207.

performances are transformed worldwide to provide and provoke new meaning to other oppressive orders.

The performance of power is placed at the centre of the political order as it has the ability to shape social relations and expectations.[40] Politics for Jacques Rancière only exists: "when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part"[41] exercising thereby a reordering of power.[42] Azam Torab examines how the discourses around religious practices are constructing gendering processes disrupting thereby the category of gender. Whether in Dublin, London, Kuwait or Bahrain, Shi'i religious ritual practices convey the same message of resisting existing power structures, although on different scales – whether communal, national or transnational, generating thereby internal and external negotiations of power. Religious subjects in this book, use language, images and bodily performances to articulate their resistance which constitute part of the existing discourse of power, or what Talal Asad calls discursive tradition.[43] Religious and political performativity are examined in this book within Shi'i socio-historical, religious and political contexts highlighting thereby issues of gender, power and communal narratives of memory,[44] or what Tripp calls the imaginative.

Antonio Gramsci[45] understands hegemony in terms of dominance and subordination of people and their self-awareness and construal of power relations existing in their lived environment.[46] This subjective construal of power is, as Bell argues, at the same time a misconstrual as it is based on the individuals' interpretation of power within a particular context.[47] This self-envisioned lived ordering of power is however not static but rather

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[40]   Tripp, "Performing the Public," 205.

[41] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pres, 1998.

[42]   Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

[43]   On Talal Asad's concept of the discursive tradition, see Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam. Occasional Papers Series* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986); Ovamir Anjum, "Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors," *Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 656–672. See also Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17.

[44]   I agree with Catherine Bell that ritual should not be seen neither as a "global construct" and "a key to culture" nor as isolated social activities. See Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7.

[45]   Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. Louis Marks (New York: International Publishers, 1957), 174–176 and 186–187.

[46]   David Laitin provides a detailed analysis of Gramscian's understanding of hegemony. For more see David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 104–108.

[47]   Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 47–93.

reconstructed and resisted in various lived experiences.[48] Similar to Bell, I would like to put Gramsci's concept of hegemony in discussion with Kenelm Burridge's notion of redemptive process. For Burridge, religion offers a set of power dispositions (which he refers to as ordering of power[49]) that guarantees the rules of a redemptive process.[50] People, as he explains, construct power relations in a way to enable their reproduction; to make everyone involved know their position but also find ways of acting within them. People, as Bell sums up, "reproduce relationships or power and domination, but not in a direct, automatic, or mechanistic way; rather, they reproduce them through their particular construal of those relations, a construal that affords the actor the sense of a sphere of action".[51]

Redemptive hegemony, characterised by relations of dominance and subjugation, serves the context of power relations and people's envisioning of ordering of power very well. The relationship between redemptive hegemony and ordering of power can be illustrated within religious performances. Burridge, similar to David Laitin, regards hegemony as a lived consciousness but also as a moral and prestige order.[52] Chosen people within a community have the privilege, or the prestige in Laitin's terms, to perform particular practices that are not accessible to others. Within an Islamic context, religious authority and leadership has traditionally been claimed within male domination and gendered hierarchy leading to the development of gender-specific religious practices. Within Shi'i Islam, certain bodily performances, such as self-hitting (*latam*), (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*), walking on hot coal have been regarded as male dominated ritual spaces justified by a male redemptive hegemony of power. Other religious dimensions of practices, in form of rituals, textual or other discursive expressions, relies, as James Kapaló argues, "entirely on the existence of superhuman extraordinary powers and the ability of some or all social actors [mainly males] to gain access to them".[53]

The exclusion of women from various forms of religious performances, as I argue, is an expression of Shi'i male redemptive hegemony constructing and shaping thereby gender power structures. The sustainability of these gender power structures are symbolically framed within what Laitin calls "common-sense" which constitute the essence of hegemony.[54]

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48   Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 47–93.

49   See Burridge discussion on religion and redemption, Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 4–8.

50   Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth*, 6.

51   Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 84.

52   Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture*.

53   James Alexander Kapaló, *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 33.

54   Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture*, particularly 159

Women until recently subscribed to their gender-limited access to certain religious practices – placing themselves into self-imposed containment contributing thereby to what is referred to as "strategies of containment"[55] important for sustaining a hegemonic ordering of power.[56] Shiʻi women, as Mary Hegland's research among South Asian women has observed, have been accepting this male imposed female exclusion of certain religious practices regarding them as "common-sense". Instead of participating in the practice, women, as Hegland and others[57] have witnessed, are stand-byers or spectators only observing male performativity.

In the context of the research outcomes of this study however, Shirazi women refuse and resist this "common-sense". They instead reinterpret Shiʻi sources, including narratives of Shiʻi history and memory of the past, and redefine the existing hegemonic ordering of power and construct a new gender discourse that allows them to break out of their religio-political self-imposed containment. Shirazi women insist on participating to increasing forms of religious rituals and performances, contributing thereby to a new construal of existing ordering of power through redefining the ideological "common-sense" of hitherto accepted Shiʻi practices and gender dynamics. They thereby not only resist existing gender power relations but also renew their meaning and reproduce practices that empowers women to participate in bodily performances that, similar to men, connect them to the transcendental. Shirazi women participate in self-inflicted pain practices by using their body as a means to articulate gender equality within performed ritual practices that allow them to connect to the transcendental.[58] The women's use of their body has a metaphysical element[59] as it allows

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[55]   For a detailed discussion on "strategies of containment," see William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to the Political Unconscious* (Bristol: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1984), 76–93.

[56]   One can however also argue within Bourdieu's habitus terms understood as the interaction between social structures and individual lives defined through a set of dispositions operating within a particular context.

[57]   Elizabeth Warnock Fernea provides the first general overview of Iraqi Shiʻi women's life in the 1950s, as part of her wider ethnographic research. Fernea refers primarily to women's roles in the Karbala rituals as merely spectators of men's rituals on the streets of Iraq. For more, see in Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Q. Bezirgan, "Women's Religious Rituals in Iraq," in *The Women of Karbala. Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shiʻi Islam*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 229–240 and Elizabeth Fernea, "Remembering Taʿziyeh in Iraq," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4, Special Issue on Taʿziyeh (Winter, 2005), 130–139, as well as Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965); Basima Qattan Bezirgan and Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); Robert Fernea and Elizabeth Fernea, "Variations in Religious Observance among Islamic Women," in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis in Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 385–401. Similar observations within the Syrian Shiʻi context, see Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm," 86.

[58]   Bargu explains, it is "a means of staging a protest that advances certain specific demands as the political ends of that protest. […] [T]he body is not an empty, mediate vessel to achieve political ends precisely because its deployment only by way of its destruction defies the distinction between means

women to detach themselves from what they call 'worldly' values, feelings but also rationality. The subject here needs to move out of the body and enter a new metaphysical realm that enables the subject to connect with the transcendental. Shi'i women in my study are self-conscious of the power dynamics within their existing discourses as they debate and reconstruct these dynamics. This resonates with R. Marie Griffith's research on charismatic evangelical women who are able, through bodily performances, to change conventional hierarchies and construct new selves.[60] Similar to Griffith's evangelical women who "continuously redraw and renegotiate the boundaries of power and authority"[61], the Shirazi Shi'i women I met are critically engaging with existing gender power structures and find alternative ways of resisting the current orders. It is however important, as explained earlier, to understand existing power and gender structures in order to understand the changes that have taken place. The book therefore does not only offer an insight into the performative subject as expressed within Shi'i women communities and their religious practices but also the perspectival shift one needs to take into account when examining issues of agency within Muslim women communities. Agency, in this study, is not only understood as resisting the dominant male order by subverting existing hegemonic power structures through the performance of highly visible forms of resistance. The study understands agency in its ability to destabilise current power relations also through the use of less visible acts of resistance understood within its own spatio-temporal, religious and political contexts. Mahmood explains, in terms of her mosque participants, that any "attempt to destabilize the normative structure must also take into account the specificity of embodied practices and virtues, and the kind of work they perform on the self, recognizing that any transformation of their meaning requires an engagement with the technical and embodied armature through which these practices are attached to the self."[62] Torab's research investigates how gender is constructed through religious practices among middle-class Shi'i women in Iran and regards religious practices as modes of self-expression and social change. She examines how the discourses around these religious practices construct gendering processes of complicity, on

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and ends and obliterates instrumental rationality." See Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York, Chichester, England: Columbia University Press, 2014), 16.

59   On the meaning of the self-destructive act as an expression on the meaning of existence, see Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 16.

60   R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (University of California Press, 1997).

61   Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 16.

62   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 167.

the one hand, and resistance, on the other hand.[63] Torab argues that being influenced by several discourses affects the women's development of multiple selves:

> The notion of multiple selves does not mean the disappearance of powerful discourses, but their realignment under contest. It is therefore not simply that there are multiple discourses within cultures, but in addition, individuals themselves are multiple constituted, which allows them to scope to act on the world in which they live[64]

Women's acts of resistance in this study, whether in form of direct or indirect subversion of power and performed in both the Middle East as well as Europe, lead to the redefinition of gender social structures countering thereby the existing ordering of power. This book examines therefore women's acts of resistance that lead to the destabilisation of current systems of various forms of power female religious movements, such as the Shirazis, find themselves confronted with. By doing so, they construct a new *doxa*[65] in Shi'i ritual practices – or what I would term, a specific Shi'i *doxa* within gendered hegemonic ordering of power that transcends communal boundaries and relates to external power dynamics within as well as beyond the nation-state. Mahmood distinguishes between the body as a medium for or a sign of the self.[66] Her analysis of the bodily performances of her mosque participants places the body as a medium for its formation. This is in contrast to the existing nationalist-identitarian interpretation of religiosity of which the mosque participants are critical as the body here is seen as the sign of the self through which religiosity can be expressed. The body in performative practices in my study, is regarded as both a sign of the self but also a medium for collective gender self-realisations. The subaltern subject is embedded within a dominant order, navigates within existing hegemonic power and uses prevailing structures.[67] The intervention and change of the reiterative structure destabilises the referential status quo. It is the individual who is shaped by the existing power structures but which in turn shapes and gives new meaning to new forms of powers.[68] The tools that Shirazi women use are,

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63   Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency", 235.
64   Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 248–249.
65   Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance De La Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
66   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 166.
67   Similar to Butler and Mahmood, Tripp observes Syrians" oppositional movement using the same existing structure of power used by the Assad regime in their resistance turning thereby what once appeared to breed conformity on its head. See Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 3.
68   See Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*.

however, the same tools existent within the dominant male hegemonic order.[69] In other words, by using the same language, the reiterated context is redirected to symbolise different meaning and fulfil a different function.[70] Women's participation in what has traditionally been regarded as male dominated religious and political spaces not only contributes to a redefinition and change in communal gender power structures but also opens up inner- and outer-Shiʻi negotiations of gender dynamics and raises questions on the degree and extent to which women should be involved in resisting current political power structures. Shirazi women's performative aspect of the political, navigates between existing power structures and norms within their own communities, the various nation-states as well as on a transnational scale.

Performances as a Sensorialised Political Sociality

When Tripp discusses performing the political or the theatre of politics, he refers to the dramaturgical aspect "of role construction, of narrative emplotment and display, addressing and mobilizing diverse audiences."[71] Relying on Judith Butler, he understands the term performative as a process of enunciation or bodily enactments.[72] Whereas Tripp mainly focuses on the state-making of performances, I focus on the women's performance of politics within public, semi-private and private spaces. Similar to Tripp, however, I understand artistic productions as an aesthetic expression of bodily resistance – a bodily performance that, as Mahmood argues, is teachable referring thereby to what she calls "docility of the body."[73] This teachability of the body allows the subject to deal with current power relations and disrupt its structural stability through "*literally* retutoring the body […] posting an alternative representational logic that challenges masculinist readings of feminine corporeality".[74]

The emotive engagement of individuals with the narrative of Karbala and the development or teachability of emotional expressions as a sign of the individual's enactment

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[69]   Deniz concept of "patriarchal bargains" understood as women's manoeuvring within a set of patriarchal structures without openly challenging these is helpful in this context. See Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2 (1988).

[70]   Butler, for example, analyses the term 'queer' and its historical homophobic meaning and how these negative normative meaning of the term have changed and have become a symbol of self-identification. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*. Discussed further in Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 167.

[71]   Charles Tripp, "The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018), 337–342 (337). See also Julia Strauss and Donal Cruise O'Brien, eds., *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 1–14.

[72]   Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

[73]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 166.

[74]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 166. Emphasis in the original.

of the narrative and its sensorial affect have been cultivated among Shi'is for centuries.[75] Weeping for Imam Husayn, for example, is regarded by Shi'is as a source of salvation.[76] Emotions[77] reflect communal collectivity and togetherness. The capability of emotional expressions is related to the iterability of affect[78] and its recontextualisation processes that helps the enactment and embodiment of the memory of Karbala. Through making the Battle of Karbala relevant to current socio-religious and political conflicts of religious actors, the ritual becomes personalised and more relevant to relate to.[79] With references to their own biographies and wider communal or social concerns throughout the ritual, religious actors engage with the narrative and internalise it further – preparing believers to express their emotions through weeping, self-beating and other ritual practices. This ritual internalisation and its wider socio-religious and political context transfers the individual's body to a social body.[80] Through the now politicised social body, power relations and structures are personalised through the embodiment of the wider political context that is central for the destabilisation of the hegemonic power. Commemorating the Battle of Karbala and lamenting the death of Imam Husayn gains a wider function beyond religious boundaries of salvation. Here few questions come to mind which this book will discuss in more detail in the following few chapters: How do women link their emotive engagement with the narrative of Karbala to current political and institutional power structures? What roles does the female body play in linking the religious and historical particularity of the Karbala paradigm to the generality of hegemonic communal, state as well as cosmic power relations? How is power personalised through language, performances, material objects and symbols?

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[75]   As Ayoub explains: "Sorrow and weeping for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and the suffering of the Holy Family became a source of salvation for those who chose to participate in this unending flow of tears". The challenges of this cultivation among converts to Shi'i Islam is explained in more detail in Yafa Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam: "Process of Subjectification" among Shia Women Converts in London," in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdūnas Račius (New York: Routledge, 2018), 130–151.

[76]   Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 147.

[77]   See also Saba Mahmoud's research on a Muslim piety movement in Egypt and their development of their capacity to weep within ritual practices. Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety*, 128–131.

[78]   Kabir Tambar, "Iterations of Lament: Anachronism and Affect in a Shi'i Islamic Revival in Turkey," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 3 (1990); Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 489. See also Peter Hamilton, *Emile Durkheim: Critical Assessments* 8, ed. Peter Hamilton (London: Routledge, 1995).

[79]   See Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam". Lara Deeb in her research within the Lebanese context has also observed the importance of emotions for Shi'i women as she explains: "Emotion remains important […], yet emotion is given contemporary purpose in its revision from an end to a means," see Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 143.

[80]   See on social body Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge, 2003). See also Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 81.

The senses play an essential role in the expression and performativity of the narrative of Karbala:[81] It is heard through verbal transmission in the form of various lectures and recitations of lamentation poetry (*na'y*)[82]. It is seen through visualizing the narrative through a variety of images and slogans as well as theatrical performances (*tashabih*). It is also felt through the rhythmic ritual self-beating on the face and the upper body (*latam*) as well as through the walking on hot coal practice (*mashy 'ala al-jamur*). In addition, it is smelled through the blood that is shed during the performance of (self-)flagellation by using swords and knives for cutting one's body (*tatbir*).[83] Sally Promey and Shira Brisman introduce in this context the term "sensory cultures"[84], which describe the interaction between objects and individuals through their association with different smells, sounds, touches and sights.[85] The religious, historical, biographical and socio-political dimensions of Shi'i rituals are fused together through the concept of pain that is individually and also collectively experienced and embodied.[86] The process in which the individual pain becomes a collective pain is an example of an embodied experience of sociality expressed through sensory cultures.[87] The body in ritual practices is not an isolated entity but rather engages with other bodies within the ritualised space embedded within the wider environment and surrounding.[88]

The collective experience of pain reinforced social cohesion between community members. That way, pain is essential in community building and bonding enabling thereby the experience of commonality.[89] Within Shi'i commemoration rituals, pain is articulated mainly through weeping and mourning referring thereby to the pain felt for the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters. Particularly through the ritual oration and the lamentation poetry recited, the feeling of guilt among believers is cultivated – a historical guilt Shi'is

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[81]   Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam".

[82]   Lamentation poetry is also known as *ritha'*.

[83]   Although this practice is highly controversial among the various Shi'a communities across the world, it is gaining in popularity particularly among young women, despite the fact that traditionally it has been regarded as an act of 'masculinity'.

[84]   Sally Promey and Shira Brisman, "Sensory Cultures: Material and Visual Religion Reconsidered," in *Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 72–77.

[85]   The authors argue, "Sensory culture, like material culture, concerns not simply perception and its histories and theories but also things perceived and things produced for sensory apprehension," see Promey and Brisman, "Sensory Cultures", 198.

[86]   On the individual and collective conceptual and performative dimensions of emotions see also Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White, "The Anthropology of Emotions," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15 (1986).

[87]   Hsu argues, "[t]he individual's sensory experience of pain is made social". See Elisabeth Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy," *Etnofoor* 18, no. 1 (2005), 85.

[88]   See also Thomas J. Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993), 138.

[89]   See also Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy," 86.

believe they should feel for leaving Imam Husayn with no support on the plains of Karbala.[90] This narrative refers to the historical remembering of the battle during which the people of Kufa under the threat of Yazid abandoned Husayn although originally calling him to support a revolt against the Caliph. In order to feel the pain of Husayn and his supporters who died on the plains of Karbala, the majority of Shi'is perform self-inflicted pain, in form of self-beating and increasingly through (self-)flagellation and walking on burning coal, as a symbol of solidarity but also symbolically to express their willingness to die for Imam Husayn's cause. Self-infliction of pain provides religious actors with the opportunity to feel the suffering of Imam Husayn which they could have prevented from happening if the Kufans had supported him during the battle against Yazid. Pain self-infliction, though experienced individually, is performed collectively. The performance of the Battle of Karbala through speech does not only refer to the feeling of guilt but collaborates also to the emotional pain felt expressed through weeping and mourning the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters. The collective felt grief and pain establishes a bond with others and constructs a feeling of sociality. Elisabeth Hsu in a different context argues that during a pain event:

> […] it is as though the boundaries between the I and the you are broken down, for both you and I are completely overwhelmed by the pain event. […] Acute pain is acute for both the person in pain and those surrounding him or her, and it thus generates synchronicity, a situation in which all participants involved are acutely aware of only one single event and turn their full attention to it.[91]

Trauma inflicted on the body influences one's understanding of oneself and shaping of the self as Tripp explains: "the transformative dialectic of self and others in performance and the part this plays in the constitution of the self: we become what we act, and we act before others and their expectations of us, through our expectations of them. This never happens in a neutral environment, but in a setting where power differentials are very much part of the practice and where it could be argued that the interpellation of the subject has initiated the performance."[92] According to Hsu there are two functions for (acute) pain: (a) it is a warning signal for survival. This survival refers within the Shi'i context to Imam Husayn's survival: Although killed by Yazid's army, it is believed, Imam Husayn has been immortalised through

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90   Compare Judaeo-Christian tradition of guilt. See Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy".
91   Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy," 85.
92   Tripp, "Performing the Public," 209–210.

the annual remembering of his killing and the remembering of the battle in general. It is however also the survival of Shi'i communities which have been persecuted, oppressed and humiliated within various geo-political contexts since the Battle of Karbala;[93] (b) it is a way for enhancing sociality and bond-building constructing thereby a sense of togetherness between individuals. Pain in this context, as Seremetakis argues, "mobilizes trans-individual systems of communication, meaning, and value".[94] Through Shi'is' individually performed but collectively experienced ritual practices, boundaries are broken down and a state of Shi'i "trans-individual fluidity"[95] is established, articulating thereby a narrative of Shi'is' emotional and physical oneness and unity.

The participation in Shi'i ritual practices provides religious actors with a sense of empowerment[96] as, within a Shi'i context, the participation itself offers believers the opportunity to connect to the transcendental and to receive intercession from Husayn and members of *ahl al-bayt* on the Day of Judgement.[97] As Pinto in a different context argues, religious experiences "[…] allows the embodiment of capacities and dispositions that are lived as deriving from the sacred dimensions of existence, producing religious selves endowed with forms of power".[98] The power gained through the collective is articulated throughout the *majlis* in which religious practices are performed.

Since the message of the Karbala paradigm is embedded within current political and socio-religious and sectarian conflicts a narrative of the subaltern is produced in which Shi'is, as a collective, are presented as a counter movement to all anti-Shi'i regimes within various geographical contexts and throughout history. This anti-sectarian resistance movement is increasingly apparent among Shi'i women building a cohesive Shi'i sociality on two levels: as an alternative Shi'i movement presented as a homogenous counter-discursive entity and as a variety of Shi'i movements with multiple religious, ideological and political convictions, located in different regional contexts and exhibiting diverse clerical allegiances and political

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[93] See here the slogan "Everyday is Ashura, every Land is Karbala": Ali Shariati, *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman*, ed. and transl. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1996).

[94] C. Nadia Seremetakis, "Durations of Pains: A Geneology of Pain," in *Identities in Pain*, ed. Jonas Frykman et al. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press), 151–168 (151).

[95] Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction," 87.

[96] Thomas J. Csordas, *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 45–49.

[97] It however also provides participants with a cathartic experience through expressing strong emotions during a ritual, See Paul Tabar, "Ashura in Sydney: A Transformation of a Religious Ceremony in the Context of a Migrant Society," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002).

[98] Pinto examines the production and communication of religious experience in the Sufi ritual of *darb al-shish* (body piercing with needles or iron skewers) among members of the *zawiya* (ritual lodge) of *Shaykh* Mahmud, a Sufi community linked to the *tariqa* Rifa'iyya1 in the town of 'Afrin, in northern Syria, see Paulo G. Pinto, "Mystical Bodies/Unruly Bodies: Experience, Empowerment and Subjectification in Syrian Sufism," *Social Compass* 63, no. 2 (2016), 197–212 (200).

ideologies. The performativity of these diverse convictions enables Shi'i women to personalise their understanding of existing power dynamics through collective practices within their local and transnational contexts. Through visible and less visible acts of resistance, women demonstrate their power by positioning themselves within the existing order of power destabilising thereby its structures.

In addition to the collective Shi'i empowerment through the experience of religious ritual practices, gender-specific empowerments also take place. Shirazi women in particular use the body to stimulate the senses, advocate emotions and express these in ritual and discursive practices, textual productions and acts of speech and performances to gain authority and set new positions and ordering of power within their communities.[99] In the empirical field data that forms the basis of this study, I demonstrate the central role of the body within Shi'i rituals particularly as it is expressed in the practice of walking on hot coal (chapter 3) and *tatbir* (chapter 4). The social construction of the self, articulated through the power of performance, in both speech and action, provide women with a newly defined understanding of identity and empowerment – which is articulated transnationally.

Research on sensory stimuli, according to Adam Yuet Chau, have examined the effect of the sensory stimuli on the body ignoring the active role the body can have on the construction of these sensory stimuli. In his research on temple festivals in China, Chau takes the discussion of sensorialised worlds a bit further through analysing when and how sensorialised sociality becomes institutionalised.[100] Chau asks: "But what if the body and its actions themselves are key contributors to the production of the sensory event and the effect of the sensory event is located not in the individual body but rather in the social collectivity itself?"[101] As discussed above, the sensory engagement with ritual bodies should not only be seen from an isolated subjective lens but rather discussed in dialogue and relation to the experiences of others and embedded within a wider socio-political and religious context. Our bodies, as Csordas explains, "are not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others, we must also specify that a somatic mode of

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[99]   According to Kapaló, "practice is taken to encompass the contextualised analysis of ritual practice, discursive practice, textual production and acts of speech", Kapaló, *Text, Context and Performance*, 33. Pinto also explains, "[i]ndividual members of a community become empowered through their religious experiences. This empowerment challenges existing power structures and hierarchies that need to be negotiated and normalized in order to preserve the internal organization of the community", Pinto, "Mystical Bodies," 200.

[100]   See Adam Yuet Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," Ethnos 73, no. 4 (2008), 485–504 (487–488).

[101]   Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," 488.

attention means not only attention to and with one's own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others".[102]

The participation of Shi'i women in ritual practices, whether in public, semi-public or private spaces, is part of ongoing historical, political and religious intra-Shi'i as well as trans-Shi'i power structures. Women navigate their way, in addition, through existing gender power relations within various Shi'i communities in numerous geo-political contexts. When Shirazi women claim their right in participating in ritual practices that have traditionally been regarded as male dominated ritual spaces, women enter into a newly defined gender-specific religiosity they had been traditionally excluded from. By doing so, Shirazi women not only use their body for personal and individual sensorial experiences to express their own level of religiosity, or piety to use Mahmoud's term, but more importantly they use their body as a social body within ritualised context for truth-claiming to present themselves as the 'true' Shi'a. Since the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Shi'i women have been intensively participating in ritual practices constructing thereby a new religious subject that re-defines social and religious structures.[103] By doing so, they enquire the active participatory role "as makers of the social sensorium".[104] In the context of this study, the focus lies in the examination of pain and other sensorial practices as part of Shi'i women's bodily, social and cosmological experiences articulated through various Shi'i religious ritual practices in Europe as well as in the Middle East. The institutionalisation of Shi'i sensorialised socialities, that are individually felt but collectively articulated, is in this book examined and embedded in a discussion on the wider positionality of Shi'i women within as well as outside of Shi'i spheres.

Through increased globalisation, or what Arjun Appadurai calls "global scapes"[105] in form of the movement of people, the connectedness of people through modern technology but also the increased flow of information through various media channels, the widespread diversification and fragmentation of religious authorities and global economy, has led to worldwide connectedness in various forms and across national boundaries. Shi'i women, whether in the Middle East or in the diaspora in Europe, express their religious and political views, make decisions and take actions within specific national and transnational social

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[102]   Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention," 139.
[103]   See in difference contexts Alan Morinis, "The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation," *Ethos* 13, no. 2 (1985) and C. Nadia Seremetakis, "The Ethics of Antiphony: The Social Construction of Pain, Gender, and Power in the Southern Peloponnese," *Ethos* 18, no. 4 (1990), 481–512 (483).
[104]   Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," 488.
[105]   Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

networks[106] that are navigated through Appadurai's "global scapes".[107] Shirazi Shi'i women, in particular, exercise gendered agency across transnational spaces through destabilising, deconstructing and reformulating power hierarchies within Shi'i ritual practices. As will be illustrated in more detail in chapter 4, the practice of *tatbir* among women was first developed in London, then adopted and performed in the Middle East. Shirazi Shia women in the diaspora are changing the perception and understanding of female agency and empowerment in the Middle East through focusing on aesthetics and bodily practices. Shirazi women are able to define women's positions in the Middle East anew in which their bodily practices are at the centre of political as well as clerical and social attention. This is articulated and strengthened through their transnational mobilization of practices, ideas, materials and images. This book, therefore, questions the centre-periphery dynamics within Shia Islam and, for the first time, offers a new understanding of female agency and empowerment within an emerging Muslim Shia women's resistance movement. Shii diasporic communities in Europe – in London in particular - play a central role in shaping the bodily practices and sensorial expressions of this transnational resistance movement.

New approaches to the study of Muslim women's resistance movements

Resistance takes various forms from militant, non-militant, visual arts, literature and poetry to counter systems that deny people agency and autonomy. This book offers an examination of the different forms of resistance among Muslim women operating in different religious, socio-political and geographical spheres. Different from other studies on women's religious movements, this study combines both local and transnational aspects of women's resistance to state as well as communal and gender power structures.

The book examines acts of resistance in their various forms among Shi'i women in London, Dublin, Kuwait and Bahrain. It interprets the growing centrality, intensification and politicisation of an alternative set of practices of resistance among Shi'i women including: bodily performances, such as self-hitting (*latam*), (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*), walking on hot coal (*mashy 'ala al-jamur*); speech in form of poetry, sermons but also material and visual

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[106]   See also Linda Basch, G. Schiller, Nina Glick, and Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne, Pa: Gordon and Breach, 1993), 2.

[107]   See also "Gendered geographies of power" as a framework to analyse people's social agency across transnational terrains. See Sarah J. Mahler and Patricia R. Pessar, "Gendered Geographies of Power: Analyzing Gender across Transnational Spaces," *Identities* 7, no. 4 (2001), 441–459.

culture expressed through theatrical performances (*tashabih*)[108], religious objects and supranatural apparitions.[109] This study examines the meaning, function and effect of these alternative forms of women's agency and resistance expressed through religious practices impacting local as well as transnational political, social, and gender power dynamics. It provides not only new perspectives on women's positionality within Islam, and Shiʿi Islam in particular, but offers a whole body of new, first-hand ethnographic insights into Shiʿi religious groups in Europe and the Middle East no other researcher has studied before – particularly in relation to Shirazi women. The book thereby provides a new understanding of female agency and empowerment within Muslim women's resistance movements.

As has been demonstrated earlier, the increasing political tensions and civil unrest and wars in the Middle East, in particular since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, introduced new sectarian power dynamics in the Gulf.[110] The examination of the performance of these sectarian power relations as expressed in Shiʿi ritual practices, whether in the Middle East or in Europe, offers the opportunity to understand the wider implications of these tensions as understood, projected and challenged by women on the ground. The performative aspect of the political can only be examined when understanding existing power structures and norms that allow for the oppressive status quo to sustain. To study the politics of resistance one needs, therefore, to pay attention to the direct and indirect subversion of power that can lead to the destabilisation of current systems of power.[111] This book examines the role of Shiʿi women in countering imposed forms of structural and institutional power through bodily performances in ritual practices expressed as part of their religious and political identity.[112] By doing so, the book does not only contribute to existing literature on

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[108]   Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: NYU Press, 1979); Peter Chelkowski, *Staging A Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, co-authored with H. Dabashi (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1999); Peter Chelkowski and Frank Korom, "Community Process and the Performance of Muharram Observances in Trinidad," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 2 (Summer, 1994); Peter Chelkowski, "Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre," in: *Die Welt des Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); Peter Chelkowski, "Taʿziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 31–40; Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Eternal Performance: Taʿziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals* (London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010); Peter J. Chelkowski, "No Access. From Karbala to New York City: Taziyeh on the Move," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (T 188) (Winter 2005), 12–14.

[109]   For an overview of the different ritual practices within Shiʿi Islam, see Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shiis of Iraq* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[110]   Lloyd Ridgeon, ed., *Shiʿi Islam and Identity: Religion, Politics and Change in the Global Muslim Community* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

[111]   Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 7.

[112]   The book also contributes to existing literature on Shiʿi women's commemoration practices from a gendered perspective. See among others, Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighbourhood in Iran," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 235–252 as well as Ingvild Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety.*

resistance but overturns previous scholarship which limited Shi'is acts of resistance expressed through religious practices to predominantly male spaces.

The 'classic' understanding of resistance, particularly regarding gender-based resistance, assumes the inversion of existing power structures operating within the binaries of resistance and submission.[113] Shi'i women in this study regard their religious practices as a way to contribute or express other expressions of power in form of religious, gender and political resistance with the aim of gaining recognition of their individual and collective agency. This politics of recognition is articulated through women's participation in Shi'i ritual practices that have been intensified and politicised, since 2003 in particular. Visible as well as less visible forms of resistance contribute to the wider ordering of power for the individual as well as for the collective. Institutions, states or otherwise, are concerned with the behaviour of individuals operating within them mostly when this behaviour deviates from existing social norms.[114] This concern can involve the institution's interference in ways of life, ways of clothing as well as ways of defining gender dynamics. The politics of gender and the politics of resistance are therefore interlinked and position the individual's agency within a collective action.[115]

For Tripp, performativity is a form of "an agency-centred account of the political"[116] that enables "the imagination and performance of counter-hegemonic projects of resistance."[117] The Karbala paradigm as it is reconstructed and performed within Shi'i ritual spaces provides the platform for the examination of Shi'ism's imagination and negotiation of

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Representation, Reception and Function of Imagery in Iranian Shiism (PhD Dissertation, Bergen: University of Bergen, 2008) as well as Ingvild Flaskerud, "Representing Spiritual and Gendered Space. Challenges in Audiovisual Recording of Iranian Shia Women's Rituals," in: *Anthropology of Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* 1, no. 1 (2013); Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: University Press, 2006); Lara Deeb, "'Doing Good, Like Sayyida Zaynab': Lebanese Shi'i Women's Participation in the Public Sphere," in *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies*, ed. Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine (New York: Palgrave, 2005a); On Syrian Shi'a, see Edith Szanto, "Sayyida Zaynab in the State of Exception: Shii Sainthood as 'Qualified Life'," in: *Contemporary Syria. International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 285–299 and Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," in: *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 75–91; Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Women of Karbala. Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

113   Tripp explains: This understanding places "the subaltern against a dominant order that is held in place by hegemonic power," see Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 178. Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990s), 41–55.

114   Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 179.

115   Compare Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 180.

116   Charles Tripp, "Performing the Public: Theatres of Power in the Middle East," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013), 203–216 (203).

117   Charles Tripp, "The Politics of Resistance and the Arab Uprisings," in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, ed. F. Gerges (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2013), 142.

power. What new forms of resistance have current power structures created within various religious and political Shiʻi groups? What are the affects of female Shiʻi aesthetic productions on relations to gender, communal and state power? To what extent can these aesthetic productions shape the political imagination? Women's performance of the political provides them with the opportunity to organise themselves in various religious spaces and transform themselves into religious but also political actors.

This performance of power also functions as the possibility in generating new power structures and new political and gender orders. This generation of new power dynamics can lead to the mobilisation of the individual towards collective resistance on a local but also on a transnational scale as the examples in this book will demonstrate. Shirazi women in particular claim authority towards new interpretations of Shiʻi sources and bodily practices that transcend existing gender-limiting boundaries. By doing so, they influence communal but also societal and political dynamics – not only through performing but also through their transnational negotiations of their practices. Shiʻi women are mobilised to influence the course of politics within not only the various nation-states but also religious communities transnationally. This book offers therefore an alternative and new understanding of women's subjectivities within existing socio-political and religious power structures that transcend the examined nation-states by adopting a truly transnational perspective.

The increase in sectarian conflicts in the Middle Eastern region is affecting community dynamics in both the Middle East and Europe; how people feel about existing power dynamics influences their attitudes towards resistance.[118] Hearing about diverse types of resistance, individuals and collectivities reconsider their relationship to those in power and, in certain cases, to question existing power relationships as a whole. Shiʻi women use the body in ritual performances as a space to redefine gender politics and create various avenues of resistance. Through bodily performances, power is constructed and performed and its relationship to the subject, or the individual, reproduced. The performance of power reveals the individual's agency in understanding power relations and structures that are then performed through rituals. In other words, the self-representation of the Shiʻi women's positionality within existing power structures is reinforced. How is this done and what tools in terms of creative and artistic medium are used, what role the body plays and to what extent speech is able to articulate these power dynamics, will be examined throughout this book.

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[118]   Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 11.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides an overview on the trajectories of Shi'is in the Gulf and their presence in Europe. The Shi'a in the Gulf consists of indigenous as well as migrated and, in some cases, also of converted Shi'is. Whether forced or voluntary, the experiences of migration and settlement among Shi'is in Europe and the Middle East varies. Often coming from minority contexts of marginalisation, discrimination and persecution, Shi'is' experiences of migration are often different to those of other Muslim immigrants in Europe as well as in the Middle East. In the 1980s large scale displacement of Iraqi Shi'i Muslims, for example, forced them to migrate through a multi-local trajectory of displacement in so-called 'transit countries' such as Iran, other Gulf countries or neighbouring countries such as Jordan or came first to European countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands or Germany and later moved to the UK. The national and transnational interactions and networks of these Shi'i communities will be discussed in this chapter to offer an overview of the various diverse Shi'i communities present in Europe and the Middle East.

Chapter 2 covers the historical and contemporary development of the rites of mourning within Shi'i Islam. References from historical sources on the performance of mourning rituals since the Umayyad period will lay the foundation for a critical discussion on what constitutes a ritual and when did the performance of commemoration rituals start. As for most women I interviewed, Zaynab, Husayn's sister, is believed to have initiated mourning practices for the first time in order to keep the memory of the killing of her brother alive. Others, mainly within Shi'i scholarships, see the initiation of the practice has taken shape later by men. This chapter serves as the foundation for the whole book as it introduces each ritual practice, understood as an act of resistance, with a particular focus on the role women play therein.

Chapter 3 discusses the various forms of the performativity of the political and examines the enactment of the Karbala paradigm through theatrical performances (*tashabih*).[119] The chapter focuses on *tashabih* practices in women-only *majalis* in Kuwait and Bahrain as well as in the UK. *Tashabih* performed among women-only *majalis* that I attended in these countries concentrated mainly on the women and orphans of the Karbala battle highlighting the virtue of sacrifice that is addressed to each women in the *majlis* as an

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[119]   This is the term the women I interviewed used. Some refer to these performances as *shabih* or *ta'ziye* in general. In the Soviet Azerbaijan a distinction was made between ta'ziyeh and other dramatic forms. They rather referred to it as *shabih* 'imitation' in William O. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'zieh," in *Ta'zieh, Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 24–31 (25).

expression of their support of Husayn's cause. The analysis in this chapter focuses on the aspect of pain understood as a trans-individual system of communication[120] which, through the use of visual performance, mobilizes meaning and value. Here the individual and collective emotions that are generated and their effect on the body play an important role: The emotional pain caused by the oral narration together with the visual performance of certain historical events are interwoven with the actual physical pain that is self-imposed through certain Shi'i ritual practices. On the last day of *Ashura*, after Imam Husayn had been killed and all the tents had been burned down, some Shi'is believe that the remaining women and orphans were forced to walk on the hot ashes of the burned tents. In memory of this particular historical account, some Shi'is perform the ritual of *mashy 'ala al-jamur* (walking on hot coal). The reciprocal relation between emotions, the body and visuality will be discussed in more detail through examining this particular act of resistance further.

Chapter 4 focuses on the controversial practice of *tatbir*.[121] *Tatbir* is the act of (self-)flagellation by using swords and knives for cutting the body. It is performed on the tenth day of *Muharram* – the day Shi'is commemorate the killing of Imam Husayn (d. 680). This very controversial ritual practice, which is traditionally performed by men, is increasingly practiced by Shirazi Shi'i women. Shirazi Shi'i women in London claim that they have initiated this practice among women for the first in 2007, influenced and inspired since then other Shi'i women to practice *tatbir* in other European countries and in the Middle East including Kuwait and recently Bahrain. The chapter examines to what extent the increasing number of women performing *tatbir* in Europe can be regarded as a form of female religious empowerment thus influencing the gender dynamics within Shi'i ritual practices not only in London but also among other Shi'i communities in other European countries and in the Middle East. The chapter discusses the ritual practice of *tatbir* as a form of what Walter Benjamin calls the "aestheticization of politics" through sensational forms[122] that are portrayed as a symbolic power of not only gender but also sectarian and ideological differences opposing certain political regimes and religious movements within Islam.

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[120]　　C. Nadia Seremetakis, "Durations of Pains: a Genealogy of Pain," in *Identities in Pain*, ed. J. Frykman et al. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998), 151–168 (151).

[121]　　Mirza Husain al-Na'imi, the *marja' al taqlid* (source of immolation) in Najaf, was known to be in favour of the practice. As Ende argues "until today, this *fatwa* by a *marja al-taqlid* (and even more significantly a "progressive" one) is considered by the defenders of the flagellations as one of the most important proofs for the religious correctness of their position," Werner Ende, "The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi'ite 'Ulama'," *Der Islam; Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* 1, no. 5 (1978), 19–36 (29).

[122]　　Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Chapter 5 examines the historical theological and hagiographical as well as contemporary portrayal of the figure of Fatima. It analyses the significance of Fatima's presence in women-only *majalis* in the Republic of Ireland, the UK and Kuwait and to what extent her images and roles support women's agency and contribute to the attainment of gender eschatological equality within Shi'i ritual practices. For Twelver Shi'is, Fatima is remembered as a woman who embodies Shi'i notions of woman- and motherhood, for being the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad, the wife of Imam Ali and the mother of Imam Husayn. She therefore occupies a special status as a member of the prophet's family, the *ahl al bayt*.[123] This image, however, changes over time and space, influenced by the religio-political contexts of the *majalis* as well as communal function she is remembered in. She is believed to be spiritually and, in some cases, also physically present during commemoration ritual practises held by Shi'i believers remembering the death of her son Imam Husayn. Fatima's apparitions and other miraculous events during *majalis* are linked to the transformation of women's empowerment within their communities; in addition, to women's recent increasing contribution to Shi'i ritual practices particularly those which traditionally have been regarded as male dominated practices. Fatima's apparitions are seen as a divine intervention in support of women's transgression of these specific patriarchal religious boundaries. Women's apparition narratives are instrumental in overcoming gender inequality in the performance of religious practices. Women's claims for their right to participate in certain Shi'i ritual practices is strengthened and, to a certain extent, legitimised through Fatima's appearances.

Chapter 6 focuses on the production of art in form of poetry and sermons but also material and visual culture expressed through banners, posters and graffiti as a form of resistance and reordering of the political system. In the context of Twelver Shi'a Islam, writing elegies and performing them in mourning rituals has been a central element in lamenting the death of Imam Husayn. The lachrymal expressions and descriptions that characterises this lamentation poetry have the religious and ritualistic function of metaphorically identifying the participants with Imam Husayn and uniting believers in the fight for his cause. Yet, very little is known about Shi'i lamentation poetry (*husayni marathi* (pl.), *ritha'* (sg.)). This chapter focuses mainly on lamentation poetry written by men but

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[123]   Ruffle explains, "Fatimah's sons trace their descent through her and not through their father 'Ali, as is customary according to the patriarchal system of patrimony". Karen G. Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shi'i Devotional Literature and Performance," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010), 386–397 (396).

performed by women during women-only *majalis* in Kuwait and London. It discusses how poetry, as an artistic production, is politicised locally but its impact transnationally transmitted. The chapter also examines women's use of banners, posters and graffiti as a form of resistance art[124] to articulate their own definition of power and authority within both the private as well as the public space in Bahrain.

Chapter 7 brings back the discussion on the definitions of resistance, female agency and its link to the aesthetisation of politics. In order to understand Shi'i women's self-inflicted pain practices as a sign of power and resistance we need to examine the various structures and forms of power[125] existent within the social structures and fields women operate in. Resistance in this book is used as a *"diagnostic* of power"[126] that enables us to examine the historical shift in the formations and methods of women's exercise of power. The structures and strategies of power are constantly evolving and expressed in numerous local and transnational everyday acts of resistance. Shi'i women in this study share and articulate nationally and transnationally their role in contributing to the historical continuation of Shi'i actions of resistance through the introduction of a new definition of the *new* Shi'i *woman* representing it as a declaration of their true 'Shi'a-ness'. Shi'i women use performativity, language, symbols and signs to construct a new version of the 'Shi'i woman' that is able to counter and resist male hegemonic power structures. Gendered narratives of masculinities and femininities take place. As a conclusion for the book, I argue that through women's self-inflicted pain ritual practices, a new female aesthetisation of the feminine subject is defined, produced and articulated on and through the female body: Women stained with blood, scars, burns and hit marks are regarded as markers of women's religiosity, self-sacrifice and female martyrdom, to achieve gender equality in eschatological terms. The newly defined Shi'i woman is a symbol of the performativity of power dynamics but also the performativity of women's actions resisting existing power structures that lead to a female Shi'i transnational collective reordering of power.

Resistance in this study is articulated through Shi'is performativity of the political through speeches, poems, theatre and art as well as numerous other bodily practices to express defiance and resistance locally as well as transnationally. These highly visible but also those less visible acts of resistance are part of women's political and religious movements within Shi'a Islam. This book offers unique ethnographic material on Shi'i

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[124]   See Charles Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East," *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2012), 393–409.
[125]   Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance".
[126]   Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance".

Muslim women communities in various geographical contexts and provides readers with a novel perspective on Muslim women resistance movements. The growing intensification and politicisation of an alternative set of practices of resistance among Shi'i women are positioned within a larger discussion on local as well as transnational inner- as well as trans-sectarian power dynamics within Islam illustrating thereby the roles women play in reshaping and redefining them.

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CHAPTER 1 TRAJECTORIES OF SHI'IS IN THE GULF AND THEIR PRESENCE IN EUROPE [MAJOR CHANGES]

The Shi'i ritual practices as performed, perceived and described by the women I have interviewed since 2009 are embedded within the women's political, religious socio-economic, geographical local as well as transnational contexts. Before analysing how these contexts are articulated by the women within their ritual practices, an overview of the situatedness of the Shi'i population in the Middle East and in Europe is essential. This chapter illustrates the power-relations between Sunnis and Shi'is as expressed in the ruling structures in the countries covered in this book but also within the wider context of the Arab Gulf and the relationship to Iran in the region.[127] The illustration of the political and socio-economic context of the countries covered is important as the ritual and discursive practices as well as textual productions of Shi'i women are connected to the ongoing geo-political developments and the position of Shi'ism. These practices and productions are in response to the geo-political context in the Middle East and its impact on the Shi'i population in Europe. There is a reciprocal relationship between the context, ritual practices and Shi'i women's empowerment. The power dynamics within this triangulation is not linear or constant but is in continuous change, reflecting the unsettled political situation of the region as a whole. The illustrated political references in this book only include the geo-political context of the region up until 2018 and do not intend to present a comprehensive history of the presence of the Shi'i population in the Gulf.[128] Rather, the aim is to provide the reader with a general picture of the power dynamics between the Shi'i population and the ruling elites and their impact on Shi'is' relationship to their states in the Gulf. This is important in order to understand the empirical examples and case studies discussed in the chapters to follow.

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[127] For more on sectarian tensions in the Middle East, see among others: Vali Nasr, The Shiʿa Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future (London: Norton, 2007; Yitzhak Nakash, "The Shiʿites and the Future of Iraq," Foreign Affairs 82, no. 4 (July–August 2003): 17–26; Michael Scott Doran, "The Heirs of Nasser: Who Will Benefit from the Second Arab Revolution?" Foreign Affairs 90, no. 3 (2011): 17–25; Nakash, Yitzhak. Reaching for Power: The Shiʿa in the Modern Arab World. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006; Fibiger, Thomas Brandt, 'Sectarian Non-Entrepreneurs: The Experience of Everyday Sectarianism in Bahrain and Kuwait". Middle East Critique, 2018, 27(3): 303-316.

[128] On the history of the presence of the Shi'i population in the Gulf, see Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (Columbia University Press, 2008), Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shiʿism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015). See also Ḥaidar Saʿīd, ed., *Al-Shīʿa al-ʿArab: Al-Huwīya wa-l-Muwāṭana* [translated by the editor as: *The Arab Shiites: Identity and Citizenship*] (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019).

The Arab Shi'a in the Gulf
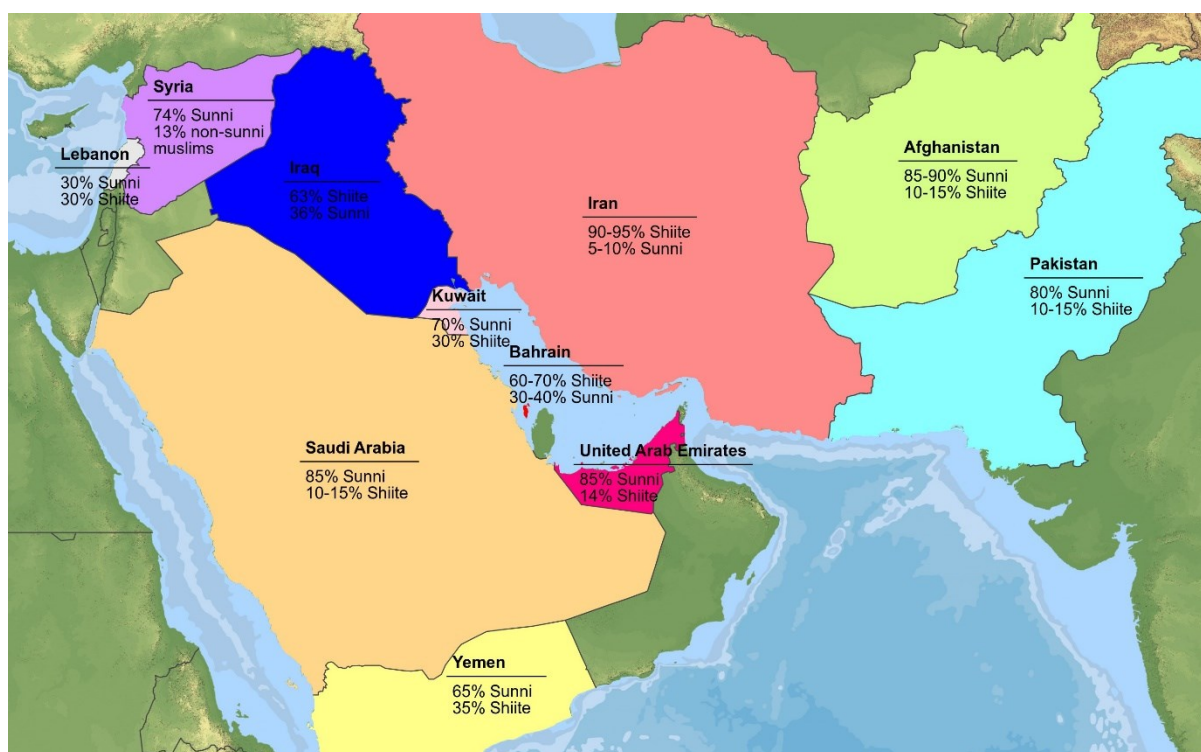
[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 1 HERE]

Figure 1: Distribution of Shi'ism and Sunnism in the Middle East @Shanneik [129]

The world's Muslim population is estimated around 1.8 billion with Shi'is constituting 10–13 % of the overall Muslim population.[130] In the Gulf region, there are numerous distinct sects and groupings.[131] After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the various nation-states in the twentieth century, the Shi'i population in the Arab Gulf had to

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[129]   All data taken from Wolfgang Gieler and Sabine Wege, *Staatenlexikon Asien: Geographie, Geschichte, Kultur, Politik und Wirtschaft,* Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021. For Afghanistan, see Andreas Dittmann and André Staarmann, 13-28; for Irak, see Andreas Dittmann and André Staarmann, 151-170; for Pakistan, see Andreas Dittmann, 389-404; for Bahrain, see Wolfgang Gieler, 49-62; for Saudi Arabia, see Louisa Sofie Kropp and Natalja Geringer, 417-434; for Syria, see Wolf-Dieter Lassotta and Martin Schwarz, 471-488; for Lebanon, see Wolf-Dieter Lassotta and Schirin Vahle, 305-316; for Yemen, see Markus Mess, 223-232; for United Arab Emirates, see Bruno Munoz-Perez and Mohammed Zarouni, Mohammed, 557-566; for Iran, see André Staarmann, 171-188 and for Kuwait, see Zeynep Yilmaz, 287-296. In addition for Saudi Arabia, see: Saudi Arabia: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/#people-and-society and for Syria, see: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society.

[130]   Some sources estimate between 10 and 20%. See various sources: Pew Research Center, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030," http://www.pew-forum.org/files/2011/01/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf, accessed June 2019; Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabic, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, An Imprint of Stanford University Press, 2013); CIA factbook, available: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/world/#people-and-society, accessed 27 January 2021.

[131]   Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprising and the Rebirth of the Shia-Sunni Divide* (Oxford Scholarship online, 2017), 2.

construct new identities and to "redefine their relations with newly emerging states, and to non-Shi'i ruling elites backed by Western powers".[132] The degree of the new Arab nation-states' accommodation and acceptance of their Shi'i population has varied and changed according to geo-political changes in the region. In countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the Shia population is significantly high and "have been afflicted with varying levels of political marginalization, economic deprivation, and religious discrimination".[133] The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 not only shifted the Sunni- Shi'a power-dynamics in the area placing the Shi'a into the centre of political discourses in the Middle East but it also impacted on inner-Shi'i power relations, through the establishment of Iran's Islamic Republic and the consequent increase of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's (d. 1989) political and religious power, particularly within the global Shi'i clerical leadership structures (*marja'iyya*). The most important seminary institutions of Twelver Shi'ism which also hosted the most senior clerical authorities in Shi'ism were based at that time in Najaf in Iraq. The Iranian Revolution consolidated the shift of the centre of Shi'i Islam and of Shi'i clerical authority from Najaf to Qum in Iran - a trend that started 30 years earlier.[134] The Islamic Revolution in Iran transformed the dynamics of transnational Shi'i politics significantly. Qum has developed to a, if not, the major transnational centre of Shi'i learning. Sectarian hostilities in the region were further fuelled through the mobilisation of Shi'is in Iran's neighbouring countries.[135] Until the late 1980s, the political leadership of the Islamic Republic sought to export the Islamic Revolution toppling neighbouring regimes by mobilising local Shii communities. The Iranian-backed Hizbullah in Lebanon is one of the most successful examples of Shii political mobilisation as it is the most powerful political movement in contemporary Lebanon and has been central to the political mobilisation of Shiis within the country. The increasing power of Iran in the Gulf influenced the relationship between Iraqi parties and movements and the Iranian regime with the former having been eager to maintain their independence from Iranian political control and financial dependency.[136] The Islamic Revolution and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 have

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[132]   Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 7.

[133]   Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf. From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 16.

[134]   Nakash argues that the establishment of the Sunni-dominated Iraqi state in 1921 led Najaf to a "socioeconomic and intellectual decline, and in the middle of the twentieth century was superseded by Qum in Iran as the major Shi'i academic center [and] […] became the centre for disseminating Shi'i ideas." See Naqash, *Reaching for Power*, 19.

[135]   Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 31.

[136]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power* as well as Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 69–75.

contributed to an increase in religious discrimination against Arab Gulf Shia. Saddam's fall further shifted sectarian power dynamics in the region allowing thereby the rise of the so-called Shia crescent.[137] Saudi Arabia deployed a Salafi and anti-Shia discourse as part of its Shia counter-mobilization strategy against the increasing power of Shii political actors in the region who are often portrayed as collaborating with Iran.[138] The post-Baʻathist period in Iraq during which Shia Islamist parties have gained in power has also been perceived as a challenge to countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain who feared their Shia population to become inspired by the Iraqi change of sectarian power dynamics.

Not only the historical influence of the Iranian regime in the Gulf and its eagerness to control the Shiʻi transnational sphere religiously, ideologically and politically, but also the uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 influenced the wider socio-political and economic position of the Shiʻi population in the Gulf.[139] The anti-governments protest and armed rebellion that spread across much of the Arab world during these uprisings were particularly for Gulf regimes, increasingly unsettling, undermining their legitimacy and threatening their power in the region. Shia in the Gulf have used familial and clerical links to other Shia in the Middle East but also in the European diaspora for increasing their political and religious empowerment in their own nation-states challenging thereby the ruling monarchies' status quo by demanding more rights for their Shia population. These transnational ties also include the transnational religious authority of the sources of emulation (*majraʻ al-taqlid*) of senior Shia clerics who provide followers with religious, juridical but also, in certain cases, socio-political guidance. Clerical leadership in Shiʻi Islam has oscillated between political and non-political clerical participation.

The Shiʻi population in both the Arab Gulf and in the European diaspora is ethnically, socio-economically, but also religiously diverse. They follow a wide range of Shiʻi religious authorities and emulate different supreme sources of emulation (*marjaʼ al-taqlid*) to whom they pay religious taxes (*zakat* and *khums*). These taxes are redistributed across their networks for charitable and educational purposes building thereby a social system of their

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[137] King Abdullah of Jordan warned in 2004 about the spread of the Iranian influence from Beirut to the Persian Gulf describing it as the Shia crescent.

[138] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 17 and 18.

[139] For a discussion on Arab Shiism, see Rola El-Husseini and Mara Leichtman, "Arab Shiiʼism and the Shiʻa of Lebanon: New Approaches to Modern History, Contemporary Politics, and Religion," Welt des Islams 59, no. 3–4 (2019), 253–281; Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*.

<mark>own. Numerous clerics who are based mainly in Qom and Najaf compete over the allegiance of lay Shi'is as it provides them with religious, social but also economic capital.[140]</mark>

The following sections offer an overview of the environment in which Shia communities live in in Kuwait and Bahrain and their transnational links to Shia in the diaspora in Europe. The integration of the Shi'i population within wider Arab Gulf societies, their acceptance and the degree of their involvement in the various political and governmental sectors of each nation-state differs. Whereas in Kuwait, the Shi'i population is generally not seen as a threat to the ruling regime, the case is different in Bahrain where Shi'i political groups have been perceived as a major political threat to the existing political order and regularly linked to the Iranian regime.

Kuwait

In Kuwait, the Shi'i population forms with 20–30 percent[141] a minority within a Sunni state ruled by the al-Sabah family.[142] Kuwaiti Shi'is are one of the most diverse and distinct Shi'i groups in the region in terms of their ethnic, economic, political and ideological backgrounds.[143] Living in Kuwait since the 18th century, Shi'is in Kuwait are divided according to a) different ethnic compositions between Arabs (originally coming from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, named al-Ahsa, and Bahrain) and *'Ajamis* (Shi'is of Iranian origin)[144], b) political groups such as: The National Islamic Alliance (NIA) (*al-Tahaluf al-Islāmi al-Watani*) and the Assembly of Justice and Peace (*Tajammu' al-Adala wa al-Salam*).[145] These various groups follow different *maraji'*: The National Islamic Alliance

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[140] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986); Pierre Bourdieu and Wacquant, Loic J. D., *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[141] Some estimations are higher than 30–40 percent. See Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 159.

[142] Falah al-Mdaires, *Islamic Extremism in Kuwait: from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al-Qaeda and other Islamic Political Groups* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 76.

[143] Ḥasawi and Baharna are Arabs coming mainly from Southern Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Ahwaz coming from Southwest Iran (Arabistan) and 'Ajam are Kuwaitis of Iranian descent. For a more detailed description on the background of Kuwaiti Shi'is, see Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 157–158; <mark>Anh Nga Longva (1997) *Walls Built on Sand*: *Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).</mark>

[144] For more on the historical development of the various Shi'i schools in the region, see Toby Matthiesen, "Mysticism, Migration and Clerical Networks: Ahmad al-Ahsaʾi and the Shaykhis of al-Ahsa, Kuwait and Basra," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34, no. 4 (2014), 386–409; <mark>Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 41-40.</mark>

[145] Hamad H. Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: The Case of the Kuwaiti Shia," *The Muslim World* 106, no. 1 *Special Issue: Overcoming Sectarian Faultlines After the Arab Uprisings: Sources, Symptoms and Solutions* (2016), 109–126. <mark>For a discussion on the *hadhar-badu* divide, see: T.</mark>

(NIA) for example follows the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) and before him his predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), accepting, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Khamenei's political leadership. The Assembly of Justice and Peace are followers of Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi (b. 1942), and before him his brother Muḥammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001). Whereas the first group has been, since the Iranian revolution in 1979, predominantly politically active and has developed into one of the most influential Shi'i groups in Kuwait, the Shirazis have focused more on religious activities since the 1970s. Rivalries between these two groups go back to the 1980s: Ayatollah Muḥammad al-Shirazi at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution was a great supporter of Khomeini but later disagreed with the autocrat direction Iran took which caused long-lasting disputes until today.[146]

Kuwait is one of the most liberal states in the Gulf with free elections for parliament allowing different political groups to compete and a fairly free press which also includes media outlets of diverse groups such as Shi'is. The Shi'is are therefore generally supportive of the ruling al-Sabah family. However, some political incidents have caused certain Shi'i groups to dissociate themselves from the ruling regime: Kuwaiti authorities for example denied Khomeini entry when he tried to find refuge in Kuwait after his deportation from Iraq. Another reason relates to Khomeini becoming more critical towards existing regimes in the Gulf and their attitude towards Shi'is in their countries after the success of the Islamic Revolution. These two reasons have led his followers in Kuwait in the late 1970s and beginning of 1980s to shift allegiance away from the regime, demanding more influence within the government and a change in Kuwait's political discourse towards Shiis in the Gulf more generally.[147] Shi'is' later activism in the 1980s however were due to "the Iranian revolution, […] the decimation of the Iraqi Da'wa party, many of whose members fled to Kuwait; the emergence of Islamic Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon; and above all, the strong support given by the Kuwaiti government to Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war."[148] The Iran-Iraq war worsened the relationship between the Shi'i groups and the Kuwaiti regime. The Kuwaiti government was in support of Saddam Hussein as they feared the influence of the Islamic

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Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, p. 94; Anh Nga Longva (2006) Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38, pp. 171–187; Claire Beaugrand (2013) *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait* (London: I.B. Tauris); and Farah Al-Nakib (2014) Revisiting Hadar and Badu in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing and the Construction of a Dichotomy, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46, pp. 5–30; Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 41-43.

[146] Oliver Scharbrodt, *Creating Shia Spaces in British Society: The Role of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in North-West London* (Berlin: Springer, 2018).

[147] Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", 113.

[148] Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 155–156. See also similar observations in al-Mdaires, *Islamic Extremism in Kuwait*.

Republic of Iran in the region and its intention to export the revolution to other regimes in the Gulf. Within these ongoing sectarian conflicts and Shi'i activism, some Shi'is were imprisoned, their nationalities revoked or were deported from Kuwait.[149]

The sectarian tensions in Kuwait witnessed a shift when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. Most Shi'i political groups and business elites supported al-Sabah and remained loyal to the ruling family articulating their allegiance to the Kuwait state and its ruling family – an act that supported the Shi'is' acceptance into Kuwaiti majority society.[150] Fuller and Francke explain: "the shared ordeal of the Iraqi occupation helped create a stronger feeling of nationhood among Kuwaitis than one can find in most Arab countries today."[151] Different to Bahraini Shi'is, the al-Sabah family allowed Kuwaiti Shi'is to play significant roles in the political and economic sectors,[152] holding important positions in the army and the police force. Shiis are generally not regarded as a threat to the Kuwaiti regime.[153] The positive attitude of the Sunni ruling family in Kuwait towards their Shi'i population made Kuwaiti Shi'is establish a supportive relationship to the ruling family by supporting the government in efforts to counter the political influence of Sunni Islamists, such as the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood.[154]

This however caused an increase in the Sunni/Shia divide in the country. Yasser al-Habib for example is a well-known Shia cleric who in the beginning of the 21st century attracted public attention through a series of anti-Sunni sectarian statements. In 2003, al-Habib was arrested and sentenced to ten years imprisonment for his disparaging remarks on the first two caliphs and the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha.[155] He was, however, pardoned by the Kuwaiti emir a year later.[156] Still active in his anti-Sunni rhetoric and before being rearrested, he fled to London where he continues to stir sectarian tensions in Kuwait and the wider Gulf region. Habib's political transnational activities are expressed through his UK-basedsatellite TV network, al-Fadak, and various other media outlets which he regards as "the step towards a revolutionary Shia mediascape"[157] through which he mobilises transnational political activism. The majority of Kuwaiti Shi'is I talked to disassociated

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[149]   Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", 114.

[150]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 38.

[151]   Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 156.

[152]   Some held influential positions in the oil industry and in the mid-1970s became minter of oil. See more Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 42.

[153]   Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 161.

[154]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 38; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 69.

[155]   Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*,.

[156]   Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 207.

[157] Own translation, see, https://elaph.com/Web/news/2010/9/597933.html?entry=articleRelatedArticle, accessed 13 Jan 2021.

themselves from al-Habib and rather highlighted the privileged situation Shi'is in Kuwait live in compared to other Gulf countries.

In 2011, intensive anti-Iranian and anti-Shia rhetoric was also employed by Sunni politicians who used social media outlets to heighten the Sunni/Shia divide in the public sphere.[158] Although not to the extent of the uprising in Bahrain, Kuwait also witnessed a political uprising in 2012: a blog and a Twitter account were published under the name *karamat waṭan*, (Dignity of the Nation)[159], which called for mass demonstrations against the government's plans to undergo changes in the electoral system that were considered to reduce the opportunity for opposition parties to constitute a majority in the National Assembly.[160] Not all Shi'is supported such reform movements as they criticised the sectarian discourse of some figures in the movement and argued for a wider aim of such movement beyond a Shi'i-Sunni dichotomy.[161] The movement was however contained by the authorities soon after, either by revoking the citizenships and deporting or persecuting Shi'i activists.[162]

The increased sectarian rivalries in the public space presented a challenge to the security situation in Kuwait. The rise of militant anti-Shii movements such as ISIS conducted several attacks on Shiis in Kuwait: In 2015, The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant claimed responsibility for the attack of the Shi'i al-Imam al-Sadiq Mosque, one of the oldest mosques in Kuwait, which caused the death of around 27 and injuring hundreds of Shi'i worshippers. In response, several security measures were in place during the time I conducted fieldwork in Kuwait in 2015. Particularly in public Shi'i centres but also in semi-private religious gatherings: metal detectors were used and large handbags were not permitted inside religious gatherings. The atmosphere was tense as people were worried about further attacks. Women I talked to had faith in the Kuwaiti government and authorities to control the situation as generally speaking they feel protected by the government from radical Sunni militant actions.[163] The response of the government contributed to Shi'is feeling secure in Kuwait: Sabah al-Sabah, the then Emir of Kuwait, visited the site after the attack[164], offered free treatment of the injured, attended the funeral of the victims and a year later he reopened

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[158] See for example the Shia tweeter Nasser Abul. For more see, Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 244.

[159]   A similar movement happened in 2009 named 'Irhal': "*nastahiqq al-afdal* (we deserve better)". See Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", 119

[160]   Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring".

[161]   Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", 123.

[162]   Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", 124.

[163]   See similar observations in Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 164.

[164]   http://alwatan.kuwait.tt/articledetails.aspx?id=440699; accessed March 2020.

the mosque with a number of government officials being present.[165] The government's hands-on attitude provides, to a certain extent, Kuwaiti Shiʻis with an additional sense of reassurance and contributed to a narrative of the national inclusion of Kuwaiti Shiʻis, which the government is eager to foster as well.

Bahrain

The situation is very different in Bahrain, where Shiʻis, who with 60-70 percent constitute the majority of the population but are discriminated against in various political, economic and educational sectors.[166] In contrast to Kuwait, whose ruling family views the Shiʻi population as allies particularly after Saddam's invasion in 1990, al-Khalifa, the ruling Sunni family in Bahrain, relies on foreign powers and international financial aid to secure their authority within a Shiʻi majority country.[167] By the end of the 18th century, al-Khalifa had to invite Sunni tribes to settle in Bahrain in order to stabilise the Shiʻi/Sunni balance on the island.[168] As Nakash explains, "[t]he newcomers regarded social standing as a matter of tribal lineage […] and looked down on the Shiʻi cultivators, peal divers, and fishermen as a nontribal population."[169] The Sunni population enjoyed a preferred status in Bahrain, whereas the Shiʻis benefited less from state support as part of Gulf rentier states. Bahrain established a close political and military alliance with Saudi Arabia to protect itself from any invasion of Iran. The decline of oil revenues also led Bahrain to rely on Saudi's financial support, which, by the end of the twentieth century, reached up to 45 percent.[170] The al-Khalifa had to employ a large number of foreign workers in the economy and the bureaucracy, as well as in the army and the security services, attempting thereby "to prevent the rise of political organizations

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[165]   https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-mosque-ravaged-by-daesh-bomb-reopens-1.1846540; accessed June 2019.

[166]   See also Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*. Most of the grievances listed by Fuller and Francke have been mentioned by Bahraini Shiʻis and also Sunni women I interviewed in Bahrain, such as harassment of Shiʻi communities, imprisonment of Shiʻi activists without fair trials, discrimination in housing benefits as well as in University education (University seats as well as scholarships). See Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 136–137.

[167]   See Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 120–154 and 161–162.

[168]   See also Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 120–125; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʻa Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʻism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 145; Omar H. AlShehabi (2017) Contested Modernity: Divided Rule and the Birth of Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Absolutism in Bahrain, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44(3), pp. 333–355; Omar H. AlShehabi, Contested Modernity. Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Bahrain. One World Academic, 2019); Fuad Khuri (1980) *Tribe and State in Bahrain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press); Mahdi Abdalla al-Tajir (1987) *Bahrain 1920–1945: Britain, the Shaikh and the Administration* (London, New York: CroomHelm).

[169]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 47.

[170]   See Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 46. See also Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 152; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*; Safran Nadav, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985).

and labor unions that cut across regional and sectarian lines."[171] The increase in expatriates in the workforces particularly in the security and economic sectors in Bahrain not only caused high unemployment rate particularly among the Shiʻi population, with some sources stating it as high as 30 percent,[172] but also impacted on Bahrainis' understanding of their national identity and relation to the state.

In 1981, the Shiʻi Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, led by foreign clerics such as Iraqi-born Hadi al-Mudarressi (b. 1957) and the Iranian Sadiq Ruhani (b. 1926), attempted a coup which was unsuccessful, however caused lasting effects in the relationship between the Sunni ruling family and the Shiʻi population.[173] Similar to Kuwait, certain Shiʻi and Sunni political oppositional parties have since the early 1990s worked together demanding more political transparency, reduction of number of foreign workers, return of exiles and release of political prisoners (to name only a few). Although originally al-Khalifa promised after the oppositional uprising in 1994 negotiations with these parties, Al-Khalifa accused, particularly the Shiʻi groups, of collaborating with Iran and attempting another coup.[174] The promised fundamental reforms were not implemented and, in order to strengthen his power in the country even more, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa declared himself king, changing thereby the State of Bahrain to the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2002.[175] The now King together with his son Salman as the crown prince increased their own authority through changing the structure and the power of the parliament, the Bahrain National Assembly (*al-majlis al-watani al-bahraini*). It now consists of two chambers: The elected Council of Representatives (*majlis al-nuwwab*) and the appointed Consultative Council (*majlis al-shura*). Before 2002 and based on the 1973 constitution there was only the democratically elected Council of Representatives.[176] After 2002, the King introduced the Consultative Council which is entirely appointed by the King himself curtailing thereby significantly the power of the elected Council of Representatives with both having 40 members each. So, with 40 loyal members in the appointed Consultative Council and sufficient loyal parties in the

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[171]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 48.
[172]   See Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 49 as well as Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 137–138.
[173]   See Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 125–127.
[174]   "Bahraini Shiʻis argued that the Al Khalifa invoked Iran in order to undermine the nationalist credentials of Shiʻis, to pose as "the guardian of the Sunnis," and to undercut the demands for job opportunities and political reform." See Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 53; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 37 and Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 130–131; Munira A. Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment," in *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion*, eds. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick (New York: St Martin's Press 1997), 167–188 (182–183); Laurence Louër, "Sectarianism and Coup-Proofing Strategies in Bahrain," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013), 245–260.
[175]   Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 31-32; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 15.
[176] For which women did not have voting rights.

elected Council of Representatives, the parliament does not pose a serious threat to the ruling family and the government. The majority of Shii political parties opposed this significant decrease in the power of the elected chamber of parliament, which further disenfranchised the country's Shii majority population.[177]

Bahraini Shiʿis' attitudes towards citizenship and their understanding of Bahraini identity has been questioned when al-Khalifa, once again, in 2011 invited Sunnis such as from Saudi Arabia, Syria or Jordan to come and settle in Bahrain to alter the Sunni/Shiʿi demographic balance in the country.[178] These newcomers "were granted citizenship and housing, and their children were enrolled in special schools."[179] Bahraini Shia are not only underrepresented in key government ministries but are also prohibited from certain professions such as in serving in Bahrain's security and military services. These recent Arab immigrants were recruited to serve in the security services and made responsible for protecting the regime.[180] That Al-Khalifa granting these Sunni newcomers not only social benefits but also citizenship has been criticised by many women I interviewed for this study. The women repeatedly mentioned the existence of a group of Bahrainis who have Iranian origin (also known as *'Ajam*)[181] but were born in Bahrain and have lived without a Bahraini citizenship (also referred to as *bidun*, meaning 'without citizenship'). Granting outsiders Bahraini citizenship but denying it to other Bahrainis, is, for many Bahraini Shiʿi women I talked to, a clear declaration of sectarian ostracism and refusal as one women explains:

> Can you imagine, the government refuses to give people Bahraini nationality – people who have been living here for centuries, but those who just came yesterday are given Bahraini citizenships immediately. The problem is that these people seriously think they are now Bahrainis and live this lie even by suddenly feeling a moral obligation to serve the king and protect his kingdom. This is unbelievable but it is the reality for so many people who are literally stateless. The problem is however that their stateless situation has been imposed on them by their own state!

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[177]   Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, 32.*
[178]   Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 33; Laurence Louër, "The Political Impact of Labor Migration in Bahrain," *City & Society* 20, no. 1 (2008), 32–53; Frances S. Hasso" The Sect-Sex-Police Nexus and Politics in Bahrain's Pearl Revolution", In: *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016, 105 – 137.
[179]   Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 54. See also Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 108–109.
[180] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, 33*.
[181] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, 34*.

Women referred in our conversations to the *Baharna* who are, as I was told, those Bahrainis who have lived in Bahrain before the al-Khalifa conquered Bahrain in the late 18th century: "In the Shi'a collective memory […] the Al Khalifa and their tribal allies are frequently described as usurpers and conquerors".[182] *Baharna* are regarded as the original inhabitants of Bahrain and are dominantly Shi'i.[183] This "nativist argument" or "nationalist myth"[184], as Matthiesen calls it, separates the al-Khalifa ruling family from the 'true' Bahrainis.[185] Naturalised Bahrainis, coming from Jordan or Syria who have been given positions in the security sectors are made responsible for violence exercised against Bahraini Shi'is, their torture in prisons and eventual killing as explained by one interviewee I talked to in Bahrain: "A fellow Bahraini will never kill his own brother even if that person was a Shi'i. They [the ruling elite] had to bring people from outside to gain control on their population".[186]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION3 HERE]

Figure 2**:** Bahrain 2015: A cemetery in which a number of the Bahrain victims of the 2011 uprising are buried

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[182] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 33.

[183]   'Ajam are those Bahraini Shi'is who originally come from Iran. For very similar observations see Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 29–30. See also Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, 120–121.

[184]   Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 30–31.

[185]   See very similar observations Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a* who argue that that Bahraini Shi'is "tend to view the al-Khalifa to this day as outside Sunni conquerors and oppressors, and modern events have done little to change this mindset" (122). See also Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 30.

[186]   For very similar observations see Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 30. BBC also reported similar observations: "Later that year, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa brought in troops from neighbouring Sunni-led Gulf states to restore order and crush dissent. The unrest left at least 30 civilians and five policemen dead", see https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000, accessed June 2019.

The constant pressure in the form of denial, discrimination and repression on the Shiʻi population caused, similar to several other countries in the Middle East as part of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, a wave of mass protest against the authoritarian rule of the al-Khalifa government. On 16 February 2011, demonstrators rushed to the Pearl Monument[187] in the capital city of Manama to revolt against the ruling government. At the start, this revolution attempt was not characterised as a Shiʻi revolt but rather as a Sunni-Shiʻi opposition cooperation similar to the one in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.[188] As Matthiesen, who observed the uprising in Bahrain 2011 reports, the slogans, posters and paintings on the tents which were placed in the sit-in demonstration at the Pearl roundabout increasingly gained Shiʻi references. Through linking the political situation in Bahrain with the historic and socio-political narrative of Karbala, pointing at political prisoners, political exiles and the suppression of the Shiʻis in general, the revolution increasingly turned to a Shiʻi uprising. The situation intensified when supporters of the Shirazis held up slogans for political reform during the demonstrations. Through the Shirazis' transnational connectedness, other Shirazis in the Easter Province in Saudi Arabia joined protests in their own localities[189]: "The Shirazis are not key in the protests, they represent a minority, but their political views and activities in the roundabout are diverse and – together with Hadi al-Mudarrissi's speeches from abroad – may well lead to a confrontation with the government."[190]

When I visited Bahrain in 2015, protests were still ongoing particularly in Shiʻi dominated villages. The Bahraini regime tolerates, to a certain extent, these protests as long as they do not approach the capital Manama or are seen by Bahraini Sunnis or international mainstream media,[191] as Fuller and Francke also explain:

The villages demonstrate the degree to which Shi'ite communities are now living in almost total isolation, cut off from the rest of the island by security forces and under

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[187]   Also referred to as Pearl Square.

[188]   See Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*; Marc Valeri, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain: Opposition Cooperation Between Regime Manipulation and Youth Radicalisation," in *The Dynamics of Opposition Cooperation in the Arab World: Contentious Politics in Times of Change*, ed. Hendrik Kraetzschmar (New York: Routledge, 2012), 129–149.

[189]   Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 19.

[190]   Hadi al-Mudarrissi is a very well respected religious figure among Bahraini Shiʻis across the board. He also was the leader of the 1982 failed coup in Bahrain. For more, see Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 34.

[191]   Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 45.

heavy police guard. Poverty and poor conditions are widespread; houses are poorly built and in a state of serious disrepair.[192]

Many of these villages, however, were either partially or completely under siege – blocked off entirely through checkpoints guarded by police cars and army tanks:[193]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 33 HERE]

Figure 3: Bahrain 2015: Example of a partially sieged village border

One particular village, Draz[194], has been under siege for years as it is the village of Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim (1937)[195], the spiritual leader of the political Shiʻi oppositional Islamic party al-Wifaq.[196] Al-Wifaq is the largest Shia Islamist political party[197], which tried to work within the government and occupied eighteen out of forty elected seats in the Council of Deputies, before their withdrawal in the 2011 uprisings.[198] During the uprisings in Bahrain,

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[192]   Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʻa*, 139.

[193]   Mass collective punishments on entire villages began in Bahrain already in 1997 to control the episode of serious unrest in Bahrain between 1994 and 1999. For more, see Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, 34-35.*

[194]   Some write it Diraz or Duraz. I will refer to it in the way the Bahrainis I talked to have pronounced it.

[195]   Similar actions were taken in Saudi Arabia against the cleric Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr that led to his arrest in 2009. Al-Nimr was known for his anti-Saud and anti-Salafi rhetoric that gained a lot of supporters in his village of al-ʻAwamiya as well as internationally. His arrest sparked international attention and solidarity. On transnational solidarity for the arrest of Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, see Yafa Shanneik (2018), 'Moving into Shia Islam: 'Process of Subjectification' among Shia Women Converts in London', in: *Moving Into and Out of Islam*, ed. by Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdunas Racius, 130-151. Austin: University of Texas Press.

[196]   Sheikh Isa is also regarded as the spiritual leader of the Shiʻi community as a whole. See also https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000; accessed June 2019. More, see Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Shiʻism in Bahrain: Marjaʻiyya and Politics," Orient 4 (2009): 16–24.

[197] See Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 68 and Marei and Shanneik, "Lamenting Karbala in Europe".

[198]   Haqq and the February 14 Youth Coalition are other Shii political movements in Bahrain who were more critical towards the Bahraini monarchy. For more detail, see Machlis, Elisheva. 2016. "Al-Wefaq and the

al-Wifaq party was declared illegal, the citizenships of their members revoked, including Sheikh Isa's.[199] They have been accused of promoting sectarianism and causing a threat to the interests and security of Bahrain by the government.[200] Sheikh Isa has been in house arrest since, until he was taken to hospital in London in 2018 to receive medical treatment.[201] The Bahraini Minister of Interior justified actions against Sheikh Isa by accusing him of serving foreign interests, mainly Iran, and promoting "sectarianism and violence"[202] through adopting "theocracy and stress[ing] the absolute allegiance to the clergy".[203] Some of the al-Wifaq MPs and their families I met in London during religious gatherings have placed the situation of Bahrain in the focus of discussion. One of the wives of one of these MPs explains:

> My husband was in London when the government of Bahrain decided to strip his citizenship off him. I was in Bahrain with our children. We were unable to see him for months. He had no passport and was stuck here in London. Now after eight months I am able to see my husband again. He has not seen his children yet.[204]

The situation of these MP families was very challenging as their salaries were cut off, their assets were frozen and any governmental benefits such as scholarships for their children were stopped as the wife continues: "We lost everything. The government tries everything they can to make our lives hard and to humiliate us. Yes, we are Shiʻis but we are Bahrainis and we have the right to stay Bahrainis". The Bahraini citizenship law however allows the government to revoke citizenships from anyone who is believed to cause harm to the interest and security of the Bahraini kingdom.[205] The inhabitants of Draz as well as other Shiʻi groups I met in various other areas in Bahrain strongly support Sheikh Isa and are willing to protect him: "Draz is like Karbala but we are not Kufans. We will protect every single person, old,

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February 14 Uprising: Islam, Nationalism and Democracy – The Shiʻi-Bahraini Discourse." *Middle Eastern Studies* 52 (6): 978–995.

[199] Human Rights Watch. 2018. "Bahrain: Hundreds Stripped of Citizenship: Bahrainis Deported from Homeland." Accessed June 26, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/27/bahrainhundreds-stripped-citizenship.

[200] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/bahrain-strips-religious-leader-nationality-160620122338238.html; accessed March 2020.

[201] Sondoss Al Asaad, 'Bahrain's Ayatollah Qassim Treated in London', https://en.mehrnews.com/news/135714/Bahrain-s-Ayatollah-Qassim-treated-in-London, accessed 13 Jan 2021.

[202] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000; accessed June 2019.

[203] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000; accessed June 2019.

[204] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000; accessed June 2019.

[205] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000; accessed June 2019. See also Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 46.

young, man, woman, children in Draz. Yes, they besieged Draz but they will never dare to enter it because they know that all Shi'is in Bahrain will stand against them." This particular woman was referring to the betrayal of the people of Kufa who did not come to help Imam Husayn, despite their numerous assurances to support him in his revolt against the Umayyads, according to the Shi'i tradition.[206] The Bahraini families I met who live in Draz describe their village as the 'Gaza of Bahrain' referring to the same besieged situation in Gaza as one of the women describes:

> Similar to Israeli check-points, we have here Bahraini check-points. Like people of Gaza who are humiliated by their Israeli colonizers, we in Draz are humiliated every single day.[207] Every day when going to work our cars need to be checked, making the journey to work ten times longer than it would usually take. It all also depends on the [...] soldier at the checkpoint it could take sometimes for ever until we are out.

The women described how Draz has developed to a prison, "if you are not from the village, you are not allowed to get in. You, for example, would not be able to enter as my guest or visitor. We are completely cut-off. The government does not want to allow anyone in so their violation of our human rights is not reported outside of Bahrain". The Drazis had to be in their village by a certain time. Depending on the security force at the check-point they can be refused to enter. After having dinner with a groups of Drazi women, they were very keen to finish early in order to go back home: "if we come late, the officer at the check-point might not allow us to get back to our families and children. They would order us to turn our cars, drive away and spend the night outside." With these women being al-Wifaq members and mainly from the *Baharna*, they represent a strong nativist stand: They stressed that those officers at the check-points are not from Bahrain but rather foreigners brought in from outside as one of the women explains:

> [T]hey are not Bahrainis. A Bahraini would never tell a group of women to spend the night outside and not allowing them to go back to their families. The government played it well. They knew that Bahrainis would never treat other Bahrainis in such a

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[206] One of the women explains further by saying "Banu Umayya is everywhere here and next door and next door and next door all targeting Shi'is but they can wait long. Shi'is will never surrender. Our heads have been up since the battle of Karbala and will stay until the appearance of the Mahdi".

[207] Another woman compared the Israeli settlers with the al-Khalifa family who settled in Bahrain by the end of the 18th century saying "They [Al Khalifa] are not *Bahrana*. They are settlers. They forced themselves in and now are ruling over us through force. Al Khalifa are *yahuud Bahrain*."

cruel way even if they are Shi'is. Instead they brought these savages in, allowed them to hold our passports and take our benefits.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, the toppling of Saddam Hussein and Shii political empowerment after 2003 and the events and regional repercussions of the 2011 Arab uprisings paused a threat to the Gulf security system particularly to those with high Shia population such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who feared sectarian upheaval within their borders. As Wehrey explains, Shia in these countries possess "a strong revolutionary potential, rooted in frustrated expectations for economic improvement, political marginalization, and growing cultural discrimination."[208] Shia political activists and protesters in these countries supported each other by exchanging experiences and strategies for reform and change. Bahrainis in the diaspora in Europe, as the following chapters will illustrate, feel responsible for bringing the Bahraini political context to the *majalis* held in London in order to raise awareness of the Bahraini situation abroad which, as they believe, has not gained much international attention due to the lack of access to the country.[209] The women's transnational connectedness with various Bahrainis in exile as well as in Bahrain itself enables them to transport the Bahraini political case to Shi'i communities around Europe. As this book will demonstrate, expressions of solidarity received from Shia in the diaspora in support of Arab Gulf Shia more generally in their demands for more socio-political and economic rights contribute to transnational political mobilisation. As one Iraqi Shia in Dublin explains: "Our brothers and sisters in the Gulf need to know that they are not alone in their fight for freedom and equality. We are there for them. We will support them in any way or form." Events in the homeland, thereby, influence and affect diasporic communities abroad in the way they define themselves but also in their relationship towards their homeland and other coreligionists. Such events influence diasporic communities' strategic choices and political actions locally as well as transnationally. Political changes in the Middle East empower and mobilise Shia in the diaspora urging them to undertake political actions across transnational spaces.

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[208] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 48.
[209]   More on Transnational Bahraini politics in London, see Fouad Gehad Marei and Yafa Shanneik (2021), "Lamenting Karbala in Europe: Husayni Liturgy and Discourses of Dissent Amongst Diasporic Bahraini and Lebanese Shiis', Islam and Christian Muslim Relations, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1827341, accessed 13 Jan 2021.

Shi'is in Europe[210]

The Muslim population in Europe is very diverse in its ethnic, socio-economic, educational but also religio-sectarian background.[211] Its presence goes back to the time of Muslims' occupation of al-Andalus and other parts of Europe during the Ottoman Empire, as well as European colonialism of various Muslim territories.[212] The Shi'i population in Europe constitutes indigenous Shi'i communities such as Alevis, mainly from Turkey, but also Azeri Shi'is in countries of Eastern Europe that were part of the Soviet Union. Shi'a-oriented Bektashi Sufis in Anatolia and the Balkans have influenced the Shi'i presence in Greece, particularly in its north-eastern region.[213] The Shi'i presence in Europe is primarily also due to various migratory patterns going back to the 19th century, when students of South Asian background came to the UK to study, for example.[214] The majority of Shi'is coming to Europe however came predominantly in the mid-20th century, either as students or migrants and later as asylum seekers, constituting thereby a wide Shi'i diversity in terms of nationalities, cultural and ethnic belongings as well as religious affiliations, ideologies and practices, but also educational and socio-economic backgrounds. In the UK for example, in the 1970s a wave of students came from countries such as Uganda (Khoja Shi'a), Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, but also a number of business people from Iran and other Gulf countries.[215]

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[210]   This part relies extensively on the special issue of the *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2, *Special Edition on Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions* (2017), ed. Yafa Shanneik, Zahra Ali and Chris Heinhold.

[211]   For more on the Muslim presence in various European countries see Oliver Scharbrodt, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Egdūnas Račius, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2016). For an up-to-date overview on Muslims and Shi'is in Europe see, Scharbrodt et al., *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe.*

[212]   Veit Bader, "The Governance of Islam in Europe: The Perils of Modelling," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no. 6 (2007), 871–886.

[213]   Marios Chatziprokopiou and Panos Hatziprokopiou, "Between the Politics of Difference and the Poetics of Similarity. Performing Ashura in Piraeus," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2 (2017), 198–215; Shanneik et al., "Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe".

[214]   Humayun Ansari, '*The Infidel Within*': *Muslims in Britain since 1800* (*London*: C. *Hurst*, 2004). See also Sufyan Abid Dogra, "Karbala in London: Battle of Expressions of Ashura Ritual Commemorations among Twelver Shia Muslims of South Asian Background," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2, *Special Edition on Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions* (2017), 158–178. South African students from an Indian ethnic background were one of the largest international student groups at the Royal College of Surgeons until the late 1960s in Dublin. See Oliver Scharbrodt, "Muslim Immigration to Ireland after World War II," in *Muslims in Ireland Past and Present*, ed. Scharbrodt et al. (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 49–75.

[215]   Karin Hesse-Lehmann and Kathryn Spellman, "Iranische Transnationale Religiöse Institutionen in London und Hamburg," in *Zuwanderung und Integration. Kulturwissenschaftliche Zugänge und soziale Praxis*, ed. Christoph Köck, Alois Moosmüller and Klaus Roth (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), 141–162. Matthijs Van den Bos, "'European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands," *Ethnicities* 12, no. 5 (2012), 556–580.

Labour migrants of Turkish Alevis and Azeris, but also asylum seekers[216] from Pakistan and Afghanistan, headed to countries such as Austria[217], Belgium[218], Germany[219], Italy[220] and the Netherlands[221]. The so-called Celtic Tiger period beginning of the 1990s in the Republic of Ireland attracted many Shi'i migrants and asylum seekers particularly from Iraq.[222] There are large Iranian and Iraqi diaspora communities in the rest of Europe due to the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, but also due to the oppression and persecution of Iraqi Shi'is during the rule of the Baath regime, the Gulf War in 1990 and the increase of sectarian conflicts after Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003.[223] The number of migrants coming from the Middle East, Asia and Africa increased the Shi'i population in Greece significantly since the mid-2000s, mainly coming from Pakistan, and peaked after the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2010. As the main gateway to the EU, the majority of migrants however were only crossing through Greece, heading to seek asylum in northern European countries.

With the increase of the Shi'i population in Europe due to their wide-scale persecution in the Middle East[224], more Shi'i institutions developed. Chain migration of Shia to the UK

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[216] The Shi'i Muslim presence in Norway first started as labour migration, but later constituted mainly of refugees and asylum seekers coming from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Marianne Bøe and Ingvild Flaskerud, "A Minority in the Making: The Shia Muslim Community in Norway," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2, *Special Edition on Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions* (2017), 179–197. The authors again here highlight the difficulty in stating the number of Shi'is in Norway. However they have estimated around 40 000. A similar estimation has been made, as the authors highlight, in Sweden, see: Göran Larsson and David Thurfjell, *Shia muslimer i Sverige: En kortfattad översikt. Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfunds (SST) skriftserie* 3 (Stockholm, 2013), 23.

[217] See Lise Jamila Abid, "Muslims in Austria: Integration through Participation in Austrian Society," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2006), 263–278; Sabine Kroissenbrunner, "Islam and Muslim Immigrants in Austria: Socio-Political Networks and Muslim Leadership of Turkish Immigrants," *Immigrants and Minorities* 22, nos. 2–3 (2003), 188–207; Halima Hadciz, *Der Moslemische Sozialdienst* (Vienna: Safinah, 2013).

[218] There is an estimate of 8 000 to 10 000 Moroccan Belgium Shi'is. For more, see Iman Lechkar, "Being a 'True' Shi'ite: The Poetics of Emotions among Belgian-Moroccan Shiites," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2 (2017), 241–259.

[219] See Robert Langer and Benjamin Weineck, "Shiite 'Communities of Practice' in Germany, Researching Multi-Local, Heterogeneous Actors in Transnational Space," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2, *Special Edition on Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions* (2017), 216–240.

[220] M. Mirshahvalad, "How an Italian Amorphous Space Became a Twelver Shi'a Mosque," *Working Papers Series* 5 (2018), 105–128.

[221] Annemeik Schlatmann, "Towards a United Shia Youth Community: A 'Dutch' Muharram Gathering," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6, no. 2, *Special Edition on Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions* (2017), 260–276.

[222] See *Muslims in Ireland Past and Present*, ed. Oliver Scharbrodt, Tuula Sakaranaho, Adil Hussein Khan, Yafa Shanneik, and Vivian Ibrahim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 113–138.

[223] See Katherine Spellmann-Poots and Reza Gholami, "Integration, Cultural Production, and Challenges of Identity Construction: Iranians in Great Britain," in *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2018), 93–124.

[224] There is an increasing number of European converting to Twelver Shia Islam. See Yafa Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam: 'Process of Subjectification' among Shia Women Converts in London," in

were common among Iraqis but also Iranians who joined their family members and friends particularly in London.[225] London developed, thereby, to the 'Shi'a hub' of Europe with a number of Shi'i centres (*husayniyya*) representing various religious and political factions within contemporary Shiism.[226] Various Shi'i religious and political figures also established their headquarters or liaison offices in London. These offices started to develop a Shi'i "infrastructure"[227] to cater for the diverse Shi'a presence, not just in the UK but the whole of Europe. Bahraini Shiis also contributed to this infrastructure through their own community centres: The Dar Alhekma Trust and Abrar Islamic Foundation in London have developed into key diasporic venues for political debates. They regularly invite local and international academics, political and human rights activists to speak on various political topics currently happening in the Middle East with the aim of raising public awareness on the sectarian situation in the Gulf in particular. In Dublin, the major Shi'i centre, the Ahlul-Bayt Islamic Centre in South Dublin and the Pakistani Azakhana-e Zahra, in Blanchardstown north of Dublin are both closely linked to various Shi'i institutions in London. In Germany, the Iran-funded Islamic Centre in the northern city of Hamburg became the major reference for Shi'is in Germany with close links also to institutions in London.[228] Shi'i communities and their institutions in Europe still have close links with their societies of origin, particularly with various religious authorities and establishments and political parties. Shiis' transnationalism in Europe is closely linked to the transnational mobilisation of a) scholars visiting Shi'i institutions in Europe, particularly during important religious events such as Muharram and

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Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdūnas Račius (New York: Routledge, 2018), 130–151. See also Tripp, C. 2007. A History of Iraq. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Walbridge, L. S., ed. 2001. The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja'i Taqlid. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[225]   Kadhum, O. 2017. Diasporic Interventions: State-Building in Iraq Following the 2003 Iraq war. Coventry: Warwick University; Scharbrodt, O. 2018. "A Minority Within a Minority?: the Complexity and Multilocality of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in Britain." Contemporary Islam. [online]. Accessed November 22, 2018. http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11562-018-0431-0; Cameron McAuliffe, 'Transnationalism within: internal diversity in the Iranian diaspora', *Australian Geographer* 39: 1, March 2008, pp. 63–80; Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma, 'The "Iranian diaspora" and the new media: from political action to humanitarian help', *Development and Change* 40: 4, 2009, pp. 667–91; Cameron McAuliffe, 'A home far away? Religious identity and transnational relations in the Iranian diaspora', *Global Networks* 7: 3, July 2007, pp. 307–27; Reza Gholami, *Secularism and identity: non-Islamiosity in the Iranian diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[226]   See Scharbrodt, "A Minority within a Minority?," 1–19.

[227]   More on the Muslim infrastructure in Europe see Tomas Gerholm, and Yngve Georg Lithman, eds., *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1988); Stefano Allievi, "The Muslim Community in Italy," in *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock, and Bogdan Szajkowski (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), 315–327; Jørgen Nielsen, *Towards a European Islam* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Ralph Grillo, "Islam and Transnationalism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 5 (2004), 861–878.

[228]   The Iran-funded Islamic Centre in Hamburg offers, in collaboration with Al-Mustafa University in Qom, a BA degree in Islamic Theology. See Langer and Weineck, "Shiite 'Communities of Practice' in Germany".

Ramadan; b) assets funding these religious institutions either fully or partially, but also through the collection of the Shiʿi religious tax, *khums*.[229]

With the growing political instabilities in the Middle East since the 1970s, Europe has become an important space for oppositional political parties to develop, and through migrants' transnational links impacted in various ways and degrees on political, social but also religious dynamics in the Middle Eastern region.[230] London in particular developed to the centre for various political movements forming oppositional parties against various governments in the Middle East.[231] The Islamic Daʿwa Party, the main Shiʿi Islamist party of Iraq, built a base in London and became one of the major hubs of diasporic politics in particular around the husayniyya of Dar al-Islam.[232] Contacts to Western governments were coordinated by Shii political groups and institutions in London. The Clinton administration's Iraq Liberation Act (ILA) on 1998 symbolised a shift in Western policy towards Iraq and created the political momentum for the eventual removal of Saddam in 2003. With the fall of the Baaʾth regime, Shii Islamist groups received an opportunity to come to power in Iraq since the Western powers were now interested in cooperating with Iraqi Islamist groups.[233] The Iraqi Shia Islamists opposition parties in exile, such as in London, collaborated with the US-led coalition in Iraq's new state-building project.

For Shia more generally, the removal of Saddam carried the symbolic meaning of revenge for centuries' long Shia victimhood, persecution, human rights violation and displacement.[234] These political transnational links between London and Iraq paved the way for a new sectarian power system in the Gulf region shaped by new sectarian but also new inner-Shii identity formations: "It was a way for us to flourish again. To be present and to mark our footprints in the new Gulf. It did not matter whether you are Iraqi or Bahraini. We

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[229] Shiʿis are obliged to pay to their *marjaʾ al-taqlid* a religious tax known as *khums* which the *marjaʾ* redistributes across the networks that are associated to him for charitable and educational purposes.

[230] For similar argument, see Nadje al-Ali and Khalid Koser, "Transnationalism, International Migration and Home," in *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home,* ed. Nadje al-Ali and Khalid Koser (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–14.

[231] The Bahraini Freedom Movement (BFM) also built a base for their oppositional activities in London. The movement is also referred to as 'Bahrain Liberation Movement'. In Arabic they are referred to as *Harakat al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya*. See Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shiʿa*, 130 and 131. Kadhum explains within the Iraqi diaspora: "Shia political transnationalism from London operated through transnational opposition networks and nodes in Iran, Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Syrian" among others. See Oula Kadhum (2020): Where politics and temporality meet: Shiʿa political transnationalism over time and its relationship to the Iraqi state, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 7.

[232] See Scharbrodt 2018 and 2020.

[233] Allawi 2007, 74 and Kadhum 2020, 7.

[234] Allawi, A. A. 2007. The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the war, Losing the Peace. New Haven: Yale University Press.

are all Shia fighting for the same goal: To be heard and respected" as a Bahraini women in London explains. Shia communities in the European diaspora witnessed in Iraq a start of a new political reality in which long-exiled members of the Iraqi Shia opposition parties in London gained increasing power in building a new Iraq. The diverse political and religious affiliations within the Shia diaspora however allowed a plethora of political alliances but also religious allegiances to various clerical authorities beyond the boundaries of nation-states. For Iraqis in the diaspora it meant a form of 'long-distance nationalism'[235] and non-Iraqi Shiis expressed solidarity as an articulation of their affiliation to a global Shiism. As the Bahraini woman above explained: "It did not matter whether you are Iraqi or Bahraini. We are all Shia fighting for the same goal".

Shia political transnationalism, however, changed its course since numerous terrorist attacks were perpetuated by various militant Sunni jihadi groups on Shia holy shrines and cities – such as the attack on the Shii Golden Mosque in Samarra in 2006; the fall of Mosul in 2014 and the attack on the Shiʻi al-Imam al-Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait in 2015.[236] Whereas Shia transnational political mobilization since 2003 focused on increasing Shia's political presence and power in the region, since these attacks its efforts has been to ensure the protection of Shia and their holy places by improving security provisions to protect against anti-Shia militant groups.[237]

Such political events and the change in sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East have wide-ranging implications on the lived socio-political but also religious reality of Shia in the European diaspora. Shia political transnationalism in Europe is not only articulated in the public sphere through various demonstrations, marches, public talks and lobbying with governments but also through religious gatherings and community events. Religious rituals and practices in Europe have become *the* platform for the 'emplotment' of diasporic Shia into the new sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East. These sectarian tensions have developed as part of a metanarrative of a global Shia consciousness allowing those Shia in exile, who are not allowed to go back to their home countries, to be part of a global cause. Bahrain, for example, is to a large extent closed off for Bahrainis in exile leaving their transnational connectedness limited to their transnational networks with Bahrainis in Bahrain.

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[235] See also Anderson, B. 1992. *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics.* Amsterdam: CASA. See also Saleh 2018, 516.

[236] On intrasectarian clashes and tensions in Iraq in 2005, see Babak Rahimi (2007), 'Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Baʻathist Iraq', US Institute of Peace, available: https://www.usip.org/publications/2007/06/ayatollah-sistani-and-democratization-post-baathist-iraq, accessed 12 January 2021.

[237] Compare Babak (2007), 'Ayatollah Sistani'; Oula Kadhum (2020), 'Unpacking the Role of Religion'.

This disconnect with the homeland generates, as this book will demonstrate, a diasporic formation of Shii unity through ritual aesthetics. The translocalisation of sectarian politics[238] between the Middle East and Europe serves the aim of connecting marginalised and oppressed Shia in the Middle East with coreligionists in Europe – offering thereby a source of solidarity and support to both. It provides Shia in Europe with a sense of belonging to a transnational and de-territorialized global Shia identity.

Transnational Shirazi network

This period of a new Shia-centric political consciousness was also used by followers of Sayyid Muḥammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001). The Shirazis are a prominent clerical family hailing from the Iraqi city of Karbala where the shrine of Imam Husayn is based – the Shirazis are therefore also referred to as the "Karbala group".[239] The Shirazis were always eager to gain recognition within the clerical establishment of Najaf but never quite achieved it. The power dynamics between the Shirazis and the clerical establishment in Najaf led Muḥammad Al-Shirazi to build his own power base in Karbala with a strong local identification in the early 1960s. Because of oppressive policies of the Baath regime, Al-Shirazi left Iraq in 1971 and found a base initially in Lebanon and later inKuwait before settling in Iran after the success of the Islamic Revolution. His exilic itinerary contributed to the establishment of a Shirazi transnational political network that extends also to Europe particularly London where the Shirazis have established a base since the early 1980s. The aim was to build a visible Shirazi presence amidst the growing Iraqi Shia diasporic political formation in the city. The Shirazis are known to be in clear opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran and were never part of the mainstream Shia establishment. Yet, they have been very keen in maintaining a distinct factional profile and identity within the Shia diaspora but also transnational Shia community by particularly insisting on the performance of certain Shia religious practices. One of these practices is the highly controversial act of (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*).

In 2007, the wife of the Ayatollah Mujtaba Husseini al-Shirazi (b. 1943) who is the younger brother of Muḥammad al-Shirazi, announced the religious right of all women to practice *tatbir*.[240] This was a significant moment for Shirazis living in London as it marked a perspectival shift on the role women play in the commemoration and veneration of the killing

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[238] See Marei and Shanneik, *Lamenting Karbala in Europe*.
[239]   More on the Shiraziyyin, see Scharbrodt, *Creating Shia Spaces*.
[240] This information is based on numerous interviews conducted with Shirazi women in London.

of Imam Husayn. Whereas traditionally *tatbir* is performed by men, since 2007 an increasing number of Shia women regard the performance of *tatbir* as their religious obligation to express their 'true' Shianess locally as well as transnationally. The wide-scale practice of *tatbir* among women was therefore first performed in London and then spread to the Middle East. As will be demonstrated in more detail in chapter 4, Shirazis use the practice of *tatbir* among women to assert more clearly their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran whose Supreme Leader Khamenei explicitly outlawed this practice and declared it prohibited (*haram*) in 1994. In a period of high Shia political engagement in which the position of Shia Islam is redefined in the Middle East post-Ba'athist period, the Shirazis use the controversial practice of *tatbir* as a symbolic maker to disaggregate themselves from the increasing number of political movements emerging primarily from London – in particular those that are aligned to Iran.

Similar to the impact Iraqi Shia political transnationalism have had in shaping a new Iraq,[241] Shirazis in London shape a new understanding of Shiism: Shia Islam has taken a new direction in which aesthetic formations expressed through sensory experiences are used to build new local and transnational Shia socialities. Different to the new Shia political direction that has been taken place through diasporic Iraqis' transnational political engagements, Shirazis form new dynamics of community bonding through embodied aesthetic experiences and the material encounter with the transcendental through religious sensory practices. Bodily practices are used as self-cultivation methods to renegotiate a new Shia self that is marked by aesthetic sensory practices and interwoven within Shia traditional narratives around virtues and norms of the *ahl al bayt* (the family of the prophet).

This new Shia self, and in particular the new Shia woman, is used as a counter-discourse to existing power relations within the various Shia communities and the increase in power of Shia Islamist parties in the diaspora. Instead of expressing one's Shianess through political transnational activism - as is the case among the Iraqi political elites in London - Shirazi Shia women demonstrate their 'true' Shianess through bodily practices building thereby new processes of social formations. Alternative distinguishable Shia communities are formed that are not based on political transnationalism per se, but rather shaped by their performativity of the political through aesthetic formations that link the Shia community in Europe to Shia in the Gulf but, more importantly, positioning them closer to the transcendental - supporting thereby their narrative of being the 'true' Shia.

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[241] After all, four of Iraq's prime ministers since Saddam's fall were from the Iraqi diaspora.

Transnational links between Shirazis in London and other European cities as well as their wider networks in the Middle East allows this distinct, dynamic and performative Shia identity to spread to other communities across the Gulf. The proliferation of technology and the rise of social media and other digital platforms enable Shirazi Shia women to immerse themselves in global spaces.[242] Shirazis become active netizens and use their digital landscape to share their particular creative style of mourning with an aestheticization of politics that is expressed through their bodily expressions and sensory experiences. This public visibility and media attention are important for the positioning of the Shirazis in the wider political and religious arena – an arena which historically they have been marginalised from. As this book will demonstrate, this distinct Shia identity and its mediatisation is important for Shirazis' own processes of subjectivication[243] as articulated through language, images, ritual practices, art, poetry, drama, posters and banners. Local and transnational socialities are produced through sensual and embodied experiences to strengthen a Shia collective global consciousness.

Through their distinguishable presence, the Shirazis ensure that the Shia presence is also mapped through their own defined political aesthetic performativity within the new geo-political context of the Middle East. This is achieved, as will be illustrated in the following chapters, through Shirazi Shia women's use of power on three different scales: communal, national and transnational. By operating within these three levels, Shirazi women are able to redefine the centre-periphery dynamics between the Middle East and Europe.

Conclusion

The increasing empowerment of Iran has had an impact on the positionality of the Shi'i population in various Arab countries in the Gulf. Shi'is in both Kuwait and Bahrain discussed in this book, have experienced different degrees of socioeconomic and political encounters with the ruling state. To what extent the Shi'i population in Kuwait and Bahrain has been accommodated within the nation-state has heavily depended on regional factors prevalent in the Gulf region but also domestic political, historic as well as social power dynamics in each country. The relationship between the Shi'i population and the governing elite, whether of support and acceptance or discrimination and suppression, has a long complex history embedded within wider geo-political and economic national as well as international interests.

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[242] On digital diasporas and community building, see Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
[243] Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 10–11.

A new sectarianism in the region and a violence that has not existed in such form before have emerged. The fall of Saddam Hussein inspired other Arab Gulf Shia to take action for reform by reaching out to other coreligionists in the Middle East and in the European diaspora. However, the dominance of Sunni ruling elites in the Gulf has not been challenged. Opposition has either been suppressed or led to "cosmetic reforms and by stoking sectarianism – a bankrupt strategy that left a young generation of Shia increasingly embittered and sparked the protests of early 2011."[244] As a consequence, Arab Shia reached out, formally and/or informally, to transnational political and economic as well as religious support from Iran, Lebanon and Iraq but also other Shia in the European diaspora.

Sectarian tensions in the Middle East went viral with various social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram, becoming a tool for transnational solidarity expressions among and between Shia in the Gulf and in the European diaspora. They proved to be a way for individuals, groups and organisations to release their tensions, anxieties and frustrations. These online spaces were however also used to inflame sectarian tensions further as we have seen by the Kuwaiti cleric Yasser al-Habib who has used his exile in London to mobilize followers in Europe and in the Middle East against the violence imposed by Sunni rulers against their Shia population in the Gulf. In other words, local political tensions in the Middle East are not local any more but rather have become global with a transnational, cross-border and post-national reach. A global transnational Shia consciousness developed allowing Shia in the European diaspora to reconnect and to express their solidarity with coreligionists in the Middle East as well as their support against anti-Shia discrimination around the world.

This Shia sociality was not only expressed through political and humanitarian terrains, as is widely discussed in literature, but has also entered Shia ritual spaces through the aestheticization of politics in form of bodily practices and sensory expressions. As this book demonstrates, Shia women have imported the rising sectarian violence narratives into their religious spaces, *majalis,* constructing thereby a gendered form of resistance not only on the scale of women's involvement in Shi'i ritual practices but also their increasing participation in the politicisation discourses of Shi'is in Europe and in the Gulf.

Shi'i women, whether from the first or the second generation, now living in Europe have close and increasing links with other Shi'i women in various countries in the Gulf. Women exchange through social media, in particular, their religious experiences and views

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[244] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 250.

on political and social matters. Shi'i women in the periphery of Europe through their transnational links influence not only religious practices performed in the Middle East, particularly in terms of the rituals women perform and how they are performed, but also impact on the gender dynamics within Shi'i communities more generally. Shi'i women's negotiations of resistance to existing political and gender structures in Europe influence societies in the Middle East. Through Shi'is' displacement and growing presence in Europe, London in particular, a shift in power has taken place. Whereas in the past Muslim communities in Europe have been influenced by religio-political and social changes in the Middle East, currently, the growing presence, the religious literacy and the political self-awareness of particularly younger Shi'i communities in Europe, influence religious and political dynamics in the Middle East.

Studies on sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East has so far ignored these aesthetic formations of individual and collective Shia subjectivities. This book provides a perspectival shift on the role Shia women play in the transformation of gender power relations in the Middle East by examining the local and transnational mobilisation of Shirazi women through their various aesthetic acts of resistance. Literature on political transnationalism focuses on the importance of the political system in empowering and mobilizing collective action of political actors in political movements through the formation of potential allies and coalitions.[245] Very few studies dealt with the transnational relationship between Shiis in the Gulf and its diasporic population in Europe.[246] For the majority they have focused on the religious and political transnational links of Shia clerical and political Shia Islamist party networks and their mobilization of members and followers in the diaspora. The discussion on religious transnational identity politics in this literature have focused mainly on how religious identity is evolving transnationally and mobilized from the diaspora

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[245] McAdam, D., et al. 1996. Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Tarrow, S. G. 2011. Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics. Cambridge; Studies in Comparative Politics. Rev. & updated 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Tilly, C. 1995. Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834 by Charles Tilly. New York: Harvard University Press; Oula Kadhum (2020): Where politics and temporality meet: Shi'a political transnationalism over time and its relationship to the Iraqi state, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.

[246] Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: sacred authority and transnational family networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia politics: religious and political networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Oula Kadhum (2020), Unpacking the Role of Religion in Political Transnationalism: The Case of the Shi'a Iraqi Diaspora since 2003', International Affairs, 96(2), 305-322; Oula Kadhum (2020), 'Where Politics and Temporality Meet: Shi'a Political Transnationalism Over Time and Its Relationship to the Iraqi State', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 1-18; Emanuelle Degli Esposti (2018), 'The Aesthetics of Ritual – Contested Identities and Conflicting Performances in the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora: Ritual, Performance and Identity Change', *Politics* 38(1), 68-83.

in form of long-distance nationalism to fulfil specific political, civic and humanitarian as well as religious goals within a particular national context.

This study however offers a different angle by analysing how cross-national Shia identities are interlinked with transnational Shia practices embedded within ongoing political and sectarian changes in the Middle East. It focuses on the religious and political mobilization of Shia women articulated through their transnational interrelationships and links to other Shia communities in the Gulf beyond their own countries of origin. Different to other studies on ethno- and Shia political (trans)nationalism which focus on a *single* national context, this study examines Shia transnationalism articulated through aesthetic religious practices performed by women outside the boundaries of nation-states. It argues that the recent political transformations in the Middle East contributed to the emergence of new modes of gendered political expressions particularly since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the increased political and social instabilities caused since the Arab uprisings in 2011 in the region. This book puts forward a new understanding of embodiment, individuality and agency and shifts our understanding of political resistance movements and diaspora politics to incorporate gendered religious agency expressed in creative and aesthetic forms and practices neglected in literature so far.

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> If only Fatima and her father had eyes to see her sons and daughters, dispossessed, wounded, plundered and slaughtered, and the daughters of prophecy with hearts ripped open, grieving over the loss of their beloved ones, their hair flying, coming out of their quarters, striking their cheeks in their misfortune, mourning and wailing, with no protector or guardian. Oh people of sight, discernment and understanding, tell yourselves the story of these children's death and cry to God over one and all, help them with love and tears and grieve over their loss of support. For the souls of these kinfolks, wards of the people's ruler, fruit of the Prophet's heart, darlings, of the virgin 'shining one' [Fatima], and whoever drank with his noble mouth their teeth, and preferred their mother and father over his own.[247]

Shi'is not only visit the shrine in the city of Karbala but also organise religious gatherings, *majalis* (sg. *majlis*) to remember the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters. The practice of *majalis* has a long history; its function however is highly contested: Some scholars argue that before the twentieth century, the Husayni *majalis* were mostly focusing on retelling merely the events at the battle of Karbala through recalling day-by-day historical events in the way they are remembered.[248] The emphasis in the past, as it is argued, was at that time "[…] to make you cry" as one of the *mullayat* in London explains. This is achieved through the use of elegiac poems that set the sad atmosphere in the *majlis*. This act of "performing memory"[249], however, changed in function from a mere passive to active or as one woman in Dublin explains "from emotional to rational" mourning.[250] Another *mullaya* in London, however, argues that this line of argument has only been used and emphasised upon after the Iranian revolutionary ideologue, Ali Shariati (1933-1977), used Shi'i history and *majalis*, in

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[247]   Radi al-Din Ali b. Musa b. Ja'far b. Tawus, *Al-Lahuf fi Qatla al-Tufuf* (Tehran: Dar al-'Alam lil-Nashr, 1929), 84–85.

[248]   Khalid Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon (*al-khotba al-husayniyya*) in Shi'ite Literature: Development, Structure, Venue, Preachers' Titles," *Orientalia Suecana* 54 (2005), 151–178 (161–162).

[249]   Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[250]   As Sindawi argues, preachers have introduced "a variety of meta-physical, ethical and literary topics […] include[ing] Marxism, Capitalism, rebuttal of attacks on Islam, women's rights in Islam, slavery, the family, the relationship between religion and science, and the significance of Islam as a political or an economic system", Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 161–162. On further references for the political use of rituals in modern history, see Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1990), Mary Elaine Hegland, "Ritual and Revolution in Iran," *Political Anthropology II: Culture and Political Change* (1983), 75–100 and Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

particular, as tools in order to mobilise masses and to change widespread perceptions and attitudes towards the role of women in the public sphere. She, as well as other women I talked to in Dublin, London, Bahrain and Kuwait, suggests, that Shi'i *majalis* indeed evoke revolutionary sentiments.[251] They, however, do not believe that this is a product of today's time or that it was different in the past and has now transformed. As a woman in Bahrain explains, "Shiism itself is political … everything is political … a gathering of people more than three is political. How come *majalis* were not?" Her friend adds:

> You need to reduce the value of one side in order to raise the importance of the other side. Shariati's speeches had to gain in value and power. This was done by emphasising the 'change' of Husayni *majalis* apparently have gone through. But there was no change. It always existed. People were only made aware of it before and after the Islamic Revolution.

Their Iraqi friend adds, "why else do you think Saddam prohibited commemoration *majalis*? Because they are political and have always been now and 200 years before!"

The narrative of Karbala and its aftermath is indeed used in the *majalis* that I attended in Europe as well as in the Middle East, as a symbol of Imam Husayn's revolutionary fight against oppressive and tyrannical rule. The Shi'is' historical self-consciousness of their subaltern and oppressed position since the Battle of Karbala is linked to contemporary Shi'is facing sectarian violence and discrimination. This in not only limited to the historical rule of the Umayyads but extends to any kind of autocratic regime today and throughout history. The *majlis* becomes a space for believers to come together and build a group's "master narrative"[252] around the killing of Imam Husayn.[253] Through *majalis* community members gather to remember and mourn as a group the death of the Imam and his companions through the performance of various religious ritual practices: "[r]emembrance gatherings are the most widespread and influential events across the Shia world".[254] This narrative produces a general feeling of a homogenous unified group providing communities with a sense of oneness and

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[251] As Sindawi sums it up the Husayni *majalis* "has today been transformed into a rallying point of revolutionary sentiment among Shi'ites". Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 168.
[252] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.
[253] The killing of Husayn at the plains of Karbala is also referred to as "the Karbala paradigm" in Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, 19–26.
[254] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (London: Longman, 1975), 232.

unity.[255] The Karbala narrative becomes the "ultimate example of sacrifice, the pinnacle of human suffering."[256]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 4 HERE]

Figure 4**:** Shi'i procession in London 2014

Majalis in Europe as well as in the Middle East vary in detail to a certain extent. However, the general structure of the *majalis* is very similar. Preparing a *majlis* requires a lot of engagement and involvement of community members. This applies not only to the *majalis* organised in religious centres, *husayniyyat*, but also to those at home, particularly if a large number of visitors is expected. Which religious ritual practices are performed during a *majlis* depend on gender but also on one's religious affiliation to a particular *marja'* (source of emulation) and one's political views.[257] This chapter focuses, therefore, on the following questions: To what extent does a reconstruction of Shi'i history justify and support women's claim for the right to participate in religious ritual practices they have been traditionally excluded from? What roles do the historic and contemporary self-consciousness and self-awareness of empowerment and resistance play in women's renegotiation of gender boundaries in ritual practices? To what extent do women express authority and power

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[255]   Compare Lake Lambert, *Spirituality: Religion in the American Workplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) as well as David Pinault, *The Shi'ites, Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 103.

[256]   Peter J. Chelkowski, "Time Out of Memory: Ta'ziyeh, the Total Drama," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4, Special Issue on Ta'ziyeh (Winter, 2005), 15–27.

[257]   See Bridget Blomfield, "The Heart of Lament: Pakistani-American Muslims Women's Azadari Rituals," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 380–398.

through men's dependence upon women's performance of certain women-only religious practices?

The Structure of a *Majlis*

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 5 HERE]

Figure 5: *Majlis* in London, 2014

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 6 HERE]

Figure 6: *Majlis* in Kuwait, 2015

There are various ways of holding a *majlis* but in short it consists of readings from the Qurʾān and saying prayers for the particular member of the Prophet's family to be mourned within the *majlis* by a reader (for women by a *mullaya*).[258] The *majlis* usually starts with *hadith al-kisa* ('Tradition of the Cloak'),[259] as it is believed to provide a blessing in the *majlis* developing thereby a protective religious atmosphere in the room.[260] The prayers are standardized prayer texts found in Shiʿi prayer books, such as *Mafatiḥ al-Jinan*[261], and are

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[258]   For more detailed information on the Husayni preachers and their roles see Muḥammad Sadiq al-Kirbassi, *Muʿjam Khutaba al-Minbar al-Husayni* (London: Husseini Centre for Research, 1999), 151; Faysal Khalid al-Kazimi, *Al-Minbar al-Husayni* (Beirut: Dar wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 2004).

[259]   The Tradition of the Cloak refers to the incident when the Prophet Muḥammad one day visited his daughter Fatima, asking her to cover him with a cloak. The prophet asks Fatima, her two sons and her husband Ali to join him. The incident, which is narrated by Fatima herself, refers to the distinctive positioning of the five infallible members of the *ahlul bayt* (also known as the *maʿsumeen*). The Tradition of the Cloak is an essential part of the *majlis*, constituting Shiʿi identity. For more, see Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad: Metamorphosen einer frühislamischen Frauengestalt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002).

[260]   See among others Diane D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 181.

[261]   Shaykh Abbas Qummi (Author), and Ali Quli (Translator) Qarai, *Mafatih al-Jinan: A Treasury of Islamic Piety* (Translation & Transliteration) 2: *The Book of Ziyarah*, 2018,

always linked to the battle of Karbala. This is followed by a *khutba* (oration)[262] which is very complex as it is a combination of a sermon on any topic relevant to the community addressed which always is creatively linked to the narrative of Karbala.[263] The *khutba* is the space where the virtues (*fada'il*) of the members of the prophet's family are highlighted, usually presented in Standard Arabic. This is followed by the illustration of the suffering (*masa'ib*) of *ahl al-bayt*, which is linked to current political sectarian tensions and oppression of Shiʻis more generally. Different to other studies on Shiʻi *majalis*[264], those I visited usually have the *masa'ib* partly in standard Arabic and partly in colloquial Arabic to increase the emotive impact of the oratory, in particular when the *masa'ib* are linked to the current context. There is a smooth turning from the historical to the current narratives. This transition from historical narrative of the battle of Karbala to current topics and back to the narrative of Karbala is called *takhallus*[265] and in popular circles referred to as *goriz* or *nuzul*. This is an important part of the *majlis* as it connects believers not only to Shiʻis' past but emphasises the continuation of Shiʻis' suffering of persecution since the Battle of Karbala through the elaboration on current events. It is here where the narrative of resistance is articulated, starting from the resistance Imam Husayn at Karbala exhibited and continuing with Shiʻis' current resistance against existing oppressive regimes. Speech and bodily performances through self-inflicted pain play a central role in developing a collective emotive attachment to the narrative of resistance. It is the self-representation of Shiʻis' historical and current suffering within the context of the narrative of resistance that generates the self-consciousness of the individual's position within existing political and social power structures.[266]

Once the description of the suffering is through and the peak of the *majlis* is reached, the *mullaya* moves back to the virtues of the family members to end the *khutba*. Blessings to the Prophet Muḥammad and his family are said throughout the *majlis* in the form of a dirge in

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https://www.amazon.co.uk/Mafatih-al-Jinan-Treasury-Translation-Transliteration/dp/1724879243, accessed 1 July 2019.

[262]   See Ahmad al-Wa'ili, *Tajaribi ma ʻa al-Minbar* (Beirut: Dar al-Zahra, 1988), 43; al-Kazimi, *Al-Minbar al-Husayni*, 317.

[263]   Usually excerpts are taken from Ali's speeches, sayings, essays and letters all which are compiled in the book *Nahj al-Balagha* by Ali b. Abi Talib and compiled by al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1009 CE). For more details see M. Djebli, "Nahdj al-Balagha," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 903–904.

[264]   For example Ibrahim al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie des schiitischen Chiliasmus. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des irakischen Passionsspiels* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1975).

[265]   Sindawi argues that the first preacher to have used the "takhallus form" in its present form is Shaykh Kazim Sabti who was born in Najaf and died in 1921. See Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 164.

[266]   Afary equally observes among others that the *majlis* "transgresses temporal and special boundaries of real and imagined worlds." Janet Afary, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seduction of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 47.

order to set the sombre atmosphere in the room. Melodic lamentation poetry sometimes in Standard Arabic, but more often in Colloquial Arabic is chanted, which has a particular effect on the listener as it evokes emotions to the extent of weeping and self-beating to express sorrow for the maltreatment and ultimate killing of Imam Husayn, his supporters and members of the family. The *mullaya* can demonstrate her rhetorical skills through her emotionally moving recitation of the elegiac poetry. The greater her agitating skills in moving the collective to the extent of intensive weeping are, the more popular she will become. Weeping for the Prophet and his family is believed to be a source of salvation for which every Shiʻi will be rewarded[267] the participants during a ritual oscillate between the ordinary and the sacred world that includes the imaginary of the past that stimulates ideas of power and images of the marginal.

The climax of the mourning ritual is reached by beating the chest in line with the rhythmic chanting of the lamentation poetry (*latam*). In unison the participants in the *majlis* become one, through the melodious dirge and the sad atmosphere through the collective grieving, loud sobbing and crying as well as the rhythmic chest beating of each individual in the *majlis*. Through the body and the pain exercised on the body by harsh breast and face beating, believers are united in their sorrow and grief. The agitated state in which the participants are in during the *majlis*, which usually is very crowded, becomes audible by the loud weeping, crying and rhythmic self-beating. This is followed by a long prayer of supplication, "[t]hose who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they will be overturned"[268] which is used to ensure Shiʻi believers that God will take revenge and punish those who have caused suffering to *ahl al-bayt* and to Shiʻis in general: "It is this last sentence that gives you assurance and tranquillity that everything will be fine. Our rights will be returned to us. Everyone who caused or even just wished us harm will be punished and justice will rule for Shiʻis because God is great", as one woman in Bahrain explains.

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[267] See also Kamran Scott Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative: Shīʻī Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001), 151–176, Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ʻĀshūrāʼ in Twelver Shīʻism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), Pinault, *The Shiʻites* and David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala. Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) and Vernon J. Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam. Shiʻi Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). On the different viewpoints on the excess of weeping and the balance between mind (*ʻaql*) and emotion (*ʻatif*) within a Lebanese context see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shiʻi Lebanon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 150–151.

[268] Qurʼan 26:227. See also Mayel Baktash, "Taʻziyeh and its Philosophy," in *Taʻziyeh Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 95–120 (107–109).

The ṣalawat, a phrase repeating "peace be upon Muḥammad and his family and grant them victory against the oppressors [Shirazis would very often add: 'and curse his enemies']" helps to punctuate, control and unite the audience in the *majalis* again. This can be repeated several times (usually three times) until the audience is set to start or restart the *majlis* after a short break. The *majlis* ends by blessing the Prophet and his family, reciting a visitation prayer (*ziyara. pl. ziyarat*)[269] by facing to the direction of Husayn's tomb, recite the opening chapter of the Qurʾān (al-Fātiḥa) for the benefit of the hosts of the *majlis* and for everyone in the room as well as for the salvation of all Shiʿis.

As D'Souza argues, the *ziyara* invocation appeared in the second century A. H. to allow Shiʿis who were unable to perform the actual pilgrimage, *ziyara,* to the burial site of Husayn to do this during a *majlis*.[270] In the European diaspora Shiʿis feel closer to and united with these burial sites particularly among those who either cannot go to these sites because of financial or/and political reasons:

> The last time I did *ziyara* to our beloved Imam Reza in Mashad was back in the 1980s when Saddam forced us to leave Iraq. Since being here in London, I always come to the *majalis*. It gives me a feeling of being just there … there … Where I once was with my beloved Imam Reza.

The prayer in the *majalis* becomes what Pierre Nora calls *Erinnerungsort* which refers to spaces, objects or events that have a significant meaning to a particular groups' collective memory.[271] The performance of *ziyara* transforms the believer spatially to another place. Depending on the individual's own memory and emotional attachment and experiences to the site this could either be the shrine in Karbala, Qum, Mashhad or in Damascus. The collective memory refers to Connerton's 'master narrative' of the Karbala paradigm but the individual's memory of each believer in the *majlis* carries each women to an *Erinnerungsort* of her own

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[269]   The visitation of the tomb of Imam Husayn and other imams has developed into one of the rituals in memory of the deceased imams. It constitutes part of Shiʿis' collective memory expressed on the tenth day of *Muharram* (known as *ziyarat Ashura*), the day Imam Husayn was killed, and forty days after (known as *ziyarat al arba'een*). The *ziyara* is however also done as part of the commemoration ritual within a *majlis*, where believers are symbolically performing a *ziyara* by turning towards the tomb direction reciting thereby their visitation prayer. For more, see Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origins of 'Ashura'," *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993), 161–181.

[270]   D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 96.

[271]   Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: 'Les lieux de mémoire'," *Representations* 26, no. 7 (1989), 7–24.

memories as well.[272] The emotional and physical collective pain generated through religious practices position Shiʿi women within a *majlis* in a state of subjectivation, which forms the foundation for mobilising the individual in a collective to develop one's own narrative of religious, political and social resistance as will be explained further in the following chapters.

The Religious, Political and Social Dimension of Rituals

Whereas from the outside Husayni commemoration rituals might look very similar, as this book demonstrates, they differ in style, content, form and function and are influenced by ethnic, cultural, religious and political elements. Rituals and their meaning develop and change over time.[273] Who is doing what in the *majlis*, how and for which purpose are constantly negotiated within Shiʿi communities.[274] In the Lebanese context, for example, as Deeb describes, changes occurred around "condemning self-injurious *laṭam*, removing myth and exaggeration from *majālis*, de-emphasizing Zaynab's tears, and prioritizing revolutionary meaning over soteriological".[275] The topics discussed within Husayni *majalis* go beyond its religious message and cover a wide range of topics such as educational, ethical or social.[276] The most dominant function however among the *majalis* that I attended in Europe and in the Middle East is the political.[277] Specific political parties support religious ceremonies and use them for their own agenda.[278] Various preachers address current political issues and play a crucial role in mobilising the masses. The Iranian *Muharram* rituals of December 1978, for

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[272] On *Erinnerungsort* within a Shiʿi context, see Yafa Shanneik, "Shia Marriage Practices: Karbala as Lieux De Mémoire in London," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2017), 1–14.

[273] See also D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 84.

[274] See Yafa Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam: 'Process of Subjectification' among Shia Women Converts in London," in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdūnas Račius (New York: Routledge, 2018), 130–151.

[275] Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 153.

[276] See al-Kazimi, *al-Minbar al Husayni*, 317 as well as Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 166–167. On the various functions of a ritual see D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 80.

[277] On the political meaning of *Ashura* see Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative," Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿa Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), Emrys Lloyd Peters, "A Muslim Passion Play: Key to a Lebanese Village," *Atlantic Monthly* 198 (1956), 176–180, Gustav E. Thaiss, "Religious Symbolism and Social Change. The Drama of Husain," in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis in Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 349–366. Within a migrant context in Australia, see Paul Tabar, "Ashura in Sydney: A Transformation of a Religious Ceremony in the Context of a Migrant Society," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002), 285–305.

[278] Sindawi refers in this context to the Daʿwa party (founded 1957), the political movement in Iraq lead by Muḥammad Baqir al-Sadr, who explicitly see their support of religious ceremonies. See Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 167 as well as Shumran al-Ijli, *Al-Kharita al-Siyasiya fi al-Muʿarada al-Iraqiyya* (London: Dar al-Hikma, 2002), 176.

example, were "turned into rituals of revolution"[279] and turned the crowed "[…] against the Shah's regime".[280] It is therefore not surprising, as Sindawi continues, that Imam Khomeini repeatedly stated: "Whatever we have we owe to Ashura".[281] The link between religious gatherings and political reform and activism with intellectuals and religious leaders emphasising *Ashura* being "the reality of Shiʻis not only of the past but also of today" as one *mullayat* in London describes, has always existed.[282] During the Safavid and Qajar era, commemoration rituals were performed to consolidate the legitimacy of the rulers and allow them to appear as supporters of Shiism. The Safavids encouraged these rituals to foster the Shiʻi conversion and Shiʻi identity of Iranians.[283] What has changed in the last 50–60 years, however, is that these rituals are used as a tool to mobilise Shiʻi communities against the nation-state, as happened in Iran and later in Iraq. In other words, commemoration rituals become a tool to preserve Shiʻi communities in light of an autocratic state and to mobilise resistance against it.[284] Therefore, Husayni commemorations are useful tools, as this book illustrates, to support or counter existing power structures.[285]

The structure of the *majlis* consistent of narrations, poetry, Qurʾān recitations and various smaller and larger ritual practices, allows for variations and opens various ways of interpretations. The oration, for example, delivered as part of the narrative of the *majlis* consists in general of three parts. As illustrated above, it starts and ends usually in Standard Arabic and focuses on a certain event that the narrator wants to recall on that day. In between, however, the narrator moves to a local dialect and fuses it directly or indirectly (depending on the degree of political control the *majlis* operates in) with current religious, political and social issues the narrator wants to highlight. Depending on the experience and eloquent skills of the *mullaya* the shift from the historical to current issues and back to the historical narration is done in such a perfection that the temporal and spatial dimension of the two

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[279]   Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)Forming Meaning, Identity and Gender through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," in *Eternal Performance: Taʻziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 334–379 (335).

[280]   Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 167.

[281]   See Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 167.

[282]   Toby Howarth explains "[i]t is a largely intellectual exercise providing insights into broader theological truths that often go beyond the simple events of Karbala (Toby Howarth, *The Pulpit of Tears: Shiʻa Muslim Preaching in India* (Thesis [doctoral], Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2001), 278). See Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative," Nikki R. Keddie, *Debating Revolutions* (London: New York University Press, 1995), Hegland, "Ritual and Revolution in Iran," Mary Elaine Hegland, "Political Roles of Iranian Village Women," *MERIP Middle East Report* 16, no. 10 (1986), 14–19, and Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*.

[283]   Andrew Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

[284]   See Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʻa Islam*.

[285]   See also David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988).

narrations merge, letting the three parts of the narration appear as one entity or as one event. Shi'is believe that the Karbala paradigm is not only history but, in their opinion, by looking at the systematic oppression and persecution of Shi'is since the battle of Karbala until today, is still their current reality. The *mullaya* in the *majlis* addresses an audience that strongly believes in the continuous maltreatment and suffering of Shi'is.[286] The entire oration is therefore built around this narrative of the oppressed. It is also a way to keep the memory of Karbala relevant to today's time.[287] This is important as this construction of the oppressed stimulates ideas around injustice and forms the emotional platform for people to act against oppressive structures. Ideas around oppression need to be personified in order to allow the women in the *majlis* to identify with them and act against them. It is this subjectivation that allows the subject to develop a self-awareness of one's oppressed position. It is at this stage that the subject is able to perform agency and resistance.

In recent years, drawing analogies between the unjust treatment Imam Husayn and the various oppressive acts against Shi'is within different contexts has intensified.[288] The overall message in the modern reading of the Husayni narrative is the condemnation of injustice and Shi'is' right to oppose their oppressors.[289] By framing it in the context of human rights discourse and social justice, the message of the Karbala narrative becomes universal, allowing it to be embedded within various contexts to fit other narratives – helping thereby the personification of the narrative.

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[286] For the Lebanese-Iranian religious leader Musa al-Sadr (1928) "the revolution did not die in the sands of Kerbala; it flowed into the life stream of the Islamic world, and passed from generation to generation, even to our day. It is a deposit placed in our hands so that we may profit from it, that we draw out of it a new source of reform, a new position, a new movement, a new revolution, to repel the darkness, to stop tyranny, and to pulverize evil." Cited in Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 143.

[287] As Flaskerud argues the main task of the *qare'* is to engage participants emotionally in order to gradually bring them into the mental state of mourning, where they could express their grief and sorrow for the sufferings of the holy persons in the battle at Karbala, in Ingvild Flaskerud, "'Oh, my Heart is Sad. It is Moharram, the Month of Zaynab:' The Role of Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz," in *The Women of Karbala. Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2005), 65–91 (72). On relevance of the Karbala paradigm in current Husayni *majalis* in the UK among particularly the second and third generation of Shi'is in the UK and among converts, see Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam".

[288] Hegland also views the Karbala narrative to be applicable to other context such as the "Pakistani Shi'a as a mistreated and threatened minority, Iraqi Shi'a as beleaguered by brutal Saddam Hussein, and in general Muslims under attack by the West." Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism," 241. For a similar argument, see Hamid Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theatre of Protest," *The Drama Rrview* 49, no. 4, Special Issue on Taʿziyeh (Winter, 2005), 91–99.

[289] For similar observations see Azam Torab, *Neighbourhood and Piety. Gender and Ritual in South Tehran* (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis: University of London, 1998).

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 7 HERE]

Figure 7**:** London procession 2018, "Hussein made selfless stand for social justice"

One of the central arguments of this book is that the main change in Husayni commemoration ritual practices lies in the current discourse within Shi'i communities around women's participation in Shi'i rituals practices that have traditionally been regarded as male dominated ritual spaces. In the following, I will illustrate how women reconstruct Shi'i history to justify and support their claim for more rights to participate in religious ritual practices – from which they have been previously excluded – and will discuss how this reconstruction helps them to reorder gender power relations within their communities.

Women's Role in Shi'i Commemoration Practices

There are various views on the historical development of the Husayni *majlis* and the role women have played therein.[290] Some sources see the first stage of commemorating Imam Husayn initiated by the female survivors of the Karbala battle who were captured by Yazid's forces in Damascus.[291] The women in this study believe – in line with the general view on the Shi'i tradition – that Husayn's sister Zaynab was the first to organise a commemoration ritual gathering in memory of the death of her brother Imam Husayn[292] as one of the women in Dublin explains:

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[290]   See also Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon", 151–178.
[291]   See for example Dakhil al-Sayyid al-Khudari, *Mu'jam al-Khutaba'* 7 (Beirut: Al-Mh'assasa al-'Alamiyya lil-Thaqafa wa-l-I'lam, 1991), 41–46.
[292]   See al-Kirbassi, *Mu'jam Khutaba al-Minbar al-Husayni*, 184.

It is Zaynab who started organising *majalis*. She is the first to have initiated the practice of *majalis*. It is because of her that we remember Imam Husayn and the people who were killed at the battle of Karbala every single year. Year by year thousands of women gather together to remember the people of Karbala and all this goes back to one single woman: Our beloved Zaynab.

For the women in this study, it has been essential to highlight and emphasis the important historical role women have been playing within their communities and society as a whole. Shirazi Shiʿi women specifically referred to historical accounts and incidents in numerous conversations to 'prove' Shiʿi women's important roles in leadership and authority positions throughout history. Not only the *mullayat* but also other Shiʿi women made various references to strengthen women's active position within their societies. It is through these references that women support their claim for their right to participate in Shiʿi religious ritual practices they have been previously excluded from. *Mullayat* in *majalis* encourage women to go back to Shiʿi history and "look for evidence to close the doors of doubt", as they describe it. Women are urged to go back to their books, to their history and look for proof, as "we [women] were not standing silently at the back. Women were active, outspoken and courageous fighting for our right for freedom, equality and leadership" as a *mullaya* in Bahrain explains in one of her very popular *majalis*. The following recalling of Shiʿi history has been repeatedly referred to in my conversations with the women of this study.

Zaynab's role after the battle of Karbala has been indispensable in securing the safety of the remaining family members of those killed in the battle. After the death of her brother, Zaynab occupied the most important female authority and leadership role in Shiʿi history: She is remembered as someone who spoke up courageously in front of Ubaydallah bin Ziyad, the governor of al-Kufa, when she and the other remaining survivors of the Karbala battle were taken as hostages. Ubaydallah bin Ziyad wanted to kill the only surviving male member Zayn al-Abidin, Imam Husayn's young son, and successor as Shii Imam. However, because of Zaynab who interfered and stood up for Zayn al-Abidin that the killing of the fourth imam was prevented.[293] Zaynab is remembered asking Ubaydallah: "O Ibn Ziyad, haven't you had enough of us? Have you not stained yourself with our blood? Will you let any of us survive?"

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[293]   Pinault makes similar observations saying: "Upon Muhammad's death his cousin Ali succeeded him as religious leader of the Islamic community. Upon Husain's death his sister Zaynab succeeded him, if not as a religious leader, at least as imamic regent, protecting the life of the fourth Imam Zayn al-Abidin during the spiritual interregnum until Zayn al-Abidin's health was restored and he could assume his hereditary leadership role as imam." See Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, 83.

She is remembered to have asked Ubaydallah to kill her instead.[294] Ubaydallah who was about to kill Zaynab was stopped by his own people who reminded him that she is only a foolish women and not to make responsible for her words. As one of the *mullayat* in London explains: "This "foolish woman" was at the end the one who prevented Ubaydallah from killing Zayn al-Abidin. Ubaydallah could not kill a woman and definitely not the Prophet's granddaughter".[295]

A similar argument have been put forward by another *mullaya* in Kuwait

with being 'only a woman' it was Zaynab who at the end was able to rescue the only remaining male survivor of the Prophet's family. […] "If they had killed Zayn al-Abidin, the line of Imamate would have been broken. It is because of Zaynab and her courageous protection of Zayn al Abidin that the line of Imamate could have been carried on."

In Bahrain, this narrative has been echoed by another *mullaya* saying:

Zaynab had all the attributes of an Imam. She was the leader of the Shiʻi community for a certain period of time until it was possible for a male Imam to take over and lead the community further. So, once Zayn al-Abidin was ready, Zaynab handed the leadership over to him.

According to Shiʻi doctrine, however, an imam becomes imam upon his predecessor's death even when he is a child or ill, as was the case of Zayn al-Abidin. The new imam possesses divine knowledge from the moment his predecessor dies. So, according to Shiʻi beliefs there is no need for a temporary regent as the imam has all the qualities needed for his role.[296] Shirazi Shiʻi women, however, attribute to Zaynab the temporary role of leadership and responsibility for the community after Imam Husayn's death. This is supported by their re-calling of several historical events such as when Imam Husayn asked Zaynab a night before his death to take care of the orphans after him: "Imam Husayn trusted Zaynab to take care of the community after him. He approached her and no one else to take this responsibility. It

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[294]   See also Muḥammad ibn Jarir al-Ṭabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (*The Caliphate of Yazid b. Muʻawiya*) transl. and annotated by I. K. A. Howard (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[295]   For similar narratives, see Pinault, *Horse of Karbala.*

[296]   See Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʻa Islam* and his chapter on imamate, 31–50.

was Zaynab the woman" as one *mullaya* in Kuwait explains. Shirazi Shi'i women reject the down-playing of women's roles in both mainstream Shi'i accounts but also men's attitude towards their role within as well as outside of their religious communities: "They deny us our right for leadership. They deny us our right to speak up and represent ourselves and others. But if they would only look at Shi'i history – our history – they would find plenty of examples showing how women were playing very important roles in politics and in society" as one women in Bahrain explains.

Zaynab's role, as one of the two most influential Shi'i female figures, has been repeatedly referred to in our conversations to highlight the role she played in fighting against oppressive regimes. She is remembered as someone who spoke up against the Umayyad Caliph Yazid and protected other female members who some men in Yazid's court wanted to take as slaves. Similar to her protection of Zayn al-Abidin, she is remembered to have protected these girls preventing them from being taken as slaves to men: "Zaynab protected the girls who were taken as hostage in Yazid's court. Zaynab the woman. Nobody else. It was her whom they feared. Once she spoke everybody else was silent."

Women and their role in religious ritual practices and gatherings had a huge impact on a social as well as on a political level.[297] Zaynab's house in Medina after their return from their captivity in Damascus became known as "a house of mourning".[298] One woman in Dublin explains: "Women were those who kept up the mourning tradition by organising commemoration gatherings, composing lamentation poetry and reminding people who have been killed and left stained with blood on the plains of Karbala". These mourning gatherings imposed a threat to existing political systems, as the same woman continues, "They were all afraid of her. The way she stood against the Kufans or even against Yazid proved to them that she can even lead another revolution against them. This is why they feared her and feared her *majalis*." D'Souza notes that these home-based gatherings "carried tremendous risk. In the eyes of the Umayyad rulers mourning assemblies were subversive acts, stirring up sympathy and support for the followers of the rebel Husayn."[299] This is the reason why women I have spoken with believe that Zaynab had to be sent away, making thereby references to historical events similar to those noted by Shams al-Din:

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[297]   D'Souza argues: "[S]trong and visible female leadership provides an inspiring role model for girls and women in the community." D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 141.
[298]   See also D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 81.
[299]   D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 81.

[..] the greatest of the family rites of remembrance held by the women was undoubtedly the rites which Zaynab, daughter of Ali, held. They were solemn rites under the leadership of Zaynab. These rites and the anti-Umayyad reaction they generated in Medina prompted the governor of Medina Amr ibn Sa'd ibn al-As to write to Yazid ibn Muʿawiya: "The presence of Zaynab among the people of Medina is inflammatory. She is eloquent, clever, intelligent. She and those with her are determined to take vengeance for the death of al-Husayn." This led to her being taken away from Medina and sent to Egypt where she died on 14th Rajab in the year 62.[300]

Shi'i women in this study criticise the lack of recognition among mainstream Shi'i scholars of Zaynab's crucial role, and of women in general, in the development of Husayni *majalis*. As a response to this lack of recognition, as illustrated above, women frame historical events as part of their own mythical paradigms, in order to find religious evidence to justify their claim for more rights in their involvement in ritual practices and in wider societal and political issues more generally. Dismissing Zaynab's important role as the initiator of Husayni commemoration ritual practices led to the counter effect among women in recent years to develop new ritual practices that allow them entry to transcendental realms that traditionally have been reserved to men. By doing so, women counter prevalent male hegemonic power structures and define them anew through the support of their own framing of Shi'i history. One woman in Kuwait explains:

> Zaynab as a woman occupied a very powerful role – a role some male religious scholars prefer to turn down a bit. Zaynab is a role model for many women particularly young women. This empowerment of women could be a bit worrying or even frightening to some men particularly.

Shirazi women are keen to emphasise and highlight the important role Zaynab played in pre-serving and securing the line of the imamate by securing the survival of Zayn al-Abidin and initiating commemoration ritual practices to retain the memory of Karbala for posterity. Shirazi women who have their own understandings of some Shi'i ritual practices and women's involvement in certain self-inflicted pain rituals need the historical support, as they construct it, in order to strengthen their position in destabilising existing hegemonic male

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[300]   Muḥammad Madhi Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Ḥusayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society* (Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1985), 145.

power structures. Mainstream images of Shi'i female authoritative figures are male constructions of the ideal Muslim woman.[301] Shirazi Shi'i women deconstruct this ideal image and reconstruct a new Shi'i ideal woman that conforms to their own understanding of hegemonic communal, state as well as cosmic power relations. This is done by shaping Shi'i history, particularly around the figure of Zaynab, in a way that allows them to shift gender hegemony within their communities.

Pinault in his study of *Muharram* rituals in India argues that: "[m]ale helplessness among the survivors of Karbala let to role reversals and unexpected inversions of traditional gender-linked behaviour".[302] Shirazi Shi'i women's construction of the period after the killing of Imam Husayn highlights male's absence of power and the vulnerability of *ahl al-bayt* during this period which Zaynab has rescued through standing for justice and freedom in Kufa and Damascus allowing the line of imamate to continue. Male hegemonic order of power in which women take the role of 'helpless men' add to the vulnerability of men at that time. Dismissing this period from certain Shi'i sources helps to relativise the loss of male power immediately after the death of Imam Husayn during the Battle of Karbala.

This perception of Shi'i history is controversial, but provides Shirazis with a strong argument to base their claims for resistance to existing hegemonic male power that restrain women to certain spaces of authority. Shirazi women contribute to a shift in Shi'i women's ideal of passive bystanders mourning the male fatalities during the Battle of Karbala, on the one hand, and challenging political leaders, on the other. Women in this study critically engage with this duality, reset existing gender-limiting boundaries and reconstruct new boundaries of power and authority. Shirazi Shi'is' unique understanding of Shi'i history is part of their Shirazi sociality and collective identity that provides them with the particular Shi'i emotional and physical oneness and unity. The collective pain that is generated alongside the constructed historical narrative expressed on women's body enables women to claim for more socio-political and cosmological equality. Women's body in ritual practices is used to express power, religiosity and equal access to the transcendental. As Hegland observed among Peshawar women, their religious ritual practices allowed them to express

> [...] gender resistance implicitly through their body, and specifically through its engagement in ritual activity. Through Shi'a ritual practices, in conjunction with

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[301]   Denise L. Soufi, *The Image of Fāṭima in Classical Muslim Thought* (Unpublished PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997).
[302]   Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, 73.

changing conditions and perceptions, women formed, transformed and subtly contested meaning, identity and gender.[303]

Different to Hegland's and other scholars on Shia women's participation in ritual practices published so far, this study illustrates the eagerness and willingness of women for unrestricted participation in bodily ritual practices and sensory experiences. The pain experienced through the body communicates meaning and value between individuals, particularly when performed in a collective, but also brings the individual closer to the transcendental. Self-inflicted pain rituals on the female body provide Shia women with the ability to collectively express agency and resistance to dominant patriarchal power structures that impose limits on women's permissibility to participate in ritual to commemorate their imam. There are however at the same time certain practices that are limited to women-only that provide them, as will be illustrated in the following, with authority and power.

Vowing for Intercession

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 8 HERE]

Figure 8: *Sufra* in London, 2014

As mentioned above, nearly at the end of the *majlis*, Shi'is perform a *ziyara* by standing up, facing Karbala, reciting the *ziyara* invocation and asking the Prophet's family for

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[303]   Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism, 242.

intercession. This entreat is in most cases in combination with a vow (*nathr*) which the believer promises to fulfil in exchange for the answered prayers.[304] Very often believers link the *nathr* with the organisation of a *sufra* which is a dining table or cloth that is spread, very often, on the ground on which food of all kind is served in honour of particular Shi'i figures remembered on that day such as Imam Husayn, the female members of the Prophet Muḥammad's household such as Fatima, Zaynab or Ruqaya, Imam Husayn's daughter.[305] The *sufra*, similar to the *ziyara*, is performed to honour *ahl al-bayt* but also to ask for their intersession.[306] It consists of four parts: the *niyya* (declaration of intention), recitations and prayers, a *nathr* and the consumption of food.[307] What is offered during a *majlis* depends on each individual's financial abilities and means. The type of food offered reflects, in most cases, the oration delivered in the *majlis* on that day referring thereby to particular Shi'i religious figures. In addition, the *sufra* is linked to historical events as recalled and remembered in the *majlis* such as the starvation and dehydration of Imam Husayn's family members and supporters on the plains of Karbala[308]; as one of the women explains: "When you do a *nathr* you give whatever you can give and Allah will reward you. You need to believe in it strongly. Allah will reward you. Believe it."[309] Another woman adds: "You can also bring anything you like to the *sufra*. Anything that comes from your heart will be rewarded. The family of the Prophet never forgets anyone."

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[304]   For similar observations, see D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*.

[305]   On Sufra in Iran see Faegheh Shirazi, "The Sofreh: Comfort and Community among Women in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005), 293–309. Among Bektashis in Turkey see Mark Soileau, "Spreading the Sufra: Sharing and Partaking in the Bektashi Ritual Meal," *History of Religions* 52, no. 1 (2012), 1–30. On Sufra among Shi'i Muslims and Zoroastrians in Iran; see Sabine Kalinock, "Supernatural Intercession to Earthly Problems: Sofreh Rituals among Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians in Iran," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 531–546.

[306]   For similar observations, see references above on *sufra*.

[307]   For similar observations see references above on *sufra*.

[308]   For similar observations see D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab* and al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie des schiitischen Chiliasmus*.

[309]   See similar research findings D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 174.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 9 HERE]

Figure 9: *Sufra* in Bahrain, 2015

Rituals include the use of a combination of senses "[b]ut it is only when some substance is in-gested that all of the senses can operate together".[310] Consuming food in a ritualised context involves meaning generated through the collective and individual translation of signs and symbols. As Soileau argues, food and drinks "reflect the beliefs, values, cosmology, history, hierarchical structures, and other aspects of the religious culture"[311] that needs to be translated. The meaning associated with the food on the *sufra* is collectively constructed and through the *mullaya* and the content of her lecture articulated during a *majlis*. The peak of the *sufra* ritual is when the food is ingested as at this point the object of sensation comes inside the subject body. Meaning is generated through the consumption of food and drinks during a *sufra* as one of the interviewees explains: "Eat from the *sufra,* Yafa. It is *baraka*. The *mullaya* reads the Qurʾān over it and the endurance of suffering of *ahl al-bayt* is in this food. It will give you strength to overcome any obstacle." *Baraka* here is, as Torab argues, "transformative and can be transferred to any person by contagion, or it can be somatised through ingestion and the senses (sight, sound, smell, touch)".[312] In the *sufra*, prayer, recita-tion and narration are very important and are spoken over the meal cloth as only through them the food is transformed from ordinary food to ritual food which functions as the vessel that contains *baraka* and links to the divine.[313] The belief in the power of food that has been

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[310]   Soileau, "Spreading the Sufra," 7.
[311]   Soileau, "Spreading the Sufra," 7.
[312]   Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 129.
[313]   See Torab, *Performing Islam* and D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab* as further examples.

==blessed is widely spread in various *majalis* I attended in Europe and the Middle East. Ritual food==, as Torab continues,

> is distinguished conceptually from other food and talked about in the intransitive mode as "becoming imbued with *barakat*" (*tabarrok shodan*) in the ritual context. In effect, women transform food through the actions they undertake (the recitations of *salavat* and prayers, for example) so that it becomes a potent channel for *barakat*, which can be transmitted to anyone who partakes of that food.[314]

==*Sufras* are a form of sacrificial offerings as it involves the communal consumption of blessed food for the sake of receiving *baraka*.== *Sufras* are a way to communicate and link with the divine[315] and spread the affect of this communication to others. One woman encouraged me to wish something for me and my family saying: "Before you eat pray for something you truly want for you and your family. The power of *ahl al-bayt* will *insha' Allah* fulfil it. They never forget anyone. Eat Yafa!"

Despite the critical voices that exist among various Shi'i communities, *sufra* is widely practiced since as one woman puts it: "It works. It has been tried out before. It is worth doing." Some *sufra* practices have particular elements in them that are unique and not widespread such as "the pot of pudding" practice. One of the *sufras* I attended in London placed a pot covered in green cloth at the centre of the sufra.

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[314]   Torab, *Performing Islam* (2006), 129.

[315]   Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 10 HERE]

Figure 10**:** A *sufra* with the pot of pudding, London 2014

The women in the *majlis* were very excited about the pot and wondered whether it has 'worked' or not. I was told that the pot is peculiar as it has been blessed in a particular and unique way. The women believed that a sign will be sent through the pot if the prayers of the *majlis* are to be answered. They would not know what the sign precisely will be but it could be a name of one members of *ahl al-bayt* or any other sign that will be visible through the pudding in the pot. Once the time came for us to consume the ritual food, a sudden silence filled the room and the pot was open.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 11 HERE]

Figure 11**:** The open pot of pudding, London 2014

Suddenly the crowd became louder and all rushed to look inside the pot saying "it worked… it worked ... all our prayers will be answered. Ṣalawat." While saying the *ṣalawat*, the women were very keen to allow me to have a look at the pudding which surface had hardened with many grooves. The women started to follow the grooves and tried to give meaning to them when suddenly a woman explains: "Here you see. It is so clear. Huuuuu-saayyy-n." Another woman added saying very slowly: "And here it says Ruuu-qa-yaa. Oh sisters, it says Husayn and Ruqaya … *Ṣalawat*." The *sufra* was held to honour the life of Ruqaya, Husayn's daughter, who is believed to have died as a child in Damascus out of sorrow for her father's death after the battle of Karbala. The women were filled with joy and happiness about the success of the *sufra* and made more prayers and more *ṣalawat*.

Not only the pudding, but also other food items such as stews are given meaning through relating them to the lives of women today linked and supported by the power of historical Shi'i figures. *Sufrat Umm al-Banin* is another *sufra* that is very popular in Bahrain

for example. Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas is Imam Hasan's son who accompanied his uncle Imam Husayn to Karbala to fight against Yazid's army. It is believed that Abu al-Fadl was captured and taken into prison by Yazid's army before being killed by one of his solders, Abdullah ibn Aqaba. The *sufra* honours the memory of Abu al-Fadl's mother, called Umm al-Banin, who endured the suffering, imprisonment and ultimate killing of her son. A particular stew is cooked for this *sufra*, and women who have male family members in imprisonment believe that they will be released through the power of this stew. Mothers in Bahrain who have sons or husbands imprisoned for weeks, months or sometimes years participate and organise *Sufrat Umm Al-Banin* on a regular basis praying for the release of their male family members from captivity. Those women whose male family members are released are socially obliged to host a *sufra* for other women so their relatives are released as well. This series of *sufra*-making become a social activity and generate a communal feeling of togetherness and sociality in the suffering of losing family members. Successful *sufras* also increase the popularity and, in Bourdieu's terms[316], the social capital of the host but also the religious capital of the *mullaya* holding the *sufra*.[317]

The link between historical and contemporary political issues is apparent in *sufra* practices. Women's suffering of living in a country with lack of security and political transparency caused by increased sectarian tensions, such as in Bahrain, is linked and embedded into the general narrative of the suffering and persecution of Shi'is since the Battle of Karbala.[318] *Sufrat Umm al-Banin* is a way to shift the institutionalised power of the ruling regime to the individualised power of women in the *majlis*. The performative affect of *Sufrat Umm al-Banin* allows women not only to deal with the traumatic affect of losing one's family member but also, symbolically, shift structures of power from the top to the people on the ground. A type of personalisation of power takes place during the *sufra* as each individual person in the *majlis* relates to *Sufrat Umm al-Banin*. Thereby, it becomes a space in which the individual pain is shared and a collective pain is generated and united in the demand of conformity and justice.

The link between current injustices and Shi'is' historic persecution contributes to the aforementioned concept of subjectivation in which the individual's self-realisation of lack of

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[316]   Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
[317]   As Torab explains: "[…] sponsors of votive meals inevitably derive spiritual reward (ajr) and merit (savab), as well as prestige." Torab, *Performing Islam*, 136.
[318]   Torab argues: "Food sharing is a key symbol of equality and striving for harmony," Torab, *Performing Islam*, 135; see on food sharing among Durrani Pashtun also R. Tapper and N. Tapper, " 'Eat This, It'll Do You a Power of Good': Food and Commensality among Durrani Pashtuns," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986), 62–79 (67).

power allows for one's resistance against occurred injustices. Women's expression of resistance to state's violence against Shiʻis in Bahrain is expressed through their performance of *Sufrat Umm al-Banin*. Their belief in their access to divine powers in form of divine intercession to achieve justice expressed through the release of political prisoners after a *sufra* is their way, or to use Foucault's term, their 'technique', to shift existing state power to individual power. By doing so, women position themselves not only as part of the existing political power structures but more importantly as strong actors able to manipulate these power structures through their unique and exclusive access to the divine that is able of intervention.

The practice of *sufra* is disdained among Shirazi Shiʻis for several reasons: They refuse the concept of the *sufra* itself as they argue that believers should be doing good without making a condition to God and that they only need to pray directly to God without the medium of the *sufra* for their prayers to be answered. One *mullaya* in London explains: "You should not give Allah a condition. When Allah wants to give you something He will give it to you without you saying "If you give me this, I will do that. The same is with *ahl al-bayt*. This is disrespectful." Another reason for some women rejecting the concept of the *sufra* is the overemphasis on material goals, expenditure and the associated social prestige.[319] However, more importantly, some Shirazi women reject the ritual as it is regarded as an Iranian practice. The Shirazi family has a long and complex historical and political relationship with the Iranian government – it worsened since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. The Iranian political and religious establishment has expressed in numerous occasions their condemnation of Shirazis religious practices which generated various forms of animosity among Shirazi followers towards practices associated to Iran or which are known to be widely practiced in Iran. Regarding *sufra* as an Iranian practice is-, however, largely contested as others claim it to be a Shiʻi and not a merely Iranian practice.

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[319] Similar observations makes Torab. See Torab, *Performing* Islam, 135–138.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 12 HERE]

Figure 12**:** *Sufra* in London, 2014

This is particularly emphasised among other Shiʻi groups to the extent that the *sufra* itself and the various objects on the *sufra* and the way they are placed become a space for articulating symbolically national identities and allegiances. The picture below illustrates objects that symbolize at least five nationalities within a diverse Shia congregation in London. Some regard the *sufra* as a space that is inclusive of different national backgrounds and on which national distinctions can be overcome. The *sufra* presents therefore a form of supra-national Shiʻi identity in a diasporic setting. Others, however, regard the *sufra* as an opportunity to demonstrate their own understandings of Shiʻi history and meaning of symbols. The women in this particular *majlis* insisted on translating for me what every single object on the cloth means and where it comes from as one woman explains: "The way the food is put in portions and placed in a circle is a Bahraini practice. The brown pudding in the middle is Iraqi. Placing sweets in a box with Husayn written on it is Lebanese. The candles, yes, these are Iranian but the mirror is a Kuwaiti practice."

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 13 HERE]

Figure 13**:** Bahraini-style *sufra* in London

While not all women would agree with this classification of the objects, it is interesting to see how the *sufra* is politicised and made part of inner-sectarian power discourses. The way this particular woman explained the objects to me saying "[…] The candles, yes, these are Iranian," illustrates her awareness of the on-going anti-Iranian discourse among some Shirazi followers in relation to the *sufra* and its association with Iran.

Many Shiis who attended the *majalis* organised in London were exiled from their home countries and were unable to return. The *sufra* is a space to articulate an aesthetic transnational connectedness between these exiled Shiis and their homelands. The objects displayed on the *sufra* are all anchors of memory that enable the reconnection to the places they had to leave behind. The purpose is to keep these memories associated with these objects alive avoiding thereby their oblivion.[320] Shia women organizing such *sufras* engage consciously with processes of remembering but also of forgetting. Through shared memories, individuals engage in meaning-making processes generating thereby a Shia diasporic social bonding. This collective social cohesion around memories of loss but also of hope to return back to the home country contributes to the Shiis' historical consciousness of maltreatment and oppression.

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[320] Compare Pierre Nora 1989.

The objects on the *sufra* become material identifiers of the nation and its loss. Sensory experiences are provoked through the transnational mobility of these objects: sometimes whole objects are brought over to the UK such as baskets, candles or boxes but sometimes only particular parts which are then build and prepared before the *majlis* such as cloth, images or ingredients, as I was told: "It's not that we cannot find them here. Nowadays there are many Iraqi shops in London selling the items we usually put on the *sufra*. But it is not only about placing something on the cloth. When I ask someone who is coming from Bahrain to London to bring me something for my *sufra*, she is not only bringing the object but the scent of home'. Objects are turned into national icons and symbols of resistance connecting Shiis in exile with contemporary political events they have been forced to be disconnected from.

Sufrat Umm al-Banin mentioned above within the context of Bahrain was also organised in London with a similar purpose: the release of political prisoners in Bahrain but also in other countries in the Middle East. Women took pictures of their *sufra* and sent them to their relatives back to coreligionists in the Gulf to reassure them of their support. It also fulfilled the purpose of making Shia in exile feel part of the ongoing struggle in the Middle East. The *sufra* becomes thereby a site of long-distance nationalism[321] that is tied to an imagined global Shii collective identity sharing similar pain of loss that transcend national boundaries. The iterability of the practice of the *sufra* enables the enactment and embodiment of the conflict among not only Shia women in the Middle East but also among Shia in the diaspora. It allows the personification and internalisation of the violence through transnational spaces. The *sufra* enables women's collective engagement on political actions locally as well as transnationally. Women are able to express emotionally and physically current political situations, generating thereby an iterability of affect which is an important performativity process. It is through this iterability that self-awareness of women's ability in changing power relations and structures are achieved. During a *sufra*, particularly after the consumption of the ritual food, women believe to embody the political context allowing thereby their own female bodies to become the vessel for the destabilisation of political hegemonic power. By doing so, they articulate and maintain their communal identities against an oppressive regime and reconstruct inter-communal gender power dynamics: Through women's access to the divine, they belief of their ability to influence and shape current political dynamics in the Middle East anew.

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[321] Anderson 1983.

The *sufra* as a ritual practice symbolises for many women a declaration of gender power within their communities. Men do not perform a *sufra* as it is regarded as "women's practice". Men, however, ask their female family members to either organise and host a *sufra* or ask another woman, who is known for successful *sufras* in which the prayers are answered, to hold one for them.[322] This gender particularity of the practice is seen as women's powerful status within their Shi'i communities as men are dependent upon women's performance of the ritual. Women's ability to connect to the transcendental and ask for intersession also for their male family members is regarded as an opportunity to open up new venues for women's entry into other transcendental realms that are preserved for men only such as (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*). In *sufra* practices, women have access to divine realms that men do not have access to, as one woman in Kuwait explains: "Whenever he needs something he asks me to hold a *sufra* for him". This gendered-privilege is used particularly among *mullayat* to build up women's self-confidence of their ability to access further divine realms. Shirazi women, who for the majority do not support *sufra* practices, look for other rituals such as walking on hot coal (*mashy 'ala al-jamur*) or *tatbir* to expand their territory of accessing and connecting to the divine further.

Conclusion

The *sufra* is a site of ambiguity and contestations. Objects, images, taste and smell all provoke sensory experiences that associate each individual in the *majlis* with particular memories causing thereby sensualized and embodied experiences on various levels: on a local level, the *sufra* becomes a site for the articulation of a national identity that is filled with pride but also sorrow. The variety of *sufra* types and forms represent the various national associations and become a representation of the diverse Shia congregation in London who all engage through this *sufra* in processes of remembering and forgetting. On a transnational level, the *sufra* becomes a form of 'symbolic repatriation'[323] in which Shii women in exile are included within contemporary political events in the Middle East. Through the exchange of pictures with other coreligionists through social media, women feel part of the Shii struggle abroad. This attachment to sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East is intensified

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[322]   For similar observations within Shi'i Islam see Torab, *Performing Islam*. For other examples of 'women-only' practices see Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[323] Lamia Benyoussef, "Gender and the Fractured Mythscapes of National Identity in Revolutionary Tunisia". In: *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016, 51-79 (54).

through the mobilisation of goods but also of speakers who translocate through their narrations in the *majalis* these power relations to the congregation in Europe. Finally, women in the *majlis* feel empowered through the communal consumption of the blessed food allowing them to become closer to the transcendental. The ingestion of the ritual food makes the narratives of remembering and forgetting reach higher levels of meaning as it links the worldly suffering with eternal salvation as the *mullaya* in London reassures the congregation: "Everything goes except your love for the *ahl al-Bayt*. Your suffering will go away as the food on this *sufra* but your love to Husayn will last until the day of judgement where we all will get what we really deserve".

Women carve out ritual spaces for themselves by constructing historical events particularly around the figure of Zaynab to engage in more rituals practices. The lack of recognition of women's historical role can be related: a) to men's aggravation of their status after the Battle of Karbala and b) in contemporary time, to male's fear of deprivation of their control and authority within patriarchal dynamics of Shi'i communities more generally. The latter is done through the exclusion of women from certain ritual practices or assign women to specific ritual practices such as *sufra*.

Women's efforts in gendering female religious spaces contribute to Shi'i women's wider struggle on their social and communal position within their communities and society as a whole. Women work towards a politics of recognition of their position through claiming access to the divine in women specific religious practices such as the *sufra*. By doing so, women deconstruct the historical narrative of Shi'i male redemptive hegemony through contributing to a new understanding of history in which women have played a vital role. By doing so, women destabilise the religious legitimisation and social standing of male redemptive hegemony. Not only historical but also contemporary positions of men's hegemony is reconstructed through women's initiation of their own practices on the one hand and their access to ritual spaces and divine intervention that has been traditionally preserved to men on the other hand. The privilege status of men in expressing their religiosity and connecting with the transcendental is being redefined and restructured through women's participation in not only the same practices but also additional female-only practice to which men are denied access to. Whereas certain links to the transcendental have only been possible for men, now women enter this transcendental realm through allowing themselves access to ritual spaces they were denied before. Women have their own women-only practices but men reach out to those as well by asking women to perform certain rituals, such as *sufra*, on their behalf. Whereas in the past, hegemonic redemption has been limited mainly to men, today

Shirazi women, as this book illustrates, enjoy an empowered position to the extent of being able to redefine gender dynamics in ritual practices and make a gendered hegemonic shift within their communities. This book illustrates various examples of female bodily performances such as theatrical performances (*tashabih*), walking on hot coal (*mashy 'ala al-jamur*) and (self-)flagellation (*tatbir*) to demonstrate how this shift is achieved.

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CHAPTER 3 PERFORMING THE SACRED: EMOTIONS, THE BODY AND VISUALITY [<mark>MAJOR CHANGES IN THE SECOND HALF</mark>]

Tashabih[324] are religious performances commemorating the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters at the Battle of Karbala. They are performed in various public, private and semi-private spaces. This chapter analyses *tashabih* in women-only *majalis* as observed in private and semi-private spaces in Kuwait, Bahrain and the UK.[325] *Tashabih* in this study are not only performed as an integral part of the *majlis* but impact and generate other religious ritual practices such as rhythmic ritual self-beating (*latam*) and walking on hot coal (*mashy 'ala al-jamur*). Besides their religious function, *tashabih* are used as a tool to communicate issues around persecution and discrimination imposed on Shi'i communities. These theatrical performances address these issues in a sensorially rich manner, placing the body at the centre of the construction and production of sensory events. Women, through their own bodies and senses, become active participants and makers of a Shi'i social sensorium.[326] The individual body acts within a sensorialised sociality[327] embedded within a collectivity and expressed through the value and feeling of emotional and physical pain caused by women's participation in self-inflicted pain ritual practices. The religious actors' internalisation and embodiment[328] of rituals are context-dependent and therefore flexible in relating to various social issues concerning the Shi'is in multiple places. *Tashabih* are a social activity that sensorialise the Shi'i world on stage by addressing the individual but also the collective sensory stimuli.

<mark>The purpose of the multi-cited fieldwork is to highlight the specificity of each site relating it to its own socio-political and religious context but also to illustrate how these different sites are similar and interlinked. This fusion of experiences contributes to Shiis' narrative of a global[329] and transnational Shii cause of fighting against injustices imposed on Shiis. Pain is central in this context as it links all experiences together allowing them to be</mark>

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[324] This is the term the women I interviewed used. Some refer to these performances as *shabih* or *ta'ziye* in general. On *ta'ziyeh*, see "Special Issue on Ta'ziyeh," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005), https://www.jstor.org/stable/i405133; accessed March 2020.

[325] I participated in *tashabih* by taking part in the audience engagement with the plays performed on stage.

[326] On the term 'social sensorium', see Adam Yuet Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008), 485–504 (488).

[327] Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social", 487–488.

[328] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 87–95.

<mark>[329] Sufyan Abid Dogra talks within his own research on South Asians in the UK about a notion of Shia globalism. See Dogra 2017 and 2019. Dogra 2019, "Living a Piety-Let Life beyond Muharram: Becoming or Being a South Asian Shia Muslim in the UK". Contemporary Islam 13, 307-324; Dogra 2017, "Karbala in London: Battle of Expressions of Ashura Ritual Commemorations among Twelver Shia Muslims of South Asian Background", Journal of Muslims in Europe 6, 158-178.</mark>

<mark>expressed through sensorialised and bodily practices.</mark> The role of pain as a tool for trans-individual communication expressed through visual performances will be discussed in line with the following questions: How is visual performance together with the oral narration on certain Shi'i historical events used in *majalis* to generate individual and collective emotions, developing thereby a form of Shi'i sociality? How is visual performance and physical self-imposed pain linked to current socio-political issues? Finally, what is the reciprocal relation between emotions, the body and visuality in Shi'i ritual practices?

The Ritual of *Tashabih*

The term *'aza'* or *ta'ziyeh* ('condolences') is used to refer to the commemoration rituals of *Ashura* in general. Women in this study used the term *tashabih* to refer particularly to the dramatisation and performance of the battle of Karbala, also known as passion plays.[330] *Tashabih* are dramatisation ceremonies in form of ritual productions commemorating the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters.[331] These mourning rituals were very often seen as sites for political dissent as they have always been linked to not only religious narratives but also political and social issues. Shi'i scholars realize the potential use of *tashabih* as a political instrument to articulate and represent certain political and ideological agendas.[332] From a theological perspective, it is viewed as a source of salvation as Shi'is believe that the participation in *ta'ziyeh* dramas, both as actors and spectators, will grand them Husayn's intercession on the day of Judgement.[333]

The main research on *tashabih* has been focusing on the Iranian context as these passion plays have developed to formal theatre plays with proficient performances including professional and trained <mark>(mainly male)</mark> actors, specialized costumes, props and professionally written scripts.[334] My observations of the *tashabih* resonate more with Fernea's research on *tashabih* in Iraq at the end of the 1950s.[335] Fernea refers to the non-professional theatrical

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[330]   In Iran they are called *ta'ziyeh*. For more on ta'ziyeh see Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). See also within the context of South Lebanon Sharara Waddah, *Transformations d'une manifestation religieuse dans un village du Liban-Sud* (Beirut: The University of Michigan, 1968).

[331]   Baktash, "Ta'ziyeh and its Philosophy", 95.

[332]   *Muharram* Observances in Anatolian Turkey by Merin and in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (1979), 238–254 (251).

[333]   Peter Chelkowski, "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (1977), 31–40. Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (1979), 2.

[334]   See Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (1979).

[335]   Elizabeth Fernea, "Remembering Ta'ziyeh in Iraq," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4, Special Issue on Ta'ziyeh (Winter 2005), 130–139.

performances of rural mourning rituals as "people's drama".[336] In this chapter, and different to other research so far, I focus on *tashabih* performed by women for women in private and semi-private spaces. I refer to them as Shiʻi women's drama as the particular historical events recalled, narrated and performed in these religious gatherings (*majalis*) have also a gender-specific message. This message reflects, on the one hand, on-going political tensions in the Middle East and, on the other hand, the expectations of female religious community leaders on the role women should play therein. The performances are however also unique particularly in terms of the relation between the performed and the audience which will be discussed further below.

Tashabih **in Women-only** *Majalis*

The structure of the *tashabih* does not differ from Europe to the one's I attended in the Gulf: The theatrical performance is always integrated within the *majlis*. This can be either at the beginning followed by the lecture and the lamentation poetry that both build on the topic of the performance shown, or it can be in the middle of the *majlis*, supporting and reinforcing the lecture by theatrically performing it. In both cases, the *tashabih* complement the *majlis* and are an important and powerful contribution to the emotional affect the *majlis* has on the women. In the UK, the costumes and props are usually brought by community members from their countries of origin, however fitted and prepared in the UK. This is similar to the objects placed on the *sufra* discussed in the earlier chapter and thereby provides another example of the transnational mobility of goods for the preparation of *majalis* in Europe. These items are also seen as *baraka* as they are brought in from the home countries and from Shii shrine cities such as Najaf or Karbala.

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[336]   Fernea, "Remembering Ta ʻziyeh in Iraq," 138–139.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 14 HERE]

Figure 14**:** Performance of the battle at Karbala (Kuwait 2015)

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 15 HERE]

Figure 15**:** Performance of the killing of Imam Husayn's son (London 2014)

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 16 HERE]

Figure 16**:** Performance of the killing of Imam Husayn's son (London 2014)

Performing through 'Sensory Cultures'[337]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 17 HERE]

Figure 17**:** Women's theatrical performances in Kuwait, 2015

Shiʻi theatrical performances enjoy a great deal of publicity within as well as outside of Shiʻi communities. What makes *tashabih* unique is the relationship that exists between the audience and the performance. The audience is engaged in various ways – sometimes outside of the drama but very often also as part of the performance itself.[338] Different techniques are used to invoke the audience's emotional attachment to the play and to capture their attention to and involvement in the narration of a particular episode of Shiʻi history performed.[339] The senses, in form of smells, sounds, touches and sights, are used to evoke emotions.[340] These senses are tools used to transmit and present the Karbala narrative during theatrical

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[337]   Sally Promey and Shira Brisman, "Sensory Cultures: Material and Visual Religion Reconsidered," in *Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 72–77.

[338]   William O. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Taʻzieh," in *Taʻzieh, Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 24–31 (26).

[339]   Studies on performances and hermeneutics, see Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance," *History of Religions* 26, no. 1 (1986), 1–33.

[340]   Promey and Brisman, "Sensory Cultures", 198.

performances producing heightened emotionality and attachment to the play and the historical narrative it performs.[341]

The audience-performance relationship during *tashabih* is dependent on the content of the narrative. Since it is believed that Imam Husayn was left unsupported by the Kufans and as a result defeated and killed by the Umayyad troops who outnumbered him and his supporters in thousands, the audience feel themselves obliged to emotionally and physically express their support during the performance. In other words, the lack of support by the Kufans is compensated by the support of the audience during the play. In women-only *majalis*, the support that is provided is usually directed to the female family members who are presented as strong and self-sacrificing believers: "Help Zaynab"[342], "Support Rabab"[343] or "Stand by Fatima"[344] are encouragements heard repeatedly by the *mullaya* who is steering the performance, thus making sure the audience remains engaged by yelling and booing at the Umayyad soldiers on stage or hitting their chests and faces as an expression of the sorrow felt by Husayn's female members. At particular dramatic events during a performance, such as the wounding or killing of one of Husayn's supporters, the crowd becomes very loud, not only because of their shouting at the enemy forces but also because of the intensity of hitting their bodies.

Through causing pain on their bodies, women are transformed to the battlefield and intend to feel the pain Husayn and his supporters felt, as one of the women I talked to after one of these performances in London explains: "Yes, you feel part of the battlefield. You feel as if you are fighting with Imam Husayn against these cowards. You can feel his pain. You can feel his suffering." The body here functions as a tool for transmitting the pain felt by Husayn and his supporters during the battle to the audience. The body becomes a vessel through which religious actors are able to transform themselves from their own context to the historical context of the Karbala battle. The female body becomes thereby the battlefield on which the pain of the sufferers on the plains of Karbala is expressed and felt. This spatial and temporal transmission is very important for the women's attachment and interaction with the

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[341]   See also Yafa Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam: 'Process of Subjectification' among Shia Women Converts in London," in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdūnas Račius (New York: Routledge, 2018), 130–151.
[342]   Referring to Imam Husayn's sister.
[343]   Referring to the mother of the infant baby killed on the battle field.
[344]   Referring to Imam Husayn's mother.

narrative of Karbala. Women living in London have expressed their feeling of satisfaction to be able, through religious performances, to feel part of Husayn's entourage.[345]

The female body however also functions as a tool of punishment. Many women expressed their feeling of guilt of not being able to support Imam Husayn and fighting with him in defeating the Umayyads. They feel dishonoured and ashamed of the Kufans of having left Imam Husayn alone as one of the women in Bahrain explains: "The Kufans were cowards. They did not dare to stand in front of the enemy and left our beloved Imam Husayn and his people to be slaughtered like animals with no mercy. It is our fault that our beloved Husayn is dead. It's our fault." The woman started hitting her face and crying intensively while screaming very loudly: "It's our fault. Our fault. Cursed be Yazid and his people."

A more intensive dramatic atmosphere is generated when women use real animal blood in their performances to stimulate sensory experiences. At some women-only *majalis* I attended in the Gulf –something that I have not witnessed in Europe – women use blood of a sheep, chicken or cow to soak costumes of key figures who died in the battlefield during a performance. One of the very common figures is Ali al-Asghar[346], Hussein's baby infant who was often represented by a doll soaked in real animal blood.[347] The use of real animal blood not only gives the whole performance a more authentic feeling but causes, among some women, a sense of disgust. This feeling of disgust that might ends with few women running out of the room to vomit is linked in the *mullaya*'s narrative to their feeling of repulsion and antipathy towards the cruelty and barbarism of the Umayyad troops.

The intensive smell of real blood in the room, which is filled with hundreds of women, contributes further to the women's feeling of being transformed to the battlefield in Karbala. The audience's engagement with the performance at this point is so intense that the dialogue of the actors is not heard anymore as it is over-voiced by the audience's cry, self-hitting and shouting. The audience usually sits on the floor or on chairs looking up to the *mullaya* who is very often standing during a performance holding a microphone to raise the

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[345] More on the role of the human body as a space to express conflicts, see Marwan Kraidy, Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 and Marwan M. Kraidy, "The Revolutionary Body Politics: Preliminary Thoughts on a Neglected Medium in the Arab Uprisings." Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication 5:2 (2012), 472-483 as well as various chapters in *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

[346] His nickname is Ali al-Asghar ('The Smaller One'). For more details see Tawus, *Al-Lahuf fi Qatla al-Tufuf*, 117, 123.

[347] See also *Muharram Ceremonies in Tehran* by Ilya Nicolaevich Berezin (1843) written by Jean Calmard and Jacqueline Calmard, "Muharram Ceremonies Observed in Tehran by Ilya Nicolaevich Berezin," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 54–73 (69).

attention to her and her narration. The *mullaya* is supposed to control the flow of actions and reactions of the audience towards the performance. When, however, intensive dramatic representations take place, for example, through the use of real blood, the *mullaya* loses this control for some time. The degree of the audience's participation in the performance is at this point depended upon the intensity of the narrative and its visual representation.

Sometimes, however, the visual representation characterised by the transmission of certain signs and images, in showing a doll soaked with real blood for example, is stronger than the verbal articulation of the narrative itself. Andrzej Wirth argues that *tashabih* are more concerned with the "transformation of signs (icon/symbol/index) than with the trans-formation of "characters"."[348] The intensive engagement of the audience in the performance often over-voices the *mullaya*'s verbal delivery of the narrative. Signs interwoven with sens-ory stimulated communication replace direct speech either intentionally or unintentionally.[349]

In Shiʿi theatrical performances, therefore, audience-performance relationship becomes central.[350] The audience does not only play the role of the spectators but also of the actors. Crossing the boundaries between the performer and the non-performer in *tashabih* illustrates and highlights at the same time crossing boundaries between participation and non-participation in the battlefield, between the feeling of guilt and innocence as well as between punishment and reward through intercession. Shiʿi women I interviewed in both Europe and the Gulf not only enjoy theatrical performances because they illustrate the Karbala paradigm, providing them with a sense of belonging and identity but most women believe in their necessity. Theatrical performances are sees as part of Shiʿi mourning ritual practices as one of the women in Kuwait explains: "Do not think of them as theatre. This is not theatre. These are ritual practices (*tuqus*). They are not performed to entertain. They have a serious message to the audience." Another woman in London highlights the religious benefits of such performances: "We will be rewarded for participating in *tashabih*. It gives us *shafaʿa* ('intercession') on the day of judgement." Similar to other Shiʿi mourning ritual practices, *tashabih* are seen by many as part of their Shiʿi identity and a way to connect to Imam Husayn. Participation in the performance involves other mourning practices such as *latam* (rhythmic self-beating), lamentation poetry, crying and yelling – all seen as part of the commemoration practices.

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[348]   Andrzej Wirth, "Semeiological Aspects of the Taʿziyeh," in *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 32–39 (36).

[349]   See also Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 111.

[350]   See Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Taʿzieh", 27.

Tashabih: Political Performativity

The performances in these women-only *majalis* do not concentrate much on the battle itself but more attention is given to the presentation of orphans and widows and their suffering and emotional status during and after the battle of Karbala. I will illustrate below the focus of performance on the two figures: Qasim and Zaynab performed in London, Kuwait and Bahrain before going into analysing them in light of current rising political and sectarian tensions in the Middle East and in Europe.

The Wedding of Qasim

The narrative of Qasim is also referred to as the *Wedding of Qasim*.[351] The way this narrative is re-called and performed in *majalis* varies. In general, the presentation is around Imam Husayn's young nephew Qasim, Imam Hasan's son, who joined his uncle on his journey to Karbala. Qasim wished to support his uncle in the battlefield but because of his young age, Imam Husayn refused. The young man, however, insisted and tried on several occasions to convince is uncle of being ready and well able to fight against the enemy – but Imam Husayn still refused. The narrative then shifts to and focuses on Qasim's mother Ramla. She is portrayed as a very strong woman who understands her son's wish to fight and support his family against the Umayyad ruler. The narrative goes further to illustrate Ramla approaching Imam Husayn and trying to convince him of allowing her son to fight in the battlefield. Ramla is presented as strong and not affected by the idea of sacrificing her son but rather as a woman who "does not even blink one second in doubt of her son's insistence to fight against injustice", as one *mullaya* in Kuwait explains. "Ramla knows this is the right thing to do," as she continues. It takes her quite a time to finally being able to convince Imam Husayn who eventually allowed his nephew to participate in the battle.

It is believed, that Hasan, Imam Husayn's brother, wished his son to be married off to Fatima, Imam Husayn's daughter. It is at this stage where most presentations of Qasim vary. Some recall that Imam Husayn asked Ramla to organise a wedding ceremony for Qasim and Fatima before him joining the battle. The narrative then goes on describing the wedding planning and organisation. On stage in a *majlis*, Qasim and Fatima (all female actors) are being wed with a huge celebration including henna paintings and recitation of wedding poetry. After this celebration, at which the mother and the bride are portrayed as happy

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[351] See also Ingvild Flaskerud, "Aruze Qasem. A Theatrical Event in Shi'i Female Commemorative Rituals," in *People of the Prophet's House*, ed. Fahmida Suleman (The Institute of Ismaili Studies and the British Library: Islamic Publications Ltd., Azimuth Editions, 2015), 202–211.

enjoying the moment, Qasim enters the battlefield and is killed. Moving from the auspicious to the tragic, the audience joins Ramla, the mother, and Fatima, the newly-wed widow, in mourning the death of Qasim. With passages such as "the henna has not dried on Fatima's hands yet" or "the groom's bed is still warm", the audience is emotionally moved and join the mourning through loud crying, yelling and self-beating.

Other *majalis* present the Qasim–Fatima scene in a different manner. Some believe the wedding did not take place at all and that Qasim and Fatima were engaged and were planning to marry after the battle at Karbala had ended. Qasim however died and "his mother never saw her son as a groom", as a *mullaya* in London describes. However, Qasim promises Fatima to marry her on the day of resurrection. The theatrical performance for this type of narrative focuses on the prospective wedding ceremony that the community would like to prepare for a young couple who never had the chance to marry. Passages such as "Instead of henna, Qasim has blood on his hands", or "Poor Fatima, her tears are tears of happiness but of sorrow for never wearing her wedding dress", are heard in such performances.

At both theatrical performances of the wedding ceremonies, the audience acts as either family members or as wedding guests supporting the mock celebration of the wedding of Fatima and Qasim. Here, the audience–performance relation is very important. A *mullaya* in Bahrain encourages the audience to take part in the ceremony by saying: "Let us all celebrate the wedding of our beloved Qasim and Fatima. Our son and daughter. It's your son's wedding. It's your daughter's wedding. Aren't you all happy for them? Let's show them how happy we are for the lovely newly-wed bride and groom." Although in a commemorative period, on this day and at this moment, the audience is cheerful, carrying nicely decorated candles, large plates with henna, sometime preparing a feast with food and a wedding cake and gifts.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 18 HERE]

Figure 18: *The Wedding of Qasim and Fatima* (Kuwait 2015)

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 19 HERE]

Figure 19: Wedding gifts given to the couple in the *majlis* (Kuwait 2015)

The day on which the *Wedding of Qasim* is remembered is one of the most passionate but also emotionally mixed *majalis*. Whereas at one point women are cheerful, clapping and ululating, few minutes later they weep heartedly, hit themselves in sorrow and yell at the Umayyad soldiers on stage. Yelling and screaming defines a collectivity of subjects united in pain expressed in shared memories. Similar to other ritual practices, the wedding of Qasim is a tool to evoke and display various emotions at once. It is a narrative that shapes the individual's subjectivity where the individual's self is framed and objectified in a clearly defined collective Shi'i identity. It is, however, also used to illustrate women's engagement with the narrative of Karbala and to define women's positioning within Shi'i commemoration practices. The *Wedding of Qasim* and Fatima's endurance of the loss of her husband provide women with a narrative that empowers their position within the Karbala narrative. It, however, also provides women with a symbolic religious standing that supports them to

overcome their own loss and displacement as Shiʻis. The individually felt pain is evoked through the Qasim–Fatima narrative causing a collectively felt grief.

The marriage of Qasim symbolises the social and religious transformation through marriage and the change in status from a bachelor to a married man. It, however, also symbolises the spiritual transformation from a young man to an adult by becoming a martyr. In case of the bride, the transformation is symbolically presented through losing one's virginity by entering wedlock enquiring thereby a married status. Both the female as well as the male body are presented as one body, one loss, one pain with the same transformation in status. Both depend on each other as only through their marriage their bodies were able to connect and become one as one of the *mullayat* in Kuwait explains: "There is no difference between man and woman. Both Shiʻi men as well as Shiʻi women all offered their sacrifices in support of our beloved Imam Husayn. Both have gone through the same pain." Pain unites both men and women in the fight for justice. Some women go a step further in highlighting the additional pain that the women of Karbala had to endure as one women in London explains: "Qasim fell at the battlefield but Fatima has to live with her pain of losing her newly-wed husband."

Wedding ceremonies such as the one celebrated for Qasim and Fatima are social events at which the Shiʻi community within a *majlis* feels bonded and united in the marriage practices, but also in their collective feeling of pain. Not only the bride on stage but also women in the audience[352] put henna on their hands during the *majlis.* The body here acts as preservation mechanism to keep the memory of Karbala visible on the body for a couple of days. Henna leaves a mark on the body similar to scars or wounds or burns, as will be presented later through the act of walking on hot coal and *tatbir.* Henna marks are here a symbol of happiness and unity of a couple who had to be separated through war and death. As mentioned above, Shiʻi ritual practices are an amalgamation of a variety of emotions and feelings some of which are feelings of sadness and anger; others, however, of happiness and love. The green henna, which colour will turn to red after drying out and washing away, is a symbolic reference to the bloodshed on the battlefield in Karbala. Similar to the bloodshed through *tatbir* the red colour on the women's palms are a sign of their memory of the killing of Imam Husayn and his people, but also of their symbolic participation in the battlefield itself – the battlefield that is presented on stage. Here the boundaries between the performers and the audience are crossed again through the audience's participation in the symbolic battle

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[352]   Men also sometimes apply henna in their *majalis.*

through the appliance of henna on the women's palms. The temporal dimension of the henna is also crucial here, when applied on their hands it is a symbol of happiness remembering the *Wedding of Qasim*, but when taken off and turning to a red colour it moves to symbolize death and loss. The link between marriage and death is highlighted in the Qasim–Fatima narrative, whereby Qasim's physical death is linked to Fatima's emotional death through losing her groom on the battlefield. Comparisons between Qasim stained with blood and with the henna on the bride's hands are recurring images in the narrative and lamentation poetry heard in various *majalis* I attended in both Europe and the Middle East. Imageries and their associated meanings were used across Shii groups in both geographical locations. This again shows how pain is central and used across *majalis* to emphasise Shiis' sensorialised sociality united by the same loss but also strengthened by the same cause for fighting against injustice.

Mashy 'ala al-Jamur – 'The Walking on Hot Coal'

One of the most visited scenes in the theatrical performances during *Muharram* is performed on the evening of the 10th day. After the commemoration of the killing of Imam Husayn in the morning (what is known as the *maqtal*) and during which *tatbir* is performed among Shirazis, in the evening women gather in the *majalis* again to remember what has happened with the survivors of the Karbala battle. The preparations for this performance and the following ritual practice starts in the late afternoon, when hot coal is being prepared and laid down on the ground inside the yard of the *majlis*.[353]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATIONs 21a, 21b HERE]

Figures 20a, 21b**:** Preparation of the coal for the ritual, Kuwait 2015

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[353] There are however slight variations within *majalis* in timing of when which ritual is organised.

The following scene is performed on stage with the *mullaya* in the background, re-calling the event when Imam Husayn and his supporters were killed: "After their murder, women and children were dragged outside of their tents. Yazid's soldiers burnt the tents down. In chains they pushed the survivors and forced them to walk on the now burned-down tents. Still half-burning and hot, women were forced to walk over them." As the *mullaya* describes further: "with the heads up high, very proud and courageous they walked over the burned tent." The performers enact the scene: Those who acted as Yazid's soldiers took the prisoners and forced them over the burning tents. At this moment, the actors left the stage and walked towards the hot burning coal in the yard:

[PLACE ILLUSTRATIONs 22a, 22b HERE]

Figures 21a, 22b**:** Setting up the place on which the hot coal will be placed on, Kuwait 2015

A shift is happening from an acted scene to real sensory experience: the heat of the coal was felt in the open space of the *majlis* and at this stage, the actors walked on real hot coal. The acting was linked with a real life situation: The prisoners' screaming while walking on the coal was not performed but real. They felt the burning heat on their own bodies. As one women said while watching: "Oh God help them. Oh God give me the strength to do the same sacrifice." All the women in the audience followed the actors. Some ran very quickly over the hot coal, others kept jumping to have the least contact with the coal on their skin but others walked with their heads up high, proudly demonstrating their strength and endurance in giving their suffering a symbolic sacrifice to Imam Husayn. Military marching music and poetry accompanied the performance. The room was very warm, the atmosphere emotionally heated and women were in an agitated state ready to walk over the hot coal. Some were used to it, others were daring to walk on the coal for the first time. Some were older, others

younger. The collective feeling of pain was crucial during this *majlis*: the collective goal of walking on these coals and the connectedness with the women of Karbala sharing their pain.

The performance–audience relationship again is very apparent here. The role women play in this ritual is linked to the presentation of power, not only of Zaynab, but also of the women of Karbala as a whole – a power, women in the *majalis* are urged to take as an example and follow in their everyday lives. The gendered power is also expressed through women's actual walking on the hot coal. Women in the *majlis* operate in a sensorially rich space in which the individual communicates with the other through the feeling of the emotional, but, more importantly, the physical pain they endure. As Hsu argues: "acute pain is easily, rapidly, and extremely efficiently communicated from one to the other. No words are needed."[354] No words are needed in the *majalis* because its "presentness"[355] is articulated through the collective experience of pain. Pain here is individually felt through the women's own bodies which is collectively communicated through the ritual itself.[356] Women help to bandage their burns and eventually try to wake up women who had lost consciousness after they have performed the ritual.

The theatrical enactment of the women of Karbala on stage and the performers' actual walking on hot coal during which pain was not just re-enacted but actually felt as well as the audience's subsequent walking on hot coal has another dimension. The self-infliction of pain has also the function of penitence.[357] The pain that the actors and the audience feel does not only relate to the pain felt for the death of Imam Husayn and his people but also the self-punishment and the feeling of guilt for leaving him behind and not supporting him.[358] The Shi'is' identification with the people of Kufa who did not come to Karbala to fight with Imam Husayn against Yazid's troops is repeatedly articulated throughout the *majalis* that I attended in London as well as in various parts of the Gulf. One of the women I interviewed explains:

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[354]   Elisabeth Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy," *Etnofoor* 18, no. 1 (2005), 78–96 (84).

[355]   Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (*New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9.

[356]   On embodied experiences more generally, see Robert Desjarlais, "The Office of Reason: On the Politics of Language and Agency in a Shelter for 'the Homeless Mentally Ill'," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996), 880–900.

[357]   Afary has the same observations, as she argues "ta'ziyeh is the act of public confession and a public manifestation of penitence." Janet Afary, "Shi'ite Narratives of Karbala and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of The Iranian Revolution, 1978–79," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 192–236 (211).

[358]   For other examples, see C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

I did *tatbir* yesterday morning and *mashy 'ala al-jamur* in the evening [showing me the wounds and burns]. The pain will go in few days but the scars will stay forever – as the memory of Imam Husayn. We left him dying. It's our fault. We should have been stronger. We should have not gave in to Yazid's threats. We should have been stronger.

Another woman adds:

But we are stronger now. Look what we can do. Look what women can do. What they dare to do and even more. Nothing can stop us now. Nothing. Look around you. We all went through this [*tatbir* and *mashy 'ala al-jamur*]. We all saw death once and we will not hesitate to see it again.

The ritual provides women with a community feeling of collective responsibility and unity. It becomes a site for social cohesion, inclusion and communal support. Not only the boundaries between the performer and the audience are crossed, but also boundaries between individuals are broken down. Everyone in the crowd is overwhelmed by the degree and severity of pain. As Hsu explains in regards to acute pain in a collective context, it "[…] generates synchronicity, a situation in which all participants involved are acutely aware of only one single event and turn their full attention to it."[359] Although individually felt on each individual's body, the collective pain event is experienced in the group as one pain on one body. The boundaries between individuals disappear and a "state of trans-individual fluidity"[360] is experienced. Statements by the *mullaya* saying: "We are one. We are one blood. It is one pain," or "Your body is Zaynab's body. Your bare feet are Rabab's feet. Feel the pain. Feel the suffering" indicate how the boundaries between the individuals and their surroundings are broken down. The embodied experience of pain functions as a tool to build and strengthen social cohesion and bonding but also to link past historical religious accounts with the present.

The ritual is also appealing to women as it challenges their endurance of pain and hardship. As one of the women, before coming to the ritual, explains: "Yes, of course, it is hard and only thinking about it you might think, hmm, maybe I should not go. But you should go and see it. You will feel the power in the room. Believe me Yafa you will not think

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[359]   Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 85.
[360]   Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 87.

twice." Another woman who had not performed the walking on hot coal before described her feeling before going as follows:

> I heard about this ritual among women. I did not know about it before and I thought, yes, why not? It is a brilliant idea. We always hear about the women of Karbala. What they had to go through but, I think, we will understand their situation more if we feel with them. If we actually feel their pain on our own body. I do not know what I will expect tonight. But I am very keen to go and I will walk on the coal. You will see.

The women's description of their experience after performing the ritual revolve around their feeling of being stronger, as one of the women explains: "I feel much stronger. I know now I can do things I would have never thought I could do. I now can do anything. I am not scared. Nothing could scare me. Nothing. I am ready for anything." Through the ritual of walking on hot coal the women enter into, what Robert Desjarlais calls, "sensory attentiveness."[361] The ritual involves high tension of emotions building an intensive sensorially rich space for women to develop a form of sensorialized sociality[362].

The *mullaya* builds on this idea of cooperative socialities within which individuals are united together in their suffering and pain but getting stronger in the collective fighting for survival. Although the theatrical performance itself is over, the marching music continues and the *mullaya* is among the crowd, supporting them in performing the ritual. Similar to the *tatbir* practice in which the *mullaya* makes a link between the historical narrative of the Karbala paradigm with current political issues, during the walking on hot coal ritual, various direct and indirect references to current political turmoil in the Middle Eastern region, as will be illustrated below, are constantly made. Women are reassured of their competency of being strong and able to support in fighting against the enemy. The difficult step they have achieved in women overcoming their fear through performing the ritual of walking on hot coal is used by the *mullaya* as an attentiveness tool to make them realize how strong they are as women.

"Women do not always realize what they are capable of. This ritual is an awakening call for them to see the world around them from a different perspective. They need to come out of their comfort zone and realize how much they can achieve and how far they can go", are the words of a young *mullaya* in Kuwait who focuses in her *majalis* on women's empowerment and active involvement in local and international political and social issues.

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[361]   Cited in Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 84.
[362]   Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social".

Women feel empowered by the performance of the ritual and reassured of their power within their communities and societies. The pain felt can "be viewed as a trigger for an embodied experience of sociality."[363]

Goriz – The Art of Linking[364]

Combining historical accounts with current political and social events within a narration in a *ta'ziyeh* is called *goriz* in Persian or *nuzul* in Arabic.[365] The narrative of Qasim above, with all its versions, is – with their tropes of loss, despair, distress and death – linked with the current political and social context of Shi'is in the Middle East as well as in Europe who have gone through similar oppression, humiliation, displacement and persecution. *Mullayat* repeatedly move from presenting the Karbala narrative to the presentation of current political issues in its various manifestations. The slogan of "Every Day is Ashura. Every Land is Karbala" is used and understood in the context of this ongoing persecution of Shi'is around the world.

The figure of Zaynab and the role she played during and after the battle of Karbala is repeatedly used in theatrical performances across *majalis* in Europe and in the Gulf, to help women to endure their hardship and to ease their pain of loss. As illustrated in the previous chapter, Zaynab is understood and presented as a symbol of strength and activism on various social but also political levels. Zaynab is remembered as supporting her brother and the other fighters at the battlefield and of taking care of the remaining members of *ahl al-bayt* and their supporters after the battle. The strongest moment is remembered through her self-confident public appearance in Kufa and at Yazid's court in Damascus,[366] addressing in both instances "the traitors who allowed the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad to be killed and his women to be humiliated", as a woman in London explains. When Zaynab is portrayed during theatrical performances the audience feels empowered and can relate to her experience of persecution, humiliation and displacement.[367] Most women in the *majalis* know the wording of Zaynab's speeches to the extent that they contribute to her dialogues in unison. When

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[363]   Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 85.

[364]   Khalid Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon (*al-khotba al-husayniyya*) in Shi'ite Literature: Development, Structure, Venue, Preachers' Titles," *Orientalia Suecana* 54 (2005), 151–178 (164–165).

[365]   Sometimes also referred to as *takhalus*.

[366]   More on Zaynab's speeches see Nūr al-Dīn Jazā'irī, *Khaṣā'iṣ al-Zaynabīyah* (Qum: Intisharat al-Sharif al-Rida, 1998). 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *'Aqīlat Banī Hāshim: Zaynab bint al-Zahrā' baṭalat Karbalā'* 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1972).

[367]   On role modules see Fazaeli and Künkler, "Of Alima, Vaizes, and Mujtahidas".

Yazid asks Zaynab: "How did you see God treating your brother and your people?" not only Zaynab, the character on stage, but the whole crowd shout out: "I saw nothing but beauty." The audience participated in Zaynab's speeches also during the scene when she ran out to see Imam Husayn after he was killed on the battlefield, Zaynab lifted her brother's body a bit up looking at the sky asking God: "Oh God accept our sacrifice". The atmosphere in the *majlis* was very intense at that moment. The emotions were mixed between feelings of sorrow for the loss of Imam Husayn, of grief for women's own displacement and humiliation but also of happiness of victory for having been able to offer God such a great sacrifice as well as of strength of being able to stand up against the tyrant.

The remaining women of Karbala are never in the *majalis* I attended presented on stage as broken or weak, but rather as strong and fearless. They are presented as women who resisted injustice and showed strength and agency in solving their problems. When Zaynab addressed the people in Kufa it was her first statement held after the battle of Karbala. This first statement was delivered by a woman and not by a man. It shows "women's active involvement in the political and social arena as well as their empowerment and strength in changing society", as one women in Bahrain explains. It was also Zaynab who rescued Zayn al-ʻAbidin, Husayn's ill son, from being killed in Damascus. The strength that Zaynab showed in front of her male transgressors could only be opposed, as is believed, by degrading her as a woman in order to avoid any further public humiliation of the Umayyads and their destabilisation of power.

Women in *majalis* urge other women to take leadership positions in their communities and families particularly if men are not present. The political tensions in the Middle East lead to various social and communal changes including the shift in the understanding of gender roles. The political instability of countries such as Iraq and Bahrain force the redefinition of gender boundaries. These new forms of gender role understandings are interwoven with remembering and presenting particular historical Shiʻi events in a way to highlight the active role women played. During the time of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and in Bahrain today, men have either been imprisoned, killed or are missing, leaving their families and communities behind with no protection and in some cases with no financial means. *Mullayat* urge women to be strong, take the lead, care and protect their families the same way as Zaynab did when she was in similar situations. Zaynab is taken as a role model here to follow and always to remember as one of the *mullayat* in a *majlis* in Bahrain explains:

It was Zaynab who organised the first *majalis* to remember the killing of Imam Husayn; it was Zaynab who arranged for the burial of the dead at the plains of Karbala; and it was Zaynab who took care of the orphans. As you all know we live in the time of Ashura. We live in Karbala. You, as women, you need to follow Sayyida Zaynab and do the same as she did. You need to take care of the wounded, you need to take care of the disabled, you need to take care of the orphans. Only if we stay together we will stay strong and as Zaynab, carried the message of Imam Husayn on, we need to carry it on too.

In *majalis* in the Gulf, statements such as "Karbala is still present today", "We live in Karbala at the moment", "We bleed with Imam Husayn", "History is not history but present day" were recurring expressions. Many women I interviewed either have sons, brothers or husbands who were taken for interrogations or were convicted and for years imprisoned by Bahraini police forces. They very often do not know what happened to them for weeks and even months until they discover that they are either in prison or already dead. In Kuwait, terrorist attacks performed by the so-called *Islamic State* (IS) fighters and their militant and violent attitude towards Shi'is in the region cause general anxieties among Shiis. When I was in Kuwait in 2015, organisers of *majalis* were worried about possible further terrorist attacks on *majalis* by IS members as the attack on the Imam al-Sadiq Mosque was only few months before: It was during the Friday prayer in the month of Ramadan when a bomb caused the death of 27 and injured hundreds of Shi'i worshippers. Fear of further attacks was therefore apparent everywhere I went. The atmosphere on the streets and in the *majalis* was restless and worrying. Extended security measures were implemented. As illustrated in chapter 1, Kuwait enjoys a good degree of religious freedom in comparison to other countries in the Gulf region but experienced a rise in anti-Shii attitudes from various Sunni groups. Women in the *majalis* did not want the degree of their religious expression or even their freedom of movement in the country to be controlled, limited or restricted because of such rising anti-Shii sentiments. They use the space of the *majalis* to strengthen the meaning and value of Shi'is' religious freedom in Kuwait and women's fight for its persistence. The felt collective fear from potential IS attacks is linked to the attack performed by Yazid's troops against Imam Husayn and his supporters in Karbala:

Our brothers were camping in the Imam al-Sadiq Mosque as our beloved Imam Husayn was. They were surprised by the attack and by their brutal and cold killing. They were praying and worshiping. They did not do any harm to anyone but still

killed with no mercy. Some of you had to receive their dead bodies on that day. Others had to calm their sisters down and give them support and strength. Exactly as the women of Karbala who had to accept the sacrifice their male family members offered for the protection of our beloved Imam Husayn. Remember: We live in Karbala. Karbala is not just a past it is a present that we live in every day. We make the same sacrifices and need to endure the same pain.

The power that Zaynab exhibited during and after the battle at Karbala is celebrated and em-phasised during the *majalis* I attended in Kuwait. The *mullaya* above continues by saying to her congregation:

Zaynab took the lead after the majority of the male family members were killed at the battle. She was responsible for the remaining survivors. She took great care of the women and children now widowed and orphaned. She protected Zayn al-'Abidin from being killed by Yazid. Zaynab was in charge now not only in taking care and protecting the survivors but also in thinking forward: Where to go now and how to proceed.

Women use such narrations about Zaynab to build their own power and strength in order to carry on after such violent attacks. The *majalis* become a site for collective endurance and support to overcome struggle and pain. This is also the case in Bahrain. The protests and uprising in Bahrain in 2011 were still relatively recent when I visited in 2015. Its aftermath was certainly still felt on the streets through police and military checkpoints, narratives of mass withdrawal of citizenships of particular political figures as well as massive government raids on protesters and underground activists. The Qasim–Fatima narratives expressed through theatrical performances focus on the role women have played at the Battle of Karbala. The narrative is also used as a religious justification and encouragement during *majalis* for women in today's sectarian conflict in the Middle East to fight against such exploitation and oppression[368] as one of the *mullayat* in Bahrain explains:

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[368] For similar observations, see Sadeq Humayuni, "An Analysis of the Ta'ziyeh of Qasem," in *Ta'ziyeh, Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 12–23.

We have a lot of corruption in our country. Shiʻis are discriminated against: No housing benefits, no scholarships for our children to go to proper universities. Nothing. We need to change this. First, we need to raise awareness among us, second, plan rationally and finally put them into action. This cannot be done without *us* women. It did not work without Zaynab after the battle and it will not work here either. We are in war. Our men are either killed or imprisoned. Who is left? Us women. This is the message I give the women here, be smart, be active and work towards the benefit of your people. We are all hurt, we all had the blood of our men in our hands when we collected them off the streets after being shot – but then what? Do you want to stay mourning and yelling all day? Zaynab did not, Ramla did not, Fatima did not, neither should we. We should follow the strong women who stood up after the biggest loss of Shiʻis. Our beloved Imam Husayn and all his men were murdered but still women stood up. They stood up against the tyranny of the Umayyads and we can stand up against ours.

The *mullaya* was referring to the violence exercised by the Bahraini government against protesters during the 2011 uprising but also to the regular protests Shiis have been organising since. The government's responses have been extremely punitive to such small as well as large-scale protests as I was told: "it does not matter what you do. They come and get you, torture you and throw you like dogs on the street for your family to collect. If they imprison you, your family will not know where you are for weeks and months and if they are lucky they will receive you alive. Your body and your soul will have been tortured to an extent that your family needs to put the broken pieces together". I heard narratives such as these from women across neighbourhoods in Bahrain who were very eager to let outsiders such as myself hear what is going on in Bahrain – a country that is very difficult to access and whose internal political regime and sectarian conflicts are not much covered within European media.

Analogies were made between Yazid and the Umayyad's rule and Al Khalifa family and their ruling regime. The memory around the brutality Imam Husayn and his supporters at the plains of Karbala had to endure is compared to the brutality Bahrainis are experiencing. As explained in chapter 1, women I talked to believe that this brutality is not exercised by Bahraini police and army forces but rather by foreigners brought in to control the Shii population. One women in Bahrain explains what happened in her neighbourhood as follows:

They came into the neighbourhood in large numbers, they pushed themselves in without considering whether there are women in the house who need to cover themselves up first. They destroy everything – all furniture, appliances, dishes – they even break beds and cut through mattresses and cushions. If you are unlucky, they burn parts of your house down or sometimes the whole house. You go over what is left. You walk on ruins and ashes similar to the women of Karbala who were dragged to walk over the burned tents. Karbala is here. Right here. The flames of Karbala were never extinguished. It is an eternal flame until the Mahdi comes and rescues all of us.

The *Wedding of Qasim* is a site of such remembrance during which the women very often cry out their sons' names who, similar as Qasim, have lost their lives during such raids. Personal pain is interwoven with religious pain and embedded within Shiis' own recalling of history. Similar to other *majalis* mentioned above, the boundaries between the performance and the performed with the audience and their personal experiences are crossed and blurred. This is because the felt pain is nested within religious narratives of Shiis' history of pain. As one women in Bahrain puts it: "Our men are already broken, we cannot afford to break too. This is what they want. They want to break us but we will stay strong". Similar to *majalis* in Kuwait, Zaynab is taken here also as a role model as a *mullaya* in Bahrain explains further: "She [Zaynab] showed strength towards the people of Kufa – those who promised their support but at the end left Husayn being slaughtered and not even buried on the plains of Karbala." The focus in the *majalis* is on the role women should play in such situations where men are either killed, imprisoned or missing. Women are encouraged to stay strong, to think of the welfare of their community and make appropriate arrangements as the *mullaya* in a conversation explains: "We, women, need to carry on. Look around you Yafa all these women they are even not allowed to commemorate the death of their sons. They are not allowed to hold meetings to receive condolences from friends and families". One woman I visited showed me a hidden back room behind a built wall in which she held the pictures of her deceased husband and sons to remember: "if they raid and see these pictures they will punish the whole household. These are the *Banu Umayya*. They will have no mercy on anyone" as this woman explains.

Not being allowed to commemorate the death of their own family members is compared with the inability of the women of Karbala to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn and his supporters. *Majalis* and *tashabih* such as The *Wedding of Qasim* are used to provide women with a space to perform such commemorations for the death of their own

sons and to receive condolences. As Qasim, their sons are regarded as martyrs fighting for the same cause. Women in the *majalis* I attended see the enactment of the *Wedding of Qasim* as an opportunity to celebrate the martyrdom of their own sons. The use of *nuzul* in *majalis* is not only a way to link historical events with current political and social issues, but also a way to endure the hardship of loss of or separation from family members, whether their own or of others. Through remembering Shi'i historical events, Shi'is in the *majalis* are reassured of the reward their family members and they themselves will be granted through their sacrifice they have endured.

Similar to the *majalis* in the Gulf, in Europe, women draw parallels between the religio-historical narrative and current political events through the use of the *nuzul* technique. The difference however is that the narrative produced in such *majalis* concentrates more on issues around human rights violations imposed on Shiis by various Sunni regimes in the Gulf. This is intended to ensure constant emotional attachment to Shi'i history as well as current Shii reality beyond personal affiliations to particular nation-states. Women in these *majalis* construct their own social worlds in sensorially rich contexts through ritual practices that allow them to build a sensorialized sociality which aim is to fight against injustice, corruption and exploitation across borders. These sensorialized socialities become institutionalized locally and mobilized transnationally through women's active involvement in transnational activities. This is important in order to ensure the continuation of the narrative of unremitting suffering of Shiis globally. The description of the Iraq war below by one Iraqi woman in London reflects similar memories recalled by Kuwaitis and Bahrainis above which also reflect the historical narrative of Karbala itself:

> Dead bodies were lying on the streets. Like the bodies in Karbala they were lying with not one person to bury them. Large vans at night would come and throw out the dead bodies on the street for us to find them the next morning. It was horrible. But we were strong and buried them all.

Local and transnational political activism is expressed widely through the digital landscape among Shiis in the diaspora. Through these virtual spaces, the two geographical spaces of Europe and the Middle East are fused expressing communal pain and a communal cause. This connectivity of Shiis who used to be in the past less- or totally disconnected from on-going political events in the Gulf changes the role of the diaspora but also the perception of

people in exile. It raises issues around being in and out of place connected or disconnected with the lived realities of people who are still within the context of oppression: "In the past before we had WhatsApp and Facebook relatives were angry on the phone as they felt alone and left behind in the misery they were living in. They always said: 'what do you know about how we live? You live now in London and enjoy your lives. We are here in hell'" as an Iraqi women in London recalls.

Through social media, local and transnational political and social developments are quickly transmitted making communities outside of these contexts constantly up-to-date as one of the women in Dublin says: "I love snapchat and WhatsApp or Instagram because we are instantly informed of what is going on in the Middle East. The *majalis* are a way to communicate the political developments in the Gulf." This is also reflected in London as woman explains: "*Majalis* are today like news agents. Instead of watching Al-Jazeera we can go to the *majlis*. The good thing here is also that *mullayat* have become so professional. They can integrate up-to-date news in the ritual within a blink of an eye." One of the *mullayat* supports this argument by saying: "When something happens in Iraq – an explosion or the like – it will be mentioned in my lecture the same day. The Shi'i community here needs to be linked and connected to Shi'a in the Gulf and be part of their suffering and pain as we have to be part of the suffering and pain of *ahl al-bayt*."

The use of social media outlets provides a space for both those in the Middle East to feel supported and not forgotten but also those in the European diaspora to feel part of the struggle and not disconnected. A lot of women I talked to in Europe see their lives now as an opportunity to change the public perception on Shia Islam and to inform the world about sectarian violence in the Middle East through the organization of various protests, marches, speeches and events. These activities of Shiis in Europe are widely distributed online and shared throughout various social media outlets. This distribution invites empathetic recognition from Shiis in the Middle East. This is important as it helps diasporic Shiis to connect and reaffirm their own positioning within the ongoing sectarian conflict in the Middle East. The digital landscape of diasporic Shiis in Europe allows them to play a role in countering hegemonic political discourses in the Middle East through their own transnational activism.

These activities in Europe are however also supported by Shiis' relatives in the Middle East as they supply them with information, pictures, videos but also materials and objects needed for their public events but also private activities in form of *majalis,* for example. These activities become a collective effort of individuals and communities across

national borders and feeds into the narrative of a global transnational Shii identity: "We are one. Shiis are one. We have the same pain. We are in it all together whether we live here or there. We cannot send the message of Husayn alone. We need the support of Shiis in the Gulf and they need to know that we are there for them too. They work from the inside and we from the outside. Together we fight for change" as a Kuwaiti in London explains. Shiis develop hybrid virtual and physical spaces to express their activism and resistance creating thereby new geographies of aesthetic protest. This hybrid activism has developed to a hub for exchanging information but also for the collective acts of resistance initiating thereby networks communicating the aestheticization of politics through ritual performances.[369]

There is no doubt that events in the Middle East affect Shii communities in Europe. They however also contributed to women's efforts in changing and redefining gender power dynamics within their own diasporic Shii communities. Women instrumentalize sectarian violence in the Middle East for their own gendered political mobilisation. They develop new creative spaces in order to articulate women's move from the margin to the centre also in relation to their participation in religious ritual practices. They move from the traditional position of being bystanders to a new position of being influencers. Social media is thereby used to support such efforts in order to ensure the transnational reach of such gender-based changes. By being actively engaged in various spaces, women thereby challenge gendered understandings of spaces in which the 'public' is presented as masculine, powerful and political and the 'private' as feminine, dependent and apolitical.

This is particularly apparent among the Shirazis in London whose digital landscape spreads to various countries in Europe and the Middle East. Women's participation in theatrical performances and in more controversial ritual practices such as *tatbir* and *mashy 'ala al-jamur* is well communicated, discussed and circulated through social media networks. Other studies on body activism expressed through online spaces used to criticise existent gendered and sexual discourses in the Middle East have highlighted their need to make the private public.[370] This is different among Shirazis as their transnational activism expressed through social media among diasporic Shiis in Europe is not an attempt to make the private public. The private/public dichotomy is in this study more complex and reciprocal. Women empower and influence each other through the circulation of images and videos of their

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[369] On an alternative urban hub, see Wael Salah Fahmi, "Bloggers' Street Movement and the Right to the City. (Re)claiming Cairo's Read and Virtual 'Space of Freedom'", Environment and Urbanization 21:1, 2009, 89 – 107.

[370] *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016.

majalis motivating other communities to follow their form of commemoration. The individual's sensory experiences of pain and suffering becomes viral through the use of social media. The embodied experience of sociality extends the local environment and includes transnational contexts. The experienced feeling of unity transcends national boundaries through the use of social media in which pictures and videos of the degree of women's involvement in ritual practices circulate. Through the wide dissemination of these activities in private chat rooms in particular, communities learn from each other the art of presentation and improve the way of aestheticizing politics through ritual practices.

Conclusion

Shi'i women have always engaged with their socio-political contexts but the scale and the politicisation of their engagement has increased since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The relatively easy access of both Kuwait and Bahrain and the transnational connectedness of people in the region, have allowed theatrical performances by women for women to develop to a phenomenon attracting numerous visitors from abroad. *Ta'ziyeh* becomes what Chau calls a "sensory-production model"[371] in which women actively participate in the construction and production of sensory stimuli that develop, through ritual performances, to a sensorialised sociality. This sensorialised sociality becomes institutionalised through the idea and ideological concept of being Shii that is believed to go back to Imam Husayn and his killing on the plains of Karbala. By not only seeing the violence imposed on Imam Husayn and his supporters on stage but also through the audiences' active engagement in the play itself, the feeling of Shi'aness becomes intensified through the embodiment of the narrative. Pain, whether observed by others or self-inflicted on the body, functions as a medium for trans-individual or communal exchange of experiences in a collective context. The individual pain felt influences and, to a certain extent, shapes the pain of others in the crowd – i. e. the communal pain. This communally felt pain is important for an intense experience of Shi'i commonality which becomes one of the main reasons why women travel abroad to participate in *tashabih*.[372] Pain, as a sensorially rich sensory stimulus, expressed in Shi'i theatrical performances symbolises for women survival. Through their increased participation in Shi'i ritual practices, women are able to survive the sectarian violence imposed upon them as it provides them with a sense of resilience and endurance.

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[371]   Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social", 488.
[372]   See also Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 85.

In recent years Shiʻi women have developed into active participants in the politicised Shiʻi discourse particularly through sensory events performed by women in private and semi-private spheres in which the female body is central. Similar to the private/public dichotomy discussed above, the centre-periphery dynamics in which the Middle East has been traditionally seen as the centre and diasporic Shiis as living in the periphery are shifted: Whereas diasporic Shiis used to be at the margins of political and religious events in the Middle East, now in Europe they occupy a central role in influencing ritual practices among women back in the Gulf. The change in sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East since the fall of Saddam Hussein and the rise of anti-Shii sectarianism created for Shirazi women an opportunity to respond and to offer long-term changes in women's participation in this sectarian struggle. The aesthetiziation of politics through sensory experiences and bodily performances articulates agency and seek to alter gender dynamics and political discourses. The new Shii woman is one who is an agent of change who is strong, politically as well as religiously. Social media platforms serve here as an alternative space to express women's aesthetic articulation of oppression and survival. The new Shia woman becomes an activist netizen influencing other women to seek their religious right for unlimited and unrestricted participation in religious practices. It also invites empathetic recognition from other Shiis particularly from those in the Middle East who at times of heightened sectarian violence feel left behind. At the same time, it also offers a space for others to articulate their rejection and criticism to women's new and increasing participation in religious practices and their increased political involvement by using their own bodies in the aetheticization of politics as the next chapter on *tatbir* will demonstrate.

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CHAPTER 4 AESTHETICIZATION[373] OF POLITICS: THE CASE OF *TATBIR*

On the 10th day of Muharram, the *mullaya* of the Shirazi *husayniyya* in London invited me to come to what is regarded by many as the peak of Shi'i *Ashura* mourning rituals. The women's religious space in the husayniyya looked and smelled different on that day. The area was divided into a very small space for women to gather and to make themselves ready for the ritual. The floor and walls of the rest of the room was covered with blue plastic sheets looking like a tent.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 24 HERE]

Figure 22: Entrance of a *tatbir* tent in a Shirazi lead Husayniyya in London 2014

At the front of the tent was a huge poster with a verse from the Qurʾān saying: "Whoever holds in honour the symbols of God, such (honour) should come truly from piety of the heart"[374], referring, as I was told, to those who venerate the signs of God, through honouring shrines, monuments, commands and prescribed duties, of having hearts that have been blessed with the fear of God.[375] This is followed by the label 'Tatbir tent' in four languages: Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English. Inside the tent was a table with orange juice and water. At one side there were three plastic chairs and a bucket and another three plastic chairs on the other side. Breakfast was served consisting of cream, honey, marmalade and bread but also of

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[373]   Aesthetics is used in this study in its Aristotelian sense as sensory and bodily experience rather than in a post-Kantian sense as the articulation of beauty. See Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations.* .

[374]   Qurʾan 22:32.

[375]   Muḥammad Tahir-ul-Qadrī in www.altafsir.com.

warm grain pudding, called *ḥaris*[376] that consists of a variety of wheat, honey, milk, sugar and nuts. *Ḥaris* is regarded as a good source of carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. The women insisted those performing the *tatbir* to eat it in order to have 'the power to perform it' as I was told. After the breakfast, women washed themselves and wore a white shroud known as *kafan* used traditionally to wrap in the dead body before burying it.[377] The symbolic reference of the *kafan* is not only to the victims of the battle of Karbala and the killing of Imam Husayn on that day but also a reference to the Shi'is' willingness to sacrifice themselves as martyrs for the sake of Imam Husayn and his cause.[378]

Inside the tent, women first performed a regular *majlis*: Women were in the middle building a circle, hitting their faces harshly with their hands, with someone reading lamentation poetry.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 23 HERE]

Figure 23: The interior female space of a Husayniyya where *tatbir* is performed (London 2014)

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[376] Some refer to it as *Jareesh*.

[377] See also Andrzej Wirth, "Semeiological Aspects of the Ta'ziyeh," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 32–39 (36).

[378] For other Shi'i symbols see Kamran Scott Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Washington D. C.: University of Washington Press, 2004); Kamran Scot, Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) and Peter J. Chelkowski, "Iconography of the Women of Karbala. Tiles, Murals, Stamps and Posters," in *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

When the *mullaya* arrived, she started reciting very moving and powerful lamentation poetry accompanied with marching music that heated up the crowd.[379] With the music and the recitation of the poetry in the background, three women on chairs took each a sword from the bucket calling the women to line up to perform *tatbir* by parting their hair indicating where and how deep they want the sword to be cutting their heads and/or foreheads. Returning back to the ritual circle, women started hitting on their cuts to help shedding out more of their blood as well as pulling their hair and harshly hitting and sometimes bloodily scratching their faces. The atmosphere was very moving and although very heated everything was very well organised: Some women were responsible to take care of others by calling female paramedics in for anyone in need of care or providing water and orange juice to anyone who felt nauseous.

Tatbir is the act of (self-)flagellation by using swords and knives for cutting the body. The women in this study cut their heads and/or foreheads for the purpose of causing bleeding.[380] It is performed on the morning (or noontime) of the tenth day of *Muharram* – the day Shiʻis commemorate the killing of Imam Husayn (d. 680). This very controversial ritual practice, which is traditionally performed by men, is increasingly practiced by Shirazi Shiʻi women. Shirazi women in London claim that they have initiated this practice among women for the first time in 2007 and have influenced since then other Shiʻi women to practice *tatbir* in other European countries and in the Middle East including Kuwait and recently Bahrain.[381] This chapter will demonstrate how *tatbir* opens up discussions around the perception of women's participation in the ritual, the interpretation of authoritative texts, negotiations of gender roles within as well as outside of ritual spaces and women's increasing involvement in society and politics as a whole.

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379   More on this see chapter 6 on poetry below.

380   For a detailed historical discussion on *tatbīr* among men see Ende, "The Flagellations," 29. Ende argues that some scholars refer the practice of *tatbīr* back to the Buyid period. Muḥammad Mandi al-Qazwini, as Ende states, argued in work published end of the 1920s that *tatbīr* 'was initiated 'about a century ago' by people not well versed in the rules of the Sharia' (Ende, "The Flagellations," 29). Afary argues that the ritual was performed later saying '[m]any bloody rituals of Muharram (wounds to the forehead with knives and swords or scorching of the body) were gradually introduced in the sixteenth and early seventeen centuries. Janet Afary, "Shiʻite Narratives of Karbala and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of The Iranian Revolution, 1978–79," in *Eternal Performance: Taʻziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 192–236 (198).

381   Few observed women's participation in *tatbir* in Lebanon, see Richard Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon," *The Drama Review, Special Issue on Taʻzieh* (2005), 140–155.

Tatbir is regarded in this chapter as what Birgit Meyer calls a "sensational form"[382] understood as a mediator that conveys immediacy between the believer and the transcendental. *Tatbir* allows individuals to become religious subjects empowered through the collective participation in the ritual practice. It is therefore a religious aesthetics that enables individuals to engage with the divine and with each other generating thereby particular collective sensibilities.

On a social and political level, the body is used as a meaning-making tool to transform power structures and define them anew. *Tatbir* will be analysed in this chapter within the following three socio-political and communal contexts: gender power dynamics within the Shirazi Shiʻi communities, intra-communal religio-authoritative dynamics among the various Shiʻi networks and finally religio-political dynamics regarding the larger positionality of the Shiʻa in Islam in relation to the geopolitical and sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East. The relationship to Iran is very crucial when examining *tatbir*. Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared in a fatwa in 1994 *tatbir* as not permissible (*ḥaram*).[383] This caused inner-communal conflicts within the various Shiʻi communities in the Middle East and within the Shiʻi diaspora in particular. As discussed in more detail in chapter 1, the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 changed the power dynamics between Sunnis and Shiʻis but also between various Shiʻi groups and their attitude towards linking religion with politics.[384] Whether among Shirazi Shiʻis in Europe, Kuwait or in Bahrain, how and to what degree religion and politics are linked differs. The political agendas of each group varies according to the positionality of Shiʻis, and Shirazis in particular, within each nation-state and their relation to the political system and ruling elite.

This chapter examines to what extent the increasing number of women performing *tatbir* in Europe and the Middle East can be regarded as a form of female religious empowerment thus influencing the gender dynamics within Shiʻi ritual practices not only in London but also among other Shiʻi communities in other European countries and in the

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[382]   Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010).

[383]   http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4209/Tatbir-is-a-wrongful-and-fabricated-tradition-Imam-Khamenei, accessed 18 March, 2019. Whereas the Shii jurist and *marjaʼ al taqlīd* (source of immolation) in Najaf, Mirza Husain al-Naʼini, was known to be in favour of the practice. As Ende argues 'until today, this *fatwa* by a *marjaʼ al-taqlīd* (and even more significantly a "progressive" one) is considered by the defenders of the flagellations as one of the most important proofs for the religious correctness of their position', Werner Ende, "The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiʻite 'Ulamaʼ," *Der Islam; Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* 1, no. 55 (1978), 19–36 (29).

[384]   Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq: Contextualising the Civil War of 2006–2007," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013). 115–138.

Middle East. It will also discuss the ritual practice of *tatbir* as a form of what Walter Benjamin calls the 'aestheticization of politics' through sensational forms. *Tatbir* is portrayed as a symbolic power to change existing gender dynamics but also sectarian and ideological dynamics in the Middle East and in Europe more generally.

The Political and Religious Dimension of *Tatbir*

The performance of *tatbir* is very controversial among the various Shiʻi clerical authorities in the Middle East – some of whom disapprove this practice and urge men and women to donate blood rather than, in their opinion, 'shedding it', as one of my interviewees in Dublin opposing this practise explains. The most traditionalist contemporary clerical authorities are ambivalent towards this practice. [385] Senior clerics like Grand Ayatollah Sistani employ vague language allowing their followers to read his fatwas as either supporting or condemning the practice of *tatbir*.[386] This ambiguity appeals to various groups among their followers ensuring that certain constituencies are not alienated among their followers who either support or reject this practice. Strongest opposition towards *tatbir* with a clearer stance is coming from Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[387] Shiʻi clerical authorities, organisations and individuals close to the Supreme Leader or the Islamic Republic discourage this practise as well. One group within contemporary Shiʻi Islam which maintains *tatbir* presenting it as a unique marker of their particular factional identity are the Shirazis.[388] The Shirazis use the practice of *tatbir* to present themselves as the 'true' Shiʻa, and to express what they regard as the cultural and religious authenticity of Shiʻi Islam, as one of the women in this study explains. Shirazis maintain the centrality of *tatbir* as an essential ritual to mourn the death of Imam Husayn but also to assert their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran using this controversial ritual as a symbolic marker to disaggregate themselves from the Iranian regime and from other more political movements in contemporary Shiʻi Islam.[389]

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[385] According to Ende, some religious scholars have even condemned the practice of being *bidʻa*, see Ende, "The Flagellations," 34–35.

[386] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-mrE4HDKOo, accessed 18 March 2019.

[387] His fatwa was issued 1994, David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala. Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shiʻi Lebanon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 153. Ende also refers to concerns al-Amin had towards *tatbīr* in the 1920s, see Ende, "The Flagellations," 29.

[388] Among men, tatbir is performed also by followers of other maraje'.

[389] See also Oliver Scharbrodt, "A Minority within a Minority?: The Complexity and Multilocality of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in Britain," *Contemporary Islam* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-018-0431-0; accessed June 2019.

These inner-sectarian conflicts between Shirazis and the Iranian regime, are recent developments. Some refer these conflicts back to the mid-1980s when huge numbers of Iraqi Shi'is were forced to leave Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war and found refuge in Iran. The resentments towards the Iranian regime resulted out of the mistreatment some of Iraqi women felt while living in Iran: "They [Iranians] treated us as second class citizens forgetting that we are as Shi'i as they are", as one woman in London explains. The younger generation of Shi'i women living in Europe who perform *tatbir* themselves argue that religion cannot be separated from politics. In their opinion, the complexity of the political context in the Middle East can be best taught, explained and transmitted through aesthetics in the form of rituals, poetry, theatrical performances, video clips, imageries and images etc. as one of the woman in London explains: "When you want people to understand something. When you want people to never forget something you need to show it to them. You need to show them something they will never forget again." Visual representations seem to be women's most favoured medium to construct and make a particular historical narrative of Shi'i history alive. Theatrical performances, as we have seen in the previous chapter, reconstruct on stage a particular remembrance of Shi'i history and is performed to adults and children in various Shi'i communities in Europe and in the Gulf. The power of representation through *tatbir,* however, is, according to the women, stronger than 'only' performing it on stage. The image of women in the *majlis* stained with blood is a powerful image as describes by one of the woman in Kuwait:

> Women of Karbala were all covered by blood. This is an image we shall never forget. This is different than the *tashabih* [theatrical performances] in which we perform what happened in Karbala on stage. *Tatbir* is real. It is our own blood in which we are covered in from head to toe. It is our own pain. This pain shall never be forgotten.[390]

The power of the visualization of images is articulated through the act of *tatbir* that involves, to a large extent, smelling the own and other people's blood in a small sensorially rich socio-religious space giving individuals the feeling of being transformed to the battlefield in Karbala: "We are in Karbala. Can you smell it? Can you smell Imam Husayn's noble blood?

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[390]   Another woman adds 'not the pain we feel out of cutting our body but the pain we feel in our heart – of what happed to our beloved Imam Husayn and his family.' A similar observation can been seen within the Lebanese context as Deeb argues: 'Blood spilled in memory of Karbala is similarly an embodiment of grief and an empathetic expression of solidarity with the imam's pain and sorrow', Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 149.

Sayyidna we are coming. We are on our way", women cried out while lining up in the queue waiting for their turn to be flagellated in Kuwait.

Gender Dynamics around *Tatbir*

Scholars working on Shi'ism in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, other Gulf countries, Iran, India and Pakistan have observed the performance of *tatbir* among men alone and have characterised it as a 'rite of masculinity'.[391] Mary Hegland on her work on Peshawar Shi'i ritual practices argues that women are: "[…] disqualified from the most laudable and spectacular manner of veneration".[392] This is however different among women following the religious cleric Muḥammad al-Shirazi and his family who have been increasingly performing *tatbir*. At the time of initiation in 2007, the number of women performing it did not exceed ten. In *Ashura* 2014, when I observed this practice for the first time, over one hundred women, mainly from

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[391]   Sporadic and individual women in the public sphere were observed in Lebanon to perform *tatbir* by Fouad Gehad Marei and Richard Norton, in "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon," *The Drama Review*, Special Issue on Ta'zieh (2005), 140–155. More research into its Lebanese but also wider socio-religious and political context still needs to be conducted. On Shia women's participation in other religious ritual practices in Lebanon see Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*; in Syria Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013), 75–91; in Iraq Elizabeth W. Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh. An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York: Anchor Body, 1965); Elizabeth W. Fernea, "Remembering Ta'ziyeh in Iraq," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010), 284–297; in Iran Aghaie, *The Martyrs*; Ingvild Flaskerud, "Women as Ritual Performers. Commemorating Martyrdom in Female Gender-Specific Rituals in Shia-Islamic Iran," in *Women and Religion in the Middle East and the Mediterranean*, ed. Ingvar B. Mahle and Inger Marie Okkenhaug (Oslo: Unipub, 2004), 115–134; Ingvild Flaskerud, "'Oh, my Heart is Sad. It is Moharram, the Month of Zaynab:' The Role of Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz," in *The Women of Karbala. Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2005), 65–91; Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of *Jalaseh* Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighbourhood in Iran," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* (N. S.) 2 (1996); Azam Torab, *Neighbourhood and Piety. Gender and Ritual in South Tehran* (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis: University of London, 1998); Azam Torab, "The Politicization of Women's Religious Circles in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran*, ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (London: Curzon 2002), 143–168; in Bahrain Thomas Fibiger, "Ashura in Bahrain. Analysis of an Analytical Event," *Social Analysis* 54, no. 3 (2010), 29–46; in India David Pinault, "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from Modern India," *History of Religions* 38, no. 3 (1999), 285–305 and in Pakistan Mary Elaine Hegland, "Shi'a Women of NW Pakistan and Agency through Practice: Ritual, Resistance, Resilience," *Polar* 18, no. 2 (1995b), 65–79; Mary Elaine Hegland, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's *Majales*: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sties of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity and Gender," in *Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999).

[392]   Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism," 249. See also Mary Elaine Hegland, "Shi'a Women of NW Pakistan and Agency through Practice: Ritual, Resistance, Resilience," *Polar* 18, no. 2 (1995b), 65–79. Same argument is made by Afary, "Shi'ite Narratives," 201. Pinault heard about Hyderabadi women, however no research has been undertaken within this context, saying: 'I was told that these women had performed *shamshir-zani* (gashing their foreheads with knives), and that Hyderabadi women will occasionally vow to shed their own blood on *Ashura* in one of the severer forms of *matam* if their prayers to *Ahl-e-Bayt* (the Prophet Muḥammad's family) and the Karbala martyrs are answered.' Pinault, Horse of Karbala, 59.

the younger generation, performed *tatbir* in London. They claim that they have since then influenced and inspired other Shi'i women in the Gulf to practice *tatbir*. The wife of Ayatollah Mujtaba Husseini al-Shirazi (1943), the younger brother of Muḥammad al-Shirazi, urged women in London to participate in *tatbir*. As one of the very influential Shii *'ulama's* wives, she argued that women have the religious right to participate in the practice of *tatbir*. Women felt encouraged and authorised by her call to participate in the practice. In order to support their claim even further they make references to particular historical narratives and religious texts supporting the act of *tatbir* among women. Shirazi women re-visit and re-interpret particular events, narrations and hadiths from Shi'i sources such as *Bihar al-Anwar* below to support their claim for more right to participate in *tatbir*:

> Zaynab turned and saw her brother's [captivated] head. Then she hit [*natahat*] her forehead against the saddle [some refer to the pillar of her tent] until we saw blood pouring out under her veil.[393]

Zaynab occupies a particular status within Shi'i Islam and is regarded, together with her mother Fatima, as one of the most important historical female Shi'i figures who laid down the foundation for the mourning rituals around Karbala. The general Shi'i narrative recounts how Zaynab witnessed the battle at Karbala and how she took care of the children and widows who were brought as hostages to Damascus after the battle.[394] While imprisoned in Damascus, she kept the memory of Karbala alive through her performance of mourning rituals. Women take Zaynab as a role model: "If Zaynab hit her head, then we are religiously obliged to follow her and do the same". Women's narrative of their obligation as women to follow the role of Zaynab in carrying the message of Imam Husayn acts as a "symbolic continuum"[395] to carry on the memory of Karbala as one of the women in Kuwait clarifies: "It is because of Sayyida Zaynab that we have *majalis* today. She made sure that the memory of Karbala is kept alive". Another woman adds: "It is our religious duty to follow Sayyida Zaynab and make sure that the memory of Karbala is never forgotten." The sermons in the

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[393]   Own translation. 'Abbas Qummi, *Mafatih al-jinan* (Tehran: Chapkhana-ye Muhammad 'Ali 'Ilmi, 1964).

[394]   For more on the role of female Shi'i historical figures in Shi'i Islam, see Yafa Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala in the Diaspora: Religious Rituals among Iraqi Shii Women in Ireland," *Religion* 45, no. 1 (2015) and Kifah al-Haddad, *Nisa' al-Tufuf* (Karbala: Al 'Ataba al-Hussayniyya al-Muqqadasa, 2011).

[395]   Nadia C. Seremetakis, "The Social Construction of Pain, Gender, and Power in the Southern Peloponnese," *Ethos* 18, no. 4 (1990), 481–511 (501).

majalis I attended in London and in the Gulf reflect the narrative of these women in which the authoritative figure of Zaynab is used to legitimise women's efforts in claiming more rights in religious ritual practices. Women are repeatedly urged in the *majalis* to "be Zaynab" to "feel like Zaynab" and to "act like Zaynab".[396] One of the women in London explains:

> Zaynab's head is not less precious than ours – God forbid. She did not think twice – actually she did not think at all when she hit her head against the wood it was rather a natural reaction. It should therefore be our natural action to do *tatbir*. This is the least we can do.

Another woman in Kuwait says with tears in her eyes: "Shame on us. Shame on all of us who make a big fuss about hitting or not hitting our heads. Zaynab must be ashamed of us. Imam Husayn gave up his life for us and we discuss whether making a small cut is allowed or not allowed".[397] Another reference is to a number of hadith texts such as the one below which is attributed to Imam al Mahdi, the hidden 12th Imam who is believed to re-appear on the Day of Judgement, saying that:

> We will mourn you mornings and evenings and weep blood instead of tears.[398]

Shirazi Shiʿi women argue that, according to this tradition, Imam al-Mahdi did not restrict mourning expressed through blood shedding to men only. They use this text among others to support their argument for their right as women to participate in the practice of *tatbir*. They believe that *tatbir* is not only a religious right but more importantly a religious obligation for women as much as it is for men. They also emphasise that women are well capable of leading a community and making their own decisions and rules: "We are educated, we have the intellectual skills but also the religious knowledge to set for us women more roles within our communities." References to levels of education, intellectual skills and religious knowledge were regularly repeated in my conversations with women in the Gulf as well. Women in Kuwait, for example, highlight women's religious education in various *hawzas* (religious seminaries) in Iran, Iraq but also in Kuwait itself underlining the high level of religious

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[396]   Pinault in his research observed men wanting to 'feel Husain's sorrow', David Pinault, *The Shiʿites, Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 106.

[397]   Pinault argues that the ritual is seen as an expression of regret and 'desire for penitence', Pinault, *The Shiʿites,* 105.

[398]   Own translation. Muhammad Baqir Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*. 110 vols. (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah, 1966), vol. 98, ch. 24, 320.

knowledge many women acquire: "We do not need men to tell us what to do or not to do. We have the same knowledge needed to hold *majalis* and lead communities – by the way knowledge acquired from the same *'ulama'* men learned from". Another woman in Kuwait referred to the religious privilege men have enjoyed for centuries: "It's an honour to do *tatbir*. Men have always been doing it. It's our turn now. We want to be united with Imam Husayn. His sister did everything to make the whole world know about Imam Husayn. It's our turn now."

Tatbir becomes a legitimate practice for a growing number of women in Europe and in the Gulf through the support of certain *'ulama'*'s opinion combined with the reference to influential Shi'i textual sources. When women participated in *tatbir* for the first time, it was still perceived with scepticism particularly from the older generation of Shi'i women who argued that "we've never participated in the ritual why should we now?" However, after few years of its initial introduction in London it became more popular among the younger generation of Shirazi women in particular but increasingly so also among the older generation.

The news of women's participation in *tatbir* spread very quickly among the various *husayniyyat* in London and other cities in the UK resulting in various reactions from community leaders and members. I met women from other European countries, such as from Norway and the Netherlands, who came to London to witness the precedential case of women's participation in the ritual practice of *tatbir*. The process and organisation of *tatbir* among women in London is mobilised through women's transnational links to Shi'i communities in other European countries as well as to various countries in the Middle East such as Kuwait, Iraq and Iran. Although women's participation in *tatbir* does not enjoy the same degree of public visualisation, as the practice among women is performed indoors, it still is very powerful in mobilising women in participating in the practice. Word of mouth particularly articulated through social media channels is the most powerful medium used by women to publicise their participation in the ritual. Many women came to the ritual on the morning of *Ashura* out of curiosity to witness for the first time women's participation in *tatbir*. Some were still very sceptical but others were motivated and, although originally not planned, joined the crowd and performed *tatbir*. One woman from Norway described her experience of visiting the *tatbir* ritual among women for the first time as follows: "I heard about women doing *tatbir* but could not imagine a woman doing it. I'm here today to see how strong women's belief in Imam Husayn is. Look around you. It's amazing".

Tatbir Contested

Although the practice of women performing *tatbir* has only been introduced gradually to Bahrain, it already receives a lot of rejection and condemnation from within as well as outside of Shi'i communities. In a country where sectarian tensions are increasing and the Shi'i population faces severe discrimination and persecution, many women in this study regard the act of *tatbir* among women as another step to fuel up tensions between Sunnis and Shi'i in the country and in the region as a whole. Different to Kuwait where the public performance of *tatbir* on the streets has been banned in 2005 because of possible militant reactions from so-called Islamic State (IS), in Bahrain it is permissible and very well-known in the region for its intensive and very powerful presence in the public sphere. It is a huge event with many activities such as public theatrical performances and art exhibitions to which many people in the region come to in order to witness and participate in. Although the sectarian tensions in recent years have increased in Bahrain it did not stop the performance of *tatbir* or other ritual practices among men on the streets. In contrast, however, the very few women who perform *tatbir* in Bahrain do this in hidden private spaces and without public attention.[399] Bahraini women's performance of *tatbir* is regarded as '*fitna'*, as I was told, causing tensions within the Shi'i community and damaging the image of Shi'a and Islam in general as one of the women in Bahrain says: "This is not acceptable. The image of Shi'i Islam is being damaged by one or two women who now think that they need to do *tatbir* themselves." Another woman adds: "They are not even religious. I know them quite well. They even do not wear their *hijab* properly and now they think they are the 'true' Shi'a just because they cut themselves." Another woman criticises the rhetoric used by Shirazis of being the 'true' Shi'a saying: "This has been their politics of convincing women to do *tatbir*. The whole talk about being true or not true Shi'a. What is all this nonsense? We all believe in *ahl al-bayt* and therefore we are all Shi'a even without cutting ourselves." Both sides – those supporting or rejecting women's performance of *tatbir* – use the same rhetoric of discrediting the degree of women's religiosity. By describing the women who perform *tatbir* in Bahrain as being "not so religious" and "not wearing their *hijab* properly" they are demeaning their credibility publically through the use of social media, in particular. Fearing the increase in women's participation in *tatbir* following the development of other countries in the Gulf in which women's participation is growing, as for example in Kuwait, the rejection of women's

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399   This is different in London or in Kuwait where the public attention of women performing *tatbir* is very high particular as discussed in social media.

involvement in Bahrain is very strong. The tone is very aggressive and the rhetoric used, as will be illustrated below, is not much different from those who support it.

The controversy caused through performing *tatbir* is only related to women's participation not men's. The distortion of the image of Shi'i Islam in the public sphere and the use of *tatbir* among some Sunni groups to denounce and attack Shi'is is not linked to *tatbir* in general but only to women's participation in *tatbir*. This is different from Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's opinion and those supporting his *fatwa* who regard the act of *tatbir* as such harming the public image of Shi'is in general and disallow its practice as such without gender distinction. In Bahrain however, the women I interviewed only saw *tatbir* problematic when it involved women. They emphasise the "noble status of women", as they referred to, in Islam in general and the unique position of the female members of *ahl al-bayt* in particular when arguing against women's involvement in *tatbir*.[400]

Similar to those supporting female participation in the ritual of *tatbir*, those rejecting it also use textual references and a certain memory of Shi'i history to support their disapproval. These women, for example, remember Imam Husayn visiting his sister Zaynab in her tent the night before he was killed. They remember him explaining to her that "when the next day comes bad things will happen to him and to the others" and asked her to be strong and supportive, as one of the women narrates. He asks her to lead the community and take care of the orphans after him. He also asks her when she hears about his death she shall *not* tear her clothes, scratch her face or weep excessively.[401]

These women emphasise the noble behaviour of the women of *ahl al-bayt* and reject any indecent actions from any member particularly from women: "they are the reason (*hum al-mantiq*) and therefore would have never behaved in such an indecent way and would have never allowed other women to act so barbarically (*waḥshiyya*)".[402] They highlight the religious obligation to keep the memory of *ahl al-bayt* alive "… but how? Through cutting ourselves and being stained with blood? No, we need to spread their message of peace and love." Women rejecting the female participation in *tatbir* believe that this involvement will increase the sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is in Bahrain: "We marry from each

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[400] On similar finding see Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala".

[401] Compare Al-Mufid al Shaykh; *Al-Irshad fi Ma'rifat Hajij Allah ala al-'Ibad,* v. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Mufid, 1993), 94:

"يا أخية إني أقسمت بأبري قسمي، لا تشقي عليَّ جيبا ولا تخمشي عليَّ وجها ولا تدعي عليَّ بالويل والثبور إذا أنا هلكت ثم جاء بها حتى أجلسها عنده".

[402] Interestingly one of the women Deeb interviewed in Lebanon also described the self-flagellation of men in the South of Lebanon which she has seen on television as 'barbarism.' Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 136 as well as 154.

other. Women should keep up the good image of Shi'is among her in-laws. My Sunni in-laws would tear me up into pieces if I support this act. I have to present Shi'i Islam in a good and clean manner. All this does not help". Another woman explains further by saying: "Those participating in *tatbir* only do so out of intransigence." In a country which is socially and political instable, women fear the destabilisation of the Shi'i communities from within even further through women's participation in the act of *tatbir*: "*Tatbir* among men is something we have always known but women? This is something new? What is this? A new fashion? We do not need new fashion in Bahrain. We need to calm down and secure what we already have". Female participation in the ritual is not regarded here as empowering but rather as falling back into the old traditional 'trap', as one of the woman puts it, of women being the 'trouble maker': "Women were always being regarded as causing *fitna*. Women's participation in *tatbir* confirms this and as you know, *fitna* is even worse than killing."[403]

Shirazi Shi'i women do not deny the conversation between Imam Husayn and his family mentioned above but, in their opinion, what was discussed on that night and what happened the day after are two different matters. They argue that "Zaynab's love for her brother and her pain in losing him was at the moment she heard about his death more powerful than what she agreed on the night before". They rather support the references mentioned earlier which state that she has hit her head against the pillar of her tent (or the saddle), causing her forehead to bleed as a reaction to the death of her brother. Women opposing the female participation in the ritual of *tatbir* claim that Zaynab would have never shown weakness in front of the enemy but rather stayed strong and firm about the news of her brother's death. Shirazi Shi'i women however argue that by hitting her head, Zaynab did not show weakness but strength and should therefore be regarded as her way of resisting and not fearing the enemy as one of the women in London explains: "By shedding her own blood she showed the enemy that she does not fear death and that her own body and life is meaningless for the fight against injustice". The power to disconnect from, what the women refer to as, any 'worldly values' whether it is one's own life or one's own children or other family members, one's own body or wealth has been repeatedly mentioned in the *majalis* in London and the Gulf. They recall the strength of women who celebrate the death of their sons when

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[403]   الفتنة اشد من القتل. Religious Shi'i scholars at the beginning of the 20th century such as Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin al-'Amili (d. 1952) also regarded Shi'i religious ritual practices such as *tatbir* as *bid'a*. See his book *al-tanzih li-a'mal al-shabih* (published 1927) cited in Ende, "The Flagellations," 22.

being martyred referring to historical Shi'i female figures[404], or other women whose sons were either killed, kept captive or are missing by either militant Sunni groups or autocratic Sunni regimes. They highlight women's strength in bearing their loss regarding it as a sacrifice for their love for Imam Husayn. Cutting their body is perceived as a small gift for Imam Husayn and to articulate their disconnection with 'worldly values' and their willingness to die for his cause. Shirazi Shi'i women regard their participation in the ritual of *tatbir* as stepping into the footsteps of a powerful and resilient Zaynab who did not fear physical harm or death. They believe that cutting one's own body and shedding one's own blood is the highest symbolic proof of their resistance and power, as one women in Kuwait explains: "You always fear the one who does not fear the loss of anything in life because everything in life is worthless." Another woman adds: "We are only visitors in this life. Life is transient/ephemeral (*fan*) but our act is immortal. The memory of Karbala is immortal (*khalid*)."

When observing the ritual of *tatbir* among men one very often sees them holding their own swords, knives or other sharp objects and cutting themselves. The performance usually different among Shirazi women as they line up waiting for their turn to be flagellated by other women. Women I talked to in relation to this difference highlighted the symbolic message of women's willingness to *go* to death rather than causing (symbolically) death to oneself as one of the women in Kuwait explains: "You talk about reason (*mantiq*)? What more proof of reason do you want when a woman goes on her feet to be flagellated?" Another woman explain further: "Some say we are mad but we are not. We submit ourselves to something bigger than life. We submit ourselves to Imam Husayn. We go on our feet to be martyred." Women believe that allowing other people to flagellate them has a stronger symbolic meaning than flagellating oneself: "You never know where it hits you. You also never know how hard", or "It's the same with your enemy. You never know how bad it reaches you. When other people flagellate you, you get the same surprising effect on how much blood is shedding out." References are also made to the martyred sons of historical female Shi'i figures such as Imam Husayn's brother Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas[405] who Shi'is remember have been killed by a sword cutting his hands and finally his head while fetching water for the women and their children at Karbala. Whether lowering their heads and kneeling down as in Kuwait or standing up right with their heads raised up as in London waiting for their turn to

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[404]   Amlah the mother of al Qasim, Layla the mother of Ali al-Akbar, Rabab the mother of Abdallah al-Radi' and Um al-Baneen the mother of Abbas, Ja'far, Abdullah and Uthman. For more see Haddad, *Nisa'*.

[405]   His mother is called Fatima al-Kolabiyya.

be flagellated, women believe they are embodying and personifying the experience of *ahl al-bayt* by showing their submission to the will of God.

Tatbir as a Form of Women's Religious Empowerment

Shi'is who perform *tatbir* believe that through blood-letting they are purifying the body and the soul thereby healing and ridding their body from their own rotten blood. By doing so, they believe to symbolically express their willingness to die for Imam Husayn.[406] Women performing the act of *tatbir* consider themselves transforming to purified bodies and souls. Through their engagement in the ritual of *tatbir* they not only articulate spiritual meaning but also contest gender dynamics within Shi'i ritual practices. Through women's symbolic articulation of their willingness to be martyred for the sake of Imam Husayn, which is the peak of Shi'is' expression of their love and veneration for the imam, they seek to achieve eschatological equality. The ritual empowers women as individuals in their own beliefs elevating them to a higher spiritual position expressed symbolically through the willingness to die. While accessing the transcendental through the act of *tatbir* has traditionally been reserved for men, now women claim their right to create sustained links to the transcendental as well via this specific ritual practice. Women use their body to access the transcendental thus elevating the female subject by challenging male dominated social and religious hegemony.

"Whether I do *tatbir* or not is my own choice as it is my own body and my own head", was repeated several times in *majalis* in the UK as well as in Kuwait. Women highlighted the need to disconnect from the material and physical world and turn to the afterlife as one of the women in Kuwait says:

> The most precious thing for a woman is her look. Her body. We spend so much money on beauty products to make us look nice. We even do liposuction and body lifting *(shafft we-shadd)*. A woman's body is precious. We need to show Imam Husayn that all this is not important when it comes to supporting him. We need to be willing as women, even more than men – notice here even more than men, to sacrifice which for us women is the most important thing we possess – our body – our female beauty.

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[406]   See also Gustav E. Thaiss, "Religious Symbolism and Social Change. The Drama of Husain," in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

The female body is used as a symbol of female sacrifice and disconnection from what the women referred to as 'worldly values'. It is also a symbol of female empowerment of having control over their body and taking the lead to decide for themselves whether to flagellate it or not. This step however needs to be supported by authoritative religious figures and backed up with textual references to give it the religious legitimisation needed to be accepted among Shirazi women. The patriarchal social systems in which these women operate in, have traditionally regarded women as being physically and emotionally weak but also fragile in their belief and always in need for male guidance. One of the women in London says: "Men think we are only good for crying." Weeping for *ahl al-bayt* is indeed believed to be a source of salvation for which every Shi'i will be rewarded in heaven[407] but Shirazi women strive to achieve a higher spiritual rank. They want to be linked to the transcendental and be united together with Imam Husayn and his sister Zaynab through the act of *tatbir*. Shi'i women I interviewed have highlighted the shift in remembering the female members of *ahl al-bayt* from victims to active members referring it back to the new memory of Shi'i history in which women are portrayed of being rather strong and supportive.[408] Shirazi Shi'i women see this version of a 'new Shi'i women' reflected in their participation in the ritual of *tatbir*. They argue that whereas men's participation in *tatbir* is regarded as an act of masculinity and strength, women's participation should equally be regarded as "women's unlimited love for Imam Husayn", as one of the women in London describes. The use of women's body as a declaration of 'true' faith is regarded by Shirazi women as the highest sacrifice and proof of their loyalty to Imam Husayn but also their worthiness of being equal to men in their love for Husayn. In their opinion, they have proven their willingness to sacrifice the most precious value of a woman in life – her beauty and her body – which on a day-to-day basis has frequently been used against her as one of the women in Kuwait explains:

> They [men] accuse us of neglecting our religious obligations as we are busy making ourselves pretty. This might be sometimes the case but when it comes to Imam Husayn all this is forgotten. When I do *tatbir* I show very clearly that all this does not matter. My body, my beauty is worthless besides my love for Imam Husayn.

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[407]   'Whoever wept or pretended to weep. Allah will reward her/him in heaven.' See also Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala".

[408]   Ali Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, translated by Laleh Bakhtiar (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, 1981) and Shanneik, "Remembering Karbala".

The empowerment of the self through women's participation in the ritual of *tatbir* is expressed through the material object of the shroud (*kafan*) – the white garment worn while doing *tatbir*. The *kafan* is transformed into a "personal symbol"[409] used as a communicative tool to articulate women's individual as well as collective ritual experiences in performing *tatbir*. Men very often pose covered in blood and holding their knives in pictures and distribute these in various social media channels such as WhatsApp, Snapchat and the like. Women, because of being veiled, do not take pictures of themselves.[410] However, some would take off their *kafan*, take pictures of it highlighting the immense of blood on it then put it into the same social media channels men would use. These distributed pictures function as a representation of women's ritual experiences expressed through embodied forms of power articulated through the object of the shroud.

The belief in exceptionality is central in the ritual of *tatbir* among Shirazis. The phrase 'only true Shi'is do *tatbir*' has been repeatedly expressed in various *majalis* in London and the Gulf. The construction of truth-claiming through a particular memory of Shi'i history and with the support of certain clerical authorities and religious texts, provides women with the empowerment needed to set communal gender structures anew. The construction of pain, through cutting their bodies with sharp objects and shedding excessive blood is central to the truth-claiming strategies used by women.[411] Through women's use of their bodies and their feeling of pain, they symbolically articulate their willingness to suffer and to be martyred, similar to men, for the sake of Imam Husayn for which they believe they will be rewarded for in the afterlife.

Through women's entry into the *tatbir* tent, they enter a liminal stage by disaggregating themselves from the existing male-dominated social order that restricts the act of *tatbir* to a male practice. Women's participation in *tatbir* becomes a powerful source of the transformation of their communities' existing power structures. Since *tatbir* has traditionally been regarded as a male ritual, women redefine these gender dynamics by becoming part of men dominated ritual practices. Women claim their right to participate in *tatbir* and by doing so, they re-enter the social order on their own terms – by making the act of *tatbir* permissible

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[409]   See Gananth Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[410]   This is different among the few women observed performing *tatbir* in the Nabaṭiyyah context in Lebanon.

[411]   For similar research result among Maniat women of the Southern Peloponnese see Seremetakis, "The Social Construction".

for both men and women.[412] Women inverse religious hierarchies, transform the meaning and function of Shi'i mourning rituals in renewing religious and cultural power structures within their communities also beyond religious boundaries. Women's participation in *tatbir* opens up a wider debate on women's participation in society and in politics more generally. *Tatbir* becomes a space for women's articulation of their right to participate in every aspect of their community. A new understanding and perception of women's abilities is constructed and male hegemony is questioned and redefined by women's participation in a practice that for centuries has been a male prerogative solely.

Women of other Shi'i religious networks, opposed to this practice, following different religious scholars in London highlight the decreasing number of men in the Middle East performing *tatbir* relating it to the "rise of their level of understanding of Shi'i history", as they describe it. Whereas in the Middle East the number of men performing *tatbir* is declining, in Europe not only the number of men but also the number of women performing *tatbir* is growing. At the same time, this increase in women's participation in *tatbir* in Europe, influences the popularity of *tatbir* among women back in the Middle East. One of the main driving forces in the increasing number of women performing *tatbir* lies in the relation between pain and religio-political discourses. Pain here does not necessarily refer to the pain caused by the open wounds as a result of the act of (self-)flagellation but rather the social construction of a long history of Shi'i collective pain – or what I would call a Shi'i collective memory of pain. As far as the Shi'i women I interviewed are concerned, the pain started with the killing of Imam Husayn and of *ahl al-bayt* and continued throughout centuries up until the present day with various acts of suppression, displacement, humiliation and persecution of the Shi'is. As Seremetakis in the context of Maniat women of the Southern Peloponnese argues: "Pain as an institutional, jural, and political [in the Shi'is' case also religious] idiom constructs a subject by fusing emotional or physical states with the ideological organization of the social structure."[413] The construction of a collective narrative of pain contributes to an empowerment of the subject resulting in the increase in power and authority of the Shirazi group within Shi'i Islam in general. Shirazis facilitate formalised and authorised practices

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[412]   Seremetakis explores in her work the relation between gender identity and death rituals among Maniat women of the Southern Peloponnese. She understands women's participation in mortuary ceremonies also as women's re-definition of their positioning within their social and cosmological orders. Further on this topic see Seremetakis, "The Social Construction".

[413]   Seremetakis, "The Social Construction," 483. See also Alan Morinis, "The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation," *Ethos* 13, no. 2 (1985), 150–175; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Peregrine Books, 1979) and Talal Asad, "Notes on the Body, Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual," *Economy and Society* 12, no. 1 (1983), 287–327.

that provide, through *tatbir* in particular, access to the transcendental. Through women's re-interpretation of Shi'i sources and the support of certain *maraje'* they are now able to access the transcendental in a manner that traditionally was only accessed by men. Women's bodies in Shi'i ritual practices function as a "symbolic continuum"[414] not only as a continuum for Shi'is' memory of pain but also for the tradition of female mourning, believed to have been carried out by Imam Husayn's sister Zaynab also in regards to *tatbir* – thus emphasising here the female involvement in the practice.

The Aestheticization of Shi'i Politics

Shirazi Shi'i women in the diaspora in London follow the political developments in the Middle East very closely and integrate these into the *majalis* they organise. The political context forms a central part of their lectures, lamentation poetry and follow-up conversations. Looking at the political developments and the social discrimination of Shi'is in neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Bahrain, addressing the political has also been a central element in the *majalis* I attended in Kuwait. In both London and Kuwait, the *tatbir* ritual has been used as a platform to articulate structural and institutional power expressed through bodily performances and articulated as part of women's religious and political negotiation of their identities. The systematic discrimination of Shi'is in Bahrain and the increasing sectarian tensions after the 2011 uprising has been one of the main issues surrounding *majalis* I attended in both London and Kuwait. The violence performed on Shi'is and the revocation of citizenships of various Bahrainis who belong to the Shi'i oppositional Al-Wifaq party, is linked to the wider narrative of the historical persecution, maltreatment and displacement of Shi'is since the Battle of Karbala. Through women's transnational links, particularly through social media, a transnational conversation on the socio-political situation of Shi'is in various contexts in the Middle East is generated. Women's cutting of their bodies is linked to the on-going sectarian conflict and violence against Shi'is. The performance of *tatbir* among women in London began in 2007 which was the height of sectarian violence in Iraq. The women's self-imposed pain on their bodies is interwoven with the narrative of the psychological and physical pain experienced by other Shi'i women on the ground in Iraq. The performativity of pain expresses an aesthetic and symbolic emulation of the actual suffering of Shi'i women in the Middle East. It articulates the sectarian conflict and the involved power dynamics contributing thereby to women's awareness of their lived environment. *Tatbir* enables women

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414   Seremetakis, "The Social Construction," 501.

to connect, on the one hand, to the transcendental but, on the other hand, it provides women with a space to articulate and negotiate existing power structures that are framed within the general Shi'i narrative of oppression towards Shi'is since the Battle of Karbala.

Different to research conducted within the Lebanese context which shows a shift in the meaning of *Ashura* from the soteriological to revolutionary purposes, in the *majalis* I attended, women see their position in both the transcendental and the revolutionary. Through the use of the body through *tatbir*, women are able to access both spaces to which they were traditionally excluded from.[415] The amalgamation of the individual, social and political body in the practice of *tatbir* is articulated in female religious spaces through the lamentation poetry recited during the act of *tatbir* that causes a sensational affect – a topic covered in chapter 6. The younger generation of Shirazi Shi'i women are aware of the controversy around women's participation in the ritual of *tatbir* but they tend to be more vocal about their right to participate in it. They are also most innovative and creative in generating a narrative around the socio-political context of Shi'is in the *majalis*. They collaborate with the *mullayat* in forming the lecture, the lamentation poetry and the discussions after the *majalis* have ended. These young Shirazi Shi'i women believe in the power of *tatbir* and their ability to change current gender, social and political discourses as one woman in London explains: "If we are not faithful to our believes, if we are weak in our love for Imam Husayn, if we are afraid of a small cut on our bodies that we are bandaging after the ritual is over, how can Shi'is fight against the enemy? How can Shi'is gain their dignity back within their society?" Whether in Europe or in the Gulf, Shirazi Shi'i women I interviewed believe that Shi'is should stand more for their religious but also social and political rights within their societies. Mourning rituals to which current political conflicts are central provide women with the strength to endure the hardship of persecution and suppression but also urge them to be active in their fight against injustice. A woman in Kuwait explains: "In Iraq and elsewhere Da'esh [IS] is killing us and our governments are watching. They [governments] are of no use so we need to take the lead and it starts by disconnecting ourselves – our souls – from any physical or materialistic values we associate with life."

The increasing popularity of *tatbir* among women in Europe and in the Gulf can be linked to three factors: the increasing global empowerment of particular Sunni militant groups, such as al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State (IS), and to the growing sectarian tensions in the Gulf region as well as to the systematic demarcation of the Shirazis within the

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[415]   Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 152.

wider Shi'i political arena. *Tatbir* as an authorised and organised sensational form serves as a platform to articulate these power-dynamics not only through the act of *tatbir* alone but also through the whole aura[416] that is being constructed to mediate the empowerment of the subject. The Shirazi Shi'i women's step towards performing *tatbir* feeds therefore into a larger discussion on intra-communal transnational power relations. Its goal is to strengthen the position of Shirazi communities within the Shi'i national and transnational networks. The ritual can therefore be seen as a form of what Walter Benjamin calls "aestheticization of politics" that not only has an impact on the political and religio-authoritative status of Shirazis within Shi'i communities in London but also within other transnational networks within as well as outside of Europe.[417] The aestheticization of politics is articulated through the sensational form of *tatbir*. Power dynamics are thereby redefined on three levels: Firstly, gender power relations within the Shirazi community itself are re-conceived through women's insistence on their right to participate in the ritual of *tatbir*. Secondly, the religio-authoritative status is shifted among the various Shi'i networks particularly those opposing the practice of *tatbir*. Finally, the larger positionality of Shi'is in Islam re-arranged particularly in relation to the geo-political and sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East.

 Tatbir is a symbolic medium that aestheticizes politics through authorised sensational forms[418] that are socially shaped and religiously legitimised. *Tatbir* is the aestheticization of politics understood as the ability to provide an expression of resistance through aesthetics which is a powerful tool as it is visible (broadcasted through various media and internet channels), mobile (transferable through transnational links) and flexible (variations in the form of performance). *Tatbir* allows the formation of collectivity through the expressive self-assertion of individuals demonstrating their empowerment through ritual practices. This empowerment is expressed through women's participation in *tatbir* but also in women's articulation of power dynamics within sectarian-conflict laded contexts in the Middle East. *Tatbir* is therefore an amalgamation of religion, politics and sensation that empowers and vocalises the marginalised. As Benjamin argues revolutionary politics requires "nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images".[419]

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[416] More on aura see Gary Smith, *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Scottsdale: Prism Key Press, 2010).
[417] See further on this point chapter 6 on lamentation poetry particularly the discussion on the politics of lamentation poetry below.
[418] Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion".
[419] Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Penguin, 1979), 236–238.

The power of images among Shirazis is articulated best in the act of cutting one's body through the performance of *tatbir*. The shedding of blood becomes a unified medium to bond individuals perceiving similar oppressive structures together highlighting their ability in the collective to restructure this oppressive power. *Tatbir* generates religious attention through discussions raised by various *'ulama'* on the permissibility of the practice. The strongest opposition comes from the Iranian regime to whom Shirazis predominantly articulate opposition to. On a governmental and general security level, the practice raises also political concerns about any larger social mobilization and political uprising the ritual may cause. Although *tatbir* is permissible in Bahrain, it is performed under high governmental surveillance as one woman explains: "yes, it is done but the government has people everywhere to see what is being said against them. They will interfere if necessary." In Kuwait, access to *majalis* in which women perform *tatbir* is restricted to certain people and only accessible to outsider through the approval of certain stakeholders. The performance of *tatbir* has always been a medium for the public expression of political resistance against any threat towards destabilising existing religious and/or national identities.[420] Beginning of the 20th Century in Iraq for example witnessed an increase in *tatbir* practices on the streets as an expression of resistance against colonialism.[421] The current sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and the rise of militant Sunni groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) as well as the increasing political and military collaborations of a number of governments in the Gulf with Western forces all contribute to an increase in Shi'is' participation in commemoration rituals. The link between religion and politics increases during a time of high political tensions and an increase in sectarian conflicts.[422]

Conclusion

When I observed the practice of *tatbir* in 2014, I met a Shi'i women from Norway who came to the UK in order to witness the performance of *tatbir* among women and to introduce it to

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[420]   Ibrahim al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie des schiitischen Chiliasmus. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des irakischen Passionsspiels* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1975), 23–27. Deeb however argues that within the context of pre-1970s Lebanon self-flagellation was associated with political quietism as 'violence is directed at the self, not outwards, implying a personal expression of grief, an internal struggle with regret, and the potential for individual salvation, rather than collective political or social action.' Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 150. This however changed again during the Iranian revolution as self-flagellation was regarded as a symbol of political resistance, see Mary Hegland, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Signs* 23, no. 2 (1998), 391–428.

[421]   Al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie*, 23–27. See also Khalid Sindawi, "The Husayni Sermon (*al-khotba al-husayniyya*) in Shi'ite Literature: Development, Structure, Venue, Preachers' Titles," *Orientalia Suecana* 54 (2005), 167.

[422]   Al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie*.

Shi'i women in Norway. The practice of *tatbir* is growing to a phenomenon that impacts not only Shi'i communities in the UK but also other European countries reaching to various countries in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf. Shi'i religious ritual practices performed by Shi'i women in the periphery in London influence, through their transnational links, practices performed in the Middle East particularly in terms of the rituals women perform and how they are performed – thus impacting the gender dynamics in Shi'i ritual practices in the Middle East more generally. Women's growing participation in *tatbir* in Europe and its influence on societies in the Middle East questions centre-periphery dynamics within Shi'i Islam. Through Shi'is' displacement and growing presence in Europe, London in particular, a shift in power has taken place. Whereas in the past Muslim communities in Europe have been influenced by religio-political and social changes in the Middle East, currently, the growing presence, the religious literacy and the political self-awareness of younger Shi'i communities in Europe influence religious and political dynamics in the Middle East.

This chapter provided another example of the active participatory role of the female body in religious ritual practices within Shi'i Islam which operates in sensorially rich social spaces. Here the body occupies a fundamental role and partakes in felt sensations[423] creating perceptions that are immediate not only to the individual but also to the collective. The engagement of the body in the ritual creates a gendered individuation process that foregrounds the female subject allowing the formation of links between the female subject and the transcendental. This individuation process contributes to the formation and development of a personal religious but also communal identity. This communal identity is articulated through the narrative of Karbala surrounding the suffering and ultimate killing of Imam Husayn. The pain that is associated with the battle of Karbala is not only felt through conceptualisation of the idea of pain alone but also through one's own body.[424] The female body becomes the embodiment of Karbala collectively communicated through the female practice of *tatbir* forging thereby new beliefs and values within Shi'i communities. Shirazi Shi'i women develop a materialised, embodied and intense understanding of subjective and collective religious experiences through the performance of *tatbir*. They hereby enter what has been regarded until just recently as a largely male dominated space but legitimizing their involvement through referring to religious sources and authoritative figures.

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[423]   Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 112.

[424]   See also Bridget Blomfield, "The Heart of Lament: Pakistani-American Muslims Women's Azadari Rituals," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London, New York: Seagull, 2010).

The female participation in the practice of *tatbir* extends the individual female empowerment within the local context as expressed and defined by the Shirazi women movement. Embodied experiences contribute to the formation of religious subjectivities which define existent power structures present in religious systems anew. Through women's participation in *tatbir* women articulate and redefine power on three levels: they re-define their position within their Shirazi community; they contribute to re-locating the Shirazis from their marginalised position to the centre within the larger Shiʻi network and finally women play a role in the wider discussion on sectarian power dynamics within the current political and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. *Tatbir* becomes a platform for women to engage with the on-going political contexts relating to the situation of Shiʻis in the Middle East in general and the position of Shirazis within Shiʻi Islam in particular. Through women's participation in *tatbir*, the Shirazi movement is able to transform the practice into a gendered form of religio-political expression of permanent resistance. The female body becomes objectified and institutionalised to articulate their perception of themselves to be the 'true' Shiʻa.[425] It has been argued in this chapter that *tatbir* can be regarded as a medium that aestheticizes politics through the articulation of images around oppression and persecution of Shiʻis. Ideas of Shiʻis' history of persecution and marginalisation is collectively articulated and individually expressed through the medium of *tatbir*.

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[425]   Kertzer argues that rituals are a useful tool to support or counter existing political regimes, David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988).

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CHAPTER 5 FATIMA'S APPARITION: POWER RELATIONS WITHIN FEMALE RITUAL SPACES [RESTRUCTURED MAJOR CHANGES]

> Fatima can be watching from above but she could also be with you here in the room, sitting next to you and if you are special or if the *majlis* is special and if we are all sincere in our mourning she might be mourning with us today.

This *mullaya* in Kuwait was referring to Fatima al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad, the wife of the first Shiʿi imam, ʿAli, and the mother of the two imams Hassan and Husayn. Within Shiʿi Islam, she is regarded as the most holy of Muslim women, sinless and in a state of perpetual purity (*tahara*) occupying thereby an exceptional position.[426] She is presented as a "prerequisite for imitable sainthood"[427] whose femininity as a daughter, wife and mother are taken as a socio-ethical exemplar of the "best of women" (*khair al-nisaʾ*).[428] In women-only *majalis* Fatima is presented as a creation that embodies moral and esoteric significance who is believed to exercise power to heal and intercede on the Day of Judgement (*shafaʿa*) and as the "mistress of the women of the two worlds" (*sayyidat nisa al-ʿalamain*) able to physically appear in our world as well as in the afterlife.

Although the belief that members of *ahl al-bayt* to Shiʿis appear in *majalis* is widespread, there is no extensive academic study of these phenomena. [429] The apparition of Fatima during Shiʿi ritual practices witnessing the mourners and collecting their tears is only

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[426]   See Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad: Metamorphosen einer frühislamischen Frauengestalt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002). See also within South-Asian context: Chiara Formichi and Michael Feener, eds., *Shiʿism in South East Asia: ʿAlid Piety and Sectarian Constructions (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[427]   Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shiʿism*, 59.

[428]   Karen G. Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shiʿi Devotional Literature and Performance," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010), 386–397 (387).

[429]   *Ahl al-bayt* also appear to Shiʿis in dreams, see Marcia Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," in *Dreams: A Reader on Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming*, ed. Kelly Bulkeley (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 73–92; V. Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meaning in the Old Arab Tradition* (New York: Vantage Press, 1991); I. Edgar, *The Dream in Islam: From Qurʾanic Tradition to Jihadist Inspiration* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Y. Snehi, "Dreaming Baba, Resituating Memory: Popular Sufi Shrines and the Historiography of Contemporary East Punjab," *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* 2, no. 1 (2014), 3–24; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2015); D. Reynolds, "Symbolic Narratives of Self: Dreams in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies," in: *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. P. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 261–286; R. Rozehnal, "Flashes of Ultimate Reality: Dreams of Saints and Shrines in a Contemporary Pakistani Sufi Community," *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* 2, no. 1 (2014), 67–80; Amira Mittermaier, "How to Do Things with Examples: Sufis, Dreams, and Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, S.1 (2015), 129–143; Amira Mittermaier, "(Re)Imagining Space: Dreams and Saint Shrines in Egypt," in: *Dimensions of Locality: Muslims Saints, their Place and Space*, eds. G. Stauth and S. Schielke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 47–66.

marginally mentioned in academic studies.[430] Fatima died before the battle of Karbala. She is, however, believed to have visited the plains of Karbala after her son Imam Husayn was killed and since then, to visit the commemoration gatherings of Shi'is around the world to bear witness of the communal commemoration of the killing of her son. They believe Fatima to be the patroness of the *majalis* who is present to witness Imam Husayn's supporters while mourning his death in ritual gatherings: "Cry Shi'is of Ali, cry. Fatima is watching you. Show her your grief for Husayn's death. Show her your pain", as one of the *mullayat* was encouraging women in one of the *majalis* I attended in London.[431] These tears of the believer will prove their loyalty to Imam Husayn and support Fatima who is referred to as *al-Mansura* ('the one who is Victorious in God') when interceding on behalf the believers on the Day of Judgement.

Shirazis claim that because of their adherence to authentic Shia Islam, Fatima visits their *majalis* in particular. This special connection to Fatima is also used to legitimise the Shirazi religious and political approach despite the significant opposition to them. In London, Kuwait and Bahrain, Sunni women, who are not Shi'is, visited Shirazi *majalis* to witness the appearance of Fatima: "We [Lebanese Sunnis] have always taken part in Shi'i *majalis* and we believe in the unique position of Fatima within Islam. If I can be in the same room with her why not? I have been coming to this *majlis* for a while and I had the honour to see her as everybody else here", as a woman in London explains. Another Iraqi Sunni in Kuwait highlights: "Fatima is Fatima, there is no Sunni or Shi'i. I love the Shirazis, they have been our neighbours for years and years and they love us."

Shirazi specific ritual practices transcend inner-Islamic, intra-sectarian and trans-national boundaries. This is an unusual perception of Shirazis who usually exhibit a strong anti-Sunni sectarian approach (see Yasser Habib in chapter 1). Having Sunni women in the gathering is openly celebrated within the *majlis* and is used to support the on-going narrative of being unique as a Shirazi group: "Women are coming from everywhere, every religion,

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[430]   Ruffle, Pinault and Thurlkill, just to mention a few.

[431]   Pinault, making similar observations, explains: "Fatima is spiritually present at every majlis during Muharram; matam performed at the end of a majlis will lead her to intercede with God on behalf of the matamdar: she will be moved to intercession by the degree of devotion to her son Husain shown by the individual mourner", see David Pinault, *The Shi'ites, Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 103, 106. "Even while in Paradise Fatima is believed to grieve continuously for Husayn and to descend to earth to be spiritually present at every lamentation gathering held in remembrance of her son." See David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala. Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 62. Ruffle explains: "The mourners' tears alleviate Fatimah's grief and pain, because the *majlis* is proof that she is not alone in remembering the violence that has been committed against her family and religion. These tears are Fatimah's sustenance", Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears", 393.

every religious group, every nationality, every country. Yes, we are attacked and so many do not agree on what we do … cutting and burning ourselves but Fatima comes to us not to the one at the end of the street … and my Sunni friend here, she comes to us also not to the one at the end of the street" as a woman in London explains. In one of the *majalis* in Kuwait a Sunni woman says: "If Fatima would not approve the Shirazis why is she always here? Why does she keep coming to them? There must be a reason?"

As has been illustrated in earlier chapters in this book, Shirazi women have entered male dominated ritual spaces through participating in rituals, such as *tatbir* and walking on hot coal, which has traditionally been regarded as male practices. In order to support their claim for equal access to performing these specific practices, Shirazi women, as we have seen so far, have re-visited Shi'i history and historical accounts on specific Shi'i female figures such as Zaynab. Not only *tatbir* but also the walking on hot coal has been increasingly practiced among female Shi'is in the UK as well as in various countries in the Gulf. All of these fairly new practices among women have contributed to the increasing hostility towards Shirazis within as well as outside of the Shi'i community. This has caused occasional alienation also within the Shirazi communities, leading to heated discussions about the legitimacy of Shirazi practices, but, more importantly, the authenticity of Shirazis. Fatima's apparitions have proven to help *mullayat* combating doubts regarding the increasing female participation in what have traditionally been regarded as male dominated ritual spaces. Fatima's apparition helps the *mullayat* to sustain the distinct factional identity of the Shirazis and to legitimise their claim to Shi'i authenticity. Fatima's appearances within Shirazi *majalis* provide women with the 'living' approval of their practices supported by the charismatic figure of Fatima. This chapter will demonstrate how Fatima's apparition is used as a medium for inter-communal gender role change in both women's increasing involvement in ritual practices as well as in public pro-social actions. The tradition of apparition has a long history in Christianity, but is hardly discussed within Shi'a Islam, particularly not in relation to apparitions of Fatima. Nevertheless, there are a number of parallels between the apparition of Fatima and the Virgin Mary as will be discussed in this chapter. I will start in highlighting the importance of the Figure of Fatima for Shiis, followed by an overview of the characteristics and the wider socio-political and religious context of Marian apparitions to move later to discuss and analyse Fatima's apparition within Shi'i Islam.

The Importance of Fatima

During my long and intensive ethnographic research among Shi'i women communities in various geographical contexts, I have come across a number of incidents and heard various accounts of women witnessing the appearance of Fatima during a ritual gathering. This first-hand experience of Fatima's apparition is a way of symbolising the sacred and ways of practicing and assuring an exceptional and 'true faith' for many women. Fatima occupies within Shi'i Islam a distinctive social and religious standing which is emphasised most in the narrative of her creation. *Mullayat* highlight the exceptional position of Fatima within Islam referring to God's creative act in which Fatima received an equal share of divine light like Muḥammad. The chronological order of their creation plays an important role. They highlight the narrative that Ali and the other twelve imams were created after Fatima and had to share one-third of God's light. Fatima in the contrary received a larger portion.[432] Some sources place Fatima on the level of the first of creation highlighting her primordial formation: Fatima was created first. Her divine light was then transferred from her to the imams – a narrative supported by many Shirazis.[433] The Prophet's daughter is portrayed with the other male members of the Prophet's family as closer to God. She is also regarded as one of the 14 infallibles (*ma'sumin*), which include Muḥammad, Fatima and the twelve imams.[434] She is portrayed as a pre-eternal being and a transcendent figure whose generative light (*nur*)[435] is the source of prophecy and the imamate.

This narrative of Fatima's creation forms the foundation for her position in Shi'i Islam as an extraordinary enactment of feminine sanctity. For many women, Fatima's central

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[432]   Karen G. Ruffle worked extensively on Fatima, see for example *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Karen G. Ruffle, "An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shi'i Narratives about Fatimah al-Zahra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (September 2013), 791–819; Karen G. Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shi'i Devotional Literature and Performance," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010), 386–397.

[433]   Rubin cites this tradition from the ʿIlal al-Sharaʾiʿ ('The Laws Explained') of Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (d. 381/991), in whose writings "the Fatima legend, in its essential characteristics, already [found] its completion". Verena Klemm, "Image Formation of an Islamic Legend: Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad," in *Ideas, Images and Methods of Portrayal. Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), 181–208 (197). Uri Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light – Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), 62–119 (102) [Reprinted in Uri Rubin, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia, Variorum Collected Studies Series* 4 (Ashgate, 2011)].

[434]   Her epithet Fatima *al-Zahra'* ('the radiant, the shining, the bright') refers to Fatima as the light which is believed to be God's source that gives the imams and the *khamsa* (Fatima, Muḥammad, Ali, Hasan, Husayn) their infallibility. Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*, 104–106. Fatima is also referred to *surat al nur* in the Qurʾan. She is part of the *'awliya'*, according to Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad* the *Khamsa* refers to Muḥammad, Ali Fatima, Hassan, Husayn, 110–111.

[435]   Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 102. Fatima's divine luminosity follows her from pre-creation to postapocalyptic heaven. Sa'im Chishti, *Al-Batul* (*The Chaste Virgin*) (Faisalabad, Pakistan: Chishti Kutub Khaneh, 2005), 390.

position is a confirmation of their right to increase their involvement in religious but also social and political actions for the sake of securing a better Shi'i community. Fatima's appearances during mourning rituals are, as others have highlighted[436], a way to secure her intercession on the Day of Judgement. As the following will demonstrate, it also has wider intra-communal and political but also gendered dimensions. Fatima's apparitions are also used to challenge specific communal agendas[437] particularly around gender. The idea that Fatima, the only woman who is one of the first creations, is the one who visits the *majalis*, protects the Shi'is and records who mourns the death of her sons and eventually intercedes on behalf of that person on the Day of Judgement, provides women with a sense of authority and power within their communities.[438]

Apparitions

Apparitions in Christianity are a form of miracles[439] that are collectively shared and used to challenge and threaten, to a certain extent, ecclesiastical hierarchies.[440] The topic of apparition has a long history among various forms and denominations within Christianity and is discussed widely by scholars.[441] Marian apparitions have been linked particularly to repentance and healing of the ill.[442] Various sites all over the world have witnessed a series of apparitions such as the one in Lourdes where it is believed Mary to have appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. The spot of Mary's appearance has turned to a miraculous

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[436]   Ruffle, Pinault and Thurlkill.

[437]   See within other religious contexts Davis and Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work".

[438]   Regarding spiritual authority Thurlkill explains: "By appropriating the image of Mary and Fatima to their own circumstance, it seems many women succeeded in gaining some amount of spiritual authority." Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 121.

[439]   Nada al-Hudaid, *Karamah ('marvel'): An Exploration of the Literal and Ethnographic Meaning of Miracles among Shi'a Female Artists in Kuwait* (World Art, 2020), DOI: 10.1080/21500894.2020.1735502; Stefano Bigliardi, "The Interpretation of Miracles according to Mutahhari and Golshani: Comparative and Critical Notes," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013), 261–288; Stefano Bigliardi, "Above Analysis and Amazement: Some Contemporary Muslim Characterizations of 'Miracle' and Their Interpretation," *Sophia* 53, no. 1 (2013), 113–129; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2015); Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams and the Miraculous," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, ed. Sorya Altorki (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 107–124.; H. Yahya, *Miracles of the Qurʾan* (Scarborough, Ont.: Al-Attique Publishers, 2001); D. Thomas, "The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic," *Journal of Semitic Studies* XXXIX, no. 2 (1994), 221–243.

[440]   Erich Goode, *Collective Behavior* (Fort Worth: Saunders College Pub, 1992).

[441]   See William A. Christian, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), William A. Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1996); Ralph Della Cava and John Della Cava, *Miracle at Joaseiro* (Institute of Latin American Studies: Columbia University Press, 1970).

[442]   Shi'is also turn to Fatima to seek healing from illnesses. See Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*.

spring to whose waters thousands of believers go to for the hope of being cured and blessed.[443]

An increase in Marian apparitions have been also noticed after specific political, socio-religious and ethnic crises and conflicts followed by changes in society.[444] As Margry explains "shifts in ideological, social and ecclesiastical paradigms in Europe after the Second World War"[445] influenced the increased appearance of the Virgin Mary. Visionaries and their adherents used her appearance to deal with socio-religious and economic changes in society.[446] The increasing interest in Marian apparitions is linked to people's anxieties about change.[447] Her appearance is believed to support individuals and institutions to cope with these changes and find redemption.[448]

The Virgin Mary's apparitions are very often linked to nationalist discourses.[449] Skrbiš argues that the "apparitional phenomenon is constantly caught up in the antagonistic tension between the universalistic Christian appeal of the Virgin's messages and the possibility of its particularistic/local appropriations, such as in nationalism".[450] The figure of the Virgin Mary highlights the exceptionality of a certain religious group over others. Narratives of "being chosen by Mary" feed, however, also into a larger narrative of "being a

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[443]   See Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999); Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From la Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014); Stephane Baumont, *Histoire de Lourdes* (Edition Private: Univers de la France, 1993); Theodore Mangiapan, *Lourdes: Miraculous Cures* (Lourdes: Lourdes Medical Bureau, 1997); Patrick Theillier, *Lourdes, When One Speaks of Miracles* (Sankt-Ulrich, 2003).

[444]   Peter Jan Margry, "Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology: The Elastic Politics of the Roman Catholic Church on Modern Apparitions," *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2009), 243–263.

[445]   Margry, "Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology", 261. She also explains that apparitions in 1967 in Egypt were a search for dignity after losing the war with Israel.

[446]   Margry, "Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology".

[447]   E. Ann Matter, "Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics," *Religion* 31, no. 2 (2001), 125–153.

[448]   Margry, "Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology" and Matter, "Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century" we well as Davis and Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work".

[449]   See as examples: Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Edith Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Nicholas Perry, *Under the Heel of Mary*, ed. Loreto Echeverría (London: Routledge, 1988); Eric R. Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 279 (1958), 34–39; Grzegorz Sokół, "Matska Boska Czestochowsha Jako Polski Symbol Narodowy," *Konteksty* 1–2 (2002), 120–125; Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Linda B. Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas*, ed. Teresa Eckmann (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Anna Niedźwiedź, *Obraz i postać. Znaczenia wizerunku Matki Boskiej Częstochowskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2005); Everard Meade, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940* 27, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis (Durham, NC, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

[450]   Zlatko Skrbiš, "The Apparitions of Virgin Mary of Medjugorje: The Convergence of Croatian Nationalism and her Apparitions," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2005), 443–461 (458).

chosen nation".[451] With the influx of spectators coming from abroad to witness the apparition of the Virgin Mary, also from other Christian denominational groups, transcends exclusivist national interpretations.[452] Marian apparitions represent, therefore, both local and global meaning, causing an "emotional intensity"[453] that transcends any religious and national particularism.

The accounts on the appearance of Fatima among Shirazi women communities echoes developments in relation to Marian apparitions of transcending exclusivist national interpretations.[454] Fatima is presented to appear only to Shi'is (inner-communal power dynamics) and only to chosen Shi'is (intra-communal power dynamics). Narratives of being chosen by Fatima highlight the Shirazis' positioning among the larger Shi'i communities who, because of various political and socio-religious reasons, either condemn Shirazis' practices or distance themselves from them as one of the Shirazi *mullayat* in London explains: "Other Shi'i groups are too lenient towards Sunnis and try to be overtly politically correct. This is why they [other Shi'i groups] condemn our practices". Fatima's apparition serves therefore as a legitimization for Shirazi's specific ritual practices, strengthening thereby their position within the larger Shi'i community, leading to the transnational spread of their practices among various communities. Shirazi women in the *majalis* I attended in Europe and the Middle East not only use the image of Fatima as an empowerment tool but also as a declaration of true faith articulated in their 'true Shi'aness' that distinguish them from other Shi'i groups.

Apparitions within Shi'i Islam: *Thuhur Fatima*

Opinions on her actual physical presence in a *majlis* varies; some believe she is present at all mourning gatherings but others, and they were the majority, believe she only comes if a *majlis* is special or if there is a reason or purpose for her to be present at a specific *majlis*, as a *mullaya* in London explains: "Yes, her soul is with us all the time. There is no *majlis* she does not know about. She knows everyone who is mourning the death of her son Imam Husayn. But she only comes out to the special ones." Similar statements have been made by other *mullayat* in Kuwait and Bahrain. Fatima watches over the *majalis* and takes note of every single believer expressing loyalty to *ahl al-bayt* through weeping and

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451   Skrbiš, "The Apparitions of Virgin Mary of Medjugorge".
452   Skrbiš, "The Apparitions of Virgin Mary of Medjugorge".
453   Skrbiš, "The Apparitions of Virgin Mary of Medjugorge", 445.
454   Lofland argues within the context of apparitions, that what is important is how people define a situation, see Lofland, "Collective Behavior".

participating in mourning rituals remembering the battle of Karbala and the oppression and injustice levelled against *ahl al-bayt*. Fatima can be present either as an observer or as a participant, as the following account from a woman in London explains:

> I saw her sometimes sitting with us in a *majlis*. She was so beautiful, pure and special. Everyone saw her – you could not miss her. She would sit at the corner mourn with a special voice, a unique voice. We all heard her pain it was a life-time experience. Her presence was felt strongly in the room.

In Kuwait, I was invited to attend a semi-private *majlis* that Fatima is believed to frequently attend. The very young *mullaya* gave a very eloquent memorial lecture and powerful recitation of devotional mourning poetry. The *mullaya* comes from a traditional Shiʻi clerical family that is known for their long history of female *mullayat*. In mourning gatherings, there is usually a gradual increase of emotions expressed through an increase in weeping and self-hitting; mourners becoming louder in their repetition of poetry until finally reaching the peak of mourning expressed through self-hitting or other forms of mourning expressions. At this particular *majlis* however, the peak of the *majlis* was immediate. There was no gradual increase of emotions but rather an instant break out of collective grief. The atmosphere was extraordinary, providing participants with a unique emotional experience, as one young woman highlights: "You can go anywhere you like. But you will never experience something like that anywhere." Another woman warned me before entering the *majlis* saying: "Be prepared. What you are going to see inside here you have never seen before" and jokingly added: "Don't run away though!" At this particular *majlis*, women believed Fatima to mourn in the midst with them. She is believed not to be silently mourning in the corner, but right at the centre of the *majlis* jumping and hitting her head harshly and continuously with all the other participants in unison. One of the women after the *majlis*, still in an agitated state, screamed at me saying "have you seen her? She was right in the middle with us. She was there. We proved our allegiance and love to Imam Husayn, our love. Yes, she was there." Another woman next to her added: "The ground was shaking from our feet hitting and stamping on it. We shook this world and cracked it open for Her [Fatima] to come out to us and join us in our sorrow for Imam Husayn." Later that day I had a conversation with another woman who also participated in the same mourning ritual who pointed at the exceptionality of this particular *majlis* which is known not only in Kuwait but also abroad. The *mullaya's* religious and social capital is important within the context of apparitions that transcends

national boundaries. It is about Shirazis' way of mourning and its religious and political standing among Shi'i in general that is crucial: When I was in Bahrain, young Shi'i women praised that particular *mullaya* and added that they would travel regularly to Kuwait just to attend her *majlis*: "She does not seem to need any effort in holding a *majlis*. It comes natural. This is what we love about her. She speaks from her heart. This is a *mullaya* who is gifted right from birth", as a woman in Bahrain explains. The women believed that it is the genuine nature of that particular *majlis* that attracts Fatima to come to witness the authentic and strong emotions that are expressed for the memory of the killing of her son Husayn.

Fatima, as Ruffle explains, is the "embodiment of transcendent sainthood".[455] Among the Shirazi women in this study, however, this sanctity becomes human, real and close to the believer through her physical appearance. In other words, Fatima's apparitions make her a more approachable and imitable saintly figured. This is important since ritual practices rely heavily on re-calling particular narratives on Shi'i history and religious Shi'i figures that are to a wide extent abstract. Objects that are attributed to specific religious meaning, by individuals or collectives, help believers to materialise their belief. Fatima's apparition represents both her physical as well as her spiritual body, signifying thereby, as Thurlkill explains, "the ever-immaculate vessel for the Imamate".[456]

Apparitions add another level of materiality and religious connectivity and approachability between the Shi'i believer and their religiosity: "Have you seen the woman in the black *'abaya*?" or "Have you heard the women next to you sobbing loudly?" or "Have you seen the women with the dusty feet?" are some of the questions women raise between each other when talking about the apparition of Fatima. I was told that the dusty feet refer to Fatima who visited the desert plains of Karbala after her son Husayn was killed. Women also make references to Fatima's extraordinary smell: "Have you noticed the smell in the room? It is Fatima's smell brought down from paradise." Specific shared images are established[457] and in combination with social interaction, meaning is attributed to them and a collective confirmation of Fatima's appearance generated. The process of meaning-making is what contributes to the development of a narratives around apparitions. When listening to Shi'i women's accounts on seeing Fatima and mourning with her, the women construct a narrative of a collective vision and shared imagination. Usually a particular symbol or imagery is constructed, such as a smell, that builds up to a collective narrative with a shared meaning.

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[455]   Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*, 83.
[456]   Mary F. Thurlkill, "Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 14, no. 2 (2007), 27–51 (43).
[457]   See also Snow and Davis, "The Study of Collective Behavior".

The collective in this process plays a huge role in building a sensorialised sociality around the figure of Fatima: Women construct an environment of symbols, proving or legitimising thereby a spiritual presence represented in the figure of Fatima. Meaning is thereby generated collectively around shared symbols and images all leading to a collective narrative of Fatima's apparition.

Materialisations of Fatima

Additional objects and imageries associated to Fatima and her apparition are also found in what is known as Fatima's hand or Fatima's tent. The use of the tent is a very popular object in the countries I visited in the Gulf, as often women use it during their *majalis* with the hope to receive Fatima's intercessory grace (*baraka*). [458]

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 25a HERE]

Figure 24: Fatima's tent (closed) in one of the *majalis* in Kuwait with Fatima's hand on the top, 2015

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 26 HERE]

Figure 25: Fatima's open tent in one of the *majalis* in London with Fatima's hand on the top, 2014.

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[458]   Similar research findings within the Hyderabadi context, see also Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears", 387.

How the tent as a religious and sacred object is used in the *majalis* varies: Some women hold onto its edges, spread it open and while some keep holding the edges making knots, others would sit underneath it reading prayers. In other *majalis* women leave the tent closed but those holding it move around the room while hitting the wooden pillar on the ground allowing women in the *majlis* to make knots and others to open them again; in other *majalis* the tent is not used as part of an active collective ritual practice but rather occupies a specific space in the *majlis* for individuals to perform their own practices as they feel fit. Regarding the meaning and function of the different practices around the use of the tent, one of the participants in the *majlis* in Kuwait explains: "we go underneath the tent as it reminds us of the tents the members of *ahl al-bayt* were in during the battle of Karbala. Sayyida Fatima's *baraka* is in this tent. Whoever goes underneath it will be protected by our beloved Sayyida Fatima." Another person in Bahrain explains the meaning of knotting the fabric of the tent, as it is believed that one's problems and the associated pain and sorrow would fade away when the next person opens the knot that you made before – "*tfuk el 'azmeh* (reliefs pain and conflicts)", as she puts it.

The process of symbolization is central in understanding the roles objects play within religious ritual practices and spaces. Objects very often require a shared meaning given to them – meaning that changes over time and place. The collective acceptance of meanings and functions of certain religious objects are important for the communal legitimization of the use of such objects.[459] Objects are therefore constructed through collective legitimization of meaning and actions.[460] This was particularly noticeable in one of the houses I visited in London. The host of the *majlis* was very proud to show Fatima's tent she brought with her from her last visit to Kuwait. Whereas it is commonly used in Kuwait, in London some women we reluctant to use it and doubt its religious significance. A heated discussion was started on whether this tent should be part of the *majlis* or not. Since the object was lacking communal support of its significance, the general aura of the tent – that is usually felt in *majalis* in the Gulf – was gone as the host explains: "the tent is much appreciated in *majalis*

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[459]   David A. Snow and Philip W. Davis, "The Study of Collective Behavior: An Elaboration and Critical Assessment," in *Self, Collective Behavior and Society: Essays Honoring the Contributions of Ralph H. Turner*, ed. G. M. Platt and C. Gordon (Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, 1994), 97–115; Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (*Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1970).

[460]   David Snow and Phillip. W. Davis, "The Chicago Approach to Collective Behavior," in *A Second Chicago School? The Development of Postwar American Sociology*, ed. G. A. Fine (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 188–220 and David Snow, "Extending and Broadening Blumer's Conceptualization of Symbolic Interactionism," *Symbolic Interaction* 24, no. 3 (2001), 367–377. See also Phillip W. Davis and Jacqueline Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolization and Crowd Interaction. When the Virgin Mary Appeared in Georgia," *Georgia State University Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 4 (August 2003), 371–402.

back home. Here people are not use to it so they do not know what to do with it." I saw the same host the next evening in her house again who reported as follows: "I left the tent open in the living room over night. Before going to bed, I checked whether the front door was closed. The room felt different. But I soon realised why: Sayyida Fatima was sitting in my tent. I felt so honoured. In my house! Here in London. I started crying. She came to tell me not to be sad about my friends' reactions towards the tent. She was there for me to give me support. I will support her by organizing another *majlis* next week. Come in … come in." She invited me into her tent to receive Fatima's blessing.

In other *majalis* I attended, women also tend to go and sit at the space where Fatima is believed to have appeared and touch what she would have touched with the hope of obtaining her blessing. They sit there for a while praying or talking about what they have felt during Fatima's visit. That particular space will be remembered and referred to on other occasions. One of the women sitting at Fatima's apparition site explains to me: "You put your hand here like that [sweeping my hand on the floor] then you put it on your chest [sweeping my hand again on my chest]. You can feel your body shivering as Fatima's soul is coming into yours. Try it … it's a unique feeling." In the course of social interaction after a spiritual appearance, discussions are generated around the authenticity of particular Shi'i practices and communal ways of mourning including specific devotional poetry recited and language used during lectures. These discussions are also conducted on social media platforms. Pictures of the space might be taken and sent in various social media outlets to be discussed with either women who were there or with women who have missed the occasion. Many of the women I met in Bahrain heard about that particular *majlis* in Kuwait above through these social media channels. Shirazis use their digital landscape to expand to transnational spaces allowing more women to visit and explore Shirazi women's commemoration methods. Through their increasing popularity across national borders, Shirazis emphasise their narrative of authenticity of belief and uniqueness among the Shirazi followers to confirm the legitimacy of their practices.

Fatima's Apparition as a Medium for Change

As has been discussed earlier, recalling Shi'i history in general and remembering the events of Karbala in particular, as illustrated in the various Shi'i ritual practices discussed so far, serve not only a religious purpose but also give meaning to current political and social contexts and issues. The individual's construction of contemporary Shi'i religious meaning is

supported by a collective confirmation expressed through the reconstruction of a shared Shi'i past. The suffering of *ahl al-bayt* under the *Banu Umayya* as described in Shi'i narratives and recalled by the women in this study represents for Shi'is the apogee of suffering and injustice. Drawing analogies between past and present religious and political contexts provides the women with a distinct Shi'i identity and confirms the Shi'i perception of Islamic history as one of continuous suffering.

Fatima is very often remembered through recalling the incident of the attack on her house: It states that Umar ibn al-Khattab, a companion of the Prophet and later second caliph, stormed Fatima's house to secure Ali's pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr as the first caliph after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad. It is believed that Fatima was standing behind the door when Umar pushed it open in order to enter. This, as this particular narrative continues, led to her ribcage to break, to the miscarriage of her unborn child and eventually to her own death. As the following poem heard in London illustrates:

> Oh father, I wish you were here
>
> Oh father, I wish you were here and saw what they have done to your daughter
>
> Oh father, I wish you were here
>
> How many ribs were broken[461]
>
> How many memories were left in the orphans' eyes?

This narrative is highly controversial not only between Sunnis and Shi'is but also within Shi'i communities. Some women in the *majalis* I attended in Dublin reject the above narrative with the argument that Fatima is the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad who had a certain social and religious standing within the community and therefore could not have been treated in such a humiliating manner. Others, however, argue that Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, together with his family were humiliated, maltreated, tortured and eventually killed in Karbala. Hence, treating, in their opinion, Fatima in such a way is therefore not that unlikely to have occurred and in line with the patterns of persecution *ahl al-bayt* had to endure more generally.

Fatima's involvement in this particular incident is represented in two ways: On the one hand, she embodies the image of the victim who sacrificed herself for the protection of her family. Her sacrifice highlights, however, her weakness as a woman being targeted by the

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[461]   *Min Fatimah we-Haydar* (*Bassem al-Karbala'i*).

male enemy – an enemy who without hesitation and remorse exercised violence on her to reach power and control over the nascent Muslim community. In the various poems recited during ritual practices, the image of Fatima as weak and powerless, being overcome by the enemy is strengthened by the *mullayat*'s intensive and very detailed description of the attack leading to her injury and subsequent miscarriage. The emotions in the room during a ritual in which this image of Fatima is represented are overwhelming as they combine both empathy for Fatima, the victim, as well as anger directed towards Umar. Extensive weeping and excessive self-hitting express the women's sympathy towards Fatima's fate while numerous curses levelled against Umar and the Banu Umayya as well as on any other perceived opponent of *ahl al-bayt* illustrates the emotional agitation remembering this incident evokes.

At the same time, the same incident is also framed as demonstrating Fatima's strength in dealing with a situation of conflict. Here, Fatima is not presented as a weak and powerless victim, but rather as a strong and independent woman fighting for the safety of her family. It is Fatima and not her husband Ali, who is in the centre of conflict. As one of the *mullayat* in Kuwait explains: "It is Fatima who protected her family from the enemy by not thinking of herself, but rather thinking of the wellbeing of the Shi'i community." Women supporting this representation of the incident highlight the need for women today to think outside of the traditional representation of Fatima as a victim. In this context, a recurring narrative of the female body emerges: Women are urged to think beyond the material world they are living in. The female body is represented as vanishing and not eternal. Here, Fatima's body is taken as an example, highlighting in this incident how her ribs were broken and her child stillborn. What, however, is eternal, as the *mullayat* emphasised, are one's deeds: "It is because of Fatima's courage that we are remembering her today. It is what she did and cared for what we celebrate today. We should take that as an example." Women are urged to transcend the limitations of and attachment to their female bodies, to forget emotions, to be strong and to remember what is worth living for as one *mullaya* in Bahrain highlights: "It is not important whether you are a man or a woman, Bahraini, Kuwaiti, Iranian or Iraqi. What is important is that you fight for yourself as a Shi'i and hope to die the same death as Fatima because this is what counts… this is what you will be remembered for."

This proactive stand is then linked and related to recent political events and to women's positionality in such conflicts. Different to D'Souza's research that places Fatima only as a "holy figure whom believers love and revere"[462], in the *majalis* I visited she is

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[462]   D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 30.

referred to as a socio-political role model women seek to emulate. The narrative of the attack on her house is particularly popular in this regard. Fatima's experienced maltreatment and the sacrifices she made in order to protect her family is linked to women's own biographies, as this Iraqi woman in London explains: "Explosions were everywhere. My family and I hid underneath the beds. Some soldiers forced themselves into our house. At this moment, I remembered Sayyida Fatima. She gave us protection, and gave me strength and courage."

The link between Fatima and political conflicts and resistance was central in many *majalis* I attended. *Mullayat* in the UK and even more so in the Gulf region encourage women to participate in social actions particularly as family structures and demographics have changed due to sectarian conflicts, civil wars and the displacement of Shi'is in the region. An increasing number of male family members have either been killed, imprisoned or due to torture, have permanent disabilities or have disappeared. This has led to the displacement of many female Shi'is who are now responsible for taking care of their children and other family members.[463] A *mullaya* in Bahrain highlights the change in gender roles due to the lack of male protection caused by the government's attack on male members of their families: "Look around you Yafa … Most of these women are now the 'man' in the house. They need to take care of their families because their husbands or fathers or brothers are not there anymore to take care of them." *Mullayat* play a role in changing the mind-set of women within the *majalis* highlighting the equal responsibility they hold now within their families to that of men. The increasing attacks and violence on Shi'is since the Arab uprisings influence women to re-think and re-define family structures and gender roles within their societies. Referring to examples from Shi'i history provides these *mullayat* the theological grounding for supporting their claim for more female engagement in political, social and religious issues. Taking authoritative historical female Shi'i figures as role models and constructing a narrative that portrays these figures in similar political situations of religious conflict, provides women with a confirmation of their right to fight against oppressive regimes and to resist any injustice imposed on them. The *mullayat* I interviewed highlight the social responsibility that women hold equally to men for fighting for their rights.

Women have been encouraged and told repeatedly within *majalis* not to victimise themselves and rather assume responsibility for their families by becoming independent and strong women. The continuous references to Fatima in the *majalis* I attended highlight the

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mullayat's concern of potential female social passivity as one of the *mullayat* explains: "We should not hide behind curtains. Women are nowadays attacked as much as men and therefore we need to be equipped to fight back and protect ourselves and our children." The empowerment of women whether in the Middle East or in Europe is central in the *majalis* I attended. Women are urged to think about the well-being of their communities whether it is through supporting people in need within their neighbourhoods or through transnational organisations which through their charitable and humanitarian activities empower women in their communities by providing a safe learning environment for them, as one woman in London explains: "We collect money, arrange teachers, design courses and provide everything women need to learn a skill to start to support their families. Women need to become independent. Financially independent." Some of these women concentrate on changing women's attitudes towards their involvement in society in their neighbourhoods first, then, take their successes as an example to demonstrate how women can become active members of their communities transnationally. Within the Gulf region, women are very vocal regarding the importance of women's financial independence not only from their male family members but also from any support from their governments as one women in Bahrain explains:

> We Shiʻis cannot wait until the government gives us support because they won't. We women cannot wait until our men give us support because they were killed or imprisoned. We therefore need to take care of ourselves. We need to be active and move – like Sayyida Fatima.

These recurring narratives across *majalis* I attended reflect Ali Shariati's plea made in Tehran in the 1970s for changing the way Fatima as a role model should be remembered. Traditionally Fatima, as he describes, "would sit and cry. […] She would cry and lament for hours. She spent her short life crying and cursing her fate until she died".[464] He continues by emphasising the new image of Fatima as being the source of the inspiration for freedom, desiring what is right, the seeker of justice, a woman who resisted oppression, cruelty, and discrimination.[465] In this type of narrative, Fatima is portrayed as a strong woman overcoming life challenges of poverty and hardships reflected in her epithet of *umm al-*

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[464]   Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, 13.
[465]   Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, 286.

masa'ib ('the mother who overcomes catastrophes'[466]). Ali Shari'ati argues that Fatima is "the perfect model of a responsible, fighting woman when confronting her time and the fate of her society."[467]

Fatima's portrayals as vanguard of a political revolution and social change is articulated in the *majalis* I visited in the role she took in the narrative of Khaybar where she stood up against injustice. The Prophet is believed to have bequeathed to Fatima the date-palm orchard of Fadak, which she claimed as her inheritance after his death.[468] As this particular narrative continues, Abu Bakr, who became the ruling caliph, rejected Fatima's claim on the grounds that prophets do not give any inheritance, but their property should be given away for charity (*ṣadaqa*) after their death.[469] By taking this particular example women present Fatima as courageously speaking up against this injustice committed against her; challenging authorities, in this case Abu Bakr, and fighting for her rightful property that the illegitimate ruler withheld from her.

Shiis in the diaspora are encouraged by their *mullayat* to follow the example of Fatima and to think about their own land they were forced to leave behind – land they believe have been taken from latter-day embodiments of the Banu Umayya: Saddam Hussein during his reign, the so-called Islamic State or any other current Sunni monarchy in the Gulf region, such as Al-Khalifa in Bahrain, are taken by women in the diaspora as current manifestations of the Banu Umayya. The narrative of resistance and the religious right to fight for one's rights is constantly referred to during *majalis* highlighting thereby the roles women in particular should play in the fight against injustice as one of my interviewees in London explained:

> We need to know that we as women should fight for what belongs to us. Similar to the
> fight Sayyida Fatima lead either for her husband's right to lead the Muslim
> community after the Prophet's death or for her fight for the land they took from her.
> Women are as strong as anyone else. Our Shi'i history proofs it.

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[466]   As was explained to me. However, the way one translates this reflects one's attitude towards Fatima.
[467]   Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, 27. See also Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather our Tears".
[468]   See Suleman, "The Hand of Fatima", 180; Vaglieri, "Fatima", 844 and Soufi, *The Image of Fatima in Classical Muslim Thought*, 69–74.
[469]   References were made to the following Quranic verse: "From what is left by parents and those nearest related, there is a share for men, and a share for women", see Qurʾan *Surat al-Nisaʾ* [Chapter of the Women], 4:7. Ruffle explains in her own research on the figure of Fatima: "Fatimah invoked her Qurʾānic legal right and brought her case to court for arbitration. Although she was ultimately unsuccessful, her knowledge of her legal rights and desire for justice indicates that she was deeply involved in the affairs of society." See also Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 21.

In one of the private *majalis* I attended in Bahrain, the *mullaya* recalls a story she heard from her mother who due to her husband's illness had to work in the field to feed their children at home. The *mullaya* moved from this narrative to the present day asking women to look around themselves: Look here and there (commanding women to move their head to the right and to the left) and make yourself useful." While women were moving their heads from side to side, one woman pointed towards the door saying *al-salamu 'alayki ya sayyidat nisa' al-'alamin* ('peace be upon you, oh Mistress of all the women of the universe') indicating thereby Fatima's appearance. At this point, the room was filled with excited and ecstatic women looking towards the door sending their greetings to Fatima and all of the members of *ahl al-bayt* and saying prayers collectively as well as individually. The situation required one woman to link the crowd's attention to a figure in the room who they believed to be Sayyida Fatima. This generated a chain of confirmations expressed through women's greetings of Fatima. The *mullaya* used the moment to emphasise her message of gender mobilisation and social activism within the local context:

> Our beloved Fatima is supporting you girls. Your community needs you. Your families need you. Your husband and your sons need you. Take Sayyida Fatima as your example. She was the right hand of her father supporting the Prophet Muhammad in everything in life. With the miraculous presence of our beloved Sayyida Fatima I urge you all to move and act and help.

As discussed above, Fatima is remembered as the one who fought for her right to inherit and placing herself in danger in order to protect her family. This narrative supports the *mullayat* in encouraging their female believers to find their own roles in society and feeds into a liberal and progressive feminist agenda. Women in crisis situations take Fatima in particular as the ultimate example since she represents the ideal woman whom female Shi'is believers imitate. Fatima is the embodiment of an alternative patriarchal order predominant in Arab societies. The increasing change regarding the redefinition of gender roles and reconstruction of family structures occurring in various Arab countries, including the Gulf countries, particularly since the Arab Uprisings, is a focal point of discussion in various *majalis* I attended. Fatima is equally venerated by men as well as by women and represents in her identity as daughter, wife and mother, the ideal image of womanhood who in addition to her social roles was very knowledgeable of Islamic teachings and, as illustrated above, is believed to have fought for

justice. In *majalis* I attended in Kuwait, Fatima's virtues of being a good daughter to her father, a supporting wife to her husband and a caring mother to her children is central as the following poem I heard in several *majalis* describes:

> She is the mother of her father[470]
>
> She is the mother of the universe[471]
>
> Who will ease her of her loss?
>
> Who will comfort her of her sorrow?
>
> Your place in the tents was empty
>
> No one would be more affectionate than you
>
> If you were in the plains of Karbala and saw your child
>
> You would have shown endurance and patience
>
> But who would comfort your pain?

The description of this particular incident is very emotional and focuses on the relationship between a mother and her child. Very often the death of Imam Husayn's baby child Ali al-Asghar and his mother's cry of her loss is related to Fatima and her loss of her sons. In order to connect the women in the *majlis* emotionally even closer to these incidents, a link is made between Shi'i historical female figures and women's own loss of their children and their pain – a feeling a lot of women in the *majlis* who are mothers themselves and who very often have lost their own children, in war or during riots leading to their children's death or imprisonment, can relate to. The high status of mothers is repeatedly highlighted within the *majalis* by one *mullaya* in Kuwait saying:

> With each heartbeat, remember your mother. Your mother is your soul.
>
> I don't need to tell you the importance of mothers
>
> If you have a mother take good care of her. If you have lost her, pray for her.

Similar to other socio-political gatherings[472], *majalis* are used as a space to articulate socio-political issues. These issues are linked to mythico-historical Shi'i narratives constructed in various *majalis* around the maltreatment and killing of Shi'is in general. Fatima is part of this

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[470]   *Ummu Abeeha.*

[471]   Fatima's wider cosmological role is emphasised here again.

[472]   See Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

mythical paradigm of Shi'aness that is used in the *majalis* to legitimize their claim for more rights not only in terms of religious participation, but also political and social terms. Urging women, whether in the Middle East or in Europe, to demonstrate on the streets to call for justice for the maltreatment and killing of Shi'is in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia has been repeatedly mentioned as part of the *mullayat*'s lectures during *majalis*.[473] Demands for women's central role in promoting social and political change has been part of various *majalis*, by making references to women's active role in influencing the political scene through their participation in demonstrations; their other involvement in charity and human-itarian organisations; their role in changing the mind-set on gender roles within a new gener-ation of Shii women. Through these references, *mullayat* promote a version of the *new Shi'i woman* who is like Fatima a mother, a wife, a socio-political activist and a revolutionary by changing gender role dynamics. The *new Shi'i woman* is not the one who mourns about her loss and pain per se but one who is also active in a powerful collective aiming for the betterment of society and the Shii community worldwide.

Conclusion

Religious actors construct meaning of religious events, symbols and objects expressed through ritual practices in the course of social interaction producing and renewing socialities. Similar to the ritual practices elaborated upon in the previous chapters, the figure of Fatima is another activity constructing a social world in sensorially rich manner affecting Shi'i women's understanding of their Shi'aness embedded within turbulent geo-political developments in the Middle East.[474] Apparitions are another level of symbolisation and social interaction with the aim of constructing a distinct religious identity articulated through ritual practices and women's interaction with the sacred figure of Fatima. Apparitions become another sensory experience in which the individual body searches for meaning and interpretation of the visual within a collective. Women actively negotiate the presence of the figure of Fatima and construct meaning to certain signs and symbols important for their individual, but also collective understanding of themselves as Shi'is.[475]

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[473] Shia women are very vocal on Londoner streets to demonstrate against the maltreatment of Shi`a in the Gulf. Weekly demonstrations were organised in front of the Saudi embassy in 2015 in order to prevent the execution of Shaykh Nimr, as well as to raise public awareness of the human rights violations against Shi`a in the country. For more, see Shanneik 2018.

[474] Adam Yuet Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008), 485–504.

[475] Davis and Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work", 395.

The unique opportunity of the Shi'i community to be visited by Fatima, is used by *mullayat* to link them to the Shi'i communities' narrative of exceptionalism at large. This link is very important for Shi'i women' confirmation of their identity on three levels: 1) The Shi'i community in general is positioned in an extraordinary situation – marginalized, suppressed and persecuted by both non-Shi'i groups as well as by oppressive political regimes in the Gulf region, 2) The Shirazis, as a targeted Shi'i group within the larger Shi'i community, are also placed in a distinctive position because Fatima favours them in particular with her apparitions; 3) Women within Shirazi communities are also distinguished from other Shi'i groups as Fatima appears frequently within their women-only *majalis*. Because of all three distinctions which the *mullayat* represent as characteristics, Fatima appears.

Shii women exercise a form of female agency that is not build on liberal notions of progressive femininities but rather on their ability to acquire a degree of a religious self that enables them to see the sacred figure of Fatima.[476] Shirazi women believe Fatima visits their *majalis* the most and are seen by Shirazis more than by any other Shii group. Such notion of aesthetic performative collectivity distinguishes them from other Shii groups. It also places them on a higher spiritual level allowing Shirazi women to feel empowered. Fatima's appearances help individuals to build an alternative community to counter anti-Shirazi sentiments prevalent within as well as outside of Shii circles. Shirazi women redefine existing power dynamics through carving for themselves a distinct Shii identity. This is important for Shirazi Shii women's processes of subjectivication as it involves self-cultivation to the extent of being able to disrupt the structural stability of social norms. This is achieved through making the invisible figure of Fatima visible not only to Shirazis or other Shiis but also to Sunnis.[477] A female agency is thereby produced through a shared aesthetic style in form of the imagined figure of Fatima. Similar to the Virgin Mary, Fatima symbolises an immaculate and pure status. Through Fatima's apparition, this extraordinary and sublime status is being transferred further to the Shirazis and to Shirazi women in particular who understand her apparitions as legitimising the authenticity of their Shi'aness.

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[476] Compare here Mahmood's discussion on religious piety. Mahmood Politics of Piety.

[477] For more on Fatima's apparition, see Shanneik (*forthcoming*), "Making Fatima's Presence Visible: Embodied Practices, Shi'i Aesthetics and Socio-Religious Transformations in Iran".

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CHAPTER 6 THE POWER OF THE WORD: THE POLITICISATION OF LANGUAGE

[RESTRUCTURED: MAJOR CHANGES]

The relationship between performativity and power and women's ability to destabilise, to a certain extent, existing political, social and gender power relations through the use of their body in religious ritual practices has been covered so far. This chapter examines another layer of the articulation of existing power dynamics expressed through the production of art. Resistance among Shiʻi women in this study is articulated through various forms of art including poetry and visual art on banners, posters and graffiti.[478] Numerous emotions as well as political and religious views are expressed in these art forms through the use of language, imagery and metaphor but also sound and rhythm. The chapter starts with poetry recited by women in their own *majalis* in both Europe and the Gulf. The following questions will be covered in this chapter: How is poetry, originally written and performed by prominent male reciters, now recited by women? How is it used in women-only *majalis* to convey a message about gender equality in religious performances? How is poetry, as an artistic production, politicised locally, but its impact transnationally transmitted? Banners, posters and graffiti among Shiʻi women in this study have developed to mainstream resistance art[479] through which power and authority is articulated. Within the Shiʻi context, banners, posters and graffiti are used to express sectarian power dynamics in public spaces. How do Shiʻi women in various contexts link the discourses articulated in the public space with those in their own

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[478] There are numerous other genres of Shiʻi art such as paintings, sculptures and statues. More on these, see Khosronejad, Pedram. 2006. "Anthropology of Islamic Shiʻite Art and Material Culture." Anthropology News 47 (6): 33-33, https://doi.org/10.1525/an.2006.47.6.33.1; Khosronejad, Pedram. 2012a. The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd; Khosronejad, Pedram. 2014. The art and material culture of Iranian Shi'ism. London: I.B. Tauris in association with Iran Heritage Foundation; Allan, James. 2012. 'Forward'. Pp. 161–78 in The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam, edited by P. Khosronejad. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd; Afzaltousi, E. and Mani, N., 2014. Sangabs (Lavers) of Isfahan, The sacred Shia art; Suleman, F. (2015). People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam. Azimuth Editions; Okasha, T. (1981). The Muslim Painter and the Divine: The Persian Impact on Islamic Religious Painting. London: Park Lane; Newman, A. (2013). The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shiʻism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shiʻi Islam edited by Pedram Khosronejad. Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies, 6(4), pp.486-491; Kousari, Masoud. "The Shiite Art in Iran." (2011): 5-34; Abedinpoor, Vahid, and Masoomeh Samaei. "Theoretical Review of the Concept of "Shiite art" Emphasizing the Study of Shiite Approaches In the Timurid Era Architecture." History of Islam and Iran 29, no. 42 (2019): 101-126; Al-Hudaid, Nada. "In the khidma ('service') of Ahl al-Bayt: Agency and social capital of religious statue art in Kuwait." In: Shanneik, Yafa, Fouad Gehad Marei, and Christian Funke. Forthcoming. *Beyond Karbala: New Approaches to Shii Materiality*.

[479] See *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016, Charles Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East," *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2012): 393–409. Tripp, "Performing the Public," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013): 203–216. Charles Tripp, "The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 337–342.

women-only private and semi-private spaces? What roles do women play in the creation of graffiti and what meaning does it convey to them in regards to their own understanding of power and authority?

The chapter is divided into two parts, the first is focusing on poetry, particularly those recited in London and Kuwait and the second part investigates banners, posters and graffiti in Bahrain as a country that faced numerous sectarian tensions particularly since the uprisings in 2011. In all three forms of art covered in this chapter, language, its sound and rhythm, is central.[480] Particular attention throughout the two parts will, therefore, be paid to the language used and its wider religious, socio-political but also sectarian connotations. Many of the poems discussed in this chapter were recited across *majalis* in both Europe and the Middle East with slight variations. The multi-cited ethnographic fieldwork presented here aims to demonstrate the commonality across Shiʻi communities in lamenting Imam Husayn making thereby references to a similar socio-political and gendered context beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

The Politicisation of Poetry

Twelver Shiʻis are known for composing and reciting plaintive and melancholic poetry, mourning the death of Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt* during Husayni *majalis*. Lamentation poetry, sometimes in Classical Arabic, but more often in colloquial Arabic is chanted, which has a particular effect on the listener as it evokes emotions to the extent of weeping and self-beating (*latam*) to express sorrow for the maltreatment and ultimate killing of Imam Husayn. This poetry, also referred to as Husayni laments or lamentations (*ritha'*), has various rhythmic beats from slow, middle to fast which also determine the pace of the *latam* itself.

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[480]   On music, language and sound in Shiʻi Islam, see S. Blum, "Compelling Reasons to Sing: The Music of Taziyeh," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005), 86–90; R. B. Qureshi, "Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shiʻa Majlis," *Ethnomusicology* 25, no. 1 (1981), 41–71; R. K. Wolf, "Embodiment and Ambivalence: Emotion in South Asian Muharram Drumming," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000), 81–116; R. K. Wolf, *The Voice in the Drum: Music, Language, and Emotion in Islamicate South Asia* (University of Illinois Press, 2014),; S. J. Williamson-Fa, "'Hüseyn'im Vay!': Voice and Recitation in Contemporary Turkish Shiʻism," *Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia* 40 (2019), 209–224 (209). In Islam more generally, see M. Frishkopf, "Against Ethnomusicology: Language Performance and the Social Impact of Ritual Performance in Islam," *Performing Islam* 2, no. 1 (2013), 11–43; R. Harris, "'The Oil is Sizzling in the Pot': Sound and Emotion in Uyghur Qurʾanic Recitation," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 23, no. 3 (2014, September), 331–359. Deborah Kapchan, "Learning to Listen: The Sound of Sufism in France," in *The World of Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 65–89; Deborah Kapchan, "Singing Community/Remembering in Common: Sufi Liturgy and North African Identity in Southern France," *International Journal of Community Music* 2, no. 1 (2009), 9–23; R. Sultanova, "Yassavi zikr in Twenty-first Century Central Asia: Sound, Place and Authenticity," *Performing Islam* 1, no. 1 (2012), 129–151.

Which type of poetry to chant depends on the *mullaya* and her ability to perform the poetry she has memorised. In addition to its spiritual function, Husayni poetry recited in *majalis* is also used to articulate existing power dynamics and discourses of religious and political authority.

As has been discussed earlier, *tatbir*, the practice of (self-)flagellation, is highly controversial among various Shi'i groups. Whether to perform *tatbir* or not has been used as a measure of piety[481] and an expression of true 'Shi'aness' among different Shi'i groups in Europe as well as in various countries in the Middle East. The relatively recent participation of women in this practice has added another level to the discussion whether *tatbir* has a historical and doctrinal grounding and therefore should be practiced or whether it is disliked or prohibited from the perspective of Islamic law.[482] The various intra-sectarian Shi'i power dynamics and their wider political dimensions have already been discussed. This part of this chapter focuses on how these intra-sectarian discussions around *tatbir* are articulated in various national and transnational contexts through the medium of poetry: To what extent is the question of gender identity politicized through the example of *tatbir* as expressed in Husayni laments and how is poetry used to re-define gender dynamics within Shi'i ritual practices among various Shi'i communities are some of the questions that will be addressed below.

Shi'i sacrifice and redemption has traditionally been discussed within gendered terms: Shi'i men avenge the death of Imam Husayn through literally shedding their blood in the battlefield or, in contemporary terms, symbolically through the practice of *tatbir* that is performed as a step further to hitting themselves or weeping, on the tenth day of *Muharram*, the day Imam Husayn is believed to have been killed. In other words, traditionally women's vengeance of the killing of kinsmen has symbolically been expressed through women shedding tears and reciting lamentation poetry. These tears are – in ritual terms – similar to men's bloodshed in the battlefield regarded as a liquid sacrifice.[483] Mohamed Abdesselem, also in relation to the pre- and early Islamic period, argues that women have traditionally expressed their sorrow through the composition and recitation of lamentation poetry, also

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[481]   See Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[482]   See various fatwas among Shi'i *maraje'* on *tatbir*. See also on *tatbir* Yafa Shanneik together with Oliver Scharbrodt, "The Politics and Gender of Shia Ritual Practice: Contestations of Self-Flagellation (*tatbir*) in Europe and the Middle East," *European Association for the Study of Religions* (EASR), University of Helsinki (28 June – 1 July 2016).

[483]   Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, & Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Code* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 179.

known as *ritha*'[484]. In addition to women's historical poetical expression of sorrow, according to Abdesselem, they used their body to create a special blood pact with the deceased and his cause through harsh hitting and scratching it until bleeding.[485] Not only the pain felt but also the shedding of their own blood symbolised a gendered expression of blood sacrifice and allegiance to the fallen kinsmen.[486] As women are, traditionally at least, not supposed to participate in the battlefield, Shii women avenge his death through tears and self-hitting. This clear separation of gender roles within revenge practices goes back to the pre- and early Islamic period, as Stetkevych explains:

> [W]hereas the male redeems his slain kinsmen by pouring out the liquid soul (*al-nafs al-sa'ilah*) – the blood of vengeance or his own blood, should he fall while attempting to take vengeance – the kinswoman does so by the shedding of tears, another 'expression' of liquid soul and a metaphor for the composing of *ritha'* itself.[487]

Women were able to become part of the battle in their own terms, expressing thereby their own female redemptive hegemony of power.[488] The composition of lamentation poetry, the shedding of tears and the expression of sorrow through harsh hitting and scratching one's body all are symbolic expressions of women's sacrifices that are not only characteristic of Shi'is today but go back to the pre- and early Islamic period. Shi'i women's redemptive

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[484]   Al-Khansa', who was a contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad, is one of the best known poetesses of this period particularly known for mourning the death of her two brothers Sakhr and Mu'awiyya. The style of her lamentation poetry, and of others in her time, have created and shaped the genre of Arabic lamentation poetry until the present. See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[485]   On the topic of gender and death, see also Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1993); Lila Abu-Lughod, "Islam and the Gendered Discourses of Death," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 2 (1993), 187–205; Charles Briggs, "'Since I Am a Woman, I Will Chastise My Relatives.' – Gender, Reported Speech, and the (Re)Production of Social Relations in Warao Ritual Wailing," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992), 337–361; Sascha L. Goluboff, "Patriarchy through Lamentation in Azerbaijan," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008), 81–94; C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[486]   Mohamed Abdesselem, *Le thème de la mort dans la poésie arabe: des origines à la fin du IIIe-IXe siècle* (Tunis Université de Tunis, 1977), 98–99. For a comparison to Twelver Shi'a, see also Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," in: *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013), 75–91.

[487]   Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 168.

[488]   See also Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

practices[489] are therefore a continuation of a long female mourning tradition in Arab culture and society.

Lament is a form of oral performance[490], which involves various embodied experiences. These experiences are articulated within *majalis* particularly through lamentation poetry, which play a salient role in inciting individuals in sensorially rich manner[491] to perform commemoration practices. The inter-discursive[492] characteristics of lamentation poetry allows its contextualisation within current gender and communal discourses, also known, as explained earlier, as *nuzul*. Husayni lamentation poetry represents various poetical responses addressed towards outer-non-Shi'i critical voices but also to intra-Shi'i male scepticism towards women's participation in specific Shi'i ritual practices or, in some cases, scepticism towards the degree of female involvement in these practices. Shi'i women participating in (self-)flagellation practices emphasise the hierarchies of socio-religious and political authority embodied in such practices. As explained in earlier chapters, the historical exclusion of women from the practice of *tatbir*, as the ultimate expression of Shi'aness, highlights Shi'i men's claim of absolute male redemptive hegemony. *Tatbir* therefore becomes a space for communal negotiations of gender power structures within Shi'i communities articulated nationally and transnationally and on various political and social levels. The performativity of the poem and its contextualisation within a *majlis* becomes a space for gender contestations: it addresses the wider criticism of Shi'i ritual mourning practices and the various attempts to limit women's participation in them. In other words, the performativity of the poem becomes a space for gender-specific negotiations of power.

When examining lamentation poetry one needs to analyse, what Wilce refers to as "the semiotic complexity of lament and the non-linguistic dimension of lament's textuality",[493] examining thereby not only the metaphors expressed in the literary text but also the wider socio-political, religious and communal context in which this text has been produced and presented.[494] As Wilce and others have also argued, text and textuality can be

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[489]   See also Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

[490]   James Wilce, *Language and Emotion. Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language* 25 (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2009).

[491]   Adam Yuet Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008), 485–504.

[492]   James Wilce, "Traditional Laments and Postmodern Regrets: The Circulation of Discourse in Metacultural Context," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005), 60–71.

[493]   Wilce, "Traditional Laments and Postmodern Regrets", 61.

[494]   See also Wilce, "Traditional Laments and Postmodern Regrets", and W. Hanks, "Text and Textuality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989), 95–127.

re-contextualized to fit into new contexts[495] and reflect the realities of individuals on the ground. Textual iterations are interdiscursive and can develop new contexts relevant to the socio-political lived realities of Shi'is today that are in turn re-contextualised in new textual iterations. In women-only Shi'i *majalis*, the re-contextualisation occurs constantly and instantly, re-defining and re-constructing the religious and socio-political meaning, function and message of certain poems.

In the following, two poems will be discussed which in the last couple of years have been very popular and are repeatedly recited during women-only *majalis* in the UK and Kuwait.[496] The two poems, *Do Not Blame Me* (*la tulumuni*) and *My Madness* (*jununi*)[497], have become the most popular Husayni lamentation poems and are performed by the prominent Iraqi eulogy reciter Bassim al-Karbalaei and the Bahraini reciter Hussein Faisal. Both poems are highly politicized within women-only Shi'i spaces. Edward Said talks about 'resistance text' highlighting thereby the socio-historical context of texts that operate within specific networks of power.[498]

In the following, I will examine how the two poems, that are performed by two popular male reciters, are interpreted and used in women-only *majalis* and to what extent they are a) a response to Sunni and other Shi'i groups who are sceptical towards Shi'i practices in general and of (self-)flagellation in particular, b) women's attempt to re-define gender dynamics within Shi'i religious ritual practices. The examination of Shi'i lamentation poetry therefore is at the same time the examination of women's self-reflexivity and self-presentation. It is the politicization of gender identity and negotiation of women's positions within their own intra-communal and sectarian transnational power relations.

The Politicization of Gender Identity through Language

The peak of Shirazi ritual practices is the performance of *tatbir* and the walking on hot coal on the 10th day of Muharram. For ten days, *mullayat* in the *majalis* are working towards building the psychological state of individuals to the level of being able to perform such practices particularly since they involve an increased degree of self-inflicted pain. Poetry and

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[495]   Briggs, " 'Since I Am a Woman, I Will Chastise My Relatives' ," Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[496]   I have also observed *majalis* in which these poems were recited in Bahrain as well.

[497]   جنوني and لا تلوموني حب الحسين اجنني

[498]   See also Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 184. See also Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 113; Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

the performativity of poetry here plays a central role in elevating the psychological state of women in the *majalis* to an agitated state that enables them to perform practices such as *tatbir* and walking on hot coal. The poetry recited, however, is also a tool for women to engage with debates around Shirazi women's participation in such practices. For women, poetry becomes a space where they can articulate their views on these debates and a way to affirm their position. The practice of (self-)flagellation, for example, has very often been criticized within Shi'i circles as well as from non-Shi'i groups as being "mad" (*majnun*)[499]. The usage of the term insanity (*junun*) comes up frequently in poetry written by Shi'is who support the practice of *tatbir*. (In)sanity is used to refer to both the performance of *tatbir* as well as to the degree of love and veneration of Imam Husayn that lead individuals to tear their clothes, hit themselves harshly on their chests, (self-)flagellate and walk on hot coal.

The two poems *Do Not Blame Me* and *My Madness* are a reflection and a response to the charge of being 'mad Shirazis receive because of the way they express their sorrow for the death of Imam Husayn. *Mullayat* in the *majalis* I visited perform these two poems in their own way in terms of the order and the iteration of stanzas as well as in the intonation of their voices when stressing on a particular message within a certain stanza. Textual iterations, the rhythm and melodic tone of the poems recited during Husayni *majalis* contribute to inter-discursive connections developing new contexts, relevant to the socio-political realities of Shi'i life today that are constantly re-contextualized in new textual iterations. These re-contextualisations help the Husayni narrative to stay alive and to be appealing and relevant to women listening to lamentation texts within women-only *majalis*.[500] In the following, I will demonstrate how women use, but also interpret these two poems during their own performativity of the poems, building thereby a discourse of resistance against voices demarcating Shi'i women's involvement in Shi'i ritual practices within their *majalis*.

The poem starts by stating "Do not blame me if I tear up my clothes. Do not blame me if I flagellate my head" (لا تلوموني اذا ثوبي مزقته، لا تلوموني اذا راسي طبرته). With these lines, the poem situates the performer in a rather comfortable position of passivity and even of

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[499]   Different than in English, *majnun* and *junun* have different connotations in Arabic. For more on that, see Karim Hussam El-Din, "The Terminology and Notion of Madness in Arabic," *Alif. Journal of Comparative Poetics* 14 (1994), 6–19. Madness in Arabic poetry is widely discussed. See for example, Geert Jan van Gelder, "Foul Whisperings: Madness and Poetry in Arabic Literary History," in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*, ed. Joseph Lowry and Shawkat Toorawa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 150–175.

[500] Together with Fouad Gerhad Marei we called it translocalisation. See Fouad Gehad Marei & Yafa Shanneik (2021): "Lamenting Karbala in Europe: Husayni Liturgy and Discourses of Dissent amongst Diasporic Bahraini and Lebanese Shiis", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, available: https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1827341, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.

victimhood highlighting the fact that it is not the performer's fault that these practices are performed (or have to be performed) but rather someone else's responsibility leading to such ritual actions. There is a tendency described therefore in the text towards 'blaming' others. The text thereby redirects the blame to a different direction without however identifying precisely who to blame – allowing a wider space for interpretation. Very often, the blame is politicised in the *majalis* I attended within a historical context but also with references to contemporary persecution and repression of Shi'is in the world more generally. A more concrete clarification on who to blame is usually the focus of the lecture before or after the self-beating (*latam*) session.

Later in the poem, one can observe a transition in power through the text as the power dynamics within the text moves from the passivity of the performer to a self-determined and self-affirming individual by saying:

<div dir="rtl">

لو طبرت الهامه لا تقرب عليه ...

</div>

When I flagellate my head do not come near me.

<div dir="rtl">

آني من الطم على صدري شيضرك؟

</div>

When I mourn and hit on my chest what does it matter to you?

<div dir="rtl">

هذا صدري وآني ما أذيت صدرك

</div>

This is my chest. I did not hurt your chest.

<div dir="rtl">

آني حر براسي اطبر ما اطبرك

</div>

I am free whether to flagellate my head. It is my head not yours.

One can observe a change in tone in these later stances. The action becomes more affirmative and clear. It also articulates an empowered position. Here the performer is not stepping back blaming others but clearly seizes initiative and expresses a confident control of the situation. By saying "do not come near me", the performer is declaring ownership and possession on the space with a threatening tone by saying "do not". The affirmation of ownership is not only restricted to the ritual space but also to the ritual body. By saying "[t]his is my chest [...] my head" the performer clearly articulates the message of power with being able to self-rule and self-determine by saying "I am free"[501], highlighting thereby one's individual agency. The poem therefore expresses a move from passivity to action and from being controlled (by the actions of others) to self-control and self-ownership as well as agency over one's body.

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[501] In some versions I heard, "It is my choice". Choice here is again a sign of self-control and agency on one's own body.

This change in power is expressed in the text itself that provides the speaker with the authority to rule over one's body. Women use the text in the poem in their *majalis* as evidence for the ultimate power to mourn the way they determine.

The discourse that women develop within their *majalis* highlights women's ownership of their bodies and their right for self-control. The poem helps women asserting their view on participating in practices such as *tatbir* and walking on hot coal not only as their religious right but also as their right as humans, highlighting thereby concepts of freedom, individuality and self-determination. In London, I met women who had to sneak out of their homes in the early hours on the tenth day of *Ashura* to go to the *Husayniyya* to perform *tatbir* against the will of their, mostly, male family members because they believe that women should not perform *tatbir*. Women's decision to perform *tatbir* is influenced, to a great extent, by the poems performed on the ninth day – the day before the actual *tatbir* is practiced. The part "I am free whether to flagellate my head. It is my head not yours" interwoven with the collectivity of the performance that *mullayat* emphasise by saying "together we will perform *tatbir*" plays a great role in women's attitude towards *tatbir*. The collective performativity of the poem becomes a what Tripp calls "vehicle for agency"[502] in developing various acts of resistance leading to the ultimate performance of *tatbir* and walking on hot coal.

The shift in power dynamics is also apparent in the second poem in which the charge of being mad is not refused but asserted: "Don't blame me Husayn's love made me mad. Yes, I am mad since I have known him" (لا تلمموني حب الحسين اجنني، اي نعم مجنون من اليوم الي عرفته).[503] Here, insanity is, however, not used as a sign of weakness but turned into strength. Admitting to be mad rather than rejecting it and fighting to prove the opposite, shifts the speaker from a defensive to an affirmative position. The state of madness offers a form of security from being charged of wrongdoing. A *hadith* I heard in one of the *majalis* in Kuwait and various discussions on this topic in the UK, offers a religious support for the empowerment of the mad: "The Pen has been lifted from writing the deeds of three: The one who is asleep until one wakes up, the child until he/[she] becomes pubescent and the crazy person until he/[she] becomes sane [or comes back to his senses or recovers]".[504] The section of the poem above offers two of the states mentioned in the *hadith*: being asleep and mad and therefore

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[502]   Tripp, "Performing the Public," 203–216.
[503]   "Do not blame me".
[504]   "رفع القلم عن ثلاثٍ عن النائم حتى يستيقظ وعن الصبى حتى يحتلم، وعن المجنون حتى يعقل"
          http://alsunna.org/Beneficial-Verses-and-Hadiths-to-Know.html#gsc.tab=0, accessed 21 February, 2018.

exempted from any liability. One of the women in Kuwait explains: "Well I'm sorry, but we cannot take their accusations seriously. If we are mad … we are mad … alright but then the pen is lifted and we cannot be charged on nothing". The power dynamics and structures, again, are apparent here since fighting those in support of these ritual practices counter the accusations from within a religious framework using religious sources that relate to these accusations but this time serve Shiʻi goals. The text at this stage also detaches the ritual body from the rational mind by saying "my mind has departed" (فارقني عقلي). This separation between mind and body, including the soul, demonstrates the ability of the body to survive independent of the mind. The poem presents Shiʻis with the ability to produce "religious selves endowed with forms of power"[505] through their love to Imam Husayn. Objectifying (in)sanity through the love for Imam Husayn empowers the individual lifting her to a higher sacred position outside of worldly values – the mind being departed now has no effect on the ritual body. On the contrary, the individual is in the empowered position to re-direct the mind to the body again thereby 'recovering' from insanity since, as the poem continues, "And my insanity for Husayn embodies true reason" (والجنون في داخلي في الحسين هو العقل).

The love of Imam Husayn oscillates in its poetic representation between reason, or logic, and madness.[506] The separating line, or the demarcation, between the two mental states becomes blurred and rather unspecified as well as vague as the second poem by the Bahraini reciter with the title *My Madness* illustrates:

يتهموني و اعترف انا لحسين انجرف

They accuse me, yet I admit, that I am mad for Husayn

والله يا عالم احبه احبه انا لحد الجنون

Oh people, I swear I love him till madness

من انوح القاني جنبه جنبه وناسي من اكون

When I weep, I find myself near him, forgetting myself

انا فارق جنوني عابس وعقلي فارقني

My insanity has surpassed Abis[507] and my reason has departed

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505   Paulo G. Pinto, "Mystical Bodies/Unruly Bodies: Experience, Empowerment and Subjectification in Syrian Sufism," *Social Compass* 63, no. 2 (2016), 197–212 (200).

506   This dichotomy between reason and madness is also part of *ghazal* poetic form with a long history in Arabic and Islamicate poetry (e. g. Sufi *ghazals*). See more in Asʻad E. Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry; an Interpretation of the Magnun Legend* (Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1980).

507   ʻAbis ibn Shabib al-Shakiri was one of Imam Husayn's supporters who died in Karbala. His deeds were referred to as 'Abi's madness', *junun* Abis, referring to his courage in defending Imam Husayn by putting his armours down in the battlefield and fighting until he died.

<div dir="rtl">انا حتى بالحلم لفظ اسمه جنني</div>

Even in my dreams, his name has driven me mad.[508]

Regarding the performativity of both sections in the first poem *Do not blame me*, the intonation follows a constrained pattern[509]: Whereas the first stanzas of the poem starting with "do not blame me" is performed with a lower and more passive voice, the later stanzas "When I flagellate my head do not come near me" signals a more confrontational voice. The entire vibe in the room when the second section of the poem was recited changed as well. It echoes Seremetakis' observations within the Greek lament poetry saying: "To hear a lament improvised is not merely to hear one person sing, but to hear an entire social ensemble vocalize".[510]

In one of the *majalis* I attended in Kuwait, women were all in the middle of the ritual space, standing, hitting severely their heads and bodies. When reaching the part where the *mullaya* says "It is my choice whether to flagellate my head or not" the women's repetition of the stanza over voiced that of the *mullaya*'s. The women were in a social sensorium, articulating their pain in a group context that was felt on their own female body through harsh hitting and later through *tatbir*, but also the emotional pain, anger and self-determination expressed in the language, sound and rhythm of the poems. The performativity of the poem becomes a central element in the women's sensorial practices within their social and cosmological experiences articulated on and through their body. The women felt stronger, united and empowered not only against the context of suppressive political regimes and anti-Shi'i sentiments during *Ashura* but also against certain Shi'i groups, and men particularly, who are trying to set limitations to women's freedom of religious expression and involvement in religious ritual practices. One of the women in Kuwait explains: "No one tells me what I can or cannot do. For Imam Husayn it is my body that I am sacrificing for him. No husband, no father, no brother can prevent me from expressing my love for Imam Husayn".

The tone in which this and similar statements from other women, not only in Kuwait but also in London, was set, reflects their eagerness to define their own gender boundaries within Shi'i religious ritual practices anew. Their participation in ritual practices that have traditionally been regarded as male domains, expressing men's virility, re-define traditional gender structures in order to reach eschatological equality by being united with the

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[508] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CiKIxdqeEU, accessed 22 February, 2018.
[509] See also James Wilce, "The Pragmatics of 'Madness': Performance Analysis of a Bangladeshi Woman's 'Aberrant' Lament," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 22, no. 1 (1998), 1–54.
[510] Seremetakis, *The Last Word*, 120.

transcendental. In the context of Catholic charismatic healing, for, example Thomas Csordas argues that bodily and emotional experiences are being objectified, transforming the "suffering self" of the participant into an empowered "sacred self".[511] This objectification is articulated in language and textuality, as Csordas argues: "We can identify how emotion is objectified and taken up from experience into language".[512] The confinement structures of the poetry gives Shiʿi women the ability to politicize their gender identity, empowering thereby their plea to participate in certain controversial Shiʿi practices and distribute these transnationally through the text. Social media is used here to send texts of lectures, poetry, pictures and snaps to spread the word on women's participation in *tatbir* or the walking on hot coal – practices which are very often described by certain groups as 'backward' or 'primitive' or 'mad. These 'primitive' practices are however turned into powerful tools for intra-communal gender role negotiations that enable women to set gender boundaries anew.[513]

The Politicisation of Sectarian Conflicts through the Performativity of the Poem

Emotion and the generation of emotion have always played a central role in Shiʿi ritual commemorations. Within the Husayni poetry the lachrymal expressions and descriptions that characterise lamentation poetry have the religious and ritualistic function of metaphorically identifying with Imam Husayn and his cause, constructing thereby a sociality among ritual participants. It also functions to literally identify with shared political and social experiences of members of the same community's.[514] Since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, this feeling of Shiʿi sociality that lead to various forms of Shiʿi large scale grief in public as well as private spaces has gained in popularity particularly since the spread of numerous uprisings during the Arab Spring in the Middle East. This new Middle East, caused a threat to the stability and continuity of the autocratic rule in the region as has been witnessed in various contexts such as in Bahrain and has led to a further intensification of sectarianism in the region. Classical analyses of ritual lamentation emphasises the importance of the relationship

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[511] Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994), 57–72.

[512] Csordas, *The Sacred Self,* 282. See also Wade T. Wheelock point out in "The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 1 (1982), 49–72 (65).

[513] Compare various examples of women's resistance through blogs and body activism during the Arab uprisings in Hasso and Salime, *Freedom without Permission.*

[514] The sharing of grief also is reflected in the Arabic word *ʿazah* which is a cognate of *taʿziyeh*. For more, see *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

between the social and the individual, affirming thereby the collective bonding between participants within a particular religious community.[515] Large-scale grief and associated feelings of sadness and anger contribute to Shiʻis' sociality which has been used as a tool to mobilise masses such as during the Islamic Revolution in Iran[516] or later in Lebanon where a shift from mourning to revolution has been observed.[517] Emotion, as Lara Deeb argues, is thereby "given contemporary purpose in its revision from an end to a means".[518]

Husayni lamentation poetry and lament in general is also undergoing a global revival in various regions within both Muslim majority as well as minority contexts. The ability to weep in diverse spaces and at diverse times invites analysis of the ways in which the sensibility to affective provocation is nurtured[519] and new contexts are developed.[520] The growth and spread of Husayni lamentation poetry goes back to its portability within the increasing transnational connectivity of various Shiʻi communities around the world. Lament functions within ritual expressions as a way to both express the effects of mourning as well as the "meta-affects" in the social receivability and acceptability of mourning that is articulated locally as well as transnationally.[521] Similar to lectures covered in earlier chapters, *mullayat*, as was described earlier, link the Karbala paradigm with current issues, through the technique of *nuzul*[522]. A common link within Husayni lamentation poetry is made between Husayn's resistance movement against the Umayyads and new resistance movements expressed among Shiʻis today. When examining Shiʻi lament one needs to look at the visible embodied acts of resistance and the less visible ones expressed through the metaphors that have characterized lament texts. In the following section of this chapter, I will examine the role Husayni lamentation poetry plays within political and inner-sectarian Shiʻi resistance movements in the diaspora but also within Muslim majority contexts. How are emotions generated within the narrative of resistance movements and how are these exported transnationally? What is the role of rituals in enabling the spatiotemporal extension of effects among various Shiʻi

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[515]   Peter Hamilton, *Emile Durkheim: Critical Assessments*, ed. Peter Hamilton (London: Routledge, 1995).
[516]   See B. Good and M. J. DelVecchio Good, "Ritual, the State and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society," *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* 12, no. 1 (1988), 43–63.
[517]   Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 149.
[518]   Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 143.
[519]   See Talal Asad, "A Comment of Aijaz Ahmad's in Theory," *Public Culture* 6, no. 1 (1993), 31–39. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), Mahmood, *Politics of Piety.*
[520]   See also Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*.
[521]   See also Greg Urban, "Ritual Wailing in Amerindian Brazil," *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 2 (1988), 385–400 (386).
[522]   Also referred to as *goriz* or *takhallus*.

communities across diverse geographical spaces? These are questions the following will be addressing.

The afore-mentioned poem *My Madness* by the Bahraini eulogy reciter Hussein Faisal has been central in *majalis* I attended, constructing a narrative of a transnational Shi'i community with a global responsibility of supporting Shi'is in their fight against their enemy. The poem says:

و يا دمع يكفي جراحا تكفي همومه

What tears are enough for his wounds

و هذا نهجه ابن السما ضل يمطر دمومه

When his pouring blood represents his Lord Almighty

عالعهد باقي انا وما يغيرني احد

On this path, I remain steadfast, and nothing (no one) will change this

تبقى اهداف الحسين في ضميري للابد

Husayn's goals will remain in my conscience forever

التهمني كربلا و ما يهمني حرمله

I am inspired by Karbala, and Harmala [the enemies] do not matter to me

كلشي للعشاق يجري يجري تصير المعجزة

Everything for the lovers is a stream of miracles

و لو اموت احيي في قبري قبري على حسين العزا

And even in death, in the grave, we will mourn Husayn

In one of the *majalis* I attended in London, this particular poem was made highly relevant to the specific Bahraini context and its contemporary sectarian conflict. "Husayn's goals" in the poem were linked to narratives of social justice and freedom of religious and political expressions. The *mullaya* argued in her speech that Shi'is need to pay a cost in order for these goals to "continue to pour in each individual Shi'i's vein until the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi even if this vein will be cut through!", as she explains. She makes direct references to sectarian conflicts in Bahrain but also in other places such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia in which she positions Shi'is as victims of tyranny and discrimination – similar to experiences lived by Imam Husayn. She refers back to Harmala in the poem, the Umayyad archer who is believed to have killed Imam Husayn during the battle at Karbala, saying: "He dared to kill our beloved Husayn but they [Imam Husayn's supporters] did not fear him – they felt sorry for him. Those who attack Shi'is we should not fear but rather pity as they will see their destiny

very soon." She urges listeners who have lived or still live in similar conditions to take Karbala as an example and explains that "even the worst enemy [Harmala in this case] should not matter to us", as the *mullaya* continues. This is a clear reference to the text in the poem cited above that says: "Husayn's goals will remain in my conscience forever. I am inspired by Karbala, and [Harmala] the enemies do not matter to me." Fighting until death is a recurring imagery in Husayni poetry[523] as *mullayat* use this language to provoke feelings of resistance among their listeners. The permanent mourning of Shii's is central in the *majalis*, as one of the *mullayat* explains: "The more they kill us, the more they imprison us, the more they torture us, the more they displace us, we will keep steady with our heads up waiting until Imam al-Mahdi brings justice." Here, the *mullaya* again makes reference to the poem that says: "And even in death, in the grave, we will mourn Husayn", highlighting that "even death will not stop us [Shi'is] mourning our beloved Husayn".

Direct links were made to the Bahraini context particularly around the displacement of Bahraini members of the Shi'i oppositional al-Wifaq party whose citizenships were revoked overnight, leaving them stranded overseas for months.[524] A number of these affected now live in London and participate in or also organise their own ritual mourning gatherings during *Ashura*. The poetry heard in these *majalis* is characterized by a different political and social tone: Whereas Imam Husayn is repeatedly presented to have urged his followers to remember him through mourning and crying "mourn me" (فاندبوني), in these *majalis* the general message in the poetry urges the listeners to stop mourning and crying but to stand up for justice and to become politically proactive:

My Shi'i, don't shed your tears for me	شيعتي لا تذرفوا ماء العيون
Mourn the slaughtered do not mourn me	واندبوا المذبوح لا لا تندبوني

Mourning in these *majalis* is not only directed to Imam Husayn alone but also the 'slaughtered' (المذبوح), referring hereby to those who were victims of any state's repression such as Shi'is in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In a *majlis* in Kuwait the 'slaughtered' was referring to the victims of the Shi'i al-Imam al-Sadiq Mosque who were attacked by IS fighters in 2015. Similar political messages within women-only *majalis* were articulated in

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[523]   It is also a recurring imagery within pre-and early Islamic lamentation poetry known as *ritha'*. See Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*.

[524] Human Rights Watch 2018: Human Rights Watch. 2018. "Bahrain: Hundreds Stripped of Citizenship: Bahrainis Deported from Homeland." Accessed June 26, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/27/bahrainhundreds-stripped-citizenship.

Bahrain itself in which *mullayat* urge women to mourn the current fallen "martyrs of the uprising", as they are referred to. The stanza above urges their listeners to follow Imam Husayn's own words in asking his followers to mourn the 'slaughtered' saying: "My Shiʿi do not shed your tears on me but rather mourn the slaughtered … do not mourn me." Because of the sensitivity of the sectarian tension in Bahrain, metaphors and indirect references have been used in the *majalis*. [525] The individual's unspoken attachment to the Husayni narrative is a form of political resistance expressed by subjectifying one's own oppressive context and projecting it onto the historical figure of Imam Husayn. By leaving the literary expression in the poem open, vague and unspecified, the *mullaya* can offer a critique of contemporary injustices by presenting the performed as a mere reproduction of history reflected through current sectarian conflicts in the Gulf.

يخويه

Oh, my brother!

ابسهم المثلث قلبك طلع من ظهرك

That triangle arrowhead has pushed your heart out of your back

تصد بالعين لطفالك

Your eyes fixed at your children

اباري اطفالك ابعيني

Your children to me are as dear as my eyes.

لتتهم يا امل دنياي

So, rest in peace, you, the hope of my world

Many Shiʿi women fleeing wars in the Middle East and living in exile in Europe are now responsible for their children because their male family members are imprisoned, dead or missing. *Mullayat* in London compare the women's situation to that of Zaynab who, after the death of her brother and other male supporters, was responsible for the orphaned children. *Mullayat* use the lines above in which Zaynab reassures her brother that she will take care of the children to give women the strength to take control over their situation. The historical figure of Zaynab is taken as an example for other women to follow. Through various social media channels, women in London express their reassurance to other women in Bahrain that Imam Husayn will give them the strength to deal with their situation. Through the exchange

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[525]   Such ventriloquism functions as a self-protective mechanism providing defeasibility and thus safety to vulnerable speakers. See also Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East", 402.

of various verses of poetry, such as the one above, women express transnational support of Shiʻi sociality and a collective resistance towards oppression against Shiʻis.

Similar to the theatrical performances discussed earlier in which the audience becomes the participant in the drama, poetry also becomes a space for women to renegotiate the audience–performance relationship anew. In the last verse which says: "I will take care of your children do not worry my dear", Zaynab reassures her brother Husayn that his children – referring here to the survivals of the battle – will be protected by her. In a *majlis* in Bahrain, the *mullaya* and the women in the *majlis* reformulated the stanza by saying "do not be concerned", or "do not worry", addressing thereby their fallen or missed or imprisoned male family members. The atmosphere in the room was very powerful: The acute pain produced through self-hitting and the articulation of the male family members all fused together as one loss, one pain, one body expressed through a Shiʻi sociality projected onto and embedded in the Karbala paradigm. This resonates with Hsu's observations on acute pain events that generate synchronicity around an acute feeling of pain.[526] The fusion of individuals as one body within a ritual space and the ritual group experience that breaks down boundaries between individuals is articulated repeatedly in Husayni *majalis* used by the *mullaya* to forge a Shiʻi sociality.

The collective feeling of pain is not only addressed to the pain felt as a result of a collective group victimisation of Shiʻis within a perceived sectarian conflict zone, but is also linked to the feeling of guilt and self-punishment. Here the inner-Shiʻi power dynamics are central to the discussion around inner-Shiʻi support that some women felt is lacking to a certain extent. In London particularly, *mullayat* refer to the following narrative of Umm Loqman, daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad's cousin Aqil ibn Abi Talib, on the death of her brothers and others at Karbala saying: "What will you say if the Prophet asks you: "What have you, the last *umma* [the community of believers], done with my offspring and my family after I left them?"[527] The *mullaya* here asks the women in the *majalis* "What have you done for the umma? […] We are still up until this day fighting for the same freedom Imam Husayn fought for." The *mullaya* continues with the narrative of Um Loqman which describes the unburied bodies of the fallen people at Karbala and links this description with the fallen Bahrainis during the uprising: "Do we know what happened there? I tell you what happened there. Our men are tortured and then thrown to their families back on the streets like dogs." Similar to the historical narrative of Um Loqman, the *mullaya* describes a scene in which

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526   Hsu, "Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy", 85.
527   Cited in D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 82.

participants of the Bahraini uprising were taken by the secret services. A similar description was narrated to me in Bahrain as follows:

> They come to the edge of our village (as they would not dare to enter) in the middle of the night, just before the Morning Prayer with their large vans, open the door and throw the bodies to the ground. In the morning when our men make their way to the mosques to pray they find the corpses lying on the ground smudged with dust and sand and stained with blood.

This image has been linked to the following poem in which Zaynab is addressing her mother, saying:

> Oh mother of Hussein, your son has grown up.
> On that night I found him lying on the ground and heavily wounded
> And when I hurried to carry him I found him dying in his grave

<div dir="rtl">

يم حسين كبر ابنج ياليله   يم رجـــليه واجـــروحه ثجيله

ايا ساعة اللي جيت اشيله   لكيته اعلى الثره امعفره الخديين

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As the woman continues she says:

> Men who rushed in the early morning hours to collect the bodies from the ground were shocked to see the degree of deformations on some of the martyrs. As soon as the news were spread in the village that the bodies were given back to the villagers, the women rushed out to see whether their male family members were among them. The men, however, were worried to present the deformed bodies to their mothers and wives and rushed to cover them with any cloths brought out from the mosques. Women rushed out of their homes to see whether their men were among the victims.

The *mullaya,* similar to *mullayat* in London, constructs a feeling of collective pain among the listeners accompanied by harsh hitting on breast and head. Here the self-inflicted acute pain is regarded as the individual's and collective's expression of feeling the pain these women

and their fallen male family members had to endure. Pain here acts as a self-punishment[528] and an expression of the feeling of guilt for leaving Bahrainis suffer. Here the *mullaya*, in an agitated state hitting herself harshly, says, referring to the aforementioned poem *Do not blame me*: "When people see me they shout it's enough, it's enough, but it will never be enough because how much it bleeds it will never pay him [Husayn] or any of the Shi'is back."

Shi'is in the diaspora tend to feel a more extensive feeling of guilt for being out of place and physically detached from the violence performed on coreligionists in the Gulf. They therefore use the act of *nuzul* to link the congregation with these current political contexts allowing them to "imagine themselves in place again rather than out of place".[529] Shi'is in the diaspora are able to be part of events happening in the Middle East through ritual practices that aestheticize politics and unite Shi'is through their belief in the transcendental. Different to Saleh's case study on Iraqis in London where the experiences of exile is transformed through the momentum of joy experienced through the community watching the fall of Saddam Hussein's statue live[530], the boundaries and barriers of Shi'is' experiences of exile are shifted through an aesthetic transnational connectedness of Shi'is performing ritual practices and articulated through lamentation poetry. *Mullayat* are very skilled, and even more so in the diaspora, in such lamentation triangulation techniques linking thereby the construction of history to current political situations and to poetry. These skills and productions are exchanged through social media between Shi'is in the diaspora and Shi'is in the Middle East creating thereby a transnational ritual space in which political identities and gendered resistance discourses are exchanged and redefined.

The poem *My Madness* ends with a clear statement: "I remain in this oath and raise my slogan. I am a Karbalai forever, and Husayn is in my core."[531] The *mullaya* in London added references to the poem itself, saying: "Yes, they have taken our sons, striped off our citizenships and estranged us [displaced us] from our home countries, but they will never succeed as this is our path and we remain steadfast and no one will change it." There has also been a reference to the fact of being a 'Karbalai', used to assert a distinct Shirazi factional identity and to demarcate Karbalais from the Najafi clerical establishment – as the Shirazi family comes from the city and most of its population follow their clerical leadership. There are various references here to inner-Shi'i power dynamics, particularly between the two main

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[528]   See here Judaeo-Christian tradition, Seremetakis, *The Last Word*.
[529] (Saleh 2018, 520).
[530] (Saleh 2018)
[531]   انا باقي عالعهد رافع شعاراتي... كربلائي للابد والضامي في ذاتي

Shi'i clerical establishments of Karbala and Najaf which are two of the main clerical centres of Shi'i Islam. The Najafi clerical establishment, as Scharbrodt explains, rejected to recognise Muḥammad al-Shirazi as a *marja' al-taqlid*, a source of emulation. Despite this rejection, he developed, what I would call, the Shirazi infrastructure in Karbala in form of various educational and charitable institutions and cultural activities.[532] The Najafi clerical establishment has since been sceptical towards Shirazi ritual practices including the act of *tatbir*. As one *mullaya* explains, "the Najafis have been too lenient towards the Sunnis and obsessed with political correctness. Above all however they are pleasing the Iranians by rejecting our practices." Shirazi Shi'i women who increasingly perform *tatbir* in Europe also engage in the criticism addressed against the female participation in this practice which also comes from the Najafis. Using the phrase "I am a Karbalai forever" is used as a political expression of resistance towards centuries long rivalries between the Najafis and the Karbalais and as such expressed by Shirazis in women-only *majalis* I attended in London to strengthen and affirm their factional Shi'i identity.

Posters, Banners and Graffiti

Posters, banners and graffiti can be acts of resistance used to express one's understanding of power through art.[533] The public space is used to articulate concrete political and religious views, thereby imposing an alternative discourse to that enforced by the state. Graffiti is a powerful tool to express resistance with a global reach. One of the examples Tripp focuses on is the Separation Wall that the Israeli government built to close in and control the West Bank. This wall has developed to a space on which various expressions of graffiti art engage with human right violations exercised upon Palestinians.[534] In this part of the chapter, the focus will lie on the Bahraini context as country in which the expression of politics through art is widely manifested. The following questions will be discussed further: How is the public space used in Bahrain to articulate political messages through religious rhetoric? What role do women play in influencing the public space and how are the messages in that public space transferred to the private space of women-only *majalis*? To what extent are women's

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[532]   Oliver Scharbrodt, „Khomeini and Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī: Revisiting the Origins of the 'Guardianship of the Jurisconsult' (wilāyat al-faqīh)," *Die Welt des Islams: International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam* (2020), 1–30.

[533]   More on this topic see Charles Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East," *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2012), 393–409; *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

[534]   Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East", 398.

transnational connectivities and mobilisation supporting social and political resistance and contributing to changing inner-Bahraini sectarian power structures?

Among the countries I have researched in the Gulf, Bahraini Shi'is are unique in their banners, posters and graffiti display in terms of their number, content, use and reception. <mark>This is why Bahrain is occupying a central space in this chapter.</mark> Banners and posters very often refer to speeches of Imam Husayn and other Shi'i religious authoritative figures or to Shi'i texts as an expression to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn. They are characterised by a religious rhetoric but embedded within a political message of demand for political reform, more transparency and social justice. In a time of political turmoil and Shi'i uprisings, putting such banners in the middle of Shi'i neighbourhoods in which police raids regularly take place is not only a political statement to the authorities but a political message to the people.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 27 HERE]

Figure 26: Bahrain 2015: 'The children of Adam should succumb to the inevitability of death like the necklace that surrounds a girl's neck'[535]

The statement on the banner above was used during a private women-only *majlis* in Bahrain referring to a public speech Imam Husayn is believed to have delivered addressing the pilgrims in Mecca. While on his way to Karbala to assist the Kufans in the revolt against the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, Imam Husayn travelled to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, and used the gathering of the masses to make a statement that, as the *mullaya* in Bahrain explains, "is one of the strongest and most important messages Imam Husayn left for his supporters: Death and the meaning and function of death. Every human being will have to die one day like the necklace that surrounds a girl's neck." The round shape of the necklace symbolises

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[535]   The full section of Imam Husayn's statement says:

"خطّ الموت على ولد آدم مخطّ القلادة على جيد الفتاة، و ما أولهني الى اسلافي اشتياق يعقوب الّى يوسف. وخير لي مصرع أنا لاقيه"

the circle of life – the point where everything starts will be the point where everything ends. The necklace is, however, also the object with which a girl beautifies herself with. Referring hereby to the option, a human has in making their death an object of beauty, as the *mullaya* explains further:

> You can determine whether you would like to die with honour and pride or with shame. You live your life the way *you* decide to live it. You die in the way *you* decide to die. Do not forget that our Imam Husayn died in fighting for the good for his people.[536] You can live your life with a purpose. We need to continue this fight for the good of the Shiʻis today. Look around you. See what is wrong and fix it!

The meaning of life defined by honour and shame is a narrative widely discussed within body activism.[537] The body is used as a weapon to generate dignity and becomes the material site on which politics is articulated. In the banner above, the meaning of existence and the value of life are questioned. Women I talked to do not believe a life is worth living if one's dignity as a human being is not granted. Life and death are used as defence strategy expressed in the name of human dignity.[538] Death is thereby used as an object to reclaim the value of life by asserting ownership on one's body and one's life. It is also a medium to express refusal of existing power dynamics between the state and the oppressed Shia population. The use of the body becomes here the last tool to break out of the existing order of power. The right to put one's own life to an end in the way the individual finds it is embedded a narrative of power and domination: "You live your life the way *you* decide to live it. You die in the way *you* decide to die.", as the mullaya above explains.

The body – in pain or deceased - as an object of beauty has been the focus of this book. Self-inflicted pain and death are aestheticized through various bodily practices that generate sensorialised socialities and express the willingness of Shia to die for Husayn's cause. Shirazi women use the act of *tatbir* and walking on hot coal but also the *kafan*, the

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536   The continuation of the statement (which is not on the banner) states that "his fate (of dying) he will face in any way": ‏"وخير لي مصرع أنا لاقيه"‏

537 On political self-immolation, see within the Tunisian contexts: Banu Bargu, "Why Did Bouazizi Burn Himself? The Politics of Fate and Fatal Politics", Constellations 23:1 (2016), 27 – 36; within the Turkish context: Banu, Bargu, Banu. *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. New York, Chichester, England: Columbia University Press, 2014; Fadoua Laroui, similar to Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, commited self-immolation in Morocco, see https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/3/28/being-a-poor-woman-in-morocco-the-intersectionality-of-oppression

538 See also Banu, *Starve and Immolate*.

white shroud used to cover the dead body, to mark their willingness to perform fatal actions (whether symbolically or literally). Life and death are political by virtue. The willingness to die is therefore a political expression to reclaim agency and assert ownership and power on one's own life and death. The body becomes the battlefield on which sectarian conflict, state's oppression and inequality is addressed. The lack of agency and vulnerability in Shiis' everyday life is compensated through an honoured death – even symbolically through a ritual performance. This wiliness to die with dignity is intensified through Shii rhetoric in poetry and sermons as well as military marching music used in *majalis*.

Private *majalis* make regular references to publically exhibited banners linking thereby the public and the private spaces together. As the *mullaya* explains:

> The Umayyad Caliph Yazid was a corrupt and unjust ruler who, because he went astray from the right path of Islam, had to be overthrown. Revolting the unjust ruling of the Umayyad ruler was the main purpose of Husayn's revolt against Yazid and the main message of his speech which is partly printed in the banner outside.

Women's message of resistance is articulated in such (semi-)private spaces allowing them to comment privately what is impossible to articulate publicly due to public constrains and surveillance by the Bahraini state. A counter-public is created in these *majalis* allowing women to participate in the formation and re-formation of public concerns and institutions of power. Through social media channels, women are able to articulate these public and private messages to the Shi'i community in the diaspora, thereby illustrating efforts in changing not only how people think about authority and power relations within Bahrain but also impact and inform coreligionists abroad. The use of social media during the Arab uprisings was also widely used. Political affects such as anger and sadness were increasingly expressed in women's blogs in Egypt, for example. Blog posts were spaces through which the public and the private spheres were questioned as Pahwa explains: "Approaching their digital practices as a repertoire of transposable dispositions (as in performance) allowed women bloggers to articulate a spatially fluid conception of politics that challenged a public/private division. The bloggers' practices generated repertoires of dissent that were unabashedly gendered, potentially disruptive, and imaginatively transformative of the spaces and languages of

normative politics."[539] Women in Bahrain also used photo and video blogging on private online pages and chat rooms "making visible what had no business being seen"[540] outside of Bahrain. Women in Bahrain are very careful what they say in their *majalis* but equally careful of what they say online as they fear the punishment of Bahraini security services, since: "Police in Bahrain works through sectarian discourse, racialized naturalization policies, security forces dominated by non-Bahrainis, and gendered and sexual forms of violence and control".[541]

As discussed in the introduction of this book, subjectivities are embedded within existing power relations. Shiis in Bahrain find diverse ways in escaping these power relations and resisting the current political order by the reordering of power on their own terms and within their own available means. Shiis explore various ways and possibilities of resistance with permanent and/or temporal effect contributing thereby to the existing political struggle of Shiis in diverse contexts.

Women's activism against such oppression is increasingly expressed through Shii social private forums. Shiis reclaim space for themselves on the streets but move also to online spaces as they are more difficult to control, monitor and police by state intelligence services.[542] These spaces support women to extend their activism from the *majalis* and from the street to other virtual geographies allowing Shiis outside of Bahrain insights into their lived reality they are, to a large extent, cut out from. Women in Bahrain forge connection to coreligionists abroad to generate empathy and affect worldwide. The spread of photos, videos and images women use in these online spaces provide Shiis in the diaspora evidence of anti-Shii sectarian everyday lives and events which they in turn use within their own diasporic private/public spaces to raise awareness of injustice imposed on Shiis in the Middle East. Through Shiis' use of private/public/viral spaces a chain of global Shii political but also aesthetic resistance is produced directed against Sunni power regimes in the Gulf region.

Shiis' striving for political reform to regain dignity and justice is reflected on the following banner:

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[539] Sonali Pahwa, "Politics in the Digitial Boudoir. Sentimentality and the Transformation of Civil Debate in Egyptian Women's Blogs". In In: *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016, 25 – 50 (29).
[540] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30.
[541] Hasso" The Sect-Sex-Police Nexus", 107.
[542] Control and surveillance on online spaces still takes place, as Hasso explains: ''The state monitors public and private expression on email, telephone, streets, Twitter, websites, Facebook, YouTube, Internet cafés, and Skype and even in Shi 'a community spaces such as *ma'atams*.' Frances S. Hasso" The Sect-Sex-Police Nexus and Politics in Bahrain's Pearl Revolution", In: *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durcham: Duke University Press, 2016, 105 – 137 (108).
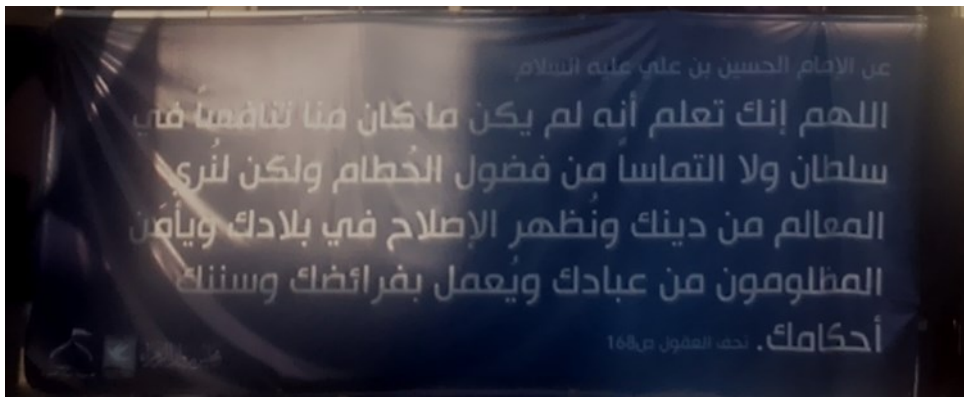
[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 28 HERE]

Figure 27**:** Bahrain 2015: Oh Allah, you know that it was not that we have been competing for authority or seeking anything out of this ephemeral life. But we have been striving to save your religion and to establish reforms in your country so that the oppressed feel safe, fulfil their duties and abide by your judgements.[543]

One of the women in the *majlis* I talked to explains the banner as follows: "We are not competing with or challenging the throne but we ask for a ruler who follows Islam's teachings by reforming current structures through balancing power in the parliament and ensuring the security of his people." This subtle critique of the unequal distribution of power between the Sunni ruling Al Khalifa regime and the Shia majority population is however more clearly articulated by the woman below saying:

After Ali was assassinated, Muʻawiyah became the ruler and turned the caliphate into a dynasty – a reason for Imam Husayn to revolt against this ruler. This is similar to the change Hamad al-Khalifa had made when he announce himself a king of the now Kingdom of Bahrain. Don't you see parallel in the corruption here?

The change in the power dynamics Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa declared publically when announcing himself king in 2002, generated a long-term feeling of injustice among the country's Shia population. Shiis in Bahrain feel betrayed by the regime. The banner below refers to a narrative of a speech by Imam Husayn talking to the Umayyads, reminding them

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543   Source: الصفحة – 239 تحف العقول ـ ابن شعبة الحراني
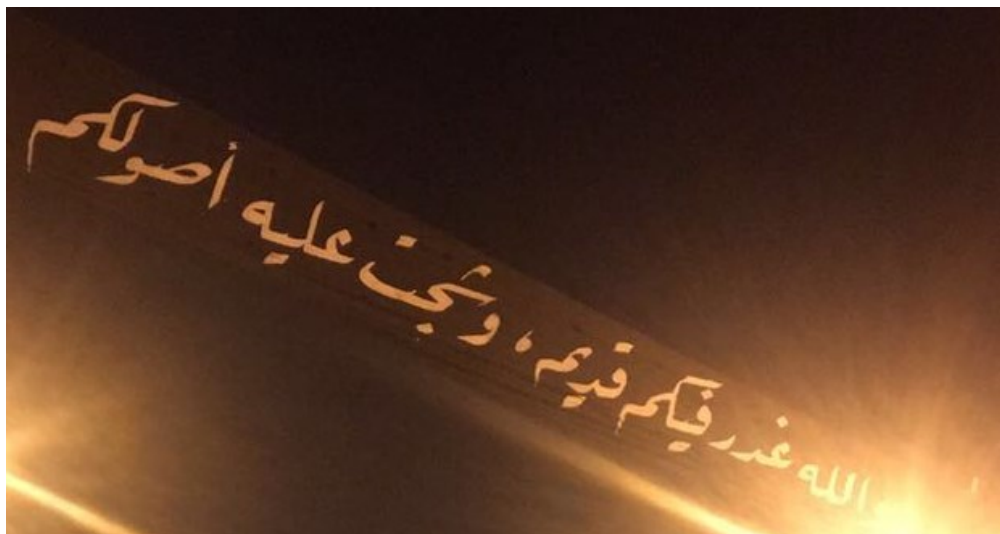
[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 29 HERE]

Figure 28: Bahrain 2015: "Betrayal is an old characteristic of yours and has become part of your being."

The *mullaya* uses this public speech hanging on the streets of one of the Shi'i neighbourhoods in Bahrain to remind listeners of the importance of loyalty, saying: "Those who betrayed the Prophet and the family of the Prophet are those who will feel sorry at the end. Maybe they are in power now [referring here to the al-Khalifa family] but the time will come when they will regret the violence and injustice imposed on us Shi'is."

The three banners above are examples of how public and private spaces are interwoven together to build a space for a new narrative of sectarian power dynamics within Bahrain. The question to whom are these banners speaking to is central as they not only address the regime but also Shiis themselves. It is a form of direct and indirect Shi'i subversion of power with the aim to make people think about their relationship to the ruling regime. All three banners articulate their political messages through religious rhetoric that are commentated on within women's (semi-)private *majalis*. For an outsider, these banners could be regarded as non-political. However, when interpreted within their political context of Bahrain embedded in debates within *majalis*, their political relevance becomes clearer.[544] Narratives of Husayn's resistance movements against the Umayyad dynasty are interwoven

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[544] On Rancière's discussion on politics and speech, see Michael Feola, "Speaking Subjects and Democratic Space: Rancière and the Politics of Speech", *Polity*, 46:4 (2014), 4980519.

with the ongoing oppression against Shiis by the current Bahraini regime.[545] Through public and private articulation of historical and contemporary resistance, a space is constructed to raise awareness and attention towards the need to understand existing power structures to realise the ability to define these anew. By doing so, women generate an understanding of their individual and collective agency in countering existing political power structures within their communities. Linking the historical to the contemporary political position of Shi'is feeds into the narrative of the continuation of the Shi'is' fight against injustice since the battle of Karbala. Women nationally and transnationally articulate their role in contributing to this historical continuation of the Shi'iacts of resistance. With the increasing social and political disempowerment and margilalization of Shiis in Bahrain, they feel part of those who have no part in society.[546] This is recaptured and articulated on banners expressed in the public sphere allowing thereby a collective public defiance to existing power dynamics. Through these activities, Shiis put themselves at risk of being punished by authorities[547], however "[y]ou live your life the way *you* decide to live it. You die in the way *you* decide to die". As discussed in the introduction of this book, only through the individual's subjectivation[548], the individual is capable of realising one's position within a set order of power. It is only after the individual's self-awareness that one is capable of performing agency. The politics of gender and the politics of resistance are therefore interlinked and position the individual's agency within a collective action.[549]

Women's actions in resisting existing sectarian power dynamics and structures and their contribution in the collective reordering of power in Bahrain is articulated in women's involvement in street art in form of graffiti. This generation of new power dynamics leads, in the context of Bahrain, to the mobilisation of the individual towards collective resistance on a local, but also on a transnational scale. Bahraini women use social media to spread images about their street actions online as they believe that the inner-Bahraini sectarian conflict has been ignored by the international community since access to international reporters, Human Rights activists and researchers has generally been denied by the Bahraini government.

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[545] This is different within the Lebanese context, see Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 140.

[546] Jacques Rancière talks about la part des sans-part, see Jacques Rancière, La Mésentente, Paris, Galilée, 1995.

[547] Tripp, "The Art of Resistance in the Middle East", 398. See also Charles Tripp, "The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018), 337–342.

[548] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. and transl. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1983).

[549] Tripp, *The Power and the People.*

==Similar to the banners above, the addressee of such actions is the Al Khalifa regime in the first instance but also the Shii community to remind them of social and political injustice addressed to them by the regime.==

Various Shi'i villages and numerous Shi'i families are under constant surveillance by the secret service. The house of one woman where I was supposed to stay at for a couple of days was raided, demolished and several members of her family detained. This led one of the women in the house to go out and graffiti the walls of her village with statements about justice and freedom. Bahraini Shi'i neighbourhoods are characterised by the apparent amount of graffiti on the walls, thereby reflecting the Bahraini uprising ==and its long-term consequences== as the picture below shows:

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 30 HERE]

Figure 29: Bahrain 2015: "The people want the fall of the regime"[550]

Scholars such as Tripp wonder to what extent the paintings on walls during the Arab uprisings have influenced the relation of power to the state. In the context of Bahrain, the influence becomes clear in the degree of the authorities' obliteration of the graffiti. Sometimes authorities knock down the entire wall on which the graffiti has been painted. One woman who has been active in graffiti painting herself explains: "The government is not able to keep up with our expression of anger and dissatisfaction of the ruling family on the walls. Whenever they paint over it we keep graffiting back". Whereas demonstrators in the uprising during the Arab Spring tore down large portraits and statuses of leaders such as Hafiz al-Assad in Syria, Mu'ammar Qadhafi in Libya, Husni Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia, in Bahrain, ==in addition to the destruction of the Pearl Roundabout,== the authorities tore down

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[550]   A popular slogan during the 2011 Arab Spring.

large scale of banners, posters or obliterated graffiti on walls. Authorities' obliteration of graffiti however happened mainly on main roads as the picture below shows.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 32 HERE]

Figure 30: Bahrain 2015: Entire village borders covered with Shi'i graffiti painted over by the government

The more one comes closer to the centre of Shi'i neighbourhoods the more apparent the graffiti become. One woman sarcastically explains: "They do not dare to go deep inside the villages. Only the ones on main roads or at the beginning of the village they paint over." The lack of the authorities' obliteration of graffiti inside of Shi'i villages is seen as a demonstration of the authorities' lack of power on the one hand and Shi'i's increase of autonomy in parts of Bahrain's neighbourhoods, the state cannot reach. When authorities obliterate graffiti on houses over and over again, some owners decide to paint their entire houses in black.[551] This is very common at the entrance of a village to mark the com-memoration of the people in the village who were victims of the Bahraini uprising. With black car tires piled over each other at the entrances of the villages, people put the tires on fire trying to protect their villages from police forces' intrusion. However, police raids happen regularly, not only searching for male but also female activists.

Women have been very articulate towards their involvement in graffiti. For them it is a gendered articulation of power towards inner-communal but also outer-political power dynamics. It is regarded as women's everyday resistance towards existing political but also gender power. Women are increasingly discouraged to participate in street actions, as men

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551   In order to protect my informants and secure their confidentiality, I was unable to add a picture of these houses painted in black.

fear their humiliation and sexual abuse by the regime's security forces.[552] Young Shii Bahrainis I met however increasingly participate in street art resistance as one woman explains: "You paint something very quickly on the wall. Your message is out. Your own people can see it and others [the state] can see it." The space of the wall on which the graffiti was done is regarded by women as their own space on which other women add their own graffiti. The wall therefore becomes a space for a collective, gendered articulation of power on which existing power structures are articulated and resistance is expressed.

Shiis challenge and question the state's autonomy expressed through Al Khalifa's autocratic sovereignty by placing numerous banners, posters and graffiti in the public sphere. Women I talked to highlighted constantly the state's restrictions in controlling Shii neighbourhoods by 'not daring to enter' or 'only coming into the neighbourhoods in large numbers'. Territory is also reclaimed in Shia neighbourhoods to which state's security apparatuses have only restricted access. Territorial control within Shii neighbourhoods challenges thereby the state's sovereignty and demonstrates the limitations of its autocratic rule.

The obliteration of Shiis' expression of political resistance through graffiti and Shiis repeating overwriting them demonstrates their assertive stand against state's control. Al Khalifa's politics of fear and threats of violence exercised upon the Shii population in Bahrain through numerous riots, arrests and torture is combated through protests but also through the continuous use of the public sphere as a site of political counter-discourse. Shiis invade the public sphere by graffiti and posters illustrating publically state's brutality and violence imposed on its Shii population, which is in turn shared with other coreligionists and activists online. Pictures of Shii diseased activists seen as religious martyrs demonstrate publically the regime's violation of human rights. Entire walls are used as murals to demonstrate visually state's violence claiming territory for themselves through art. Streets in Bahraini Shia neighbourhoods become thereby site of public obituary on which the fallen martyrs of the Bahraini uprisings since 2011 are remembered.

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[552] More on the sexual abuse and harassment of women during the Bahraini uprising, see Hasso.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 31 HERE]

Figure 31**:** Bahrain 2015: Shiʻi graffiti and posters of martyrs painted over

Conclusion

Resistance can take various forms. What needs to be included in a study of resistance is the imagination of what stimulates ideas, images and memories for people acting politically. For Shiʻis, the narrative of the Karbala paradigm is central, but for Shirazi Shiʻis in particular the role women have played since the battle at Karbala is what generates their narrative of female participation in acts of resistance. In this chapter, I have introduced women's acts of resistance through poetry, banners, posters and graffiti. Their resistance to power is expressed through language as much as it is expressed through art in demanding particularly the change of the political regime in Bahrain.

Lamentation poetry is written to eulogize Imam Husayn. It is recited as a dirge during mourning ritual practices. It sets the sad atmosphere in the room to the extent to evoke emotions by the listener up to the level of weeping and self-hitting. The production of pain and the associated plethora of emotions have the function of constructing a sociality of bonding in remembering a collective memory of the Shiʻi past that still has its effect and relevance in the present time. The poetry recited in such ritual practices immortalizes Imam Husayn by keeping his memory alive but also provides a meaning for persecuted and displaced Shiʻis around the world. In this chapter, I have discussed the semiotic meaning of Husayni lament understood on two levels: a) as a symbol of Shiʻi sociality that through the lament's textuality produces collective emotional affects on women of various backgrounds residing in contexts that are different in geographical, political and migratory terms; b) as an expression of a resistance movement that is influenced by local and global religious and socio-political discourses. The *mullaya* plays a central role in setting the tone and the political direction of the *majlis* – sometimes this occurs with direct references to political contexts, whereas other times this happens symbolically and indirectly depending on the social and

political context of the *majlis* and to what extent it is secure to make direct political statements.

Husayni lamentation poetry can be contextualized and re-contextualised to fit various political discourses and subjective emotional attachments and interpretations. Husayni poetry has proven to fulfil a gendered ritual pattern and functions as a distinctive oral poetic form situated in relation to various regional or global trends as well as transnational networks. The narrative of Karbala in general is presented as an example of a resistance movement against oppressive regimes of all kind and the particular roles Shi'i women ought to play therein.

Pain is central in Husayni lamentation poetry and is presented as a collective transnational Shi'i experience. Poetry is inter-discursive and can develop new contexts relevant to the socio-political realities of Shi'i life today that are in turn re-contextualized in new textual iterations. As this chapter has shown, the re-contextualization occurs constantly and instantly in women-only *majalis* in diverse contexts in which women re-define and re-construct the religious and socio-political meaning, function and message of Husayni laments. Shi'i women articulate their identity and their fight against gender and political oppression through textuality expressed in devotional poetry that is locally produced and transnationally negotiated. Husayni laments function therefore as a form of identity affirmation and legitimization of political resistance.

This chapter has also discussed how existing power dynamics are questioned within public and private spaces through the use of banners, posters and graffiti by women in Bahrain. Women link their women-only private *majalis* to historical narratives articulated on banners and posters in the public space, thereby developing a narrative of resistance towards existing political and gendered power dynamics. Through women's everyday practices of the so-called marginalised, women are able to express collective resistance to power through their own reordering of power. This is achieved by raising awareness and self-realisation of Shi'is' positionality within the sectarian conflict in Bahrain, but also through women's actions of resistance through their own defiance of the public space in form of graffiti. Through women's individual and collective act of graffiti, they declare ownership to the public space, thereby empowering their position as the subaltern and oppressed within a widely male-governed community. Women's aesthetic production in form of graffiti shape the political communal and public imagination and provides them with the opportunity to organise themselves in alternative spaces and become political actors. By doing so, they influence existing gender and political communal order and construct a new discourse of gender empowerment.

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CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Shi'i women's resistance through their body is not necessarily perceived, acknowledged, and recognised as a form of resistance because it does not conform to a progressive and emancipatory understandings of resistance. This book has demonstrated the need to move away from a universalistic definition of resistance and agency articulated through the discourse of identity politics and rather look into new forms of performative resistance. Then, self-inflicted pain practices can be regarded as forms of agency. This study therefore provides a new perspective on our conception of resistance which foregrounds the understanding of the marginalised female subject outside of its universalistic gendered objectified position.[553] To what extent are the case studies in this book offering insights into unaccounted forms of female agency that would help us rethink this normative liberal account on human agency and female emancipation? How is this study contributing to a new understanding of women's resistance movements operating in both local and transnational spheres? Finally, how is a study of women's aesthetic performativity of actions resisting existing power structures able to overturn our understandings of the gendered body and the technologies applied beyond the ethics of religious duty and moral agency within Islam? To answer these questions, we first need to return to a conversation started in the introduction of this book on agency, religion and aesthetics.

Agency, Resistance and Pain

Agency has been discussed widely in academic scholarship and refers to the self-empowerment of the individual to act consciously and intentionally.[554] It is understood to be the individual's ability to represent a moral/legal/ethical responsibility for something by taking actions to change. Agency for Asad is "a complex, relational term, whose senses emerge within ways of dealing with people and things".[555] There is a tendency to romanticise agency and to be overly fascinated by the fact of individuals resisting certain oppressive power dynamics. Mahmood sets a new understanding of agency that transcends these

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[553]   For a comparison, see Ulrike Auga, "Resistance and the Radical Social Imaginary: A Genealogy from 'Eastern European' Dissidence to New Social Movements: Connecting the Debates between Activism and Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Epistemology and Theology," *New Perspectives in Resistance and Vision: The Challenge of Postcolonial, Postsecular and Queer Theory. Journal of the ESWTR*, (2014): 22, 5–30.

[554]   Talal Asad, "Agency and Pain: An Exploration," *Culture and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2000), 29–60.

[555]   Asad, "Agency and Pain," 35.

romanticised hegemonic limitations. In her book *Politics of Piety*[556] she examines an Islamic revivalist women's movement in Cairo in the 1990s. She distinguishes between this movement in which women invest in self-cultivation based on an ethic of religious duty and moral agency and other political Islamist movements that aim at challenging and seeking state power. Women within this piety movement support their self-fashioning through their reading of religious texts and prescribe to traditional gender roles in Islam without challenging religious authorities. Women's virtues (*fada'il*) are cultivated and articulated through their piety (*taqwa*) and religious devotion by listening, for example, to religious sermons[557] and/or performing religious practices. These acts of worship have been presented as acts of action and agency. The women in Mahmood's study neither aim at challenging the existent patriarchal framework apparent in their society nor work towards a new definition of gender norms to re-position women's social standing. Mahmood's understanding of women's agency operates *within* rather than against the constraints of patriarchal male dominance articulated in Islam. In other words, this women's movement operates within ethical and moral frameworks that are guided by religious texts and thereby provide a new understanding of female agency based on religious piety.

Asad has added to the understanding of agency the role of the human body. Body, as Asad explains, very often has been used to refer to the individual rather than taking the human body itself as a site of agency.[558] Margot Lyon and Jack Barbalet have also positioned the body and the role emotions play at the centre of their discussion on agency.[559] They argue that the body and its associated emotions play an active and essential role in generating social relations and constructing social actions.[560] Scholars discussing agency very often link it with the concept of responsibility and the need to find references to current issues recognising thereby its moral need for taking action.[561] As such, self-inflicted pain practices, based on an internalised and ritualised collective memory of the past, are related to current issues and

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[556]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

[557]   See also Charles Hirschkind, *Technologies of Islamic Piety: Cassette-Sermons and the Ethics of Listening*, PhD Dissertation (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1999); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[558]   Asad, "Agency and Pain," 30.

[559]   Margot Lyon and Jack Barbalet, "Society's Body: Emotion and the 'Somatization' of Social Theory," in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[560]   Lyon and Barbalet, "Society's Body," 50–60.

[561]   See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993). Body as a global protest, see Dabashi, Hamid.2012."LaVitaNuda:BaringBodies,BearingWitness." Al Jazeera, January23.http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01 /201212111238688792.html. The use of the female body during the Arab Uprisings, see *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016

used to articulate resistance through pain and suffering. It is because of this framing that a feeling of responsibility is generated that requires individuals to act to achieve a change in power. This change is not only limited to the context of ritual practices but also to society and politics as a whole. The problem that arises here however is around the act of agency itself. Whereas the justification, i.e. the construction of responsibility, is based on a universal understanding of oppression, religious self-inflicted pain practices are not necessarily recognised as agentic practices within a universalised progressive and emancipatory conception of female resistance.

In the history of Western thought, as Asad explains, issues of pain are often "related to punishment, penalty, penance, and repentance" which is expressed in terms of "a metaphysical desire to resist power".[562] Pain can be experienced in private spaces but very frequently it is displaced in public domains to make others aware of pain, its reason and its consequence. Criminals used to be in the past, and in some parts of the world still today, punished in public in form of torture and/or eventual persecution as a form of public warning. This was performed symbolically to demonstrate the power of the state or the ruling elite. The public space is today also used by the ruled public as an extended arena to express power either through public demonstrations, posters and banners and/or through social media as part of resistance movements such as the more recent Arab Spring.[563] These public demonstrations of one's own understanding of resistance is essential for the creation of a social communal space for action and agency.

This book has built on these definitions of agency by adding two additional aspects that are crucial in understanding women's agency in today's Muslim women's movements: first, the role of religious aesthetics and performativity beyond practices such as praying, fasting, veiling and learning religious texts and adhering to religious regulations and moral guidelines. Women in this study perform self-inflicted pain practices as *symbols of resistance* against male domination, sectarian supremacy and political authoritarianism. Through religious aesthetics and performativity women are able to redefine their agentic subjectivities and positions within their religious communities and wider socio-political contexts. Women in this research have worked *within* their religious parameters but, different to Mahmood's study, they have also positioned themselves critically towards their assigned social standing as women within patriarchal communities. By looking at historical narratives and female

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[562]   Asad, "Agency and Pain," 43 and 45.

[563]   In the context of this book to reveal one's own bruises, cuts and scars and the amount bloodshed caused by such self-inflicted pain practices.

figures and reinterpreting them anew, women of this study have engaged actively in challenging religious authorities and redefining a new political order. Second, different to other case studies of female resistance or piety movements,[564] this study has contributed with a new process of female reordering of power that is not limited to national boundaries of Egypt, Lebanon or Iran to name a few. Women's engagement with social media but also with the flow of people and goods transnationally, enables them to transfer and expand their power of transformation and change of oppressive political and gender orders worldwide. Women have set their own understanding and definition of power within their own Islamic framework and applied it within communal, national and transnational levels.

Power and Resistance

Theorists of culture tend to present and talk about agency and resistance as if they were self-defined terms which meanings are agreed upon across cultures.[565] What to resist and how to resist tends to be 'normalised' and actions taken against oppression and suffering as 'accepted' human behaviour. Resistance becomes to be seen as a vehicle to confront power and its aim is, in most cases, to become more powerful. Lila Abu-Lughod criticizes previous studies on resistance for being too occupied with finding resistors and explaining resistance rather than understanding the construction of power itself as she argues:

> In some of my earlier works, as in that of others, there is perhaps a tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated. By reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power.[566]

Power in this book is understood in Foucauldian terms as not an institution or a structure but rather a "system of differentiations"[567] which allows individuals to take actions operating

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[564]   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Abu-Lughod, "Islam and the Gendered Discourses of Death;" Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, and Torab, "The Politicization of Women's Religious Circles in Post-Revolutionary Iran".

[565]   Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, *Culture/ Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: University Press 1993).

[566]   Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55 (41 f.).

[567]   Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1983), 792.

within "mechanisms of power".[568] Power for Foucault is the transformative capability of individuals to achieve and create change. It is the medium that facilitates change and makes transformation possible.[569] As Heller explains:

> While the decision to exercise power is always intentional, *the mechanisms of power that individuals use to exercise power are inherently non-subjective, because they do not depend on the existence of those individuals for their own existence.* Power-mechanisms, because they are structured and reproduced by a multiplicity of power-relations that are not reducible to the individuals who exercise them, are necessarily incapable of being controlled by any particular individual.[570]

In other words, individuals are all bound within a system of power-relations and are differently capable of using various power mechanisms to create and achieve social change. Individuals and groups use what Foucault refers to as "tactics" to exercise power and cause social change.[571] For Foucault, individual subjects are produced by a pre-existing system of power-relations. In other words, subjects and subject formations are essentially discursive and context-related. Individuals and groups who use certain tactics to express resistance can only do so within their discursively formulated contexts. At the same time, different contexts enable different tactics. This reciprocal relationship between tactics and contexts reflect the individual's position within a specific discourse imposing limits and boundaries to individual's choice. As Heller explains: "no subject's choice of tactics is ever the unconditioned product of a self-standing outside of history and language. Indeed, all subjects are equally *unfree*. […] [The individual's] intentionality, therefore, is never completely their own".[572] These discourses are however neither static nor uniform. The presence of a multiplicity of discourses construct a multiplicity of subject-positions.

Women of this study are highly diverse in their religious and socio-political views on their role within their communities and wider societies articulated within their nation-states and beyond. However, they all engage in agency aiming and achieving various degrees of

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[568]   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Peregrine Books, 1979), 28; Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 786.

[569]   Compare Kevin Jon Heller, "Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault," *SubStance* 23, no. 1 (1996), 78–110 (83).

[570]   Heller, "Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault," 85 [author's own emphasis].

[571]   Strategies are however non-intentional and non-subjective exercise of power that are however socially and institutionally recognised. Heller, "Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault," 87 f.

[572]   Heller, "Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault," 91 [author's own emphasis].

change either on a personal or individual level or collective and societal level.[573] As for Foucault, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject-positions can coexist. Individuals use mechanisms of power prevalent within the dominant ensemble of power-relations to reach effective counter-hegemonic resistance. In other words, "*all* power mechanisms are potentially capable – in certain determinate political contexts – of being utilized counter-hegemonically".[574] Counter-hegemonic groups will therefore always have access to and use certain mechanisms of power to resist their domination.

Women's resistance movements of this study have used their access to mechanisms of power on three different scales: Communal, national and transnational. Through operating on these three different levels, women are able to redefine the centre of gravity by shifting it from the Middle East to Europe. This shift of the centre-periphery dynamics feeds back to women's new defined positions in the Middle East. Women's agency and empowerment is not only limited to their religious communities but includes 1) wider sectarian power dynamics particularly in the Gulf and 2) perceptions of Islam in Europe more generally. As this book has shown women within this study have contributed through material and visual culture such as banners, posters and graffiti to challenging existing power dynamics within the public sphere. By doing so, women have contributed to the resistance movements during the so-called Arab Spring since 2011 in countries such as Bahrain and Kuwait. In the semi-private and/or private spheres women are similarly actively engaged in challenging gender role orders within their communities and across various inner-sectarian branches to enable women to occupy more religious spaces that will enable them to connect to the transcendental – spaces which traditionally have been reserved for men.

Women's engagement with religious ritual practices from which they were traditional exempt from has set a precedential case on our conceptual understanding of the gendered body and women's participation in political resistance movements. This has wider transnational consequences for women and Islam in general: Self-inflicted pain practices performed on the female body have become a *symbol of resistance* of gender inequality, sectarian discrimination and state violence. This is a shift in perception and has become a site of contestation, as within a progressive, emancipatory understanding of resistance, women performing self-inflicted pain practices are not seen as agentic subjects but rather as women performing 'irrational' acts by submitting themselves to religious practices. Women's

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[573]   See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997c).

[574]   Heller, 102 [author's own emphasis].

aesthetic performativity through self-inflicted pain practices are rather regarded as *symbols of submission* to repressive religious discourses. Women's fight for the recognition of their right, equally to men's right, to participate in religious ritual practices are choices that are not recognised as agentic as they are not in line with liberal, progressive values. This study has moved on from where other scholars have stopped and pushes feminists thought on agency to new theoretical and political terrains beyond gender and national boundaries: Women not only articulate different forms of agency within their socio-religious contexts but transcend these through their global connectivities building thereby a new transnational understanding of systems of power in which women are not restricted to their own women-only spaces and practices within national borders. Women of this study use existing power mechanisms, i. e. tactics, and engage actively in a new system of order in which their own position on various scales is reversed and redefined. By doing so, women act counter-hegemonically by redefining their subject-positions nationally, transnationally and transcendentally.

New Religious Movements and Aesthetic Formations

Birgit Meyer focuses in her work on the mediatisation of religion and the central role embodied practices play in building new communities through aesthetic experiences. These shared sensory experiences are used to mediatise religion and forge new socialities. New dynamics of binding and bonding are created between community members offering new opportunities through the creation of tangible forms of religion and senses of belonging. Her work on media and religion is essential in understanding the emergence of new movements that go beyond the aforementioned level of religious piety. This book has shown that self-cultivation is not only achieved through seeking and acquiring more religious knowledge reached through an intellectual engagement with religious text but also attained by an embodied aesthetic experience and material encounter with the transcendental through religious sensory practices.[575] In the context of my study, this self-cultivation is not only negotiated within a particular nation-state but is articulated transnationally between various Shiʻi communities in the Gulf and the European diaspora. Shiʻi aesthetics expressed through sensory experiences and interwoven within Shiʻa traditional narratives around virtues and norms of the *ahl al bayt* (the family of the prophet) is used to form a counter-discourse to existing power relations either towards the state, as in Bahrain, or towards inner-Shiʻi gender

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[575]   Aesthetics is used in this study in its Aristotelian sense as sensory and bodily experience rather than in a post-Kantian sense as the articulation of beauty. See Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

relations as discussed in other contexts in this book. Different to other studies discussed earlier, this book has highlighted the importance of internet technology and social media in strengthening the interconnectedness of transnational religious actors and networks: Methods of protests and resistance are shared, new religious practices are exchanged and novel material and aesthetic expressions are experimented with.

Here, in line with Meyer, aesthetic is understood in an Aristotelian sense: the ability of the body to experience objects through its senses and experiencing sensations through their particular constellations. Meyer developed Benedict Anderson's imagined communities[576] further by discussing the roles processes of social formations and bodily dimensions play therein. Meyer argues that sensational forms contribute to the formation of subjects and socialities building thereby alternative communities through a shared and collective identity expressed through sensational forms. Social formation, for Meyer, is articulated through a shared aesthetic style[577] that distinguishes communities from one another. These communities are understood in their performativity of the aesthetic and their link to the transcendental. Such a notion of performative collectivities overcome the dualism between form and substance and the post-Romantic preference of the spiritual over the material. The material side of religion is emphasised and the particular aesthetic style[578] provides individuals with a shared and recognisable public appearance. The public visibility and media attention are important for the positioning of movements in the wider political and religious arena.

As has been illustrated in this book, Shiʿis have experienced a long history of persecution and oppression across the Arab Gulf countries without gaining much public attention on issues around sectarian resistance. It is only through notions of collective consciousness[579] in sharing images and other cultural forms that a collective Shiʿi identity has been formed which is dynamic, performative and distinct. This distinct Shiʿi identity is important for processes of subjectivication[580] as it involves self-cultivation by applying techniques of the self and the body, forming thereby distinct subjects and communities. Studies on religious movements have neglected the important role of the mediatisation of religion via aesthetic experiences in the formation of resistance. Here media is understood in its broadest sense including material culture, artefacts and the role the human body plays

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[576]   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[577]   Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*.

[578]   See also Michel Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World. Figures of Community Style* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[579]   They become to what Asad refers to as Conscious actors in Asad, "Agency and Pain," 30.

[580]   Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 10–11.

therein, to challenge existing sectarian power dynamics and counter ideologies of nation-states in the Middle East. This book has engaged with countries in the Middle East, such as Bahrain, with a high proportion of Shiʻi population and sectarian tension and/or conflicts but still neglected within wider public debates. This disregard for embodied acts of resistance by women within the context of a religious community that could be labelled "conservative", might be due to the secular bias of academic scholarship on the region and on political resistance movements in general which favours movements that represent civil society actors and enunciate emancipatory and progressive agendas in line with Western liberal notions of the modern nation-state and the public sphere.[581]

Connecting religious subjects with the transcendental through rituals, doctrines and beliefs that bind individuals within religious communities are not new and not specific to Shiʻi Islam.[582] What this book has offered, however, is a critical engagement with the use of aesthetic formations that are mass mediated and used as a tool to transform the political and religious visibility of sectarian power dynamics in the Gulf through the aesthetic styles of religiosity of Shiʻi women. Women's involvement in actions of resistance through aesthetic performativity does not only challenge inner-Muslim perceptions of gender power dynamics but also questions the dominant secular *weltanschauung* of the Muslim gendered body and the technologies applied for the construction of the Muslim female subaltern-self. The postcolonial imagined 'subaltern woman' has become a main actor in setting the parameters of existing power dynamics which thereby urges a reflection on the uncritical use of a dominant understanding of female agency. In a post 9/11 climate of increased Islamophobia in Europe, Shiʻi born and convert women have used the public sphere to change perception of Islam and present Shiʻi Islam as a form of 'good' Islam.[583] Neither sectarian power relations in the Middle East nor inner-sectarian Shiʻi power dynamics can be understood in the 21st

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[581] See for example Karina Eileraas, "Revolution Undressed: The Politics of Rage and Aesthetics in Aliaa Elmahdy's Body Activism",. In *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, edited by Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 167-220; Karina Eileraas, Sex(t)ing Revolution, Femen-izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics, Signs 40:1, 2014, 40-52.

[582] See for example Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. For more, see R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (University of California Press, 1997); Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994).

[583] Compare here Mahmud Mamdani's notion of "good Muslims [versus] bad Muslims" (M. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* [New York: Pantheon, 2004]; Oliver Scharbrodt, "Shaping the Public Image of Islam: the Shiis of Ireland as 'Moderate' Muslims," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31 [2011], 523–538). See also Yafa Shanneik, "Moving into Shia Islam: 'Process of Subjectification' among Shia Women Converts in London," in *Moving Into and Out of Islam*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdunas Racius (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018) 130–151.

century today without considering and examining the roles Shi'i women play in the transformation of gender power relations in the region. Resistance movements, particularly since the so-called Arab Spring, have been extensively examined, however either within a Sunni or secular dominated framework. This book provides a perspectival shift in examining acts of resistance that have been so far neglected because they are not explicitly part of regular patterns of political mobilisation within a nation-state (i. e. political parties, elections, public demonstrations, civil society) but engage with traditional practices and transcend the boundaries of the nation-state.

Different to other studies on Islamic movements, this book engages with various acts of women's religious resistance which are not bound to a national context but are transnationally connected and mediatised through shared aesthetic forms. The transnational bonding of women is materialised through social bonding in ritual performances in which the human body and bodily sensations are central. Through sensory experiences produced through language, images, ritual practices, art, poetry, drama, posters and banners, affect is generated as part of local and transnational socialities. Sensual and embodied experiences are shared to strengthen a Shi'i collective consciousness. The aesthetic performativity of Shi'ism in the Middle East and among Shi'i diasporic communities in Europe in both private and public spaces occupies an important role in mapping the Shi'a presence within the geo-political context of the Middle East. When examining sectarian power dynamics in the Middle East, it is essential to engage with these aesthetic formations of individual and collective Shi'i subjectivity as they contribute in the de-stabilisation of these power relations. This book therefore provides a new approach in researching gendered spaces of contemporary Islamic movements by engaging with new women resistance movements which are dynamic, performative and transnational and which, through notions of alternative aesthetic formations, has reconfigured sectarian and inner-Shi'i power dynamics.

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