



Making Fatima's Presence Visible: Embodied Practices, Shi'i Aesthetics and Socio-Religious Transformations in Iran

Yafa Shanneik

To cite this article: Yafa Shanneik (2023): Making Fatima's Presence Visible: Embodied Practices, Shi'i Aesthetics and Socio-Religious Transformations in Iran, Material Religion, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2022.2154970](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2022.2154970)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2022.2154970>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 03 Apr 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

**making fatima's presence
visible: embodied
practices, shi'i aesthetics
and socio-religious
transformations in iran**
yafa shanneik

Yafa Shanneik is Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Lund/Sweden. She researches the dynamics and trajectories of gender in Islam within the context of contemporary diasporic and transnational Muslim women's spaces. Currently, she is working on a project, which explores women's narratives of transnational marriage practices performed by Iraqi and Syrian women who have settled in Europe and other countries in the Middle East since the 1980s. The project focuses on the historical developments and contemporary understandings of family and gender relations. It particularly examines approaches of marriage practices among displaced Iraqi and Syrian Muslim women and foregrounds questions of identity, home and belonging of women constituted through local, national and transnational scales of migration experiences. She has published several articles and books on gender and Islam: Yafa Shanneik and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Global Dynamics of Shi'a Marriages: Religion, Gender and Belonging* by Rutgers University Press 2021; Yafa Shanneik and Justin Jones (eds.), "Reformulating Matrimony: Islamic Marriage and Divorce in the Contemporary UK and Europe." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (special issue), 40 (1). Her monograph: *The Art of Resistance in Islam. The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.
yafa.shanneik@ctr.lu.se

ABSTRACT

Iran has witnessed an increase in cohabitation relationships, or so-called white marriages (*izdiwāj-i sifid*), which has caused wide political and religious efforts in cultivating religious selves based on an Islamically defined moral order. This article examines the symbolic re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and Ali, the Prophet's cousin and the first Shi'i Imam, a ritual which participants use to receive spiritual legitimation for their cohabitation practices. These re-enactments are organized by the Shirazis, the designation given to followers of Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and of his brother Sadiq al-Shirazi (b. 1942). Shirazis use the aesthetic enactment of the wedding of Fatima to build an alternative to state-centred structures of domination within Iranian society. Through using the materiality of representations, Shirazis in Iran aim to counter societal changes around sexual relationships and cohabitation practices, which young Iranians use to express political disobedience. Women of this study, however, shared embodied experiences of seeing Fatima and constructed their own collective identity and articulation of political dissensus. Refusing the defined moral order of both the regime as well as the Shirazis, women fight for their politics of recognition by defining their own sexual identities and gender relations.

Keywords: materiality, aesthetics, embodiment, Shi'is, Iran, rituals, Fatima

Material Religion volume 0, issue 0, pp. 1–19

DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2022.2154970](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2022.2154970)



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Introduction

The number of cohabitation relationships, or so-called white marriages (*izdiwāj-i sifid*)¹ is increasing specifically among young middle- and upper-class Iranians in Tehran and other large urban centers in Iran.² Young people of this study use cohabitation practices to express their frustration and disillusionment with the existing political and economic circumstances and the general lack of long-term prospects of success and development for less fortunate youth in Iran. Instead of following the government's imposed codes of behavior, these young people seek alternative lifestyle forms and develop their own definitions of sexual identities and gender relations outside of conventional Islamic marriage frameworks.

Religious scholars regard this development as a threat to society's adherence to Islamic teachings and increasingly organize religious gatherings to articulate the importance of an Islamically defined moral order. Their concerns reflect those of the existing political regime. This article focuses on the symbolic re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and Ali, the Prophet's cousin and the first Shi'i Imam. This religious activity was organized in South Tehran by a group called the Shirazis—a religious network which has been vocal in their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran and follows the clerical leadership of Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and his younger brother Sadiq al-Shirazi (b. 1942). Shirazis I talked to believe young people's political resentments towards the Islamic Republic should not be conveyed through their rejection of more conventional marriage relationships. They advocate, therefore, for a separation between religion and politics understood as the detachment of religion from the monopolistic control of the Iranian regime.

The article critically engages with the visual and material narrative of the wedding ceremony that is used by the Shirazis to fulfil a religio-social function: The Prophet's daughter is represented as the visual model of pious relationships and an icon for the kind of relationship young people should aspire to. The aesthetic re-enactment of the wedding also becomes a political tool for the Shirazis to express a dissensual intervention to the Iranian regime's "natural order of domination" (Rancière 2004, 11). Such religious practices are political interventions which seek to build alternatives to state-centred structures of patriarchal domination, religious monopoly and political control.

The politics of aesthetics defines both the political and the aesthetic as embodied experiences that play a central role in building communities of dissent. This article demonstrates how multi-dimensional and multi-directional aesthetic interventions allow for the performance and articulation of alternative disagreement and social formations. These alternative understandings of aesthetics create different communities of dissent with different views on moral behaviour: The same visual re-enactment of Fatima's wedding is used by these young

women to gain Fatima's approval on their relationship choices, even those which fall outside conventional Islamic marriage forms that the Shirazis and the state each promote. Young people of this study reject thereby the Islamically defined moral order of both the Iranian regime and of the Shirazis and prefer maintaining their cohabitation relationships.

The article contributes to the study of materiality within Shi'i Islam and opens new avenues in examining how material objects as well as visual experiences are represented, lived, embodied and imagined among young Shi'i communities in Iran. Further, it points to new empirical and methodological approaches to the study of Shi'ism through investigating materiality within its socio-political formations and recent transformations.³ This helps us to understand contemporary Shi'i sociality in Iran and attitudes of youth—who are trying to set new parameters on gender and sexual relationships in Iran—toward the Iranian regime. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork among six Iranian women and eighteen Iranians of Iraqi background conducted in 2016 in North and South Tehran. Additional fieldwork in Tehran includes interviews with six female Iraqi and Iranian preachers, *mullayāt* (sg. *mullāya*), and three male Iranian religious middle-ranked scholars in one of the important Shi'i shrine cities of Qum.⁴

Political Disobedience and Disillusionment: Cohabitation Practices as a Form of Resistance

Current research on cohabitation practices has focused on the popularity of this relationship form among Iranian youth and discussed its wider debate in the media. In addition, studies have highlighted the intensive debates on the part of governmental institutions and religious authorities regarding the causes and consequences of white marriages in Iran.⁵ The discussions on this form of relationship have pointed in particular to its "sociological, demographical, economical, psychological and ethical aspects" (Rodziewicz 2020, 52). This article adds an additional aspect neglected so far in the discussion by focusing on the religious-political dimension of cohabitation practices among Iranians of Iraqi background who came to Iran in the 1980s. It thereby illustrates how the phenomenon of cohabitation practices is also spreading among minority groups living in Iran and informing their attitudes towards the Iranian regime and their positionality within Iranian society.

Iran is a party to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and is the fourth-largest refugee hosting country in the Middle East (UNHCR 2015).⁶ The majority of Iraqi refugees in Iran are Shi'is and reside outside refugee camps (UNHCR 1999, 2015) in large urban centers including Shiraz, Qum, and Tehran (HRW 2003). The Iranian government supported Iraqi Shi'i dissident groups against Saddam Hussein during its war with Iraq (1980–1988), resulting in an influx of over half a million Iraqi refugees to Iran in the 1980s (Nikanjam 1995; Rajaei 2000; Nicholson and Clark

2002). South Tehran has been one of the primary destinations of Iraqis fleeing the Ba'ath regime since the late 1970s and during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. The more affluent neighborhoods of parts of northern Tehran are home to a diverse population of the middle- and upper-class, mainly Iranians, but also other ethnic groups including affluent Iraqis (Madanipour 1999). Family ties as well as travels to Iran for pilgrimage and religious education purposes also contributed to many Iraqis settling in numerous Iranian cities. In 2001, the Iranian government introduced a system of registration for refugees, thereby officially recognizing their status as displaced persons. Nonetheless, a large number of Iraqi refugees remain undocumented (HRW 2003).

The demographics of Iraqi refugees in the neighborhoods of southern Tehran have changed over time. The increase in in-migration dynamics within Tehran altered its social structures in terms of individual and collective identity, social class, as well as level of religiosity and the feeling of belonging to a religious community (Madanipour 1999; Haghghat 2014). In the words of one interlocutor:

[T]he first wave of Iraqis that came to Tehran hailed from religious Shi'i families. They were targeted the most by Saddam [Hussein] and had to leave early-on in the conflict. They settled in South Tehran first, but then moved to the center around the bazaar. [...] Once their financial situation improved, they became part of the elite residing in North Tehran. Later [in the 1990s], more and more Iraqi Shi'i families came to South Tehran and settled particularly in an area called Dawlatabad, which is also known as *'irāq-i kūchak*, or Little Iraq.

Both North and South Tehran have seen rapid societal transformations by which the youth, in particular, has been affected: The increase in international economic sanctions on Iran and the growth of the unemployment rate despite the rise of graduates with higher-education degrees place enormous financial and social pressure on young people in Iran.⁷ Consequently, this frustration has caused increased disillusionment and disenchantment towards the ruling regime as the following Iranian woman coming from an affluent Iraqi family explains:⁸

It is very frustrating. We are stuck here. We cannot go anywhere. It is very hard to get a visa and leave because of the sanctions imposed on us. I grew up here but I do not feel the regime is looking after us at all. They only impose rules on us to control us but they do nothing to show that they really care about us. We are fed up to obey and stay silent. This is why we live together without being married. By living in what they call white marriages, we do what hurts the regime the most—not living Islamically according to their own understanding of what Islam is. For us we believe this is Islamically alright because our relationship is sincere and we do not play around.

In an apartment in North Tehran, I visited a woman who invited other friends in their twenties and thirties over that day who all live in cohabitation relationships. We had long conversations on marriage, religion and politics. It became very quickly clear that they feel increasingly frustrated and disappointed by the regime:

You must be surprised to see us living together in this apartment without being married. Maybe this is something you would not have imagined happening in Iran but we are not the only couple. Later today, you will meet a few more of our friends who lead a similar lifestyle. We live together because we love each other. We do not need a marriage contract and we do not want anyone to tell us how we should live. The government should stay away from governing our lives. They are already controlling everything around us—and not even doing a good job at it. They should leave us in charge of our private lives—at least that we should be able to decide upon ourselves. Yes, we live together without a marriage and we do this to send a message to the government that we do not follow their moral values but our own and in the way, we see right.

Religious groups such as the Shirazis I talked to in Qum are aware of youths' frustration and disappointment towards the regime. They are also worried about the increase in cohabitation relationships, not only in Tehran but in other Iranian cities as well. They work closely with female preachers to organize and hold religious gatherings (*majlis*, pl. *majālis*) such as the re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima for young women, to raise their awareness and reinstate the appeal of more conventional Islamic marriage forms.

The Wedding of Fatima: Representing the “Perfect Family Unit”

In 2016, the Iraqi young women I conducted fieldwork with were talking for days about the upcoming wedding of Fatima: what they were going to wear, how they would do their hair and what makeup they were going to put on. When I received the invitation, I was also looking forward to attending the wedding of Fatima. On the wedding day, we all made ourselves ready and headed to the wedding hall, which was in Dawlatabad, the predominantly Iraqi neighborhood of South Tehran. We were congratulating other women we met while rushing into the hall, where we took our chadors off. The hall was filled with women in party dresses. Food and deserts were beautifully organized around the hall with many fresh and bright-colored floral decorations. Women were singing and ululating, filling the atmosphere with great joy and happiness. I was very curious to go to the altar to see the bride everyone was for days impatiently waiting to see. Pushing my way through the women to reach the end of the hall, I finally saw two sculpted calligraphy figures sitting on two white chairs. One figure that spelled

“Fatima” had a wedding veil and a tiara, and the other spelling “Ali” had a sword. Similar to any other wedding I attended in Iran, there was the traditional wedding *şufra* (Figure 1), a dining table or cloth spread on the floor. Both “Fatima” and “Ali” were seated underneath a wedding arch of white and pink flowers. There was no difference to any other wedding ceremony I had previously attended, neither in the setting of the space and the seating arrangement of the couple nor the recitation and ululation heard.

Fatima and Ali are both important figures for Shi‘i as they signify the beginning of the lineage of the Shi‘i Imams. Fatima is regarded as the most holy of Muslim women, an infallible woman (*ma‘şūma*) in a state of perpetual purity (*taḥāra*) (Beinhauer-Köhler 2002; within the context of South Asia, see Formichi and Feener 2016). Shirazis who organized this *majlis* used the materiality of representations in order to counter societal changes around sexual relationships and the increase in cohabitation practices among young women. Through the re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima and Ali, the importance of an Islamically defined moral order is foregrounded. Fatima is conjured as a socio-ethical exemplar (Ruffle 2010, 387) and viewed as a role model for every Shi‘i woman to emulate. By illustrating Fatima in all her roles as a daughter, wife, and mother, she is presented with her husband Ali as an exemplar of *the* “perfect family unit.” It is the marriage ceremony that is hoped to convey this message to the women in the hall.

The wedding guests were repeatedly reminded by the *mullāya* that they are the offspring of Fatima and Ali, “*intum awlād Fatima*,” who, only through their marriage, were able to

FIG 1.
Wedding altar and *şufra* for
Fatima and Ali. © Author 2016.



produce the Shi'i community. Fatima is presented as the personification of the earthly and the esoteric body (Ruffle 2013) who appears in dreams but also through other apparitions (Amir-Moezzi 1994; Soufi 1997; Suleman 2015; Shanneik 2022). Shi'i material culture is used in *majālis* as the medium to access the power of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). Through objects, Shi'is are able to connect to the transcendental and ask for the intercession (*shafā'a*) of *ahl al-bayt*. Objects become the source of the sacred that bestows grace and love on the viewer through the women's devotion and attachment to *ahl al-bayt*. The *mullāya* referred to Fatima's shining radiance—a radiance that can fill “the young women's hearts with love and guide them back to the right path of Fatima.” At this ceremonial event, Fatima's intercession was sought for all the women and young girls who might have developed doubts in *ahl al-bayt's* teachings of female chastity and societal behavioral codes around gender and sexual relationships. The *mullāya* assumed regrets among the women living in cohabitation relationships but reassured everyone in the room that “it is never too late and nothing is lost because Fatima's *shafā'a* will save you all.” For the organizers, experiencing Fatima's presence in the ritual space is important to reassure those who have failed to adhere to the moral and ethical teachings of society, according to Shirazi's own definition of chastity, that they can be purified and re-integrated into the Shi'i community.

The wedding guests experience, feel, sense and imagine Fatima. The wedding points to the “presence in absence” (Ruffle 2017) of Fatima and Ali and allows the viewer to enter into the imagined world of *ahl al-bayt*. The wedding ritual and its various stages and diverse practices, the objects placed around the room, the language, vocabularies of gestures and postures are all used to construct an aesthetically meaningful and embodied experience. For the organizers, the sensory, embodied, and discursive practice aims to highlight the “perfect family unit” of Fatima and Ali whom young people should emulate. The re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima represents the virtues and norms of the household of *ahl al-bayt* and aims to set the parameters of sexual behavioral codes of social conduct.

The wedding and its setting are part of Shi'i material culture that evoke a plethora of sensorialised experiences. Scholarship on religious visual culture has suggested not to focus solely on the image but on the act and ways of seeing. The act of seeing is a cultural operation in which the viewer enters into a relationship with the object that stretches across time and space (Morgan 2005). By taking such a broader approach on the act of seeing, the entire visual field is under analysis rather than the image alone. In what follows, the article builds on Morgan's understanding of the act of seeing which consists of “a viewer, fellow viewers, the subject of their viewing, the context or setting of the subject, and the rules that govern the particular relationship between viewers and subject” (Morgan 2005, 3).

The context in which an object is seen is significant as it influences how this object is interpreted and what the viewer associates with the object and, on this basis, what to expect from the act of seeing. The context also sets out certain behaviours, reactions and gestures on individuals. All objects within the wedding hall derive their powers and functions from the individual's own act of seeing. The power of the individual's imagination and own beliefs determine what the objects stand for. Through the act of seeing, the object becomes alive, ritualised in a sensorialised space, and embedded within a religio-historical context. The women's own expectations of what they want to see determine the sensorial and representational capacity of the objects displayed. Members of *ahl al-bayt* become, thereby, alive and present in the space through the individual's own imagination. As will be discussed below, Fatima's presence is made "real" for believers through feeling her in the room and seeing her appearance in the mirror.

The Present-in-Absence

Vision as a religious act is socially and historically constructed with multiple ways of seeing that "encompasses the image, the viewer, and the act of viewing" (Morgan 2005, 5). The collective, but also the individual, determines how something is seen and what impact the seeing has on the viewer. The experience, meaning and function of what people see are formed in these ritual spaces by particular religio-political narratives expressed within the space of the wedding ceremony. This is facilitated through the *mullāya* mobilizing memories of the hagiographic Shi'i past, represented in the figure of Fatima. The invisible Fatima is made "visible" through sensorialised experiences that provide a dialectical imagination (Brown 1999). The individual is at the center of attention within such religious experiences, albeit in reciprocal relation to the collective. The power of the collective—the Shi'i collective in this case—is emphasized by bringing to life historical Shi'i figures who have the power of intercessory grace.

The embodied presence of Fatima and Ali at their wedding ceremony is a reminder of their eternal presence in the communities' own imaginative dialectic. This dialectic functions more than simply to reconstruct past narratives. The celebration of their wedding also reflects the strong belief in miracles which establish a spiritual and physical link with the members of *ahl al-bayt*. This link, embodied through objects, performed and experienced as a "real" bride and groom, brings the congregation closer to the transcendental. The calligraphy figure placed on the chair of Fatima disappears into a beautiful and shining woman who is celebrated as a bride on her wedding day. The objects in the room serve as a conduit for the invisible to become visible: the wedding veil and tiara placed on the sculpted calligraphy figure, the text recited, and the songs chanted all make the belief in the presence of Fatima in the room "real." For Morgan, images are

[...] forms of mediation, filling the spaces between bodies, places, things, saints, dreams, and nations. Images are the material, moral, and imaginative technologies without which these sometimes very abstract or immaterial realities would remain quite unreal. [...] Images deliver information, they touch and move, they intuit what cannot be seen, and they imagine communities and connections that complete the individual by securing his or her relation to a larger reality (Morgan 2015, 9).

The larger reality the organizers of this *majlis* aimed to address was the increase in cohabitation practices among women in Iran. This is the reason why the focus in this gathering was on the somatic experiences which are felt and sensed around the love and passion of a couple that is united through marriage and embodies Islamic ideals of matrimony. Women in the room did not see Fatima sitting on the chair, but the aesthetic representation and the somatic context around the object suggested the bride was present.⁹ In other words, the presence of Fatima was not visualised on this occasion as an apparition, but her image was sensed and imagined through the language and the whole aura of the space in celebration of her wedding:

Congratulate the bride on her wedding day. We are here today to celebrate the wedding of our beloved and beautiful Fatima [ululations]. May her life always be filled with happiness and joy [ululations]. The scent of paradise shall always fill her home which she shares with her beloved husband Ali. May their love last forever.

The aestheticization of politics articulated within this *majlis* focused on Shi'ī teachings around sexual relationships. In the fear of losing young people's love and adherence to *ahl al-bayt* completely, aesthetic spaces are used to bring back the Shi'ī collective and thereby ensure social conformity to sexual behavioral codes (see also Bauman 1975; Csordas 1997). Young people who the organizers see as to drift away from the normative understandings of behavioral codes as dictated by the teachings of *ahl al-bayt* are not shunned or punished. They are rather re-approached to attend religious gatherings in which Shi'ī aesthetics are used to (re)connect the youth with *ahl al-bayt*. Organizers of this Shirazi *majlis* I spoke to believe that through emphasizing the value of individuals as Shi'īs and their importance to the overall well-being of society, Shirazis are able to respond to what they see as the decline of religiosity amongst the youth. Religion, in their opinion, and Shi'ī materiality, in particular, should not be used as a disciplining mechanism that make young women feel disappointed by themselves. The sensorial dimension of such ritualized practices function as a reminder to cherish one's self-worth and value. As one of the organizers explains:

The government's approach is counterproductive. Too much pressure on the youth to follow strict rules and guidelines. These young people are disappointed in their government who provide

them with no security and no prospective for a better future. On top of this, they control their lives through fear and punishment. We do not agree with this. Our solution is rather to allow these young women to breathe, to experiment with different ways of life but always to be reminded that they can come back because the love and forgiveness of *ahl al-bayt* is endless.

Aesthetic experiences, however, allow the formation of various forms of dissensus and the articulation of diverse disagreements. Whereas the Shirazis aimed at forming a particular community of sense and sensation that brings believers back to their own definition of Islamically defined moral values, women in the *majlis* formed their own understanding of their aesthetic experiences. Shirazis spend enormous amounts of time decorating and preparing the congregational space, mirroring narratives on and descriptions of the “here” and the “thereafter.” By physically transforming the congregational space into a paradise-like space, the boundaries between the “here” and the “thereafter” become porous. Not only is Fatima able to cross and dwell in both worlds, but also believers are provided access to the grace of the afterlife. This is apparent in the mirror and its function during the wedding. The mirror (Figure 2) was placed facing the wedding guests at the start of the wedding ceremony, enabling the women to see their own reflections.

I was told that once you pass by the mirror, certain women will see Fatima’s reflection in the mirror rather than theirs. This will only happen to those whom Fatima wants to send her blessings to, particularly if she believes that they “need” her guidance—as I was told. Mixed feelings occurred among women walking in front of the mirror as they either hoped or feared to see Fatima. In both cases, women described how fast their hearts were beating:

I walked passed the mirror the first time and was only able to see my own reflection. I could feel my heart jumping out of my breast cage. It was unbelievable. I was so nervous. I went back to the mirror and kept looking at my reflection for a while. I was thinking about my life and my relationship with my partner I am living with. I am

11 **FIG 2.**
Fatima and Ali on wedding chairs
with the mirror. © Author 2016.



Shi'i and I strongly believe that living with my partner without marriage is the right thing for me at this stage of my life. Not seeing Fatima in the mirror gave me the reassurance that this is the case. Fatima was a strong personality who fought for her own convictions. I am fighting for mine. I do not want to obey to the rules of the government. We should live our own lives the way we want to live. Like Fatima, we should not go with the flow but rather fight for what we stand for: our dignity and freedom to live our lives the way we want.

Another young woman shared similar feelings and talked about her fear of being judged by Fatima:

I knew I will see Fatima in the mirror. I knew she will be there waiting for me to tell me something. Once I sat in front of the mirror, it was as if I was sucked into the mirror. For a while, I felt not in the wedding hall anymore but in a different world: I went to the other side of the mirror. It was as if Fatima wanted to show me another world. It was very beautiful like paradise. I was walking along a river with Fatima—a river that smelled like perfume. I thought she would be angry at me but she was not. She just wanted to show me her love. I felt so happy.

Similar to the invisible-yet-present bride and groom, the mirror experience demonstrates complexities of human perception and the relationship between the object and its viewer. In other words, there is a process of communicability occurring between the object and its viewer. Viewers of an object search for something valuable to be mediated to them. The sensorial and representational capacity of the object of the mirror derives its meaning from the power of the individual's imagination and own belief. The mirror itself does not possess meaning but rather the women's own representation develop its meaning of what they want to see or are driven to see. Walking passed the mirror allows the viewer to enter into the imagined world of the "here" and "there." Similar to Fatima, who is able to dwell between the two worlds, women in the *majlis* are driven into their own imagination of what they will see inside the mirror.

The viewing happened in a collective, embedded within a religious Shi'i context. The meaning-making techniques of the *mullāya* in the room would usually play a role in the act of seeing and its effect on each individual—this was however not the case at this *majlis*. The power dynamics within the aesthetic performances in the *majlis* were turned around: Women in the *majlis* were able to articulate their own social formations, which were created by a shared aesthetic style, which was not based on the organizers' definition of community formation but on their own. Aesthetic formations are performative articulations of embodied experiences that are forged and negotiated in diverse ways. Aesthetic experiences are subjective but also intersubjective: Women were able to share embodied experiences of seeing Fatima in the mirror and construct a collective identity through shared socialities of living in cohabitation relationships.

The aesthetic experience through the re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima represents the Shi'i *dissecta membra*, the scattered fragments of the Shi'i past, which not only associates them with the sufferings of *ahl al-bayt* and of Shi'is throughout history, but also serves as a tool to present Shirazi women as exceptional. The ability to see Fatima is used widely by Shirazis to express the degree of their religiosity and exceptionality (Shanneik 2022). Women who believe they have witnessed Fatima's image in the mirror use it to distinguish themselves from others who did not have this "privilege." It is this feeling of being recognized and cared for that Shirazis try to instill among the group of women in the *majlis*: "particularly by living in a metropolitan city like Tehran, these women lack self-confidence. They are one among many. They feel neglected and forgotten by the government and rebel against it by going astray from the love of *ahl al-bayt*," as one Shirazi in Qum explained.

The idea of exceptionality was used by the women of this study in a different manner. They saw themselves as exceptional because they live in relationship forms that are unconventional and rejected by both the Shirazi religious group and the Iranian regime: "We are different: We live with our partners without marriage, position ourselves thereby against our government and their understanding of sexual relations and on top of this, we see Fatima." Young women see in their rejection of the Islamic Republic's rules and regulations on gender and sexual relations a counter-discourse to the government's authoritarian rule, but also to the Shirazis themselves and their understanding of moral order that they tried to convey through the re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima.

Conclusion: The Aestheticization of Shi'i Politics

In this article, aesthetics is understood as the ability of the body to experience sensations through objects and their agentic capacities to produce affects on individuals and collectivities (Meyer 2009; 2010). These sensory experiences provoke a dialectical imagination (Brown 1980) around images, sounds, and texts, which symbolize and represent the invisible, yet present, transcendental figure (or figures) within religious experiences. Material realizations add another layer to social bonding, which is important in order to give the dialectical imagination sense and emotional effectiveness. The individual's experience of religious practices performed in a collective produces a religious sociality and gives meaning to sensualized and embodied experiences. These sensory experiences are shared in a collective and embedded within certain socio-religious and historical discourses. A socio-aesthetic formation (Meyer 2009; Bennett 2010) takes place through shared memory and meaning-making processes in which subjects are shaped and communities are created (Meyer 2010). In other words, subjectivities and socialities are formed through images, symbols, and rituals that are individually and collectively shared, defined, and experienced.

As we have seen, there are various aesthetic styles with numerous meanings, functions, and aims. What these aesthetic styles have in common, however, is their ability to mark distinctions, allowing the formation of different communal identities with variant ethical codes embedded in particular political contexts. Subjects mold their lives in accordance with these ethical codes by performing “particular techniques of the self and the body that modulate—and, indeed, ‘hone’—persons into a socio-religious [and political] formation[s]” (Meyer 2010, 10–11). Walter Benjamin in this context talks about the “aestheticization of politics” (Benjamin 2010) in which aesthetics is used to articulate and present political agendas of any kind and form by redefining existing power structures therein.

The “classic” understanding of resistance, particularly gender-based resistance, assumes the inversion of existing power structures operating within the binaries of resistance and submission.¹⁰ Institutions—states or otherwise—are concerned with the behavior of individuals operating within them, especially when this behavior deviates from prevalent social norms (Tripp 2012, 179). This concern can involve the institution’s interference in ways of life, ways of clothing as well as ways of defining gender roles and dynamics.¹¹ The politics of gender and of resistance are therefore interlinked and position the individual’s agency within a collective action or, in certain cases, resistance (Tripp 2012, 180).

As illustrated above, the dominant regime of the Islamic Republic aims at controlling its population’s sexual behavior through imposing strict rules on relationships that causes a growing aversion to marriage among an increasing number of young people in Iran. Young women in particular feel suppressed by the Iranian government and its structures of control, which have caused their additional feeling of disempowerment and neglect within society. They express their assertiveness in rejecting the regime’s control by seeking alternative forms of lifestyles embedded within their own definition of sexual and gender relations. The more the government uses the institution of marriage as a tool to control people’s ethical and moral behavior, the more young people in this study tend to reject it. Individuality and self-assertion are expressed through the refusal to adhere to social structures central within a society that is largely controlled by a moral regime embedded within a religious context. In other words, resistance to the regime is expressed through cohabitation relationships, which are rejected by the government and religious scholars as they do not subscribe to their moral and ethical codes. This strong political, religious, and, more generally, social rejection helps young people to fight for their politics of recognition by defining their sexual and gender relations on their own terms.

Shirazis in Iran, however, argue that a distinction needs to be drawn between acts of political defiance and the rejection to live in line with religiously sanctioned sexual relationships. They believe that the only way to tackle this phenomenon is to separate religion

from the regime. The political foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the concept of the guardianship of the juriconsult (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) whose aim is to forge a religious state for a religious population. Shirazis I talked to believe, however, that the regime has failed to create religious subjects, hence the increase in cohabitation relationships among the youth.

Assuring social conformity to sexual behavioral codes should not be seen—as Shirazis argue—as a sign of political loyalty but rather of religious identity. As a response, Shirazis increase the number of religious gatherings, *majālis*, to facilitate ideological mobilization against *wilāyat al-faqīh*. Shirazis use Shi'i materiality to reignite the love of *ahl al-bayt* and to instill adherence to their teachings. By doing so, they want to emphasise that one can be a Shi'i without believing in *wilāyat al-faqīh*. By attempting to reintegrate young people into religious circles, religious gatherings are used as a way to aestheticize the political by gently reinstating them into social conformity to sexual behavioral codes. Through Shi'i aesthetics, Shirazis try to create new religious selves that the regime has failed to maintain.

Research on gender and religious piety in the Middle East has focused on how pious women debate and redefine religiosity within notions of modernity embedded in the political climate of their individual nation-states (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; D'Souza 2014; Inge 2017; Szanto 2013). This newly defined religiosity is developed through a process of women's self-cultivation within their own defined ethical codes and is achieved through women's everyday intellectual engagement with religion by seeking and acquiring religious knowledge. This article contributes to this discussion by adding the aesthetic experience and material encounter with the transcendental through religious practices and sensory experiences. It contributes to a growing literature critiquing the concept of visualism and the rationalist approach of ethnographic observation (Aghaie 2004, 2005; Farnell 1996; 2011; Hirschkind 2006; Khosronejad 2012; 2014; Morgan 2005; 2015; Torab 2007; Shanneik 2022).

Religious groups, such as the Shirazis, try to cultivate young people's social lives with the aim to nurture new religious selves, change their behaviors and “redirect the youth back to appreciate the unit of the family that constitutes the roots of our society,” as explained by one of my interlocutors in Qum. Embodied aesthetic experiences are, however, multi-dimensional and allow for the performance and articulation of diverse dissensus. What the women in this study have demonstrated is that young people create their own understanding of communities of dissensus based on their own shared collective identities. They have rejected both attempts, that of the regime and that of the Shirazis, in creating religious subjects framed within their own Islamically defined moral order. They rather used the re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima as a tool for ethical self-cultivation and as a vehicle to gain transcendental reassurance for the rightfulness of their own definition of a pious lifestyle.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Brian Bocking and Dr Fouad Gehad Marei for offering considerable feedback.

Funding

This article was part of the research project “Karbala in London”: Transnational Shi’i Networks between Britain and the Middle East funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and based at the Chester Centre for Islamic Studies (CCIS) at University of Chester and led by Professor Oliver Scharbrodt. The European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 724557) supported the publication of this article.

notes and references

¹The term refers to the relationship between a man and a woman who are living together without formally registering their marriage. This new form of relationship has developed to a phenomenon in Iran particularly among young people living in major cities (Motlagh 2016; Rodziewicz 2020; Girard 2021). There is also an increase in temporary marriages (also known as *ṣīghe* or *mut‘a* in Arabic). The term *mut‘a* will be used throughout the article in reference to temporary marriages (Afary 2009; Haeri 1989; Shanneik and Moors 2021). Because the research sample for this article is mainly of Iraqi origin who talked to me in Arabic, all non-English words are transliterated according to the Arabic pronunciation.

²Legally, these marriages are illegitimate and ethically regarded as immoral. The increase in white marriages particularly among the younger middle and upper class member in the North of Tehran has also been discussed in other studies (Rodziewicz 2020; Girard 2021).

³On the Iranian clergy’s attitude of separating religious and political identities, see Foody (2015) and Wellman (2021).

⁴This being a very sensitive topic in Iran, I cannot reveal more information on the background of my interlocutors in order not to breach any confidentiality agreement I have with them but also in order to secure their safety.

⁵The relationship between a man and a woman without a formal marriage was discussed in 2014 in the women’s journal *zanān-i imrūz* before the Council for Media Control (*Hay‘at-i Niẓārat bar Maṭbū‘āt*) suspended the journal for supporting immoral practices among

youth in Iran (ISNA 2014; Tebyan 2015; Din Online 2014; Khabar Online 2015). See also Entekhab 2014; Esfahani and Shajari 2012).

⁶There are various estimates on the number of Iraqis living in Iran. According to UNHCR report 1999 the number of Iraqis were around 510.000 who after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 returned to Iraq (see UNHCR 1999). The latest UNHCR report estimates 28.268 (see UNHCR Iran). According to CENSUS Iran (2016), the number is 34.532 with the majority residing in Tehran. In a research article published in 2011, authors estimate the number by 300.000 (Riyahi, Ḥariri, and Fard 2011).

⁷Young people’s perception of marriage forms and family structures is influenced by the rise in financial obligations that they cannot hold up with including wedding and housing costs; military conscription delaying men’s employment which also impacts their financial means and ability to marry and build their own families; and the pressure to conform to social obligations such as following a strict tradition of marriage procedures (Koutlaki 2020).

⁸This is articulated, among others, online and/or offline through public demonstrations (Rahimi and Gheytauchi 2008; Barlow 2012; Rahimi and Faris 2015).

⁹On the apparition of Fatima within Shi’i communities, see Shanneik (2022).

¹⁰This understanding places “the subaltern against a dominant order that is held in place by hegemonic power,” see Tripp (2012, 178).

¹¹For more on Iran’s attitudes and approaches towards gender, see among others Afary (2009).

- Afary, Janet. 2009. *Sexual Politics in Iran*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Aghaie, Kamran Scott. 2004. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. 1st ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Aghaie, Kamran Scott. 2005. *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad. 1994. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*. Translated by David Streight. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Barlow, Rebecca. 2012. *Women's Human Rights and the Muslim Question: Iran's One Million Signatures Campaign*. Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Publishing.
- Bauman, Richard. 1975. "Quaker Folk Linguistics and Folklore." In *Folklore, Communication, and Performance*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, 117–139. The Hague: Mouton.
- Beinhauer-Köhler, Bärbel. 2002. *Fatima bint Muhammad: Metamorphosen einer frühislamischen Frauengestalt*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2010. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Scottsdale: Prism Key Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, Marshall. 1999. "Errors Endless Train": On Turning Points and the Dialectical Imagination." *Modern Language Association* 1: 9–25.
- Brown, Peter. 1980. *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- CENSUS Iran. Iran Data Portal, Census 2016, the Statistical Center of Iran 2016. Accessed March 30, 2020. https://irandatportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/Iran_Census_2016_Selected_Results.pdf and https://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/1/census/2016/Census_2016_Selected_Findings.pdf
- Csordas, Thomas. 1997. *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- D'Souza, Diane. 2014. *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Deeb, Lara. 2006. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Din Online. 2014. "Āmār wa-arqām: Rawāj-i hushdār-āmīz-i izdiwāj-i sifid." Accessed February 23, 2022. <http://www.dinonline.com/doc/news/fa/3660/>
- Entekhab. 2014. "Rawāj-i hushdār-āmīz-i izdiwāj-i sifid." Accessed February 23, 2022. <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/160548>
- Esfahani, Hadi Salehi, and Parastoo Shajari. 2012. "Gender, Education, Family Structure, and the Allocation of Labor in Iran." *Middle East Development Journal* 4 (2): 1250008-1–1250008-40.
- Farnell, Brenda. 1996. "Metaphors We Move By." *Visual Anthropology* 8 (2-4): 311–335.
- Farnell, Brenda. 2011. "Theorizing 'the Body' in Visual Culture." In *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, edited by Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby, 136–158. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Foody, Kathleen. 2015. "Interiorizing Islam: Religious Experience and State Oversight in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (3): 599–623.
- Formichi, Chiara, and Michael Feener, eds. 2016. *Shi'ism in South East Asia: 'Alid Piety and Sectarian Constructions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Girard, Sophie-Yvive. 2021. "Between Love and Sex, Modernity and Archaism: Iranian Students' Discourse in The Netherlands about Sigheh." In *Global Dynamics of Shi'a Marriages: Religion, Gender and Belonging*, edited by Yafa Shanneik and Annelies Moors, 121–134. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Haeri, Shaghla. 1989. *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Haghighat, Elhum. 2014. "Iran's Changing Gender Dynamics in Light of Demographic, Political, and Technological Transformation." *Middle East Critique* 23 (3): 313–332.
- Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and*

- Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Iraqi Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Displaced Persons: Current Conditions and Concerns in the Event of War Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper (HRW). 2003, February. Accessed August 21, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/background/mena/iraq021203>
- Inge, Anabel. 2017. *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman. Paths to Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ISNA (Iranian Students' News Agency). 2014. "Tarḥ-i muqābila bā izdiwāj-i sipīd bah shauwrā-yi bar-nāmāh-rīzī-yi astān-i tihrān mirawad." Accessed February 23, 2022. <http://www.isna.ir/news/93061508557>
- Khabar Online. 2015. "Guftugū bā zawjī kah bah in sabk zindigī mikunanad: izdiwāj-i sifid." Accessed February 23, 2022. <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/406227/society/social-damage>
- Khosronejad, Pedram. 2012. *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,
- Koutlaki, Sofia A. 2020. "By the Elders' Leave, I Do': Rituals, Ostensivity and Perceptions of the Moral Order in Iranian Tehrani Marriage Ceremonies." *Pragmatics* 30 (1): 88–115.
- Madanipour, Ali. 1999. "City Profile Tehran." *Cities* 16 (1): 57–65.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Meyer, Birgit, ed. 2009. *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meyer, Birgit. 2010. "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (4): 741–763.
- Motlagh, Amy. 2016. "What Kind of Crisis? Marriage and Masculinity in Contemporary Iranian Cinema." In *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation*, edited by Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy, 192–211. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, David. 2005. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morgan, David. 2015. *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nicholson, Emma, and Peter Clark. 2002. *The Iraqi Marshlands: A Human and Environmental Study*. London: Politico's Publication.
- Nikanjam, Shahnaz. 1995. "The Refugees of the Imposed War." *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 7: 645–659.
- Rahimi, Babak, and David Faris, eds. 2015. *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rahimi, Babak, and Elham Gheytañchi. 2008. "Iran's Reformists and Activists: Internet Exploiters." *Middle East Policy* 15 (1): 46–59.
- Rajaei, Bahram. 2000. "The Politics of Refugee Policy in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *The Middle East Journal* 54: 44–63.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated with an introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum.
- Riyahi, 'Arif, Najla Ḥariri, and Faṭīma Nushin Fard. 2011. 1395 SH/2016. "niyāzhā-yi iṭṭilā' āti-yi muhājirān-i afghāni wa-irāqi: Mawāni' wa-'awāmil-i muwwathir bar raftār-i iṭṭilā' yābi-yi muhājirān-i khārijī dar irān." *Ta'āmul-i insān wa-iṭṭilā'āt*, 2(4). Accessed March 30, 2020, <http://hii.khu.ac.ir>
- Rodziewicz, Magdalena. 2020. "The Legal Debate on the Phenomenon of 'White Marriages' in Contemporary Iran." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 15 (1): 50–63.
- Ruffle, Karen G. 2010. "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 (3): 386–397.
- Ruffle, Karen G. 2013. "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 (3): 791–819.
- Ruffle, Karen G. 2017. "Presence in Absence: The Formation of Reliquary Shi'ism in Qutb Shahi Hyderabad." *Material Religion* 13 (3): 329–353.
- Shanneik, Yafa. 2022. *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shanneik, Yafa, and Moors, Annelies (eds.). 2021. *Global Dynamics of Shi'a Marriages: Religion, Gender and Belonging*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Soufi, Denise L. 1997. "The Image of Fatima in Classical Muslim Thought." Unpublished PhD diss., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Suleman, Fahmida. 2015. "The Hand of Fatima: In Search of Its Origins and Significance." In *People of the Prophet's House*, edited by Fahmida Suleman, 173–188. London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies and the British Library.
- Szanto, Edith. 2013. "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals." *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6 (1): 75–91.
- Tebyan. 2015. "Izdiwāj-i sifid dar khānahā-yi mujarradi." Accessed February 23, 2022. <https://article.tebyan.net/295306/>
- Torab, Azam. 2007. *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tripp, Charles. 2012. *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- UNHCR. 1999. "UNHCR Global Report." Accessed August 21, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/fundraising/4a0d20356/global-report-1999.html>
- UNHCR. 2015. "UNHCR Global Trends." Accessed August 21, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/statistics/unhcrstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>
- UNHCR "Refugees in Iran." Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran>
- Wellman, Rose. 2021. *Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zanan-i imruz. 2014. "Pazirish wa-yā radd-i izdiwāj-i sifid khatāst!" Accessed February 23, 2022. <http://zananemrooz.com/fa/>